Teaching Writing: A Primer

A Workshop for Graduate Students in English

A summary

What to do

- Focus on process: generating ideas, drafting, revising, editing

- Teach informal argument: claims, warrants, backing, refutation

- Provide rubrics or statements of grading criteria

What not to do

- Don't waste time teaching grammar terms and punctuation

- Require polished prose from in-class assignments

- Assume that "good writing is good writing"

Your background

- Take a minute and write down one or two basic assumptions you have about how people learn to write.

- Share these.

Your students' beliefs

○ They are not English majors

○ They come from a high school curriculum with a truncated rhetoric—the 5 paragraph theme, teacher as audience, one-shot drafts

○ More?

Rhet

Genres

○ What are the genres of writing in first-year English?

○ What kinds of arguments count?

○ What kinds of claims make sense in first-year English courses (as opposed, say, to PhD claims)?

○ What kinds of evidence counts?

Effective writing assignments

What should be on the assignment sheet?

- Topic/Description

- Purpose

- Audience

- Invention/Drafting/Research strategies

- Length

- Drafts/workshopping schedule/deadlines

- Revision policy (if applicable)

- Late penalty

- **Criteria for evaluation/Grading rubric** (refer to the one from the Writing Program or create your own)

Process

- Divide the course into blocks framed by assignments

- For each assignment, proceed through the process: generating ideas, drafting, peer response, revising, editing

- Match your class activities to each stage of the process (see next slide)

Generating ideas

- Stasis questions: what kind of thing (poem, story) is it? What quality is it?

- Brainstorm

- Idea maps

- Talk and listen

- Freewrite

Generating ideas (cont'd)

- Short, impromptu writing

- Summaries

- Paraphrases

- Responses

Drafting

○ Create a working thesis

○ Write paragraphs that make up parts of the overall argument

○ Create an outline

○ As instructor, write a draft on the board using student input

Response and revision

○ Have students exchange drafts

○ Create worksheets to guide responses to drafts

○ Focus on evaluating and strengthening arguments at this point

Editing

Work on style:

- combining sentences

- verb choices

- sentence variety

- transitions between paragraphs

Whatever topics you use for the assignment, make sure part of your description requires students to tailor their writing to include their own experiences or to refer to local (Edmonton, U of A ~~London~~, ~~UWO~~) aspects of the topic .

Tips on grading

○ Create a rubric for each assignment

○ Convey the criteria to students

Writing 207: Website Development Criteria

Criteria

5 Pages of writing
   1. Page 1—
   2. Page 2—
   3. Page 3—
   4. Page 4—
   5. Page 5—

Chapter 6: Scannability
     • Titles—
     • Subheads—
     • Keywords, phrases, links--
     • Lists--

Chapter 7: Links
   • Emphasis—
   • Number of links—
   • External/outbound links--
   • Pre-linking information—
   • Use of keywords--

Rubrics

○ Statements of grading criteria

○ Descriptions of achievement

○ Usually laid out on one page

○ Can refer to whole course or to an individual assignment

What not to do

- Teach parts of speech

- Teach punctuation rules

- "A variety of studies corroborate the most important finding of Elley et al. (1976): **Teaching grammar does not have a beneficial effect on students' writing**" (Hillocks and Smith 730).

Grammar?

- Grammar 1: language competence (5-6 yrs old)—ability to use a grammar

- Grammar 2: linguistic study

- Grammar 3: language etiquette (usage)

- Grammar 4: school grammar

- Grammar 5: stylistic grammar

Read like a writer

Read for style:

- Sentence types and lengths

- Verbs

- Transitions

- Coherence

Read like a writer

○ Your focus is not analysis of the literary text as literature but as rhetoric—shaping ideas through language

○ Any text becomes the subject of study, particularly texts students are familiar with and read constantly