

# Graded In-Class Writing: An Approach to Developing Composition Skills in Academic Research Essays

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This teaching note presents an approach to composition for second-year seminar students in the Department of British and American Studies who are being introduced to academic course content and academic research skills. Students in the seminar are expected to produce a short academic research essay of roughly 1000 words by the end of the semester. Both the process of writing and the final product are stressed throughout the course. Students are asked to complete specific assignments related to the final essay by the deadlines designated by the instructor. In addition, models are employed at different stages of the process. In previous years, however, students have struggled to meet the course objectives, encountering difficulties in (1) following proper format and structure (for example, in-text referencing of sources and topic sentences), (2) identifying sources, and (3) relying too heavily on source texts during the composition stage with the result that student writing sometimes borders on plagiarism.

In the current semester, students were required to write main body paragraphs as a graded activity during class time rather than as homework. This relatively simple shift in the process had a positive impact on the quality of student writing. It is the belief of this instructor that the positive results are due partly to students having an environment in which to complete their tasks without distraction. However, positive results are likely also due to the fact that (1) the in-class activity is graded and therefore provides an external motivator; (2) students are forced to work from research notes only, rather from the sources themselves, thus reducing the likelihood of plagiarism and; (3) students use a clearly labeled model paragraph provided by the instructor.

## Context: The Seminar Course Content

The seminar focuses on current issues in modern sports. Although historical context is included, the course centers on the gender and class dimensions of sports as well as on issues such as violence, drugs and racism. Students are asked to choose a well known sports figure

and write a biographical essay. Students are encouraged to think of how the themes of the course can be incorporated into their work. For example, the issue of drugs might be the focus for an essay on Lance Armstrong. Students are given short lectures in both academic skills and course content. Students are also tested on academic skills. Short readings that relate to both class content and the model paragraph or essay structure and format are distributed, and these reading materials form the basis of group activities and discussions.

## The Problem

As explained above, when asked to write main body paragraphs outside of class time, students often encounter difficulties despite having been given clear instructions. Specifically, students do not include in-text references, do not provide adequate support for arguments, and often rely too heavily on sources.

## The Solution: A Graded In-Class Writing Activity

In this course, students are given a review of the basic structure of a five-paragraph essay and detailed explanation of the structure and format of individual paragraphs. This is done in class lectures accompanied by PowerPoint presentations. The focus then shifts to research. Students are asked to choose a general topic (an individual sports figure), find sources, and begin basic research on their topics. Each student must keep a research notebook, which is monitored by the instructor. Students are then given instruction in research and writing skills and asked to apply what they have learned in various class activities within small groups. For example, they are given sources and a model paragraph and asked to write a main body paragraph. Emphasis is on the use and integration of summary, paraphrase, and quotation along with in-text references. Students will have received significant instruction in and practice of a main body paragraph for a research essay before the graded in-class writing activity is introduced. Moreover, they have had a chance to discuss this work with peers and address any problems with the instructor.

## Implementation

First, students are given a model of a main body paragraph with written instructions and parts of the paragraph clearly labeled. The model identifies the topic sentence, the kinds of support (example, detail, explanation), an explanation of how to introduce and integrate sources, and in-text references following the MLA style. In class, they are given a chance to examine the model, discuss it with peers and ask questions of the instructor. Second, as a

homework assignment, they are asked to research, make an outline, and prepare detailed research notes which they can use as the basis for their in-class writing. Students cannot use the original sources for the in-class writing exercise but must rely only on the outline and research notes. Students can also use the model paragraph provided by the instructor. Third, the instructor reiterates the basic structure of the paragraph and calls attention to specific formatting issues, such as in-text citations, before beginning the activity. In class, students are given ample time (students generally took 60-70 minutes) to complete their writing. They are asked to proofread their writing and submit both research notes and outline along with their in-class writing. In-class writing is then assessed by the instructor.

The main marking criteria depend on the specific part of the essay that students have composed. In the case of a body paragraph, the focus should be on structure (clear topic sentence, adequate support for the topic sentence), format (identifying sources and in-text references) and evidence of adequate content (research). The instructor can also choose to identify specific grammatical issues, especially common errors. Students can use the evaluation to rewrite these paragraphs for a first draft of their essay. It is also possible to conduct a peer review immediately following the exercise or in the following class, which can call further attention to the structure and format of the main body paragraph. Also, as a follow up, the instructor can address common problems that students had in their in-class writing and/or consult with students individually. During the semester, all three main body paragraphs of the five-paragraph essay assigned to students were written using this approach.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Although these results are based on anecdotal evidence, the task holds promise for teaching basic academic research and writing skills at the introductory level. Overall, the quality of writing obtained through this method was of a much higher level than that which was submitted in previous years. Students generally wrote more extensively, and with more attention to the structure and format of the academic essay. For example, in the previous semester, students consistently failed to include in-text references despite receiving in-class explanation and models. Moreover, students often failed to give adequate or logical support from sources. Finally, while this approach cannot completely solve the issue of plagiarism, working only from research notes and/or an outline means that students are forced to write in their own words. They also learn the value of careful note-taking which includes writing down source information and page numbers. The first time this approach was implemented, a few students failed to do adequate research or organize their materials and thus had poor results. This can be an eye-opener for some students and allows them to see the importance of taking good research notes and creating an outline for a paragraph. Also the instructor

has a chance to identify the students with problems, help them understand why they struggled with the assignment, and offer solutions. The second time students used the approach, there were fewer problems.