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Teaching Freshman Composition:
A Manual For Beginning Instructors

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by
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Every year new graduate assistants and adjunct faculty in departments of English teach freshman composition for the first time. Many of these new instructors have problems teaching and have difficulty organizing their freshman composition class. Some of those problems and difficulties could be avoided if the new instructor had access to the many teaching and organizing sources that libraries have on file.

This manual presents three options for teaching and one for organizing which will help the new instructor during the first semesters. In addition discursive bibliographies cite numerous references where instructors can find more examples, explanations and materials for class.

Three chapters suggest how student journals, peer evaluation, and practical writing can be used effectively in freshman composition. The additional chapter offers help in planning for the course before the semester begins.

The manual draws upon the research and the classroom experience of the author, herself a graduate teaching assistant. It should not be considered a freshman composition curriculum, but a guide to preparing one.

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Introduction

As graduate assistants teaching freshman composition, you are coping with several problems. For some it may be the first time you have ever taught. For others, like me, it was not a first time teaching, just a first time with such a nebulous subject. A textbook, an answer key, an anthology of essays, and definitions of patterns of development made up the extent of my preparation when I taught my first semester of freshman composition. After four semesters of teaching and two semesters of research, I have discovered that there is so much more to add to freshman composition. This manual is the "so much more."

I have researched three units I believe should be included in your freshman composition class because they stimulate and improve writing: journals, peer evaluation, and practical writing. The manual also contains a simple "how to" for devising a semester lesson plan of subjects, compositions, and readings you want to cover. I do not define the patterns of development, nor do I discuss grading, conferences, or testing because I believe the first can be found in any standard English text (including the one you are assigned), and the second through the fourth problems should be discussed with an advisor. I chose the four topics to research -- journals, peer evaluation, practical writing, and

Lesson plans -- because they are often overlooked by the first-time instructor, and I believe that a command of them can relieve a great deal of pressure from the first-time instructor and graduate student. My purpose is to present for the novice composition teacher a few options and ideas that will not only give the class more variety in the subject and presentation, but also provide more freedom of movement by permitting less instructor-based teaching and lecture.

Mining the Journal deals with the whys and hows of journal writing. I recommend assigning students journals for many reasons: availability of workable composition topics, accountability for reading assignments, and frequency of informal (but necessary) daily writing. My own list of topics and assignments could be used, but it will be better if you assign topics which your class has discussed. Freewritings or student-chosen topics (or ramblings) must be allowed so that the student may shape and style his journal into his unique collection of assigned topics, soap-box ideas, diary entries, fiction or poetry.

Workshopping for Profit and Pleasure stresses the many advantages of peer evaluation. The chapter discusses the techniques of grouping two, three, or four students to look for errors in grammar, mechanics, organization, and/or content in each other's composition. It also points out that you should not feel as if the experiment is a failure if a group does not coalesce as well as the other groups, or if some compositions seem untouched by

helpful comments the first time students are grouped. My experience has taught me that the majority of students will eventually learn to help other students if only by making them aware of an audience other than the instructor. The compositions are proofread by the reader before you, the instructor, add your comments and grade. The advantages of peer evaluation are many for you, also. Not only will you see better compositions, but also you will be freed from the role of single judge. The unit describes peer evaluation in both the prewriting and rewriting stages.

Writing That Makes Learning to Write Relevant stresses practical writing, a form of composition which not only gives more versatility and creativity to the class but also lends more reality. What student could argue against a letter of application being correct or a process description being audience-oriented? If we keep in mind that our primary goals are to teach audience awareness and standard English, then we will not cover exactly the same material that technical writing classes do, at least not for the same purpose. Technical writing often teaches exact forms or patterns, while we only wish to borrow the reality and directness which comes when the student is writing to a certain person for a certain purpose.

Mapping the Course expounds the whys and hows of deciding what should be taught, written, and discussed and in what order. This chapter does not deal with writing directly. The planning for prewriting, writing, and rewriting should be completed and recorded

so students know, from the beginning, that composition is never a one-step process. The chapter also stresses lesson planning. I have found that a clear feeling of sequence of assignments places the responsibility of class attendance and class work on the student instead of on the instructor.

The purpose of this manual is to provide some help for you. This help comes in two forms. One form consists of collected articles which I think are good and contain useful classroom ideas, but did not mention in the text of the chapter. These references are briefly annotated in a section called For Further Reading at the end of each chapter. For example, the book 1,000 Composition Topics is very useful, but it would be needless to describe in the body of the chapter. The other help or guide is the project itself and the articles that support the ideas in the project. In the four chapters, I have put together what it has taken me four semesters to learn about content in freshman composition. Maybe all will seem obvious after the first semester of teaching, and this material will be less useful to you as a second-semester instructor. Fine. The unit on lesson plans will probably never be reread by anyone, but when you sit down to plot your first semester's activities, it will help. Peer evaluation, once tried, will be second nature for you to use; but if no one has said "Let's try this," or if the ideas seem too risky, they might never be used. The bibliographical references can be used as alternate sources for an ideas or explanation (or if you need five of the

1,000 topics). Once read and tried, the articles help to build on your own expertise. Although this project does not define a freshman composition curriculum, it offers a series of optional approaches to and recommendations for a freshman composition curriculum.

I should describe how I began and ended my search for materials so that you feel confident I was thorough in this search and not merely relying on chance to bring articles. I found few articles in Reader's Guide. Then I searched the ERIC indexes (Resources in Education or RIE) from January 1980 through June 1982 under the descriptors: composition, curriculum, English, freshman, instruction, journals, language and literature, peer evaluation, practical writing, technical writing, and writing. It took three months to do the research. ERIC is a clearinghouse for educational material, so the entries ranged from government studies to conference presentations. My second step was a computer search which scanned the files of ERIC and doctoral dissertations under the headings I requested. It turned up little. My third step was thumbing through back issues of College Composition and Communication, College English, and English Journal. Of all of these sources, ERIC is the most valuable.

I used few books. Those I did review or skim were the ones constantly being mentioned or credited in the articles. I agreed, for the most part, with their ideas and theories, but felt that the first semester instructor did not need abstract ideas. Rather he or she needed definite units or usable suggestions. For the

first semester of graduate study and teaching, it is much easier to slide in a piece of microfiche on the topic you want to read and spend fifteen minutes reading and digesting the material to use immediately in class than it is to finish a chapter or book. The chapter or book might only give theory when what you want is practical advice. Therefore, most of my references within and at the ends of the chapters contain teaching suggestions that are immediately usable in your classroom. I support all the simplicity you can find.

Mining the Journal

The first reaction to the journals is usually: "Oh no. I kept one of those in high school. Yuk. Awful." The problem I see is not students' bad experience with journals, but their fear of informal writing. Others (writers of articles and other graduate assistants) cite the fears of students who feel they must write only perfect sentences, the first draft, fears of writing something the instructor will object to or find laughable, or the inability to sit down and write for the required time. What I have found is different. We tell them the grammar, mechanics, organization, and content will not be graded or marked, and yet the look of terror, the reluctance is still there. Why?

My hypothesis is this: writing, if informal and nonstressful, will often betray some emotion, some insecurity, of the writer. The student begins to write about his day, his thoughts, his reflections, and suddenly he realizes that he has shown a part of himself that he had rather keep to himself. Writing does that.

Often, too, students have told me incidents in their lives which I have difficulty understanding and forgetting. At the beginning of a fall semester, one young man wrote constantly of his girlfriend, their plans together, and what she meant to him. About the fifth week into classes, he missed a few days, came in with an excuse, and told me he had been to his girlfriend's

funeral. In this case, I was the one who wished that I had not read his journal, and I wished too that I could stop imagining how he felt.

Because the diary form of journal writing (the day-to-day, I-did-this-and-then-I-did-that writing) often fosters such problems, I choose topics that students can write about with some feeling, detail and originality. I say "can" because students are told from the beginning of the semester that if a topic is too difficult, they should make up one of their own and write the required number of pages for that topics. Last semester, my students were given these topics to respond to in their journals:

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Topics</u>
2	Go to the grill (on campus), and write a description of what is going on.
2	Describe a special, unusual time this weekend.
4	Discuss your reflections on high school.
2	Compare two of your friends.
2	Compare two people you dislike.
3	Discuss your feelings about death.
4	Freewriting
2	Discuss in detail a character in one book you have read.
4	You are a spy. MSU is supposed to be the source of major activity against your country in the

United States. Since you like it in the United States, you write home (to whomever you want to write) and tell half lies. Describe the "terrorist activities."

- 2 Freewriting.
- 3 Discuss your ideas for a novel.
- 2 Discuss where or what you would like to be in five years.
- 4 Discuss a theme, or issue, ideas, that the author is concerned with in a book you have read.
- 2 Write some poetry for a greeting card company.
- 2 Define "you."
- 2 Freewriting.

My students were also responsible for two pages per month of a review from a magazine in their field of study or interest. In addition I assigned topics in class after the discussion of subjects such as the good of ROTC, the "main" problem in high school, and banned books. Students seemed to welcome the opportunity to give their opinions, not only in class discussion, but also in writing.

Talk to your students about the journal. I tell my students that my primary purpose in assigning the journal is that writing will become easier, less of a threat. Putting words on paper scares some students. By keeping a journal in which none of the

mistakes will be marked or corrected, the student learns to concentrate on transferring thoughts into words and not dwelling on commas, spelling, or fragments.

The journal can also be used as a depository for potential essay topics. Since a student has already written down some ideas in his journal, the ideas can be used as a kernel of a composition. The tedious task of starting is taken care of, and the student can leap ahead to organizing.¹

Evelyn Roberts states that there are three useful kinds of entries in the journal:

1. reading: students read books and essays and respond to them in the journal;
2. sense: the five senses are used to describe an object;
3. process: the journal is the beginning of a composition.²

Using the journals as part of the process of writing compositions is a realistic and pragmatic approach. The journal again becomes less of a diary and more of a mine for ideas.

According to Shelley Reece, the journal is an effective way to insure students have already thought out and written out ideas for their next compositions. Her article states the journal works:

1. to foster personal growth;
2. to reduce writing apprehension and anxiety;

3. to strengthen pre-writing in students' composing processes;
4. to enhance the development of writing abilities.³

I suggest journals be taken up and read every three to five weeks. If they are collected more often, students might feel their journals are nothing but instructor-oriented exercise books which must be finished as quickly as possible. If journals are collected only once or twice a semester, students may either forget them until the last moment, or feel that there is no audience and make the journal so vague and impersonal that it is useless. The right time to collect the journals should correspond with a time period you have built to read them. Giving your students an approximate date when the journal is next due will help them schedule writing time. Students often put off writing thirty pages until the day before a journal is due, so do not be surprised if you find your students in the cafeteria two hours before class, writing the twenty-first page of a thirty page journal assignment. One of the oddest questions I was ever asked concerning the journal was: "Well, what if I want to do all the pages in just one night instead of doing them every few days?" Freshman often forget that they are not dealing with their high school teacher who might be shocked at such a remark.

Our major concern should be with the student who wants to learn, and journals are a good indicator of how serious students

are in their studies. A good student will produce a journal, complete, at the appropriate time. An average or disinterested student will produce a journal with some blank or partially filled pages. A student once turned in a notebook with the word "journal" written on the outside but no words on the inside. I am not sure if he thought I did not read the journals or thought that I would not care, but students are surprised when I do not give credit for buying the notebook.

In closing this section, I remind you that before you begin teaching freshman composition is the best time to think of topics and the number of pages you want your students to write. By assigning the journal the second class period and distributing the topics and required pages, you have stressed to your students the importance of the journal in your class work. One-fourth of my students' final grade was dependent on the journal. I usually assign about eighty to one hundred pages of college rule (not skipping every other line). Do not be surprised if your students act dismayed; you know you are approaching writing in the least painful way. Students need to write, and they need to write more than compositions. Through the journals, students can write a lot, and we, as instructors, do not have to analyze and criticize that writing. The journals take pressure off of us to grade every piece of writing a student produces. Finally, you know that you will have helped some students to begin a practice (journal writing) they will continue for the rest of their lives, or at least through freshman composition.

Notes

¹ Dawn M. Wilson, "Steppingstones to Success: A Journal-Based Composition Course" in Structuring for Success in the English Classroom, ed. Candy Carter (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1982), pp. 67-72.

² Evelyn Roberts, Self-Discovery Through Journal Writing (ERIC ED 203 348), p. 1-3.

³ Shelley Reece, The Journal Keeps the Person in the Process (ERIC ED 193 665), p. 3.

For Further Reading

For more topics to choose from, 1,000 Topics for Composition (ERIC ED 184 138) is helpful and would insure writing that may be transformed into compositions later. An article that states the many wonderful benefits of journal writing and offers some suggestions for topics is "Journal Writing -- The Quiet Times" by Barbara Warren in Structuring for Success in the English Classroom, ed. Candy Carter (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1982), pp. 107-112.

Two articles to read before you begin to assign the journals are Come-on Out -- The War's Over or Making Peace with English 1A by Peter Mueller (ERIC ED 184 116) and "Day after Day: The Journal as an Aid to Teaching Composition" by Nancy Maus in Writing Projects, ed. Margaret Fleming (ERIC ED 198 559). Both articles contain more than journal information, but they both also show how the journal can fit into a writing course like freshman composition. "Day after Day" shows how to introduce journals into your class; Come-on Out stresses the journal to increase fluency in a nonthreatening way.

Three articles that explain why journal writing is more useful than standard, teacher-oriented writing or term paper writing are Writing Apprehension: Implications for Teachers (ERIC ED 189 619), Student Journals in the Composition Classroom: A Reassessment

through Granted Theory Development (ERIC ED 172 218), and English Composition: A Course Design in Individualized Instruction in the Community College (ERIC ED 190 169). All three articles are written in a very dry, professional style with a little too much jargon. The important sections are at the beginning of all three in which the authors explain why the learning-oriented student writing will be more successful than class or teacher-oriented writing. By learning-oriented they mean the student writes to explain or clarify, not to be graded or marked. The journal is one kind of learning-oriented writing.

Workshopping for Profit and Pleasure

What do you do when you discover that those classification papers which your students have written -- supposedly taking time to prewrite, write, and proofread -- are indescribably bad? The organization of the composition cannot be detected; words are mostly utility and misspelled; punctuation is missing or misused; and the instructions to select a restricted, imaginative topic have been forgotten. This list does go on and on and on. If you grade these papers, most will receive lower than a "C"; they will be filled with marks (any color pen), and the comments that you make will be the typical, nagging, proofreading kind. You also know that the student will get back this paper and think: "I know if I had taken time to really work on this, I could do whatever these marks say. I don't need to read these marks."

This is my situation before midterm. My solution is peer evaluation. It does work with most students most of the time. It is important to realize that some people will respond to one another in a given situation and some will not. But the surprise (it was for me) is that the student who does not seem to care will sometimes like and benefit from peer evaluation more than from my written remarks. There are exceptions. Students who either do not care or do not know what standard English is will hurt other students with useless comments or criticism. However, I feel the

good peer evaluation outweighs the bad, and so I continue to use it. There are two divisions of peer evaluation I use:

1. peer evaluation of subject and ideas, and
2. peer evaluation of the finished product.

I would suggest trying number two before number one, only because until your students learn to work with other students, the idea of peer evaluation in the draft stage might be too unsettling. Nevertheless, I will discuss them in their logical order.

At first my students were certain that I was joking. I had explained what a classification paper was, what it needed to contain, and I had given examples. They knew what my next sentences would be: choose a topic and begin to prewrite the composition. I would walk around the room to check the topic and answer any questions. Then, as they wrote I would walk around the room to each and ask what he was writing on and if he had enough material. It was a long hit-and-miss process. I stayed too long with a talky student and not long enough with a shy, but seemingly needy student. The surprise and relief appeared in their faces when I said that they should:

1. find the partner I would assign;
2. go some place on campus, library, grill, empty classroom;
3. talk through what they wanted to write about;
4. take a few essential notes;

5. allow their partners to talk through their ideas about a topic and how they were planning to cover it;
6. make appropriate, helpful comments.

The results were interesting.

The students were to write the composition from these notes and turn the papers in the next class period. The grammar, mechanics, and spelling problems were not helped very much. But organization and overall imagination were better than in any previous paper. My students were enthusiastic about what they had done. One young man of flighty but sincere nature told me that at first, he and his partner had joked around, gotten cokes, and had finally settled down in the cafeteria. They talked about topics and decided that his topic needed to be restricted much more and chose a topic for him then and there. They talked about some of the details of his composition: the divisions of the classification, the sensory details, the best way to introduce and conclude. After the young man had finished explaining his composition (and receiving help), the older, better writer explained his ideas, mentioned examples he thought would be interesting, and even discussed how he was preparing to approach his topic. The younger man turned in a better composition than I had expected, and he had had a good time too. Most comments were similar concerning verbal prewriting. The only problems occurred when I accidentally paired off two very shy people who prewrote the remaining time in class, in silence. But on the whole, it worked. I was stationed in my office ready to assist.

Why does peer evaluation during drafting work? Why should it work any better than sitting down by oneself with pen and paper and ideas? The primary problem I see from my own experience in writing and with my students' experiences is knowing where and how to start. Talking makes a start. Most of the time, students can be spontaneous and the compositions, as one student said, are more fun (I translate "bearable") to write.

Richard Gebhardt in "Teamwork and Feedback: Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writings" gives some reasons that apply:

Since students feel fear and frustration privately, they need to be helped to see that they are not alone, that they can receive feedback from others who themselves are fearful and frustrated and so themselves need help. They need to feel, when they open up in a writing group, that others understand their hesitancy and look at their writing with sympathetic candor. Such positive vibrations received in response to the attempt to be open in a collaborative group are forms of feedback.⁴

He adds:

It seems to me that collaborative writing strategies should be applied to finding a promising topic, generalizing details on the topic, and locating the intended audience for a paper.⁵

I stated earlier that peer evaluation on rewriting should be used first because when students are new at peer evaluation, having something to work from is easier than starting from nothing (as in peer evaluation in drafting). Before assigning any composition, tell the class that you may ask them to read or show their compositions to one or two other classmates. This will help the student realize he is writing not only for you but for a much wider audience; and it will also curtail any "confessions," gut-ripped, guilt-ridden, embarrassing stories, which you alone will suffer through. Students will then choose a topic (or your help in assigning specific topics might work better for a beginning) and begin to prewrite, then to write, and finally to turn in.

I like for my students, after they write and before they get into peer evaluation groups to revise, to turn their papers in to me. I read the compositions, write one or two general remarks, and then return the compositions to the class the next period. The groups meet to read each composition and make comments on grammar, mechanics, organization, and clarity.

Assigning groups may cause you a few problems at first. I regard my selection of rewriting groups more importantly than my drafting groups. Rewriting groups are composed of three or four students, depending on the class size. These groups must be not only compatible, but they also must be made up of students of varied skills. Low, middle, and high students work fine together as long as the personalities do not conflict. The conflicts in

personality may take the form of one student doing all the work and the other student ignoring or being ignored. Sometimes students may not want to work together, and then all you can do is make a note to yourself not to put those people together again.

Before allowing students to get into groups, describe exactly what you want students to look for in the compositions. Maxine Hairston believes that our mania for correctness in little things such as lie and lay, commas, spelling, and other small problems, interrupts the real learning that students could be doing. We place too much emphasis on the little problems, which robs our students of discovering and correctly applying ideas about organization, content, and topic. We should give our students ideas about what we think is important. For example, one objective for revising would be to make the organization as clear and as explicit as possible. Your list should change as the semester goes on, touching problems you see in the compositions. Remember not to overload students with too many problems to look for.⁶

The rewritten papers should be due the next class period to insure that students do not put off rewriting them for longer than a day or two. That way student evaluations and comments will be remembered and important in rewriting.

In supporting peer evaluation class rewriting, we are being, as Kristina Elias says, "less teacher-centered and more student-centered (in) instruction." In her article Peer Interaction: A Method of Creating Voice in Writing, Elias says the "teacher should develop peer interaction lessons to teach voice."⁷

The argument for peer evaluation or student workshopping is also supported by James Moffett in Teaching the Universe of Discourse. He states there are three main reasons for giving students a chance to work together. I give you here a very brief and simplified paraphrase:

1. The student is given an audience other than the "authority-figure" teacher;
2. the student receives a reaction immediately and can ask questions of the peer who reads and responds to his paper;
3. the instructor will receive the rewrites of these revised compositions and can concentrate on problems that are not clear to her students.⁸

Moffett supports the method of allowing students to learn as much as they can on their own, without what students consider the nit-picking, English teacher comments. We as overworked instructors, gain too. Instead of conferring with each student for each composition, we can hold workshops that require our attention only as the final say in a debate. Instead of spending ten minutes marking mechanical errors and writing "frag," I can begin to make remarks that my students would not know how to phrase in evaluation groups or remarks that I feel might help the student understand a consistent problem.

If you are unsure still about how you want to begin with your student workshops, Structuring for Success in the English Classroom

contains a helpful article entitled "Structuring the Classroom for Peer Revision of Composition." It moves from a list of warm-up exercises to teacher involvement and noninvolvement.

Read as much as you can on workshops (peer evaluation), but remember that your primary goal is to make drafting and revising a challenging, stimulating exercise, not a lesson in martyrdom for you or your students. Try your own ideas; mix certain unlikely combinations of students together in a workshop situation and watch for the reactions. Give them specific guidelines for getting started and different places to go and to work. Spontaneity and originality are often as energizing as experience in an instructor's teaching. We can keep interest and sincerity in our classrooms as long as we help the students to realize that we are not reaching down to them in our explanations but only explaining a little more fully, and often their peers can help to do that better than we.

Notes

⁴ Richard Gebhardt, "Teamwork and Feedback: Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing," College English, 42 (1980), 71.

⁵ Gebhardt, pp. 73.

⁶ Maxine Hairston, Adapting the Research of Shaugnessy and Britton for the Composition Classroom (ERIC ED 177 578), pp. 11-12.

⁷ Kristina Elias, Peer Interaction: A Method of Creating Voice in Writing (ERIC ED 216 356), p. 14.

⁸ James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 193-195.

For Further Reading

In Structuring for Success in the English Classroom, ed. Candy Carter (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1982) there are two articles, "Structuring the Classroom for Peer Evaluation of Composition" (pp. 120-25) and "Facilitating the Peer Critiquing of Writing" (pp. 113-19) which would be helpful to read before you attempt peer evaluation in the classroom. Both articles give good warm-ups to get the class ready to give and receive advice from each other.

Anne Legge, Small Groups in College Writing Classes: Why and How (ERIC ED 204 803) gives us more "why" than "how," but her article is good to read if you are still undecided about whether or not peer evaluation is worth the trouble.

Speaking Your Writing (ERIC ED 199 713) by Regina Rinderer gives definite suggestions about taking notes within the pre-writing peer evaluation stage and suggestions for the instructor about preparing your students to be more helpful with their comments.

Speaking as a Prewriting Activity: Its Application to Teaching Community College Freshman Composition Pupils (ERIC ED 185 585) by George Douglas Meyers gives advice on how to set up pairs of students as well as explains that speaking skills can

strengthen writing skills, if directed properly. His students wrote better compositions if he allowed them to prewrite orally.

Writing That Makes Learning to Write Relevant

First let me define what I mean by "practical" writing. I define practical writing in my freshman composition class as writing that is directed at a certain audience for a certain purpose. The complexity of practical writing is largely determined by who reads the composition. Practical writing teaches the same qualities that essay writing teaches, except practical writing stresses these qualities for the work or business world instead of the unknown red marker (us). Practical writing assignments, I have found, are successful because they remind the student that there is a reader who is interested in the information the student has to present. Essay writing often has a vague audience and no purpose other than to satisfy the instructor in order to get a grade. Practical writing assignments can be used to show why the skills students learn from essay writing are necessary. There are three main writing assignments I scatter throughout the semester that particularly stress audience-centered or practical writing:

1. resume and letter of application
2. process paper
3. specific audience composition.

Audience and students' awareness of an audience or reader are stressed from the beginning of the composition courses. I have drawn the communication triangle in different classes and explained

it in different ways; my students would nod at me, and I would receive general, boring, undirected compositions which were written to be turned in to the red marker. Then, almost by accident, I decided to try a process paper. I had never assigned a process paper to a class, and I was reluctant. I told my students they should choose a process that they could explain to the class, in front of the class. Behold! Audience awareness! The majority of compositions were sets of instructions; but for the most part, the instructions, the processes, were audience-oriented. Furthermore, the suggestions that other students made to the student giving the process lecture helped to define the audience even more. Audience or reader, the term did not matter. Students wrote better, more precisely, more accurately if they knew the audience and the purpose for writing.

The assignment for process composition was often to write a very complex and intricate set of instructions. These instructions were suitable since my primary goal was explanation according to the needs of a given audience, not the concern of what a "true" process composition was. The composition class seemed to enjoy the challenge of instructions (or process) because the student could be the expert, explaining to a naive reader in his field. The composition could be critiqued much more easily since, if I failed to understand or if I felt the instructions or the process was too vague, I could give concrete, absolute suggestions. (See the sample paper at the end of this unit).

My next big step came two semesters later when I had my students write resumes and letters of application. These, too, proved challenging to students because I asked them to write for a job to someone in their field. The students were interested because all had tried to apply for jobs and all had heard of letters of application, but few had written them. The red marker was still there, but the primary concern was: Whom am I writing to, and how do I write to this person? Not all papers were good. A few students refused to acknowledge that they must present themselves to an employer in a favorable way. Others were quick to abandon the composition class writing and show this "employer" their skills, energies and enthusiasm. Student interest was very high on this assignment because all saw the need for it.

You may ask why we should try to do so much in our class. Why should we present so many ideas to our freshmen when they have four years of college to learn resumes, letters of applications, and, in general, writing? Some students are enrolled in two year programs in the university, and some in the community colleges plan to go no further. Also, currently enrolled freshmen have a decreasing chance to finishing school, according to recent projections. But, even if we believed that the chance for some remains high, how do we ease our consciences for the rest who will take only our writing course during their short college careers? For some, freshman composition is the only writing course that they may ever take. We can not justify teaching a less than comprehensive course.

From Charles Side's Technical Writing: Implications for Compositional Skills Development emerge three arguments that support the need to blend in some technical writing qualities into our essay classes. Technical writing, he says:

1. is a method of writing development that is "you-centered" rather than "I centered;"
2. is a heuristic for perceiving and organizing experience in a technical society;
3. is a pragmatic alternative to the traditional and sometimes stale approaches to composition.⁹

Sides goes on to soothe away our fears of every composition class becoming a technical writing class by saying:

A freshman composition course cannot be a technical writing course for the simple reason that the content for such a course is not there; students do not yet have the technical knowledge to make a course such as that worthwhile. But certainly we should teach even freshman students how to write a variety of communications which are useful in the society in which they live.¹⁰

There are extremes though. Philip Snyder in "Writing 1-0002: A Theme Course for Freshman Composition" has arranged all his writing assignments in technical writing: business letter,

memos, reports, and replies.¹¹ This seems as careless as ignoring the practical side of a writing altogether.

The five most frequently listed qualities of a good writer, as enumerated in "Writing in the World of Work: What Our Graduates Report," are:

1. ability to write frequently,
2. ability to consider audience,
3. ability to spot error,
4. ability to persuade, and
5. ability to be clear and concise.¹²

None of the above are necessarily the qualities of a good technical writer only. Each could be learned and practiced without any technical writing or technical writing training. What is important, though, is to make the student aware that these five qualities are important. The skills that practical writing develops are skills that we should try to develop in any pattern of development. The following chart shows the skills, in order of importance, that English professors and managers desire in their students and employees:¹³

Skills Chart: Order of Importance
of Writing Skills

Professors

organization

Managers

clarity

(Skills Chart Continued)

<u>Professors</u>	<u>Managers</u>
spelling	grammatical accuracy
clarity	conciseness
grammar	spelling
punctuation	simple language

Another list in the October 1982 College English has as the top three qualities: clarity, grammar, and organization.¹⁴ The lists above are similar; the managers' differs very little from the professors' list. The only notable difference is that "simple language" is mentioned in the managers' list and it is not mentioned in the professors' list. Why "simple language"? I believe it goes back to audience. If the words, phrases and jargon a student uses cannot convey his meaning, the report is worthless. Therefore, once again, we find ourselves focusing on audience. We must teach our students to consider audience when deciding how much information to include or how technical the jargon can become.

Practical writing can be taught and should be taught in freshman composition because the skills that practical writing stresses are skills necessary to write anything. From an extremely good article entitled "On-the-Job Writing of High Level Business Executives: Implications for College Teaching" I glean for you six recommendations for teaching:

1. teach the importance of audience,
2. teach analytical thinking skills,
3. demonstrate different patterns of development for a particular writing assignment,
4. teach the writing of summaries,
5. teach organization for audience needs,
6. teach clarity.¹⁵

Regardless of whether we choose to call any writing we assign to our students technical or practical, the above suggestions should apply to the writing they do. Formats such as application letters, resumes, process papers, definition papers, and simple instructions are all good teachers of audience in themselves because students are not writing simply for the red marker, but for an audience. I believe such formats with their emphasis on audience awareness are good to teach because students see the need to learn them. As instructors of a non-computer course, we must prove to our students that we and writing are worth their time and study, because we are.

Sample of Process Paper Draft for Peer Evaluation

You hear a bang. Your car suddenly veers to the side. You can hear the rhythmic Flop, Flop, Flop of rubber hitting cement. You have a flat tire, but don't despair. Changing a tire is a simple system, and when done correctly, it can be accomplished in a minimum of time. So, get out of your car and let's get started!

Obviously, there are a couple things that need to be done. First, such as getting the car off the road and onto a hard flat surface. The next two steps are all-important -- see which tire is flat, and check to make sure you have a spare tire in the trunk. If you don't have one, it's time to start walking. But we'll assume there is a spare in the trunk, and we'll go on from there.

Get the spare out of the trunk now -- it might be harder to do once you have the car jacked up. Get the jack out now, too. For our purposes, we'll say the flat tire is the right rear one.

In the body of most cars, there is a small indentation near each tire, into which you place the jack. There are several different types of car jacks, and since they're relatively easy to figure out, I'll leave that part up to you.

Wait a minute! Before jacking the car, it's very important to loosen the nuts which hold the tire on, called "lug nuts". The way to go about this is to take the hubcap remover (usually

on the end of the jack handle), and, needless to say, remove the hubcap. Once this is accomplished, use the lug wrench (usually also on the jack-handle) to loosen the lug nuts. It's important to do this while the car is still on the ground, because once the car is suspended, it becomes hard to gain enough leverage to loosen the nuts. Once the nuts are loosened, however, it is time to raise the car, by way of the jack (I'll bet you thought we'd never get around to it!)

Use the jack to get the car to a point where the tire you're working on is about a half a foot off the ground. Please be very careful with the jack, making sure it's level and sturdy. If the jack should happen to be placed precariously under the car, the car could slip, fall back down, and hurt you. (You don't want that to happen, do you?)

The car's jacked up. The lugs are loose. Now it's time to remove the flat tire. Use the lug wrench to remove the lug nuts. If you were smart, and loosened them like I told you earlier, this should be an easy job. Once you've taken all the nuts off, it's time to lift the tire off. Remember, that tire's heavier than it looks. If you aren't careful, you may end up with a hernia or something.

Once the flat has been removed, place the spare in its place. Make sure you put the new tire on in the right direction. If you put it on backwards, you may have trouble replacing the hubcap.

When you have the new tire in place, fasten each of the lug nuts back onto their bolts. Tighten them as much as possible.

When you have the new tire on, and the nuts tight, you may lower the car, again by way of the jack. Let the jack down slowly so as to avoid damage to the car. It may be fun to kick the jack out, but your car probably wouldn't like that.

When the car is back on the ground, take the lug wrench and tighten the nuts again, as tight as possible. Then replace the hubcap. It looks just like new, doesn't it. Go back around to the trunk now, and replace the jack, and put the flat where the spare tire was.

It would be advisable to go to a gas station and have the tire repaired as soon as possible. After all, if you get a flat tire again, you'll want to show off your newly acquired skills, won't you?

Now, get back in your car and get going! I told you it wouldn't take very long!

Notes

⁹ Charles H. Sides, Technical Writing: Implications for Compositional Skills Development, (ERIC ED 182 748). Later printed in The Technical Writing Teacher, 8 (Winter, 1981), 3.

¹⁰ Sides, p. 7.

¹¹ Philip Snyder, "Working 1-0002: A Theme Course for Freshman Composition," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 315.

¹² Robert Bataille, "Writing in the World of Work: What Our Graduates Report," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 280.

¹³ Christopher J. Thaiss, The Writing Required by Professors and Managers: Two Surveys (ERIC ED 178 938), pp. 15 and 18.

¹⁴ Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller, "What We Learn from Writing on the Job," College English, 44 (1982), 5.

¹⁵ Barrie Van Dyck, On-The-Job Writing of High-Level Business Executives: Implications for College Teaching (ERIC ED 185 584), pp. 7-9.

For Further Reading

Two articles that provide ready-made units for practical writing are From Composition to Career: Sequential Assignments for Professional Writing by Lillian Bisson (ERIC ED 202 026) and "Teaching Creative Business Letters and Memos" by Joan Knapp in Structuring for Success in the English Classroom, ed. by Candy Carter (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1982), pp. 88-91. Both articles present reasons why practical writing should be taught and how to help students master the needed skills.

Marshall Atlas' Writer Insensitivity to Audience -- Causes and Cures (ERIC ED 185 568) would be a good article to start your reading with because it gives many reasons why students ignore audience and why practical writing can awaken students to audience awareness.

The Effect of Multiple Revision on Freshman Writing by Suzanne Pferrer (ERIC ED 191 048) discusses the revision needs and practices of students and how practical writing can teach revision better than regular essay writing.

The Technical Writing Teacher, edited by Donald H. Cunningham for the Association of Teachers of Technical Writers is a good journal to read along with the other regulars, College Composition and Communication, English Journal and College English. The

Technical Writing Teacher publishes articles dealing with audience, composition, and basic writing.

Mapping the Course

You receive your teaching assignment. You realize after the placement test (if there is one) and after telling your potential students your name (and asking theirs), you do not know what to say or to do. The class will expect something the first day after that placement test and something after that. The realization comes: you and freshman composition are the shot-gun wedding of the year. How do you begin to make-up assignments? Why should you write up assignments for half the semester or the entire semester instead of doing and planning week by week? Why should you give your class copies of your syllabus instead of telling them class period by class period? I will try to answer these questions and give examples of previously used syllabuses. For Further Reading will contain the advice, guides, units, topics, and examples that I think can be used, or that I have used in some form or other.

How do you make-up assignments? A good lesson plan begins with a good draft. Look at the samples at the end of this section. Note that sometimes an entire three class period week is summarized into four words: prewrite, write, and rewrite. Note too that grammar, mechanics, and spelling exercises are scattered. Note the lack of detail in many examples. The assignment sheet you will give your students will look something like this. Your

lesson plans will look like this except they will be filled in more fully: different worksheets you will bring, what you will read beforehand, just a little more material that will get you ready to explain an idea to your students. The lesson plan and the syllabus for your students are similar in all but one way: you have the details. We will concentrate here on the syllabus or assignment sheet.

The easiest way to start is brainstorming. To make this step-by-step and easier to follow, try this:

1. Take texts that you will be using for the semester, and take out only two sheets of typing paper and a pen.
2. Number the paper from one to fifteen leaving space in between the numbers. Each number is a week in the semester.
3. Look briefly at the sample assignment sheets on the following pages. Do not take notes. Turn back to this page.
4. Look through the text or texts, deciding which chapters you want to cover and in what order. Just because a chapter is designated as number one, it is not necessary to teach it first.
5. Write in the chapter titles on the appropriate space allotted for the week. Remember that you and your students might feel more secure beginning with a textbook.

6. There are a number of patterns of development you may want to teach: narration, description, classification, comparison and contrast, process, definition, cause and effect, persuasion. Decide which you want to teach first, second, and third. Remember that narration is the easiest form to write and persuasion is the most difficult. Sprinkle those throughout your worksheet. Remember, you are going to change this to make it more unified and more logical, so do not be afraid. Be sure to allow class time for group drafting, group rewriting, and writing, as well as the class period you explain the pattern of development and give the examples for it.
7. If you want to cover different problems with grammar, mechanics, or special problems, put on different lines or spaces: cover grammar, commas, fragments, run-ons, subject and verb agreement, etc. Do not be upset if you decide you need to add a worksheet every two weeks or so. These are a nice change of pace from writing every period, and the success rate for a well-explained, special problem worksheet is high.
8. Put aside your draft. Look at the two examples of assignment sheets. Are there any units listed that you like? Add them to your draft. Note how some weeks

are totally given over to a chapter in the text or to a certain composition. You realize your lesson plans will need more information. Now is a good time to begin to collect material for the units you are uncertain of. What class periods can be given over totally to a group or class discussion on such hot topics as sentence vs. word outlines? What signifies completeness? How much jargon can you use and not lose the intended reader? How important are introductions and conclusions in a composition? Allow your students a period or two to fight out these ideas among themselves with you as referee. Students enjoy expressing their views when their views are asked frequently and asked with no definite answer (from you) in mind. Be relaxed, and enjoy the times your class debates such issues.

Once you have all the additions to your syllabus, recopy it on the other sheet of paper. Again, do not worry if there are a few gaps; you can change or add to this even at midterm, even if your students have copies. If there are any amazing gaps you cannot fill, take this plan to a professor and ask advice; you have a good start.

Why should you write up assignments for the entire semester instead of writing them week by week? One reason is pressure. Right now you are not under any burdening pressure. Class does

not meet tomorrow. You can afford to experiment, brainstorm, and think. During the third week of classes, your imagination and your thinking may not be in perfect working order: too much to do in other classes, too much to grade, too many students wanting to know what they are doing next.

Another reason is that we work better if we know where we are going. If you can give yourself and your students an idea of what is going to happen, class meetings are not isolated events happening in no particular order. By making out lesson plans now, you begin to see what you want to do instead of what you back yourself into doing.

Giving your students your assignment sheet will also give them the responsibility for knowing what is due. Not only do they hear you assign the paper or exercise, but it is also written down, and students can consult their assignment sheet to see if missing class today would be a wise move or a stupid one. We are therefore not responsible if the student misses the important composition, for he knew when it was due from the beginning of the semester. We are not subjective assigners who attempt to catch students off guard; but we have planned our assignments, and if the student misses, he nevertheless knows what he is responsible for.

The following are sample assignment sheets that you may use as guides. These are only examples of what assignment sheets can contain. You will devise one that suits your preference for teaching style and content. Remember that my notes for some of

these units were lengthy. Also, remember, the more flexible you are, the less likely you are to teach only twenty minutes or so during your first classes because you run out of material when your students will not talk to you. The articles in For Further Reading you should read, if for no other reason than that some of the entries are good sources for composition topics and lesson units. A good, well-written lesson unit will help you when your own work begins to overpower you. Do not be upset or feel less professional if you decide to borrow and teach an entire unit from one of the articles. Remember, though, that if your class does not respond, there is no reason to be upset. You can explain the material in different ways, and you can make it interesting next semester.

Sample 1

Texts:

McCrimmon, James. Writing With a Purpose. 7th ed. Boston:

Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.

Decker, Randall E. ed. Patterns of Exposition. 7th ed. Boston:

Little, Brown and Company, 1980.

Assignments:

1. Written Composition Test (a placement test)
2. Introduction to the course.
3. Explain the narrative. Discuss Decker p. 282. Begin pre-writing.
4. Write narrative.
5. Discuss McC. 1-23. Write advertisement in class (audience-awareness).
6. Return the narrative. Rewrite.
7. Discuss McC. chapters 2 and 3.
8. Complete exercises on sentences (worksheets). Turn in first 24 pages of journal.
9. Discuss Decker p. 276. Prewrite Narrative 2.
10. Write narrative 2.
11. Begin paragraphs: description.
12. Discuss McC. chapter 5. Return narrative 2. Rewrite due next class period.

13. Worksheet on comma splices and run-on sentences.
14. Verbal worksheet.
15. Fragment exercises.
16. Mid-term test on complete sentence.
17. Discuss chapter 6 McC.
18. Decker p. 60. Explain classification composition. Begin prewriting.
19. Write classification composition.
20. Read chapter 7 McC.
21. Bring in newspaper article exhibiting the misuse of words.
22. Write a classification composition.
23. Words. Rewrite classification composition replacing all circled words with more precise words.
24. Library tour.
25. Library tour.
26. Library tour.
27. Explain comparison and contrast composition. Read Decker 90 and 94.
28. Peer evaluation of topic and prewriting.
29. Write comparison and contrast composition.
30. Rewrite comparison and contrast composition.
31. Worksheet on lie/lay, sit/set, and rise/raise.
32. Read Decker 176. Explain process composition. Prewrite and turn in first draft.

33. Return prewriting with comments. Write process paper.
34. Discuss McC. chapter 8.
35. Rewrite process composition.

Sample 2

Texts:

McCrimmon, James. Writing With a Purpose. 7th ed. Boston:
Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.

Decker, Randall E. ed. Patterns of Exposition. 7th ed. Boston:
Little, Brown and Company, 1980.

Assignments:

Jan.

- 24-28 Description of the course.
Describe compositions and narrative composition.
- 31- 4 Prewrite narrative 1. Discuss McC. chapter 1 and 2.
Write narrative 1.

Feb.

- 7-11 Discuss McC. chapter 3. Prewrite 2nd narrative.
Due Wed.
Discuss comparison and contrast compositions.
Worksheet on independent and dependent clauses.
Return narrative 2. Discuss verbals.
Decker 94 and 115. Peer evaluation on narrative 2.
Rewrite.
- 14-16 Chapter 5 McC. Decker 90. Worksheet for fragments.
Prewrite comparison and contrast. Peer drafting.
Due Mon.

- 21-25 Library
Return comparison and contrast paper.
- 28- 2 Discuss chapter 6, McC.
lie/lay, sit/set, and rise/raise.
Mid-term; complete sentences.
- March
- 14-16 Chapter 7, McC.
- 21-25 Discuss classification. Decker 60.
Peer evaluation in prewriting classification.
Write classification paper.
Worksheet for comma splices.
- 28-30 Letter of application and resumes.
- April
- 4- 8 Pronoun/antecedent agreement.
Subject/verb agreement.
- 11-13 Process paper explained.
Process paper written and turned in.
Process paper returned with my comments and then
comments by peer evaluation groups.
Rewrite due on Mon.
- 18-22 Explain definition paper; peer prewriting. Write
composition in class.
- May
- 1 - 6 Choose pattern of development and topic.
Prewrite paper and turn in.
- 10 Turn back for final revision and writing.

For Further Reading

Two articles that are designed as a series of assignments are Designing a Sequence of Freshman Composition Assignments by James Aubrey (ERIC ED 213 014) and The Writing Workshop: A Course Outline by James Collins (ERIC ED 191 094). Both articles are practical "how to" in nature and style.

Controlled Compositions: More Practice for Students, Less Grading for Teachers by Helen Gordon (ERIC ED 200 995) stresses time saving ways for instructors to improve student writing and to give the instructor more time to research and study.

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