PART I

Assigning Writing
Devising assignments for students in composition courses is one of the most taxing and least understood parts of any teacher’s job. There is no escaping this task, not even if we believe that students should select their own topics. Regardless of the topics they ultimately choose, students will need help figuring out what to write about, how to write about it, and in what medium. In any course, there is some kind of curriculum that suggests certain things are learned at different points in the term. The teacher must decide which kinds of writing will best suit the curriculum, and when.

We need to keep in mind that the writing of assignments is, after all, writing. All the problems and all the stages of writing are part of the process of devising assignments, and no one should imagine it to be easy. Many rhetorical problems add to the unique difficulty of crafting writing assignments: the extraordinary compression of the form (usually less than a page), the need for clarity and exactness of communication, the requirement that assignments elicit a response from a range of students with disparate interests and varying levels of creativity, and the pressures of grading and the curriculum, which may be mandated by the writing program. It is no wonder that most attempts fall short. Yet we must offer the best assignments we can devise in order to stimulate our students’ creativity and critical thinking and convince them to learn what we teach. This chapter suggests some concepts and provides a series of examples to guide the development of composition assignments in written, digital, and multimodal forms.

PLANNING ASSIGNMENTS FOR DISCOVERY AND REVISION

Composition courses should undermine the night-before, all-night typing frenzy and its product — the McPaper — a fast-food version of writing that offers little nutritional value to students and is frequently indigestible for readers. They should also deter a student’s temptation to purchase such stock McPapers from one of the many paper mills readily available on the Internet — one of the many challenges of teaching writing in the digital era. Although the McPaper is more prevalent outside of composition courses, it is a strong enough pattern, whether generated by a mindless computer or a frantic writer, that some students are likely to use it unless the assignment makes it impossible. Few students really expect, as they begin college, to produce more than one draft of an essay; many students tend to feel that the first draft is a fully formed text, to be changed as little as possible. Even good students will, at most, proofread an
initial draft for neatness, spelling, and footnote format—the primary criteria for good grades according to folklore (and much student experience). This expectation that academic writing is essentially first-draft writing does not diminish as students move through college and into their major fields of study—unless their teachers continue to reinforce the need for revision as an essential part of the writing process. (See the Outcomes Statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators [CWPA], in the Appendix, for suggested first-year course outcomes and principles for teachers outside of the first-year program to help students continue to grow as writers.) Certainly one of the most important tasks we can accomplish in any college writing course is to insist that the first draft, in whatever medium, is the beginning of the composing process, not the end of it.

Because virtually all professional writers spend substantial amounts of time revising their work, the designers of useful writing courses—and of writing assignments in all courses—should follow that model in seeking to establish new patterns for both students and teachers that emphasize process and recognize the importance of revision. The most effective writing assignments set up a continuum of drafting and revising that begins when the first assignment is distributed and concludes at the end of the term—if then. Further, good composition classes link in-class exercises to take-home assignments, emphasizing that composition is also a skill learned in discrete steps over time. Thus, while there are times when we will need or want to assign in-class or other impromptu writing, we need to make clear both in the assignment and in the assessments that follow that such activities serve a particular purpose: either to bolster and practice the skills required of the more substantial take-home assignment or to serve as a diagnostic of the student’s overall writing process. And we also need to help students, for whom timed writing tests will be important throughout their college careers, develop patterns of revision under those constrained circumstances. Below, we adapt a heuristic proposed by compositionist Erika Lindemann for constructing pedagogically sound assignments.

A Heuristic for Composition Assignments

Erika Lindemann proposes a series of helpful questions for faculty to ask themselves about their writing assignments; the following version of that heuristic (adapted from Lindemann 220-21) exemplifies the kind of thinking that ought to go into creating assignments that can support constructive writing instruction in any mode or medium, including digital writing and multimodal composing.

A. Task Definition, Meaning, and Sequencing. What do I want the students to do? Is it worth doing? Why? Is it interesting and appropriate? What will it teach the students specifically? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? What can students do before they undertake the assignment, and what can I expect them to be able to do after completing it? What will the assignment tell me? What is being assessed? Does the task have meaning outside as
well as inside the class setting? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these goals?

**B. Writing Processes.** How do I want the students to do the assignment? Are the students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice pre-writing, writing, and revising? Have I given enough information about what I want so that students can make effective choices about subject, purpose, form, mode, and tone? Have I given enough information about required length and about the use of sources? If the assignment is to be submitted in digital form, have I dealt with software issues? If peer response groups or software are involved, have I given clear directions for their appropriate use and enough time in class to learn how to use them? Have I prepared and distributed a written assignment with clear directions? Are good examples appropriate? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these processes and requirements?

**C. Audience.** For whom are the students writing? Who is the audience? If the audience is the teacher, do the students really know who the teacher is and what can be assumed? Are there ways and reasons to expand the audience beyond the teacher? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the audience?

**D. Schedule.** At what point in the course will students do the assignment? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? Is the assignment sequenced to give enough time for prewriting, writing, revision, and editing? How much time inside and outside of class will students need? To what extent will I guide and grade the students’ work? What deadlines (and penalties) do I want to set for collecting papers or for various stages of the project? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the writing process?

**E. Assessment.** What will I do with the assignment? How will I evaluate the work? What constitutes a successful response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper, in early or later drafts? Does the grading system encourage revision? Have I attempted to write the paper myself? What problems did I encounter? How can the assignment be clarified or otherwise improved? Have I discussed evaluation criteria with the students before they began work, and will I discuss what I expect again as the due date approaches?

We now have solid evidence to suggest assignment design and assessment is best when it takes local context into consideration. Lindemann’s guidelines for constructing assignments must, of course, be adapted to fit the students, the curriculum, and the assignment for the particular course it serves. For instance, not every question in the heuristic would be applicable to a typical short writing assignment or an in-class writing assignment. But Lindemann’s heuristic is particularly valuable for longer take-home assignments, where students are submitting work in stages (see item D). Depending on the assignment, this schedule could call for notes, bibliographies, abstracts, plans, outlines, sections, drafts, or whatever is most appropriate. A simple deadline schedule for each assignment has two important benefits: (1) it enforces the need for the
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student to get going quickly and to work steadily at the task, instead of trying to handle the assignment the night before the due date, and (2) it largely ensures that the work is the student’s own, as early stages of a bought or borrowed paper are unlikely to be available. It is also important to consider where you place this information on the assignment sheet. For example, if you ask for a simple deadline schedule, but it is buried inside the prompt, it may be lost to the uncareful or untrained student eye. It is a good idea to highlight due dates in bolded text, perhaps using a text box and shading to draw further visual attention to this information. Both document design (deciding when, where, and what information to highlight on an assignment sheet) and discussing the assignment and its learning objectives with students are crucial to good composition pedagogy. It is also important to consider how one will sequence (or scaffold) assignments over the entire course to help students work toward more complex composition and writing goals.

SEQUENCING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Most students experience writing assignments as a series of discrete tasks with little overlap. On the surface, many writing courses appear designed so that the assignments are unrelated—a narrative or a personal literacy history followed by a comparison/contrast paper, or an analysis of a poem followed by analysis of a short story. Even teacher comments on papers, which are intended to lead to improvement on work throughout the course, may only affect revisions of the same paper as the student turns to new and apparently unrelated tasks.

If writing assignments can be sequenced so that each one builds directly on the one before it (again “scaffolding”), students are more likely to incorporate revision into their natural writing process and produce better work. The instructor’s comments will appear as helpful suggestions for the task to come, rather than as judgments to be filed away or disregarded. If entries in a writing journal can lead to class projects, both the journal and the projects become parts of the overall composition process and the course becomes an exercise in learning to manage long-term projects, where the final assignment is a showcase of skills learned over the course of the semester. Similarly, if readings can be sequenced and connected, the information will compound, have context, and will resemble the academic reading in other courses.

In our experience, poorly written papers on complex topics are often due to a lack of understanding of how to accomplish the cognitive tasks required of the genre. In fact, the complexity of the comparison/contrast genre makes many teachers unwilling to assign it, for such writing is rare outside the classroom and students require substantial help in understanding its demands. Yet, its very complexity is attractive to some teachers, who are ready to rise to its challenge when it is the result of a coherent sequence. One way to productively sequence assignments is to divide a complex writing task into a series of smaller tasks. Understanding the different nature of these tasks can help the instructor and students understand what is involved in the larger assignment. Each task could be the focus of a discrete smaller assignment, outlined in the
following writing prompts: (1) summarize text A; (2) summarize text B; (3) list similarities and differences between texts A and B; (4) write an essay in which you develop an idea about the similarities and differences between texts A and B. Assignment 4 would be the culminating take-home assignment for the unit, while the other smaller assignments would serve as part of in-class and take-home writing that contributes to the process of revising and drafting assignment 4. If a class is working with summaries and book reviews, a good assignment might ask students to compare and contrast two reviews from different kinds of publications (say, a newspaper and Web site, or a scholarly journal and a popular magazine) of the same book. The next assignment might call for the writing of a book review to be submitted to a particular publication. As students work through the sequence of tasks, they also learn about differences in media, audience, and conventions, and are able to apply these conventions in constructing their own essays.

We can use this process-based approach to teach other types of assignments as well. An assignment to write about an important event from childhood could be approached as a series of steps, each building toward the culminating assignment, a personal narrative: (1) describe the setting of the event, using clear and vivid detail; (2) narrate the event chronologically, combining the story with its setting; (3) speculate about why the event stays in your mind, why it remains significant to you, and why it might be interesting to the reader; (4) narrate the event, rearranging it so that significance, rather than chronology, becomes the organizing feature; (5) revise the writing so that the meaning of the event is shown (embedded in the narration), rather than told. Throughout this process, sample personal essays can be assigned for reading—Phillip Lopate’s *The Art of the Personal Essay* or Richard Rodriguez’s “Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood,” for example—and in-class discussion can address how these essays serve as models toward which students are working. Better yet, if you have examples of other students’ drafts, you can use these as models—with written permission—to encourage students to teach each other how best to approach the assignment. We will address this further in our discussion of the use of peer review in teaching writing (see Chapter 3).

A sequenced assignment can also be organized according to a progression of skills. Take, for example, the research paper. An assignment focused on finding and distinguishing between a credible and noncredible source can be valuable early in the research process. At the same time, most students simply insert quotations without comment or connection into their texts, and students need to learn ways to use this kind of evidence before they can handle research. After students begin choosing several sources from their research, a single-source assignment (such as the one given on pages 82–84) will help students understand the most difficult problem when writing a research paper: how to use someone else’s idea as support rather than substitution for an idea. We further address source attribution in Chapter 2.

Sequencing assignments around the research process is also helpful for beginning writers as it generally involves an initial introduction to information literacies—or library and online search skills. Even advanced college students
struggle with summarizing and evaluating sources; short in-class and take-home assignments on using the Internet and college library databases to choose sources effectively are helpful in guiding students through what may be an initial foray into a college-level research process. Many students are insufficiently aware of the unreliability or origin of some online sources; Wikipedia cannot be the only source for a research paper, for instance, and it is the beginning, not the end of research. On the other hand, most students are entirely unaware of scholarly journals and their important role in developing knowledge; assignments that lead the more capable and advanced students to these journals will help them understand and join in academic discourse.

**CONSTRUCTING EFFECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Teaching the research paper in the digital age presents its own unique challenges and opportunities, and writing teachers are well poised to help students begin to think critically about the kinds of information they access online, how they access it, and how they should be thinking about research as they work toward developing their own ideas about a given topic. Because of educational policies like the Common Core, students are increasingly entering composition classes with somewhat fuzzy expectations about research and the importance of credible sources in writing research papers. In the age of digital writing, the common temptation for students is to bypass learning critical research skills—learning how to find a scholarly journal article, or how to choose the right kinds of sources—opting instead for the perceived efficiency and credibility of Google Scholar.

An underlying problem for many students is to find ideas of their own to pursue and develop in the face of all the authoritative (and not authoritative) source materials they have discovered. An assignment asking students to write about differing interpretations of the same material will help them find their own topics and their own voices. This could look like a traditional comparison/contrast paper as described in the sequence above; it could also look like a Platonic dialogue in which students dramatize two or more characters who personify the virtues of opposing viewpoints on a given topic. To push the compositional edge a bit further, you could ask students to consider the role media plays in shaping the production and delivery of information by challenging them to partake in traditional oral delivery and *progymnasmata*, working in small groups to act out the dialogue in class. Or, to explore the communicative possibilities of digital and social media, you could ask students to translate the traditional Platonic dialogue into opposing Twitter handles in order to personify different understandings of their topic through multimodal interfaces (for an example of such a topic, see Chapter 2, pp. 40–42). Such assignments not only teach critical thinking but also encourage creativity and reduce incidents of plagiarism (see the discussion below in this chapter), since many instances of apparent plagiarism are the result of the improper use of sources, rather than deliberate fraud.
Mark Gaipa developed an excellent multimodal composition assignment to deepen students’ understanding of this process of developing one’s own voice amid the authoritative voices. His compositional tool of choice? Drawing. In teaching literary criticism on Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, he asks students to begin the invention process by drawing a square on a piece of paper, which represents the annual Hemingway conference venue. Students then populate the square with authors from their readings of secondary criticism, providing a caricature for each author and a dialogue box that aptly summarizes that author’s interpretation of the novel. The goal is to humanize the research process and help students gain control over their reading of Hemingway by way of synthesizing secondary criticism. In the process of drawing their “ballroom map” students eventually see how the various authors align and disagree on their respective readings of Hemingway, and this is visually represented through both the students’ caricaturing of each author and the spatial orientation of one author vis-à-vis another inside the map. The diagram comes to represent the social milieu of Hemingway scholarship.

Finally, students have to figure out where they see themselves located in this map. Here, Gaipa discusses eight common argumentative strategies used by scholars to enter this conversational space — again, he uses cartoons and visualization, and has students place themselves on the map. The goal is for students to see how they have to be in control of their own reading of Hemingway at the same time they must also engage previous interpretations. As students draft their paper, they frequently revisit and revise the map, making necessary changes as their understanding of the criticism develops. When students are ready to submit their final draft, Gaipa requires a final drawing that represents the student’s unique argumentative strategy — a visual cover memo of sorts in which students articulate their argumentative moves against and with various authors. In our experiences teaching research and argument in composition courses, this exercise translates well because the heart of the exercise asks students to engage opposing viewpoints. It helps them value the variety of interpretations on an given topic, but it also requires them to take responsibility for finding their own voice within the broader conversation.

DISCUSSING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS WITH STUDENTS

After planning the assignment, the next step in eliciting good writing from students is to take time in class to discuss the assignment. Many teachers fail to provide sufficient time to explain an assignment. Sometimes they hand out the assignment at the end of the period, or they simply tell the class what they want, or jot something on the chalkboard to be copied (or miscopied). Such casual treatment of an assignment suggests that a similarly casual response is called for. Students can misunderstand even a written and discussed assignment; less careful assignments routinely lead to confusion. “Oh,” the student will say, holding a paper with a poor grade, “I didn’t remember what you wanted.” Many experienced teachers have learned that they must write out,
distribute, and discuss their assignments if they are to be taken seriously and if a particular goal is to be made clear.

There is a second caveat to consider when preparing to discuss assignments with students. For a variety of reasons, including personal preference and institutional mandates, many teachers are moving to digital platforms to teach writing. Using a personal Web site or classroom management program such as Blackboard, D2L, Coursework, or Sakai can be an excellent way to cut printing costs, promote environmentalism, and create a space to archive student learning all at the same time. However, classroom time still needs to be allotted to thoroughly discuss assignments. Teachers using online platforms want to be sure they have access to technology in their classrooms—many schools still don’t have fully wired campuses—so that they can display the assignment document on an interactive whiteboard or projector screen. If your classroom lacks this technology, it may be best to continue printing and distributing assignments. Even if your classroom has this technology, experience suggests it still may be wise to print out assignments and have students follow along and annotate the hard copy in order to promote deeper student engagement in discussion of assignments. Another good idea is to post assignments online with a summary of the classroom discussion as a series of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Sometimes an apparently simple assignment can lead students to understand some fundamental and important concepts for college writing, if supported by classroom discussion. Consider, for example, this simple assignment for an impromptu class assignment or an essay test:

*Describe a person you knew well when you were a child. Your object is to use enough detail that your readers can picture the person clearly from the child’s perspective and at the same time understand from the tone of your description and from the particular details you choose how you felt about the person you describe.*

That assignment is discussed in detail in the following chapter but for our purposes here, notice just what the student is asked to accomplish: the student needs to use detail as evidence for some conclusions, without telling the reader how to interpret those details. The class discussion of the assignment, with students taking notes on the assignment sheet—or making digital annotations to the document using software like Adobe Acrobat and Word (free versions of both are often readily available for students with proof of student ID)—can make clear the difference between this assignment and the more vague “Describe a person you knew well when you were a child”—which is all that students will take away from an oral assignment. The written assignment and subsequent discussion make clear that the description has a rhetorical purpose and that it has a connection to later assignments using evidence to support conclusions.

Effective discussion of an assignment should include both learning objectives of the assignment—which you may also want to consider placing on the assignment sheet—and a review of how the assignment will be assessed. It is
always a good idea to hand out scoring guides (or develop one with the class) so that students can use them productively during drafting and early revision. Though few of us have the time, you may also consider doing the assignment yourself—there is no better test of whether an assignment is clear and manageable in the time and space available than walking in our students’ shoes and seeing the assignment from their point of view—an argument many compositionists continue to make in efforts to promote more effective composition pedagogy.

Because few students will have experience meeting deadlines for plans or drafts, students will probably ignore such assignments unless they are clearly explained in detail, itemized on the assignment sheet, and, likely, given some kind of grade (like a simple checkoff). If enough time is allowed for discussion of the assignment, students will leave the class session with an understanding of what is required, why, and how to approach the job. They may even develop some enthusiasm for the task, and will know that a last-minute first draft will not be adequate. If you are using an online classroom management program, you might ask for a volunteer or two to take notes on the discussion and post them to the class Announcements page as a reminder for the class and for anyone who was absent.

A properly discussed assignment should also reinforce the need to draft and revise drafts, and should distinguish the cognitive work of revision from the editorial work of correcting errors—often referred to as global and local revision rather than “editing.” This last point can be made by distributing a former student’s first draft—be sure to get written permission—which demonstrates the looser structures of thinking-in-process, followed by that student’s revision (rearranged so that the logic of the argument develops coherently, with cohesive topic sentences and sequential presentation of evidential support). For an example, see the sample student paper in two drafts given in Chapter 3.

A Note on Open Topics

Some teachers prefer to let students choose their own subjects for writing, on the grounds that such openness will encourage creativity and a greater sense of ownership of the topic. There is no doubt that open topics help some students learn to write more effectively; it represents a student-centered classroom, attention to the classical ideal of discovery, commitment to critical thinking in prewriting, and an ideal of teacher involvement with student writing that some institutions support for all assignments. Many writing teachers are so committed to student-centered classrooms, with responsibility and authority shared between teachers and students—or even mainly in the hands of students—that they willingly take on the additional work. And they are ready to point out that Benjamin Bloom, in his revised taxonomy of learning, has placed creativity above even evaluation at the very top of the scale.

With undefined topics, however, a large part of the student’s energy available for writing must go into selecting, defining, and redefining a topic. If more than one or two such exercises are included in the writing course, students
have less opportunity to learn other aspects of the writing process, such as development and demonstration of ideas, use of sources, and revision. Open topics may reflect unclear and problematic course design or vague assignments rather than a commitment to independent and creative thought; such assignments may also be an open invitation to hand in unrevised high school writing and for the insecure to purchase ready-made essays. Students tend to want to choose their own topics, often so that they can remain in a comfort area. But if they are to learn what college has to offer they should be asked to undertake new and sometimes uncomfortable challenges.

Despite these arguments, some superior writing instructors remain committed to open topics; they are convinced that students will write better when they are free to choose what they will write about and how they will write about it (we return to this issue at the end of the chapter in relation to teaching writing to second-language learners). They also feel that open topics allow instructors the flexibility to create assignments that play to students’—and teachers’—interests and strengths. Further, if the assignment is, say, a brief open response to a reading or a personal narrative, the unstructured assignment should pose no problems. But more complex writing tasks often call for planning to overcome the problems we have been describing. Therefore, before students begin work, they should always receive a written assignment giving a description of the purpose of the assignment, its format, and the criteria that will be used in evaluating it. Students need to internalize and own the underlying purpose of the assignment so that they can select topics that will fulfill that purpose.

Because an open assignment makes it easy for students to omit parts of the complex task or tempts students to change topics when they hit a roadblock in the research or inquiry process for their first topic, it is especially important to build in accountability for revision by requiring students to submit plans, outlines, drafts, bibliographies, and other components throughout the writing process, and be prepared to discuss them in class. At every stage, the students should ask themselves, “Is this work fulfilling the original purpose of the assignment?” If the assignment does not build or suggest a structured topic and a process, the students must discover them. Conferencing is often the best way to resolve such issues, but we recognize that not all teachers have the luxury of time to meet with students individually. Therefore, much class time has to be spent discussing topics and helping students define, limit, and focus what they expect to say. Peer review is another way to dedicate in-class time to these concerns, but class time alone may be insufficient for many students, who will need individual attention during (and after) office hours. This should be considered when deciding how open or structured assignments will be for the course.

The construction of appropriate writing assignments is one of the hardest jobs for the teacher of undergraduates and is exacerbated by the dearth of supportive material available. Teachers can benefit greatly from sharing materials with one another and having open and honest discussions about the most effective ways to teach writing at their particular institution. In our experi-
ence, some of the most rewarding experiences of teaching writing come from the lively discussions about our assignments and students’ work, and how to improve them both, with our colleagues. Though there are some common best practices, which we have been outlining for you here, ideas about how best to teach writing often change when teachers find themselves teaching at new schools and in new environments. Finally, every teacher should keep in mind that designing assignments is a particularly demanding form of writing, calling for the teacher to use the entire writing process. Careful consideration of the needs of the audience and class discussion of the assignment (over the entire period when students are working on it) will help the teacher find out where students are having problems; reflection about these problems will often lead to a revised assignment for future years.

PREWRITING AND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Students will write better if they are required to think systematically before they turn on their computers or put pen to paper. Although scholars debate what kinds of prewriting are most effective, there is a clear consensus that active engagement with an assignment before writing begins is immensely valuable; prewriting not only improves the quality of the work to be done but also trains students in a crucial part of the writing process. Some composition faculty use formal methods derived from logic or problem solving (sometimes called heuristics); other teachers use various forms of brainstorming, cognitive mapping, or clustering of ideas. Still others ask students to do daily unstructured five-minute writes—freewriting, or aptly named discovery drafts—as ways to uncover or develop ideas. These are all forms of what classical rhetoric called invention: the finding of topics for development. (The word topic comes from the Greek word for “place,” suggesting that the thinking process is a kind of geographic quest, a hunt for a place where ideas lurk.) Some of the smaller assignments discussed here and in Chapter 2 would all be considered part of the prewriting process.

By now, many students will have learned to do prewriting on a digital device, a great convenience for all kinds of brainstorming. But working on a computer also prompts students to edit constantly and preserve their texts, which are the least important issues when prewriting. For some students, the computer will restrict their inventiveness, particularly if they spend most of their time using a search engine to find out what others have had to say, or if they limit their thinking to the strict outline formats some business-oriented software displays. Other students will be so accustomed to using the computer creatively that it is liberating in the same way it is for professional writers. It is important to find out just where your students are along this spectrum. This can be a difficult task, particularly for teachers with large class sizes and many sections of writing per term. However, a general diagnostic assignment in which you ask students to freewrite in class using the computer for ten or so minutes may help give you an idea of how comfortable students are with using a computer to do early drafting. These can be printed and collected the next day or,
if you are using a course management system, students can upload these free-writes into their respective student folders for immediate review. Students can also e-mail you a copy of the document. The goal here is not to grade what students have written but to understand how students are using the computer to learn how to write. This is especially valuable if you intend to assign much multimodal composition in the course.

Any assignment demanding substantial student effort is worth discussing in class as the work progresses. The most valuable discussion often emerges from presentations of what the other students in the class are working on. As students listen to their peers’ plans, they begin to envision new possibilities. As they express their own thoughts on the subject, they begin to acquire ownership of their topic. Moreover, early notes and reading give them an unaccustomed start toward more satisfying writing than their previous training and habits may have led them to expect. Some teachers will break the class into small groups on the day that plans or outlines are due so that all students will be able to present their ideas to others in the class. The pressure of such a presentation is healthy; some students don’t mind being unprepared for the teacher, but very few students are willing to look foolish before their peers.

Although many of us think of writing as a solitary act, more and more writing outside of school is now done by teams and much academic writing in some fields is collaborative, with each individual contributing to a final report, grant application, accreditation document, and so on according to his or her particular strengths. This development suggests that some part of a writing course should ask for collaboration, perhaps by randomly assigned groups of three or four or by self-chosen groups. First-year students are not accustomed to this kind of work, which requires a good deal of organization, equitable distribution of the workload, and ready communication and editing of drafts. But the digital environment has made collaborative assignments much more practical than they were in earlier times when teams had to meet face-to-face and handwrite each stage of a draft. The advantages of students teaching each other as they work toward a common goal — and often a common grade for the outcome — compensate for the complexity of developing good assignments for collaborative writing.

One traditional way to foster collaboration is to form teams to prepare a grant application for a local or national foundation, perhaps one to solve a particular community problem that the class has identified. At the class meeting where the groups are formed, one person could prepare a timeline for action, another could prepare the budget, and another the draft inquiry letter stating the purpose and limits of the proposed project. A fourth member of the team could then put together the application in accord with the criteria of the grant agency. The team would have to agree on times they could meet and review the materials they were putting together and approve the final document. Such an assignment is more suitable for a residential campus than for one with commuting students or for students with work as well as school commitments. But the advent of audio- and videoconferencing now allows every college to foster this kind of collaboration.
Collaborating Using Digital Media

Another approach to collaborative writing with a focus on digital writing and new media involves working in groups to redesign existing media. Students are asked to identify an example of ineffective media—a Web site, blog, brochure, public relations campaign, advertisement—and, after careful rhetorical analysis of its audience, context, purpose, and design, groups propose a redesign with a cover letter addressed to the media’s author or parent company that provides a rationale for the revisions. This is a particularly functional assignment in writing classes that are focused on understanding the role of media in today’s communication environment. This assignment would also work well in a writing class interested in community literacy and public pedagogy. If the teacher could develop connections with local organizations, this assignment could be tailored to support a local nonprofit that needs some media redesigned for their stated purpose. Such an assignment provides students with an opportunity to produce documents with real purposes and audiences, and they can submit the work for assessment by a real client. Revision is naturally built in as they submit multiple drafts and revise until the client is happy. There is much current research suggesting the promises of such an approach to teaching writing, but it remains enormously time-consuming and perhaps best undertaken by a teacher with local connections already in place. Nevertheless, this kind of assignment complements the broader pedagogical initiatives supported by composition’s flagship organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication and its “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” as well as the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)” in the Appendix.

A final practical collaborative assignment using digital media could ask students to work in groups to build a Web site or blog that draws on research to articulate the importance of a given topic in a language accessible to a general audience. Essentially, this is a research paper in digital form; however, there are considerable differences between a traditional research paper and conducting research to write a blog or build a Web site. While debates continue in the field about the limits and potentials of using templates for such digital assignments, it is important to first and foremost consider the local context in which you assign this kind of project. Do students have access to individual computers or a wired classroom and the required software necessary to complete the assignment? For these logistical reasons, teachers often encourage students to use open source and free software, many of which come with templates, such as Wordpress and Weebly. Secondly, what is the class size in which you will assign this project? In our experience, collaborative work is usually maximized in groups of three to four. Anything more or less tends to lead to labor disparities and tension across the groups. A smaller seminar-style writing class of twelve to fifteen students could easily work in groups of three, while a larger class of twenty-five or more students would probably benefit most from groups of four. An excellent reading companion for this kind of
collaborative work is Carnegie Mellon professor Joanna Wolfe’s book *Team Writing*, which outlines a series of small but timely exercises central to healthy group writing. When students are asked to make group charters outlining individual roles and responsibilities toward a project and identify and remain accountable to a self-directed schedule with short- and long-term tasks, the quality of student work usually improves as students can contribute their respective strengths to the varied skills needed by the assignment on their own schedules. These kinds of projects also have the benefit of reducing grading loads for teachers because we are now holistically assessing a group’s performance over a limited set of projects, rather than reading multiple individual research papers on the same topic. Again, debates over how and what to assess in digital assignments loom large in the field (you may wish to consult *Digital Writing Assessment & Evaluation* by Heidi A. McKee and Dannielle Nicole DeVoss for more information on this matter).

Digital media is not a simple migration “from pencil to pixel,” as Dennis Baron notes in his same-named anthologized article. One particularly challenging aspect of a blog or Web site assignment is learning the limits of simply plopping a written paper into a Web site or blog platform. While early versions of such an assignment tended to be limited in that way, as teachers become more familiar with the opportunities available in the digital environment, they have asked their students more and more to consider composing online and in a variety of digital genres. When the right devices and connections are available, assignments can expand to include such questions as

- How do language and tone shift to accommodate a different audience and genre of writing when using digital media?
- How do we use evidence to support claims in Web sites and blogs and how do we give proper citation attribution?
- What other kinds of media besides print-based text can I use in a Web site and blog to enhance the meaning of my argument?
- How does hyperlinking affect the arrangement of my argument and the reading process of my audience?
- Would a blog or a Web site best serve my needs and purposes for this topic?
- Do I intend to keep the project up after the course?
- How do my time commitments to and investment in the project determine whether I want this to be a private or public site?
- How does this affect what kinds of material I can borrow and use?

Sequencing smaller in-class exercises to scaffold the design process is important when assigning collaborative projects such as this one. Early in this project, students will want to get a better sense of the digital genres they are being asked to produce, and the ways Web sites and blogs communicate information differently than traditional essays do. A short take-home assignment that asks students to compare and contrast a good and bad Web site on a similar topic would help students understand this issue. In class, the teacher could ask students to share their findings in an effort to create a common vocabulary among the class for understanding what works and doesn’t work in these dif-
ferent genres. If a teacher is comfortable with the software, and is requiring students to design their own blogs and Web sites, the teacher may also consider providing a practical workshop to address the basics of how to design the Web site or blog using free and relatively intuitive software such as Wordpress or Weebly. In our experience, students can generally start up a new Web site or blog in about thirty minutes of guided instruction. As the project progresses, students work on their own to customize the design and look of the project.

**Digital Media and Copyright**

Students working with blogs and Web sites will benefit from discussions of digital copyright, the new frontier of plagiarism in composition. It is a good idea to check with your local institution, generally the library, to see if they have a formal statement on digital copyright. Fair use and privacy settings are also important to discuss in this kind of assignment; sometimes students can use imported material for educational uses, but if a blog or Web site is set to public settings there are stricter limitations that require consideration by student and teacher. Sequencing of assignments around copyright are helpful when teaching collaborative digital projects. One early assignment might ask students to read the university’s copyright policy and then apply this knowledge by searching through Google Images for fair use and Creative Commons media that would be appropriate for their topic, with a written rationale accompanying each of these choices. In-class, teachers can ask students to begin defining their understanding of fair use and digital media. They can then be directed to look for any official policy on fair use located on their university library’s Web site. After establishing some common rules as a class around standards of fair use and copyright in digital media, student groups can deliberate over their image choices that best fit the guidelines established in class. Finally, in-class discussion and exercises about the conventions of overall document design and visual rhetoric as it relates to blogging and Web site design helps students learn both the theoretical and practical applications of writing in digital environments and encourages critical practice with twenty-first-century literacies while also remaining flexible and open to students’ interests. This approach to teaching writing may not be for everyone. But, as more and more students enter our classrooms expecting to work in this medium, we may wish to learn how best to responsibly join them in these efforts. As a starting place, teachers interested in this approach to composition may wish to consult the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) “Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education” (http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/fairusemedialiteracy).

**AVOIDING PLAGIARISM**

We tend to avoid the term *plagiarism* because it is a scary term that has many and varied meanings. Certainly, students need to learn how to use sources properly, and they need to learn that they are subject to penalties if they present the
work of others as if it were their own. They also need to understand that the ready availability of, and ease of copying from, the Internet does not relieve them of that responsibility. Yet there are degrees of copying, some of which are more acceptable than others (Rebecca Howard sees “patchwriting”—the incorporation of scraps of quotable material into one’s own—as common in professional writing), and the issue is not at all simple. Outright fraud does exist, but most of what teachers call plagiarism is a result of students’ genuine confusion about what is proper and what is not—that is, how to use sources responsibly.

The following description of the issue derives from a class handout, initially prepared by Peter Schroeder of California State University, San Bernardino, and much revised for the writing textbook *Inquiry: Questioning, Reading, Writing*, edited by Lynn Z. Bloom and Edward M. White (485–88). It is addressed to students and can be adapted and distributed to your classes for discussion.

Suppose you are writing a paper on American civil disobedience. You are particularly interested in the relation between idealism and lawbreaking. You decide that the following passage from Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience” is relevant to your topic, and you want to use it as a source:

> Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt?

What Thoreau has to say is clearly useful for your topic. But how are you to use it? And how are you to avoid using it improperly?

Let’s take a moment to look at the wrong ways to handle sources, for many students are nervous about falling into plagiarism—using sources as if they were your own idea—by mistake. Very few students will be deliberately dishonest and foolish enough to plan plagiarism—that is, to copy what Thoreau said word for word and hand it in as if it were original. But honest and sensible people still have trouble using sources properly and sometimes stumble unaware into plagiarism, unless they understand clearly how to incorporate other people’s ideas into their own work.

For instance, one way to misuse Thoreau’s material would be to copy what he says word for word and put a note at the end referring to the source of the quotation. Sometimes plagiarism happens if you take careless notes that fail to distinguish quotations from your summaries of what you have read. There is no intention to deceive in this case, but plagiarism is still going on since (without quotation marks) Thoreau’s words and ideas are put forward as your own. It is more responsible to put the quoted material
in quotation marks, of course, but even that does not complete the job of using the source responsibly. Why is the quotation in your text? How does it relate to what you have to say?

The whole point of writing a paper using sources is not just to include relevant quotations and to cite sources, but rather to demonstrate that you have thought about your quotations and your sources in relation to your topic. If you just string together sources, quoted or paraphrased, with a bit of connection to hold them together, you are not accomplishing the inquiry that lies behind writing itself. Sources will help you demonstrate your ideas, but they cannot substitute for your ideas.

One way many students would use this source would be to figure out what Thoreau is saying and to put it into their own words:

People suffering under unjust laws have to decide if they should obey the laws or not. Most people decide to obey them while they work for change, since breaking the law might be worse than the unjust law itself. But it is better to break the law, since the law itself should allow the best citizens to make changes.

But inserting this rewording of Thoreau’s idea into your paper (while it shows that you understand his idea) is still not by itself a responsible use of the source, particularly if you fail to cite Thoreau at the end of the paraphrase. The idea is still his, even if the words are yours, and just placing someone else’s ideas into your paper represents a failure to use the source properly. And even if you do cite Thoreau after the paraphrase, your reader will not know what the citation means. How much of what you say is yours, how much is Thoreau’s, or is there any difference?

The problem you must handle as a writer using sources is not only to understand Thoreau but also to come to some personal understanding of the material at hand (here, the moral and legal problem of either obeying or disobeying unjust laws). You must regard Thoreau critically; if you end up agreeing with him, you should say so explicitly. If not, point out where and why you differ.

So we return once more to the topic. Is Thoreau’s argument (those in a “wise minority” should break laws they feel to be unjust) an idea you wish to support, in whole or in part? What does your own experience say? What do other sources (for instance, Martin Luther King, Jr.) say about the same subject? Does Thoreau’s location in nineteenth-century New England in any way determine what he will see? How does Thoreau’s view relate to your own?

To think this way is to come to terms with the problems of writing a paper using sources. If you decide to put the whole quotation into your paper, you will need to introduce it, analyze it, comment on it, and relate it to your own ideas. You might begin, after the quotation, something like this:

When we look closely at what Thoreau has to say, we can argue that he oversimplifies the issue; as the last 150 years have made plain, it is hard
to decide exactly what is an unjust law. Few of us today can be so certain that any law is wrong. But Thoreau’s arrogant certainty has undeniable power. . . .

But perhaps you do not want to focus so heavily on Thoreau’s views; in that case you may want to quote a small portion of what he says, as part of another argument:

Disobedience to law in our time has proven to be a powerful force for change. The idea that we should always obey laws while seeking to change them has repeatedly been shown to be the way governments perpetuate evil; they argue that breaking laws is worse than any evil the law may bring about. But I would argue, as does Thoreau, that “it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil.” A truly democratic government will provide ways for those who object to its laws to protest legally and effectively.

Or you may just want to allude to what Thoreau says as part of a survey of various ideas on your subject:

Among the most well-known proponents of disobeying laws they felt to be unjust are Thoreau (who briefly went to jail for opposing a government supporting slavery) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who. . . .

There are many ways to use sources responsibly, but the important principle to keep in mind is that you must understand what the source is saying and how it relates to your own ideas. In using sources you must not simply be a sponge, soaking up uncritically everything you read. You must distinguish between the opinions of another and the opinion that you yourself, after careful consideration, come to hold. The quotation then becomes a fact, the fact that a particular writer has said something, which you as author of your own work must interpret as you would any other fact; you need to show how the evidence provided by the quotation relates to what you yourself have to say. Every writer has their own intellectual identity, though most ideas inevitably come from outside sources. A responsible use of sources recognizes that identity and distinguishes clearly between what you think and what the sources think. It is no sin to accept another person’s idea: “But I would argue, as does Thoreau, that. . . .” But you must interpose yourself between the sources and your writing, thus making other people’s ideas your own through a process of critical scrutiny.

Once students understand the basics of plagiarism they are ready to begin a discussion of how a writer can use sources to different rhetorical effect. This is perhaps more for an advanced writing class, say, an honor’s course, or a second-semester or upper-division writing course. Gaipa’s ballroom map exercise (p. 9) dramatizes for students how to think about using source attribution in writing an argument using a visual medium.
LITERATURE AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Since most teachers of writing have received advanced degrees in some field other than writing, they are likely to be tempted to design a course focused on the content of those fields instead of writing instruction, particularly when they have had little or no training in rhetoric and think that writing instruction is a limited or even remedial activity. A college course calls for substantial content and challenging reading; teachers, reasonably enough, want to teach what they know best. Yet students have enrolled for a writing course, not for one in literature or political science, and teachers and writing program administrators are concerned about truth in labeling, as are the students. While we need to maintain sufficient intellectual content in the writing curriculum, we need also to see the distinction between reading supporting the teaching of writing rather than substituting for the teaching of writing.

Because so many writing instructors are graduates of literature programs, a typical writing curriculum often centers on a series of reading assignments, with the writing assignments appended to the reading. Often these reading assignments are more or less random, designed to deepen understanding of each piece of literature. There is a serious temptation, if you are particularly interested in literature, to teach a course in literature instead of the writing course described in the course syllabus—with student writing serving only or principally the function of understanding the reading. However, a more effective writing course is based on a sequenced series of writing assignments designed to help students attain a clear set of writing goals, with the readings serving as models and stimulation for those assignments. One way to create such a course is to organize the syllabus around a sequence of writing assignments designed to achieve certain writing goals before selecting the reading.

For instance, the reading in a course focused on writing the personal essay could present a series of fictions moving from simple narratives such as Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” or Ernest Hemingway’s “The Killers” to postmodern stories with the narrator interwoven with the characters, such as Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”; writing assignments on narrative point of view could increase in complexity with each selection, moving toward postmodern personal essays, such as Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue.” Alternatively, if your students are reading Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, for example, you might select one of the editions with a series of critical essays from different perspectives in an appendix with a goal to use student writing as a way to enforce the fact that a work of literature has no one “correct” reading—that students must come to terms with their own reading amid the complexity of interpretations (p. 9). Thus an early assignment might focus on a formalistic reading, based on close reading of a passage. The students might investigate what assumptions about the meaning of a work of literature are embedded in such an approach. A subsequent assignment might ask the same questions of a contrasting viewpoint, such as a psychological reading asking about Conrad’s voyage into his own subconscious. A historical essay could be the focus of the next assignment, looking at colonialism and
perhaps the African novel *Things Fall Apart*, a book the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe deliberately set out as a reply to the Conrad novel. By this time, the students will have used their own writing as a way to understand a series of critical perspectives and should be in the position to argue for a satisfying one of their own and situate this reading against the other readings encountered in the class. While students will certainly learn a good bit about how to read fiction and how to make some sense of critical differences, the goal for the writing course is for them to learn to write analytic and argumentative essays using citations, interpretations they may not agree with, and a coherent expression of their own views.

One helpful way to understand this distinction is by considering what sort of writing is assigned and how it is evaluated. Is writing integrated into the course as an end in itself as well as a means of learning the material? For instance, what proportion of class time is spent on such activities as prewriting, journal writing, evaluating drafts, peer group discussion of student writing, teacher-led discussion of sample student papers, and the like? Does the material allow reasonable scope for a variety of student interests, for a series of writing assignments with a coherent rhetorical purpose related to increasing student writing ability, for revision and development of student ideas? Do the syllabus and the evaluation procedure allow time for and reward revision of writing, and is student writing ability the main criterion for the final grade? Are student-teacher conferences about writing built into the course plan?

Or, on the other hand, is the course built around mastery of the content? Is most student writing evaluated as a product, such as a term paper that is largely the student’s responsibility and is handed in at the end of the course? Are most classes devoted to lectures on or discussion of the reading? Is the course grade wholly or largely dependent on tests or unrevised papers evaluated on mastery of the content?

For example, a Shakespeare course will define a group of a dozen or more plays by date (early) or by kind (tragedies) or the like. The students will spend their time reading the plays, perhaps writing an occasional limited short paper on one of them (the meaning of suicide in *Hamlet*, the clothing imagery in *King Lear*, or the hidden colonialism in *The Tempest*), and probably writing a term paper on some aspect of the plays read or on some topic relating the plays to early modern England. The students may read some Shakespeare criticism, see videos or live performances, or undertake other activities to deepen their understanding of Shakespeare. There will be a final examination, and perhaps a midterm as well, to evaluate the depth of their knowledge.

Such a course should not be called a writing course, even though it may include a good bit of student writing. The writing is there to support the learning and understanding of Shakespeare (as it should), and writing instruction is incidental to the major goals of the course. But it is not hard to conceive of a writing course based on Shakespeare (or any other content area). Such a course would use the plays to provide content for a variety of writing assignments. Perhaps one sequence could move from a description of a performance to a review of the performance to a research paper on classic performances of the
same play. A comparison of *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Othello* (with their similar plot lines) could lead to a series of papers comparing comedy with tragedy as artistic forms or even as approaches to understanding experience. Class time would be spent largely on the writing problems posed by the course—though, naturally enough, some attention would be given to the reading of the plays. But now the understanding of Shakespeare would be ancillary to the student writing, and the students’ grades would depend much more on their writing than on the depth of their understanding of the plays within the early modern context.

The issue is not to exclude literature from a writing course but to use whatever reading is assigned to support the writing process the students are learning to pursue. Since reading and writing abilities are interwoven in ways we hardly understand, careful reading surely belongs in a writing course. Numerous books and handbooks are available to illustrate research and other kinds of long assignments on literature and other content areas; that interesting topic is beyond the scope of this book. But the two assignments based on given texts in Chapter 2 and later in Chapter 5, with their scoring guides and sample papers, illustrate how impromptu writing based on a given text can support student learning and allow for evaluation of student writing.

**ESL AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT ASSIGNMENT DESIGN**

Ever since the implementation of the GI Bill following the second world war, university and college populations have included wider and wider segments of the population. Whereas one unspoken goal of the required writing course used to be to screen out those not familiar with college discourse, in recent decades the emphasis has shifted. Now, one important function of the course is to help students from a wide variety of socioeconomic and language backgrounds succeed. Our more inclusive university demographics pose a unique set of challenges to writing instructors as this new contingent of students no longer represents the monolingualism that, on the surface, once dominated our understanding of the college student. The International Education Institute estimates that well over a half million international students now study at U.S. colleges and a growing contingent of bilingual and foreign-born U.S. residents are also attending college, bringing with them their unique multilingual resources.

As writing teachers, we are well poised to help students think critically about their writing and communication skills. Yet we do not always feel we have the right tools to do so. In an effort to help us better attend to a shifting student demographic, the CCCC released an official statement in 1974 entitled “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (see Perryman-Clark, Kirkland, and Jackson’s *Students Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook*). This document, among other things, asserts students’ right to their own dialects and challenges writing teachers to learn and teach a culturally relevant curriculum that honors and respects students’ multilingual resources. Since the 1990s, thanks to a growing partnership with second-language acquisition
studies, the field of composition has paid considerable attention to meeting the needs of second-language and linguistic minorities, and in 2001 CCCC released an official “CCCC Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers” in hopes of promoting greater understanding of how best to work with second-language writers in the classroom. Despite these official policies, for a variety of reasons, many writing teachers feel underprepared to work with ESL students. Further, what it means to be an ESL student or basic writer varies depending on students’ previous experiences with writing as well as the institutional context in which they find themselves taking composition. While advances in composition, such as directed self-placement, attempt to provide ESL students with the choice to accurately assess their composition needs, many second-language students continue to find their way into composition classes unprepared to meet these needs.

As the field of composition shifts its theoretical framework to more adequately account for second-language learners, writing teachers can continue to refine their pedagogical approach to more adequately meet their needs. Arguably, no one speaks standard academic English, and the writing classroom provides an important space in students’ college education where we can have open and honest conversations about the need to, as David Bartholomae notes, “invent the university,” that is, to become comfortable with the language and assumptions that shape academic discourse. This is a process sometimes called “code switching,” meeting the linguistic codes of one’s audience, which may conflict with our desire to encourage students to explore the process of developing their own voice and dialect in their writing. This push-pull between providing students transferable communication skills valued in a college environment and encouraging them to approach writing as part of a creative process of identity formation remains a touchstone debate in the field. Yet, practically, if we are charged with teaching writing in required composition courses, then part of our job as composition teachers is to help students attain the learning objectives of these required courses. While these objectives remain open for debate, they consistently point to the values of critical thinking, understanding composition as a process of drafting and revision, and learning to appreciate the context-dependent nuances of style.

To accomplish these goals with ESL learners, teachers might consider whether or not they are teaching a culturally relevant curriculum. Secondly, teachers can consider whether or not they approach teaching grammar and style in ways that recognize and value dialects and other ways of speaking and writing that do not necessarily reproduce the privileged vernacular of standard academic English. Allowing for code-meshing, for example, and teaching students the opportune moments to do so in expository writing is one way to do this, and there is a strong body of research to support and illustrate the values of this “World English” approach to teaching composition (e.g., you may wish to consult Vershawn Young and Aja Martinez, Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance).

But what does a culturally relevant, code-meshing composition assignment look like? Often, the focus is on language itself. Assignments like literacy nar-
narratives have gained considerable traction over the years. This genre is particularly appealing to teachers who want to foreground critical discussions of language and power in the composition classroom. The genre has also found powerful articulation in the digital environment as teachers and students increasingly experiment with the potentials of digital storytelling and the digital literacy narrative in writing courses. For further discussion of appropriate assignments for ESL students, see the last section of Chapter 2, beginning on page 43.

Readings should also reflect the culturally relevant curriculum promoted by our composition assignments. If you are teaching a literacy narrative, it is a good idea to provide a reading sequence of a series of sample literacy narratives from a variety of professional writers—Amy Tan, Richard Rodriguez, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Gerald Graff, and Gloria Anzaldúa remain popular choices—as well as offer student samples to encourage positive modeling of the form and to provide a coherent curriculum where writing and reading complement the broader course objectives.

Now more than ever, in the context of today’s global economy, our classes reflect a diverse range of languages, dialects, and cultures. As writing teachers, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to address the compositional needs of all students. Some of the most innovative teachers in the field are exploring the possibilities of this kind of work. While it is beyond the scope of this book to go into depth about the complexity of teaching composition to ESL students, a few recommended readings include the work of Paul Kei Matsuda, including his collaboratively edited critical sourcebook *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom*. You might also find useful Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe’s digital publication *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times*, which addresses some of these concerns in the context of composition and globalization.

**Selected References**


When we isolate writing assignments from the multitude of simultaneous tasks a teacher must accomplish, as this section does, we focus attention on a major aspect of the writing course. As we stressed in Chapter 1, writing tasks should be the focus of every writing course: most student time should be spent writing to a planned sequence of assignments, while most teacher time should be spent responding to student writing. Class time should largely be spent preparing for and responding to various stages of the writing process. Furthermore, a well-planned assignment, with full discussion, makes the task of responding to student writing (the subject of the next two chapters) much quicker and easier — no small matter for teachers with large numbers of students. Thus it is appropriate to consider carefully each writing assignment and how it fits into the overall instructional plan for the course.

Some writing teachers structure their classes so that a great deal of the writing is actually done in class, along the lines of a workshop or a writing studio. They argue that writing itself is the best way to learn how to improve and that the teacher’s role, after making the assignment, is to move through the class, stopping for just a few moments to glance through each student’s work and then making suggestions or brief comments. The advantage of this way of teaching writing is that students can receive immediate feedback and the teacher can be sure that they are in fact writing their own work. The disadvantages are also important, however. In-class feedback in this workshop model generally works best in smaller classes. This isn’t always an option for those teachers who face course sizes of twenty-five or more students. In these instances, the role of peer review generally can serve a similar purpose and we discuss the importance of using peer review and group work during class more thoroughly in Chapter 3. However, the necessarily superficial feedback from the teacher under these conditions may be of limited value to more advanced writers and the reflection and critical thinking that complex assignments call for are unlikely to appear in writing produced under such time pressure. This is where the advantages of the teacher-student conference outside of class become important, supplying more in-depth and individual discussion for students’ varying needs. If you want your students to do all or most of their writing in class, you will want to structure assignments to fit the time and resources available and then find ways to build revision, research, and reflection into the course curriculum.
Such writing studio–oriented pedagogy also requires consideration of how much reading and how much time spent discussing the reading will also be sequenced into class time. Teachers who take the route of the writing studio model should also consider types of reading assigned. Many teachers who teach writing this way often assign reading on writing and the writing process (now called Writing about Writing, or WAW) rather than on cultural or other topics, to help students better understand the theory and process behind well-organized, academic prose. Such readings could address tasks from developing a cogent and persuasive thesis—which can then be workshoped in class—to an overview of the classical five-part arrangement of an oration (sometimes corrupted into the five-paragraph theme of high school fame, see White, “My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme”)—which students can then use as guidelines for drafting outlines of their papers. In-class discussion can address how the classical model does or does not work for a given writer’s purpose by way of peer review or a large group workshop.

No set of writing or reading assignments automatically equates to effective writing instruction. Effective instruction requires a clear plan for what each assignment should teach and how the assignments should be sequenced. Thus the assignments that follow are not set out as a curriculum to follow in a single course, but rather as examples of assignments that might fit into an overall teaching plan. Most suggestions in this chapter will have to be modified according to your class goals and your particular student population. Nonetheless, the following assignments offer many specific ways to plan successful and interesting assignments that have been proven to work in composition classrooms. They move from simpler assignments (typically used in the early part of a course) to more complicated ones (appropriate for later on). Some of the assignments are short classroom exercises; others are more elaborate. Some are designed as tests, others as papers to be revised and graded, and still others as material for small group discussion with or without evaluation. In every case, the assignment is followed by a few tips for grading—though all writing need not be graded—and for teaching. As we claim in Chapter 1, no writing assignment should ever be given without discussion of its expected purpose, audience, level of finish, and criteria for evaluation. If you give extended attention to these matters in class, you will get the best writing your students can produce, and you and they are likely to experience the satisfaction of achievement.

THE VALUE AND LIMITATION OF IMPROMPTU WRITING

Despite its limitation of time and abbreviated (and sometimes anxiety-inducing) writing process, impromptu writing in class or on tests remains an important part of college writing curricula. By impromptu writing we mean the kind of writing typical of an essay test or a first draft on a topic the writer receives and must respond to on the spot. Most students are used to performing such exercises in class or in testing rooms, sometimes with high stakes involved (as with Advanced Placement or the SAT writing tests), and have learned to cope with
the pressure in various constructive or destructive ways. They also know that they will face numerous such impromptu writing situations as they go through the university and, indeed, on the job after graduation.

If we can relieve the anxiety over grading and give meaningful assignments in class, many students will appreciate learning how to read and respond to set writing tasks with a time limit, since they also provide the occasion for learning a great deal about the writing processes they will be expected to use in more extended assignments. But we should not, in general, use impromptu writing for assessment purposes, which even at the beginning college level should emphasize reflection and revision. And if we do assess impromptu writing, we should use common sense and caution with grades—if you decide to give grades. Much research has demonstrated that student performance on such writing tasks will vary, sometimes greatly, from one kind of assignment or circumstance to another. But the kind of short writing assignment typical of essay examinations not only is useful as a placement device but also is a powerful way to help students understand some of the quality differences that distinguish successful writing from unsuccessful writing.

Portfolios, on the other hand, have obvious advantages over essay testing for summative evaluation of student writing: they contain a number of student papers, sometimes in several drafts, so we can see the writer’s process of composition as well as multiple products. Portfolios emerge naturally out of writing produced for a course and its corresponding curricula and learning objectives and so support teaching in a way that impromptu writing may not. Still, some teachers use in-class writing exercises designed to initiate a larger writing process, sometimes leading to a unit portfolio embodying several weeks of work. The obvious value of portfolios does not mean that we should ignore the value of impromptu writing in class, or of shorter essays and writing assignments to be written out of class. We cannot teach everything at once, and the very limitations of short writing tasks let us focus attention on just a few important matters. If we deliberately link these in-class writing assignments to the larger projects toward which students work, we help them focus on the job at hand as a way toward more finished writing.

ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Here are two examples of impromptu writing assignments that can be used early in a writing course as preparation for later work, as well as diagnostics to give you an approximate measurement of student readiness. We will return to these assignments in the last section of this book (Part III: Evaluating) with scoring guides, samples of student essays at various levels, and recommendations for teacher responses to the writing. Our concern here is with developing the kinds of writing assignments that can yield useful information about your students’ backgrounds and experiences in one class period and help you and them prepare for more complex assignments later on: clear and focused questions that allow students to demonstrate the abilities they can muster on short notice to shape a response.
Personal Experience Assignment 1: Description and Tone

Describe a person you knew well when you were a child. Your object is to use enough detail that your readers can picture the person clearly from the child’s perspective and at the same time understand from the tone of your description and from the particular details you choose how you felt about the person you describe.

If you are using this assignment as a test, you will (of course) print it for all students taking the test. Many teachers will be more casual about their assignments in class, but it is generally good practice, and most efficient, to duplicate and distribute all class assignments. If you merely dictate the assignment to the students, many of them will not take notes and will misremember or misinterpret the assignment. If you are using an online course management system or course Web site, you could ask students to access an editable digital version of the prompt—as in a Word document labeled “version 1,” suggesting that assignments as well as responses are subject to revision. If you want to examine the immediate fluency of your class, you might save discussion for a later class and see what your students can do with the prompt without help. But if you want the students to begin the paper in class and continue working on it out of class, you should spend a considerable amount of time discussing the assignment with students and reminding them to take notes on the assignment sheet or on their download of the assignment document. In our experience, beginning students are notoriously reluctant to take notes, even when you write things on the board. Sometimes simple directions to underscore the essential elements of a task are best so that the information they need will be at hand when they start writing.

If you intend the paper to be written in class, students may choose to hand-write. However, if you are using a course management system, teach in a computer lab, or allow laptops in your classroom (providing most students at your campus own or can access this technology), students could more easily and legibly use their computers to draft the document. The draft can then be uploaded into their respective student folders by the end of the period. You could also use Google Docs for such a draft, collecting student responses all in one space, or have students write their responses as blogs to be posted directly to a course blog at the end of class, if the class uses such a platform for learning and students are already relatively comfortable using the software. An extended learning moment from the course blog could involve assigning as homework the task of reading other students’ responses and offering a comment or feedback on several of them to further encourage peer-to-peer learning. Instructor comments could attend to both individual responses and peer feedback—either as a written comment posted to the blog, or orally in discussion during the next class period. A good time frame for an impromptu essay is generally thirty to forty minutes, so you may want to focus on a brief discussion of the assignment before students begin writing during the class period.

If you do choose to discuss the assignment in order to set students up for success, your discussion should focus on the key words in the assignment. In
this example, *describe* suggests concrete detail; you may want to help students see the difference between vague and telling details — “Her crooked smile never left her lips” is much more effective than “She was a friendly person.” Some students will ask how old the child in the assignment is expected to be. Any age will do, as long as there is some distance from the present; the student will need to choose a specific age, stick with it, and be sure to give the reader sufficient clues. You should point out that you do not want the child’s language, merely the child’s perspective. And the challenge of the assignment should be stressed: can you let us know just how you felt only by description, without telling us directly? Depending on your class’s experience with writing, you might want to let that instruction stand as a kind of game, or you may want to press further into the concept of *tone*.

Tone (or mood) is a product of the relationship among the writer, the reader, and the topic. The concept is not complicated; it insists that all writing is an act of communication and hence involves some kind of relationship. Your students know about tone in conversation. They might describe their friends as “husky” or “chunky,” whereas people they don’t like are “fat.” They may have studied something often called “connotation” and “denotation” in school. But the tone of writing is set in many ways besides the use of metaphors and connotations: such matters as abrupt or leisurely sentences, direct or indirect quotations, and even punctuation help determine the relationship of writer to reader. The issue here is that students select actively (rather than passively) the right words and sentences, with the right tones, to express the relationship they have in mind in the assignment. Tone and style are difficult to teach — especially outside of rote grammatical instruction, which research has strongly concluded to be ineffective — but worth frequent and repeated conversations because control over tone and voice make the writing more interesting to read; at the same time they help students better attend to audience-directed communication. Working with the student writing, in an assignment context like the one we suggest here, is usually an effective way to help students understand the importance of tone and style as context-dependent.

Though you may not wish to grade an impromptu essay for class purposes, sometimes it is necessary to do so for other reasons; you may be using the results for placement or be giving a pretest/posttest to your students to evaluate how much they learn by the end of the term. Chapter 5 describes the most common way to evaluate large-scale writing exams: holistic scoring, using a scoring rubric and a numerical scale. Chapter 7 describes the uses of such scores for course or program evaluation. If you decide to use the first essay as a timed diagnostic test, you will probably not want to conduct the prewriting discussion described here before the test because you will be testing to see if the students can go about these procedures on their own. But you may want to give the students an opportunity to revise their work after you return it to them, scored or ungraded, as a springboard for instruction in such matters as tone or revision. You might want to duplicate and distribute the scoring guide and the sample papers illustrating it in Chapter 5 of this book; they will help demonstrate differences in quality, illustrate the clarity and fairness of the
grading, and reinforce the need and possibilities for revision. The discussion can then be particularly rich and fruitful. You may also wish to do an exercise where students peer-review and grade each other’s responses using the scoring guide. This approach would both facilitate student-centered learning and provide students with an opportunity to begin using the language of assessment in discussing their own writing and the writing of their peers.

**Personal Experience Assignment 2: Analyzing Values in Objects**

Many observers of our society claim that modern people, immersed in materialism, are “owned by their objects.” Yet many of us have objects that we treasure not just for their material value but for a variety of other reasons. Describe one object that is important to you. Explain what values it represents, and comment on those values.

This topic parallels the first personal experience essay in its demands. It requires detailed description, draws on the writer’s experience for subject material, and moves beyond mere description to levels of abstraction. The difference between the two topics, however, may be significant for some students. Many students find it easier to describe objects than people, and such students will perform more successfully on this topic. Similarly, because a discussion of values is a more straightforward activity than management of tone, this topic will be easier for students without much control of verbal nuance. Nonetheless, the challenge of recalling human relationships may stimulate certain introspective students to write more effectively on the first assignment, despite the fact that it is in one sense more difficult. And some students may write badly on the second assignment because they may be unable to discuss values without resorting to simple sentimentalism or stock phrases.

This topic is built on the usual test demand for a well-stocked and accessible bank of memories. Even more than most, it calls for students to come up with a suitable memory, decked out with detail, before they can begin to compose. The student who came up with the music box as object (see pp. 104–5) clearly had an advantage over the student whose memory could supply only the clichéd teddy bear (p. 107). Every essay question contains this kind of hidden demand for memory and for retrieval of the right kind of memory for the writer’s use. Nearly all questions—even text-based ones—will ask for details, support, or examples as part of the response.

If you choose to discuss this topic with your students before they write, you will probably want to spend time considering the most appropriate objects to choose. Most students, particularly in a test situation, just plunge in and write about the first thing that comes to mind. More skillful students, however, will pause before beginning to write, choosing from a range of possibilities. Be sure to look ahead to Chapter 5 for sample student essays written to these two assignments, as well as scoring guides which you may want to use or adapt if you will be grading the essays. We also suggest ways of reading and using the results of reading the essays for placement purposes.
ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON TEXTS

Many writing programs disapprove of too much personal writing, since they want to move directly to an important goal of writing courses: linking reading comprehension and writing about the reading. Increasingly, as the Common Core and similar efforts to reach these goals become widely adopted in the high schools, you should be able to expect entering college students to show their understanding of a text through their writing, an important “habit of mind” in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (see the Appendix). Further, giving students an extended assignment that asks for critical interpretation of a text could occasion the valuable use of an impromptu text-based essay to test their overall reading comprehension, before they begin the process of working with secondary criticism on the text in the extended assignment. In other words, impromptu writing of this kind serves as a substitute for the “reading pop quiz.” When the prompt is distributed at the beginning of class and the remaining class time is spent discussing the text, the impromptu writing serves as a springboard for class discussion and, likewise, class discussion serves as a springboard for the students’ extended writing assignment. Here is an impromptu text-based assignment that allows students to demonstrate the important ability of textual interpretation.

Text-Based Assignment 1: Understanding a Single Text

The best swordsman in the world doesn’t need to fear the second best swordsman in the world; no, the person for him to be afraid of is some ignorant antagonist who has never had a sword in his hand before; he doesn’t do the thing he ought to do, and so the expert isn’t prepared for him; he does the thing he ought not to do; and often it catches the expert out and ends him on the spot.

— Samuel Clemens

Write an essay that explains what Clemens means by his description of the “best swordsman” and the “ignorant antagonist.” Relate Clemens’s concept to an area about which you are well informed.

Notice that this assignment makes very different kinds of conceptual demands on the writer than those made by personal experience topics. Instead of requiring the writer to plumb experience for a person or an object to write about, this question demands close and sensitive reading of the passage as the crucial first step. There is no evidence to show that text-based topics are inherently more difficult than experience-based topics or that they elicit more complex thought or writing, though some students continue to struggle with them. All we can say with certainty is that the demands are different and less personal; in some ways, these topics are more “academic” than the first set and will thus have more appeal to faculty across the curriculum, though rather less to most students. The text-based questions in this chapter make complex demands on students in the areas of both reading and writing and so may be
more appropriate for advanced students than for those lacking experience with complex texts.

As you will see when you look at the sample student responses in Chapter 5, the most adept readers notice that the brief passage is saying something interesting about the nature of expertness within a code of behavior. The expert will win if everyone plays by the rules. But sometimes someone rejects the rules— as the American colonists did against the English troops—and the expert can’t handle the new circumstances. With that understanding of the passage, good writers and readers have much to say, even in a short time. Writers unable to make sense of the passage tend to flounder.

**Text-Based Assignment 2: Comparing and Contrasting Two Texts**

The following assignment differs somewhat from the previous one by using two quotations and requiring a comparison/contrast response. If you are using it to do a pretest/posttest study to demonstrate student learning along with the first text-based topic, you should probably use only the first quotation (which works well by itself) and prepare directions for writing that parallel those for the Clemens passage. In addition, you should use exactly the same scoring guide, revised appropriately for the abilities of your students and for the specific skills taught in your course, for both tests. We present the question as an example of a difficult essay assignment with complex demands.

This question requires that students (1) understand two passages, both of which are metaphorical and in part ironic; (2) recognize the attitude each passage reflects toward the role of science in human affairs; (3) conceive and present an imaginary argument between the protagonist of one passage (the scientist) and the deceived “some” who speak in the other; (4) speculate on the views of the authors of the two passages; and (5) organize and present this material in an orderly and literate way under time pressure. Clearly, such an assignment requires substantial academic preparation. If you have many students such as those scoring in the lower ranges on the “Understanding a Single Text” assignment, this question will not yield useful information for diagnosis or anything else. But this assignment, or one with even more extensive reading passages, may be just what you need if you are teaching students who have had the benefit of rigorous academic preparation.

*Read the passage and the poem; then write an essay as directed following the poem.*

This is a story about one of our great atomic physicists. This man, one of the chief architects of the atomic bomb, so the story runs, was out wandering in the woods one day with a friend when he came upon a small tortoise. Overcome with pleasurable excitement, he took up the tortoise and started home, thinking to surprise his children with it. After a few steps he paused and surveyed the tortoise doubtfully.

“What’s the matter?” asked his friend.

Without responding, the great scientist slowly retraced his steps as precisely as possible, and gently set the turtle down upon the exact spot from which he had taken him up.
Then he turned solemnly to his friend. “It just struck me,” he said, “that perhaps, for one man, I have tampered enough with the universe.” He turned, and left the turtle to wander on its way.

— Loren Eiseley

“The path of life,” some say, “is hard and rough
Only because we do not know enough.
When Science has discovered something more,
We shall be happier than we were before.”

— Hilaire Belloc

Explain each writer’s attitude toward the relationship between science and human happiness. To what extent do the scientist in Eiseley’s passage and the “some” in Belloc’s poem agree or disagree? Do the two authors seem to agree more with the scientist or with the “some”?

This is a demanding assignment and, depending on your class, may be more appropriate as a take-home essay after class discussion or preliminary writing in class. Unless the students see the underlying sarcasm in the Belloc poem they cannot connect Belloc’s skepticism about science to the atomic scientist’s misgivings about his role in advancing knowledge of atomic energy. Once they have seen those shadowy connections, they are in a position to put their own understanding of scientific discovery in their writing: How much has scientific discovery added to or subtracted from our lives? What is the “habit of mind” that leads to science in the first place? You might even choose to use this impromptu assignment as the start of a controversy analysis involving additional readings or interviews with scientists; it could become an entire unit in a course attending to such matters in considerable depth. Or it could remain as an impromptu assignment, giving you important information about the reading and writing ability of your class and what is most needed by it.

**DIGITAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

As more and more teachers of writing turn to computers, not just as a writing technology, but as an opportunity to rethink what genres of writing assignments we should be assigning in the twenty-first century, there is a growing interest in creating accessible and practical assignments for writing in a digital environment. While the following examples are far from exhaustive, and, indeed, must be adapted to fit the local needs of the students and curriculum as would any assignment, print or otherwise, we invite you to consider the following assignments which make various use of technology and the Internet for teaching writing and research in the composition classroom.

**Research Assignment 1: Exploring Topics**—
**Considering the Limits and Potentials of Google**

One of the most difficult things about teaching writing in a research-focused curriculum is helping students see the value in *writing to learn*, rather than
writing to profess knowledge. Furthermore, as we pointed out in Chapter 1, when students are faced with more extended writing projects, like the research paper (sometimes called the researched argument), it is very helpful to sequence smaller assignments that scaffold the project into discrete writing and research tasks. Here is an example of such scaffolding that asks the students to engage with the Google and Google Scholar search engines in the early invention stages of developing a topic. You might perform this assignment with guided instruction in one class period, or assign it as homework early in the research process.

Directions: (1) Pick five key words that describe your topic. (2) Next, make as many combinations of these key words as possible, adding new words where needed. (3) Finally, enter these key word clusters into Google. What promising leads are uncovered in the process? What types of sources (Web site, blog, white paper, policy, peer-reviewed journal, social media site) does Google find? Who (scholar, government or business organization) does Google find? Do the genres, authors, and arguments of sources change as you switch the key words around? (4) Write down any recognizable patterns emerging from your search and any promising links emerging from the process. (5) Next, step back and observe your findings. Do any of the sources disagree, and if so on what accounts? Try to develop one or two focused research questions that speak to your search and see if you can define, in one sentence, the research topic emerging from the search. (6) Repeat the process using the same combination of words in Google Scholar. (7) Reflect on using Google and Google Scholar as part of the invention process: What are the potentials and limits of this approach to research? Where else might you go to continue researching based on your “investigative leads” from this exercise? What inquiry skills can you transfer to key word searches in scholarly databases?

On the surface, the assignment seems like a series of small rote tasks. And it is. Yet these tasks are sequenced to move students through the inductive inquiry process of initial topic invention in a way that keeps them open to finding new things as well as thinking critically about what they discover and how to find information. While this assignment asks students to begin with Google and Google Scholar, some teachers may wish to take students straight to digital scholarly databases, conducting the same research tasks to find peer-reviewed articles—or, some teachers may wish to begin the process with Google and assign the same tasks with a scholarly database like Academic Search Premier for homework. In more extended writing studio models, you may have time to do both. You might also consider using group work, where the class develops the topic and key word clusters together, and then each group explores resources using these key words across different spaces: Google, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, Academia.edu, and a New York Times archive, for example.

In a digital world where so much information is readily available and where students are quite comfortable thinking of research as “Googling,” it is often best to confront Google at the start of the project and help students explore
topics in both Google and library databases. After all, the skills required for inductive inquiry in Google through key words are directly transferable to library databases in search of peer-reviewed journals. The difference is helping students understand how to use Google to explore a topic—and its major controversies, stakeholders, and textual genres—and then move into the databases to find different disciplinary approaches and methods for understanding this topic. This way, students can come to see, for example, that much of what they find in Google are objects of analysis, and the sources they find in scholarly databases provide the theories and methods for analyzing these textual objects. Students are also often pleasantly surprised to find that they can turn up much more on their topic in a scholarly database than in Google Scholar, debunking the young researcher’s tendency to assume that if it’s not in Google Scholar, no one has yet asked the question.

In the early stages of research, students can benefit from exploring the nuances of a potential topic in a more open platform, like the Internet. While this can be overwhelming for some students, guided instruction through an impromptu assignment, such as this option’s attention to developing functional key words, can make the process more manageable. Again, this skill is directly transferable to library database research. It also supports a notion of research that may help students remain more open to alternative perspectives. That is, by simply looking for what’s out there on a topic, students might stumble upon a source that has a completely different perspective from their own on the issue; if the students are picking a topic on which they already have strong feelings, this is particularly important. Given the happy accident of bumping into a new perspective—without a teacher coercively telling a student they must engage the other side—students are invited to consider how to bring this new perspective to bear on their argument. Such an exploratory approach to research also helps students see the limits and potentials of the Internet for finding different kinds of sources. For example, while the Internet is great for discovering who is taking positions on and what is at stake in a topic, the sources are not all equally credible in the context of researched academic argument.

This assignment is designed to teach students the importance of inventory and exploration in research. But it should also promote a sustained discussion of the kinds of sources scholars deem credible for academic argument and the rhetorical tools needed to read popular sources to assess whether they fit this criterion. For example, does the source consider opposing opinions? Do two opposing sources use similar terms or are they talking past each other—this kind of analytic heuristic is often referred to as *stasis theory*. A classic example is abortion rhetoric and the use of pro-life and pro-choice by the right and left, respectively. Using stasis theory, we can teach students to recognize that pro-choice and pro-life are focused on two different concerns: one is the religious appeal to the sanctity of life and the other the liberal idea of a woman’s right to her own body. These are not the same issue, although they are posed as such through the abortion debate. Once students come to recognize this, they are in a better position to begin understanding how and why scholarly argument
tries to rectify the way popular opinion and texts often problematically and unproductively speak past each other.

The advantage of using something like Google early in the research process is that it promotes the kinds of research skills students may already possess while allowing teachers to refine how students think about using these skills. At the same time, it also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the limits to using only one resource, as discussed above, and then directs students to the value of new research skills, such as using library databases and peer-reviewed texts. Using Google early on is also an easy way for students to find primary texts or what Joseph Bizup calls “exhibit texts.” Using Google, however, invites students to survey the broad landscape of their topic and the various agents who have a stake in the topic, including practitioners and industry that may not be reflected in a more traditional library database search. In past experience with this exercise, students have stumbled upon white papers and international policy documents from countries they might not have otherwise considered and, in the process, completely changed the approach and purpose of their project. Upon completion of this exciting inventory stage of the research process, students can be invited to compare and contrast these results with the same key words approach (indeed, using the same key words) in several library databases—Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, Project Muse, and ERIC, for example—in order to discover what disciplinary fields and scholars are engaged in researching such topics. A good multimodal exercise for synthesizing this approach is Gaipa’s ballroom map exercise offered in Chapter 1. Thereafter, it is important to help students understand how to engage more critically and deeply with their sources, looking for their motives and understanding how arguments are constructed differently across genres. The following assignment provides one way of doing so.

**Research Assignment 2: Reading Like a Rhetorician**

This assignment is designed for the early stages of the research process when students are beginning to compile an assortment of texts and are preparing to synthesize their various arguments and stakeholders. An assignment such as the following is intended to help students learn to make critical assessments about a document (an important skill emphasized throughout the Common Core and central to research-based writing in the university). It can be assigned immediately following an activity like Research Assignment 1 in which students have just completed an initial inventory of the various kinds of sources available on their topic. While this approach to teaching textual analysis has a long history in rhetoric and composition, its methodology is transferable to any discipline. In fact, the Stanford History Education Group’s *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum is designed to help secondary and early postsecondary students better understand the recursive and involved process of sufficient and contextual interpretation of, in their case, historical documents. Below is an assignment adaptation based on the Stanford History Education Group’s
“Evaluating Sources” activity that promotes rhetorical processes of interacting with historical and contemporary texts:

**Directions:** Answer the questions below for each of your three sources.

1. **SOURCING** — Look at the source of a document before reading it—not the database or location where you found it, but the “source”—and jot down responses to the following questions in your composition notebook. What kind of document is it? Who wrote it? Why? When was it published? Where was it circulated?

2. **CONTEXTUALIZING** — Decipher the context in which the document was written. To what historical/contemporary events and/or new information is this responding and why?

3. **VALIDATING** — Cross-check the document with other sources before coming to conclusions about it. What do others have to say about this information? Where does this source stand in terms of impact and credibility in relation to other sources? Does the source directly engage arguments made by another of your sources?

The goal of this assignment is to help students begin to synthesize and articulate the broader context in which a text is created and to which it responds. That is, this assignment helps students to better understand that texts are social products created in response to larger social concerns and that involve various competing stakeholders’ respective interests. In our experiences teaching writing, we note that understanding context is notoriously difficult for young writers. Students often need clear definitions of context and struggle to understand how to relate context to meaning—which they often see as a digression from their claims. Yet an assignment like this one is designed to help students see that it is precisely context that determines the validity of and scope of probable claims one can make.

A new way of addressing context in writing in recent years has been to foreground a text’s genre. This is certainly helpful, and there is a growing field of scholars interested in (re)turning to discussions of using genre to teach writing. Here we want to emphasize that this assignment’s understanding of context is concerned with the broader sociocultural and historical moments to which texts of any genre respond. That is, context in the sense of this assignment concerns not only the relative available means of persuasion in a given genre but also how that particular text, as produced in a given genre, affects (or doesn’t) the larger conversation and cultural climate to which it responds. Students often understand this by way of literary criticism when asked to perform an analysis of the particular historical climate surrounding a canonical novel such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Similar forms of contextual sourcing and situating around nonfiction genres like primary historical documents, press releases, social media tweets, opinion editorials, and scholarly articles are also needed for students working with research-based writing, nonfiction texts, and contemporary issues in writing courses.
It is often beneficial for students to see how contemporary issues like abortion, Title IX, and environmental sustainability, for example, have historical roots and cultural precedents in law, policy, social movements, and even major literary texts. Abortion and Title IX are not relevant only to sensationalized news depictions of current events nor are they “1970s issues,” but rather ethical issues and legislation related to an ongoing fight for gender equality; similarly, environmental sustainability did not emerge with the awareness of climate change and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* but is more broadly about humans’ relationship to nature. It is important to help students see the diachronic, or long historical, view of their topic as well as the synchronic, or heavily contextualized conversation in a given moment of time, perspectives on their topic. After students complete such an exercise, they often come to an understanding about how different genres of text may be more successful for forwarding arguments about their given topic than others, and that different audiences have different expectations about both the genre and its available arguments and evidence. Finally, students can generally begin to see whether all of their sources are germane to their topic and how they might begin to write an introduction to a research-based essay that contextualizes their topic for their readers based on the textual “sleuthing” emerging from their critical reading.

A good follow-up assignment to this could ask students to move from context to synthesis of sources. The following assignment is an example of how students might accomplish this task in the form of a Twitter dialogue. However, if teachers wish to take a more traditional approach, or if digital technologies and literacy are more limited at your campus, this would be a good opportunity to assign and discuss how to synthesize opposing viewpoints in the form of a literature review or another genre more germane to the respective needs of the class and the assignment.

**Digital Style Assignment: Twitter &/as Platonic Dialogue**

The following assignment is useful for a variety of larger extended writing projects, from contextual analysis to researched argument to literary criticism, and gets at the heart of synthesis, concision, and style by using Twitter, an increasingly popular digital social media platform. The major learning goal of the assignment is to help students begin to synthesize opposing viewpoints. This is a classical approach to rhetoric reaching back to Plato’s use of dialogue as a knowledge heuristic. This assignment reimagines the Platonic dialogue in a digital environment that tends to emphasize concision—the Facebook status update, the GIF (Graphics Interchange Format), the digital meme, the vine (a short looped video), the Instagram, the tweet. If your class focuses specifically on writing and researching about social media, this assignment could be the first of a series in which students are invited to reimagine the dominant arguments of their topics in the concise digital genres.

This assignment works well after students have conducted a fair amount of focused research and reading. If a project involves literary criticism, ideally the student has read at least four or five secondary criticisms of a primary text. If
the project calls for other kinds of research, these sources should ideally repre-
sent a variety of viewpoints and possibly disciplinary perspectives on a topic. A 
variety of adaptations are possible; the following example illustrates but one 
use of Twitter to teach synthesis while also noting the role genre plays in shaping 
conventions of style.

Review the annotations you made for your sources on your topic. What is the main 
point or argument of each source? Write these down in the margins of your anno-
tations. Now, imagine the authors of these sources conversing over Twitter. Assign 
each source a Twitter handle (name) and begin putting your sources into conver-
sation, using tweets of no more than 140 characters, and no more than 20 total 
tweets (or roughly 4 tweets per source). Remember to model stylistic conventions of 
Twitter—hashtags, irony, rhetorical questions, concision.

The assignment can be completed in one class period and it is often insight-
ful and humorous for students to recite and discuss the results after complet-
ing the exercise. If you are using an online course management system and you 
can add links to your course Web site, another way to encourage sharing and 
dialogue with this exercise is to create a document on Google Docs and ask 
each student to contribute their exercise to the document—you will need to 
edit the share settings so that the link is editable by anyone with access to the 
link. While you project the assignment on the screen, students can watch the 
Google Doc grow in real time as they compose their Twitter feeds. Students do not 
need Twitter accounts for this exercise. Rather, the goal is to reimagine 
each source’s author and argument in the genre of a Twitter conversation, even 
if the conversation lives on a Google Doc. Importantly, in spite of myths of the 
popularity of social media, not all students will have heard of Twitter or its 
conventions. It may therefore be wise to ask students about their experience 
with the social media platform a day in advance or provide enough time for 
discussing the conventions of Twitter at the beginning of the exercise.

We like this assignment for several reasons, including how the assignment 
requires several important rhetorical skills and habits of mind. First, to ade-
quately complete the assignment students must be able to summarize main 
arguments and key evidence across sources (it may be helpful to ask students 
to do so in advance of class). Secondly, students need to be able to see the over-
lap and divergence in arguments by theme, use of evidence and appeal, audi-
ence, and so forth. This is achieved by asking students to provide each source 
with a Twitter handle that aptly illustrates the overall impression of the 
source. While some students go for the metaphoric route in naming sources, 
such as Obevilone, Nice_guy, Flip_flopper, others use handles as a way to humor-
ously summarize the main opinion of a source: megasportsrock, boomurbustadia, 
$$sportdevelopment. Others will chose more literal or credential-oriented handles 
that identify the author’s last name and institutional affiliation—university, 
government, nonprofit, industry: Wright_Stanford, White_Arizona, and BGates_ 
Philanthropist. Thirdly, as students begin to imagine putting these sources into 
conversation, they have to think about how best to translate these concepts
into the conventional form of Twitter-speak, often associated with branding and building celebrity: 140 characters or less and relatively epideictic—or the rhetoric of display, often associated with praise-and-blame and focused more on the present moment. Students also need to consider the primary convention of Twitter, the hashtag, and the different ways this is used by different kinds of handles—some use it ironically for humor, while others use it as a form of linking and aggregating information. This is a complicated series of tasks that demands stylistic concision and awareness of audience, genre convention, and purpose at the same time students are synthesizing major arguments and findings from their resources.

The results can be quite illustrative. Diagnostically, the exercise quickly demonstrates where students are with synthesis and reading comprehension: Have they done the reading? Do they understand the arguments? Are they privileging one source more than others, and does this source sufficiently defend its argument with valid evidence and warranted claims? Students can generally see when they have too much bias in their source options if they have a hard time creating moments of drama in the Twitter dialogue. If all of their sources agree, the exercise gets boring really fast. The exercise can be extended by asking students to retranslate the conversation back to academic paragraphs, generating topic sentences that foreground claims and using formal conventions of in-text citation to attribute evidence and authorial support to the argument. This second step challenges students to maintain the dialogic nature of the Twitter exercise in their academic approach to synthesis, adequately accounting for each source’s main points and providing necessary textual evidence. Students are also challenged to adjust the tone and vernacular of the writing for an academic community of writers. In fact, by moving from Twitter to academic writing, it is often very easy for students to see how and why tone shifts with a new audience and context.

**Style Assignment: Spoken Word**

*Translate your essay into a three-minute spoken word poem to be delivered orally in class. You will want to draw on the essay’s major argument and supporting facts, and adapt this information to fit the conventions of spoken word, a genre that capitalizes on rhetorical and oral devices like intonation, rhythm, inflection, pacing, rhyming, metaphor, alliteration, and bodily gesturing.*

Style is a tricky subject for composition and notoriously difficult to teach given the range of writing tasks required of students in a short time frame. However, it is often good and even necessary to draw students’ attention to the ways in which style affects meaning. Though the Twitter exercise above implicitly gets at this goal, sometimes it is helpful to be more explicit. One way you might ask students to think cogently about style is to create an exercise that asks students to translate their current academic writing on a topic into an entirely different genre, like spoken word. While, arguably, all genres are heavily stylized, students tend to think of style as superfluous; or, equally problematic, they tend
to think of academic writing as anti-style. The goal of an assignment like “Spoken Word” is to begin to invite students to see that all genres have stylistic conventions designed to fit the audience, context, and purpose of the genre.

For preparation, students can be directed to watch National Poetry Slam contest winners and other spoken word performances — these are widely available online on YouTube, including the works of Button Poetry and internationally acclaimed British rapper and spoken word artist Kate Tempest who has worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Class discussion in advance of the assignment can address the ways in which various performers emphasize meaning through vocal variety and rhetorical devices such as metaphor and alliteration and meter. Time permitting, you might even invite students to imitate these models and invite the class to provide instant feedback. At home, students translate their scholarly essay into a three-minute presentation designed for a general audience that begins to consciously craft some of these rhetorical devices central to the spoken word genre into the script. As students prepare and deliver their spoken word poems they are often amazed to see how visibly and tangibly style works in the medium. A good follow-up assignment asks students to reflect on how they consciously used and came to better understand style in the exercise and which stylistic aspects of their spoken word might be adapted to enliven their academic essay.

ADDRESSING ESL CONCERNS IN ASSIGNING WRITING

When we isolate a section of a book — or a class — on teaching writing to ESL students, we run the risk of portraying ESL students and/or effective pedagogical practices for working with ESL students as unique to them. Yet, generally, good writing pedagogy is applicable to both ESL and native speakers. Still, perhaps one of the more difficult challenges of teaching writing to ESL students involves helping them reconceive the role of assessment in writing and to learn to embrace self-assessment as central to successful writing practice. As Joy Reid and Barbara Kroll remind us, nowhere is the conception of academic writing as a form of testing more pervasive than for ESL students who have too often internalized a perception of themselves as “bad writers” in need of correction. Concurring with the recommendations of scholars in rhetoric and composition, ESL scholars suggest writing teachers design, discuss, and assess writing assignments in as clear and transparent a manner as possible. Even more so than with native speakers, it is ethically imperative to clearly communicate how we will assess an assignment. While this is good advice for all writing instruction, it is particularly important for working with ESL students because unclear and/or vague assignments can often disadvantage this student population.

In order to create assignments that “bias for the best,” Reid and Kroll recommend the following heuristic for effective assignment design:

- Be contextualized and authentic, linking to classroom work and learning objectives as well as writing skills needed in the “real world” and future work.
• Have accessible content, tapping into students’ background knowledge to link to new knowledge.
• Be engaging, for both the student and the teacher-reader.
• Have appropriate evaluation criterion reflective of course goals. (263)

Reid and Kroll also recommend that writing assignments should be controlled for the following variables: contextual, content, linguistic, task, and rhetorical. You may wish to consult their article in full as it details examples and explanations of effective and ineffective writing assignments, as well as how to assess the efficacy of newly designed writing assignments for working with ESL students.

As more and more students write in digital environments and with new technologies, we need to consider how computers and digital writing environments can influence how we teach writing to ESL students. Martha Pennington makes a strong argument for teachers of ESL writing to stay abreast of technological developments in using computers to teach writing and to integrate them into their pedagogical practice in ways that best help ESL students learn to write. One of the many advantages Pennington sees of using computers to teach writing to ESL students is the ease of producing text with writing software. Word processing software may encourage ESL students to write and revise more frequently, an important skill in learning to become a better writer. Since most word processing software now has functions to check grammar and spelling, writing teachers can let those functions deal with surface features and use the computer to help ESL writers better attend to the rhetorical concerns of writing such as arrangement and evidence and clarity of thought. But the grammar checkers have a downside. With their focused attention on word-level or at most sentence-level mechanics, they may distract students from the rhetorical issues that are the essence of college writing. ESL students in particular have had so much instruction in various versions of grammar that they may confuse correct writing with good writing. The computer offers one further problem, not unique to ESL students, but one of special concern for students from cultures without our definition of plagiarism. Some students may need extra instruction rather than punishment if they do not use sources consistent with American conventions of intellectual property. See Chapter 1 for materials that will help you clarify that issue.

At the same time, digital and multimodal approaches to language and composition provide teachers of ESL and second-language (L2) writing with exciting opportunities to rethink the relationship between language and representation. If digital pedagogy and semiotics have taught us anything about teaching writing it is that alphabetic print is but one medium for symbolic communication and exchange of ideas. At the same time, our institutional histories, steeped in complicated legacies of grammar instruction and prevailing myths of “correct ways of speaking,” have continued to define the composition classroom as a space of benign gatekeeping as students learn to “invent the university” through acquiring the conventions of traditional expository prose. Yet, as higher education opened its doors to a more diverse student
body, and as communication and linguistic sciences expand our understanding of “good writing” and “effective communication,” we can also expand our standards of best practice in academic writing. Further, as composition studies continues to professionalize itself as a field of study, self-reflexively critiquing and identifying a taxonomy and pedagogy for teaching “academic discourse” to students, we have come to realize there is more diversity in academic writing than in the past. Digital and multimodal pedagogies can breathe the same kinds of dynamism and variety into ESL writing classrooms by continuing to question and expand our notions of effective communication and providing students with culturally sensitive and relevant contexts for making meaning, at the same time as we explore new and important genres for communicating this knowledge. Yet the ESL classroom has remained somewhat static and reluctant to engage digital and multimodal writing practices. Since scholars continue to explore how we should teach composition in meaningful ways in college writing courses, then to ignore the same question in L2 contexts “raises questions of authenticity in L2 learning” (Lotherington and Jenson, 228).

Thus, the teaching of writing in the twenty-first-century ESL classroom should not look that different from the regular composition classroom. While there may be specific needs for ESL writing pedagogy that will help these students bridge into a regular or advanced composition course, ESL students can benefit from digital and multimodal pedagogies as much as native-speaking students. Thus, rather than seek to provide specific examples of writing assignments here that are relevant for working with ESL students, we instead want to suggest that the exercises we have offered throughout this chapter, and the rest of the book, are applicable, perhaps with some modification, to the ESL classroom as much as the general composition course. So-called democratic genres like wikis and YouTube videos draw on participatory and digital composition pedagogies in ways that can help build communication fluency and confidence in ESL learners, while allowing them to draw on culturally relevant and meaningful topics in a manner that is engaging or even playful (Lotherington and Jenson).

In order to break out of teaching what some are calling “flat” skill-based literacies for ESL students, we encourage the expansiveness of multimodality in communication, particularly in L2 and ESL environments. Or, in low-technology classes, the humble collage, the oral performance, the interpretive dance, all are multimodal forms of meaning-making that support ESL students learning to communicate and translate meaning to different audiences in different genres and modes. We can always bring multimodality back to writing through a reflective assignment where students articulate rationales behind the intention of their compositional choices in a given genre and mode.

Selected References


PART

II

Responding
Though there is much debate these days about the most effective methods of responding to student writing, there is a clear consensus about the least effective ways to handle student papers. Far too much of what teachers do with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful. Most of us model our teaching behavior on the instructors we have had in school, and more than likely they used negative responses, embodied in red ink, rather than what we now know to be much more effective patterns. To help us avoid merely repeating what our instructors did, we need to make conscious decisions about how we will handle student writing, choosing the most appropriate methods for our own classes.

We shouldn’t press the analogy too far, but teaching writing has a lot in common with parenting. It combines discipline and nurturing, encouragement and warning, even perhaps love and hostility. There is a curious intimacy to the whole business, as we read student response journals, hold one-on-one conferences, and write notes to one another. This parallel to parenting becomes particularly apparent as we consider how we have absorbed patterns of behavior without conscious awareness. Unless we make a serious effort, we simply adopt the parenting or responding styles of our early experience. And some of those styles may have been destructive or even abusive. We have to become conscious of and dissatisfied with these ways of responding before we will consider replacing them.

Few of us have paid attention to the wide range of options teachers have for responding effectively and efficiently to student papers, since it is hard to resist the temptation to focus on discrete errors a particular student has made in a particular assignment. But in this chapter we are asking you to put aside that pile or file of writing demanding your attention for a few moments to consider the best way to proceed.

PURPOSES AND EFFECTS OF RESPONDING

The educational purpose of responding to and evaluating student writing ought to be the same as the purpose of the writing class: to improve student writing. (Our society and our institution demand that we also serve one other administrative purpose, to screen out students who do not write well enough, but we will discuss that gatekeeper function later.) We seek to improve student
writing in many ways, but in responding to writing we have one overriding goal: **the student needs to see what works and what does not work in the draft so that revision can take place.** Hence, it does little good for an instructor to judge or grade writing without providing responses that allow the writer to understand the reasons for that judgment. Clearly a grade on a paper, with no comment or only a cryptic phrase or two, will not add much to student learning. Sarcastic or harsh comments allow students to displace dissatisfaction with the paper (the teacher’s intention) with dislike of the teacher and thereby short-circuit learning. Importantly, if students can simply dismiss the teacher’s views as mere personal opinion, their writing will not improve. Steady red-marking of all possible errors will bewilder and frustrate students, who cannot profit from an overload of correction; such papers tend to receive a cursory glance from students before being thrown away. Puzzling abbreviations (e.g., kw, d, fs) are also abstruse to students; they may mean “awkward,” “diction,” and “fused sentence” to the teacher, but for whom are they intended? Even vague positive comments (“Nice work,” “I enjoyed reading this”) frustrate students, who want to know what the teacher found “nice” and what, precisely, made reading enjoyable. With so many teachers responding to student writing in such uninformative ways, we can anticipate warm student appreciation and genuine attempts to improve if we surprise them by taking their writing seriously and respecting it and them.

As an analogy, a batter in a batting cage hits the ball and gains an immediate response; if the ball isn’t hit well, the player will make immediate corrections, steadily practicing until the player’s hitting improves. The coach closely observes the performance and offers suggestions, sometimes modeling the most productive behavior, but the player is the only one who can make the changes needed. It is patently absurd for batters to blame coaches for their strikeouts, and no coach (however kind and supportive) can pretend that bad play will win games; nor can an irascible and competitive coach gain improvement by continuous harassment if a player will not practice. Writing is, of course, more complex than batting (though perhaps not more difficult), but writing teachers can learn a good bit about teaching from watching a good coach. Writers (like all learners) improve when they can **internalize** evaluation — when they can themselves see what needs to be changed and how to make those changes. Conversely, if the draft is truly finished (and very few are), the writer needs to see just where its strengths lie so that they can be repeated.

For many of us in our student days, the writing and submitting of papers was just one battle in the war between student and teacher. We did our best to figure out what the teacher really wanted, often puzzling for hours over obscure directions (or no directions). Then we would hand in the paper and hold our collective breath while we waited for the more or less mysterious judgment that would be handed down when the papers were returned. If we made mechanical errors, we could expect snarls — but we often received those snarls anyway for unpredictable reasons. However, we didn’t complain much because in our heart of hearts we knew we were guilty of unknown sins. We
didn’t pretend to know “grammar,” which was an impenetrable puzzle of arbitrary rules of linguistic conduct, and we thought that the teacher did and would punish us for our unintentional and inevitable violations. It was all part of the war, and—like marine recruits—we expected random humiliation. The grade was all that really counted—revision was rarely required or rewarded—so we developed various ways of ignoring the comments a few teachers sometimes provided.

Since so many of these responding patterns remain, in the composition classroom and sometimes more vehemently in other subject courses, it is interesting to consider what purposes they served and continue to serve. At the outset, it seems clear that the negative pattern just described is a pattern: unclear assignment, harsh commentary, lack of expected revision, emphasis on grades all add up to an exclusionary design, with concern only for product. In other words, this pattern rewards the academically canny and privileged, who probably already know what is being taught. The purpose of the grade and comment is to reward virtue and punish vice, and the moral overtones of the conflict naturally lead to harshness. Students who do not show evidence of good writing are socially and morally offensive, wasting the time of the university and the professor. The teacher’s red pen symbolizes the scarlet letter, which on English papers is rarely an A. It demonstrates the moral offense of the “errors” it excoriates and the pain of the teacher who is forced to mark them. Some instructors maintain this metaphor still in their conversation; they talk of taking a batch of papers home for the weekend and “bleeding all over them.” Yet, let us reflect for a moment on the following questions about responding to writing.

• Must every assignment be graded—or be graded on the same scale?
• Must teachers read and mark every word of every piece of writing done in a writing class?
• What is the point of marking careless mechanical errors on drafts that will be revised or that are not designed for a demanding audience?
• Are we taking ownership of the paper away from students by our markings and asking students to say what we want instead of what they want?
• Are we sufficiently aware of what recent literary theory has taught us about the problematics of reading texts, including student texts?
• What are some useful ways of involving students themselves in the evaluation and response processes that every writer needs?
• How can we structure our comments, and student peer comments, so that students will want to revise their texts for their own sake rather than for ours?
• How can we use assessment and response proactively to assist both the invention and revision stages of the writing process?

Questions such as these ought to arise before red ink flows. The answers to such questions should make the immense amount of time spent with student papers more productive, more interesting, and (perhaps) less time-consuming.
The reason for raising such questions is to ask us to consider the relationship between the teacher’s role in response to writing and student learning. When teachers continue to reinforce a pattern of “bleeding all over papers” they ignore the more important concern for *writing as learning*, for the teaching of writing as supportive of learning, at the expense of writing “correctly.” While the latter is important, and we discuss the role of clean copy at the end of this chapter, this tradition of teaching writing as correctness unconsciously reinforces the gatekeeper function of schooling—rewarding the privileged and excluding almost all whose parents were of the wrong class, income, or national origin.

Instructors who unrepentantly continue this pattern today claim that they are upholding “standards,” as if it were somehow wrong to help students learn. The concern for standards is real and important but should not serve as an excuse to indulge in irresponsible response patterns. An essential part of the writing teacher’s job is to teach and enforce standards of performance that allow students to succeed in college, and perhaps thereafter. This is the gatekeeper function of writing courses, an institutional (rather than educational) function that makes many instructors uncomfortable and with which the field has long wrestled. Some large state universities make freshman composition virtually a wing of the admissions office—expecting the staff to winnow out the unqualified rather than “waste” university resources teaching them. The moral dilemma posed by such a situation is difficult indeed, and every instructor will resolve the conflict in an individual way; but this conflict should not lead to the use of evaluation and responding only as an administrative sorting tool. Nor should it lead to a narrow definition of writing as a mere test of certain skills that an institution may define as necessary, but that may be insufficient in writing contexts beyond a particular writing course or the college setting for that matter.

The uses of writing are so extensive—as a tool for learning new material, as a means of power in a verbal world, as a way to understand complex ideas, as a route to understanding the self, and so on—that we do not want to narrow our purpose as writing instructors to merely judging and enforcing group standards. Indeed, the conversation around twenty-first-century literacies and digital writing in our field is an exciting caveat that offers new ways of thinking about how to use the writing class in ways that bridge writing to learn with the kinds of everyday writing situations in which writers will find themselves once they leave our classrooms. One example is Andrea Lunsford et al.’s *Everyone’s an Author*, which confronts how the digital environment and multimodality are forcing the college writing course to reconsider its own relevance in the face of rapidly changing communicating technologies, in which many students are often dynamically proficient. While we must accept some responsibility for standards, for the sake of both the institution and the students who will be required to fulfill its demands, we believe that if we accept the profound value of writing and its many uses, media, and audiences, then responding to writing becomes extraordinarily complex, calling for some special thoughtfulness on the part of teachers.
AUTHORITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND CONTROL

One major difference between the teaching of writing and the teaching of other subjects has to do with the role of the teacher. In most college courses, the teacher demonstrates authority (through expertness in the field), is responsible for the substance of what students are to learn, and maintains control over the course. However, each of these concepts operates differently in the writing course.

The teacher continues to exercise the authority that derives from knowledge and experience. The teacher knows more about writing than the students and has, of course, done more of it. The teacher is certainly a more practiced and skillful reader and is able to apply that skill to the reading of student texts. Therefore, the teacher has the authority to structure the syllabus, make assignments, and evaluate student writing. But students will not learn much about writing if they are merely passive recipients of the teacher’s knowledge. Many studies support the need for active participation by students in the writing class if effective learning is to take place. This student-centered approach is a cornerstone of good writing pedagogy. Because students must think their own thoughts, invent, discover, write, and revise, they must themselves develop some kind of authority; no one can write very well without having something to say, which implies a certain kind of authority over the material.

Thus the teacher must be willing to share some of the authority that comes inevitably with the instructor’s role. If students are to write with a real voice, they must believe that they have, or can gain, authority over their subjects. The expressive movement in the 1970s and proponents like Peter Elbow have consistently supported this approach to teaching writing, believing that when students write about personal experiences that authority usually comes naturally enough: they are the only ones who really know what happened and they have the right to speculate on what it means. But that tenuous sense of authority tends to disappear in the face of analytical or research assignments. And, given the influence of the Common Core and the “rhetorical turn” in writing studies, it is increasingly common that students are being asked to do more and more of such writing. Though personal and analytic writing are not wholly incompatible, students do need to learn how to distinguish between the dominant conventions of each genre. For example, students used to personal writing facing an analytic assignment will often merely describe what the assignment asks them to evaluate (or summarize or quote someone’s argument), even though the assignment asks them to relate it to their own or someone else’s ideas. Adolescent assertiveness about everything often turns, in college, to a trained unwillingness to take a stand or to claim authority before the “expert” professor or the printed source. Therefore, the writing instructor must find ways to help students understand the kind of authority all writers can claim (or earn).

We cannot overemphasize the importance of balanced response in teaching writing. Some students simply cannot write for professors who assert, or seem to claim, too much authority over too many aspects of the material. One diligent
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student’s hesitant question, after receiving an assignment to write about a Renaissance poet, embodies this lack of authority: “Are we supposed to like Skelton?” Like many passive students, she had given all authorial authority (note the relation of the two words) to the teacher—or, more likely, the teacher had unwittingly laid claim to so much authority that she saw no space to assert any of her own. Until she became convinced that her response to the poem was important and could not come from outside, she was voiceless.

One uncomfortable exception to this pattern occurs with teachers from minority backgrounds (gender, race, class, age) learning how to deal with some students’ assertion of power in attempts to challenge a teacher’s authority—sometimes overtly in class and sometimes indirectly through use of loaded and/or sexual language in papers, and/or hostile teacher-student conference interactions. For a variety of reasons, student resistance to critique and assessment remains a concern and a reality for some teachers of writing, especially as they seek to share that power with students to help them find an authentic voice. If you are in this situation, one way to refocus the student on writing, instead of a power struggle, is to remain calm, neutral, and supportive of things that are working in their writing and thinking. If the situation isn’t ameliorated through such palliative measures, however, you might then provide the student a copy of the student code of conduct statement or, if relevant, the institution’s policy on sexual harassment and confront the issue directly. However, given a teacher’s tentative status as a graduate teaching assistant, a lecturer, or even as an assistant or associate rather than a full tenured professor, and given the particular culture around student authority and the status of teaching writing at a given university campus, you may find it more or less difficult to work through these kinds of situations. Contacting your course adviser (if you have this kind of support) or writing program administrator (WPA) and seeking advice for best practices regarding these uncomfortable moments is safest. You may even be surprised to find your WPA recommend a professional development workshop where experienced teachers can share and discuss these matters frankly and support new teachers as they learn their way around the often muddled power dynamics of college writing classrooms. As teachers learn to navigate the pedagogical milieu of teaching writing more confidently, it is important to find balance in a student-centered approach that still fosters respect and critical thinking.

Many conscientious writing instructors not only deprive their students of the authority all writers need but also unintentionally assume responsibility for the papers their students produce. The most obvious sign of this shifting of responsibility from the student to the teacher occurs when the student tries to revise an early draft in light of the teacher’s comments. Almost invariably, the student will not change anything that the teacher left alone; all revisions will focus on the corrections suggested by the teacher. It is not uncommon to hear students ask, “Do we only need to revise what you marked?” The result of such stilted approaches to revision is often very odd, sometimes considerably worse prose than the original. The revised portions of the paper are often much better, particularly if the instructor’s comments led the student to rethink
and reorganize their best ideas (as comments should). But the paper as a whole is now out of balance, with the original untouched portions—which seemed all right in the draft—now in need of work. When we communicate this to the student, the student is often outraged: “You saw nothing wrong with it before!” In the student’s eyes, and perhaps in our own, we have become responsible for some (or all) of the paper. “Is this what you wanted?” we may hear, as if it were now our paper.

The attitude we take in our comments is crucial here. We must convey to student writers that responsibility and control remain with them and that they need to do more than merely respond to our comments. We ought not assume the role of editor for the student, nor ought we tell the student what the paper should do. We should rather express any problems we perceive in the paper, point out the questions that the paper raises in our minds, and ask the writer to attempt to resolve these problems. We should always be friendly, even when we are feeling overburdened and crabby, and we should always find something to praise and encourage. At most, we might suggest some options or alternatives, but we must refrain from taking over the paper—even if we are convinced that we know just what it ought to be doing. As in early drafting stages, pointed questions are often still more effective than assertions, for example:

- “This seems to be your central idea; why does it first appear here, in the next-to-last paragraph?”
- “The second half of this paper seems to be on a different topic than the first half; which topic do you want to focus on?”
- “This original idea opens up exciting possibilities; can you find a way to examine them?”

A sensible posture to take toward drafts is to comment only on a few central matters: the ideas, the structure, the author’s perspective or voice, for example. We need to encourage risk taking in drafts: the trying on of ideas and arguments that may not work out or may turn out to be very exciting.

Finally, we have to have a healthy portion of humility in the face of student texts, even texts we have trouble respecting. After four decades of poststructural theory, we can no longer imagine that a text is a simple object or that our reading of it is somehow objective or neutral. We must be aware that the value of a text is negotiated, culture-bound, and grounded in social structures. We come to student texts as we come to any texts, out of our own positions as people of a particular class, color, gender, age, and background. We respond as sensitively as we can, and we must finally record our evaluations on grade sheets, but the arrogance and arbitrariness of some teachers of the past might well be left behind along with their lessons in elocution and penmanship.

**RESPONDING TO DRAFTS**

Responding to writing does not begin when you start to read student essays; it starts much earlier, at the point when the assignment is made. Earlier chapters in this book have spoken at some length about the challenge of devising...
appropriate writing assignments; we need only note here that a careful assignment makes the task of responding to the papers it elicits easier for the instructor and more useful for the students.

Perhaps the most useful responses of all occur very early in the writing process. The teacher may discuss the assignment and ask students to go through some prewriting exercises; some examples of previous class work may be distributed and analyzed. Surely this is valuable. But more valuable still is the presentation by students (to the class or to a small peer group) of early ideas for writing. The advantages of making such presentations are obvious: the students gain ownership of the ideas presented, get to work early on the task, and come up with ways of demonstrating the major concept of the project and making it interesting to others. The response to these presentations must be a delicate combination of support, encouragement, and rigor. If a topic is unworkable for some reason, this is the moment to help the student see the problem — when there is sufficient time for a change. If the evidence is unconvincing or weak, the student needs to hear that from the teacher or from the peer group. But responses at this early stage need not be harsh, for their only function is to help the student do good work. No grades or editing issues (the nightmares of so many students) need enter here. Good responding practice will begin with class discussion of the assignment, continue with class or group discussion of individual plans for the assignment, and then move into a consideration of steps for development and revision of discovery drafts.

The logic for rewarding the work in progress is compelling, and not only for the reasons I have been stating. We may talk about writing as discovery and revision and even schedule due dates for work in progress, but unless we build respect for revision into our evaluation of writing, our students will not believe us. If we continue to give a single grade for the finished (or unfinished) writing product, we are in fact saying that the product is all that we value. In reality, term papers, and student essays in general, are among the least valuable products in a world of wastepaper; only a tiny percentage of them are saved, and only a minuscule percentage are published. True, they serve as products to be graded, but the only real reason for their production is as testimony to student learning. In many cases, that learning is better measured through the steps of production than through the final formal product alone.

This is a delicate balance, for too much grading oversimplifies responding. Some instructors manage this balance by giving grades on one kind of scale for drafts, bibliographies, and the like — say, a numerical scale similar to that used in many holistic scoring sessions (typically, 6 [high] to 1 [low]). The final draft can then be graded on the usual A–F scale. Others, concerned about the imposition of authority and ownership implied by constant grading, use peer group responses and a simple checkoff system to note the completion of parts of the task. It all depends on the goals of the course and the assignment, as well as the local institutional culture regarding assessment. But the central point remains: any composition instruction that attempts to inculcate good writing habits should both require and respond to stages of the discovery and revision process.
We need to be careful about our real messages in this regard; if we intend to value revision as part of the writing process for everyone, we cannot treat revision as punishment for bad work or remediation. Unfortunately, numbers of well-meaning writing instructors include revision in their course plans either as an unpleasant option or as required only for bad work. Sometimes papers graded below B may or must be revised; sometimes revision is a possibility only if the students wish to raise their grades. In a great many classes, revision means merely editing for mechanics or making only the teacher’s proposed changes. But every real writer and writing teacher knows that revision means a “new vision” of what is being said, responding to internal as well as external demands; most writing in a writing class should be revised as a matter of normal routine, a natural part of the thinking process that writing expresses. The sample student paper in two drafts at the end of this chapter is a good example of this process.

Whatever the grading or responding system, the comments on drafts should focus primarily on the conception and organization of the paper rather than sentence-level mechanics. There is no point in spending time on editing issues—aside, perhaps, from a note reminding the student that the final copy needs to be edited. Premature editing is the enemy of revision; some writers pay so much attention to spelling and punctuation that they neglect to attend to what they are saying.

Here we return to Lindemann’s heuristic referenced in Chapter 1. To help students embrace and practice the writing process, Lindemann proposes that writing assignments be sequenced and submitted in stages. To demonstrate that the ideas of a paper are what matter in early drafts, some teachers may require an outline of some sort to be submitted along with the draft, to make it easier for both student and teacher to see the ways in which ideas are developed. Others may wish to see just a working thesis with a fully developed outline to see how the main argument corresponds to supporting evidence and claims. The basic job of draft writing is to discover and develop the subject and the organizational structure of a paper, not to worry about mechanics. Hence, it is always helpful for the teachers to mark and respond to the clearest and most inventive statements about the subject; this is another place for encouragement and stimulation of the student. If you are really bothered by errors in the draft, you might want to write something like “Be sure to clean up the copy after you revise so that readers will be able to understand and respect what you have to say.” But red-marking the errors would be destructive at this point and often results in writing anxiety for a student who now feels overwhelmed and discouraged by comments that do little to support the development of ideas and learning.

Experienced teachers have developed various schemes for reading early drafts and concentrating on their ideas, development, and structure. Some make a point of skimming the entire work before commenting, attending particularly to the opening and closing paragraphs; sometimes the first sentence or two of each paragraph will give a clear clue to the structure, or lack of structure, of the paper. It is always useful to identify the central or controlling idea, circle
it, and comment on its interest and possibilities. Questions are more useful to students than assertions at this stage. Instead of writing “coherence” or “coh” in the margin, we might say, “I’ve underlined the two separate ideas you are pursuing in this paragraph; can you connect them? If not, focus on one or the other,” or, “Your point in this paragraph makes good sense, but it seems to conflict with what you said in your opening. How do the two ideas relate?”

Finally, if we want students to profit from our reading, we should apply two commonsense rules: do not overburden students with more commentary than they can handle, and find positive and encouraging ways to suggest improvements. A good rule of thumb is to limit response to a few marginal comments per page, supplemented with an end comment synthesizing a holistic reader response to the paper that provides direct goals for revision. Anything more and students will likely feel overwhelmed and at a loss how to begin revising.

**USING STUDENT RESPONSE GROUPS (PEER REVIEW)**

Trained by years of writing for a grade rather than to an audience, students find writing for both real and imagined audiences other than the teacher no easy task. In our experience, student feedback on peer response groups remains a mixed bag. While difficult to teach, we strongly advocate peer response during the drafting process for several reasons. Firstly, a basic reason for establishing student response groups is to provide an additional audience. Additionally, the social nature of a small group can help build class trust and comfort, particularly when engaging in difficult subject matter; students enjoy working in small groups and getting to know one another. They also learn more from one another than we suspect. Students may be used to hearing, and ignoring, teacher complaints about mechanics, but they have to attend to some of their peers saying, “This is really a mess; I just can’t read it.” As they explain their ideas and their evidence to a small group, they find themselves understanding and changing preliminary views; as they tell each other why they like or don’t like drafts, they are forced to use the vocabulary of writing assessment in an active way that internalizes learning. Even large lecture classes profit from some small group work, which enforces the importance of active rather than passive understanding. Students will often write on course evaluations that they found group work to be one of the more helpful aspects of a writing course.

Still, as some students will find group work initially uncomfortable, we must establish the goals and procedures of student response groups in advance. And we cannot assume that students from all cultures will respond positively to group evaluation; students from some cultures find group work threatening, even bewildering. Furthermore, students from any culture without experience in assessing their own work and who expect the teacher to provide all judgments may simply transfer that expectation to the group, thereby intensifying their writing apprehension. We suggest in Chapter 1 that writing assignments need to take account of complex cultural issues and be relevant to the students we teach; here we remind you that writing groups must also be sensitive to these matters (Mary Louise Pratt has an excellent landmark essay on
navigating the “contact zones” of writing classrooms). Simply asking groups to read and respond to each other’s work may lead to useless (“I really like this”) or destructive (“This is stupid. I can’t understand anything.”) comments. Most students will follow the patterns they have learned in school unless instructed otherwise, and will focus on mechanics or other real or perceived mistakes. Like teachers, they need to be instructed to focus on positive and useful responses (for example, “What is most successful?”), and you should provide models. Also keep in mind that students cannot do too many things at once (“Attend to these three questions”).

These issues require that the teacher think through just what the groups can be expected to accomplish and how. Teachers with different teaching styles will use small groups in different ways and more experienced teachers are likely to have a variety of methods for using small groups depending on the needs of their students and the demands of a particular assignment. For example, for teachers using collaborative writing, small group work begins with the assignment itself, as the group parcels out tasks for each of its members. The group itself is at the core of the writing process and must meet regularly to assess the progress and quality of its own work. When the assignment is completed, the group receives the grade.

Many students also find a handout with guided instructions for peer review useful. Such guidance can help students engage productively with each other’s papers through scaffolded directions that support an interrogative stance to peer review, what Elbow often refers to as the “believing game”; otherwise, the temptation for many early writers is to assume the role of editor and, like many teachers before them, bleed all over the paper with an overattention to mechanical correctness. Yet if this response pattern doesn’t produce better student writing when it comes from teachers, it is unlikely we will see any better results from such an approach to peer response.

In order to facilitate open-ended peer response, some teachers use student response groups as part of a force for what literary theorists call reader-response criticism. This theory assumes that readers create as well as respond to a text. Thus it is essential for writers to hear what a variety of readers perceive as they make their way through the text. The writer must not be defensive or argue for his or her intentions; the writer’s job is to be silent and take notes as members of the group detail their movement through the piece of writing and their reactions. If the writer would like to produce a different set of reactions, revision is called for. This process is common in the creative writing classroom but is even more appropriate in the first-year course, where revision is essential to the writing process and even the strongest drafts have room for improved expression of controlling ideas.

In this way, many teachers ask student response groups to function descriptively: to describe to the author what they see as the controlling idea of the piece of writing, what its assumptions and arguments are, and how they understand it to be organized. Other teachers focus on evaluation, with groups emphasizing suggestions for revision after marking a rubric. And still other teachers use groups simply as a means of socializing students into the college
community of writers. The first personal experience essay in this book (see Chapter 2, p. 30), calling for the description of a character from childhood using detail that will convey an emotion, is ideal for group discussion. The groups, which should not exceed five students (three to four is ideal), can be instructed to read or listen to each person’s paper and to write down the emotion that the writer evokes; each student should identify one part of each paper that evokes the emotion most clearly. After everyone has read or heard the papers, each writer calls for a discussion of his or her paper, writing down the responses of each member of the group to the two tasks at hand without being defensive. The group should not spend much time hearing what the writer “really meant to say”; the writer needs to hear what the group has heard the paper say. The inevitable comparisons and dissonance in the group give the writer a clear sense of the relative success of the paper and of possible revisions.

Each assignment and each draft lead to different possibilities for group work. Sometimes, instead of a group of four, you will want to use pairs of students—this is common as students develop longer essays and are looking for closer reading of organization and evidence rather than an overall first impression. You may want to reshuffle the groups at this point so that patterns of response do not become fixed or too personalized, or you may want to maintain groups that are working well to cement their supportive function. And you may well want to develop a sensible mix of group work with full-class work, just as you will probably rely on groups more heavily for drafts than for presentation copies of student work. If you have a heavy student load—the growing impetus for teaching writing online is one example—you may want to use group responses for early drafts that you will not read so that you can devote your reading time to more finished work. If your campus is wired, or if all or most of your students have access to in-class computing, you may use computer groups as well as class groups, and you may be able to insist that drafts be subject to spell checkers or group editing before you read them. You may also want to experiment with digital software that aids collaborative peer review and composing, such as Google Docs, which can be an excellent drafting and responding tool for the early stages of assignments. It also conveniently provides a backup copy so that students do not run the risk of losing work close to deadlines.

Teachers unaccustomed to writing groups sometimes imagine that students will be unwilling to share their work with others or that they will value only the teacher’s comments. Rare is the student who cannot work in a group because of personality difficulties, and though students from some cultures may present special challenges, faculty who use peer review groups often find that most students are more willing to revise and to meet deadlines if they know that other students will read their work. Student responses may not be professional, but with professional guidance they can be helpful and less threatening than teacher responses. And students are less tolerant of inflated or pretentious language than many teachers are; a student comment of “Cut the bull” can serve as a healthy check on the usual student perception of “what
WAYS OF RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

English teachers like to read.” Most importantly, the student response group offers a range of responses to a student’s paper, making it seem more significant and more worthy of attention. These responses dramatize our message about sensitivity to audience, offering a real audience in addition to the teacher, and also reinforce the ultimate responsibility of each writer to make appropriate revision decisions. Students almost invariably report that the most valuable activity in class is the group work they regularly undertake.

As an example of how group and instructor responses can facilitate students’ revision process, the following section discusses a sample student paper in two drafts, and the context behind the students’ revision process.

SAMPLE STUDENT PAPER IN TWO DRAFTS

Here are two drafts of a student paper written in response to the following personal experience assignment:

Describe and analyze an institution or a group of some sort that you knew well as a child: a school, school group, scout troop, dancing class, summer camp, club, Sunday school—any group with an obvious and consistent set of values will do. You have two specific tasks to accomplish: to describe clearly what it was like to be a member of the group at the time and to assess from your mature perspective the meaning of the group’s values.

Here is the first draft brought to class by Robert, a first-year student, whose writing developed from discovery drafts about his Boy Scout Explorer post. Robert felt that the paper was “finished” but not really satisfactory, and he read it to his peer reviewers with mixed feelings. One of the authors of this book just happened to be sitting in with the group.

Explorer Post 14: Not Intellectually Prepared

I was a member of Explorer Post 14 for two years. We were a rather unorthodox Explorer post in that we wore no uniforms, had a constitution, elected officers, and had a nuclear physicist for a scoutmaster. Also, we did not go on camping trips, hikes, and other things of this type that one would normally associate with scouting. On the contrary, we studied, heard lectures and saw films on math and science, and worked on science projects, or at least that’s what we were supposed to do.

We actually did hear lectures and see films, but having a serious discussion about any subject or working on a project, that was out of the question. I believe that this will become clear as I describe one of our typical meetings.

We would meet at Aerospace about 7:30 p.m. every other Wednesday night. Before the meeting began there was always a period of utter havoc. Loud talk
and laughter, writing on the blackboard, making paper airplanes and other
juvenile actions were common until the scoutmaster arrived. We then began
the meeting with the flag salute, which was led by the president of the post.
We quickly passed over the subjects of new and old business, project discus-
sions, future plans, and other things of relative unimportance. We would then
have a film or a lecture followed by a short, abortive discussion. This was not
always the case. At times we did have lengthy intelligent discussions, but
these were rare. Then we would adjourn the meeting and all go home. This
is hardly the sort of meeting that would be expected of this type of group.

Another good example is projects. Each member of the group was expected
to work on a project, individually or with another member. The only thing was,
nobody ever worked on projects. With a group of this type, one would expect
the members to be eager to work on projects and present them to other
members for discussion, but this was just too much work.

I don’t believe that the failure of our group to function as it was originally
planned can be blamed on our scoutmaster as might at first be believed. On
the contrary, I believe it was a direct result of the attitudes of the majority
of the members toward doing anything that appeared to be work. Part of the
members were the playboy type. They received good grades in school but
preferred to chase around and go on dates three or four times a week rather
than spend a little extra time working on a project or preparing a topic for a
general discussion. Others were just plain lazy. All of the members had above
average intelligence and the ability to think and reason, but thinking was just
too much like work. Thus it appears to me that the members of this group
were not intellectually prepared for an Explorer program of this type as it
was originally designed.

Responding to “Explorer Post 14: Not Intellectually Prepared”

The peer review group began by praising the paper, which fulfills the assign-
ment quite well. Though it is weak on description, it does give a sense of what
it was like to be a member of the group at the time, and the writer does analyze
and point out the significance of the description. Since the first task for the
group was to point out what was done well, they praised Robert for using
enough detail to give them a sense of the scout troop. But along with the writer,
the group was not really satisfied with the paper, though they struggled to
figure out why.
The teacher suggested that they look closely at its tone, the relationship of the writer to both the reader and the topic. First-year writing groups tend to be particularly sensitive to tone, for many young students are at an age when nuances of feelings have become particularly important. They noticed a conflict between the Robert they knew and liked as a person and the harsh, judgmental tone of the essay he had written. They pointed out some of the terms and phrases that establish his relationship to the troop: “that’s what we were supposed to do” (paragraph 1); “that was out of the question” (paragraph 2). They also pointed out some problems with the writer’s attitude toward the reader, asking the reader to condemn the other boys in the troop without much real evidence. An astute listener in the group noted that the fourth paragraph begins “Another good example is projects” (“good example of what?”), which sounds whiny—as if there were a list of petty grievances. “You seem so stuffy and hostile to the other guys,” another student in the group said, “didn’t you like them at all?” Robert protested that he liked the other boys at the time and was still friends with many of them. Others in the group pointed out that Robert was a warm and accepting person, not at all like the tone he took in the essay, and wondered why he took the attitude he did; after all, the group was a Boy Scout troop, not a seminar of rocket scientists. Robert thought for a while and then smiled.

“I was trying to find something important to say, a controlling idea like Professor White here says we need. I guess I really forced things.” He agreed with the group that the tone rang false; he had taken an attitude toward the boys in the troop that he really didn’t feel, and that led to a false attitude to—and from—the reader as well. He didn’t much like the voice in the paper either.

Yet he felt sure that he had a good topic in the paper, even though he hadn’t yet found a good controlling idea. The group went on to talk about scout troops and how they help kids find out who they really are. Robert joined in, saying that every scout troop is a kind of “explorer” troop in that they help their members explore themselves as well as their world. “Now that’s an interesting idea,” one of his friends said, “why don’t you go with that?” I concurred that the idea of exploration sounded promising as a concept for the next draft. “I think I’ll try it,” Robert replied. A week later he had completely revised the essay, as follows.

**Explorer Post 14: The New World**

Explorer Post 14 customarily met in a room at Aerospace usually used by scientists to discuss such vital subjects as defense projects and space exploration. The walls of the spacious, well-lighted room were blank, except for the west wall, which was decorated by a map of the world showing all of the routes taken by the early explorers to the New World. But this map was covered by a large motion picture screen whose pale blankness gave the room an air of sterility.
The twelve sixteen-year-old boys supposedly gathered together for the purpose of exploring the world of math and science. But actually this was just a guise for their real purpose — the exploration of the novel, quick-paced world of the teenager.

The meeting began, supposedly, with the flag salute. Actually the meeting began fifteen minutes earlier as the group gathered in the room that was to be their uncharted world for the next hour and a half. In these first fifteen minutes, the initial exploration began with the boys testing each other with silly comments about the day’s activities at school and home. W. T. Jones III, the leader of the particular expedition, pulled the blackboard out to the middle of the room and began to map out their course. As it turned out, the map resembled the figure of Britney Spears and therefore was appropriately named “The Temptation.” About this time, Dr. Nevin, the nuclear physicist/scoutmaster, entered the room, and the expedition reached a temporary impasse.

After the flag salute, the lights went out and the motion picture screen flashed with brilliant colors and the blank walls reverberated with the sounds of a film titled *The Exploration of the Planets and Beyond*. It was the story of the astronauts and spacecraft that were venturing into the black reaches of space to explore the Earth’s nearest neighbors, Mars and Venus. As the film ended, the bright lights again flicked on, and Dr. Nevin engaged the boys in a discussion of space exploration that lasted about twenty minutes.

But then the inevitable happened. The screen came down, revealing the world map. The temporary impasse overcome, the boys returned to their exploration with more vigor than before. Their path led them to cars, the date W. T. had had the night before, and girls in general. But soon they were forced to end their journey, for the meeting was at an end.

During the last part of the meeting, Dr. Nevin had just sat with the boys, laughing with them and only occasionally entering a comment of his own. Why had he done this? Why didn’t he try to make the boys continue their discussion along more intellectually oriented lines? The reason is simple. He understood that in the strange, exciting world of the sixteen-year-old, self-exploration is much more intriguing than a journey into the world of science. For it is at this age when a person must find himself so that someday he will be a mature individual both mentally and physically. So each week Dr. Nevin took up the
role of a silent guide so that a group of sixteen-year-old boys could engage in the exploration of life.

Responding to the Revised “Explorer Post 14: The New World”

The major changes from the first version to the second occur in the writer’s attitude toward the boys in the scout troop and, consequently, in the controlling idea for the essay. The almost ritualistic condemnation of the boys, sometimes inappropriately bitter in the earlier draft, changes to sympathetic understanding as a result of more careful analysis and more original thought. As the writer examines his attitude toward the boys, he plays with the nicely ambiguous value of the “space exploration” of his topic: adolescents are inevitably involved in exploring their own worlds, even when they are supposedly finding out about planetary space. Perhaps the scoutmaster knew what he was doing after all.

In the teacher’s written response to this draft, he praised the revision for its new depth of thought. He made some notes in the margins, showing that he noticed the more understanding attitude the writer takes to the boys in the scout troop in the revised draft. He also noted the changes in the writer’s relationship to the reader: “Instead of asking us to condemn, you ask us to understand,” he wrote. He also noted in the margins that the details are now richer and focus on reactions to his controlling idea, whereas the previous draft had fewer details and only general connections between the descriptions and the controlling idea.

In an end note and in a conference with Robert, the teacher praised the changed organization, most obviously the new opening paragraph—which, Robert said with some surprise, had been the last part of the paper to be written. (He recalled that the teacher had mentioned in class that writers often write their openings last, after they see what their best ideas have turned out to be, but he never thought that would apply to him.) The teacher did mention that the tone of the opening did not match the rest of the paper, but tried to keep the emphasis on what it accomplished. Because Robert had decided to make connections between the exploration of outer and inner space, that controlling idea had to be kept alive throughout the paper—not an easy task. Further, in both drafts the paper takes us through a troop meeting from beginning to end, so the organizational changes had to occur in the development of the idea—not in the chronological order of events. In both drafts, the closing paragraph presents the writer’s analysis of the meaning of what has been described, but they are entirely different. In fact, Robert gave permission to duplicate his essay to illustrate for the class the ways in which well-structured papers used opening and closing paragraphs to set tone as well as topic.

Here is what the teacher wrote at the end of the paper:

Robert, this is an excellent revision of your earlier draft—which was good work to begin with. You have focused your details on your new controlling idea, which is more convincing and satisfying to me and your peer reviewers.
than the condemnation that ruled the previous draft. You have also used
the controlling idea to control the organization of the paper, to focus its
elements.

As you prepare this paper for your portfolio, you might want to see if
you can harmonize the tone of the opening paragraph with the rest of the
paper and if you can develop your idea of exploration more fully. Can you
give us more details about the “self-exploration” you only suggest in this
draft? I am impressed at the way you have improved your writing and look
forward to what you might do with this interesting essay.

Because this class required further revision of second drafts for certain
assignments to go in the end-of-term portfolio, the teacher includes some spe-
cific suggestions for improvement even on the best papers. Indeed, most people
are more interested in improving their best writing than their worst. Despite
its insufficiencies, Robert’s second draft remains well written and interesting,
with a defined thesis about an interesting topic. Some writers might consider
this draft only a first step on the path to a publishable essay, but most Ameri-
can college instructors of first-year composition courses would be very pleased
to see work as good as this early in the school year. The teacher’s response in
conference to the student (who was, after all, a first-year student) was “Bravo!”
and a grade of 6 on the 6-point scale. Then they spent some time in confer-
ence talking about all that was well done in the paper and how Robert could
duplicate the process for other papers. At the end, the teacher asked for a
reflective letter on Robert’s writing process for this paper to be included in his
portfolio at the end of the term, as a way for him to have a record of his suc-
cessful procedure.

RESPONDING TO COLLABORATIVE WRITING

In one sense, all writing is collaborative: every writer needs some kind of audi-
ence, some conversation, some reading, and some responding. The peer groups
that are now part of many writing classes serve as sounding boards for initial
ideas, responders to drafts, and even editors for presentation copies of final
drafts. The picture of the writer as a solitary genius holed up in an attic, emerg-
ing on occasions waving a manuscript that expresses his or her inner self, has
not been a useful one for writing instruction. Far better is the wry comment
that Hemingway allegedly made when asked about his times of greatest inspira-
tion: “Nine to five on weekdays.” Writing takes place all the time, among or
even with other people. We see this concept in physical form in the newer con-
figurations of computer writing laboratories, where groups of computers and
software support collaboration as a matter of course.

Whereas we described some collaborative assignments in previous chapters,
here we focus on collaborative responses to drafts. Collaboration offers the writ-
ing class special challenges and possibilities. Some instructors regularly estab-
lish teams to produce papers: the teams allot portions of the tasks involved to
their members, compile the drafts, and submit a single paper for evaluation as
written by the team. Those who espouse this procedure claim that student involvement is much higher than in more traditional writing classes and that the results are much more satisfactory. Classes using the computer as a normal means of text production slip naturally into the collaborative mode, as an extension of networking and regular commenting on electronic texts. In some fields, such as business or science, collaborative writing is becoming so much the standard that writing courses which ignore team production seem old-fashioned. But establishing a curriculum and writing assignments for collaborative groups requires a complete rethinking of the writing course. It may also pose insuperable problems for commuter campuses without many computer resources, or for institutions in which the idea of individual knowledge production still reigns supreme.

Responding to collaborative writing offers challenges that have not yet been well resolved. Is the writing workshop approach, with teams going about their writing and responding to the work of other teams, too unstructured for college writing courses? Will students leaving such a class be well prepared for the individual production of term papers, theses, or other college work? Is it fair to give a high grade to each member of a team if only some of its members actually did the writing, be it ever so excellent? Is it fair to give a low grade to each member of a team if some excellent writers on the team have been insufficiently influential in determining the quality of the paper? Can the team members themselves give differential grades to their own members?

We also need to take account of a certain leveling result of collaborative writing. Such writing not only helps weak writers produce better work but also, less positively, tends to restrict the opportunities for expression of strong writers. Sometimes the best writers will resent submitting their work to other students, who may (for instance) be insensitive to metaphor or irony, and who will seek to remove individual turns of phrase or unusual points of view. Unifying the overall tone and voice of a paper remains an important consideration in this context as stronger writers may want to demonstrate such individual strength at the expense of an overall unified document. Should students be willing to sacrifice unique expression, they may also be more likely to appeal their grade if they are unhappy with the final assessment. It helps to have transparent procedures in place well in advance of such collaborative assignments, and to discuss them openly with the class, in order to mitigate these kinds of conflicts. While the topic is too complex to detail here, Joanna Wolfe's *Team Writing* is a helpful resource in this regard and has been particularly popular in computer-assisted writing classrooms as well as business and technical and professional writing courses. (For more information on Wolfe and collaborative writing, you may also wish to review our discussion of collaborative writing in Chapter 1.)

As with other innovations in writing instruction, such as e-portfolios, collaborative writing offers unusual opportunities to inventive teachers. Over the course of the next decade, accumulated experience with this mode of teaching will help us find ways to meet the challenges of a shifting emphasis from individual to group writing, both in terms of the genres we ask students to write
and the technologies with which we ask them to compose these genres. The challenges are only now emerging. The increasing use of computers for writing makes it likely that we will see more and more collaborative writing in all composition classes as time goes on. (If you are interested in learning more about the use of computers in writing, you may wish to see the journal *Computers in Composition* as a starting point for ideas and innovation.)

**FOSTERING SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Writing groups work powerfully to help students develop the ability to assess their own work, to understand that readers respond more positively to some portions of the text than to others, to see what works and what does not, and to help them read their own writing (not merely what they intended to write). But we must be aware that self-assessment is a painful and difficult process for students—as it is for teachers, whose resistance to evaluation is legendary. And yet without self-assessment, students will not revise or will do so reluctantly and without the requisite personal involvement. What else can teachers do to foster self-assessment?

One place to start is the writing log or composition journal, a place for thinking and discovering but not for finished work. The writing log becomes not only a mine for writing ideas but also a place for writing that is not fixed in form, including discovery drafts. As more and more students write using digital software, they may be resistant to handwriting discovery drafts. However, timed in-class writing exercises intended to serve the same purpose can be used to support the same invention purpose that students can then apply to their “first drafts” completed at home. One important difference between the working habits of skilled and unskilled writers is that unskilled writers hate to discard anything from an early draft, whereas skilled writers are always cutting and rearranging their work. The writing log, unlike a more finished draft of a paper, will not trap students into thinking that the writing is carved in stone; indeed, if the log is kept electronically or in a cloud, it is as evanescent as electrons. The more experience students have with less fixed forms, the easier it is for them to think of early drafts as material to be reworked, reshaped, and revised. The basis for their revisions must be self-assessment, but the very idea of revision is supported by the existence of the writing log.

More direct support for self-assessment comes from work in class using scoring guides and sample student papers. Some instructors use class grading extensively, asking groups to grade the work of writers outside of their own group. A writing class will enjoy ranking a set of papers, such as those given in Chapter 5, according to a scoring guide. The exercise is usually more successful if the writers of the papers are from another class section, but it does work with peer assignments as well. Writing groups can further serve as evaluators as well as support groups, and research with very large classes suggests that, using careful scoring guides, the groups give grades that are similar to teacher grades. Utilizing both advantages of peer evaluation separates the support of one’s own writing group (which provides coaching for revision but no grading)
from the grading of papers from a different group (which provides assessment alone). But these valuable activities depend on clear public standards, which students not only understand but also agree with and enforce.

The central ingredient in such work, and one of the most effective ways to foster self-assessment, is the scoring guide, which some teachers develop through class discussion to emphasize group ownership of the standards. Scoring guides make grading criteria public, so students do not have to guess why they received the grade they did. Also, students who are clear about the tasks assigned and about what standards the teacher will be enforcing are likely to produce better writing and learn how to improve their writing than those in less focused environments. Since most students, in their heart of hearts, believe that teacher evaluation of writing is mysterious, subjective, unaccountable, and arbitrary, a public scoring guide, used consistently by the instructor and by the class as a whole, fosters self-assessment and group assessment. A student with an essay that scored 4 can see why it is better than a 3 and why it is not as good as a 5; if asked to revise the essay so that it can be scored 5, most students will succeed in doing so. When students use scoring guides as a heuristic to ask the same questions about their own writing that they do about the other student papers they are grading, and then apply those standards to their own writing, we get genuine revision. In sum, if the assignment is clear enough and the scoring guide focused enough, students will be encouraged to assess their own work, which is the most important educational outcome of giving grades.

Finally, there should be space in every writing course for invention and process writing that is not evaluated so that students can use writing to explore ideas, feelings, memories, and creativity without worrying about others' judgments. Whether that space is in writing logs, early drafts, proposals for papers, or even oral reports, such opportunities emphasize that the most important audience for all writing is the author, whose thinking is temporarily fixed on paper. When revision takes place to please that audience and seeks to meet internalized high standards, the writing course has done its job.

HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD

There is no point in denying it: teaching writing courses or using plentiful writing in any course requires a substantial investment of time, even with a small number of students. Whatever devices we may use to reduce the paper load, such as shifting some assessments to peer groups, we must from time to time sit down and go through piles of writing projects (or a long list of computer files) and try to respond as sensitively and intelligently as we can. While we must grant the inevitability of such work, we are also entitled to try to reduce the load, that is, to work smarter not harder. The teacher who regularly works a ninety-hour week, spending every waking moment grading papers, is a grim cliché; such teachers eventually either leave the profession in despair or lose the humane perspective a writing teacher should have. We are also not convinced that such overattention to response results in better student writing
or thinking. We, no less than our students, need to “get a life,” and we must preserve some time for ourselves.

Briefly, here is a summary of a variety of methods for handling the paper load without overwork, all of which we have discussed in this chapter:

- Require student writing logs, which you can skim and respond to without editing or grading through simple checkoffs.
- Design writing assignments with care, present them in written form, and distribute samples of excellent responses so that students will hand in better work requiring less response time.
- Include assessment criteria along with assignments so that you can more easily point out to students where they are and are not successful.
- Use student writing groups to give responses to early drafts or even to grade later drafts.
- Assign writing — such as journal entries, five-minute writes, or freewrites — that you will not need to read.
- Resist overmarking, proofreading, editing, and red-marking, particularly on drafts.
- Use scoring guides, the 6-point scale, and class discussion of sample papers to develop student self-assessment and reduce the need for extensive comments on individual papers.
- Focus written comments on papers to a few main points, raising questions rather than proposing solutions and locating some passages for praise.
- Designate a limited number of papers for presentation level and grading, and, if and where possible, require portfolios for the final grade, focused on the reflective letter (see Chapter 6).

The challenge of responding to student work is not only in rendering fair judgments but also in coaching and fostering the process. Most faculty have not thought much about the wide range of responding options they have, and so they repeat the patterns they experienced as students. But many of those patterns are useless or counterproductive, and other ways of responding can be extremely valuable to students, as well as less time-consuming for teachers.

Thoughtful responding to student writing begins with a carefully written assignment discussed thoroughly in class, perhaps with examples and scoring guides. As the student essay moves through prewriting and drafts, the teacher must keep responsibility with the writer, even as student groups and the teacher respond to the sequence of drafts. Editing for high polish and grading of final products may occur, but responding to student writing includes the entire range of support that teachers, acting as coaches more than judges, can give students. The result of such teaching will be students more ready to revise, more willing to see writing as a form of critical thinking, more aware of internalized assessment criteria, and more ready to be responsible for their own learning.

Teachers of writing will continue, we are convinced, to work longer hours than most other faculty and to spend more time with their students as well.
as with student work. Most of us do the job because we genuinely enjoy such work and the intangible rewards such human contact brings. We have the means to keep our working hours within reasonable limits, however, and to protect ourselves from the labor disparities that continue to challenge writing programs. We hope the suggestions we have provided will help to ease these practical problems.

A Note on Presentation Copy

Not every piece of student writing need be revised and edited to a high level of polish, and such a goal is not the primary focus of first-year writing courses using writing as a tool for learning. Still, it is helpful to clarify expectations of polish for final drafts in all writing courses. Some students will have little trouble editing their final drafts to near perfection, but most students find this an onerous and frustrating task — particularly if they did not grow up in homes speaking the school dialect. If we have many students for whom the preparation of final drafts is a major task, specifying the level of polish necessary for each assignment will help them work proactively toward these goals. After all, most of us are content with less than top performance in many aspects of our lives, even though we might be able to do a first-rate job when absolutely necessary. Some teachers feel that every essay should demonstrate the highest level of polish and that such a demand shows high standards, even though few students will meet the demand. But it is equally demanding, and more sound pedagogically, to identify certain essays as requiring high polish and then to insist on it; other essays, particularly drafts, can be submitted in less perfect form.

If we can be content with some work from each student that never enters final draft, work that we could grade for stated criteria that do not stress high polish, we can be particularly demanding on the work that will reach presentation level. Our students need to know just what is involved in presentation-level work, including standard citation form and clean mechanics, and they need enough practice in producing work at this level so that they — and we — know that they can turn it out when needed. But they also need to know that writing is much more than editing and that clean copy is not equivalent to good writing. This is a particularly valuable discussion for students in advanced writing courses or courses and writing programs where a final e-portfolio may be required.

When the student project must reach the presentation level of polish, we can use all of our editing skill to work with students: our responses will be detailed in every way. And we will ask students to keep producing drafts until the writing has achieved a high level of polish. Many teachers now do this on a few assignments per semester but resist asking that every one be brought to presentation level; we have so much to do, and writing offers our students so much beyond editing, that we should be content to know that they can do high-level work, even if they do not do it all of the time.
Selected References
CHAPTER 4

Using Assessment as Part of Teaching

Most students hate to be graded. Most teachers hate to give grades. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the most important problem with grading student writing is that it tends to discourage students from taking creative risks with their writing. For some students, a grade is a measure of self-worth; for others, of teacher approval. The external and internal pressures on students to get good grades are so powerful that student concern for grades tends to reduce any assignment to some version of “what does the teacher want?” Unless the teacher is able to align the grading system with the demands and options of the assignment, students’ concern for grades can encourage them to retreat to formulaic writing, safe forms (such as the five-paragraph theme), and cautious revision (fixing only what the teacher has marked as needing improvement).

ASSESSMENT AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

Everyone hates to talk about grades. Pat Belanoff, in her foreword to the best book we have focused on grading (Zak and Weaver), calls grading “the dirty little thing we do in our closets” (ix). Some writing teachers ascribe to a romantic view of student writing: that it is so imbricated in student personality and development that to impose external definitions of quality on individual expression is both intrusive and paternal. The best writing (according to this view) is a voyage of discovery, both of the topic and of the self, and the only audience that really matters is the self. Certainly, if you are committed to that view, your responding style will be nonevaluative and you will resist any kind of assessment. Our experience with teaching from that perspective—and most of us give some assignments based on this theory—is that a few students flower in such an environment, but most find themselves at sea, uncomfortable with such a subjective and unaccountable view of writing. A lifetime of grading has had its effect on them, and on us, and they are eager to know how well they are doing. Besides, we are part of an institution whose currency is credit hours and grades, however much we wish that internal motivation alone could urge our students to improve. Further, most writing programs in which we find ourselves teaching writing are beholden to broader curricular initiatives and required assignments that run, if not contradictory to, then in tension with this romanticized view of personal writing. Skills like rhetorical analysis, research, and argumentation beckon writing beyond personal revelation and students need help along the way in learning these compositional skills. So, as problematic as it might be, grading student work is necessary. Our concern
in this chapter will be to relieve some of the curse of grading from our lives, at
the same time considering ways to integrate it sensibly into our responding
and to use the power of grades to support the improvement of student writing
and learning.

We must emphasize that we do not need to assess every piece of writing that
students give us. Sometimes an encouraging word or a simple check mark indi-
cating satisfactory work is more appropriate than a grade. This is a particularly
pragmatic approach for assignments that ask for demonstration of reading
comprehension or early invention writing intended for idea development. But
encouragement and praise are only part of teaching; it is a self-deceiving illu-
sion to imagine that we can avoid judgment as part of our work. At most if not
all institutions, we are required to inscribe grades for students at the end of the
term, and those symbols are a powerful response to students about the quality
of what they have done. And most students are concerned enough about how
they are doing to keep asking if we try to put them off until the end of the term.
We should not condemn them for this; it is a perfectly professional and sound
question for any diligent learner to ask. If we are wise teachers, we will not allow
student concern for the grade to replace the drive to express oneself and to
improve; the assessments are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Judgment
is tough to give and tough to take, but unless we do it we are not professional; it
comes with the territory. The reading of student writing always awaits us, and
the way we do it to some degree defines us. The problem is to find ways of assess-
ing student work that are fair, consistent, public, clear, and responsible—grades
that support teaching and learning rather than substitute for them. If we can
combine such responsible assessment with useful and supportive responding to
student work, our students will learn that essential aspect of all learning: self-
assessment, which we addressed at the end of Chapter 3.

As an eternally vexing issue, writing teachers have long concerned themselves
with the best way to grade student writing. Assessment is essentially a practice-
driven theory, and there are three particular approaches to grading writing that
have dominated the field. The following section provides an overview of these
approaches to grading writing. These assessment methodologies inform our
discussion of sample rubrics in the remaining sections of the chapter.

METHODOLOGIES OF SCORING WRITING:
HOLISTIC, ANALYTIC, AND PRIMARY TRAIT

Holistic scoring (derived from Greek *holos* meaning “all,” “whole,” “entire”) was
developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) over fifty years ago so that
its traditional multiple-choice tests could be supplemented by a measure of
actual student writing to give more credibility to its Advanced Placement and
other English tests. ETS had two problems to overcome: the high cost of pay-
ing readers to score the writing carefully and the inconsistency of scores from
reader to reader (early experiments showed every paper receiving every possible
score). To solve the first problem, readers were asked to give a “general impres-
sion” rating after one quick reading of short essays on a single topic; a pro-
cess fast enough to be economically feasible. To solve the second problem, ETS developed the apparatus for scoring that became standard and will be demonstrated in this chapter. This apparatus called for a controlled essay scoring session with readers using a scoring guide, sometimes called a rubric, that defined the particular traits that the test was measuring, in broad strokes, so that all readers would use roughly similar criteria. The scoring guide was illustrated by sets of sample papers embodying the range of scores. Such readings developed sufficient reliability among the ratings given by trained readers so that the scores could be meaningful, if not definitive.

The use of actual student writing on a writing test by ETS was greeted warmly by teachers of writing, who quickly adapted holistic scoring for various purposes, including classroom teaching. By the 1990s, holistic scores were widely used for many different exams, from placement tests for entering students to graduating student exams for writing proficiency—even for entry into certain graduate programs. The theory behind such writing assessment reflected much of what teachers knew about student writing: since we do not know enough about the supposed subskills of writing and since writing as a whole is more than the sum of its parts, writing should be evaluated on its overall quality. But the extensive use of holistic scores beyond its original purpose led to a strong reaction against its overuse and misuse—a reaction that led to portfolio assessment, now the instrument of choice for high-stakes assessment of writing and writing programs. Increasingly, as more and more students use computers and digital environments to compose, writing programs are also using e-portfolios to showcase the multiple modalities in which students often compose in writing courses.

Writing researchers, seeking more detailed information about student abilities for research purposes, have developed two alternatives to holistic scoring: primary trait scoring and analytic scoring. Primary trait scoring, sometimes called focused holistic scoring, seeks to measure one or two particular aspects of writing—though, in recent years, there has been a move to expand the traits assessed; this is often referred to as multiple trait scoring, designed to measure such traits as sentence or paragraph construction or logical reasoning. While primary trait scoring has its benefits, including quick and focused assessment on a particular writing task, it makes difficult demands on readers because they must ignore all aspects of the student writing except for the one or two being measured. Thus, if we are seeking a coherence score, a coherent paper could achieve a high score despite problems with vocabulary, sentence structure, and use of evidence; if sentence complexity is the primary trait, a wholly incoherent and confused paper could score at the top, as long as it contained enough complex sentences. While useful for research, such scores do not much help teachers assigning more complex writing assignments, such as analytic or research-based writing.

Analytic scoring reverses the holistic assumption that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Analytic readings proceed by requiring readers to score individual subskills as defined by the research goals, such as spelling, sentence structure, coherence, or imagination. This scoring is often quantitative,
providing a certain number of points per subskill. These selected subskill scores are then added to provide a total score. Since those subskills are not likely to be of equal importance, however, each usually receives a multiplier, or “K factor”; thus the spelling score may be multiplied by 1, the sentence structure score by 3, and so on. But problems quickly emerge because there is no general agreement about what or how many subskills add up to writing ability; or which subskills are more important than others. The complexity and counterintuitive nature of the scoring often leads to uncertain and unreliable scores and slow scoring sessions. Analytic readings, with their large and detailed scoring rubrics, are more the tools of researchers than teachers.

Some writing programs try to have it both ways, despite the opposite assumptions about writing made by analytic and holistic scoring: they may develop a chart of the subskills they value, ask teachers to check them off, and then give a holistic score more or less based on the checkoffs. With careful definitions, this process could approach primary trait scoring, but the charts may imply that their categories encompass good writing, while there are always ill-defined subskills (imagination?) or omitted subskills that teachers will value. Nonetheless, the combination of holistic and additional analytic scoring responds to a felt need for overall evaluation and trait subscores and seems to be more and more used in the teaching of college writing.

Thus, while holistic scoring remains the most empirically verified methodology of scoring for teachers, we need to be aware of its possibilities and limitations. The major theoretical difficulty with it is, in the context of placement or other testing with consequences for students, the limitation of a single score, which gives ranking information on the particular task assigned, but no details. Teachers usually want to know more about their students’ writing than where their test papers stand in relation to each other, however useful the ranking may be for placement; we want diagnostic information to help us know what we need to focus on in class. Students want diagnostic information to help them know what they need to focus on in drafting. We can score student papers holistically but we cannot teach holistically; we must teach one thing at a time. And we know that one score on one short piece of timed writing is an unsure indicator of the complex act of writing. So we stay aware that this brief window into our students’ experience and ability can be helpful but must be subject to more careful and sustained assessment. Nonetheless, when used well, holistic and focused holistic scoring can be valuable and we give examples of both and their respective values in this chapter.

USING HOLISTIC SCORING GUIDES TO IMPROVE ASSIGNMENTS

Grading is best dealt with head-on: by making it an integral part of the teaching of writing. This chapter provides four sample topics for short papers, suitable for impromptu writing tests and for use in class, with scoring guides and sample student writing. Even if you cannot or do not use the topic samples offered below, we hope you can adapt some of the assessment practices modeled here, including the use of holistic scoring guides, to your own writing.
assignments in order to provide more transparent and consistent assessment of student writing.

Scoring guides, developed originally for large-scale assessment of writing, have unexpectedly become a powerful teaching tool as teachers have adapted them for responding to student writing in their classes. The scoring guide describes with some detail the textual features that lead to particular scores or grades. A good scoring guide will open up writing possibilities for students, not close them down. It will also be qualitative rather than quantitative, that is, in technical terms, holistic rather than analytic.

Since holistic scoring recognizes that the whole of writing is not just the sum of measurable parts, the guidelines in a good holistic scoring guide do not become formulas or restrictions; they wind up describing the ongoing work of the class. Thus they actually become liberating, since students can see what different kinds of excellent work will accomplish and they can aim for it. Providing model student texts also reinforces this goal. A poorly developed scoring guide, on the other hand, can force student writers into narrow patterns, such as the five-paragraph theme or other formulaic ways of meeting goals. For example, a scoring guide used in the past by one school district defined a well-organized paragraph as one containing three complete sentences, regardless of whether those sentences had anything to do with each other or made any sense. While this seems an obvious example of ineffective assessment, we state the case here to underscore our point that we need to use scoring guides to help students discover and shape meaning, not to establish prescriptive patterns that all students must follow.

For all of these reasons, creating a meaningful holistic scoring guide for a particular assignment is not a quick or easy task, and is much more complicated than it seems. Teachers or writing programs are often tempted to seek someone else's scoring guide and import it into their own assignment. And that sometimes works well if you have a near perfect match of curriculum, course and assignment goals, and kinds of students. But most often you will need to adapt a scoring guide to fit your situation, students, and curriculum. Here is an example of a holistic 6-point scoring guide that has been widely used and adapted for grading about forty-five minutes of impromptu writing. It assumes a test population of well-prepared first-year college students responding to a well-designed, multipart question of some complexity. In the next chapter we will illustrate its adaptation and use for specific assignments.

Sample Scoring Guide 1: 6-Point Scale for Assigned Topic

Score of 6: Superior

- Addresses the question fully and explores the issues thoughtfully.
- Shows substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought.
- Demonstrates clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization.
- Is fully developed and detailed.
- Evidences superior control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few minor flaws.
Score of 5: Strong
- Clearly addresses the question and explores the issues.
- Shows some depth and complexity of thought.
- Is effectively organized.
- Is well developed, with supporting detail.
- Demonstrates control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few flaws.

Score of 4: Competent
- Adequately addresses the question and explores the issues.
- Shows clarity of thought but may lack complexity.
- Is organized.
- Is adequately developed, with some detail.
- Demonstrates competent writing; may have some flaws.

Score of 3: Weak
- May distort or neglect parts of the question.
- May be simplistic or stereotyped in thought.
- May demonstrate problems in organization.
- May have generalizations without supporting detail or detail without generalizations; may be undeveloped.
- May show patterns of flaws in language, syntax, or mechanics.

Score of 2: Inadequate
- Will demonstrate serious inadequacy in one or more of the areas specified for the 3 paper.

Score of 1: Incompetent
- Fails in its attempt to discuss the topic.
- May be deliberately off-topic.
- Is so incompletely developed as to suggest or demonstrate incompetence.
- Is wholly incompetent mechanically.

This example illustrates many features common to all scoring guides. It uses numerical scoring rather than letter grades, a useful shift in symbolism for students carrying a burden of self-doubt from years of more or less arbitrary alphabetic assessments. It employs the 6-point scale, now the most commonly used, with its generally acceptable upper-half scores centered around the 5 and its generally unacceptable lower-half scores centered around the 2. Each score descriptor follows a similar pattern, listing a set of criteria in order of importance. Here, the first descriptor has to do with the content of the response, in relation to the question asked; the second deals with depth and complexity of thought; the third with organization; the fourth with development; and the last with correctness. To be sure, some readers will inevitably have a different order of importance, an issue that leads to much debate during large scoring sessions with diverse readers. But perfect agreement on this matter is not necessary, since the score is based on an overall impression of the student writing.
as a whole (thus, “holistic” scoring) with an understanding that strengths in one of the criteria will compensate in part for weaknesses in another. However, this scoring guide is probably more useful for proficiency exams than for classroom assignments, since it is so general in nature. The team of faculty that created it worked for some months, trying it out on sets of student papers, seeking to find terminology that would lead to widespread agreement among groups of readers. The scores it yielded seemed to work pretty well for placement of students into first-year writing courses.

The scoring guide is a kind of test of the writing assignment, which too often has unclear purposes. You cannot create, or work with your students to create, a scoring guide until you are yourself clear on what the assignment is asking students to do and what it will be teaching them. Furthermore, as we emphasize in Chapter 1, no class assignment exists without a context of class discussion, reading assignments, papers already completed and to come — that is, the assignment is part of the class curriculum. Thus the assignment in question needs to fit with overall course goals and the particular goals for that time in the course. If it does not, the vagueness of the assignment’s purpose will become glaringly evident when you attempt to put together a scoring guide.

Consider the following assignment:

Some people think schools do not encourage students to be creative. Why do you suppose the critics of the schools take that position? Locate some sources arguing for or against that view and analyze what they say. (Be sure to cite your sources properly.) Finally, think about your own schooling and whether it was or was not creative.

If we wait to come up with a scoring guide until we have received the essays students will write to this assignment, we will have a difficult time deciding how to respond. We are also likely to be disappointed in the quality of the writing, which will probably be disorganized and superficial. But if we attempt to devise a scoring guide before we give the assignment, we discover how confused and confusing it is. The creation of a scoring guide forces us to ask a number of questions: What will distinguish the best papers from those that are weak? What will we focus on and value enough for commentary? What are the papers supposed to accomplish in terms of goals and learning outcomes, and what is the process that writers should go through to accomplish those goals? And how will we know if they have learned whatever the assignment is out to teach?

As we start to write the scoring guide, we notice that there are five major tasks the assignment is asking students to accomplish: first, they must select, understand, and (at least in part) summarize sources arguing whether or not schools teach creativity (which, in turn, needs to be defined); second, they must use that understanding of the sources and quotations of them to figure out “why” they say what they do — a formidable and perhaps impossible task; third, the students are cautioned to use correct citation form (a sure distraction at early stages of writing, better left for the editing stage); fourth, they need to “think about” their own schooling, describe and analyze it, all in relation to
what the sources have said; and, finally, they need to develop their own ideas on the same topic—which means that the students must understand the difference between asserting ideas or referring to the chosen authors’ ideas, on the one hand, and developing their own ideas, on the other. There may be a few students in a typical class who will be able to rewrite the assignment so that it can be answered in a coherent way, but most of the writing elicited by this assignment will be unsatisfactory to both writers and teacher. How could it be otherwise? We’re also left to wonder if the teacher who composed the assignment was aware of the many different kinds of demands it makes on the student writer.

At this point, we need to decide what we really intend to teach. If the goal is principally the first we listed above—to help students learn to make use of outside texts—we’ll have to set aside class time to practice these activities. Some work in locating appropriate material, writing a summary, using quotations properly, and accurately referring to positions that one disagrees with would all be useful as part of the teaching and learning involved with this essay. Citation format and plagiarism issues might well enter the curriculum at this point. If another important goal is to teach the importance of definition, some dictionary work might be called for that focuses on how differing views of creativity can emerge from the same word. But perhaps the assignment seeks to help students examine the meaning of texts? If so, the class might focus for some time on ways to analyze argument, so that students can evaluate the arguments in the articles they have chosen. For example, rather than dictionary work, here we might ask students to attend to different ways in which the word creativity is defined across their sources, identifying similar and dissimilar understandings of the term in relation to the source’s overall argument. Without such instruction, however, students are likely to simplify or distort the arguments presented, say they are right or wrong without much consideration of why, and then assert their own views without giving contrasting evidence. But perhaps coursework in both those matters has taken place and the fifth goal is what matters for the assignment: development of one’s own ideas. If so, then, the class may need instruction in the difference between asserting (and reasserting) ideas, on the one hand, and developing ideas using argument, definitions, and evidence, on the other. Or, perhaps, if we are looking at the critical thinking issues in the assignment rather than the rhetorical ones, we need to engage the class in some discussion of the arguments for and against differing versions of creativity in education. It is difficult to construct an argument without much information.

Is it reasonable or fair to expect students to know enough in the five areas we have just outlined to be able to accomplish the writing task set out? We don’t think so. This assignment is in fact asking for superficial arguments and analysis; it is asking for the poor writing that it probably will elicit. By speaking in a casual and superficial way about its very complex demands, the assignment suggests that an equally casual and superficial response is good enough. Until we attempt to compose a fuller, more detailed writing assignment and devise a scoring guide for the assignment, its complexity and difficulties are
not apparent; we might be tempted to blame the weak writing on the laziness of our students, or perhaps on the high schools, which never teach their students as much as we wish. But as we start to unpack the various tasks the assignment demands and notice how many advanced skills are needed for the task, we see that an entire curriculum is adumbrated by the apparently simple task. In this way, the creation of a scoring guide demands that we articulate our criteria and goals for the assignment and understand how it fits into the purposes of our course as a whole.

These very complexities lead many teachers to argue for open topics that focus assignments around concrete writing tasks, such as the creation of an individual argument from use of sources, rather than a content-driven prompt—for example, schools and creativity—in order to encourage students to sufficiently accomplish these goals in the context of whatever topic they deem interesting. This, however, can create more work for teachers, and we discuss some of these challenges in Chapter 1. Whether or not to use open topics in lieu of more controlled assignments as offered here will remain a point of consideration for writing teachers as they seek more effective ways to teach writing to students. But though it complicates the process, an open assignment does not relieve the teacher of creating a scoring guide: students still need to know the goals of the assignment and what it will take for them to be successful at it.

If we use something like the sample offered here, we could profitably spend class time and preparatory writing assignments on each of the five major tasks involved, and then, more reasonably, have high expectations for the completion of the larger writing task. The writing assignment then would be a natural part of the class work and the class goals, and everyone involved would be well aware of these connections. Because the teacher had made clear the various components of the assignment, the students would be able to work on each and on bringing them together coherently.

If we wanted to use this assignment, after some genuine instruction in the various rhetorical and research skills it involves, we could put together a scoring guide for it. All we need at this point is a set of criteria for the scores of 5 (high) and 2 (low).

**Sample Scoring Guide 2: 2-Point Scale for Research-Based Writing**

The following scoring guide differs from the first sample in its flexibility and simplicity. This 2-point (high/low) scoring guide is effective for single-draft impromptu and diagnostic writing assignments that aren’t intended for calculation toward a final course grade, or for early drafts where idea development and invention are the primary concerns. For this particular assignment, students are asked to develop arguments from secondary scholarly research. We could imagine teachers using the criteria in this scoring guide early in the drafting process of writing courses focused on research-based writing, for instance. Note how issues of correctness in citation format and document design do not receive primary focus on this scoring guide. If such matters are important to you or your writing program, particularly in final stages of drafting,
you may wish to develop a more comprehensive scoring guide, following the 6-point scale outlined above in Sample Scoring Guide 1. We attend to this further in our discussion of the scoring guide below.

Score of 5: High
These papers demonstrate an ability to construct and develop an argument in response to several articles from a professional journal. Specifically, they

- Clearly and fairly summarize the articles on a controversial topic.
- Analyze the argument of the articles to demonstrate their strengths and weaknesses.
- Respond to the articles by showing how and why the writer of the paper differs from the views expressed in the article.
- Develop the views of the writer of the paper in an organized way, using personal experience and other sources, to demonstrate a conclusion.

Score of 2: Low
These papers do not accomplish the five tasks set out in the assignment or they do so in a superficial and unsupported way. Specifically, they

- Select weak or superficial articles and/or fail to summarize them with clarity and fairness.
- Instead of analysis of the article, present quotations or summaries without much discussion.
- Allude casually or not at all to the articles in presenting the opinions of the writer of the essay.
- Present assertions of opinion without organized development or evidence.

Again, it would be easy enough to develop the additional scores for a 6-point scale through elaboration of the criteria already set out. As the students work through a series of drafts moving toward completion of the assignment, the clear set of criteria becomes a yardstick for them to use on their own work, especially if the teacher will respond to drafts using the scoring guide. The result of using a scoring guide, as any teacher who has followed this process will attest, is remarkable. Once students see and understand what is expected, they can usually produce it—given enough time and support. Instead of encouraging superficiality and failure, a carefully developed scoring guide helps students work toward and achieve success.

Sample Scoring Guide 3: Close Reading
Here is a well-conceived first-year composition assignment, designed to teach close reading and applied analytic writing as well as use of sources (see the discussion in Chapter 1), for which a scoring guide will be very helpful. It would be particularly useful at the beginning of a research process when students are first discovering and selecting texts that contribute to the development of their topic. If you are teaching a theme-based writing course, or have certain
readings that will anchor the writing course, you could select a passage from one of your primary readings as a starting point for teaching analytic writing. Our example here is based on a provocative text.

Write a short essay examining what the anthropologist Jules Henry means in the following passage and showing the extent to which the passage applies to your own schooling.

Another learning problem inherent in the human condition is the fact that we must conserve culture while changing it; that we must always be more sure of surviving than of adapting—as we see it. Whenever a new idea appears, our first concern as animals must be that it does not kill us; then and only then can we look at it from other points of view. In general, primitive people solved this problem simply by walling their children off from new possibilities by educational methods that, largely by fear (including ridicule, beating and mutilation), so narrowed the perceptual sphere that other than traditional ways of viewing the world became unthinkable. . . . The function of education has never been to free the mind and the spirit of man, but to bind them. . . . Schools have therefore never been places for the stimulation of young minds.

—From Jules Henry, *Culture against Man*

It is worth exploring why this is a particularly good assignment to teach research skills. It has a clear purpose (to help students learn to use a source as evidence for an argument) and will help students understand a new idea and test it, combining personal experience writing with analytical writing. Even though it is accessible to everyone with memories of schooling, it contains challenges for the best writers: to understand an unconventional idea, to examine the evidence for it (some teachers will want to distribute the book chapter from which the passage is taken), to narrate and examine personal experience in relation to a source’s ideas, to control point of view and tone, and to understand the relative power of evidence from research and from personal experience. Discussion of these matters in class will help students understand the complexity of the assignment, despite its clear demand and focus. Although the assignment does not state that quotations from the passage must be quoted and examined for meaning, its definition of the goal of the paper (“showing the extent to which the passage applies to your own schooling”) in fact requires use of the source. Thus one clear pedagogical goal of the assignment is to help students see that they cannot merely insert citations into their own writing, like raisins in a pudding, but rather need to introduce and discuss quotations as part of their argument.

If the class is unusually worried about grades and relatively inexperienced with this kind of assignment, all that may be needed is a 2-point scale, reflecting satisfactory or unsatisfactory work depending on whether the assignment is fulfilled. But we might choose to call those score points 5 and 2, with the intention of developing a 6-point scoring guide at a later stage of drafting. A writing class will be ready, after some discussion, to come up with something
like the following, and it is a good idea to use class time to discuss these criteria with your students, even encouraging them to articulate some of their own assumptions about what represents a successful approach to this assignment.

Score of 5
These papers show clear understanding of Henry’s point about schools in general and also give clear evidence from the writer’s experience about the degree to which that point described their own schooling. Quotations from the source are well integrated into the essay. The writing has a developed idea and its conclusions have been supported by evidence. Writing errors do not distract the reader.

Score of 2
These papers show little understanding of or respect for Henry’s evidence and argument. The focus may be almost entirely on a defense of the writer’s school and personal experience; the language may lack convincing detail or argument; and quotations from the passage (if they appear at all) are inserted without introduction, analysis, or connection to the paper’s controlling idea. Editing is needed to deal with surface matters that distract the reader.

It would not be hard to expand these descriptors or to fill in the scores on either side of them. For example, the 6 paper would be able to show how schools must manage a series of sometimes conflicting goals. The 4 paper would accomplish the job but in a minimal way — that is, with a relatively superficial reading and analysis of the passage and little detail for the personal experience. Again, the 3 paper might have just a bit of detail and an unclear attitude toward the central argument of the passage, while the 1 paper just doesn’t understand or address the task, or perhaps is a mechanical disaster. The score of 1 will mean different kinds of writing for different classes, depending on the backgrounds and abilities represented by the students.

Sample Scoring Guide 4: Multiple Trait Scoring for Rhetorical Analysis
In recent years, many writing teachers and programs have moved toward a more trait-based approach to grading writing. As we discussed above, primary trait scoring involves measuring students’ performance in a given trait — point of view, for example — to the exclusion of all other writing issues. However, such an approach to grading writing is hardly efficient for extended writing assignments, which often draw on students’ ability to execute multiple skills (including research mechanics, organization, argument, and logic). For this, among other reasons, primary trait scoring is better used as an in-class diagnostic assessment practice when teaching a discrete skill such as descriptive writing or in-text citation. Multiple trait scoring assesses students’ writing performance across several key components for a given genre of writing. This assessment approach reflects more of an analytic scoring method, the advantages and disadvantages of which were discussed above. It also has the flexibility and aesthetic appeal of being a more visually oriented approach to holistic grading where the 6-point scoring guide is now expanded to account for student performance across six or so traits.
In grading a student’s paper using such a rubric, a teacher marks the level of student performance for each trait and then provides a final holistic grade that assesses the student’s overall performance across traits—mostly exemplary or mostly developing, for example. This grade is supplemented with summative commentary. For example, a student that performs mostly “Exemplary” on a multiple trait rubric would earn the same grade A as a student who earned a 6 on a holistic scoring guide. A student who does “Strong” to “Average” work across the multiple traits might be assigned a final grade of B to C depending on the ratio of checked boxes for each performance category.

Multiple trait scoring mirrors analytic scoring insofar as you reward students for strong performance on certain writing skills. And critics have noted the tendency for the halo effect to cloud reliable assessment across traits—that is, if students perform exceptionally well in one trait, you might inflate their performance across the other traits; a corollary worry is that if students perform quite poorly in one trait, you might also tend to grade more severely across the other traits. For this reason, advocates of holistic assessment continue to argue that good writing is greater than the sum of its parts and often find such assessment reductive. For example, White has written extensively on holistic and analytic assessment and the idea that writing subskills overlap (see, for example, “Holisticism” and Teaching and Assessing Writing).

Yet, as the trend for more research-based writing curricula increases across universities, and as big data and empirical research earn prominence in the field of rhetoric and composition, scholars are exploring the limits and potentials of multiple trait scoring, or focused holistic assessment, and its productive uses in the teaching of writing. We have seen the increasing popularity of such approaches to grading writing in recent years. For example, a reputable large-scale Southwest research-oriented writing program in which we both taught continues to adopt this assessment method in training teaching assistants to teach first-year writing.

Perhaps one reason for the increasing popularity of this approach to grading writing is its effective uses in teaching L2 and ESL students, a growing demographic in our universities. Multiple trait scoring can also be a valuable diagnostic tool to assess particular strengths and weaknesses in student writing (Bacha). When done carefully and adapted to local curricula and student needs, multiple trait scoring can directly inform teaching practice, helping a teacher tailor in-class writing instruction and drafting workshops to better address the students’ overall needs based on their performance across certain traits for a particular writing assignment.

Thus, the particular strength of multiple trait scoring is that it yields diagnostic information, which holistic scoring does not do. But that strength is problematic, since some of the most used traits, grammar for instance, mean different things to different people. Another popular trait is accuracy, which may be hard to define. More evanescent traits are often omitted; style, for example, is difficult to limit and measure, though it remains an important trait of good writing. Thus trait scoring is usually limited to situations in which the traits to be measured are carefully defined and taught.
When using a multiple trait scoring guide it is of utmost importance that the rubric reflect what students have been taught in the course as well as the language and learning objectives of the assignment sheet. For this reason, most research on assessment agrees that the rubric needs to be local and dictated by the specific needs, resources, and student demographics of a university’s writing program. While we offer the following scoring guide as an example of multiple trait scoring for teaching writing, we cannot overemphasize that you will want to make sure that such an approach supports your own curriculum and students, the broader learning objectives of your writing program, and the courses you teach in it. You also want to make sure that the specific traits being assessed, and the language used to assess them in the rubric, match the learning objectives of a given assignment.

A popular assignment in many first-year writing courses is rhetorical analysis. In general, analytic writing assignments ask students to analyze how a text uses particular rhetorical appeals to achieve its intended purpose. Often, students are assigned the text; however, some teachers allow students to choose a text. There are benefits and drawbacks to both approaches. Many teachers also teach this assignment with a focus on visuals, for example, advertisements, photographs, commercials, YouTube videos, vines, brand logos, as well as spatial texts such as architecture, buildings, and public spaces. The rhetorical analysis is often taught in the second semester of a two-part first-year writing sequence; at other times, it is offered as a beginning assignment in writing programs that aspire to a more vertical curriculum, breaking required writing into first- and second-year courses, for example. The rubric shown in Table 4.1 on page 88 is a starting point for teachers asked to assign and teach rhetorical analysis in their writing courses, and is a modification of one of the scoring guides used for this assignment in the University of Arizona’s writing program.

One of the benefits of Table 4.1’s scoring guide is that it is visual, and helps students access information quickly and effectively. A teacher can simply circle the corresponding box for each trait, and, if they wish, offer marginal comments. At the end of the rubric is an important space for final summative comments. This commentary should reinforce the performance across the multiple traits, providing the teacher’s holistic evaluation of the effectiveness of the student’s response to the assignment and acknowledging the relative strengths of the paper. It is also a good idea to provide constructive advice for any traits on which a student scored particularly low. For example, if a student received a “Developing” on the Language Use and Mechanics category, and you feel this is more a matter of taking time to edit and spell-check (beyond word processing spell-checkers), you might simply note the importance of careful editing for mechanical errors and point the student to a helpful resource for doing so. But if a student scored low in Organization, you will want to provide constructive feedback that helps the student understand what kinds of organizational struggles you encountered as a reader, and, if possible, provides tips for improving organization in future assignments. Something like, “I had a hard time following the development of your argument because your paragraphs lacked clear topic sentences. A goal for the next assignment will be to focus on...”
constructing topic sentences that help build coherence in your argument and help your reader better follow your train of thought.”

While we have represented the rubric here using the grading notations “Exemplary,” “Strong,” “Average,” and “Developing,” you could also swap or add letter grades to these terms. For example, “Exemplary (A),” “Strong (B),” and so forth. You could also ascribe a number to each category: “Exemplary (6),” “Strong (5),” and so on. The danger, however, in assigning numbers in this scoring system is a tendency to want to add up these numbers and then assign a total grade, for example a 31/35 = 88% or B+. Yet, in our experience using this kind of scoring guide, we find that such a quantitative approach does not accurately evaluate the writing as a whole. For this reason, we support a more holistic approach to the final grading.

You might note this scoring guide also builds in and rewards participation in peer reviews and revision in student writing, a core learning objective for most writing courses. This can be tricky to measure, however, and puts extra pressure on the teacher to note the quantity and quality of student participation in peer response. One way of measuring such participation is to hold instructor-led peer workshop conferences, where the teacher acts as a facilitator and the students lead discussion and critique of each other’s papers. In groups of three to four students, thirty- to forty-five-minute sessions are usually sufficient. This is usually manageable if a teacher has a teaching load of two to three courses a semester, and can build some of this workshop time into class—for example, some teachers cancel class for a week to schedule these workshops. This workshop model provides the benefits of the teacher participating as part of a larger response audience, decentering power from the teacher’s feedback and allowing student feedback to really count in the revision process. However, we recognize some teachers will have four or more writing courses a semester, with heavy student enrollment. Such an approach then may not be practical for your grading needs. For this reason, you may wish to omit the workshopping criterion, substituting a different trait for it or working across a smaller group of traits.

**USING SCORING GUIDES AS PART OF TEACHING WRITING**

Once the criteria for grading have become clear enough to the teacher and to the class, they become a natural part of the writing assignment itself. Students will know from the outset the standards by which their work will be judged. As we pointed out in Chapter 3, some teachers make sure to involve the students themselves in the creation of the scoring guide, so that they can see the quality standards as partly of their own devising. It also focuses the writing course on the process of writing itself, something often spoken of in curricula but not often practiced in class.

Some writing teachers are beginning to use computer software that includes scoring guides to assist in peer review, and the best of these programs have the additional advantage of allowing writing and writing assessment to take place in very large classes. A good example of such a program is Calibrated Peer Review
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Exemplary (A)</th>
<th>Strong (B)</th>
<th>Competent (C)</th>
<th>Developing (D/E)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Rhetorical Stance and</strong></td>
<td>Student’s essay is consistently written in a tone and style appropriate to the audience. Rhetorical choices acutely befit the purpose and occasion for which student is writing.</td>
<td>Student’s essay is mostly written in tone and style appropriate for audience. Rhetorical choices almost always work for the purpose and occasion, but there are occasional lapses.</td>
<td>Student’s essay shows an attempt at appropriateness in tone and style, but the student makes several choices that clearly do not befit the rhetorical situation.</td>
<td>The tone and style often seem off-target for audience. Rhetorical choices work occasionally, but mostly do not befit the rhetorical situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Audience Adaptation:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Style, Tone, and Genre</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Arrangement:</strong></td>
<td>Concise, coherent, and clear: developed logical structure, sophisticated transitions.</td>
<td>Mostly concise, coherent, and clear: developed logical structure but may lack transitions or clear topic sentences.</td>
<td>Sporadically concise, coherent, and/or clear, but shows an attempt; structure may lack development, transitions, or clear topic sentences.</td>
<td>Reader has to work too hard to make connections due to absence of transitions and paragraph organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cohesion and Coherence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Analytic Engagement:</strong></td>
<td>Student effectively employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis to examine the text. Focuses on rhetorical aspects of the text (audience, purpose, rhetorical strategies, etc.).</td>
<td>Thoughtfully engages with ideas presented in text. Takes some chances. Needs to stretch analysis a bit further. Effectively employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis.</td>
<td>Shows engagement with ideas in text by choosing appropriate quotations, but may lack sufficient analysis. Inconsistently employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis.</td>
<td>Quotation/textual support may not be appropriate for analysis; analysis skims surface or may not relate to purpose of the assignment. Rarely employs methods and concepts from this analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Logos</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Table 4.1: Rhetorical Analysis Assessment Rubric</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Exemplary (A)</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Rhetorical Stance and Audience Adaptation: Style, Tone, and Genre Conventions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student’s essay is consistently written in a tone and style appropriate to the audience. Rhetorical choices acutely befit the purpose and occasion for which student is writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s essay is mostly written in tone and style appropriate for audience. Rhetorical choices almost always work for the purpose and occasion, but there are occasional lapses.</td>
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<th>Arrangement: Cohesion and Coherence</th>
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<td>Concise, coherent, and clear: developed logical structure, sophisticated transitions.</td>
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<td>Sporadically concise, coherent, and/or clear, but shows an attempt; structure may lack development, transitions, or clear topic sentences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reader has to work too hard to make connections due to absence of transitions and paragraph organization.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Engagement: Logos</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student effectively employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis to examine the text. Focuses on rhetorical aspects of the text (audience, purpose, rhetorical strategies, etc.) and supports claims with textual and contextual references. The analysis is sophisticated, fresh, and exciting, posing new ways to think about the material.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoughtfully engages with ideas presented in text. Takes some chances. Needs to stretch analysis a bit further. Effectively employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis and mostly focuses on rhetorical aspects of the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows engagement with ideas in text by choosing appropriate quotations, but may lack sufficient analysis. Inconsistently employs concepts and methods of rhetorical analysis and/or may incorrectly apply these strategies in her/his analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotation/textual support may not be appropriate for analysis; analysis skims surface or may not relate to purpose of the assignment. Rarely employs methods and concepts from this unit and/or diverges too heavily from the rhetorical aspects of text.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Delivery: Document Design and Format</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sophisticated and effective use of in-text citation; embeds quotes within own logic and sentence structures. Few to no errors with in-text citation and works cited.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quotes support but don’t dominate writer’s logic. Some minimal errors in in-text citation and works cited. Citation style often used correctly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several errors in in-text citation and works cited. Some “dropped in” quotes. Exhibits developing awareness of representing and using research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citations often excluded or incorrect. Works cited has multiple errors. Lacks awareness of how to use research in academic writing.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Mechanics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exceptional command of academic language and other surface features of text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong command of academic language and other surface features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing academic language usage and other surface features.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting surface errors.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Invention: Prewriting, Writing Workshop, and Revision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant growth from draft to draft; avid participation in workshops and peer review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ample revisions. Good participation in workshops and peer review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate revisions. Average participation in workshops or peer review.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few notable changes between drafts. Unmotivated participation in peer review and workshops.</td>
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(CPR), developed by the chemistry department at the University of California, Los Angeles, with assistance from the National Science Foundation (available at http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu). It includes the full presentation of a writing assignment, a scoring guide, a training program to help students “calibrate” their responses to given examples of writing to the assignment, a way for students to then respond to and grade writing done by others in their peer groups, and an assignment to use that background for self-assessment. In other words, it presents the advantages discussed in this chapter in such a way that students can perform all the activities within their peer groups, with the aid of computers, and without personal intervention by the teacher. It is not a computer-automated grading program (with all the attendant problems) but rather an online computer program to assist students in using assessment to improve the writing of other students and, as a result of that practice, their own drafts.

At the same time, the program presents its material with an air of authority that many writing teachers will resist, most particularly its assured distinctions of right versus wrong responses to the assignment and to others' writing. Perhaps that attitude is more appropriate in the sciences than in other fields, something potentially of great value in writing in the major and technical and business writing courses that have grown in popularity over the last decade. A program like CPR is flexible enough to offer writing teachers promising possibilities for use in peer groups without increasing their already overburdened workload. No doubt other such programs will evolve rapidly.

The class work with scoring guides that this chapter describes has an underlying purpose: to change the way our students produce texts. Instead of producing a draft the night before it is due and praying that the teacher will be kind, students using scoring guides will work toward a set of clear criteria distributed alongside the assignment. They will be expected to understand these criteria, perhaps even participate in creating them; to apply these criteria in their own writing; and to assess the presence of such criteria in their peers' writing, which, in turn, should facilitate their own revision process. If the writing course can help students reach this goal, the course will have accomplished its basic function and justify its central position in the university curriculum.

Scoring guides help teachers teach more effectively: first, by helping teachers review and revise their assignments in the light of pedagogical goals; second, by supporting simple fairness in teacher grading; third, as a means of restoring credibility to grades by making grading criteria clear and public; and, finally, as a way for students to internalize standards for their peers and themselves. We need to be cautious and thoughtful in our use of them, however, for they can easily become formulas for text production instead of liberating influences for writers. But as part of a thoughtful curriculum with well-conceived writing assignments, scoring guides offer teachers ways to help students understand revision and make distinctions. They can relieve the teacher's workload by making peer response groups helpful and productive, at least for early drafts. And they form a link between general statements of what constitutes good writing and the power of grading particular assignments.
that can lead to much improved student writing. As writing teachers, we need all the help we can get, and scoring guides are a particularly helpful classroom device for us.

**Selected References**


PART

III

Evaluating
CHAPTER

5

Grading Writing Using Holistic Scoring Guides

EVALUATING IMPROMPTU WRITING
BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Studying British schools some decades ago, James Britton and his team of researchers found little personal writing; most school writing was to set abstract topics that failed to engage the students and was terribly dreary. He recommended more personal writing to infuse some vitality into school writing. Britton’s argument is also supported by writing research on ESL and first-generation students that demonstrates the importance of designing writing assignments that allow these students to apply their cultural knowledge and experiences to an assignment. In contrast, today in America, some researchers are finding that too many students enter college with little experience beyond personal writing—leading to policies like the Common Core with its focus on teaching nonfiction texts, analytic writing, and new media. The research suggests that both personal and reading-based writing—or some blending of them—belong in most writing courses. Some teachers try to reap the benefits of personal writing by opening college writing courses with personal writing and then moving by stages into more abstract and reading-based work (see Chapter 1). Every teacher who has the option should experiment with a mix of personal and reading-based writing assignments to find the combination of assignments appropriate to their own teaching style, the curriculum of the course, and their respective student demographic. This chapter begins with two sets of student papers written to a topic based on personal experience, followed by two additional topics based on assigned texts. The second of those assignments is based on two literary texts.

Assignments based on personal experience are particularly beneficial at the start of a writing course. Because they ask students to draw from and reflect on their personal experience, every student should have plenty to write about and should be interested in the topic. Even extremely weak writers can accomplish some description, and skilled writers will have a chance to manage tone and point of view for subtle effects. Personal experience topics are also good preparation for expository writing because the use of concrete detail as evidence for what the writer has to say reinforces the need to demonstrate ideas, rather than just assert them. In addition, you can see if the student is accustomed to understanding and fulfilling writing goals and if the student has a
writing process that they can describe. (These topics offer a starting point for entries into students’ writing logs.) As we discussed in Chapter 1, impromptu writings are likely to contain editing problems, particularly if you limit the time available; the student samples below are from forty-five-minute essay tests, which don’t allow for much revision or even editing. But as we will demonstrate in our discussion of the unsuccessful papers, the editing problems are part of an entire process that requires attention. We discussed this particular assignment in Chapter 2 in relation to its classroom use, which may or may not involve grading. Here we focus on the same impromptu assignment as an example of how holistic scoring works to provide diagnostic information for your class or for placement or proficiency testing for a writing program.

Essay Test 1: Personal Experience Assignment 1

Describe a person you knew well when you were a child. Your object is to use enough detail that your readers can picture the person clearly from the child’s perspective and at the same time understand from the tone of your description and from the particular details you choose how you felt about the person you describe.

Students should always be rewarded for what they do well in response to an assignment. In timed impromptu writing, every writer will make a few errors. Patterns of errors, such as repeated failures to predicate sentences or to relate ideas, will usually indicate a lower-half essay (scored 3, 2, or 1), but occasional errors are likely to appear in even the best writing. Evaluate the essay as a whole, without giving undue weight to any single aspect.

Personal Experience Assignment 1 asks the student to describe a particular person, using detail, so that a reader can understand the nature of the relationship. Essays that do not select a particular person or that are so general in their descriptions that we must guess at the relationship should be scored in the lower half, as they fail to understand and respond to the question.

Holistic Scoring Guide

6. A superior response will not only define and describe the person in detail but also provide vivid and particular descriptions arranged for a clear purpose. It will have a personal voice and use words with attention to their tone as well as their meaning; it will have a discernible organization and be focused.

5. The strong response will be less vivid, detailed, and focused than the superior one and may explain the relationship as well as show it. But the writing will accomplish the task strongly; the paper will use words with care and be orderly.

4. The competent response will accomplish the task in a minimal way: the descriptions will be clear enough to convey a relationship, but not in a particularly distinct way; the writing is likely to be marked by minor but frequent errors.
3. The weak response does not accomplish the task, for a variety of reasons: it tells about, rather than describes, a person; it features minimal or muddled detail; it loses track of its purpose; it shows patterns of error.

2. The inadequate response is likely to show patterns of serious error, to misunderstand or confuse the question, to use superficial and stereotyped language, to include oral structures with the written language, or otherwise demonstrate serious problems.

1. The incompetent response conveys ineptness at handling the assignment: it reflects failed attempts to begin the task, inability to produce the written dialect, unwillingness to undertake the writing assignment, and the like.

If you were to use this scoring guide for the sample essays that follow, you would have to adapt it somewhat for your particular situation. The scores should represent reasonable levels of accomplishment for your particular school, and those levels of accomplishment should reflect the kind of writing your students normally produce. Successful essays will probably fit into the 6–5 range; marginal essays, in the 4–3 range; and unsuccessful essays, the 2–1 range. You should have enough representative papers on hand to allow you to make decisions about the scoring scale and about the applicability of the various levels for the sample essays before you begin grading.

Sample Student Essays

Score of 6  A FORRH-GRADE MEMORY

Looking back, practically the first thing I think of when I remember her is her behind. It was a ponderous specimen to the fourth grader that I was; always an impossible obstacle thrust out into the aisles of our desks as she leaned on her elbows, absorbed in the smudgy penciled work of one of her students. I would stand contemplating it, wrapping one white knee-socked leg around the other, waiting. It was not that she intimidated me — she that sat in the dirt of our playground as if she were one of us — I could have made my need to pass known, but where, where to poke or tap her? Her shoulders were bowed over the desk, her face beaming not two inches away from her pupil’s.

Her face was an entirely different matter. The precision of her nose brought to mind the image of a pert little bird, a sparrow perhaps. Her eyes were a crisp blue, literally framed by scholarly brown glasses. Her hair might have reminded a student or two of the pictures of the thatched roofs in Norway that she enthusiastically waved at us during geography hour. (She once confided to
me that she looked in the mirror but once a day, exclaiming, “God, you’re gorgeous!” and then abandoned vanities for the rest of the day.)

Despite her decrepitude — she must have been over forty years old — she was a real Bohemian, complete with bean bag chairs and tie-dyed blouse. She had a deep affection for my father. She was widowed or divorced, I suppose, with three teen-aged children, and when she asked me how my father was and told me that he had the most beautiful, happy eyes, I wanted to hug her and let her move into my room with me. She must have been very lonely. She was generally a soft-spoken person, but was capable of an awesome bellow that would stop any taunting boy in his cruel tracks. How often I wanted to bury my head in her polyester lap, my friend, my protector, but she was my teacher. I respected her not only wholly, but voluntarily.

Score of 5  SOMEONE

He was someone who sat at our dinner table and told us to "shut-up" so he could listen to the news; he told us to eat our vegetables or we would get no dessert. He was someone who caused me to cry and leave the table if I spilled some milk because I so wanted to please him. He was someone I said goodbye to at night when he went off to work. He was someone who got us up in the morning and told us to get ready for school and “Be sure to make your beds,” he always said. I remember him helping me do my math problems, and how I would get upset when he would yell at me because I could not understand. He was always telling me to straighten my room, hang the clothes, do the dishes, and help your mom with dinner.

He was someone whom my mom would ask to take us somewhere on Sunday. He was always telling us kids to be quiet and not to fight while he was driving. He once stopped at a wreck and showed us what might happen if we did not behave while he was driving. He was someone who broke my arm by shaking me and swinging me on the ground when my younger sister and I were fighting. He was someone who gave us an allowance so we could go to the show on Saturday.

He was someone who worked hard for our food and clothes, and who on Sundays at my mom’s request took us somewhere.
I am still trying to please my father and wishing he were different than he is. He is someone whom I respect for his hard work, but I wish he would please me more with himself. Today my father and I talk of troubles in the world, but never of any personal troubles or concerns. He is still the someone who tells us, “Be quiet!” at the dinner table whenever we are home to eat. He is still the someone who furnishes us with food and a place to sleep; but now he never offers us a dime unless we ask. He no longer takes us somewhere on Sundays because our family cannot get along.

My father will always be someone whom I respect, but he will never be the dad I have always admired and wished was my own.

Score of 4  UNCLE BILL

We kids loved Uncle Bill. He had a red face and a potbelly and a jolly big laugh. At Christmas time we thought he was a kind of Santa Claus, but the best kind that would roll on the floor playing with us and tickle us as we played. He liked games as much as we did and we had so much fun with him until dad would say, “that’s enough, Bill,” and we’d have to stop laughing and act serious again. He wasn’t a real uncle, but an old friend of my fathers.

We were five kids and we got along real well, not like most families. Tina was closest to me in age, than there were Ron, Lily, Grace, and the baby Hilary. Tina and I always ran the show and the others were happy to go along. We had a big old house with lots of hiding places and we played hide and go seek for hours. Of course Christmas was our favorite time, that’s when lots of relatives showed up with presents.

It’s funny that I can’t remember much about Mom and Dad, they just were there. They never seemed to change, even today they seem to be the proverbial Mom and Dad from TV. But I have lots of memories of the other kids. I guess we were like a TV family in lots of ways.

Uncle Bill never changed either, not even as we got older. I remember at one point telling him to stop tickling me and he didn’t want to. He looked kind of hurt when I said I was too grown up for rolling on the floor and he said that growing up was no fun. Then he tried to tickle me again and I ran upstairs.
After that, things were never the same between him and me, though he was just the same with the younger kids.

He never read to us at night in bed, though he was a fantastic reader and took on all the voices of the characters and made them seem real. We’d all gather around him when he read The Night Before Christmas and he could do it like nobody else. I know that as a teenager I never felt as comfortable with him as I did as a kid. It was like he stayed the same while I went on. But I had lots of interests by then and was on the soccer team and that took up most of my free time, aside from homework. I was pretty good at math and English and was trying to get a scholarship.

Now that I’m grown, I never see Uncle Bill anymore and I can’t get my parents to talk about him. But that’s the way it goes when you grow up, as he used to say, when we were all having fun together. In some ways, I miss him, but he is part of my past. I hope when I have kids of my own they can have fun with my friends the same way I did with Uncle Bill.

Score of 3  GRAMPS

Gramps, we called him. My mother’s father was very old, but always enjoyed seeing us kids when we came for summer visits. He lived alone in a small town in Ohio, I don’t remember the name, in a small house with a garden out back.

Gramps loved to work in the garden and he always had things for us to do. How he kept his pipe going all day long while weeding I’ll never know. Once he showed us how the irrigation worked and I helped him cut and put in a new line. He never seemed to lose patience, though I’m sure I was not much help.

He always had a housekeeper, though I don’t remember much about them. Somehow, food appeared at meal time and the house was clean. When we were there Gramps spent all his time with us, though we were always helping him do his chores. The special time of the day was walking downtown to get an ice cream cone on hot afternoons. At night he liked to read stories to us from an old dusty book.

Gramps died a few years ago, I really did not pay much attention at the time, I was busy with school and sports. But now as I write this I realize that I miss him for lots of reasons and wish I had appreciated him more.
Score of 2  

DESERT HOME

As a child, my parents moved from Texas to California in search for a better paying job. My parents had no idea of living in the desert would be like, yet my father had high hopes because among his friends he heard that California was the place to live, and jobs were more available. As time went by, my parents soon learned that the lower desert in Southern California was a rough rugget, bold place to live. The dry climate was very hot in the summer and very cold in winter. The large stretches of land made the desert spacious. So roomy that people felt lonely when left alone unvisited by civilization.

As a rule everyone knew and respected owning a car or truck in the desert. It was a major prority or else suffer the consequences of being stranded out without transportation which made life even more miserable. On paid days, once a month, the whole community rised from the dead in an up roar of happiness. Everyone knew their destination. Some headed towards Needles, other to 29 palms, Barstow, and San Bernardino. Leaving the desert for awhile, and coming in contact with civilization again meant alot for the 15 families that worked for Santa Fe Railroad Company.

Our small community was called Cadiz, California. It had a post office a train station, a small market called Champlus, a trailer park, and eight cabins for visitors stopping off from highway 66, a gasoline station, and a restaurant that was a couple miles away. You see! route 66 was the main road to civilization.

Discussion of the Essays

We suggest that you begin responding to the assignment by asking your students to consider the importance of understanding what a writing assignment calls for. Students need to see that the central concern of this particular topic is the use of detail to meet the goals of the assignment: to imply a relationship. Many students write inadequate essays because they do not pay enough attention to the job at hand. The first successful response (scored 6) provides careful description of the teacher, using a very sophisticated point of view combining the adult and the child's perspective. It does depart from the descriptive goal of the assignment to discuss the relationship in its last sentence, as does the second one; good writers have a hard time leaving readers to make their own judgment from the description. The second essay (scored 5) also uses powerful detail to convey the distant and disappointingly harsh relationship between
the writer and the father, brilliantly conveyed by the “Someone” of the title. While both essays handle the topic well, the first essay, by a more skillful writer, handles the assignment with greater sophistication, managing language and point of view with unusual skill. The writer of “Uncle Bill” (scored 4) also shows talent, particularly in the detailed opening paragraph and the vivid scene in the fourth paragraph. But the essay is filled with distracting material and fails to focus on what we must see as the funny uncle of the title. Indeed, by the end of the essay we wonder if the writer is really aware of what was going on with him, even though the writer is now an adult.

When we move to papers in the lower half of scores, we can also see clear gradations of less successful writing. The writer of “Gramps” (scored 3) understands that detail is necessary but gives the detail in a scattered way, not focusing on any particular aspect of the relationship. The writer of “Desert Home” (scored 2) loses track of both the topic and the goal of the assignment. This student has some feel for the language of description but is not accustomed to the school dialect; at numerous places the writer uses a rough approximation of oral dialect (rugget, paid days, couple miles), and the student is unlikely to know how to revise or edit. What can you do to help this student without overwhelming her with everything that is wrong with the paper? If this writing is typical — always a question — what resources are available to help her — and others like her — get through their courses without failing? The writer of this essay needs to see that she did not meet the goal of the assignment, since she describes a town rather than a person. Her writing suggests a paucity of experience with writing assignments, experience that she will need to make up through extra effort or extra instruction if she is to succeed. Perhaps, in some contexts, the grade of 2 may be inappropriate, such as in a basic writing course.

Here is where the writing teacher can be a key figure in helping such students survive. What help is available on campus? Is there a developmental program that will help them learn what they need to know? Can they be assigned a tutor in the learning center? Regular conferences with you? A peer tutor from the class itself? Your objective as a teacher is to read student errors as an indication of ways to provide help, rather than merely as an indication of failure. Just as you may wish to suggest an honors section for the students who wrote the essays scored 5 or 6, you may want to refer the students who are writing at the lowest levels to whatever sources of support may be at hand. Or, if the writing program does not provide such options, you may need to recognize the challenge of providing appropriate challenges and support for the wide range of writing abilities that present themselves to you on the first day of class. On the other hand, you may decide to wait for a less pressured assignment, in case the brief impromptu essay did not accurately display your students’ actual writing ability.

You will, of course, want to use this essay assignment in various ways in addition to its placement or diagnostic function. Students should begin their writing logs by describing how they went about producing the paper; if you ask them to revise the essay after it has been graded (always a good idea), a description of the process of revision should also go into the log. Depending
on your class and your institution, you may want to deal with organization of
the paragraphs and the essay as a whole, with sentence structure, or with other
issues that have emerged. And you will want to distinguish this kind of assign-
ment from the more analytical and expository essays to follow.

Essay Test 2: Personal Experience Assignment 2

Many observers of our society claim that modern people, immersed in materialism,
are “owned by their objects.” Yet many of us have objects that we treasure not just
for their material value but for a variety of other reasons. Describe one object that is
important to you. Explain what values it represents, and comment on those values.

As with the first assignment, students should be rewarded for what they do
well in response to the question. Personal Experience Assignment 2 asks stu-
dents to describe an object important to them, and further to explain and
comment on what values it represents. Note that the question does not ask for
unusual objects. But it does require the choice of a specific object, not general-
ized abstractions such as life or God, and it asks for some descriptive detail as
well as a more abstract discussion of values.

Holistic Scoring Guide

6. A superior response will not only name an object but also describe it in
some detail, and the essay will not simply identify the values represented
but explain and comment on them, their nature, and their source. A supe-
rior essay will be literate and orderly, despite the occasional minor error.

5. The strong response will both describe a particular object and explain
the values it represents, but without the unusual richness and develop-
ment of the 6 essay.

4. The competent response will select and describe an object, though less
fully than the 5 essay; it will adequately consider the issue of values.
Minor mechanical or grammatical errors may be noticeable but do not
seriously distract the reader.

3. The weak response may adequately  handle both parts of the assignment
but will contain too many mechanical or grammatical errors to be consid-
ered competent. Or it may be mechanically competent but fail to accom-
plish the task — for example, by dealing with only one part of the two-part
question, ignoring the representativeness of specific objects, or treating
the subject in a superficial, immature, or stereotyped fashion.

2. The inadequate response is likely to show patterns of serious error, to
misunderstand or confuse the question, to use superficial and stereo-
typed language, to show consistent oral interference with the written
language, or otherwise demonstrate serious problems.

1. The incompetent response conveys ineptness at handling the assignment:
it reflects failed attempts to begin the task, inability to produce the writ-
ten dialect, unwillingness to undertake the writing assignment, and the
like.
The music box

We have in our living room a music box, which for three generations has given pleasure to the eyes and ears of my family. It stands about a foot high and measures about two feet in length and width. Except for a spray of flowers carved on its face, the outside is unadorned. Inside, pasted to the lid, is a turn-of-the-century lithograph of a pair of plump cherubs. There is a set of tin records, perforated here and there, that goes with the music box. It is run by winding it up and releasing the spring. Its tunes are dated; “My Gal Is A High-Born Lady” and “I Guess I’ll Telegraph My Baby” haven’t been among the top ten for quite a while, but this does nothing to lessen the enjoyment they give.

My grandfather was the first to own the music box. He traded a horse for it and presented the music box to my grandmother as a gift. They had been married for only six months. At first it was a very big deal. A music box in a Nebraskan farming town can cause quite a commotion, but as time went by and the popularity of “victrolas” grew, the music box passed into oblivion.

Ignored and dusty was the way my father discovered it in the cellar. He cleaned it up and got it running and showed it off patronizingly to his friends as a relic from his parent’s youth. It was played at parties as a novelty, but again it lost out against the incoming rage: the radio. So back into the cellar went the music box to await rediscovery one more time.

This time it was my sister and I who resurrected it. We hauled it out into the light, dusted off its rosewood sides and listened to the songs first heard what seemed to us to be eons ago.

My grandparents grew old, and being practical people, decided to divide their possessions with their children before their death to avoid a tragic scramble afterwards. To my father went the music box, and he carefully brought it to our home and revived it one more time.

Now, despite its years, it keeps on playing its old familiar songs. I love the old music box. It can never be associated with a price tag. My grandfather acquired it with an honest trade and it has been handed down through the years. The music box symbolizes my grandfather’s love for my grandmother,
my father’s years at home, my sister and I exploring in the dark cellar and countless fine memories. I love it for its beauty, the rich, soft red of the rosewood, the way it gleams in the sun. I love the whirr of the motor and vigorously cranking the handle. I love the corny song titles and running my fingers over the rough surface of the records. And although its value is largely sentimental, its worth stems from the fact that it has survived many years with grace and beauty; something very few people can claim.

Score of 5  MY HOUSE

As I look back on my life, the object that I place the most value on is the house that I grew up in. For sixteen years I walked through its doors and lived in its rooms. That house became a part of me.

Now, almost nineteen years old, it stands in a middle class suburb of Los Angeles. The surrounding streets are lined with well-kept homes and neatly trimmed yards.

Children that I don’t know play baseball on the avenue and cars that I don’t recognize fill the driveways. My dear house is in an alien world both to me and to it.

My family took pride in that home. We bought it new, put in all the landscaping, and made it a beautiful place to live. In all the years we lived there, I never once took its loveliness for granted. I would sit and look at it and know what a wonderful home we had.

That long avenue was my world. Little playmates moved in and out of the other houses, but I was the stable one. I didn’t believe we would ever leave our home.

That building saw my first step, heard my first word, and watched me fall off of my first bicycle. It stood by when I was sick and was there for all the happy moments too. It became more like a person, part of the family.

Leaving it all alone for new people to run about in was next to impossible. Is it as lonely as I am?

Our new house is bigger and more modern than that one was. Still, this makes no difference. It will never be home.
Score of 4  OBJECTS I VALUE!

At this point in life, I don’t have many objects which I value a great deal. The few things I do value have a sentimental value rather than a monetary value.

The first objects I value are trophies I won diving. They have a very deep sentimental value to me because it was my reward for the hours and years I practiced, working for a goal. When I look at my trophies on the shelf I think of all the joys I felt at winning and also the heart break of losing. I think of the self-control and self-discipline I gained at going to practice each day while my friends were at the beach. This, right now, is very important to me. These trophies have no real monetary value or sentimental value to anyone but me because only I earned these trophies and only I cherish them.

Another object which I value is a ring I received from my grandmother. This ring is also a sentimental object to me. I received it after she passed away and so it is my rememberance of her. This ring also has monetary value. It is a gold ring with a small diamond in it. Others would value it because of its worth but my family and I are the only ones who value it for a sentimental reason.

My next valuable object is my wallet. My value on my wallet is very sentimental. In it, it contains all my pictures of friends and experiences which I have gone through. If someone stole my wallet or I lost it, I would rather lose my money than some of the pictures inside. Maybe this is because I am not overflowing with money at the moment but right now my pictures come over my money.

My last valuable is a watch I received at Christmas from my boyfriend. This is very important to me because it is from him. I have had watches before from my parents and they really didn’t have very much sentimental value to them. But my watch contains many memories and I would really be upset if I misplaced it. Just like the ring, it is valuable to others because of the cost but to me it is the person who it signifies.

These are my most valuable objects and it isn’t because of the amount of money they’re worth but instead for the sentimental value of them. I don’t really own anything excessively expensive so I really don’t value many things for their value in money.
Score of 3  BEAR-BEAR

Blue body with a white tummy and round black eyes, soon to be loved. This poor little teddy bear went through so much just for me.

When I came home after my birth, I had 3 sisters and a strange new friend waiting for me. My sister Jamie had a teddy bear placed in my crib. They tell me I actually giggled when I first saw my teddy bear.

Well days went on and after countless washings, due to being thrown-up on or thrown into the toilet, my little teddy bear had seen his last day with those round black eyes. Yes, my little teddy bear needed some new eyes and blue buttons, so Jamie did a repair job, with some grown-up help. Now it seemed perfect. After all, blue eyes match a blue body!

Jamie decided, one day, that she would teach me how to say Teddy Bear. It was a noble effort on her part even though all I could repeat was Bear! The Teddy bear still didn’t have a name.

The next day when I was in the living room, I realized that my teddy bear wasn’t around. With the terrifying thought that he might be gone, my tiny voice piped up with; “Bear-Bear, Bear-Bear!”

There was no mistaking what I wanted. Now that he had a name, Bear-Bear would never be more than a helping hand away.

I never really pondered on why I kept Bear-Bear all these years. It’s simple—I love him and I’ll keep him many more years I imagine. Bear-Bear will always mean love, security, and friendship. Perhaps that’s why I choose my friends carefully and value their love so greatly. My friends have been wonderfully good to me (and vise-versa) since the very first time my giggle said “Hi, let’s be friends!”

Score of 2  CARS

Heat, exhaust, fumes, burning rubber and smoke are all caused by a remarkable invention that has spurred our society into being one of the most materialistic in this modern age. Our society today depends on the car for transportation. We overlook the bad side of this invention for all the wonderful things the car has done for us.
No longer are people confined to one small region for their entire lives. Trips to the coast or to a distant city for a day are not unheard of now. It has actually broadened our horizons for we can meet new people, go new places. People we haven’t seen in a long time are in easy reach.

Working days are shortened with the use of the car. Instead of walking many miles to work, it provides fast and easy transportation on highways.

Status is related to owning a car. Some people seem to feel that the bigger a car is, the better it is. Socioeconomic status is based on the number of high value materialistic things we own. Having four or five cars in a family tends to raise a family’s status.

Cars come in all shapes and sizes. Big or small we can find one that fits the needs of everybody. Compact, economy and luxury cars are priced to fit people with even low income budgets as well as high.

There is a limit that people using cars must draw. Excessive use of a car can damage our environment. Taking a car into high mountain area can damage or even ruin flora and fauna. Pollution from cars cannot be stopped unless all cars are banned.

With all the good and bad sides to cars, which way can we turn? Cars can be used for destructive purposes as well as useful, meaningful reasons.

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Score of 1  MY VALUES

I am going to write on some object which are pretty important to me. The first would be my religion because I think I should put my faith in something other than “man,” and worldly goods. I also believe that I as a person have that right to look forward to something bigger and better in life, I can live life better day by day. This is important because I’m a person who doesn’t like to have things crammed down my throat then expected to digest it easily. I feel I have the right to choose who and what I believe in, without someone handing me 2 alternatives to chose from. I want to choose freely on my own will and judgment. I feel that I am old enough to choose and have “free choice.” Another object or value which is important to me is my “Freedom.” I like to do what I like, go where I want, see what I want, to a point where I do not interfere with another persons “Freedom.” My whole life is based on what I
can do for me and other people. Without this freedom I could not serve to the best of my ability my fellow man. I couldn’t put forth 100% because I would be restricted to do only certain things. Therefore, without my religion and freedom to do what I want I should have never have been born and with out these two basics of life I do not see how any man can live. So I have told you two of my basic values, again they are “Freedom to choose my own religion” and basic Freedom to live an everyday life.

Discussion of the Essays
“The Music Box” (scored 6, superior) exemplifies the excellent writing that some students can produce in forty-five minutes under test conditions. Its wealth of detail, clarity, focus, organization, and amplitude all attest to a student with superior writing skill. “My House” (scored 5, a strong response) is clearly less proficient, but it shows a skillful writer using personification of the house as an original way to fulfill the assignment. Some teachers may be bothered by the relative lack of detail and by the placement of the writer at the center of the essay and so may want to lower the score; others may want to reward even more highly the imaginative quality of the writing. The competent essay, scored 4, reveals a skillful writer undone by a fragmented essay; the writer does attempt to focus the various objects she briefly describes on the theme of valuing feeling more than monetary worth, but that is suggested and not made clear. We suspect that the writer could do a much more effective job, given time for revision.

We scored “Bear-Bear” at the 3 level (weak response), despite its minimal satisfaction of all requirements of the assignment, on the grounds of its immature approach and stereotyped treatment of the subject. However, the considerable detail and consistent tone argue for a higher score under some circumstances. As with the 4 paper, the severe time constraint probably kept the writer from doing a better job—one of the drawbacks of timed writing is that it disadvantages writers who tend to be heavy planners in the early stages of invention. The generalized paper on cars exemplifies the inadequate (2) essay, which fails to come to grips with the topic and is beset by writing problems, despite a kind of focus and some sentence control. The last essay suggests a student who failed to read the assignment carefully or, perhaps, to take the task seriously. He or she may need substantial assistance before succeeding in a regular college composition program, or just another chance to write a paper to the topic after reviewing what others have done.

Although no single timed impromptu of any type is accurate enough to be used by itself to make irreversible decisions about student programs, the essays presented here suggest possible courses of action. The student who wrote the essay scored 1 (incompetent) might be recommended for remedial or tutorial attention, if further testing and background information support the evaluation. Such a decision might lead to success for a student otherwise heading for
failure. At the other end of the spectrum, the student producing the superior essay might be a candidate for placement in an honors writing course, if other evidence confirms the ability shown in “The Music Box.”

EVALUATING IMPROMPTU WRITING BASED ON GIVEN TEXTS

Here are two additional impromptu writing assignments with supporting material (discussion, scoring guides, and sample papers at differing levels of performance). The assignments are based principally on a given text, so students must begin with examination and explanation of that text. Although some personal experience may well enter a student’s response, these topics require much more ability to handle abstract concepts and other people’s ideas than the impromptu writing assignments in the previous section. Though each mode of essay has its strengths and problems, your particular teaching situation will suggest which is more appropriate for your students.

If you use the assignments from this chapter for an evaluation of your writing program (sometimes called an outcomes study), be careful to note that these pairs of assignments provide parallel topics—not identical topics and not necessarily topics of identical difficulty; you will want to use the procedures outlined at the end of Chapter 7 to provide meaningful results. Remember that any pretest/posttest study should use identical scoring guides and topics that in fact measure what your course teaches. Neither of these kinds of topics will tell you anything about library research skills, for instance, or the ability to revise. And finally, if (like most writing instructors) you have little experience with studies derived from social science research techniques, you might want to seek some statistical support for an outcomes study from a colleague in psychology, statistics, or education, where such studies are more or less routine.

Be sure to look at the last chapter of this book for a sophisticated way to use portfolios for an outcomes study, if you have the time and resources.

Essay Test 3: Text-Based Assignment 1

“The best swordsman in the world doesn’t need to fear the second best swordsman in the world; no, the person for him to be afraid of is some ignorant antagonist who has never had a sword in his hand before; he doesn’t do the thing he ought to do, and so the expert isn’t prepared for him; he does the thing he ought not to do; and often it catches the expert out and ends him on the spot.”

— Samuel Clemens

Write an essay that explains what Clemens means by his description of the “best swordsman” and the “ignorant antagonist.” Relate Clemens’s concept to an area about which you are well informed.

As we pointed out in Chapter 2, this kind of assignment makes very different kinds of conceptual demands on the writer than those made by personal experience topics. Hence it needs a scoring guide appropriate to the assigned
task. Here is a general scoring guide that is useful for such topics and, in particular, for Text-Based Assignment 1. The first task for the student is to read carefully and understand the given text; unless the student has learned how to do this, no amount of writing ability will receive a high score. Thus the best students will understand that Clemens is talking about the limitations of expert knowledge and will apply that understanding to something in their own experience. This is what the scoring guide terms “addressing the question.”

**Holistic Scoring Guide**

6. A superior response addresses the question fully and explores the issues thoughtfully. It shows substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought. The response demonstrates clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization and is fully developed and detailed. The essay demonstrates superior control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition but may have a few minor flaws.

5. A strong response clearly addresses the question and explores the issues. It shows some depth and complexity of thought and is effectively organized. The strong essay is well developed, with supporting detail. It demonstrates control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition, though it may have a few flaws.

4. A competent response adequately addresses the question and explores the issues. It shows clarity of thought but may lack complexity. A competent essay is organized and adequately developed, with some detail. This response demonstrates competent writing, though it may have some flaws.

3. A weak response may distort or neglect parts of the question. It may be simplistic or stereotyped in thought. It may demonstrate problems in organization. It may use generalizations without supporting detail or detail without generalizations; details may be undeveloped. The weak response shows patterns of error in language, syntax, or mechanics.

2. An inadequate response demonstrates serious problems in one or more of the areas specified for the weak (3) response.

1. An incompetent response fails in its attempt to discuss the topic, or it may be deliberately off-topic. A response in this category is incompletely developed and mechanically inept.

**Sample Student Essays**

**Score of 6  THE EXPERT IS ALWAYS ON GUARD AGAINST CHECKMATE**

When Clemens speaks of the “best swordsman,” he brings up the trained expert, the professional who has mastered the rules of the game. This expert is ready for antagonists who play by the rules. The “ignorant antagonist” stands for the untrained or rebellious outsider who reserves the right to make
up his own rules. The opposition between these two ways of fighting, playing, or living applies in many different ways.

When revolutionaries break diplomatic rules by engaging in acts of terrorism, the governments affected are often “caught out” and government leaders sometimes “ended on the spot.” In today’s world, the superpowers ready their defense for major confrontations with other superpowers or “second best” powers, but not for isolated and unpredictable acts of terrorism such as the taking of hostages, the assassination of political figures, or the hijacking of a plane—often for personal or even crazy reasons.

On the other hand, unconventional chess players don’t have the slightest chance against an expert unless these outsiders are well beyond the novice stage. The brilliant innovations in chess have nothing to do with ignorance. No expert can lose to the novice opening with rook pawns or carelessly throwing his queen into opening positions. A brilliant amateur can win at chess, where nothing can by this time be entirely new, but the innovator cannot be ignorant. However, chess is here, as elsewhere, atypical. What Clemens says does not apply in this tight, square world, so unlike the disorderly real one.

Any proverb has a basic truth but needs to be applied with care. Maybe the very best experts are those most alert to the ways unconventional moves can work. Our swordsmen in foreign relations need to be ready for mobs, terrorists, and others who will refuse to acknowledge our rules. If the ignorant antagonist can do in the duelist, the swordsman has more to learn.

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Score of 5  UNCLE FRED

The Clemens passage reminds me of a saying heard often in our family: “You can’t argue with an ignorant man.” This line has been repeated whenever someone mentions my Uncle Fred. Fred plays the part of the “ignorant antagonist” on many subjects, but most especially in politics and religion.

Although Clemens speaks metaphorically, Uncle Fred is a literal example as well. A genuine “ignorant antagonist,” he never takes the time to become informed on any one political party, candidate, or issue. He hears bits and pieces of news stories and reads headlines and political cartoons in his local small-town newspaper and then forms his opinions.
When Fred claims that the Russian leaders will always take advantage of
the Americans, because they are so much smarter, we have learned not to
argue. In the next breath, Fred might say, “I think Yeltsin has been sent
to save the world. He is going to achieve world peace.” The next day Fred
declares, “Congress is so stupid, they let the state department manipulate
them on everything.” First, our government is not smart enough to protect
us from Yeltsin, then Yeltsin is going to save us. Finally, the state department
is too smart for 435 elected representatives, despite its stupidity. It isn’t that
Fred has a blind loyalty to any one party or that he is against all of them.
He just changes his opinions as quickly as the stories change on the news
broadcasts.

You can’t argue with a man like Fred, just as the “best swordsman in the
world” can’t fence with the “ignorant antagonist who has never had a sword
in his hand before,” because he doesn’t play by recognized rules. He changes
the rules as he goes along. This can in part be explained by using Berne’s
Transactional Analysis theory. When an adult interacts with another person,
he anticipates how the other person will respond. Things usually go smoothly
when the person responds correctly, that is, according to the unstated rules
of adult transactions. However, if the person responds using an unanticipated
ego state (say, child instead of adult, or parent instead of child), you get a
crossed transaction, which often “catches the expert out and ends him on
the spot.”

Score of 4  THE BEST SOLDIER

The best soldier in the world does not fear the second best soldier of any
country. The soldier that he must respect and fear is the nonprofessional
soldier, the one who has no set standard of fighting or long regimental
traditions. The “ignorant antagonist” as he relates to me is untrained and
unskilled in the latest military arts. These people have never held a rifle in
their hands with the intent of killing another human being.

The unconventional soldier does not use the usual military tactics that
the best soldier uses. His is the world of the underground. The expert is not
prepared for this opponent.
The “ignorant antagonist” in the low intensity conflict is the soldier of his/her land. They fight a war that is unconventional and usually very deadly to the best soldier. Throughout history there are examples of such fighters besting the best soldiers. Our American Revolution is a good example of “ignorant antagonists” beating an army that was considered the best. The lines of redcoats were no match for the farmers that used what we call today cover and concealment to engage the on coming best soldiers.

The minute men, as they were called, blended in well with nature and destroyed the will of the best soldiers to continue the fight. Recently, the Afghan rebels gave the best Russian soldiers a run for their money. In Central America the contras are making it difficult for the Marxist government to expand their hold on the country. The Sandanistas are the best soldiers in that region of the world.

The “ignorant antagonist” usually has the best chance of winning the contest if the fight is short. But there is one difference that the antagonist might overlook, and that will be his undoing and the expert will “catch him out and end him on the spot.” That difference is flexibility. What made the expert the best in the first place was the ability to reason, to understand that his way has been time proven through many trials, to adapt, to learn new ways. At that point, the roles are reversed, for the best becomes the “ignorant antagonist” and the ignorant antagonist becomes the best. Thus you have a situation that the “ignorant antagonist” does make mistakes and that buys time for the “best swordsman” to counter his blows.

The one who makes the least mistakes wins the contest. It takes 50,000 dead and wounded soldiers to train a general. Can the “ignorant antagonist” pay that price? I believe he can and does. The best wins the battle with no dead and wounded, but that is not the rule but the exception. The best must be aware and fear the ignorant for the ignorant do not know what to fear about the best.

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*Score of 3  THE BETTER MAN DOESN’T ALWAYS WIN*

Samuel Clemens story about the best swordsman can best be related to that old cliché: “The better man doesn’t always win.”
Clemens story about the best swordsman best depicts a situation that I have experienced in basketball. My situation deals with a basketball game I was playing in, when I was in High School. When I was in High School, I thought of myself as being a fairly good basketball player. This feeling soon changed when I was matched up against a person who I felt I was better than. This person was terrible in the game of basketball. This individual couldn’t dribble, shoot, or even walk for that matter. But, there was one thing he could do very well, and that was guard me. Like the antagonist in the best swordsman, this individual was awful. His defensive play was like none I had ever seen before, it was awkward and unorthodox. This individual was so bad that after a quarter of play, he made me look bad. I couldn’t understand it, every move I used to fake him out wouldn’t work. Every time I would put a move on him to get past him, he would be right there to stop me. After a quarter of this, I became frustrated and got benched, much like the best swordsman’s end.

In conclusion, I feel this story about the best swordsman best depicts my situation. In my situation, the awful defensive man is much like the antagonist in the best swordsman. In that, like the swordsman, anything I did to the antagonist to beat him, wouldn’t work. Consequently, I was sent to the bench, much like the best swordsman was put to his end.

Score of 2  FRESHMAN COACH

The passage by Samuel Clemens reminds me of a Junior College basketball coach, and his Freshman athletes. Here, like the “best swordsman,” is the Coach: a man who knows his craft but fears the ignorant antagonist; the Freshman athletes. Why? because the basic skills of dribbling, passing, rebounding and shooting that his Freshman athletes should of learned in High School; the majority of these Freshman athletes don’t possess. Because practice time to teach those skills one on one is short, this puts fears in the coach who feels these Freshman athletes should already be prepared.

By lacking these skills the Freshman athletes, like the ignorant antagonist don’ t do what the coach expects from him, because the Freshman figure they already know from their previous basketball experience what to do.
Because the Freshman athletes have their own preconceived notions that their prepared with these skills, this makes the Coach who is the expert feel not prepared. The Coach now feels like he must start all over teaching the basic skills to young adults who should have learned these skills from their adolescence to teen-age lives.

This passage shows us how the best “the Coach,” can be fearful of the ignorant antagonist “the Freshman athletes,” because when the Coach is not prepared for the ignorant antagonist “the Freshman athletes” he finds himself pushed to be the best.

Score of 1  THE BEST THE STRONGER

The passage tells us about the best swordsman, and the first thing we find it to know who is the “best swordsman,” but this would be different from generation to generation, and from surroundings to surrounding. The swordsman usually like to fight, like to tell the people around him, he is the stronger. In the other hand the ignorant antagonist does not like to fight and has never had a sword in his hand. Why he never had sword, because he hate to be enemy to be aggression. The swordsman often does not know Clemens’s concepts. He hate the people and fight them maybe because he is not want to see any body more healthy or welthy than him. In my home country I know, both the swordsman and the ignorant antagonist. Therefore some of swordsman different than other depends where is he live what kind of his environment, some of the people who leave in desert, and mountain area. Those are often agressive, and like to fight the people with reason and with out reason. I think the motive for the that only to be the best the stronger the first man, but some of them to struggle to survive. The swordsman with the new life became less enemy than before. They became to have Clemens and let the people to live. The ignorant antagonist those people in the area which I live in had never had sword to kill the people or to make anything for the people. Those persons like the people to have good life with out any problem with out fighting let the people to have wonderful time in their life. They know exactly what Clemens means, and why it’s important for the people and for their life. The swordsman should be live, and let the people to live. They should go
around him and see what the people do, and do as the people. The compassion is very important to compassinate the children and the elderly people. This is the life, and this is the good way in this life.

Discussion of the Essays

The superior response exemplifies the description in the scoring guide. The writer begins by defining terms, accomplishing the task of explaining what Clemens means by using terms that can be applied “in many different ways.” For this writer, the opposition between the “trained expert” and the “rebellious outsider” works in foreign relations—and the writer shows just how—but does not work in the “tight, square world” of chess, “so unlike the disorderly real one.” Though the response is necessarily brief given the time limit, the writer does explain the meaning and apply it in two other areas; throughout, the writer is clearly thinking about meanings and applications. The demonstration that the quotation works on some occasions but not on others shows complexity of thought, and the tight focus of the essay shows careful organization. The essay includes such details as the taking of hostages and chess openings with rook pawns. Finally, the writer shows accomplished control of style, diction, and other aspects of writing.

The essay on Uncle Fred was scored 5, even though the discussion of the quotation appears only in the last paragraph. This writer began immediately with Uncle Fred, as a way of exploring the meanings of the quotation, using dialogue and detail; the writer sees Uncle Fred as the “ignorant antagonist” that no expert can handle. The paper is focused and responsive to the question, though it lacks the depth and writing skill of the 6 paper.

“The Best Soldier” opens with four strong paragraphs connecting the quotation to military history, using details from a series of wars to exemplify the meaning. Unfortunately, the last two paragraphs wander off the subject and do not seem to connect with either what has come before or the quotation. Nonetheless, the strength of the first four paragraphs shows the competence of the writer and justifies the score of 4.

The essay scored 3 (weak response) reflects a common mistake in approaching essay tests. Instead of attending to the meaning of the text, this writer glanced at it and moved to a personal experience narrative. But unlike “Uncle Fred,” the experience here seems vague, lacking in detail, and not altogether related to the quotation. The opposing basketball player, we are told, was “terrible” but nonetheless succeeded in outplaying the writer with unorthodox moves. Most readers were unconvinced by this essay because the assertions that the opposing player was an ignorant antagonist are contradicted by his success, and the writer presents himself as anything but expert. The writer clearly knows how to proceed, but the unsupported generalizations and simplistic view of the quotation move the paper into the lower half of scores.

Nonetheless, the weak response shows an understanding of the passage that the inadequate response (scored 2) does not reach. Here we are told about
the coach and the unwilling “freshmen athletes,” but the meaning of the quotation is lost. In addition, the problems with sentence structure indicate a weak writer who may, depending on the institution, profit from special tutorial or developmental instruction before or during a composition class. Finally, the incompetent response (scored 1) betrays severe problems with reading comprehension and language use, probably a sign of inadequate skill in English as a second language. Without special support services of some kind, this student will probably not be able to succeed in first-year work in college.

**Essay Test 4: Text-Based Assignment 2**

The following assignment adds new levels of complexity to the previous one by using two quotations and requiring a comparison/contrast response. We presented the question in Chapter 2 as an example of a difficult essay assignment with complex demands. We return to it here to present examples of student responses at different levels and a scoring guide that facilitates constructive and consistent teacher responses to the writing.

*Read the passage and the poem; then write an essay as directed following the poem.*

This is a story about one of our great atomic physicists. This man, one of the chief architects of the atomic bomb, so the story runs, was out wandering in the woods one day with a friend when he came upon a small tortoise. Overcome with pleasurable excitement, he took up the tortoise and started home, thinking to surprise his children with it. After a few steps he paused and surveyed the tortoise doubtfully.

“What’s the matter?” asked his friend.

Without responding, the great scientist slowly retraced his steps as precisely as possible, and gently set the turtle down upon the exact spot from which he had taken him up.

Then he turned solemnly to his friend. “It just struck me,” he said, “that perhaps, for one man, I have tampered enough with the universe.” He turned, and left the turtle to wander on its way.

— Loren Eiseley

*The path of life,* some say, *“is hard and rough*  
*Only because we do not know enough.*  
*When Science has discovered something more,*  
*We shall be happier than we were before.”*  

— Hilaire Belloc

*Explain each writer’s attitude toward the relationship between science and human happiness. To what extent do the scientist in Eiseley’s passage and the “some” in Belloc’s poem agree or disagree? Do the two authors seem to agree more with the scientist or with the “some”?

**Holistic Scoring Guide**

6. Superior responses will be well-organized essays that address the three parts of the assignment. They will accurately explain each author’s attitude, discussing directly or implicitly the irony in the poem, showing
where the two selections are similar and how they differ, and indicating how the authors seem to agree more with the scientist than with the “some.” Generalizations will be supported with appropriate details. Superior essays will display a high degree of competence but may have slight flaws in writing, consistent with timed, first-draft prose.

5. Strong essays will address all parts of the assignment, display good overall interpretations of both selections, and clearly demonstrate strong reading and writing. However, they may be less fluent or thoroughly developed than the superior papers, may reveal some inaccuracy in interpretation, or may contain minor grammatical errors or occasional awkwardness.

4. Competent essays will adequately address all parts of the question but may lack the development of higher-scoring responses, may perceive similarities and differences somewhat less accurately, or may contain some errors in sentence construction or usage. They may deal with one aspect of the assignment by implication rather than by direct statement.

3. Weak essays may show signs of strong writing but respond to only one or two parts of the assignment, may contain misinterpretations of both selections or a radical misinterpretation of one, may show evidence of serious deficiencies in writing, or may lack sufficient details to support their generalizations.

2. Inadequate responses may show serious problems in reading and understanding the selections, reveal serious patterns of faults in writing, display considerable irrelevance, or be simplistic.

1. Incompetent essays will reflect almost no understanding of the question or the selections, and the writing will display ineptness in sentence construction, usage, and idiom.

Sample Student Essays

Score of 6  SCIENCE IS NO PANACEA

In the first passage, the writer is illustrating by the anecdote that science is not necessarily a good or beneficial thing to human beings. The inventor of the atom bomb seems somewhat regretful that he used his scientific knowledge to invent something so destructive to people and the earth. This regret is illustrated by his reluctance to tamper with even the simplest laws of nature; that is, the progress of the turtle in the woods.

The second passage takes a more ironic, mocking tone. It is saying essentially the same thing as the first, even though it looks different, by using a poem and the phrase, “some say.” Who are “some”? The author makes us doubt seriously the quote from the “some” by deliberately leaving it vague. All we know is that they have a blind belief in the virtues of science: “When Science
has discovered something more, we shall be happier than before.” This is very
insubstantial and illogical. It does not follow that science will change life
from being “hard and rough” to something better; maybe (as with the Indus-
trial Revolution) many people will be even worse off.

The “some” in the second passage don’t agree with the scientist in the first.
The “some” have no scientific knowledge; just a hazy idea that more scientific
discoveries will make life easier. The scientist knows that this is not necessarily
so because he has ample facts on which to base his knowledge. The devel-
opment of the atomic bomb did not make life easier or less rough. In fact for
a lot of people in Hiroshima there was no more life, period, because of this
“scientific discovery.” The “some” in the poem have no specific data to back
up their claim — it is a generalized statement based on lack of specific
knowledge of anything scientific.

The two authors seem to agree more with the scientist than with the “some.”
The scientist in the first passage has found out what the “some” in the second
passage still don’t know. Science needs to be handled with care; all scientific
progress, discoveries, and work do not necessarily lead to health, wealth, and
happiness. The “some” in the second passage are truly ignorant of this, and
they are probably the very people who pay for scientists to work on anything
bigger or more advanced in the hope that it will bring them “true” happiness.

The author of the second passage, by spotlighting this glaring ignorance, is
mocking the “some,” and is in agreement with the first author that science is
not the panacea for all human ills.

Score of 5  FEAR OF SCIENCE

Throughout history, people have debated the usefulness of science for the
betterment of human life. Sometimes research threatened religion, and
religious leaders raised voices in protest; sometimes scientific remedies were
viewed as the path to human salvation.

These passages from Eiseley and Belloc illustrate the logical fear of the
human hand interfering with nature. Eiseley relates a story, almost a parable,
about a designer of the world’s most devastating weapon, the atomic bomb.
This physicist was overcome with joy at finding a tortoise to bring home to his
children. But some small respect for nature or a pervasive guilt from creating the atom bomb causes him to put the creature back, as near to where he found it as possible because he fears that he has tampered with the universe enough for one man.

Of course, his major "tampering" has already been accomplished by the time he discovers his conscience. Eiseley is illustrating the human burden of responsibility that comes with scientific experimentation.

One doesn’t know the effect that an invention can have on fellow human beings.

Invention of the machine did give leisure time to many, but also damned others to a life of drudgery and boredom, destroyed eardrums, and bad backs. Creation of mechanized factories caused city crowding, which led to crimes, pollution, and other urban problems.

Belloc, in capitalizing “Science,” seems to banish the idea that “Science will bring happiness” to the realm of myth. The rhyme, simplistic and childlike, makes those who espouse this belief seem silly.

Belloc’s “some,” trusting and naive, rely on the wisdom of scientists, not realizing that they are human, prone to act on ego or for other human but less than humanitarian reasons. They equate intelligence and knowledge with wisdom, not realizing that scientists (or “Science” — “The Force”) can have regrets like Eiseley’s scientist coping with his guilt in a token way.

Both authors seem to agree with the scientist that humans must be cautious in their tampering and must think of all of the possible effects of what they are creating.

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Score of 4  **SCIENCE MAKES THINGS WORSE**

In the passages, Eiseley and Belloc seem to agree in most areas. It is my belief that Belloc’s passage is written with sarcasm and that this is the factor which tends to unite the meanings of the two passages. I feel that both Eiseley and Belloc believe that science is ultimately destructive although it may seem to be a way to positive progress.

The final decision of the scientist, in Eiseley’s passage to leave the turtle in its natural surroundings shows symbolically that the world should not be
tampered with. Also, Eiseley demonstrates in his passage that the scientist has some regrets for creating something as destructive as the atomic bomb. I feel these are expressions of Eiseley’s personal opinion on the subject of science and its negative effects upon nature.

I feel that Belloc, also, would agree that the scientist made the proper decision by letting the turtle remain in the woods. My reason for this opinion is that Belloc’s use of the word “some” is outright sarcasm and is used to represent others besides himself. Yet another example of Belloc’s sarcasm is the part of the passage which says happiness comes from scientific discovery. Illustrating how far-fetched this idea is, the scientist in Eiseley’s passage was not happy after his discovery of the atomic bomb but, instead, he was regretful.

Although scientific innovation seems to be a synonym for progress, I find myself forced to agree with Eiseley and Belloc. To me, science only tampers with nature in such a way as to worsen our natural conditions. Belloc and Eiseley, I’m sure, would be proud to here me state such an opinion.

Score of 3  SCIENCE AND HUMAN HAPPINESS

Loren Eisely and Hilaire Belloc express different views toward the relationship between science and human happiness. Their attitudes voice the controversy between the need for the knowledge which science offers and it’s conscious limitation to avoid the possible destructive ends it sometimes promotes, such as the atomic bomb mentioned in Eiseley’s passage. The extent to which the scientist in Eiseley’s passage and the “some” in Belloc’s passage agree or disagree is the manifestation of this controversy.

In Loren Eiseley’s passage their is a very concerned attitude expressed toward the relationship between science and human happiness. Eiseley views science as being destructive to human happiness through it’s creation of atomic warfare. His protagonast replaces a turtle to it’s natural habitat in a symbolic gesture of not further “tampering with the universe” as he had previously done as one of the architects of the atomic bomb. Eiseley obviously believes that science can go beyond a reasonable limit, that it can and has been a destructive force in human happiness. The very least which it has done is to cause one man (Eiseley’s protagonist) to question the morality of tamper-
Eiseley’s expressing through his protagon-
ast his concern for the need to restrict the tampering with the universe and
thus with human happiness. Science has the power to do this.

Hilaire Belloc expresses a somewhat different view of science than does
Eiseley. Belloc observes the hardships in life and their relationship to igno-
rance. Science is knowledge; it discovers new things which conquer the
ignorance and thus the hardships in human life. He places his foundation on
the relationship between happiness and hardships, deducing that a decrease
in hardships will produce an increase in human happiness. The validity of this
foundation may be questionable, but Belloc uses it as a premise to indirectly
saying that science has a direct bearing on human happiness. We need science,
science will make us happier by removing our hardships. This is a very different
view than Loren Eiseley’s.

The extent to which the scientist in Eiseley’s passage and the “some” in
Belloc’s agree or dissagree is the voicing of the contravercy between the need
to promote or to limit science. The scientist and the “some” are not in agree-
ment. Eiseley’s scientist feels that science interferes with the univers, that it
tamper with things which should be left alone. His tortoise is a very symbolic
representative of this. Belloc’s “some” feel that science promotes knowledge
and ends hardship, thus helping people in their strive for happiness. This is
a complete disagreement; a contravercy between the limits and morality of
science.

Both Loren Eiseley and Hilaire Belloc side with their protagonasts in their
views concerning the necessary limitations of science. The argument between
the scientist and the “some” is the same as between Eiseley and Belloc, both
presenting different views on the limits and morality of science.

Score of 2  DIFFERENT ATTITUDES

Attitudes of Loren Eiseley and Hilaire Belloc toward the relationship between
science and human happiness are different in the following way.

Loren Eiseley, in his passage about one of our great atomic physicists,
shows that this man who challenged nature in the most vialent way by taking
the atomic power from it still thinks that there are some things that a man
should not touch in order to be happy. This is described in the scientists's
words when he was walking in the woods with his friend and picked up a
tortoise but put it back after giving it some thought: “. . . perhaps, for one
man, I have tempered enough with the universe.”

Hilaire Belloc, however, describes in his passage about what “some” say
about science a significantly different attitude. “Some” say that “. . . life is
hard and rough only because we don’t know enough” and that scientists
should temper with nature as much as possible and that “when science has
discovered something more, we shall be happier than before.”

Score of 1 AGREEMENT ON SCIENCE

When the great atomic physicists saw the tortoise he was full of excitement.
He had thought he could have had fun with it at home with his family. As soon
as the tortoise stuck him he realized that it would be happier if it was left to
wander its own way. Belloc says “We say the path to life is hard and rough only
because we don’t know.” Personally I think Eiseley and Belloc agree to the
fact that there is a lot of things we don’t know, thus we say its rough or hard
simply because we don’t know. Sooner or later when things get discovered and
we start knowing things life will be easier and we will be happier than before.

Both of the authors seem to agree on science. Eiseley feels that he has
already tampered enough with the universe and doesn’t feel like dealing with
the tortoise. He’d rather leave it alone and let it wander whereas Belloc feels
that it’s only because enough things haven’t been discovered so as to let us
know what will make us happy or what is good from what is bad. In a way I
agree with what Belloc says because the more things are discovered through
science or technology the happier humans are because life gets to be easier
and we wouldn’t have to be wandering all the time. A solution or conclusion
has been reached. The passage and the poem disagree at the point where the
physicists chooses to let the tortoise wander the way it wishes to and Belloc
says it’s only because it doesn’t know what is good or bad for it. The tortoise
could be happy under the physicists care than it would be just out in the
woods. So more discoveris have to be done to make even the animals as happy
as humans. It seems like both authors look at human rights scientifically and logically according to the way they feel or they define human rights in relation with science.

Discussion of the Essays
Both the essay rated 6 (“Science Is No Panacea”) and the essay rated 5 (“Fear of Science”) demonstrate careful and incisive readings of the two selections, answering all parts of the question and showing good control of organization, diction, and mechanics. The major distinction is in the depth of the superior paper’s reading of Belloc. These papers show extraordinary ability to handle a complex reading and writing job under time pressure.

The essay rated 4, “Science Makes Things Worse,” also answers all parts of the question and understands the reading, but at a comparatively superficial and undeveloped level. Shadings of meaning that the better responses describe pass this writer by; for example, whereas the essay rated 6 notes Belloc’s “more ironic, mocking tone” and the essay rated 5 points out that Belloc’s “some” are “trusting and naive” and his rhymes are “simplistic and childlike,” the essay rated 4 sees only “outright sarcasm.” Nonetheless, this paper accomplishes the task adequately and with clarity.

Despite poor spelling, the essay rated 3 (“Science and Human Happiness”) recognizes that the issue of the comparison/contrast has to do with the values, limitations, and dangers of science. It presents a clear reading of the Eiseley passage. But, in common with the other lower-rated (2 or 1) essays, the Belloc poem — with its ironies — poses unsolvable problems for this writer. The essay shows that the assignment is to a large degree a reading examination; without the sophisticated reading skills that give access to the Belloc poem, no writer can handle this question.

The response rated 2, “Different Attitudes,” summarizes the Eiseley passage with limited accuracy and then quotes several chunks of the poem. But the question goes largely unanswered, and its separate sections are ignored. It is better than the paper rated 1, “Agreement on Science,” for it goes through the motions of comparison/contrast, but all it does is assert that the selections have “a significantly different attitude” without explaining what that difference is or what it means. The incompetent (1) response demonstrates only the slightest awareness of the meanings of the selections, with writing that seems to go in a variety of directions at once. The student may struggle with reading comprehension, which may lead to dropping out of college. Or maybe the time constraint kept the student from writing well. More assessment will be needed.

NOTES ON IMPROMPTU WRITING FOR ASSESSMENT
You will notice some common characteristics among the essay topics given in this chapter. Each of them was initially developed for a testing program; that is, each has been refined over a long period of time to make sure that it works
as an essay test question. Essay test developers conclude that a question works if (1) it is clear enough in its demands that graders can tell if the question has been answered or not and can thus score the papers consistently; (2) it leads to a range of scores that reflect the range of abilities in the group (instead of clumping scores in the middle, as many questions do); (3) it allows all students in the test group to write something and is interesting enough to stimulate genuine responses; and (4) it is free of bias and does not place any group members at an advantage or a disadvantage.

The underlying role of essay assignments such as those we have supplied is to help students see that there are real differences between papers of high and low quality; students are much more apt to revise their work (as are professional writers) when they themselves can see what needs to be improved. Thus the scoring guides and sample essays have an important teaching function: they can help students learn to evaluate their own writing and to see what they must do to make it better.

At the same time, teachers and administrators need to be cautious in interpreting the results of essay tests, even precise and clear ones that have been shown to yield reliable information. Students can perform badly on an essay test for a wide variety of reasons, from a headache to lack of preparation for a specialized task (such as the reading of ironic poetry such as Belloc’s). In particular, students for whom English is not a first language are likely to require time for revision and editing that is not usually allowed on timed impromptus. And, as we mentioned earlier, “planner” writers usually have a harder time in timed-writing settings than “drafter” writers (for an explanation of these different kinds of writing styles, see Lisa Ede’s foundational *Work in Progress*).

The quality of essay test writing has a strong correlation to the quality of writing done under less pressure, so it is surely worth examining. But one test score is best interpreted in a limited way: the student wrote in a certain way on the particular question at a particular time under test conditions. The score suggests certain abilities that may or may not show up under other conditions. It is unwise and unprofessional to generalize about a student’s abilities on the basis of one test score without other evidence. But that score may draw the attention of faculty to students who need help if they are to succeed in college or to the unusually able students who are entitled to special challenges or special courses.

**Selected References**


CHAPTER 6

Using Portfolios

A portfolio contains examples of student work on paper in a folder or binder or in a computer file or platform (thus an e-portfolio). Some faculties in the fine arts have used portfolios for assessment and grading for many years; the final examination in a class in drawing, painting, or architectural design, for example, often consists of a portfolio of a student’s work—which is displayed, critiqued, and graded. Many writing teachers have used portfolios in the same way in their writing classes, and in recent years some writing programs have done the same. Because the use of portfolios for assessment is attractive, many schools and colleges have begun using portfolios for all kinds of purposes: screening students for advancement, assessing general education program outcomes, evaluating instructors, providing students with employment dossiers, and so forth.

The great advantage of paper portfolios and e-portfolios for writing assessment is that they can include numerous examples of student composition produced over time, under a variety of conditions and in a variety of genres and modalities. Unlike multiple-choice tests, they can document a student’s actual writing and composing performances; unlike essay tests, they can showcase several kinds of writing and rewriting, without time constraints and without test anxiety. Whereas most evaluation instruments provide a snapshot of student performance, the portfolio can give a motion picture, highlighting a student’s overall writing process. Some programs enhance the purposes of the portfolio by allowing (or requiring) revisions at the time of submission so that students can appear at their best and can demonstrate to themselves as well as to their readers what they have learned to do. And if one requirement of the portfolio is a self-assessment or reflective essay, as we have suggested, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PORTFOLIOS AND THEIR EVALUATION

Assessment of writing by portfolios has gone through several developments since it emerged in the early 1990s, after publication of essays by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff describing the program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and a volume of descriptive essays by Belanoff and Marcia Dickson. As with most innovations in writing measurement, it began with a great sense of enthusiasm and discovery, despite its long history of use in the fine arts. Portfolios appeared to resolve many of the problems that had become
evident with essay testing: the validity problem of using only one (or at most two) impromptu writing samples, the absence of opportunities for writers to reflect and revise, the lack of context or audience for the writing, inappropriate or banal writing prompts, and so on. Portfolios supported teaching, fostered revision, and offered much increased validity by using multiple writing samples over an extended period of time. Teachers who hated grading welcomed portfolios as a way to delay or even ignore that unpleasant task, although there was nothing inherent in portfolios opposed to grading; teachers committed to teaching writing as a process rejoiced to find an assessment tool that welcomed drafts as well as final copies.

The next development began with the questions raised at the writing portfolio conference at Miami University in 1993 and contained (or at least mentioned) in the book from that conference (Black et al.). After the first year or two of uncritical use, portfolio problems were beginning to emerge. In an age before we knew much about computers, some problems with portfolios as measurement devices derived from their size. The sheer mass of paper portfolios can be daunting. Even twenty or twenty-five paper portfolios—if you are still using paper—at the end of one writing class form a formidable pile of papers: over one hundred thousand words to transport and then assess. Several classes or an entire first-year composition program multiply the quantity, of course; some institutions require each student, regardless of field of study, to compile a portfolio throughout the college years. Although e-portfolios have now ameliorated the bulk problem, the quantity of writing in these portfolios remains a problem, if you choose to reread the entire contents. But in time we have learned how to deal with that problem as well: no one demands that you read every word of every draft of every paper of every portfolio. This is not cheating; the portfolios are part of the course, prepared so that the student will have a record of work to be proud of. “Did I really write all this?” a typical student will ask, with some bemusement. “You sure did,” you and the portfolio will reply. “And some of it is really good, better than anything you have done before. Take it home and be proud of it.”

But, even if the digital age has made portfolio assessment more manageable, several measurement issues remain. Because it is difficult and inappropriate to closely supervise the production of portfolio contents, several validity problems are inevitable: students are likely to get help of various sorts (from appropriate consultations in the writing center to dishonestly purchased papers from unscrupulous commercial firms), so it may be hard to know just what we are assessing. If we are assessing portfolios that show responses to a variety of assignments from other instructors, as often occurs with coursewide or collegewide assessments, we may not understand the context of some classes or the assumptions behind a particular work (although we might ask students to provide this information); we may also incidentally be evaluating the assignments as well as the responses, as better assignments tend to elicit better writing, whatever the student’s writing ability. Even more problematic, early uses of portfolios for large-scale assessments showed such variation in scores that the results could not be used.
Through the mid-1990s, articles and book chapters continued to raise questions—for example, Richard Larson in the MLA book *Writing Assessment* (White, Lutz, and Kamusikiri) and Edward White’s *College Composition and Communication* article arguing that portfolios are essentially a much expanded essay test rather than a writing assessment panacea (“An Apologia”). But portfolios have proved to be a robust methodology, and these questions have on the whole since been met by particular assessments in special ways (e.g., Yancey and Huot; Yancey and Weiser; Haswell). Thus, while the scoring of portfolios has been particularly vexing for many reasons, including the expense, the variable quality of the components, and the inherent complexity of most stated criteria, the advantages of portfolio assessment have overridden its problems. Further, as we have become comfortable with our digital age, e-portfolios have now achieved standing as the writing assessment method of choice. The expanded options for e-portfolios, which can showcase multimodal and digital assignments such as podcasts, radio essays, Web site designs, oral presentations, political cartoons, digital narratives, and so on, offer wide possibilities for writing programs and teachers. When time and resources permit, and leadership is well informed, a writing assessment today will usually be a portfolio assessment. (For a much more detailed history, consult Hamp-Lyons and Condon, particularly Chapter 1.)

The problem for teachers in using portfolios, then, is to maximize the advantages of this method of assessment while minimizing the disadvantages. The intent of this chapter is to help teachers and writing programs accomplish this feat by examining the problems and pitfalls, and by presenting ways of avoiding them. If you can perform this balancing act, you will find that portfolios are the most valuable means you have of combining evaluation with teaching.

**PROBLEMS WITH HOLISTIC PORTFOLIO SCORING**

One underlying and intransigent problem with portfolio assessment has diminished its value, despite all the advances in portfolio theory and practice: almost all such assessments have until recently been scored holistically, using the system developed for essay testing by the Educational Testing Service in the 1960s and illustrated in Chapter 5 of this book. This assessment method has worked well enough for single essays (as we have seen), indeed well enough to have been imported without much question to become the standard method of portfolio scoring. But the problems with scoring portfolios holistically are many, and they are not readily resolvable. We have from the start needed a scoring methodology that responds to and reflects the nature of portfolios, not merely an adaptation of essay scoring.

Regardless of how it is adapted, holistic scoring is fundamentally unsuited for evaluation of portfolios because many aspects of holistic scoring work against the foundational principles of portfolio assessment. How can a scoring system designed to record a reader’s “general impression” of a single essay, guided by a question-specific scoring guide, apply to two or more different
pieces of writing in different genres with different purposes and of varying quality? Do we attempt to average the high quality of a personal narrative with the low quality of a research paper? What do we do with the terrible sonnet included after the competent short story? And what about the lab report we cannot understand or the analysis of a novel we have not read?

Until recently, there have been two ways of dealing with these problems, both quite unsatisfactory. Either we have graded the entire portfolio by averaging evaluations of the different components, more or less intuitively, or we have developed a scoring guide listing multiple traits that must appear somewhere (but not everywhere) in the portfolio: reasonably edited copy, appropriate use of sources, development of ideas, and so on. Whichever system was used, problems bedeviled the reading. For instance, the surface matters that holistic scoring attempted to reduce in importance were likely to resurface with more weight as mechanical traits recurring from item to item, while the rhetorical and critical thinking abilities that holistic scoring tried to emphasize became more difficult to identify consistently across genre and assignment. We muddled through somehow this way, for some years, though reliabilities usually were much lower than for single essays, and reported our scores with some misgivings. What else were we to do, since we valued the production of the portfolios as important for student learning and we had no other way of developing scores?

Phase 2 scoring, the method for scoring portfolios that this chapter describes, has developed over the last few years and was elaborated in 2005 by White in the journal *College Composition and Communication*. Phase 2 scoring allows for relatively efficient grading, where portfolio scores are needed and where time and money are in short supply. At the same time, it is derived conceptually from portfolio theory, rather than essay testing theory, and it supports the key principle of portfolios—that students should be involved with reflection about and assessment of their own work. It is particularly valuable for classroom teachers because it focuses on the central role that reflective writing can play in portfolio scoring.

**KEYS TO THE PHASE 2 METHOD: GOALS STATEMENTS AND THE REFLECTIVE LETTER**

There are two important differences between traditional fine arts portfolios and the writing portfolios that we have been discussing: fine arts portfolios are selected to represent the best work produced by the student, while writing portfolios tend to require representative work—including early drafts and less successful products; in addition, fine arts portfolios normally do not require a reflective letter or cover letter in which the owner of the portfolio comments about the products or the processes therein, whereas writing portfolios often do. This difference reflects the emphasis on process in writing instruction, allowing the reader of the portfolio to note and value the learning as well as the best products of the student. The second difference incorporates metacognitive theories of learning, which ask the student to think about the learning
that the portfolios demonstrate. It is surprising that those working with and writing about portfolio assessment have until recently failed to appreciate fully the major importance of these differences, even though these are the theoretical underpinnings of writing portfolio assessment itself.

The reflective letter, normally mentioned in passing as one among many features by those working with portfolios, has the power to turn a mere collection of materials into a unified and important document. When we think about portfolios, we cannot help but consider reflection; it is no accident that the most vigorous proponent of portfolio assessment, Kathleen Blake Yancey, has written an important book about the various definitions and educational force of reflection as part of writing instruction: *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. When a student introduces a portfolio with serious reflection about it, the student winds up taking responsibility for the quality of work, the choices that were involved in the writing, and the learning that has occurred—or not occurred. It is a powerful metacognitive act—thinking about thinking—that no other assessment device provides. But now we have learned how to connect the power of the reflective letter to the actual scoring of portfolios, and thus we are able to connect the power of portfolios to reliable scoring.

**The Importance of Goals Statements**

Both the selection of portfolio content and the criteria for the reflective letter are key to Phase 2 portfolio assessment, and both depend on careful consideration of the goals of the assessment—a decision calling for careful consultation among the faculty and careful writing of a document for the students. We will not say much here about portfolio content, since it is obvious that the content of the portfolio should reflect its purpose: for instance, a course portfolio should probably contain the most important papers written for the course, including drafts and outlines, while an outcomes assessment for an English major should contain enough term papers in final draft for the readers to assess whatever the goals of the major happen to be. But we need to emphasize here the special nature of the reflective letter, a genre with which most students are unfamiliar, and its direct relation to instructional goals.

The Phase 2 method of scoring portfolios requires the development of two new documents as part of the assessment: first, a set of goals set by faculty for the particular course, program, or purpose for which the portfolio is submitted; and second, a reflective letter to readers composed by the student arguing that those goals have been met in whole or in part, using the portfolio contents as evidence. Although these do not appear at first to be particularly novel developments, when used together they completely change the nature of portfolio assessment, and for the better in every sense.

Before students can write such a reflective letter, they need to have a clear understanding of the goals of the course or program. A portfolio presented for assessment is essentially a set of evidence for an argument, in the rhetorical sense. What does the evidence demonstrate? In most cases in the past that crucial matter was left unstated—somehow to be worked out by the readers of
the portfolios during the scoring session, with the unsteady assistance of a holistic scoring guide. But Phase 2 portfolio scoring requires that the goals for the portfolio assessment be well understood from the start by the students as well as the readers. In that case, the portfolio content constitutes evidence that the student will use to argue that the goals of the assessment, and hence the goals of the course or program, have been met (in whole or in part). Thus the student needs to have a document explaining these goals in hand from the very beginning of the portfolio process.

Two examples of such goals statements—a short one from Northern Arizona University (NAU) and a long one based on the CWPA’s Outcomes Statement from Arizona State University (ASU)—are reprinted at the end of this chapter. Your goals statement may be long or short, immensely detailed or fairly general, but since the reflective letter is essentially an overt argument—using the materials in the portfolio to show to what extent the student has in fact met the goals—a clear sense of what the goals are is crucial. (Indeed, some will argue that a clear understanding of one’s goals is crucial for responsible teaching itself, a matter that goes beyond our discussion here.) When students have such an understanding, the reflective letter loses the narrative looseness typical of such letters (“I learned a lot this term and worked really hard” or “You are the best teacher I’ve ever had”) and gains structure and purpose (“You can see how I learned to revise by comparing the first paragraphs of the first draft of my second essay on portfolio page 9 to the third draft opening on page 22”). If the evidence does not demonstrate that the goals have been met, the reflective letter can discuss why, and if the discussion demonstrates powerful thinking about that issue, the portfolio might still receive a high grade.

With the focus of the assessment on the degree to which the student’s reflective letter demonstrates awareness of and accomplishment of the goals, portfolio reading can proceed relatively quickly and with high levels of agreement. When the portfolio reflects a single course, the reflective letter allows the students to evaluate the course in terms of their own experience of it. With their writing in front of them, they are less likely to praise or blame the teacher for what they did; more often than one would think they ask themselves what they got out of the course and why they didn’t work harder to learn more. And when the portfolio reflects an academic career, the assessment makes sense to the readers and also to the students, who find the entire operation a useful—even creative—way to envision the studies they have completed. “I never realized how much I have learned, since I was just interested in passing courses,” students will say. “Now I see that every course was part of an overall program.” The most effective part of the portfolio in helping students to come to that realization is the reflective letter.

**The Importance of the Student Reflective Letter**

Phase 2 portfolio scoring depends heavily on the student reflective letter—a document that many students find difficult to prepare, since few of them are accustomed either to thinking of their own written work as evidence of learning
or to taking responsibility for their own learning. The four programs whose goals are listed in this chapter have found it necessary to provide instructional support for students writing this letter. California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) requires a one-unit course for seniors preparing their portfolios, while NAU, ASU, and the University of Arizona’s Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE) include the preparation of a portfolio as an important part of the required course curriculum. If this support is not provided to students, they will not take the portfolio or the reflective letter as seriously as they need to, often hastily putting it together at the last moment and attaching a quickly written and superficial letter. Indeed, the increasing use of portfolios in many contexts has led to a destructive pattern of writing, since most programs and teachers do not attend much to the reflective letter. Without instruction, students are likely to give a hasty overview of the portfolio contents, including much personal experience about the difficulty of writing and revising — along with some fulsome praise of the teacher — without attending to the goals of the program at all. But when faculty pay sufficient attention to the demands of the portfolio, and to genuine reflection in the letter, the effort is rewarding to students as well as portfolio readers. In fact, in over three decades of experience with assessments of writing, these portfolios are the only assessments we have known that students genuinely find interesting, useful, and worth doing. Students rarely care enough about tests to retrieve them after they receive grades. But these portfolios are valuable to students, who normally not only retrieve them after they are graded, but carry them to job interviews and preserve them as a record of their college years.

We should also emphasize that the reflective letter need not be written in the traditional sense, particularly if you are working with an e-portfolio structure. For example, at Stanford University, some writing teachers assign a final reflective assignment in the sophomore-level writing course that asks students to reflect on their learning in that course and provide evidence in the form of a transferable anecdote or lesson. (Some teachers make the students produce a traditional reflective letter in addition to an oral/multimedia one.) This anecdote is sometimes documented as a YouTube video, a spoken word poem, or other oral and multimedia genres such as a graduation speech. If your writing program is interested in and teaches digital and new media writing, assigning a reflective letter in the form of a YouTube video or other multimedia format could be a productive way of asking students to once more demonstrate their ability to craft a persuasive reflective argument in the context of the new media with which they have been asked to engage throughout their experiences in the course and writing program. Digital reflections can also encourage the kinds of transfer in communication skills to which more and more writing programs are attending. (Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, an important collaborative document from the CWPA, NCTE, and National Writing Project, supports such an approach to composition. See the Appendix for more information about how to access this document.) Upon completion, students can upload these files to their e-portfolio as part of the final portfolio assessment. But it is also instructive to have these oral and digital reflec-
tions shared among the class on the final day as a culminating experience, one in which each student is invited to showcase his or her final reflective project and the class as a whole reflects on their learning in the course.

Reflective letters are of unusual importance when the portfolio assessment is at the program level, as in the ECE, ASU, and CSUSB examples. While faculty tend to envision programs and program-level goals, students are more focused on particular courses and professors. When the reflective letter requires them to consider what they have learned and accomplished in terms of the program rather than individual courses, they gain a new sense of responsibility for the choices they have made. While they may have chosen to take Modern Fiction instead of Advanced Composition for several reasons, including time of day and friendships in class, now they need to consider that course as part of their major and the outcomes of that course as part of the program outcomes. The reflective letter asks how they have spent their time, and what they have gotten for that expenditure. If the program failed to meet their needs, they are quite ready to say so and to apportion (perhaps even avoid) responsibility. But they can no longer see their college careers as a random set of courses; they must somehow put them together and seek coherence. If the program gave them many (perhaps too many) choices, they can make recommendations for the future. If the program is highly structured, as ECE’s is, they are ready to evaluate that structure in terms of the program’s goals.

However students proceed, they must think about and assess what they have done or not done in terms of the goals statement that has been before them for some years. In most cases, they much appreciate this opportunity for mature reflection — even if they wind up condemning themselves, or the institution, for failing to measure up.

TEACHER-GRADED COURSE PORTFOLIOS

Teachers have many options for assessing the portfolio. For example, you might focus on one or two papers with multiple revisions to give a process grade on the student’s ability to improve from draft to draft; such a grade is a responsible way to reward effort by writers who have not yet learned to produce excellent final products. Perhaps that process grade can combine with grades on the products to give a fairer term grade than one based wholly on final drafts. Again, you might allow students to focus the portfolio on a few papers they like the best, or you might define the portfolio as including several essential papers, with their notes and drafts.

If your program is particularly interested in writing with new media, you might require the e-portfolio to include several modalities or genres of composition, with evidence of student process: a student in a class focused on Web site design, for example, could include early versions of storyboarding documents with teacher and peer feedback along with the final Web site html mock-up. Another included project might focus on how the student demonstrated growth in research and revision in working toward a final draft of a radio podcast or transforming a written literacy narrative into a digital literacy narrative.
Or you might adopt the Phase 2 procedure, focusing principally on the reflective letter and the quality of the argument and use of evidence it presents. The point is to promote student ownership of their portfolios, despite the fact that the teacher must finally grade the work, and to demonstrate that the writing and composition grade depends on more than a finely edited product. Indeed, to drive that point home, some experienced instructors refuse to grade portfolios at all, though that is an unfortunate loss of a powerful assessment tool. Some teachers ask the students to make an argument for their own grade in the reflective letter, drawing on the course learning outcomes and the various learning objectives of each assignment to demonstrate evidence for their self-assessed grade. While some teachers may award the grade if they feel the student fairly assessed the portfolio, even teacher assigned grades that don't precisely match student expectations tend to be relatively close. In our experience, many conscientious students tend to be harder on themselves than is the instructor. Inviting this kind of weighted self-assessment in the reflection could very well encourage the students to take more responsibility for the quality of their writing, since they have actively participated in the process.

Because the portfolio will probably include some writing in the process of revision, the terminology for student drafts calls for some thought. Many teachers will ask for a “first draft” and a “final draft” without clarifying what those terms mean. The teacher usually wants the first draft to be what the student thinks of as the final draft—an unedited but coherent piece of writing. The student usually thinks of the first draft as a rough set of notes (which might nonetheless be a useful record of getting under way for some portfolios). Because of these problems with terminology, we suggest using more precise terms: zero draft for the prose that comprises the notes—which, upon revision, becomes a discovery draft. Almost always, this discovery draft then requires reorganization, focusing, and development. Typically, the discovery draft will not state its principal concept until the next-to-last paragraph; the student has discovered the real topic by writing about it. An experienced writer will realize this, throw away almost everything preceding that paragraph, and produce a new draft with that paragraph as the opening. But students usually feel it a waste to throw away anything and need the help and encouragement of a professional to see that the function of the discovery draft has been fulfilled if the writer has come to discover what they really want to say. The revised draft that replaces the discovery draft will normally show the development and organization that a college paper needs, but this final draft is often much in need of editing. Some teachers will delay editing comments to this stage and, for a few selected papers, require a presentation copy with careful editing and a high degree of polish as a revision of the final draft (see Chapter 3).

But we do need to be careful to allow for different writing processes. Not every student—or every professional, for that matter—will follow this typical pattern. Some writers seem able to compose a series of initial drafts in their heads, and these writers turn out first drafts that need little revision; other writers may find that editing is the spur that leads to revision, rather than the tedious final cleanup stage of writing. Such exceptions—and they are rare—
will define their writing process in special ways and are likely to need some flexibility if they are to meet a portfolio requirement for all stages of a particular writing task. The writing process is a concept, not a formula, and different writers (or the same writer on different occasions) may find a variety of routes to the finished paper.

Regardless of a student’s preferred process, the portfolio allows you to review—and perhaps grade—essays that have gone through many stages. If we do grade the various drafts, we should stay aware of the different purposes of the stages. The zero draft requires that the student collect thoughts, references, and experiences that stake out the area for the paper. The discovery draft revises the zero draft with the goal of finding out what is really interesting and worth saying about the topic within that area. The final draft focuses and develops that idea as fully as time and talent allow. The presentation copy revises the final draft for a demanding audience that expects the developed, interesting idea to be written with standard sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and footnote form—as well as appropriate control of tone, metaphor, and diction.

Though every paper in the portfolio need not include these stages (or other possible stages in a variety of writing processes), the portfolio is the only assessment device that can evaluate a student’s ability to understand revision processes. We may talk about revision, but portfolio assessment supports that talk by collecting and evaluating several projects in multiple drafts. If the portfolio were to include only a collection of final drafts, this opportunity to support teaching about the writing process with assessment would be lost. And one great virtue of portfolio assessment is that it can document the revisions that show the essential learning about the writing process that goes on in the writing course, in a single folder at the end of the term. Happily, e-portfolios have made that process relatively straightforward and easy to document as well as expanded our options for the media in which we can ask students to compose and revise.

Scoring Portfolios Based on the Reflective Letter

Phase 2 scoring does not intend or need to regrade papers or projects that have already been responded to and probably graded by the classroom teacher; its concern is the portfolio as a whole. It focuses on the reflective letter and the references in that letter to work in the portfolio as evidence for the argument in the letter. If one goal of the program is to show that the student has learned how to cite sources and then to use those sources as evidence (rather than as a substitute) for ideas, then the portfolio reader need only refer to the cited page of the portfolio to check on the student’s argument that the page demonstrates that accomplishment; at most, a quick skimming of the full contents should suffice. The reader essentially grades the reflective letter, and the portfolio as evidence cited in that letter, as the portfolio grade.

Because in Phase 2 scoring the reader is relieved of the necessity of giving new grades to each item in the portfolio, it is now possible to provide a reliable
and reasonably quick reading of the portfolios in hand. This may sound shocking to faculty used to spending, say, half an hour or more rereading and regrading student work in portfolios. But this has been the fallacy behind portfolio scoring from the start: rereading and putting grades on everything at hand. If the purpose of the portfolio is to demonstrate that the student has achieved certain stated goals, the portfolio contents are important not as individual graded papers but as part of the student’s entire learning experience. Does the portfolio support the argument in a well-considered reflective letter? Has the student taken responsibility for evaluating his or her own work? Have course or program outcomes been achieved?

In contrast to the multiplicity of portfolios, the reflective letter is a single document that needs to meet certain quite specific criteria, and therefore it is appropriate to score it using our standard assessment tools, including scoring guides. We are back to a single document, the basic material for which holistic scoring was designed, and we can usually agree on the quality of that document. With some labor, we can come up with a scoring guide and sample portfolios representing various scores, just as we do with single essays. The variation in the portfolio from item to item and from genre to genre is of no real importance now (we can expect such variation over an extended period of time, with a great variety of kinds of writing to many different assignments); we are not trying to average grades on the items but rather scoring the portfolio as a whole, from the perspective of the reflective letter.

And as we do so, we find that instead of scoring two portfolios an hour we are scoring from six to ten an hour, or more, and achieving substantial agreement on the grades. Phase 2 scoring reinforces the entire point of portfolios by making the assessor of first resort the student submitting the portfolio, who in the reflective letter performs the self-assessment that is the true goal of all academic assessment. The faculty assessment then focuses on that student assessment, which must be done in the light of clearly stated faculty goals, and evaluates the student’s overall awareness and achievement of those goals. The faculty assessment yields reliable grades at a reasonable cost in terms of time and effort. Furthermore, the entire experience is valuable in its own right. It supports student learning by requiring self-assessment and responsibility, provides direct information to faculty on the outcomes of their programs, and uses existing documents in a new way that is demonstrably direct and valid.

We do not mean to suggest that Phase 2 scoring is problem-free, nor the answer to all portfolio issues. As we have said, there will be some portfolio assessments that are not interested in evaluating reflection. The reflective letter is a genre itself, and a difficult one to do well; thus it adds a new burden to both the preparation and scoring of portfolios even as it simplifies measurement. There may well be important qualitative differences between the reflective letter and the content of the portfolio, and the scoring team will need to decide how to handle such differences consistently. There seem always to be students who will ignore course or program goals in their reflective letters, sometimes writing engaging personal narratives or flattering course evaluations that are hard to dismiss despite their avoidance of the task assigned. In
writing assessment, every solution seems to bring forth new (if more interesting) problems, and Phase 2 scoring will no doubt need to be adapted to local conditions wherever it is adopted.

**STAFF-GRADED COURSE PORTFOLIOS**

Recognizing the value of portfolio assessment, some colleges have used it for assessment outside of the individual classroom. A typical example is the assessment of student portfolios from the writing class by faculty who have not taught the students' writing class. Students prepare portfolios for evaluation, following certain criteria, and present the portfolios to an assessment team. The team might be as simple as the course instructor and one outsider or as elaborate as a full-fledged review board. This team then evaluates the portfolios, and that evaluation will play an important (perhaps even predominant) part in determining the students' grades.

This procedure has several clear advantages. The most important one is that the class teacher is relieved of full responsibility for grading. This is a definite plus, for if the portfolio is to be graded by others, the teacher then becomes more a coach than a judge. The teacher will in that case be helping students prepare the best portfolios possible for the assessment that is to come. The students come to see the teacher as a supporter rather than as an adversary, and the standards for judgment of the portfolio become a subject that the students want to learn. The teacher's comments and grades become valuable clues to the way others like the teacher will probably grade the portfolio. Rather than giving a failing grade, for example, the teacher can merely indicate that a portfolio with papers of this quality probably will not pass. Any system that turns the teacher into a valued coach is likely to assist in student learning and, incidentally, make the teacher's life much more pleasant.

Students will sometimes find the unknown portfolio team even more threatening than the known course instructor and resist team grading; everyone is likely to be suspicious of outside evaluators, naturally enough. And some teachers may initially be uneasy about losing some of their power of assessment. If the assessment team works in secret and if the results are handed down as law without appeal, these concerns will grow and eventually undermine the entire portfolio plan. But if the staff works together to define the portfolios and the grading standards, and the assessment gains their assent, the operation will become supportive rather than threatening. And once the staff sees the portfolio assessment team as "us" rather than "them," they can allay student concerns by their confidence in and support of the grading standards. The persons responsible for the portfolio team must carefully and regularly consider ways to maintain the genuine collegiality of the program.

Further, the imposition of a staff grade for portfolios can set standards that reflect the institution rather than the individual teacher. Though most writing programs make attempts to normalize standards, few are able to do more than influence slightly how teachers grade. Every student knows that some teachers are hard, others easy, and the rest in-between. But with portfolio
grading, those unjust differences are evened out somewhat — for everyone works to achieve fair and consistent grading of the portfolios, whoever the class teacher may be. To be sure, some teachers will be more effective than others, putting their students at an advantage. But the enforcement of reliable standards for grading will help less effective teachers and their students improve because all students will be subject to the same consistent and appropriate criteria.

Of course, that very impersonalization of standards is a disadvantage of staff grading, for it may also work some injustice in particular cases. Many instructors feel uncomfortable with grades given to their students by others, particularly by others who do not know the students they are grading. Perhaps the excellent student whose work dropped sharply in quality because of a divorce or a parent’s death ought to be given special consideration. And perhaps the good work of the talented writer should not receive as high a grade as it appears to deserve because, as the teacher knows, a little revision from that student would have produced truly superior work. Every department contemplating portfolio team assessment will have to discuss and resolve the relationship between the team grade and the course grade. One way of dealing with it is to make the portfolio grade a set percentage of the term grade, which remains the responsibility of the class teacher. Another is to ask the portfolio assessment team to give a pass/fail grade to the portfolio and leave the letter grade for the course to the teacher.

If the composition staff decides to use a team approach to assessment, a series of decisions will have to be made about ways to foster communication between the team and the teachers, as well as about procedures for scoring. The communication issue we leave to those who know the local situation, but five of the most prominent procedural issues are

1. content of the portfolio,
2. leaving or removing original grades and comments,
3. scoring procedures,
4. criteria for scoring reliably, and
5. appeals procedures.

**Content of the Portfolio**

We mentioned earlier some possible components of class portfolios. When an assessment team is evaluating portfolios, the staff needs to attend even more closely to portfolio content than the individual instructor does; the class situation usually makes clear what is important and what the grading expectations are, but as soon as we move out of the class context these matters must be made explicit and put in writing. The number of items in the portfolios must be limited so that they can be referred to in a reasonable amount of time, but the papers must represent what matters for the course, as defined by the staff. What is to be included, and why? Before those questions can be answered, some decisions must be made about the purpose of the evaluation.

If, for example, the purpose is to determine or strongly influence the student’s grade in the course, the teacher might not be permitted to vary more
than, say, one grade from the assessment team’s portfolio grade. For the assessment team to be able to proceed, it must reflect staff consensus about what determines a student’s grade for the course. This consensus will shape the decision about the required content of the portfolio.

- Perhaps the portfolio should contain the first paper in several drafts, the last paper in several drafts, two examples of in-class writing, and a reflective letter to readers relating the contents to the course goals.
- Perhaps the class teacher and the student could agree on the three best papers the student has written, along with a reflective letter.
- Perhaps all that is needed is the research paper, including all notes and drafts.
- Or the team may want to see specific kinds of writing and to apply particular standards to that writing, so specific papers may be needed.

Whatever the grading and selection criteria, they must be written out well in advance and distributed to all students and faculty. A few sample or composite portfolios, exemplifying a variety of grades, should be available in the library to anyone interested (with suitable attention paid to privacy issues).

Another purpose might be to evaluate the first-year course, or an entire curriculum — not individual students. How much writing is in fact being required, how is it being responded to, and what are the standards? For this purpose, the portfolios may have to be as complete as possible, but only a sample of them needs to be evaluated. In this scenario, every student files a full portfolio of all work done in the course, an administrative assistant randomly selects a few from each class (concealing the instructors’ names unless everyone agrees otherwise), and the assessment team reads without preconceptions to find out what these portfolios indicate is going on in the course as a whole. This is close to the outcomes assessment described in the next section of this chapter and far preferable to the pretest/posttest model using essay tests, since the assessment uses the actual work of the course.

Still other purposes require different definitions of what portfolios must contain. The essential principles to keep in mind are the need to match the purposes of the assessment to the curriculum — what is actually being taught — and then to the portfolios, being clear about just what is being measured. Remember, a portfolio is not a test; it is only a collection of materials. Those materials must be specified, and an evaluation procedure must then follow, if the operation is to make sense.

Leaving or Removing Original Grades and Comments

If portfolios are to be used to generate some sort of new grade, it seems fair to remove all the comments and grades of the teacher or to include a copy of the original before the teacher responded to it. Otherwise, the new grade will surely be influenced by the original grade and by the comments written on the paper. However, two major problems must be confronted if the staff decides to do this. First, the clerical work is enormous, either in collecting unmarked
originals or in erasing or obliterating what the original teacher wrote. Second, the assessment team will lose the expertness of the original comments, with their reflection of the class context and the details of the assignment. (The actual assignment as handed out is, of course, a necessary attachment to each paper, but it is often only a skeleton of the task in context.) For essays based on reading material, this expertness may be crucial, unless the assessment team members complete all the assigned reading themselves. If the course allows a wide range of reading materials, it may be impossible for the assessment team to know every piece of reading, and instructor comments may then be necessary.

A further issue arises if the teacher comments are left on the student papers: assessment of those comments themselves. Some assessment is inevitable, even if we try to avoid it; the quality of teacher comments is an important aspect of teaching, and readers will notice their colleagues’ high-quality work or the reverse. But perhaps we should not avoid it, as so much time and work is represented by those comments. This added component of teacher evaluation strikes terror in the hearts of some teachers and makes them apprehensive about portfolios; conversely, the opportunity to be rewarded for a major teacher activity that has rarely been noticed seems to other teachers yet another positive aspect of this complex assessment. Since evaluation of teaching is a fraught issue in many institutions, it is good practice to keep portfolio assessment far away from it, perhaps keeping any references to the quality of assignments and responses to a general rather than personal level. But portfolios do provide a window into the actual teaching going on and the possibility of using that information for the common good should be explored. For these reasons, as well as for practical economy, we are in favor of retaining all teacher commentary on work in the portfolio, particularly if Phase 2 scoring is used.

Scoring Procedures

Experience with essay tests has shown that reliable readings can take place only in controlled sessions—with all readers reading at the same time and place, under the direction of a chief reader. The need for controlled reading of portfolios is even more important, as the scoring of portfolios seems in every way even more difficult than the scoring of essays. The portfolio programs that report the most consistent scores are the ones that conduct controlled scoring sessions with scoring guides and sample portfolios. Hence, if the evaluation is to be consistent and therefore meaningful, careful planning of a scoring session will be necessary.

Such planning involves many details, including facilities, time management, funding, and personnel. Sample portfolios illustrating different levels of performance, and scoring guides, will have to be prepared in advance for consistency training. Each portfolio should be read twice, independently, with discrepant scores deviating by more than 1 full point given a resolution reading: for example, a 5 and 4 is not discrepant (score of 9) while a 5 and a 3 must be resolved by a third reader. The size of the portfolios and the complexity of the scoring will determine how fast the reading can go; leaders of the reading
should be sure to score a small sample in advance to make a reasonable estimate of the pace. For example, if readers can score five portfolios an hour, forty readers will require (after training) two hours to score two hundred portfolios twice. One particular advantage of the Phase 2 scoring procedures is that the reading, focused on the reflective letter, can proceed much more quickly—two to three times as quickly—than readings in which each item in the portfolio must be read and rated.

Resist using informal procedures, such as parceling out the portfolios to faculty to take home and treat as they wish. Though that may seem less burdensome, it merely disguises the nature of the work and makes it unreliable. Sometimes it seems too much trouble to work for consistency in scoring, particularly when the results may be as crude as a pass/fail score. But unreliable results are unfair and unprofessional. Instead, we should seek funding to make a controlled reading as pleasant and as rewarding as possible. Evaluation worth doing is worth doing well, which means in a fair way that gives dependable results.

Criteria for Scoring Reliably

This has been the weakest aspect of traditional portfolio assessment. If the faculty attempts to use holistic scoring procedures for the contents of each portfolio, it will likely take considerable effort to get all readers to use the same scoring criteria. In addition to developing a scoring guide that is responsive both to the goals of the assessment and to the students, and to compiling sample portfolios to illustrate the points on the scoring guide, one more step is needed: deciding on the weighting of the various components of the portfolio. Are the same criteria to be applied to first-draft, in-class writing as to a research paper that has gone through multiple drafts? If not—and good sense suggests not—how are the criteria to be applied? A much better solution is to work from the start to use the procedures of Phase 2 scoring, based on clear goals statements and the students’ reflective letters’ ability to demonstrate accomplishment of these learning outcomes, instead of attempting to grade the portfolio contents with uncertain criteria.

Though these are difficult problems, they are manageable as long as they are dealt with in advance. Composition staff working together to decide the purpose, then the content, and then the scoring criteria for portfolios are really deciding on the meaning and standards for the composition course, a most worthwhile activity. The crucial first step is to collectively come up with a goals statement that is appropriate for the institution, the students, and the curriculum. The second step is to provide the students with sufficient materials and help so that they can be the initial assessors of the work they have done in terms of those goals. Even if the focus for your portfolio assessment is individual student scores, try to find ways to use the portfolios for program outcomes assessment as well. Perhaps after the scoring session is completed, a half hour spent reflecting on what the students are learning, or might be learning, would be more productive than any series of staff meetings.
dealing with the subject in the abstract. On the other hand, if the portfolios are part of a high-stakes assessment for individuals, the accuracy of the scoring needs to be the focus, since some students are bound to question the process that gave them low scores.

**Appeals Procedures**

If the portfolio evaluators will be making grade or advancement decisions, some appeals procedure will be necessary. As with any other kind of assessment, portfolio assessment is not perfect, and some mistakes will be made. If the assessment team hands down a grade that a student (perhaps backed by the instructor) feels to be wrong, the case should be heard. However, because portfolio assessment tends to be so time-consuming, it is a good idea to think through just how appeals can be minimized and handled expeditiously.

The most effective way to minimize appeals is to develop a demonstrably careful and reliable method of scoring. A simple description of the complex and expensive scoring mechanism will sometimes make the student realize that the scoring decision was made with care. A requirement for a written statement of appeal will discourage frivolous requests, and a requirement for evidence of procedural or other error for an appeal to be heard will reduce requests to the truly serious ones. When the appeals board reviews the portfolio, it needs to reestablish the context of the original scoring, using the same scoring guide and sample portfolios at the various score levels. Too many appeals will choke the system; more than an occasional one is a sign that insufficient care and groundwork have gone into the program.

**SAMPLE GOALS STATEMENTS**

We present here four examples of goals statements for portfolio outcomes assessments. The first is from the English department of California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB); the second is a very brief one from the first-year writing program at Northern Arizona University (NAU); the third is an extensive one from the first-year writing program at Arizona State University (ASU), based in large part on the *Outcomes Statement* developed by the National Council of Writing Program Administrators; and the fourth is from the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Arizona (ECE). While the four statements vary widely in many respects, each of them was developed in a similar way. In the first place, the faculty of the departments involved agreed to put together a goals statement; they spent a substantial amount of time, well over a year, debating the important issues involved and putting together a satisfactory statement; and they tested the goals statement, refining it as they went, over the first few years of implementation. Their interest was multidirectional. The assessments sought to determine whether students were completing the programs with acceptable course grades without meeting the programs’ goals—and if so, what changes could be made to the programs in order to help students meet those goals. In each case, after
USING PORTFOLIOS

completing the portfolio assessments, the faculty readers spent considerable amounts of time considering what the experience had taught them about the program itself.

The goals statement for the English major at CSUSB reflects the typical “big tent” English department, including linguistics, creative writing, composition, and literature. Students have considerable latitude in choosing courses that fit within the structure of the various tracks. Before the portfolio assessment, the department had no way of knowing—aside from course grades and anecdotes—whether students completing the major had met the goals for the major. The assessment seeks to provide that information. Students are informed that no one student is likely to meet all the goals of the department, but that they should demonstrate that they have met most of the goals. The department was encouraged to find that most students had indeed met most of the goals. But programmatic problems emerged as readers reflected on their portfolio reading experience. One of the stated goals reflects current concern about literary theory. Students who complete the CSUSB English major should be aware that there is no single “correct” way to read a piece of literature, but rather that there are a variety of ways to read depending on the literary theory one adopts. The goals statement put it simply: students are expected “to know that literature can be studied in a variety of ways, and to be familiar with some of these critical approaches.” After the first few portfolio readings, the faculty recognized that this goal was in fact not being met by most graduating seniors. Few students understood the role or the importance of theory, and most of them continued to believe that there was one “best” way to read a literary work—usually the teacher’s. This realization led to a series of faculty meetings about more effective ways to help students meet this goal, and then to a revision of requirements for the major.

A second aspect of the curriculum came under review after readers observed that the portfolios contained almost no papers over six pages in length. There were many reasons for this, including a heavy faculty workload, students who needed to work to support themselves in college and had limited time for schoolwork, and the compression of a ten-week quarter system. Nonetheless, the department decided to take steps to ensure that graduating senior English majors would have some experience writing longer papers. Yet another discovery, that many graduates had been assigned *The Great Gatsby* in three different courses, led to additional curricula discussions and revisions.

The CSUSB example demonstrates the value of shaping a departmental outcomes portfolio assessment around a carefully developed goals statement. Such a statement as a key part of the assessment makes clear that an English major is not merely a collection of distinct courses but also a coherent program designed to impart certain abilities and ways of thinking. It also turns an outcomes assessment into a program assessment as well as an evaluation of individual student performance.

The last item in this section is a goals statement for writing from an unlikely source, a department of electrical and computer engineering, but it demonstrates the flexibility and power of Phase 2 portfolio assessment. The ECE department
at the University of Arizona, keenly aware of the need for its graduates to be able to write competently, adopted these goals after much internal debate. The goals are made clear to students early on in their studies, and an increasing number of faculty are designing assignments that help students meet the goals. The preparation of the portfolio with its reflective letter is part of a required senior-level course, and the scoring of the portfolios follows a scoring guide that focuses on that letter. ECE faculty do the scoring, with a few additional raters from a major local engineering firm and with professional leadership. Each portfolio receives two independent scores, with about 10 percent requiring a resolution reading, and the entire reading is accomplished in a morning.

California State University, San Bernardino,
Department of English Goals for English Majors

1. To be familiar with the major writers, periods, and genres of English and American literature, and to be able to place important works and genres in their historical context.
2. To be able to analyze, interpret, and compare literary works, and to write about literature in a clear, coherent, literate way that demonstrates a high level of understanding both of a text’s technical merits and of its emotional impact.
3. To know that literature can be studied in a variety of ways, and to be familiar with some of these critical approaches.
4. To have read several important works in non-western, ethnic, and women’s literatures that illustrate the diversity of literary studies and the interconnectedness of literary traditions.
5. To understand writing as process and, in their own writing, to demonstrate an awareness of audience, purpose, and various rhetorical forms as well as a high level of control of the conventions of standard written English.
6. To have some basic understanding of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures of English and their development, as well as to be familiar with theories of sociolinguistics and language acquisition.
7. In addition, students who are planning to teach English should be more specifically acquainted with pedagogical approaches to literature, language, and writing, and with the theories that underlie those approaches.
8. Students taking the creative writing track are expected to be able to demonstrate a high level of competence in some genre of imaginative writing and the forms and techniques of that genre.

Northern Arizona University Goals for English 105

1. To develop critical reading skills through close attention to text content and to the skills needed to interpret texts effectively.
2. To develop expository writing skills through attention to the writing process.
3. To apply critical reading and writing skills to formal writing tasks, including an extended writing project.
4. To develop technological literacy skills to rhetorically analyze online resources based on the audience addressed, the purpose explored, and the language used.

**Arizona State University Writing Programs**
**Course Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes**

The composition program at ASU supports the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and Writing Program Administrators (WPA) outcomes for first-year composition students. The goals and objectives we have developed from these outcomes are provided here to help teachers better understand what materials and knowledge students will be expected to acquire in ASU Writing Programs courses. Since learning to write effectively is a complex task that requires lifelong practice, any composition class should never be seen as “the” course that will make the student an effective writer. Rather, any writing class, including our first-year courses, should be seen as a step toward gaining the strategies necessary to engage in that practice.

**Rhetorical Knowledge** Our writing courses will focus on helping students develop and use a rhetorical framework to analyze writing situations in a number of ways. Students will learn how to

- use heuristics to analyze places, histories, and cultures.
- be aware of the components of argument and create their own arguments in conversation with other members of their discourse communities.
- synthesize and analyze multiple points of view.
- use a variety of argumentative strategies to write for a variety of audiences.
- express a working knowledge of key rhetorical features, such as audience, situation, and the use of appropriate argument strategies.
- adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality.
- use conventions of format, structure, and language appropriate to the purpose of the written texts.
- be able to focus on a specific rhetorical purpose.

**Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing** One of the key goals of our writing courses is to provide students with strategies to gather, analyze, and write about issues that are important to specific audiences in specific contexts. Students will learn to

- work with demanding, nonfiction readings and learn to interpret, incorporate, and evaluate these readings.
- develop and support an argument that is convincing to a particular audience.
- explore the multiple facets (ideological, social, cultural, political, economic, historical) of issues and to use writing to construct informed, critical positions about these topics.
• engage in a variety of research methods to study and explore the topics, including fieldwork as well as library and Internet research.
• write empirical, historical, and cultural analyses of issues of social relevance.
• conduct inquiry-based research and writing which is driven by the desire to study a cultural phenomenon and asks “what kind of research needs to be done in order to understand this issue?”
• analyze differing cultural and historical perspectives on issues so as to encourage students to understand that multiple perspectives of an issue are in operation at the same time. This analysis will help students to broaden and enhance their own perspectives on these issues.
• ascertain the significance of situation in adopting rhetorical strategies in their writings and readings.
• identify the kind of ideological work a text undertakes and how it serves to persuade readers to accept a particular account of an issue as accurate and effective.
• pursue an issue across projects in order to understand the complexity of the issue and to make connections between empirical, historical, and cultural aspects of an issue.
• use writing as a way of thinking through topics and ideas.

Processes  Our writing courses will focus on the writing process and will ask students to engage in a variety of practices to research, develop, and write their projects. During the course of the semester, students will learn to

• propose, plan, and undertake research projects that involve a number of writing activities that build toward a final project that meets the audiences’ needs.
• interact with texts as they read and re-read, by underlining, taking notes, and commenting in the margins, in order to arrive at a strong reading that supplies a starting point for writing.
• write and revise drafts and integrate feedback into their writing.
• engage in collaborative work at a variety of levels (research, invention, writing, etc.).
• better respond to audiences by revising work based upon feedback (peer response, teacher conferences) from others.
• discuss readings, writings, and other kinds of research with others and use those discussions as brainstorming, invention, or revision exercises.
• respond to their classmates’ work and learn how to supply effective peer editing feedback. Peer response techniques include group workshops, class discussion and examination of content, organization, syntax, and mechanics.
• actively participate in class discussions about readings and writings.
• engage with instructor, peers, and other members of the writer’s audience in order to better understand and meet their needs and goals as readers.
Conventions  We strive to teach students to analyze the writing conventions of different discourse communities and to begin to write effectively within these communities. Throughout the semester, students will learn to

- understand the ways that different discourse communities have different strategies for conveying information, for researching information, and for evaluating and analyzing information.
- employ a variety of organizational tactics.
- deploy supporting evidence.
- analyze what audiences’ expectations about conventions are and to address them in critical ways.
- understand the ways that information technologies aid and change writing conventions.
- examine the conventions of empirical, historical, and cultural writing conventions and to analyze and question those conventions.
- effectively integrate a variety of sources into their writings.
- use grammatical and mechanical conventions of a variety of discourses in appropriate ways.
- use at least one system of documentation responsibly.

University of Arizona, Electrical and Computer Engineering
Writing Outcomes

Graduates of the ECE Department should be able to:

1. Document a procedure, how something works, how to perform an operation, or how to solve a problem.
2. Write a clear and succinct definition of an open-ended problem including a summary of known attempts to solve the problem.
3. Write a proposal to perform a project, undertake research, develop a program, solicit funding, or some combination of the above.
4. Write an abstract or summary of a technical document.
5. Write a letter or memorandum taking a clear position defending or selling an idea to an audience.
6. Document a project in a professionally written design report.
7. Explain technical information to a non-technical audience.

Selected References
Larson, Richard L. “Portfolios in the Assessment of Writing: A Political Perspective.”
CHAPTER 7

Writing Programs and Evaluation

This chapter speaks to the uses of assessment in the administration of writing programs. Although many of these issues seem a bit remote from classroom teaching, they all have an impact on what happens in class and on the claims of importance that writing programs can make. As writing programs have become more and more professionalized, teachers of composition have become increasingly involved in decisions about their program and how it is run. Fifty years ago, one common prediction was that English departments and the writing programs then universally situated inside those departments would dwindle away and become rather like classics departments, of interest only to a small group of specialists. That has not occurred, largely as a result of the emergence of important and influential writing programs, often, but not always, within English departments, whose importance to the mission of a college has remained vibrant and compelling.

Many books, journal articles, and research projects have appeared in recent years, speaking to the history, theory, and development of writing programs. But until very recently, the role of assessment in relation to these matters has not been examined with care. We will focus in this chapter on the program assessment issues most directly affecting the teaching of writing and writing classrooms: placing students into or out of writing courses, evaluating transfer or test replacements for the required writing course, evaluating student writing by groups of faculty, using group scores for formative research on the writing program relating first-year required writing courses to other college requirements, and demonstrating the effectiveness of the program to outside administrative and funding agencies.

ASSESSMENT AND WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION: PLACEMENT, DIAGNOSTIC, EXIT, AND PROFICIENCY TESTS

The single most vexing issue that writing programs and writing teachers have to deal with is the endless writing assessments of students for administrative purposes, from placement of entering students to certification of graduating seniors. Most of these administrative functions have little to do with teaching and most writing teachers dislike participating in the sorting of students, often done on flimsy evidence. But one administrative task is of particular importance to every teacher of writing: placement of students into the writing course in which they are most likely to be challenged and succeed. While such placement may—and should—take place before enrollment, most of the placement
tests still in use have not proved valid for that purpose. For that reason, writing teachers are often asked to diagnose students’ writing ability early on in the course to confirm that students have been placed into the writing course which is appropriate for their background and ability.

Most writing teachers assume that the students who show up for their classes are prepared to do the work for the course. But if the institution has a writing program designed for a diverse student body — typically a basic course or two for students with weak preparation, a regular first-year course (perhaps with a special section or sections for nonnative English speakers), and an honors course for unusually well-prepared students — you may be asked to see if some of your students should be shifted to a different part of the program, and such a shift must take place quickly. Society has given us a heavy responsibility. When we try to put entering students in the classes that will challenge them, yet allow them to succeed, we are acting as benign gatekeepers, but gatekeepers nonetheless. If students get in and through our first-year writing programs, the chances that they will graduate and share in the goods of our society are strong. If we—and they—fail to meet that challenge, many who might accomplish that goal drop out. And our responsibility is not only to our weakest writers; many of our most gifted students are likely to continue to believe that writing is a matter of error avoidance, not discovery, if we mishandle placement and they find themselves in a learning environment not challenging enough to suit their writing needs.

The least satisfactory method of placement — and the most common in American colleges — is by means of some multiple-choice test of editing skills. The problems with this kind of assessment have become obvious. The multiple-choice test of editing skills does not require the production of text and so measures skills not directly related to the first-year writing course. A recent study by Vicki Hester et al. reports that over 250 students who placed in remedial courses through the COMPASS test (an untimed editing exercise on computers) were also placed by a writing sample into the regular first-year writing course at the University of Louisville, and all these students chose the higher placement. More than 70 percent of these students received an A or B in the course, and over 90 percent of these students received at least a C (see Hester et al.). Numbers of similar studies demonstrate the invalidity of multiple-choice testing for placement. For more evidence on the invalidity of multiple-choice tests for placement in writing courses, see two essays on the issue by Richard Haswell available in the online archives of CompPile (“Writing Placement” and “Writing Placement Research”). The indirect relation of such tests to writing remains in much dispute and seems particularly problematic for students from homes that do not speak the school dialect.

Instructor Placement

Even if the college placement system is effective, wise teachers will use an impromptu class writing assignment, early on in their course, as a quick and rough indication of the background their students bring to college writing.
Many teachers now do this on the first day of class. There are two advantages. Firstly, it serves as an efficient way to quickly diagnose the overall strengths and weaknesses in writing as emerging from the entire class. Teachers can then begin to modify lesson plans to best address these needs. As any experienced teacher knows, no two writing classes are the same. And what works best in one section, may not in another. An early diagnostic test also does something else very important: it serves as both a reminder that this is a *writing* class and establishes an early expectation that much of class time will be focused on discussing, drafting, sharing, and revising student writing.

While a written placement test is certainly a better message to students than tests that do not contain any writing at all, and more useful for the course itself, a single impromptu essay is usually only a rough measure of a student’s ability to write. Sometimes each teacher must develop an impromptu assignment for his or her own class for that purpose, as we suggest in the first section of this book. More often, teachers in the required writing program will collaboratively develop a common placement essay, followed by group holistic scoring. If there is enough time and administrative support, the writing program might be able to institute the best placement device of all: not a test, but a wholly different, student-centered procedure known as directed self-placement, which we will describe later in this chapter. But on many college campuses, the writing program has little to do with placement, which may be run by student services or the admissions office. Since we now know how important a valid placement program is for student learning and for student persistence in college, a modern writing program should see to it that placement is an academic concern and that the most valid placement possible is implemented.

**Committee Placement**

The central question for a committee responsible for a placement test is to know if each student has the experience and ability to profit from the range of courses available in the required composition program. Because every college is somewhat different, teachers need to create lists of abilities appropriate for their courses, student population, and institution. A highly selective school, for example, might ask entering first-year students for considerable background in reading, control over sentence and paragraph structure, an extensive vocabulary, and a developed writing process. Such a background would allow the required course to assign complicated reading assignments, writing assignments that ask students to demonstrate (rather than merely to assert) ideas in a variety of ways, and individualized research projects using library and Internet sources. An open admissions community college, by contrast, would design its placement test differently, perhaps testing to see if students are familiar with the differences between oral and written dialects, have become accustomed to meeting assigned topics, have enough self-confidence to write with their own voice, and can construct effective sentences and paragraphs. But such colleges also have well-prepared students and must provide
assessments and challenging opportunities for them as well—an advantage for students experiencing enhanced diversity but a complicating factor for placement.

In American higher education, there is no consistent definition of remedial, basic, or developmental English; every institution must define for itself what constitutes readiness for the available writing courses. In every placement decision, you will want to be alert for students whose writing abilities have been cramped by overattention to correctness in the early stages of the writing process, or who feel that writing is only a matter of adhering to a pattern, or whose skill at composition is partly obscured by inappropriate use of a spoken dialect in school writing. The basic question at stake is, “Is each student sufficiently ready for what a particular course expects students to know, that success is both possible and probable?” Thus, it is especially critical, if a placement test is to be effective, that teachers of the composition courses agree on the specific goals for all sections of the same course and on what they can reasonably expect of entering students. If every instructor has an independent curriculum and individual goals—as is sometimes the case—placement testing makes no sense and a match between course demands and student preparation is a matter of chance. But if the goals of the first-year writing course are determined by the faculty and standards are reasonably consistent from section to section, some kind of placement procedure will benefit the students (who are more likely to succeed) and the teachers (who will have more homogeneous classes to teach).

**DIRECTED SELF-PLACEMENT**

In recent years, a number of concerns have been raised about the validity of all placement tests and the assumptions that underlie them, the effects of institutional tracking and negative labeling, and the use of university resources for those defined as not prepared for university work. Part of the attractiveness of directed self-placement (DSP) is that it proposes a way through this tangle, one that might maintain the advantages of placement yet avoid its disadvantages. The idea is deceptively simple. While scored impromptu writing samples may be part of the information a college or a teacher may gather and provide for placement, the institution puts its major efforts into informing students about the demands and expectations of the composition courses available to them and how they can meet the writing requirement. Then each student makes an informed choice, and takes full responsibility for that choice—instead of more or less grudgingly accepting test results and institutional placement. Initial studies show that, given enough information and counseling, students do not often put themselves into courses they are likely to fail—and if they misplace themselves they know they have no one to blame but themselves.

DSP assumes that students are mature enough to choose the course that is right for them, if they have enough information. DSP also assumes that there are valid reasons beyond test performance for students to choose more or less demanding writing courses in their first year of college, such as self-confidence,
time availability, enjoyment of reading, and past experience with writing. However, DSP depends on the institution clearly defining the requirements and proposed outcomes of its different writing courses, maintaining consistency in those definitions, then communicating them to entering students, and finally, of course, attending to those definitions and outcomes in the courses themselves. For DSP to be effective, the institution must develop some way to make that information clear to young students—who are generally bemused by the mass of lectures, warnings, greetings, and exhortations offered in the weeks before the opening of classes. This can also be tricky with the growing interest in teaching writing through the traditional pattern of “themed” courses, where students may be tempted to place into a section whose theme they find particularly attractive, even if they don’t quite meet the qualifications for the course. While small colleges are likely to focus almost entirely on enhanced advising, large institutions are starting to combine all the useful information they have on students and offer tentative placement to their entering students. For instance, one very large university, with about six thousand new students a year, has devised a complicated index including high school English grades and various test scores—but no writing test—to place its students—well before the start of classes—into over a hundred different course sections at the usual three levels of difficulty: basic, regular, honors. However, the university suggests that some students, after becoming well informed about the various options within the writing program, may well want to change that placement. Those who feel that they have been placed too high or too low are asked to bring writing portfolios to orientation, where they meet with an adviser who reads through their portfolios and (after some discussion) will be able to place the students in a different class. Most students accept the initial placement, and most students are placed, as one would expect, into regular first-year composition, so the individual advising system at orientation is not overwhelmed.

Thus DSP is no panacea, though it is a creative substitute for placement testing. Like many other solutions to educational problems, it offers new problems in place of the old. Yet the new problems are those that postsecondary education should be meeting anyway: helping students take responsibility for their own learning, replacing more or less reductive placement testing with sound counseling, developing clear curricular guidelines and outcomes, and becoming less paternal and more (shall we say) avuncular. DSP is an answer to those who unwisely call the writing requirement unnecessary in light of the modern technological and vocational revolution. DSP maintains the first-year writing requirement as an essential introduction to college-level writing, thinking, and problem solving, but at the same time DSP proposes a radical solution to the persistent problems of overtesting, negative labeling, and student alienation from required coursework.

Does it work? At this point there are many accounts of success but little data. Maybe entering college students are not really able to make wise course decisions; perhaps communicating with entering students about their choices is too difficult; maybe the curriculum is in such disarray that it is impossible
for students to navigate it. To make DSP possible, many institutions will need to revamp their counseling procedures for new students, and such change is sometimes difficult because it requires the counseling staff to understand the levels of the writing program and to take first-year writing seriously—instead of urging students, as many counselors still do, to get required courses “out of the way.” The most important problem behind the implementation of DSP is the need for a general shift in the perception of who should be responsible for academic decisions. The concept is promising enough for widespread trials, but we need to gather information about what happens as the concept becomes procedure at different kinds of institutions. When they have the opportunity, we encourage teachers of writing who distrust the usual placement procedures—that is, most writing teachers—to try to move their institutions toward some version of DSP.

Dan Royer and Roger Gilles have recently edited the first book that seeks to pose, and perhaps answer, many of the questions raised by DSP. Appropriately, the book documents the experience of institutions rather than forces agreement about the answers—or even the questions. They, and many—but not all—of the contributors to the book, are clearly in favor of DSP and want to promote its use. It is not surprising that this innovation has attracted passionate converts: DSP is the most creative and exciting development in placement since teachers began trying to replace the dreary multiple-choice usage tests still much in use for their convenience and cheapness (in every sense). If DSP fulfills its promise, we may be able to maintain the benefits of placement while dispensing with the expense, in time and money, of placement testing.

ADMISSIONS AND TRANSFER CREDIT

Writing program administrators spend much time dealing with the issue of transfer credit, that is, students aiming to receive credit for composition work or tests taken elsewhere. As we have said, far too many students are advised to “get writing requirements out of the way”—a concept deeply offensive to those of us working assiduously to keep writing courses at the center of what a college education means. Some WPAs find dealing with this issue so problematic that they defer to whatever the admissions office decides. Indeed some admissions offices have gained control over these matters, since accepting Advanced Placement (AP) or other credit can be a powerful recruiting tool. But generally this represents an unprofessional shifting of our responsibilities to those who know little about what we do; it is really the responsibility of the writing program to make this academic decision.

The brief discussion that follows may help make decisions about awarding credit for work done elsewhere a little easier, but the standard reference on this surprisingly thorny issue is now Kristine Hansen and Christine R. Farris’s College Credit for Writing in High School, an indispensable reference that includes information about tests as well as equivalent coursework. Most institutions have general policies about such matters, so the first step for WPAs is to find
and review campus policy on transfer credit and credit by examination. The next step is to consider whether that policy supports or undermines the goals of your writing program.

The most prominent national program designed to provide credit by examination for the required writing course is the College Board (CB) AP program, administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The CB Web site notes that 358,136 students took the English Language and Composition test in 2013 and the number keeps rising every year. Scores of 3, 4, and 5 are often awarded credit, though many institutions are wary of the score of 3. Most of those taking the AP test have taken an AP course in high school and AP argues that those courses not only elevate the high school curriculum but also are equivalent to required first-year college courses. The debate about whether that is in fact possible in the high school environment and whether the tests actually do measure what college courses teach has gone on for some decades. Most colleges have a policy on awarding AP credit as a replacement for the college course or using it to place students in an advanced writing class.

After reviewing current policy, the next task for WPAs is to review the test to see the degree to which its goals match the required course learning goals. The curricula don’t have to match, since there are many ways to achieve similar goals, but the goals themselves should. If the AP test is in fact appropriate for your curriculum, then the WPA would need to check the score level at which the school can appropriately award credit.

The second most common route to credit for first-year composition (FYC) without taking the college course is through dual enrollment, that is, passing a high school course somewhat like AP but without the test to back up the assertion of accomplishment. The quality of such programs varies widely, however, depending on the involvement of college faculty. In the worst cases, the college writing program does not involve itself at all with the high school claiming its course is equivalent to FYC and simply accepts the high school course for college credit. But often, a university will work with high schools in its vicinity to ensure the standards of the dual enrollment class, which can award both high school and college credit. When this occurs, dual enrollment can become a positive source of interaction between high school and college teachers and enrich the high school curriculum. It can help students put their senior year in high school to good use, enforce college standards for credit, and provide a smooth transition between high school and college for the students who take that course, whether or not they gain credit.

Other students may present the results of tests without coursework, as through the CB College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) or online courses without tests and only peer evaluation of writing, such as the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) sponsored by Coursera. We suggest consulting Hansen and Farris for more information about all of these ways of getting credit for the required writing course without taking it. Most writing programs are justly suspicious of them, since the required writing course is designed to be a route to success, not an empty hurdle.
WRITING ASSESSMENT ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

With depressing regularity, faculty outside the writing program, university administrators, and those who hire our graduates discover that some of our students do not write very well, even though they have met all requirements for the degree. Even though these faculty and administrators may argue that the fault lies with the writing program, since we do not insist on enough grammar drill in first-year composition, they nonetheless turn to us to solve the problem by giving a test. If we accept that logic, the debate centers on the nature of that test and its standards; what, if anything, we should do with the large number of students who fail it; who should pay for it all; and so on. If this scenario is not occurring on your campus, it probably has in the past or will in the future. So what position should the writing program take?

The most important principle is to reject all but one premise of the argument. We can easily accept the assertion that most students on campus do not write as well as we would like them to; neither do their teachers, for that matter. And when you look closely at its documents, the administration is not a model of great prose either. After all, we can point out, one of the problems with the first-year writing course is that it is seldom reinforced elsewhere in the curriculum. But we urge writing programs not to be drawn into a debate about the best method of testing out of graduation writing requirements. A test, no matter how carefully put together or how rigorously graded, is not the answer to this problem. We should not accept responsibility for the writing of students we have not seen since their first year on campus or for the transfer students we have never seen. And we should not agree to the absurd proposition that a single test can measure every student’s eligibility for a college degree, whatever the student’s major. The assessment issue, as is always the case, is a disguise for much larger concerns, here, “what level of literacy a degree in business or history or education represents.” As a faculty member, you must firmly and repeatedly insist that college graduation requirements are the responsibility of the entire faculty and any graduation requirement needs to be enforced by the department of the students’ major. Your job is to help them meet that responsibility, not to relieve them of it. This means standing ready to help your campus establish a culture of writing, to help faculty in all disciplines develop ways to use writing to help students learn, and to oversee a high-quality writing center as a resource for students and faculty writers. The writing program should also make it clear that it is eager to work with colleagues in all departments to help them meet rather than avoid their responsibility to improve student writing in their majors and it is in the major that any graduation writing requirement must reside. And, finally, the writing program should stand ready to advise the division of Institutional Research in developing studies of student writing outcomes by portfolio assessment in the major.

In short, we can accept the criticism of student writing and welcome the urge to do something about it. But we must decline to accept that it is the writing program’s sole responsibility to fix just as we must decline to participate in a trivial and invalid testing program as the sole campus response to the sit-
uation. Here, we should be able to say to the dean or the provost, here is a coherent plan to establish a writing across the curriculum program and here is another for a writing center; here is what it will cost. Furthermore, here is how we will evaluate the program’s outcomes. It is worth the money and you will be pleased with the results, but it cannot be done on the cheap or by WPAs alone.

USING IMPROMPTU WRITING AND GROUP SCORING FOR RESEARCH

The problem for many writing programs is that we know that our students improve, many of them greatly, but when it comes to convincing others, we find it hard to come up with evidence to prove it. One way to try to measure the gains students have made in writing ability in your course or writing program would be to give a placement or diagnostic essay at the opening and again at the end of the required course. For instance, you might give a personal experience essay for a placement test, which could also serve as a pretest for the research project. The same or a similar essay as a final examination would be the posttest and should demonstrate student improvement—if instruction in the course focused on personal experience writing. (It is a common mistake to use a pretest/posttest assessment without ensuring that what is being tested is in fact what is being taught; if the curriculum asks students to do text-based writing, you should choose topics like those in Chapter 5.) You can expect that students will write better, if they have had instruction and practice in that kind of writing. And, if you have taken some modest research precautions, you will have evidence for the effectiveness of your program.

To ensure that your results are trustworthy, take some precautions against unintentional skewing of the scores. For example, you might save the pretests and grade both pretests and posttests at the same time; furthermore, you could get someone else to cover names and dates and to code the papers so that you would not know whether a particular paper had been written at the beginning or the end of the term. Even more credible would be a system using two different topics. Half of your group could take each topic as a pretest, and each group could write on the other topic at the end of instruction. After coding, you and your colleagues could grade each question carefully and then compare group pretest scores with posttest scores. Of course, you will want questions that are parallel in their demands on the students (though no two essay questions are ever of exactly the same order of difficulty), and you will have to use identical scoring guides for this purpose.

If you use a system of this sort, you will want to be clear in your mind about the difference between scoring papers for your use (to learn, say, what you have taught most or least successfully), grading papers for the classification or certification of your students, and grading papers to provide evidence for the success of your program. Each of these purposes is legitimate in its own right, but each of them calls for a different approach to grading. For example, if you are grading papers to help students improve their work, you need to supply comments and prepare for discussion that will help students revise subsequent drafts, whereas scoring for a pretest/posttest study requires only highly
reliable grades. In addition, grading for the benefit of the students will tend to focus on what is best about the writing and often yield more encouraging higher scores, while a program assessment is more likely to focus on generating a reliable range of scores, with considerable concern for improving instruction in what the students do not do well.

But the cautions about the use—and misuse—of personal experience writing scores with which Chapter 5 began are particularly important in the case of pretesting and posttesting. If the composition program focuses on a particular kind of writing, often called a genre, a difference in scores will give useful information about the outcomes of the program. If, however, the program is principally concerned with other kinds of writing—argument, research, text-based analysis, or writing in the major—then information about improvements in writing personal essays will tell you very little. In every case, you will want to find ways to measure what has been taught.

Many writing programs now use group scoring—of many student essays by many writing teachers—for a variety of purposes. This procedure can provide important data for student placement, for certification of students applying for course exemption or credit, for program evaluation, and so on. With careful preparation and procedures, the scoring can be reasonably reliable and valid, though it is subject to the limitations of a single writing sample written under time limits. In any case, as we pointed out in Chapter 5, the evaluation of student writing has the additional professional and social by-product of bringing together faculty to discuss standards and the purposes of teaching writing. Nonetheless, this method of research remains relatively informal, with a history of yielding uncertain results. In recent years, the demands for program assessment have become more and more detailed and strict. We suggest in the next section that when the audience for the research findings becomes distant from the writing program or even distant from the campus, new methodologies adapted from the field of educational research are needed.

**PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE FUTURE**

The time is gone when we could ask the college community or the wider community to take our word or our private experience as proof that our writing program was achieving its important goals, particularly in the view of those who expect one first-year course to produce accomplished writers. This is not a trivial matter, since competition for limited funds is bound to increase as money for higher education becomes harder to come by. There have been several books, beginning in 1963, that have attempted to demonstrate the value of particular writing programs or set out assessment designs that may apply to all writing programs. We have suggested in this chapter one way to do this. But new demands for accountability will require advanced measurement devices, such as Phase 2 portfolio assessment, along with an advanced knowledge of educational measurement and statistics. The WPA must now defend the writing program and its resources, as well as coordinate the program itself, and provide evidence to outsiders who may not share our values or know of our
discipline’s long history. Until this year, we have had no accessible source to help with this endeavor, important though it has been. Now, Edward M. White has combined forces with Norbert Elliot, with his encyclopedic grasp of statistics and measurement, and Irvin Peckham, creator of a model program assessment as WPA at Louisiana State University, to produce such a guide: Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs. This resource provides in great detail options and patterns for writing program assessment that will be of use to anyone who needs more information on these matters.

EPILOGUE

Ironic as it may seem, this book (which began in its first edition two decades ago as a rather simple testing manual) has developed into an argument against simple uses of evaluation to trivialize the composition course. Wherever we have included an assessment device or a scoring guide, we have tried to hedge it with cautions, warn of its limitations, and guard against its misuse. The assignments in Chapter 1 show the broad range of advanced skills that college composition courses teach, and they demonstrate the great complexity of evaluation involved in responding usefully to student writing. No one should imagine that the writing assessments included here (or those used anywhere) measure more than they do; nor should the concern for measurable outcomes reduce the composition course to a mere matter of editing just because editing is relatively easy to test. Assessment is immensely useful for teaching and is certainly worthy of much more attention than it has usually received from writing teachers. A good composition course always involves regular evaluation of student work. But as we have suggested throughout this book, the misuse of assessment is a serious problem in American education. The student who has moved from some ability to handle the first personal experience essay in Chapter 5 to competency at handling the research paper assignment given at the end of Chapter 1 has made immense progress in a vast range of thinking, reading, and writing skills. Most writing courses in fact do bring students some distance along these largely uncharted paths. Assessment in writing should support this complex and difficult job: assessment should help students and teachers see how far they have come and how far they need to go without diminishing the adventure of the journey.

Selected References


APPENDIX

Important Educational Policies for Composition Teachers

GOALS STATEMENTS AND FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION


Conference on College Composition and Communication. *Position Statements*.
http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions


DIGITAL WRITING AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERACIES

http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/digitalenvironments

http://www.ncte.org/positions/21stcenturyliteracy

ESL AND SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING

http://www.ncte.org/library/nctefiles/groups/cccc/newsrtol.pdf

http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting
WPA OUTCOMES STATEMENT FOR FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION (V3.0)  
(ADOPTED 17 JULY 2014)

Introduction

This Statement identifies outcomes for first-year composition programs in U.S. postsecondary education. It describes the writing knowledge, practices, and attitudes that undergraduate students develop in first-year composition, which at most schools is a required general education course or sequence of courses. This Statement therefore attempts to both represent and regularize writing programs’ priorities for first-year composition, which often takes the form of one or more required general education courses. To this end it is not merely a compilation or summary of what currently takes place. Rather, this Statement articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research, and theory. It intentionally defines only “outcomes,” or types of results, and not “standards,” or precise levels of achievement. The setting of standards to measure students’ achievement of these Outcomes has deliberately been left to local writing programs and their institutions.

In this Statement “composing” refers broadly to complex writing processes that are increasingly reliant on the use of digital technologies. Writers also attend to elements of design, incorporating images and graphical elements into texts intended for screens as well as printed pages. Writers’ composing activities have always been shaped by the technologies available to them, and digital technologies are changing writers’ relationships to their texts and audiences in evolving ways.

These outcomes are supported by a large body of research demonstrating that the process of learning to write in any medium is complex: it is both individual and social and demands continued practice and informed guidance. Programmatic decisions about helping students demonstrate these outcomes should be informed by an understanding of this research.

As students move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, their abilities will diversify along disciplinary, professional, and civic lines as these writers move into new settings where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge. Therefore, this document advises faculty in all disciplines about how to help students build on what they learn in introductory writing courses.

Rhetorical Knowledge

Rhetorical knowledge is the ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act on that analysis in comprehending and creating texts. Rhetorical knowledge is the basis of composing. Writers develop rhetorical knowledge by nego-

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1 This Statement is aligned with the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, an articulation of the skills and habits of mind essential for success in college, and is intended to help establish a continuum of valued practice from high school through to the college major.
tiating purpose, audience, context, and conventions as they compose a variety of texts for different situations.

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Learn and use key rhetorical concepts through analyzing and composing a variety of texts
- Gain experience reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers’ and writers’ practices and purposes
- Develop facility in responding to a variety of situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure
- Understand and use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences
- Match the capacities of different environments (e.g., print and electronic) to varying rhetorical situations

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The expectations of readers in their fields
- The main features of genres in their fields
- The main purposes of composing in their fields

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts. When writers think critically about the materials they use—whether print texts, photographs, data sets, videos, or other materials—they separate assertion from evidence, evaluate sources and evidence, recognize and evaluate underlying assumptions, read across texts for connections and patterns, identify and evaluate chains of reasoning, and compose appropriately qualified and developed claims and generalizations. These practices are foundational for advanced academic writing.

By the end of first-year composition, students should

- Use composing and reading for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating in various rhetorical contexts
- Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations
- Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and Internet sources
• Use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer’s ideas with those from appropriate sources

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

• The kinds of critical thinking important in their disciplines
• The kinds of questions, problems, and evidence that define their disciplines
• Strategies for reading a range of texts in their fields

Processes

Writers use multiple strategies, or composing processes, to conceptualize, develop, and finalize projects. Composing processes are seldom linear: a writer may research a topic before drafting, then conduct additional research while revising or after consulting a colleague. Composing processes are also flexible: successful writers can adapt their composing processes to different contexts and occasions.

By the end of first-year composition, students should

• Develop a writing project through multiple drafts
• Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, reviewing, collaborating, revising, rewriting, rereading, and editing
• Use composing processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas
• Experience the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
• Learn to give and to act on productive feedback to works in progress
• Adapt composing processes for a variety of technologies and modalities
• Reflect on the development of composing practices and how those practices influence their work

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

• To employ the methods and technologies commonly used for research and communication within their fields
• To develop projects using the characteristic processes of their fields
• To review work-in-progress for the purpose of developing ideas before surface-level editing
• To participate effectively in collaborative processes typical of their field

Knowledge of Conventions

Conventions are the formal rules and informal guidelines that define genres, and in so doing, shape readers’ and writers’ perceptions of correctness or appropriateness. Most obviously, conventions govern such things as mechanics, usage, spelling, and citation practices. But they also influence content, style, organization, graphics, and document design.
Conventions arise from a history of use and facilitate reading by invoking common expectations between writers and readers. These expectations are not universal; they vary by genre (conventions for lab notebooks and discussion-board exchanges differ), by discipline (conventional moves in literature reviews in Psychology differ from those in English), and by occasion (meeting minutes and executive summaries use different registers). A writer’s grasp of conventions in one context does not mean a firm grasp in another. Successful writers understand, analyze, and negotiate conventions for purpose, audience, and genre, understanding that genres evolve in response to changes in material conditions and composing technologies and attending carefully to emergent conventions.

_by the end of first-year composition, students should_

- Develop knowledge of linguistic structures, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling, through practice in composing and revising
- Understand why genre conventions for structure, paragraphing, tone, and mechanics vary
- Gain experience negotiating variations in genre conventions
- Learn common formats and/or design features for different kinds of texts
- Explore the concepts of intellectual property (such as fair use and copyright) that motivate documentation conventions
- Practice applying citation conventions systematically in their own work

Faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn

- The reasons behind conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and citation systems in their fields or disciplines
- Strategies for controlling conventions in their fields or disciplines
- Factors that influence the ways work is designed, documented, and disseminated in their fields
- Ways to make informed decisions about intellectual property issues connected to common genres and modalities in their fields
Acknowledgments (continued from p. iv)


