Chapter 4

Constructing Effective Writing Assignments

This chapter offers some strategies, along with examples, for constructing not only individual assignment prompts but also sequences of writing assignments. As you contemplate the assignments included in this chapter, notice how they encourage students to approach writing tasks with some flexibility—to link the writing to their individual interests.

The last three essays of this chapter include a variety of writing-to-learn strategies and assignments, many of which can be used in writing-intensive courses in other disciplines as well as in composition courses. In general, these activities can serve to focus students' attention on understanding and personalizing course content. For each, consider how you might revise the assignment to encourage students to explore not only academic interests but also professional, personal, or civic ones.

Sequencing Writing Projects in Any Composition Class

From the Penn State University Composition Program Handbook

The following excerpt from the Penn State University Composition Program Handbook provides an overview of how writing assignments can be structured and sequenced to encourage engagement with all aspects of the writing process.

For each writing project in your course, whether you are teaching ENGL 015, ENGL 030, or ENGL 202, try to follow the general sequence of activities sketched out below. This procedure teaches students ways to plan throughout the process of a given writing project, makes students more aware of various activities that constitute the writing process, and provides them with excellent opportunities to consult with others about their work in progress.

The Overall Writing Assignment

Explain in class the nature of the project (sometimes using an example and, almost always, some full-class activity that gets all students involved in doing the particular sort of project you are assigning). Be sure the assignment involves subject, aim, genre, and audience. Then lead students through an invention activity to get each person thinking about his or her own project (usually involving a particular heuristic and speculative writing, followed by informal consultation with others). It usually makes sense to put assignments in writing but to avoid the overspecification that can lead students to write a fill-in-the-blanks response.

Topic Proposals

Topic proposals are informal plans that can serve writers in two ways: as tools for sorting out their ideas and planning, and as ways of consulting with others to get suggestions.

Proposals can be informal, as they often are in ENGL 015 ("In an essay, I want to persuade readers of King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' that King establishes ethos in several different ways"), or more formal, as they often are in ENGL 202 courses ("The Athletic Department would like to know whether men's basketball fans prefer games to start at 7:30 or 8:00. Thus, they assigned me to study the question and to write a recommendation report with an answer. The report will enable them to decide when to schedule games this winter"). In either case, proposals probably should contain the following:

- what you want to say (a hypothesis) or what issues you will try to resolve,
- for whom,
- for what purpose, and
- in what form or genre.

When students are in doubt about what to do for a given writing project, encourage them to sketch out a couple of proposals and talk over possibilities with others. Also encourage them to revise their plans as they work through a project.

If you have time, at least once before the proposals are handed in try to give students a chance to consult with each other (in groups of three or four). After they consult, allow them time (even just a few minutes in class) to revise their proposals before handing them in for your suggestions and approval. For the sake of encouraging good writing habits and discouraging academic dishonesty, it is probably best not to accept a paper unless the student has gained your permission to do it by means of a written proposal.

Rough Draft Workshop(s)

To encourage good writing habits, show students you care deeply about rough drafts. Suggestions for conducting writing workshops are described in a later section.

Final Self-Assessment and Reading

On the day the final writing is due, have writers do another self-assessment, using questions similar to those used for the rough draft assessment while adding a comment on the whole process (e.g., noting major changes from the draft to the final paper, commenting on the reasons for these changes, identifying a major problem encountered when writing the paper and how it was solved, commenting on a particular strategy they tried to use). Have students hand in their proposals, drafts, self-assessments, and reader responses. Again, do not grade papers handed in without a proposal and a rough draft.

Evaluation of Student Work

Read your students' papers carefully and return them in a timely way, annotated with praise and suggestions for improvement in appropriate areas. Suggestions for commenting are described in a later section. Grading standard policy sheets are included at the end of the handbook.

Further Reading

Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.

Nelson, Jennie. "This Was an Easy Assignment: Examining How Students Interpret Academic Writing Tasks." *Research in the Teaching of English* 24 (1990): 362–96.

Autobiography: The Rhetorical Efficacy of Self-Reflection/ Articulation

BONNIE LENORE KYBURZ
Utah Valley State College

Bonnie Kyburz offers an argument for constructing autobiographical assignments in composition courses. Sometimes teachers consider students' autobiographical writing as less intellectually rigorous than other forms of discourse, but Kyburz counters that view with convincing theoretical perspectives.

In envisioning the impact of autobiographical writing on my life and work, I've seen Donald Murray's textual reminder: "All writing is autobiography" (66). I have always imagined that Murray is correct, and if he is—and I think that he is—then we must consider the potential power of exploring with students the nature of autobiography.

I believe that autobiography may be especially crucial to students' development as writers. Yet autobiography is often maligned as self-indulgent, as naively willing to privilege outmoded notions of subjectivity, as unproductively "expressive" in the rigidly codified Berlinian taxonomy (Berlin, "Rhetoric," *Rhetorics*). Perhaps the most daunting for autobiographical practices in composition has been the postmodern critique of subjectivity. Yet, despite postmodernist assaults on the notion of the subject and notions of individual agency, Murray's contention continues to make sense in light of our understanding that all writing emerges from writers unable to escape who they are at the historical moment of articulation, unable to disengage themselves from an infinite variety of ideological influences that determine them as unique, however socially constructed and capable of change. Thus, all writing "speaks" of and from a complex and multivocal "source" or "self," however problematic.

For autobiography critic James Olney,

> tracing an autobiographical text back from manifestation to source, one sees it recede into a fine and finer point, and there, where it disappears into its own center, is the spiritual mind of man, a great shape-maker impelled forever to find order in himself and to give it to the universe. (17)

Olney underscores the notion of the writer as capable of creating order from chaos. Murray seems to agree with Olney, and his agreement resonates in his endorsement of autobiography for writing courses in which students learn to "make meaning through language" (67).

For Murray, making meaning through language clarifies, to himself and to his audience, the ways in which his "voice is the product of Scottish genes and a Yankee environment, of Baptist sermons and the newspaper city room, of *all the language I have heard and spoken*" (67; emphasis added). This understanding of the ways in which subjectivity is shaped, and "individuality" is attenuated, by the language(s) we are born into and the cultures we inhabit, is derived from critical engagement with processes of articulating "the self," through language, at a particular historical moment, in a particular cultural situation. Such knowledge may be critical for students as they work through their student roles to gain rhetorical skills and some sense of the power of those skills; such knowledge may be capable of encouraging students to see themselves as capable agents rather than as submissive clones or members of an oppressed class of individuals in the community of the intellectual elite.

Autobiographical writing processes may also embody possibilities for critical consciousness that may be important for students' intellectual, public, and personal well-being. As bell hooks suggests, autobiographical writing may be important for the synthesis of theory and practice, particularly in terms of theorizing that is capable of catalyzing Freirean processes of conscientization (processes through which we gain critical consciousness): "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (61).

My theorizing on autobiography is shaped in various ways by Murray, hooks, and other important voices, among them Mike Rose, Peter Elbow, John Trimbur, and Kurt Spellmeyer; it would take a lifetime to explain the infinite ways in which such voices have bolstered my imagination as I have worked in the classroom. Synthesizing these voices is not wholly possible in these pages. But let me suggest what such a synthesis allows me to theorize: it allows me to consider autobiographical practices as capable of catalyzing for students—in ways unseen and objectively unverifiable—a belief in the power of language, to see how they've been shaped by culture and ideologies once considered essentially ineffectual in light of "autonomy" and "American individualism." In this way, autobiography renders the "autonomous self" highly problematic, underscoring postmodern critiques on subjectivity in the process of exploring personal experiences in writing. I consider the work of self-reflection and conscientization to be delicately and importantly symbiotic, and for this reason, I find that autobiographical writing processes are intensely useful for students of first-year composition.

As I reflect on the ways in which autobiography has informed my theoretical and pedagogical orientations, I recall student writing that is rhetorically powerful; I recall processes that have been challenging, pleasurable, exciting, and capable of encouraging students to learn essential rhetorical concepts early in their college careers. In particular, I recall autobiography as capable of promoting students' awareness of the need for an engaging thesis—explicitly or implicitly articulated—which is both supported by reasons and evidence, and rendered problematic as a means of exploring further the rigid meanings and myths they might ordinarily assign to writing produced in institutional contexts.

If autobiographical writing is promoted as engaging, pleasurable, and rhetorical, student writers are likely to find studies in rhetoric less daunting than they might if we begin by teaching Latinate terms and phrases that serve not to invite students to "invent the university" or to truly "make meaning" but to alienate them and to render their creative and intellectual strengths impotent or invalid. Instead, teaching autobiography not as genre but as rhetorical strategy, we may encourage students to think about their experiences and the world(s) that shapes them. By

breaking the natural "boundaries" of genre thinking, and by encouraging critical engagement not only with the self but also with the complex ways in which the self is shaped by and responds to the world, we disavow the notion of autobiography as exclusively expressionistic in Berlinian terms. We work instead within the social constructionist rubric that includes "self" and "world." We desegregate two key literacy myths that Shirley K. Rose identifies as "autonomy" and "participation" (4). S. Rose notes that "because autonomy and participation suggest opposite poles of experience . . . writers' representations imply that the two myths contradict one another and that an individual must make a choice between them," but that the two myths are actually reconciled in many key autobiographies, among them those of Malcolm X, Richard Rodriguez, and Maxine Hong Kingston (4). S. Rose suggests that autobiographical writing may reconcile myths of autonomy and participation, confirming what hooks sees as a process of conscientization that occurs as we work critically through processes of self-articulation.

In addition to bridging personal and public lives through autobiography (where Phillip Lopate is especially effective), which renders the "autonomous self" problematic, autobiographical writing may promote students' awareness of the nature of the theses they've learned about (usually in high school), those theses that are often unimaginative and dualistic, those that have a clear "counterpoint" and are thus unproblematic in a comprehensive sense. Through autobiography, for instance, they may learn that claims and assertions must be supported and that the support they choose is determined by the rhetorical context. I like to teach autobiographical strategies in the context of artistic proofs—as powerful imagistic language, metaphors and similes, thick description and detail that may be particularly useful to writers who seek to use Aristotelian appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos, whatever their aim. In this way, autobiographical strategies may promote student writing that is more engaging and imaginative even as it advances clearly articulated arguments that are appropriate for the college level.

Over the years, I've thought carefully about the ways in which autobiographical writing is particularly useful for first-year students, who generally have very specific notions about what

"college writing" is. In my experience, many first-year students carry with them a notion of college writing as cut-and-paste arguments, arguments that are unimaginatively dyadic, lifeless, and passive. Such works can be considered the product of what Richard Miller calls a "pedagogy of obedience" (41), or of what Freire derides as the "banking" model (54), in which, as bell hooks notes, "pleasure" and "excitement" are missing lest a teacher make it his or her mission to "transgress" such staid traditions of academic "order" in favor of a truly liberating pedagogy (7).

In short, I've come to see that autobiographical writing is rhetorical, and that autobiography can be useful, pedagogically, in many important ways, including these:

1. Autobiographical writing can be used strategically to deconstruct familiar pedagogies with which students are at ease, compliant with, and complacent about.

2. Autobiographical writing may be used to generate hybrid pedagogies that incorporate rhetorical sophistication, critical cultural and personal inquiry, and playfulness. Autobiography may be used as part of what Richard Miller calls a "pedagogy of exploration," forcing on students the burden of critical thinking at a time when the familiar makes transitions easier and recognizing that "exploration," with its postcolonial connotative value, also implies a kind of "contamination," the kind students encounter when writing on demand in institutionalized settings (Miller 51). Students may explore the politics of literacy, thus encouraging their ability to problematize who they are and who they may become in the context of a particular historical and cultural moment.

3. Autobiographical writing is capable of assisting students as they unwittingly discover ways to argue effectively, even passionately, in the context of their own interests, which are not prescribed. In this way, autobiography may encourage students to understand the power of rhetoric in their personal, academic, and civic lives as they come to understand ways in which they are constructed by and connected to the social contexts in which they live.

For these reasons, and many others, autobiographical writing processes are capable of encouraging students to develop critical consciousness through self-recovery and social participation. Such work encourages students to engage in both reflection and action as they work through their often submissive positions as students, as the educationally oppressed. In this way, such work encourages students to heed Freire when he passionately suggests that "we cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects" (qtd. in hooks 46).

Works Cited

Berlin, James A. "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." *College English* 50 (1988): 477–94.

———. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. Ed. Steven North. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder, 1970.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor, 1994.

Miller, Richard E. "What Does It Mean to Learn? William Bennett, the Educational Testing Service, and a Praxis of the Sublime." *Journal of Composition Theory* 16 (1996): 41–60.

Murray, Donald. "All Writing Is Autobiography." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (1991): 66–74.

Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: Free, 1989.

Rose, Shirley K. "Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy: Autobiographical Narratives by Maxine Hong-Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, and Malcolm X." *Melus* 14 (1987): 3–15.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993.

Trimbur, John. "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis. *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary.* Gen. Ed. Charles I. Schuster. Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur. Portsmouth, NJ: Boynton/ Cook, 1991.

Deliberative Writing

FROM THE GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT HANDBOOK
AT MICHIGAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
(http://www.hu.mtu.edu/~mmcooper/gtahandbook/deliberative.html)

The following material discusses the role of deliberative writing in a first-year composition curriculum and provides examples of viable topics for deliberative essays.

You may find this material useful not only as you describe deliberative writing in your syllabus, but also as you construct specific writing assignments focusing on deliberative writing.

Deliberative Writing

All first-year writing courses at Michigan Tech teach deliberative writing. Deliberative writing addresses an issue of concern to the writer and to the writer's community and attempts to develop a useful position on the issue, a position that serves as a good ground for action or a better resolution of problems. In deliberative writing, the writer considers thoughtfully others' ideas and positions, trying to understand the reasons others hold these ideas and positions, and considering whether they can be adopted or adapted to form part of the writer's position.

In developing and arguing for a useful position on an issue, deliberative writing does not rely on common sense. Common sense, or what most people believe to be true, may or may not be true. Deliberative writing often explores whether or not what seems to be common sense is really true. Deliberative writing always relies on evidence to support a position—people's real experiences, recorded history, observations, the results of research.

In writing deliberatively on an issue, you offer evidence and reasons for your position because other people will not automatically agree with you, and you want to find the most reasonable position because how the issue is resolved matters to you and to others.

Many students have learned to support their own opinions or preferences in essays but not to consider issues about which there are serious differences of opinion. In defining an issue to write about, they need to be helped to find an issue that has serious consequences in our society and that people hold different opinions on.

Examples

NOT: The history of the Internet. (This is a topic, not even an issue.)

NOT: The Internet offers a world of possibilities. (Who would disagree?)

YES: The Internet is improving the workplace by allowing people to work at home and by stimulating the growth of small businesses in remote areas.

NOT: Alternative music is better than mainstream music. (This is a simple preference; whether you like one kind of music or another has no serious consequences.)

NOT: When mainstream music producers take over popular alternative bands, they destroy their individuality. (Better, but still more an observation; why does this matter?)

YES: The music business only promotes music that has broad appeal, thus restricting the variety of music available. (Restricting choice of music is an issue that has broad cultural consequences.)

Another way to look at a position is that it is an answer to the question readers ask on reading a lot of information: "So

what?" or "How does this affect my life?" Obviously, in order to consider the various possible positions on an issue and to develop a useful position of their own, students need to consult and refer to a broad array of sources of information on the issue. But the information and ideas they draw from sources are used to help them understand the issue, develop a position on it, and offer evidence to support their position. Deliberative writing is not the same as writing a research paper.

The purpose of deliberative writing is to find reasonable resolutions to issues of concern, not just to report information.

The readings students do in the textbook for the class are one source of ideas and information, but in all first-year writing classes students should also be asked to find sources beyond their textbooks. Many will turn first to the Internet, which can supply lots of good information on some issues but might not be so useful on other issues. In addition to the Internet, students should be encouraged to use *library* sources, particularly newspaper, magazine, and journal articles, government documents, and archival information. Movies, television, their friends, their parents and other relatives, and other faculty at Michigan Tech can also be good sources of information, depending on the issue they are addressing.

Rhetorical Analysis: Terms of Contention

ANDY CROCKETT
Pima Community College

Andy Crockett's essay demonstrates the importance of exploring the definitions of key terms in building arguments, and provides sample assignments that encourage engagement with the defining process.

By rhetorically analyzing key terms in controversial issues, students learn the multiple contexts that shape and finally define these issues. A key or pivotal term serves as a doorway to greater understanding of the issue, so that when students have conducted a thorough rhetorical analysis of a key term, they can appreciate the complexity of an issue and shape a personal stance. As a result, students grow in metacognitive ability and gain currency in intellectual culture.

Likewise, learning the flexible and contextual nature of words helps students appreciate the role of rhetoric in democracy. As Bakhtin tells us, language is both centripetal and centrifugal: unifying and diversifying, self-identical and self-different. Thus, for students, citizens, or senators to engage in meaningful debate, they must agree on the meaning of key terms; their language must be centripetal, shared. But the centrifugal property of language, the tendency of words to reflect and deflect one another and thus to multiply meaning, forces students to recognize that meanings are social, complex, and ever evolving. (Burke's idea that communication happens in the tension between identification and division, sameness and difference, speaks to the same phenomenon.) Thus, the aforementioned debate can and often does turn in on itself, making the very definitions of words the ultimate "stakes."

The abortion rights conflict, for instance, returns again and again to the meaning of life—when does it begin? Is dependent or developing life truly viable or human? (Is a fetus dependent?) Should mere mortals defer to science or to religion when making this determination? And what does it mean to put one's faith in science or religion? As the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure showed us, life means something because it is not death, though students might feel most alive when plunging off a bridge at the end of a bungee cord. In other words, life accrues meaning from the related "terms" clustered around it: survival, work, play, health, quality, vital signs, faith, consciousness, and so on. The controversial ethicist Peter Singer (known for jump-starting the animal rights movement when he claimed that a healthy chimpanzee is more deserving of life than a vegetative or otherwise profoundly disabled human) bases much of his utilitarian ethics on notions of awareness and consciousness.

As I write, the country and the world wrestle with reconfigurations of the terms *competition* and *monopoly* within the realms of finance and telecommunications. When banks and brokerage firms merge as a result of deregulation, do we get more or less competition? When Disney weds AT&T, do consumers have more options at their disposal, or do they live more at the mercy of these conglomerates? Another instance is Bill Gates's Microsoft-Internet Explorer package. Defenders argue that Gates has played by the rules of the market and won; others argue that the ends don't justify the means when the tactics are "unethical." At any rate, in order to take a meaningful stand on this issue, one must contend with the terms *free market, fairness,* and *justice,* not to mention *success* and *ethics.*

The recent debate over how best to handle an impeached president teemed with power words and often zoomed in on them, turning the dispute into a metaconflict over interpretation. What combatants quickly found, of course, is that meaning is contextual and that interpretations are inflected by one's values and experiences. They may also find that they are mistaken as to a word's denotative meaning. *Impeach,* for example, despite its iambic kick, is a lower house hearing, not removal, not even a trial. Likewise, by learning a term's history or etymology, students gain historical perspective. *The American Heritage Dictionary* tells us that nothing hobbles a president so much as impeachment, and there is an etymological as well as procedural reason for this. The word *impeach* can be traced back through Anglo-Norman *empecher* to Late Latin *impedicere,* "to catch, entangle," from Latin *pedica,* "fetter for the ankle, snare." Thus, we find that Middle English *empechen,* the ancestor of our word, means such things as "to cause to get stuck fast," "hinder or impede," "interfere with," and "criticize unfavorably." A legal sense of *empechen* is first recorded in 1384. This sense, which had previously developed in Old French, was "to accuse, bring charges against." A further development of the sense had specific reference to Parliament and its formal accusation of treason or other high crimes, a process that the United States borrowed from the British. Although we have used it rarely at the federal level, impeachment stands as the ultimate snare for those who would take advantage of the public trust.

During impeachment hearings in the House, people argued about what the founders of the Constitution intended as the proper threshold for impeachment. Many have argued, however, that Madison, Hamilton, and others were deliberately vague about the criteria for impeachment, or at least for removal, leaving that all-important interpretation up to officials engaged in actual democratic debate, thus underscoring the connection between meaning and practice, words and situations. Because the dictionary fails to clarify meaning (and meaningful action), members of Congress and citizens made analogies between Clinton's situation and others in which impeachment was considered. Hamilton himself was threatened with impeachment for paying hush money to the husband of the woman with whom he had an affair. Hamilton, however, confessed publicly, and he was not "persecuted" by an independent prosecutor or partisan politicians. Federal judges have been impeached for perjury, but should judges and their work be viewed in a different context? Is a perjurer a liar in any case, and does a Senate trial set a dangerous precedent for the office of president? The linguistic possibilities are endless.

Lesson

Students read two essays representing opposing viewpoints on an issue. First, they write a summary of each essay, defining its central argument or thesis and its major supporting points. Second, working in small groups they compare summaries. This can be enlightening, for what is obvious or salient to one student may not be to another. It is also valuable to have students characterize the persona of the essay and the tone of voice, supporting their claims with concrete textual evidence. Again, what may sound ironic to one student may ring utterly sincere to another. Students can begin to reconcile the differences in what they "hear" by considering the baggage (conditioning, beliefs, experiences, values) they bring to their reading experience.

Next, students select a key term to study contextually. (This can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. The benefit of additional people working with the same term is that the potential facets they can unveil increase exponentially, leading them

to related terms.) Their task is multifold: One, using a college dictionary, they write down the denotative definitions of a term. Two, consulting a thesaurus, they investigate the term's connotative meanings. Three, using the definitions they have found and the essays themselves, they identify related terms (including antonyms). The main term and its related terms form a word cluster. (For instance, *law* would be clustered with *code, rule, convention, custom, agreement, folkway, principle,* etc., as well as *crime,* perhaps *anarchy,* and so forth. It could also be subclassified into constitutional law, case law, statutory law.) Four, students consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* to gain a historical perspective of their chosen term (they should photocopy that page of the *OED* and bring it to class). Five, in light of their exploration, students return to the articles they are reading and write a new précis.

Student Writing

1. Working alone or with others, students create a taxonomy from their cluster of related terms. The taxonomy must address denotative, connotative, and contextual (i.e., the present and how the past informs the present) meanings. This taxonomy can be portrayed as a tree with branches and historical "roots," or it can be a map with illustrations, road signs, streets, arrows, perhaps geographical barriers, and of course inhabitants. It will probably be organized by categories such as legal, moral, ethical, and constitutional, if not tribal and political. Students present the taxonomy to the class and report what they've learned and how their opinions have changed.

2. Students write a rhetorical analysis of the role their key term—and its family of related terms—plays in the issue. Thus, they will analyze how the various players in the issue use the term, including the conditions or threshold for agreement and the sparks for disagreement. The purpose of the rhetorical analysis is to teach their classmates, their teacher, and themselves not simply the meaning of the term but also the meaning of the issue.

3. Finally, students write a formal argument employing what they have learned. They may take a stand on the general issue or argue for an interpretation of their key term. At any rate, the key terms will focus the students' essays.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. (Original work published as *Voprosy literatury i estetiki,* Moscow, 1975.)

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1945.

de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. New York: Avon, 1977.

Assignment Prompt

EDWARD A. KEARNS
University of Northern Colorado

Edward Kearns describes a novel assignment that requires students to critically examine issues raised by newspapers published on their birthdays.

Assignment

Students examine newspapers published on the day of their birth (or their parents' or grandparents' births)—or newsmagazines

printed during that week—then write a three- to five-page essay. The source provides ample material; the task is to make sense of it: to establish a unifying theme or perspective. Simply reporting on various stories, editorials, ads, and so forth won't do; raw data of any kind is meaningless without a point of view or underlying structure that establishes relationships and meaning.

Of course, students will want teachers to supply examples of unifying themes, and certainly we can do that, but insisting that the students simply examine the raw material to "see what it suggests" leads to brainstorming/inventing and to the discovery that doing research without prior frames of reference is in itself inventive and stimulating. Creativity in any art often amounts simply to juxtaposing forms or materials in uncommon ways—hence, for example, metaphors such as "pearl of blood" or "blue roses." Simultaneously, the analysis and synthesis required offers an exercise in inductive reasoning.

If students have trouble, however, teachers can suggest comparing today's prices or clothing styles to "back then," or ask, "What does advertising tell us about people's tastes, behavior, or interests twenty years ago?"; "What do movies and television shows (or bestsellers, or pop music) tell us about ______ (fill in 'values,' 'taste,' 'censorship,' etc.)"; "Where did _______ (a piece of legislation, an event, a trend) lead?"

The assignment provides a bridge from personal narratives to formal exposition, to research, and to writing with sources—while retaining the motivational value of personal writing. Such research might be used, for example, to contextualize personal memories. It requires students to work with categorical (rather than chronological) organizational structures and leads to longer, more complicated expository tasks such as writing papers about entire decades, developments in various fields, shifting values, pop culture trends, and so on. It can even lead back to narrative and fiction since story writers commonly conduct such research to create atmosphere and verisimilitude for their stories.

Profile Assignment

Sarah T. Duerden, Jeanne Garland, and
Christine Everhart Helfers
Arizona State University

Duerden, Garland, and Helfers outline a series of assignments that expand the scope of profile projects by asking students to make connections between their professional or academic interests and their writing.

Rationale for the Assignment

Because the profile genre requires students to integrate their observations and field research into a paper, it is a useful and enjoyable assignment that can lead naturally into assignments requiring integration of research. The profile can also be used to help students begin to think about their careers and the professions they would like to enter. Although this may seem premature for first-year students, with the increasing pressure to complete a degree in four years, students benefit from investigating career choices early on.

This profile assignment, developed by the three of us, asks engineering students to discover what engineers really do in their professions. We developed this assignment in response to the number of engineering students who realize at some point in their degree programs that engineering involves much more than good math and science skills. Nevertheless, many students are advised to enter engineering because they excelled in these subjects in high school. They have less understanding of the additional oral and written communication skills, teamwork skills, and creative skills they will need to develop. Therefore, our profile assignment asks students to interview a professional engineer, attend a presentation by another professional engineer, and integrate that material into a profile that shows high school students what the engineering profession involves.

The assignment is presented to students as a problem they can solve through a piece of writing. We find this approach useful with engineering students since members of their profession often regard themselves as problem solvers; however, we have also used this terminology with nonengineers to encourage students to see that we usually write for a purpose rather than just because a teacher has asked us to do so. Their task is outlined in the solution. They must write a profile of an engineer they have interviewed, but they must also incorporate material from a presentation and material from a book on engineering. In this way, students learn to synthesize multiple sources, a task which allows us to discuss the question of validity of sources. The assignment sheet also identifies the purpose and audience for the piece of writing. In all of our early assignments, we give students a specific purpose and audience; as the semester progresses, we remove this scaffold and ask students to create their own audiences and purposes. Thus, our early assignments also act as models for students as they learn to create their own rhetorical situations for their writing. Finally, the assignment identifies the constraints within which the students must write. Again, we deliberately employ this term because it is one they work with in engineering. As the semester progresses, we also remove this scaffold so that by the end of the semester, students develop their own constraint lists—constraints the rhetorical situations have created.

Having students complete this assignment is beneficial in many ways. By writing the profile, students discover for themselves—from the mouths of "real engineers"—what working as a professional involves. They identify the skills they will need to develop during their university careers. If they focus solely on developing outstanding math and science skills and neglect teamwork, communication, and creative skills, they will find themselves ill prepared for the workplace. Students also learn to incorporate quotations in a natural way because they are quoting their interviewee and other sources to support the interviewee's claims about the profession. We have found that this approach helps students make the transition from assignments that focus on themselves to assignments that focus on issues outside their personal experience.

We later revised this assignment for use with non-engineering students. This time, we asked them to interview someone in a profession they had themselves worked in or one they hoped to work in. We also asked them to find supporting material on the Web or by using Career Services. A second option was based on an essay that argues that part-time jobs teach students few useful skills. Since most students have worked in part-time jobs in high school or currently work while they are in college, we felt they would have easy access to someone they could interview.

This version of the assignment proved successful. Some students interviewed relatives who worked in professions they wanted to enter, and so the assignment allowed them to discover more about their potential future careers. Others interviewed friends who held part-time positions, and several found that although they thought they would prove that part-time jobs are a positive benefit to students, their observations and subsequent profiles showed otherwise. They saw the problems their peers experienced juggling work schedules, schoolwork, family duties, and social lives.

Invention Activities

With both engineering and non-engineering students, we do a number of activities to help them think about whom they might interview. Once the students have decided on subjects, they can work on a list of questions they want to ask. Again, we often practice this in class by using ourselves (teachers) as professional interviewees and asking students to design questions for us. Then we give them invention sheets to fill in for the presentation and for the interview. (Both are appended at the end of this assignment.) Students may use the invention sheets to arrange the materials and use the tables to further organize those materials.

The Assignment for Engineers

PROBLEM #2: WRITING A PROFILE
First Draft Due: Friday, October 2
Second Draft Due: Monday, October 5
Polished Draft due: Friday, October 9

Situation

You are one of several student representatives for the first-year engineering program. You have just met with the dean of engineering and the president of the university. At the meeting, the dean and the president discussed the low retention rate in engineering. After the first year, almost 30 percent of the students change majors. The dean and the president asked you to review a questionnaire distributed to students who left engineering at the end of last year. One response stands out. Many of these students said they changed majors because engineering is not what they thought it would be. In fact, many felt they had been poorly advised in high school, where advisors had often recommended engineering as a career because the student was good at math and science. However, upon entering the university, many have found that engineering requires a number of skills, including communication skills and teamwork skills. At the next meeting, you explain this to the president and the dean, and they ask you to help them come up with a solution that will help future engineering students.

Solution

You and the other representatives decide to write profiles of a particular type of engineer that will be distributed to high school students considering a career in engineering. These individual profiles of a mechanical engineer, a civil engineer, an electrical engineer, and so on will be assembled and given to high school students so that they can gain a more realistic view of engineering before they begin their university careers. Therefore, your assignment is to profile a particular engineer.

Base your writing on an interview with a professional engineer you know, or a senior engineering student about to graduate, or an engineering professor. (Of course you can interview

relatives.) In addition, draw on the material that Joe Circello presented and on Chapter 2 of James L. Adams's *Flying Buttresses, Entropy, and O-Rings: The World of an Engineer* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) in which Adams defines engineering. Adams begins with dictionary definitions, though these do not prove to be very useful. He then discusses misconceptions people have about engineering, the variety of professionals who classify themselves as engineers, the kind of work they do, the range of knowledge engineers must possess, and various definitions and descriptions applied to engineering.

Your Purpose

Your purpose in this paper is to inform potential engineering students about the kinds of work typically done by a specific professional engineer, his or her allocation of time for various tasks and activities, and so on.

Your Audience

Your readers are high school students who know little about what professional engineers do but who are considering engineering as a career because they are good at math and science.

CONSTRAINTS:

- You must interview and use quotes from a professional engineer, a senior engineering student, or an engineering professor in this profile.
- You should also use material from Joe Circello's presentation and material from Adams as further support for your profile.
- When you quote or paraphrase your interviewee or Joe Circello, you must make it clear that this is their idea. Thus, you should use signal phrases in your sentences such as "According to Joe Circello" or "Joe Circello explains." Make sure that you explain their expertise the first time you mention these people in your profile. Also note that you should use the present tense: "Circello explains," not "Circello explained."

- When you are relying on Adams, make sure you identify the ideas that belong to him by using signal phrases such as "According to Adams" or "James Adams explains that." Again, initially explain Adams's expertise to your readers. You must follow quotations or paraphrases with in-text parenthetical citations (the page number[s] in parentheses) as we discussed in class. Also, see the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing,* pages 595–605. Again, remember to use the present tense: "Adams says," not "Adams said."
- You must include a copy of your interview questions with your paper.
- You must write for your audience. Since they are high school students, you may have to define unfamiliar terms and give examples and comparisons.
- You will need a thesis in your introduction. In your textbook, this is called a "dominant impression." All paragraphs in your essay must support that thesis. There should be an obvious order to your paragraphs, and each paragraph should develop only one idea.
- You can choose to organize your profile topically or chronologically (a day in the life of). See page 140–142 of your textbook for details.

Format

- Length: 4 to 5 typed pages or 1000–1250 words, double-spaced with one-inch margins. Include your name, our names, and the class time in the top right-hand corner of the first page. Number pages, please. Page 1 is always counted but it is not numbered on your work, so you must suppress that number on the first page. Give your work a title that is not in caps and is centered on your first page, and begin typing your essay one double space below your title.
- Include a separate alphabetized works cited page.
- See page 628 of your textbook for a sample works cited

page. See page 605 for how to cite the book by Adams. See page 612 for how to cite a personal interview. Use the following format to cite Joe Circello's presentation:

Circello, Joe. Presentation. Foundation Coalition Program. Arizona State University, Tempe. 23 Sept., 1998.

Assignment Revised for Students Other Than Engineers

(Much of the instructional information in this adaptation of the assignment echoes the first; in such cases, repetitive text has been omitted.)

WRITING A PROFILE
Due Dates (same)

With your polished draft, you must submit the following materials:

1. All invention work
2. All drafts
3. All peer review work
4. Interview notes
5. Article from print or Web sources
6. Reflection on writing to be written in class on Wednesday, October 7 (see page 152 of *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* for the prompt)

Format
Length: 4–5 TYPED PAGES OR 1000–1250 WORDS
Spacing: double-spaced with one-inch margins
Number pages: Put your name and page number on each page.
Title: Give your work a title that is not in caps and is centered on

your first page, and begin typing your essay one double space below your title.

Option One

Choose a profession that you believe people have mistaken notions about. It may be one that you would like to enter, or one that you have already worked in, or one that a relative works in. You will find sources about professions by going to Career Development in Career Services (3rd floor of the Student Services Building). You may also use the Web. I have found the following Web site especially helpful: http://www.jobprofiles.com/.

You can also search the library indexes of magazines for profiles of careers.

Situation

As a member of the Professional Organization of (add the profession here), you have just attended a conference in which you and your colleagues discussed the low numbers of new graduates entering your profession. One member of the conference presented a survey showing that a number of high school students interviewed about your profession either had mistaken notions about the profession or knew little about it. (Remember how David Noonan tries to correct mistaken notions about surgeons and their attitudes in his profile.)

Solution

Write a profile of this professional that could be distributed to high school students considering a career in this profession. This would allow these students to gain a more realistic view of the profession before they begin their university careers. Base your writing on an interview with a professional you know in that field, or a senior student about to graduate and work in that profession who has done an internship. (Of course you can interview relatives.) In addition, you will need to find an article that describes that profession. You should include this material with your paper when you hand it in for grading.

Your Purpose

Your purpose in this paper is to inform potential students about various aspects of this professional's workload, including how he or she typically works and on what time frame, the nature and variety of tasks completed, the skills he or she needs, and so on.

Your Audience

Your readers are high school students who know little about what professionals in this field do but who are considering this as a career.

CONSTRAINTS:

- You must interview a professional for this profile and quote extensively from that source in your paper.
- You should also use material from another source such as a print article or material from the World Wide Web. You must include copies of these sources with your paper.
- When you quote or paraphrase your interviewee, you must make it clear that this is their idea. [Omitted here are the rules for paraphrasing cited in the earlier assignment sheet.]
- You must include a copy of your interview notes with your paper.
- When you are relying on other sources, make sure you identify the ideas that belong to that author by using signal phrases such as "According to Adams" or "James Adams explains that." [Omitted here are the rules for using quotes cited in the earlier assignment sheet.]
- You must write for your audience. Since they are high school students, you may have to define unfamiliar terms and give examples and comparisons.
- You will need a thesis in your introduction. [Again, students are instructed to consult the *St. Martin's Guide*.]

- You can choose to organize your profile topically or chronologically (a day in the life of). See pages 140–142 of *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* for details.

Option Two

Many educators believe that part-time jobs do little to teach high school students useful skills. In fact, many believe that such jobs harm students because they take away time students need to spend on their studies. Read "Working at McDonald's" (*St. Martin's Guide to Writing,* pp. 299–300) for an example of someone who feels that part-time jobs in high school are a waste of time.

Situation

Imagine that the PTA of the local high school you attended read this article and is now considering asking students not to work part time.

Solution

If you agree with the premise of the article on McDonald's, write a profile of someone you know who does a part-time job, showing how that job is not teaching the student useful skills. If you disagree with the premise of the article, write a profile of someone who does a part-time job showing how that job teaches students useful skills.

Your Purpose

To persuade the PTA that they should support the ban on part-time jobs or to persuade them that they should not support the ban.

Your Audience

Your readers are parents of high school students.

CONSTRAINTS:

- You must interview a student who holds a part-time job and quote that person extensively.

- You should also use the article "Working at McDonalds."
- When you quote or paraphrase your interviewee, you must make it clear that this is their idea. [Again, rules for paraphrasing are typically reiterated here.]
- You must include a copy of your interview notes with your paper.
- When you are relying on other sources, make sure you identify the ideas that belong to that author by using signal phrases such as "According to Adams" or "James Adams explains that."
- You must write for your audience. You may need to explain and give examples for this audience.
- You will need a thesis in your introduction. [Include instructions on paragraph and essay organization from earlier instructions.]
- You can choose to organize your profile topically or chronologically (a day in the life of). See page 140–142 of the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* for details.

Observation Notes for Profile

Prior to class, answer the following questions:

- What do I already know about engineers?
- What words do I associate with them?
- What kinds of work do I think they do?
- What skills do I think they have to possess?
- What skills are less important to them?
- What do I expect to discover?
- What would surprise me?

- What do most people think about engineers?
- What would most people be surprised to discover?

How do my views of engineers differ from most people's views?
Observation Notes for Profile

During or immediately after class, fill out the following:

- Name, Company, Position
- Years of work/overview of career
- Physical appearance
- Key points discussed
- Least surprising
- Most surprising
- Dominant impression
- Quotation or paraphrase

Invention Sheet for Writing a Profile

You have now gathered a lot of information. Use this invention sheet to help you begin to sort out and organize that information.

- What is my purpose in this profile?
- Who are my readers and what must I do to meet their needs in this profile?
- What have I learned about a professional engineer that I found surprising or new?
- Does that differ from what most people think, and if so, how?

- Could I turn that into a thesis?
- How would I describe this person professionally?
- How would I describe this person physically?
- Should I organize my material topically? If I organize topically, what topics should I focus on?
- Which source deals with each topic?
- If I organize chronologically (a day in the life of), when do I begin? What events or actions do I describe? Should I include a description of the workplace?
- What source will help me support my description of a particular event or action?
- Should I begin this profile with a striking image or vivid scene, an interesting fact, an anecdote, a question, or a piece of dialogue?
- Should I close this profile with a new image, an anecdote, a piece of dialogue, an interesting fact, or should I use the one that I began with?
- How can I restate my thesis without repeating the same words I used in the introduction?

Picture Exchange: Sharing Images and Ideas in First-Year Composition

DONNA REISS
Tidewater Community College

Donna Reiss's assignment links students' interests with their writing in a uniquely personal way.

Originally developed as a way to engage first-year students in the writing process at the beginning of the term and to build a learning community by introducing busy commuter students to their classmates, a picture exchange has become the foundation of our semester, establishing writing-editing partnerships, electronic communication exchanges, and attention to detail that I hope will continue throughout the term. I assume that all students have a picture they care about and that the task of describing their own picture will be less unsettling than other personal topics would be as a first piece of writing that will be shared with strangers. I ask that they select an image that is already part of their personal collections to ensure that they really do know and care about both the image and the content depicted. This exchange fosters the kind of active learning recommended by Marilla D. Svinicki in which students "make connections between what they know and what they are learning" (31).

Because students write these descriptions as letters to classmates with copies to me, they usually think about audience even before that concept is introduced in class. The letter is a familiar form, encouraged as a genre for academic writing by Elbow, Fulwiler, Reiss, and Young, among others. Because students attempt to distinguish between their own and their classmates' objective descriptions of the images and their subjective interpretations or explanations, they are practicing skills they will further hone as they read and respond to the essays in their textbooks, subsequent peer papers on general topics, and the sources they locate for their required research paper.

Depending on how often we can access a computer-networked classroom, we do some elements of the picture exchange in class and others asynchronously between classes. Now that my students also develop electronic portfolios, future students will scan their images and incorporate revisions of their accompanying letters into Web pages.

> **Step 1**: Each student selects a picture and makes two copies, one for a classmate and one for me. They also compose a 300- to 500-word letter to their classmate in which they describe the image in objective, concrete language and explain the importance of the image and their reason for selecting it.

Step 2: Before reading the partner's letter, students view the classmate's picture and write a 150- to 200-word letter to that classmate describing the partner's image in objective, concrete language and explaining what feelings the image evokes and why they think the image is important to the classmate.

Step 3: The partners exchange their step 2 letters. Each student writes a short note thanking the classmate for his or her thoughts on the picture and identifying specific points that were interesting and ways in which their perceptions about the image were similar and different.

Step 4: The students meet, each reading the partner's original step 1 letter and the partner's response. They compare the descriptions and reactions. Together, they write a letter to the entire class in which they highlight similar and differing reactions to the pictures and discuss the reasons. This letter is published and distributed to the class. If time permits, each pair also makes a brief oral presentation to the class.

Students usually bring pictures of their family or friends, sometimes including themselves, sometimes not. Because we live in a community that annually hosts the East Coast surfing championships, pictures of surfing or bodyboarding are also typical choices. One student, for example, brought a picture of himself standing on a reef overlooking a beach in Puerto Rico, where he had mastered a particularly challenging wave, and described the setting as a reminder of the exhilaration of that achievement as well as a memory of the colors and feel of the water. His respondent was a woman who did not surf herself but as a lifelong resident of Virginia Beach was familiar enough with the equipment, a surfboard, and our own sandy, reefless beach to discern that the setting was a distant beach and that the person who selected the picture probably had a passion for beaches as well as for the sport.

The picture-letter exchange demonstrates to students that many writers and scholars work and learn together rather than in isolation, as emphasized by Ede and Lunsford in *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Their casual writing exchanges help novice writers connect with their classmates and prepare them for later peer-response groups as they share writing first in a nonthreatening but meaningful way.

Works Cited

Ede, Lisa, and Andrea Lunsford. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Elbow, Peter. "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Writing." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 69 (1997): 5–13.

Fulwiler, Toby. "Writing Back and Forth: Class Letters." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 69 (1997): 15–25.

Reiss, Donna. "Epistolary Pedagogy and Electronic Mail: Online Letters for Learning Literature." *Learning Literature in an Era of Change: Innovations in Teaching*. Ed. Dona J. Hickey and Donna Reiss. Sterling, VA: Stylus2000.

Svinicki, Marilla D. "Practical Implications of Cognitive Theories." *College Teaching: From Theory to Practice*. Ed. Robert J. Menges and Marilla D. Svinicki. New Directions for Teaching and Learning 45. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991. 27–37.

Young, Art. "Mentoring, Modeling, Monitoring, Motivating: Response to Students' Ungraded Writing as Academic Conversation." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 69 (1997): 27–39.

Reflecting on Journal Writing

LISA EDE
Oregon State University

The following assignment prompt is designed to encourage students to reflect on a range of course material. As Lisa Ede notes, the prompt also serves as "a mechanism for having students evaluate their own journals. It was originally developed by Lex Runciman (now at Linfield College in Oregon) when he was WIC director at OSU. I have used it in first-year writing and literature courses, as well as advanced courses. It's wonderfully efficient for teachers. I can move through a journal that a student has preevaluated very quickly. More important, though,

it engages students in self-reflection and self-assessment. I've found over the years that students are almost always accurate in their self-assessment; if anything, I often have to raise the grade they've given themselves."

Journal

Purpose and Logistics

The journal has one primary purpose: to encourage you to interact more deeply (and also more enjoyably) with the texts we are reading. Your entries should be more controlled than freewrites—simply free-associating or writing whatever random thoughts come to mind is not acceptable—but they are in no sense mini-essays. You do not need to come to conclusions in your journal entries, nor do you have to attend to the formal and logical constraints characteristic of essays. Rather, the entries are designed to provide an opportunity for you to speculate freely, and even playfully, without having to feel sure of your outcome. Your entries can take many forms. A successful entry might explore a question or topic by considering a relevant example or by working through an analogy. You might draw on your own experience to consider the implications of an idea, or you might make a list of all the questions or issues that a particular topic, quotation, or question raises. Just about anything goes as long as it indicates real intellectual engagement.

Most often, I will provide prompts for journal entries. Though my prompts will obviously guide and constrain your response, you nevertheless have great freedom in how you address the question(s) or issue(s) it raises. A prompt might cause one student to reflect on her personal experiences, while another might address the prompt in a more theoretical or historical vein. As I have said already, but will repeat for emphasis, what I'm looking for is engagement with the texts we are reading.

I will read your entries and return them to you. Please keep your entries in a folder for resubmission during and at the end of the term. (Be sure to print and save all online postings as well.) If at the start of the term you have any concerns about your journal

entries, I'll be happy to review them with you.

For print journal entries, please date all entries and write the topic, question, or quotation to which it is a response at the top of the page. (If the quotation is lengthy, feel free to write a brief summary of it.) Your entries may be handwritten or typed.

Evaluation

Journal entries will be evaluated on three criteria: commitment, ambition, and engagement. Style is a consideration only to the extent that your ability to manipulate language influences your ability to articulate complex and engaging ideas. The focus in the journal is your ability to engage in critical thinking.

I will collect your journals around midterm time and at the end of the quarter. On both occasions, when you hand in your journals you will include an evaluation based on the criteria listed above. (See the evaluation sheet, which includes descriptions of A, B, and C journals.) As part of this evaluation, you'll write two or three sentences to explain your ratings and then indicate an overall grade. I'll review your journals and your evaluation, and I'll use the same criteria to guide my feedback to you and to arrive at your journal grade at the end of the term.

Journal Evaluation Sheet

A Journals

Commitment: The writer turns in all journal entries (unless he or she has an excused absence). Entries may vary in length, but they regularly go on for enough time to reflect and accommodate extended thought.

Ambition: Journal entries regularly try to consider issues or pose questions which engage the writer but for which the writer may have no ready answer. The writer is willing to speculate and to try to make connections between this course and his or her experience. The writer is not afraid to address complex—and even paradoxical and contradictory—ideas.

Engagement: The writer is clearly using the journal entries to "push" his or her understanding of the text or question in particular and of the course material in general.

B Journals

Commitment: The writer turns in all but one or two journal entries. The entries often reflect and accommodate extended thought, but at times they seem merely to summarize or in an unengaged way to comment on the topic.

Ambition: Journal entries often try to speculate about issues and questions and to make connections between the course and the writer's experience. But a number of entries discuss conclusions and/or summarize or respond in an unfocused way to the topic. The writer is also less comfortable with tension, dissonance, and paradox and tries to resolve or "iron out" complexity.

Engagement: The writer sometimes uses journal entries to "push" his or her understanding of the text or question in particular and of the course material in general; a number of entries, however, seem formulaic or completed merely to fulfill the assignment.

C Journals

Commitment: The writer fails to turn in three or more journal entries.

Ambition: The journal entries seem cursory, the result of coercion rather than interest. There is little or no effort to speculate, to reach for more than obvious conclusions, or to connect with the writer's own experience.

Engagement: The writer rarely if ever uses journal entries to deepen, much less "push," his or her understanding of the text or question in particular and of the course material in general.

Journal Evaluation Sheet

Name____________ Date____________

Evaluation of COMMITMENT
Grade
Reasons:

Evaluation of AMBITION
Grade
Reasons:

Evaluation of ENGAGEMENT
Grade
Reasons:

Overall grade

Role-Playing as a Writing-to-Learn Activity

MARY M. SALIBRICI
Syracuse University

Mary Salibrici's role-playing assignments encourage students to explore how writing is shaped by authorial identity and context.

As part of a writing course that emphasizes the rhetorical nature of language, I have designed a sequence of role-playing assignments that function as write-to-learn activities. Such writing tasks work effectively as learning exercises since, building from Emig, I have found that they relate to students' "evolutionary development of thought, steadily and graphically visible and available throughout as a record of a journey, from jottings and notes to full discursive formations" (129). Completing this assignment sequence, in other words, provides students with an opportunity to invent perspectives with words and thus deepen their understanding of the basic rhetorical premise of the course—that is, what you write is governed by who you are, why you are writing, to whom, and at what cost. Additionally, they are more fully prepared for subsequent formal essay assignments that ask for critical analysis of various rhetorical features of a text. The write-to-learn activities prepare students to think deeply about the rhetorical nature of writing as they invent a persona and try to write convincingly in the role of a particular author.

Specifically, I have used such role-playing writing assignments for a six-week unit that focuses on the trial and subsequent execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and culminates in a mock trial that applies the rhetorical principles under investigation through an integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. For the first two weeks of the unit, students read a variety of pieces representing different interpretations of the case, including excerpts from a defense attorney's bestselling book, a novelist's fictional rendition, feminist perspectives about Ethel, the Rosenbergs' son's interpretation of events, articles from the *New York Times,* and editorials from the *Daily Worker,* to name a few. Complete texts from which the excerpts are taken, along with additional readings that are described in an annotated bibliography, are placed on library reserve for further student reading and research.

The first role-playing exercise is assigned after students read excerpts from Nizer's *The Implosion Conspiracy* (1973) and Radosh and Milton's *The Rosenberg File* (1983). They have begun to form preliminary impressions of the people and events involved in the case and often have strong opinions about the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence. After completing these readings,

I ask students to provide a two-page general summary of the case as they understand it so far; however, there's a twist to my request because they must adopt a particular persona as they write. The options are as follows:

- Write as if you are a reporter for the *New York Times* putting together a news summary to run on the front page shortly before the Rosenberg's scheduled execution in 1953.
- Write as if you are submitting a text to your twentieth-century American history professor as part of a take-home final exam.
- Write as if you believe the Rosenbergs to be innocent (or guilty) but your magazine editor has asked you to prepare a neutral summary of the case to be run in a For Your Information column.

The options are hypothetical, of course, but each one asks for a particular spin that students will have to convey, with the take-home exam persona being the most familiar. Interestingly, most students choose the unfamiliar stances of newspaper reporter or magazine writer. We then share the written texts as a class, discussing the nuances of word choice, style, and tone as representative of specific personas. We discuss whether they have been effective in making their roles come alive in writing and how they accomplished such an effect. Through specific language choices, they have invented the way a particular author might approach a particular task. These write-to-learn inventions result in a deeper appreciation for the way language works and a more personalized understanding of the various interpretations that can be made about the Rosenbergs' story.

The next role-playing exercise asks students to write in an even more specific way. Having read further about the case at this point, students have begun to develop a fuller understanding of the various people and events central to the case. There are several layers to the next exercise, because students are asked to share what they are reading and writing in small groups that will ultimately parallel their working groups for the mock trial. They are actually working on reading-to-learn and writing-to-learn activities as this exercise proceeds.

First, I ask students to join a small group that fits a perspective of particular interest to them, perhaps the point of view of the defense, the prosecution, scientists and historians, or reporters covering the case. We continue our assigned readings, but students are expected to read further on their own, perhaps utilizing materials on library reserve, so that they can familiarize themselves with the role of a specific person represented by their small group. For the writing portion of this exercise, I ask students to assume the voice of one individual involved in the case and represented by their group and to choose a format in which to play that person's role in writing. They may choose, for example, to portray the Rosenbergs' defense attorney and write an opening statement to the jury, or they may choose to portray Ethel Rosenberg through a witness affidavit. I ask that they adhere to the historical facts as closely as possible; in other words, they should not fictionalize material if they are trying to portray an actual historical person.

As students gather in their small groups, they share material they have gained from the readings and work on short presentations they can make to the entire class about the specific individuals they represent. I also ask students to meet me for short "reading conferences" so that before they actually write their pieces we can cover what they have learned and any questions that may arise. As we proceed through this role-playing exercise, I supplement the class readings by presenting film documentaries and artistic renditions of the Rosenberg case. Throughout this experience, students are taking notes and jotting down ideas that relate to the individuals they want to represent in writing. I also share an actual witness affidavit form, and we read excerpts from the opening statements used at the trial in 1951.

All of these writing and reading preparations help students discover and invent approaches for our class production of a mock trial, in which we give the Rosenbergs a second chance to defend themselves. Additionally, such writing-to-learn activities provide students with a more sophisticated understanding of the way rhetoric works in language, thus preparing them for the more complex and formal essay assignments that are required before the unit concludes. Just before the mock trial begins, for instance, students are asked to complete a critical essay that presents their

analyses of the rhetorical choices made by particular authors we have studied. They can either compare and contrast the rhetorical choices made by two different authors in order to argue that one is more effective at making a case, or they can do a more expository essay that simply explains the way rhetoric operates in a particular text and for a particular author. At the close of the unit, after students have watched each other produce the many dramatic facets of a mock trial, including newspaper coverage and literary representations, I ask them to write a critical essay that explains their current understanding of some aspect of the case. The various write-to-learn activities, which have served to complicate their understanding of how language works rhetorically, prove useful to this final endeavor since most students now realize that a simple argument about guilt or innocence is the least interesting approach.

Such write-to-learn activities can be very useful, especially for composition courses with inquiry topics that revolve around the rhetorical nature of language. A class that looks closely at different historical and political events such as the Lindbergh kidnapping, the Vietnam War, or even Generation X, could model the kind of activities I have presented here. Several current anthologies would also well serve the type of approach that asks students to read and reflect on the way a single event or issue can lend itself to a multitude of interpretations. Bizzell and Herzberg's *Negotiating Difference* (1996) and Selzer's *Conversations* (1997), for example, appear suitable for such purposes because they represent topics of inquiry through a diverse range of contrastive readings.

Works Cited

Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg. *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition.* New York: Bedford, 1996.

Emig, Janet. "Writing as a Mode of Learning." *The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning, and Thinking.* Ed. Dixie Goswami and Maureen Butler. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1983. 122–31.

Nizer, Louis. *The Implosion Conspiracy.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973.

Radosh, Ronald, and Joyce Milton. *The Rosenberg File: The Search for the Truth.* New York: Vintage, 1983.

Selzer, Jack. *Conversations: Readings for Writings.* 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997.

Writing-to-Learn Prompts

EDITH M. BAKER
Bradley University

Edith Baker's writing prompts, like Mary Salibrici's role-playing exercises, ask students to explore issues from various writers' perspectives, and also require them to engage in critical thinking, such as the synthesis and analysis of complex ideas raised by their reading of American authors.

These writing-to-learn strategies for a beginning American writers course are based on Peter Elbow's philosophy that students need to write often and freely, without fear of evaluation or restriction. Britton's belief that writing allows for "shaping at the point of utterance" is the foundation for these writing to learn prompts. Their purpose is to foster fluency as they encourage students to probe critical questions about the content of American literature. Central to the design of the one-semester course is the philosophy that by developing students as American writers themselves, they will wrestle with some of the same concerns that other American writers have debated.

All voices will create a conversation on similar topics, such as the individual's relationship to society or the rugged individual's confrontation with nature. Thus, the first prompts listed below

are open-ended and attempt to engage the self (Polanyi) before engaging the students in written texts. A variety of forms, from poems to autobiography, are also encouraged. Later, students can read what other American writers have said about similar issues, concerns, values, or beliefs. These prompts move from more open-ended protocols to more focused freewriting; the final examples attempt to challenge students to make connections and demonstrate mastery of course content.

Open-Ended Freewriting Topics

1. Discuss your favorite novel by an American writer. Why do you like the book? Do you remember anything about characters or themes?

2. The SAT II examination is now being marketed as a way for students to "achieve the American dream." Define the American dream. What are some of the personal characteristics that historically have distinguished Americans? What is your personal interpretation of the American dream? What do you hope happens to you in your lifetime? (After students write on this topic, a good activity is to read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.)

3. Sometime before midterm, write freely on the most important things you have learned in this American writers course. Try to mention specific authors or texts.

4. Situate yourself in a place outdoors. Concentrate on your surroundings and begin to describe what you see around you. Give many details of your observations. Imagine you are Thoreau at Walden Pond and are walking the fence posts and being "an inspector of snow storms." Where do your musings take you? Allow time to immerse yourself in nature for at least forty-five minutes, and write down your thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness manner.

5. The instructor will provide selected passages from Thoreau's *Walden*. Read these before going into nature and see what thoughts emerge as you ponder your surroundings in a favorite place.

6. Freewrite on any topic of your choice, remembering that you are an American writer, too. You might want to try to imitate the style of Paine or the topics of concern for Bradstreet. If you were Ben Franklin, what would your eleven attributes of a de-

cent human be? (Remember, he added humility after his first list of ten!)

Because I prefer discussions with students who have read the material, some prompts simply require condensation of reading assignments due at class time. I might ask students to summarize a short story or an introductory chapter of Puritan history, for example. I have found that mentioning specifics, such as character development, tone, mood, conflict, plot development, symbolism, style, and theme, gives students more schema to trigger their thinking.

Modeling an author's style is another possibility for a writing-to-learn prompt. When reading Thoreau, students might copy ten sentences from his essays or *Walden* and discuss his writing style. This same technique of imitation is offered in the option to write a poem or chapter from their autobiography in the manner of Bradstreet, Cabeza de Vaca, Franklin, or Equiano. Likewise, one in-class prompt for a freewriting exercise asks students to write the first sentence of their autobiography. I challenge them to think about how they would define themselves. I read some beginnings from other autobiographies and ask students to identify what defines their lives. Is it a value or a belief? Knowing they will not be graded, students can freely reflect on these questions.

After the more open-ended prompts and imitation of models, I suggest focused freewritings. These prompts challenge students to make connections between the texts, define important concepts, and trace themes throughout U.S. history such as the idea of westering, the concept of the frontier, different responses to nature, and the evolution of the Puritan work ethic. These log entries are writing-to-learn activities that help students master major concepts of the course.

During the first class sessions, I present many ideas on a continuum and note that during the course of the semester we will be tracing the evolution of these ideas. I also tell students that their final examination will consist of taking one of these ideas and tracing the issue, value, concept, or belief through at least six writers and at least three centuries, developing their own thesis about the evolution of this concept. Student writings thus serve

as invention activities, in the manner of Aristotle, throughout the course. These prompts require thinking skills of comparison/contrast, definition, and synthesis.

Text-Based Writing Prompts That Require Specific References to Readings

1. Discuss major characteristics of eighteenth-century writings: styles, topics, authors, concerns, voice, tone, etc. Develop your own theory about this period in American literature.
2. Read the works or transcriptions of Native American cultures: oral chants, writings, creation myths, songs, and rituals. Ponder the role of oral literature in American literature and the influence of Native American thought on our world today.
3. Summarize the similarities and differences in Hawthorne's text "Rappaccini's Daughter" and the PBS video of the same story. Note themes, style, symbolism, plot, and character development, as well as other points.
4. Write out succinctly Poe's theory of the "unity of effect" (handout). Apply this concept either to Crane's "The Open Boat" or Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."
5. Having read some short stories by modern writers, what do you think has happened to Poe's theory of the unity of effect? Include specific references to at least three writers.
6. Discuss at least three authors' responses to nature. Compare and/or contrast topics, approaches, styles, concerns. Cite specific passages. Develop your own theory about the evolution of writers' concerns about nature.
7. Compare and/or contrast images (portraits) of women or men in at least three works of literature. How do you see roles of characters evolving?
8. Read one of the plays in the text by O'Neill or Tennessee Williams and discuss character development and themes.
9. Rent some of the recent movies based on the works of Henry James, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Wings of a Dove,* and discuss how the issues in the movie relate to the topics we are discussing in class.
10. Consider the idea of God as different authors have written about their relationship to a metaphysical or supernatural world. Men-

tion some of these writers and discuss how individuals' responses to "something greater than themselves" have changed over time. Cite specific authors and texts.

Works Cited

Britton, James, "Shaping at the Point of Utterance. *Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle. Conway, AR: L&S Books, U of Central Arkansas (for Canadian Council of Teachers of English).

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958.