

Critique Assignment Redesign for English Composition

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Introduction

Incoming teaching assistants in the English department at Minnesota State University, Mankato are given a series of five papers to teach their first semester. The majority are fairly easy to teach, but there are two that both students and teachers struggle with—the analysis and the critique. For first-year instructors assigned to teach these papers, the two seemed almost alike, which made teaching students the difference almost impossible. It is also hard for students to grasp the key elements in each of these assignments—critically assessing information, breaking information into parts, etc. Classroom Management Techniques (CAT) during these times show confusion, frustration, and an overall sense of despair. At the end of the semester, most teachers decide to drop one or both of the assignments and consider meeting the course competencies in another way. However, I feel that these two assignments are valuable, so I decided to restructure a portion of my course to effectively teach both of these important assignments.

Original Structure

A common syllabus used among first-year teaching assistants includes five assignments in the following order: summary, explanatory synthesis, critique, analysis, and a fifth assignment that the individual instructor determines. New TAs are taught how to teach the summary assignment and given lesson ideas so they don't flounder in their first few weeks. As they finish with the summary assignment, they begin teaching the explanatory synthesis, which is a basic research paper combining multiple sources. Since most graduate students have vast experience writing research papers, this assignment seems to be pretty easy to convey to students. At this point in the semester, new instructors feel comfortable teaching and finally are able to know they can make it through a semester of teaching post-secondary students. However, this comfort level seems to vanish when these instructors begin teaching the critique assignment.

The critique assignment sheet given to new instructors lists a critique as being a formalized, critical reading of a passage where students determine what the author says, how well the points are made, what assumptions underlie the argument, what issues are overlooked, and what implications can be drawn from such an analysis. This is confusing to new teachers because most composition classes are filled with new freshmen that haven't been asked to critically read anything. Also, instead of focusing on an argument essay, new teachers are instructed to teach an explanatory synthesis; therefore it proves difficult to teach a class of 25 students how to evaluate an argument when they haven't had the experience of writing one. Finally, this is difficult because this definition doesn't provide a clear difference to the analysis assignment.

First-year teaching assistants are given some sample lesson ideas, but for this assignment it didn't seem like there were enough lessons to adequately explain a critique. Most instructors stumbled through this assignment and their student's outlook on the class

seemed to suffer. Midterm evaluations were handed out during this assignment, and there was an overwhelming sense of confusion among students.

When it came time to turn in this assignment, the first-year teacher's workshop started to focus on the analysis assignment. During these workshops, it seemed as if no one could adequately explain the difference between the critique and analysis assignment. If any explanation was given, it sounded like the analysis should have been taught first because the critique seemed to build off the analysis assignment. By this point, some instructors decided to change the assignment completely, some decided to combine the two assignments, and some went ahead with the original plan. In my own class, I decided to keep the analysis assignment because I didn't want my syllabus to become confusing because of a change in assignments.

As I introduced the analysis assignment, I didn't feel comfortable explaining the elements, which is an argument in which you study the parts of something to understanding how it works, what it means, or why it might be significant. To me, this didn't sound different enough from the critique to be required to teach both. When my students asked me why they needed to write both assignments, I either changed the subject or blamed it on the department for requiring the assignments. It made me feel like an inadequate teacher, and I finally decided that this portion of my course needed a major redesign for the coming semester.

Redesigned Structure

Because of the issues I faced with the critique and analysis assignment, I decided to restructure the second half of my course to adequately teach both assignments. I decided to keep the summary and explanatory synthesis assignments because I felt they were a good way to get students acclimated to a writing class. Instead of introducing the critique after these two assignments, I added an argumentative synthesis because I wanted them to learn the parts of an argument before they tried critiquing one. Through this assignment we focused on looking at both sides of an issue, presenting an argument, and performing critical readings of argumentative writing. I felt that by teaching the parts of an argument and letting the students have a chance at writing an effective argument that they would be better prepared to perform an analysis and critique of an argument.

I followed the argument assignment with the analysis assignment I had used in the previous semester. By having the analysis assignment next, I was able to focus on the elements of an analysis without having to discuss critiquing a work. I was more concerned with having them learn the basic elements, so the focus of the assignment was on a magazine advertisement instead of reading a lengthy article. Introducing the analysis before the critique proved to be quite beneficial to both my teaching of the lesson and the students' understanding of the material. I didn't feel like I was stumbling through the entire assignment, and I could accurately explain why this assignment was important.

Instead of choosing the typical last assignment of a personal narrative, I chose to make the critique the last assignment. The last assignment I used the previous semester didn't seem to be a culmination of the student's work, which was my goal for the current semester. When introducing the assignment, I explained that the critique would use most of the assignment elements they had learned throughout the semester. They would need to effectively summarize a film, discuss how the filmmaker synthesized sources, examine

the effectiveness of the argument, and provide an overall analysis of the film. Because they were familiar with all of these assignments, the students were easily able to create a list of criteria for critiquing the film we watched in class. Part of the reason the critique assignment failed the first semester was because students had a difficult time determining criteria for an article. By making the critique assignment the final essay, students were able to get past just focusing on finding criteria and actually focus on all of the elements of a critique.

Conclusion

After teaching for two semesters, I realize how important the structure of a composition course can be. By restructuring my course so the lessons built upon each other, I found that I was more comfortable with my teaching strategy, which meant by students' understanding of the assignment was better. Through this new structure, I was able to more effectively meet the course competencies for a composition class, which include demonstrating and practicing strategies for idea generation, audience analysis, organization of texts, drafting, evaluation of drafts, revision, and editing; writing papers of varying lengths that demonstrate effective explanation, analysis, and argumentation; becoming experienced in computer-assisted writing and research; analyzing and synthesizing source material, making appropriate use of paraphrase, summary, quotation, and citation conventions; and employing syntax and usage appropriate to academic writing and the professional world. While my old class structure met these competencies, I felt as though I didn't effectively communicate all of these competencies through my assignments. My new course design allowed for more effective teaching of these competencies while also making my class environment more comfortable for both my students and myself.

Although it took thoughtful consideration and a fair amount of time, restructuring my course proved to be extremely beneficial. Because this semester turned out so well, I feel I am now prepared to look at other elements of my course for potential restructure. I always knew there wasn't one particular way to teach a course, but now I see how important course structure can be in effectively teaching course objectives in a composition class.