

WRITING IN THE SOCIAL ARENA: DRAFTING SIDES TO LOCAL ISSUES
THE TOWN MEETING ACTIVITY
COMPOSITION 101

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CETL CONCEPTS APPLIED: This activity seemed to me particularly relevant after our session on general education objectives. In this activity, I seek to work through all the general concepts that students are to learn in Composition 101 (writing skills, critical thinking skills, research, and organization of ideas), as well as apply that greater world view and professional voice that is necessary when working in upper level discipline courses as well as the professional arena of the students' chosen field of study.

BROADER OBJECTIVES OF 101 THAT THIS ACTIVITY RELATES TO: One of my chief ambitions with 101 students is to arm them with the ability to communicate effectively through the written word by articulating their thoughts in a professional manner. Another is to help them think about the world in a broader context and to examine perspectives other than their own. This activity encompasses both of these objectives, while also integrating critical thinking skills, cooperative, active learning, and providing a basis for the research involved in the largest and final paper of the semester—the research-based argument. This activity asks the students to compose a four paragraph petition (an obvious objective of Composition 101), but beyond that, asks students to explore the broader aims of good communication skills and outward-thinking that should come from general education courses.

SPECIFIC GOALS OF THE ACTIVITY: This activity comes late in the semester when my students are learning the art of arguing for or against an issue of controversy (which will become their last and final paper). The first point of making a successful argument, my students learn early in this unit, is being aware of all parties, and all opinions, involved with the issue. Simply put, my students learn they cannot argue for or against an issue if they do not first understand all aspects involved (even opinions they do not agree with). My objective with this following activity, which I have dubbed “the town meeting,” is to assist students in understanding this process of a full examination of an issue.

THE ASSIGNMENT: Essentially, what this activity requires is that the instructor come up with an issue of importance that frequently affects towns and cities of various sizes around the United States—the situation I have used the two times I have gone through this assignment has been “violence in our schools as related to music and the media.” The students in the class are to act as members of a town or city facing this issue—students have recently been threatening violence in local schools with handguns and other weapons, and the blame has been put on the media. Each student is assigned to be a part of a group involved with this issue: the parents, the students, the school board, the local police, marketing executives supporting musicians and artists, and musicians

and artists. Each of these groups will have differing opinions on the issue at hand. Students form small groups according to which perspective they were assigned. In these small groups, students are asked to draft a four-paragraph petition stating their point of view and supporting arguments/examples for this point of view. This draft is required to be drafted using a professional voice and may require minimal, in-class research for supporting examples and ideas.

After this petition has been drafted, we gather as a large group and each group presents their petition for the rest of the town to react to. Students engage in back-and-forth discussion of the particulars of this argument, and the instructor mediates between the different groups, meanwhile pointing out the intricacies of creating a successful argument—and the importance of being aware of all parties, and factors, involved in making a decision about a socially tense issue. Lastly, students in each group are asked to come up with a solution to this problem that could be implemented in the town or city, and asked to persuade the rest of the town or city of the plausibility of the solution.

RESULTS: Generally, my students responded very well to this activity. For starters, the topic of music and violence is one that students feel strongly about and enjoy debating. Most students have a strong opinion on whether or not media affects violence in our schools and are eager to discuss the ramifications of making bold statements saying the connections are there. What works for this assignment, however, is that students are forced to go beyond their opinion and analyze what another group of people might have at stake in this issue. Students have responded well to this—have often been surprised, and interested, to see that an issue that seemed so black and white has so many sides.

As a follow up to this activity, I have students write a non-biased summary of their issue, and I have found that these results are much more successful when I do this activity than in semesters when I have foregone this activity for other attacks at explaining the art of familiarizing oneself with an issue prior to making an argument. I think this activity works, primarily, because it begins on familiar ground but forces students to move to unfamiliar ground—(1) looking at a perspective other than their own and (2) synthesizing that perspective with others. However, there are some drawbacks. As with any group project, the success of this project depends on how well the students work together. With a topic that is so familiar with students and ever-present in their lives, there is a much higher possibility of students getting off-track (telling stories wherein they were themselves confronted with this problem), and this needs to be monitored. Also, as students have been asked prior to this paper to refrain from arguing, or stating their own opinion, it is sometimes difficult to coerce students into actively approaching this petition and arguing with others in the class for their assigned point of view.

ACTIVITY SHEET

The Town Meeting

Your last essay (the argument-based research paper), is mainly based on two elements: (1) informing your reader accurately on a controversial issue and (2) simultaneously arguing successfully for or against that issue. Today we're going to spend time perfecting the first part, informing, which we've already spent a lot of the semester working on. This should demonstrate how important of a skill it really is.

Part of informing an uneducated reader involves what we learned in the previous papers: using source material correctly, conveying information from someone else's point of view, and covering the main points of an original author. The difference with this paper will be to integrate other sources into your own ideas, opinions, and argument. In other words, the first part of the research process that will eventually lead to a successful argument is to understand all sides of your issue. This will be the gist of your homework assignment due Tuesday.

So, today we are going to practice looking at an issue from all angles. We are going to conduct a town meeting. Here's the scene: recently, the number of students caught sneaking guns or other weapons into a local high school in the city where you live. A meeting of the townspeople has been called to discuss this problem. This is an issue that affects many different groups--parents of high school teenagers, the teenagers themselves, school district officials, local government, musicians/actors/media, and marketing execs-- there are several different active reactions to this situation. Your group will be assigned one of these viewpoints to represent at the town meeting.

Your specific task:

- 1) Decide as a group whether you believe your viewpoint would agree or disagree with the claim "music, television, and the media are causing children and teenagers to become increasingly violent in today's society."
- 2) As a group, draft a petition (at least three paragraphs) in response to the statement from your assigned point of view. What does your group believe about the claim? Why do they believe this? Consider their background (cultural, political, social, etc.). Use strong support and examples from their hypothetical lives, and remember that your task as this group of people at the town meeting would be to persuade others of your viewpoint.
- 3) Come up with three possible solutions to this problem that your group would support and/or be willing to carry out. Be ready to prepare all of this information to the large group.