

CRAFT & STRUCTURE ANALYSIS ASSIGNMENT FOR ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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Introduction

A common assignment for English 101 students is an analysis paper. Obviously, the skills used in analysis – breaking things into parts, searching for meaning, etc – are valuable ones. However, I have difficulty teaching this assignment, as it is typically very difficult for students to grasp the abstractions common to many textbooks. Classroom Assessment Techniques (CAT) during this time typically indicate confusion, frustration, and general difficulty in construction the assignment. Additionally, the English department at MSU recently reported that one of the critical elements that students were not learning in English 101 was how to structure a paper.

In order to combat these two issues, I have come up with a different way to teach analysis that simultaneously reinforces students' understanding of one of the other papers in the class. For these reasons I have decided that, as an alternative to a traditional analysis paper, I will have students write and present a craft & structure analysis of a published essay.

The Craft & Structure Analysis Assignment

Students will be required to select an essay from a list provided by me. Each week, the class will read two essay from the list. Then, during class (how many presentations/ class depends on how many class meetings/ week. Obviously, this will have to be worked out ahead of time by the instructor), one student will present an analysis of the essay's structure, the author's craft choices, and their ideas on why they think the author made the choices they did. Essays will be presented on during the unit that covers that particular essay structure (e.g. if we are studying argument synthesis, the presenting student will analyze an argument essay).

For example, suppose the class was preparing to write an argument synthesis. Each week they would read one short argument essay. Then one student (determined ahead of time) would present their analysis of the essay. Other students in the class could then ask questions, and the essay would be discussed.

These presentations should take from 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the length of the essay and the amount of discussion that follows. Presentations will identify the following areas in each essay. A clear and thorough presentation will also answer the questions included in each area:

- **Organization, Development and Structure of the essay**

- How is the essay structured?
 - Is the thesis near the beginning or the end? (Deductive or inductive?)
 - Where are the main points and how are they arranged?
 - Describe the introduction to the essay.
 - How is the essay introduced?
 - What points are brought up?
 - Where do those points reappear later in the essay?
 - Describe the conclusion to the essay.
 - How does the author conclude?
- The author's thesis
 - Where is it located and why do you think this choice was made?
 - Is it an argumentative or explanatory thesis?
 - How does the answer to this relate to the essay's structure?
- **Audience, Expression, Sentence Structure & Word Choice in the essay**
 - What do you think the author's overall strategy and purpose in the essay?
 - Who do you think this essay's intended audience is?
 - How does the tone of the piece contribute to the author's purpose?
 - What can you say about the sentence structure & length in this essay?
 - Are all the sentences structured the same way?
 - Are they the same length or different lengths?
 - Do you see any connections between those two factors and the subject matter the author is discussing?
 - What word choices or quotes are particularly memorable?
 - Where are they in the essay?
 - Do you see any relationship between their location and the essay as a whole?
- Include any other observations about the *craft* and *structure* of this essay. You should not say whether you like the essay or not, or attempt to determine whether the essay succeeds or fails. Instead, concentrate on describing what the author *does* and how he or she does it.

Students would not be asked to determine whether an essay succeeds or fails, only to describe what is happening on the page and where it is happening. Thus, students will not have the burden of 'correcting' a published author, but will instead describe how the writer creates the effects they do.

Rationale

This assignment helps strengthen several skills that English 101 is designed to teach, as well as reinforce skills that the course is having problems teaching thoroughly.

- It allows the student who presents each week an additional way to examine the structure of the essay they are working on writing at the time.
- The assignment also provides students who are not presenting several different looks at the structure of each essay in the class.

- It reinforces critical reading skills, public speaking ability, writing skills, as well as skills used during peer review.
- It provides additional weekly reinforcement on the structure of each essay as students working on it.
- This analysis also provides the class as a whole several additional ways to examine each essay other than the ones that I might think of as a teacher.
 - This assignment also provides the class with an opportunity to teach and learn from one another, rather than just from assignments and activities the instructor may come up with.
- By answering questions listed above, students also begin to examine the whole of an essay in terms of its smaller parts – which is exactly the skill that analysis is designed to teach.

To further reinforce the importance and usefulness of this assignment, instructors could share this rationale with their students, and allow them to see exactly why they are being asked to talk in front of the class – something that is frightening and difficult for many people.

Conclusion

This assignment differs from the original in two ways. First, it removes the emphasis from *writing* the analysis, and places it on *understanding* analysis. Second, it emphasizes *reading* the essay currently being constructed in the class over *writing* the essay. These double shifts in the learning process provide variety and can help make clear exactly what is expected of each assignment in the class.

Analysis of this type must be set up with extreme care. Because students will be doubly nervous about speaking in front of the class, the expectations put on them by the instructor must be made as clear as possible so that there is no confusion.

There is also a possibility that a student could wildly misread an essay, in which case the instructor will have to guide the class discussion back to the unit at hand. Overall, however, it seems that the possible gains far outweigh the potential losses in this assignment.