

College Writing Essentials: Answering the Prompt and Analyzing Academic Writing

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Introduction

As a COMM 100W instructor, I read a minimum of 8000 words per student. One of requirements for taking 100W (a course that is necessary for every SJSU student) is passing the Writing Skills Test (WST). While the COMM 80 students were not yet able (through writing level) to enroll in COMM 100W, they benefitted from some of the same lessons from 100W, which are: analyzing the prompt of an assignment, brainstorming relevant answers, and organizing the material into a readable passage that demonstrates understanding and mastery of the prompt's requirements.

Objectives

1. Students will be able to use critical thinking skills to summarize, paraphrase, understand and respond to both expository and argumentative reading assignments.
2. Students will be able to demonstrate an expanded academic vocabulary in writing and speaking.
3. Students will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their own composing process and develop adjustments as needed.

Steps/Procedure

I will describe two activities (an in-class activity and a writing assignment) that I incorporated into my course. They are: practicing WST Exercises, and the Article Analysis Assignment.

WST Exercises

In at least three class meetings, we used practice material from WST preparation books. I focused on the different types of writing prompts, though students were generally more concerned with multiple choice reading comprehension.

A sample WST essay prompt is the following:

All fields of study are occasionally enlivened by controversies within their ranks. Medicine has been shaken by formidable disagreements on universal health coverage, abortion, the clinical definition of death, and many more. In literary fields, scholars sometimes disagree vehemently on issues such as the status of authors, or critical interpretations of a work or passage. Historians have argued mightily about "tilted" history books that emphasize, for example, a Western interpretation of the age of exploration. Identify a controversy in your field of study with some balance, if feasible, and then argue for the position you embrace.

The WST process allows 15 minutes for brainstorming, 40 minutes of writing, and 5 minutes to edit. We practiced the brainstorming period and focused on these questions: What are the questions I need to answer? What are the keywords in the prompt? What information do I need to include? How can I organize this essay?

Article Analysis Assignment

The previous writing prompt brings up the topic of the student's field of study. The article analysis assignment asks the student to find an academic article within his or her field of study. We have an in-class discussion about the importance of interpreting academic writing by focusing on the following questions: Why might be important for students to read academic writing? What are some strategies that have been useful for you when reading academic writing? What are the limitations to academic writing? After our discussion of students as scholars, students chose scholarly journal articles from their majors and analyzed those articles over the course of the semester.

Analysis

Students responded very positively to both activities. Oftentimes students will compose assignments without looking carefully at assignment guidelines. At best, students lose points for not writing to the assignment requirements. At worst, they demonstrate a lack of reading comprehension and analysis. Practicing writing prompt deconstruction allowed the students to slow down the process and see what the prompt is actually asking about. Identifying keywords, brainstorming ideas, and organizing those ideas into outlines proved to be an effective formula for answering prompts.

The additional strategy we practiced in class was the article analysis assignment. Students submitted two drafts and a final article analysis. This process allowed the students to receive feedback on their work before receiving a final grade. Doing so allowed the students to assess and revise their own work. They developed revision strategies that would prove useful in their other classes. A side benefit is that students felt more involved in their area of study: they found empowerment in being able to critique the work of scholars and in having their opinions matter.

I shared my original research as a discussion panelist at the National Communication Association's annual convention in November of 2013 in Washington, D.C.

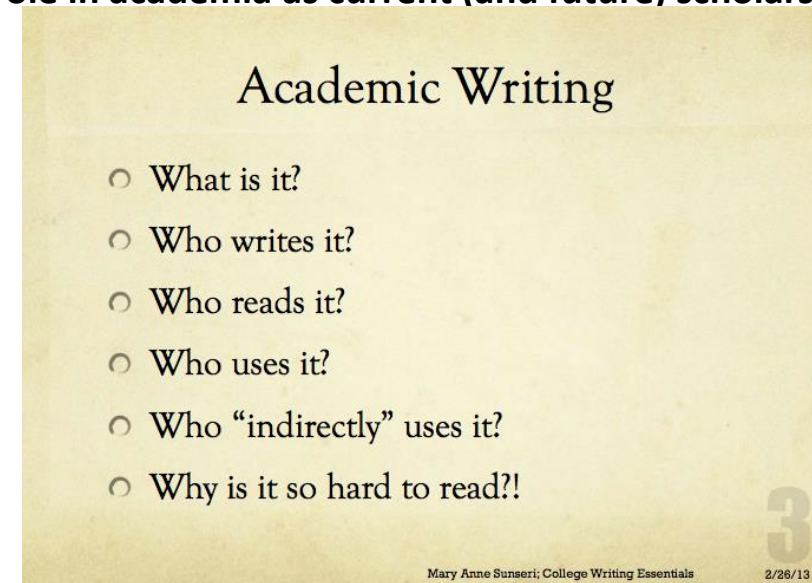
An example of analyzing a writing prompt.

The Explanatory/Analytic Essay
An *explanatory* essay question calls for the writer to explain current issues and ideas, controversies, difficulties, or opinions. A typical question of this type is the following:

Some people feel the world is advancing too fast and that "modern is not always better." Choose some recent (within 50 years) technological invention or discovery and show that it has some negative spinoffs. Explain how the negative impact of the invention or discovery has affected you and your life. What are the long-term effects of the innovation on the world?

Prompt is asking for:
1. One tech. invention/discovery
2. Negative affects
3. Negative affects to me
4. Long-term effects

Lesson PowerPoint Slide I used when we began discussing academic writing. This discussion led to students' role in academia as current (and future) scholars.



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