Lesson Plan: Using Peer Feedback and Work-Flow Tips to Strengthen Argumentation

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Timeframe: 75 minutes

Target Audience: Students in any essay-writing class should benefit from this lesson plan, which will provide them with peer feedback on the logical structure of their writing and encourage them to avoid gimmicky beginnings and mechanical transitions.

Materials Needed: Students need to bring to class (1) an outline of their essay (for their own use, not for distribution), (2) two copies of the first paragraph of their draft (to be used by the one or two other students in their small discussion group), and (3) two copies of their essay outline, which must identify the thesis statement and topic sentences of each paragraph. Ideally, the students will be at an early stage in working on that essay assignment. Instructors need to prepare in advance a few exercises for class discussion—either to be distributed as photocopies or to be screened via overhead projector.

Objectives: In this lesson, students will

- be challenged to put more time and energy into analysis;
- test out the strength of the central argument of their essays;
- receive feedback from other students about that argument;
- and rethink the relative importance of stylistic elements such as “hooks” and transitions.

Background: Students are more motivated to improve their writing if they think the problems create confusion for their peers and not just for their instructor (who they may think is unnecessarily picky or unreasonably demanding). Devising a situation in which such peer feedback is targeted and helpful, however, can be difficult, because small-group discussions of student writing, especially the short-term kind used during class, are notorious for their uncritical focus on very general ideas. The trick is to create exercises in which small-group feedback is focused on the construction of the argument of an essay, rather than on the overall point of that argument.

In addition, in writing essays many students seem to emphasize style over content. Of course, style is important in writing, and students need to master both style and argument in order to produce consistently good essays. However, students may end up focusing more on style than content in large part because the stylistic challenges are more immediate and more readily addressed—for example, a student who spends time developing a clever “hook” to begin the essay, even before working out exactly what the point of the essay will be.

This lesson, then, tries to do two things: first, to offer small-group exercises that produce peer feedback on the strength or weakness of the argument of an essay; and second, to offer “workflow” suggestions that place stylistic and analytical elements into a more helpful perspective.

Introduction to Lesson [5 minutes]:

Writing an essay is like trying to persuade someone to agree with an idea you have: the best way to go about it is usually to begin with your main point, so that right from the beginning your audience knows where the argument is heading, and then to break that main point down into smaller points and offer evidence to support them. And that's pretty much how most essays work: the main point is called the thesis statement, and it is usually formulated in the first paragraph; each smaller point, along with the evidence supporting it, becomes a paragraph (or, sometimes, a multi-paragraph section) of the body of the essay. The point of today's class is to introduce you to some techniques you can use to evaluate the clarity of your thesis and the strength of the argument you have created to support it. We'll be using these techniques to provide you with feedback from a few of your classmates today, but you can do very similar things to evaluate arguments on your own.

Procedure [65 minutes]:

Part One: Writing Opening Paragraphs

> **Workflow Tip #1:** Can't get started writing your paper? Feeling intimidated by that blank screen or empty sheet of paper? Then stop trying to come up with a great opening and begin by trying to construct a clear statement of your thesis.

Step 1A: Thesis statement, class discussion [5 minutes]

- First, you need to distinguish between the thesis itself and ideas supporting it.
  - At this point, the question should be, "Can your reader *understand* the thesis clearly, without further information?"
  - We don't expect the reader necessarily to *agree* with the thesis until the end of the essay, when your full argument has been presented.
  - If more information is needed, the first paragraph needs revision or expansion.
- To decide if your reader can understand the thesis, ask yourself, "Does the thesis need further general explanation or amplification in the body of the essay?"
  - Generally, the thesis should be fully developed in the first paragraph, but there's no hard-and-fast rule.
  - Occasionally, more than one introductory paragraph may be used if the essay is very long or if the subject is very complex.
  - Still, the thesis should almost always be developed separately from the topics in your paragraphs.
- In your first draft, the thesis should operate like the hypothesis of a scientific experiment—something that gets altered as you begin to see the results.
  - Do not express your thesis in the form of a question, rhetorical or otherwise.
  - Do not leave elements of your thesis unstated or vague, which may confuse your reader.

Step 1B: Opening sentence ("hook"), class discussion [5 minutes]

- Don't put a lot of effort into coming up with a clever first sentence. For most academic essays, there is no need to "interest" or "entice" the reader. Why not?

- The reader is probably an instructor who will read the whole thing, regardless.
  - The reader may have some expertise in the subject or otherwise find it interesting.
  - The reader may even have assigned this specific topic!
- This is not to say you cannot be interesting or that you must be boring!

- You should feel free of any necessity to think of a clever beginning.
  - Cleverness is just not that important, or helpful, and it can often backfire.
    - Gimmicky or confusing first sentences may unintentionally mislead the reader, even if you are just trying to be funny.
    - The first paragraph is the worst place for such confusion—you may lose your reader for the entire essay.
  - Instead, start with your topic, and develop it.
  - If you think of some especially effective opening, add it in the second draft.
    - But be sure the opening is worthwhile and relevant.
    - By the second draft, you will have a better idea of what your essay is about and what sort of opening paragraph will work best.
- In particular, avoid perfunctory, predictable openings, such as dictionary definitions and quotations. Test any opening "hook" with these two rules:
  - First, that it pertains directly to the topic of your essay.
  - Second, that you return to discuss the terms or ideas of the opening later in the essay.
  - If your opening doesn't fulfill both of these conditions, it is probably not effective.

Step 1C: Class discussion of examples [10 minutes]
The following examples are first paragraphs taken from student work. Once we have identified the opening idea as well as the thesis of each, we will go on to evaluate how effective that opening is, in trying to pave the way for that thesis.

1. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, a tragedy is "a serious play typically dealing with the problems of a central character, leading to an unhappy or disastrous ending brought on, as in ancient drama, by fate and a tragic flaw in this character, or, in modern drama usually by moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressures." That helps to explain why Sophocles' *Oedipus* is a better tragedy than his *Antigone*—because Oedipus is subject to both external fate and his own internal personality flaws, while the tragic flaw in *Antigone* does not belong to the title character but to her uncle, Creon.

2. Many people believe that a tragedy is a play where everyone dies at the end. They probably have *Hamlet* in mind, though even there not *everyone* dies! The death toll can be high in some ancient Greek tragedies, as well, such as *Antigone* and *Medea*, but in Aeschylus's *Eumenides* no one dies at all! That is why this paper will ask the question, "Is *The Eumenides* really a tragedy?"

[Note to instructors: Many students resort to cliched opening statements or tired gimmicks such as quotations or dictionary definitions in order to *avoid* thinking about their subject, not to

confront it. In the first example, the unnecessarily long definition doesn't tell us anything new, but it seems to have taken up enough space for the writer to feel comfortable dropping in an undeveloped thesis of sorts (*Oedipus* is a better tragedy than *Antigone*). In the second example, the writer begins with a generalization that even he or she rejects in the next two sentences and then avoids stating a thesis by ending with a question. Neither example provides the reader with a clear idea about what the essay is trying to prove.]

Step 1D: Small group discussion [15 minutes]
For this exercise, exchange drafts of your first paragraphs only. In groups of two or, at most, three, read each other's paragraphs and give feedback about them, focusing on the clarity and development of the thesis, as well as the utility and effectiveness of the opening. Helping the writer to strengthen the thesis is the main point of the exercise. Since you all should be familiar with the material discussed, a good way to judge each thesis is to have the responding student, who has read only the first paragraph, guess two or three of the main points of the essay. The writer can then more easily spot ways in which his or her main argument may have been misunderstood. Responses having to do with the opening should concentrate on whether it helps the process of stating that thesis or detracts from it.

Before you break up your groups, take a few minutes to write down the comments you have heard about your paragraph and any ideas those comments may have generated. If you are not sure that you have something right, discuss it again with your responder. When you are working on your essay later, you may not remember valuable suggestions unless you write them down clearly now.

Part Two: Developing Arguments in Essays

> **Workflow Tip #2:** Transitions between paragraphs are some of the last things you need to do in writing an essay, so don't worry about how your paragraphs fit together in your first draft or two. It will be easier to think of transitions once your paragraphs are closer to their final form, and you won't waste time developing transitions that get discarded when the ideas in those paragraphs are revised.

Step 2A: Logic and transitions between paragraphs, class discussion [10 minutes]

- Be aware of the difference in creating a logical connection between ideas in your essay and in creating transitions between paragraphs.
    - Paragraph transitions can also suggest logical connections but often do not.
    - You can lose your reader at either point.
    - Transitions may seem to receive more emphasis in composition courses, but logical connections are more important to getting your point across.
    - Transitions can usually be added in a late draft, but logical connections need to be developed early in the composition process of an essay.
    - Successful transitions can be fairly superficial, often relying on such devices as wordplay, ironic reversals, comparisons or contrasts, and repetition.

   - Logical connections are made clear by the interplay of major claims in the argument of an essay, especially
     - the main thesis of the essay,
     - the topic sentence of each paragraph,
     - and the support offered for those topic sentences.
- There is a big difference between seeing the logic of an argument and being convinced by it.
   - "Seeing the logic" means understanding the parts of the argument and recognizing that they go together.
   - Evaluating the form is much easier than evaluating the support.
   - Arguing persuasively requires logical form *and* convincing support.
   - Learning to spot weaknesses in form or support will make your revisions more effective.

Step 2B: Examples for class discussion [5 minutes]
These three exercises ask you to construct, or "reverse-engineer," the thesis statement of an essay based on the topic sentences of three of its paragraphs. If the argument of the essay is well constructed, you should be able to get pretty close to restating the thesis, without having seen it. If you cannot reconstruct the thesis, ask for it be revealed, and then try to identify where the logic went awry. After we practice this technique as a class on the following example, you will have a chance to do so with your own essay and that of a classmate's in the small-group discussion that comes next.

1. A) Achilles is petty in withdrawing from battle after Agamemnon takes away from him Briseis, a woman who is Achilles' war prize. B) Achilles causes the death of many of his own comrades. C) Achilles only rejoins the battle to avenge the death of Patroclus.
   Student thesis: Achilles is not a true hero (in the modern sense).

2. A) Until the suitors plot to murder Telemachus on his return from abroad, they haven't done anything that might be considered a "capital" offense. B) Like Odysseus, Telemachus defends Penelope's honor and his own property against the suitors, he sets sail for adventure, and he is guided by Athena. C) Telemachus is the first one to whom Odysseus reveals himself once he enters the poem, in Book 5.
   Student thesis: The first four books of the Odyssey help to develop the poem's main themes by having Telemachus stand in for his father, until the latter's dramatic entrance in Book 5.

3. A) Odysseus sleeps with Circe for a full year after he and his men have been have been released from her spell. B) Odysseus has sex nightly with Calypso (like Circe, a goddess) for seven years. C) Penelope remains faithful, even though her husband has been gone twenty years.
   Student thesis: Odysseus is not a true hero; (or) *Greek society employed a double standard in judging men and women.*

[Note to instructors: In presenting your own examples for class discussion, the thesis must not be included on the sheet or visible on the screen or board while the students are attempting to reconstruct that thesis. Try to create three examples of increasing complexity on topics related to the class but not directly connected to the assignment, so that none of the students will be using anything close. Since this part of the lesson is only to be sure students have the idea needed for the next step, move on to the small-group discussion as soon as possible.

In the first example above, the topic sentences (three traits of Achilles) do not lead to the thesis ("Achilles is not a true hero"); some argument is missing about what the traits of a "true hero" would be in a Greek epic. In the second example, the three sentences all show parallels between Telemachus and Odysseus, which may or may not be enough for students to construct a thesis arguing that Telemachus is used in the first four books as a stand-in of sorts for Odysseus. In the third example, the three topic sentences highlight the difference between Odysseus's sexual promiscuity and Penelope's faithfulness, but that might be stronger support for a "double standard" thesis than for the "real hero" one.]

Step 2C: Small-group discussion [15 minutes]
For this exercise, use the outline (or list of topic sentences) of your essay. In groups of two or, at most, three, read each other's outlines and give feedback about them, focusing on the organizing logic of the essay. As we did with the class discussion of the earlier examples, your job is to test the clarity of the logic by trying to "reverse-engineer" your classmate's overall thesis on the basis of the topic sentences that should support it. At this early point in the development of the essay, there should be no discussion of paragraph transitions, so focus on the logical connections between the topic sentences of each paragraph.

Again, before you break up your groups, take a few minutes to write down the comments you have heard about the arguments in your essay and any ideas those comments may have generated. If you are not sure that you have understood something your classmate has said, discuss it again, so that you can refer to your notes about any valuable suggestions when you are working on your essay at home.

Closure/Evaluation [5 minutes]:

The point of today's class is to get you to focus on the basic elements of your argument (the thesis statement, which is supported by the topic sentences of each paragraph, which are supported in turn by the evidence presented in the paragraph), and to leave features such as clever opening "hooks" and transitions between paragraphs until a relatively late draft of your essay. Taking these steps will save you time and aggravation, and ensure a clearer, more successful argument in your essay.

Lesson Analysis:
The strength of the small group work in this lesson plan is simply that students get feedback on the effectiveness of their arguments from their peers (rather than from an instructor). By structuring the discussion around the relationship between the thesis and the topic sentences of each paragraph, I am hoping to steer that feedback away from simple agreement or disagreement with the thesis (which the other student will not know) and encourage exchanges on the evidence. The biggest weakness of this exercise is probably that a pairing of two analytically

challenged students will not produce a clear sense of the problems and achievements of their written arguments. However, I believe that the opportunity for structured peer feedback on analysis and argumentation will make this exercise innovative, and, I hope, important for improving the composition skills of many students in the class.