

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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Critical Writing Challenging But Not Impossible!

Nesrin McMeekin
Bard Early College Hudson Valley
& Bard Early College Dutchess

EDITORS' NOTE: *This lesson plan is one of five projects created out of the Bard Early College Fellowship, which have been highlighted for the first issue of Early College Folio. Read Ligaya Franklin's "[Early College Pedagogy: An Introduction to the Bard Early College Fellowship](#)," for a comprehensive review of the fellows, their pedagogical approaches, and the broader goals of the fellowship.*

SUMMARY

This is a semester long project, where students write one long essay, in three different stages based on different texts they engage with.

OVERVIEW

While it is not difficult to get the students to engage verbally with texts and have lively in-class discussions, it is a real challenge to get them to express their arguments in a written format. In previous courses, I ask my students to write three separate essays, each consisting of one or two drafts. However, I have found moving from one essay to another can be a challenge in itself, where students lose interest and confidence in their abilities, and concentrate only on finishing the task. Asking students to start thinking about a new essay as soon as they were starting to feel confident about their previous one makes the task more difficult, and the writing often more shallow (often just summaries of texts).

I have come to believe that if the students continue to build upon the same essay over the duration of the course, rather than having a completely new topic for each one, they may see continuous progress, develop a habit of constant revision, and develop the ability to change their arguments based on new textual evidence.

This project is for a seminar course, designed for seniors (applicable for juniors as well) in Early College Education. This project aims to get the students to en-

gage with a variety of texts from a broad scope of eras and fields; to work with different arguments; and to be able to use them in critical essay writing.

In this semester-long, multi-phase project, students will be asked to complete one long essay, consisting of 12 to 15 pages, in three separate stages. The continuity in their written work will also give them more time to challenge their own arguments and consider counter-arguments to their thesis. They will have the chance to expand their paper with new texts they will encounter throughout the term. In addition to revising their own work, students will also be asked to swap their papers with other students, read and evaluate their peers' work, have in-class debates, and finally return their own work with a new perspective.

ISSUES ADDRESSED

- Students' abilities to blend creative and analytical thinking in their written works.
- Difficulty in finding essay prompts that can be used and expanded throughout the semester with variety of texts.

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND PEDAGOGIES EMPLOYED

- To get students to express themselves in a formal written format, as well as a verbal one, by writing several drafts, and having enough time to build on their original ideas.
- To engage closely with assigned texts.
- To analyze parts of each text, as well as the whole.
- To learn close reading techniques, and focus on a specific sentence/part within a longer text.
- To be able to put different texts into a dialogue with each other by finding similarities/differences between the texts, using counter arguments to strengthen their main thesis, and imagining conversations between authors.
- To establish free writing abilities, as well as formal writing skills, by doing in-class free writing exercises.
- To engage in debates, by giving students different arguments to defend.
- To establish teamwork, by getting the students to work in small groups, and on each other's work.

OUTLINE OF SESSIONS/LESSON PLAN

This is a semester long project (approximately 15 weeks) divided into three parts. Students will be asked to submit their written work with several drafts at the end of each stage.

STAGE 1

A shorter (at least 3 pages) essay answering an overarching question, applicable to the texts used so far. This stage should have at least two drafts, in which students will revise their writings.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STAGE

- Understanding essay prompts
- If possible, to come up with their own essay prompts
- Writing an outline
- Defining a principal argument
- Working on citation techniques
- Finding evidence from the text(s) relevant to their essay

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Week 1: Introduction to the task

Week 2: Work on possible essay prompts, and outline formats

Week 3: Decide on an essay prompt, write an outline (Draft 1)

Week 4: Expand the outline into an essay of 3-4 pages, work on textual evidence, revisions from the first draft

Week 5: Submit a revised second draft

STAGE 2

Expanding the paper by including new texts and more specific concepts. This stage should have at least two drafts (6 to 7 pages), where students will be asked to swap their drafts, and work with a peer.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STAGE

- Invite students to compare, and challenge different arguments/texts
- Add new evidence into existing paper
- Work on format and style
- Strengthen their main argument by challenging it with counter arguments
- Learning techniques for revision by working with the feedback given by their professor and peer(s)

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Week 6 & 7: Expand the paper into 6 to 7 pages with new textual evidence

Week 8: Submit the new draft

Week 9: Work with a peer on the paper, considering counter arguments and different perspectives in order to strengthen the main thesis

Week 10: Revise the paper with the new feedback and submit a new draft

STAGE 3

Expanding, revising, and concluding the paper with new texts, sub-questions, and concepts. This draft should be at least 12 to 15 pages, and should be submitted at the end of the semester.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STAGE

- Critical analysis of different texts and subjects in one long essay.
- Importance of revision in critical writing
- Managing feedback, and incorporating new information into existing framework.

WEEKLY LESSON PLAN

Week 11 & 12: Expand the paper into 12 to 15 pages with the new textual evidence

Week 13 & 14: Students revise their own work and make sure all references and citations are correct.

Week 15: Submit the finished, final work.

LESSON PLAN: STAGE 1

Note: This lesson (approximately 80 minutes) will try to get the students work on a text and think about: what main argument is and how to form an outline for an essay. I have been using John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*,¹ to help guide my students with the writing process: "...a 'C' paper is an 'A' paper turned in too soon".²

Students will be asked to respond to a text, or part of a text that they read before the class. This written response should be a paragraph or two, answering:

- What is the most interesting thing in this piece?
- What struck you the most in this piece? Why?
- How would you respond to it?

For example: In the reading of Plato's *Apology*, pick an excerpt that you feel is central to the piece. Summarize your selection, then tell us why it's important or central to the overall reading. (10 minutes)

Students will then be asked to read, and debate their answers; and look into similarities and differences in their answers (15-20 minutes).

Once we spend enough time on our own analysis of the text, students will be asked about what they think the main argument is? We will look into and answer questions such as:

- What is it that the author is trying to tell us?
- How can we summarize the author's argument in one sentence?
- Can we come up with our own thesis about the text/subject?

For example: In the reading of Apology, what would you say is the central argument, and how is it supported? (15-20 minutes)

Once we establish what a main argument (thesis statement) is, [this itself may take a whole class in which case working on an outline may expand to another session] students will be asked to come up with an outline for a possible paper. (20-25 minutes)

- If you were to write on this subject, how would you start the paper?
- What would you like to focus on/ talk about in your paper? Why?
- What examples or points from the texts, come to mind?
- What examples, points outside of the texts that are relevant for your paper come to your mind?
- How would you join the conversation?
- What do you want to say about the subject?
- What do you want your readers to get from your paper?

At this level, I have found that I do believe giving students some essay prompts are better than asking them to come up with their own. Later in the project, they may choose to expand or change that question, or to come up with a totally different one, on their own. It is best to pick prompts that fit in with the overall themes of the course, which then can be easily incorporated into each new text.

My current course focuses on personal freedom, and one of the questions I asked my students could be expanded to a term long project, and evolve with introduction of new texts.

Here are some sample essay prompts I might give at this stage:

- What is the relationship between knowledge and freedom in Prometheus Bound and Frankenstein?
- Can knowledge "set you free"? Why or why not?
- What do these texts say about personal freedom as it relates to knowledge?

A successful paper will have:

- A good title
- A clear thesis statement
- Brief summary of the view being pushed against
- Well-supported arguments that anticipate reader's objections
- Dense evidence from the text (clearly cited evidence)
- A good conclusion and a bibliography

Criteria for organization, development, and clarity:

- Make sure that your paper has clear, easy- to-follow structure (reader doesn't get lost)
- Make sure that your paper has sufficient development of ideas and argument
- Make sure that your paper has unified, coherent paragraphs with good transitions
- Make sure that your paper has clear, graceful, and grammatically correct sentences

LESSON PLAN: STAGE 2

This lesson focuses on evaluation, revision, and small group work.

Students will be asked to self-evaluate, by answering some questions about their own papers. In their notebooks, students should answer the following questions:

- What is the main argument in your paper?
- What is the strongest point of your paper?
- What is the weakest point of your paper?
- If you had more time, what would you like to improve/change in your paper? Why?

(This should take 5 to 10 minutes)

Once students self-evaluate their own writings, they will be asked to swap their essay with a peer to read and evaluate each other's work. The following questions can be given as a form/questionnaire format so that students can write their answers, and attach it to their peer's paper. This way when students get their papers back, they will have their peer's feedback on a separate document, and use it in their revision. This should take the remainder of the class time.

- What do you think the main argument is?
- Is there enough analysis to explain the main argument?
- Is there enough textual evidence to support the main thesis?
- Is the argument convincing? Why? Why not?
- How would you challenge this argument?
- What else would you like to see being challenged in this paper?

LESSON PLAN: STAGE 3

This lesson should help students to revise and finalize their paper.

Students will be asked to think about possible ways to expand, and how to finalize their written work. They will be asked to look into their own essays, and see if they answered these questions:

- Why did I pick/ come up with this question?
- What do I try to achieve in this paper?
- What is my purpose for writing it?
- Who are my intended readers?
- And what do I want them to learn from my paper?
- What kind of change do I want to bring about in my reader's understanding of my topic?
- When my reader is finish my paper, what do I want them to know, believe, or do?
- What kind of changes did this paper go through?
- Is the main argument still the same, or did it evolved/changed during the process? If so how?
- How can I reflect that change/progress into my paper?

This should take half of the class time (30 to 40 minutes). In the second half, students will be asked to make changes on their drafts if any/some of these questions were not answered in their papers.

NOTES

- 1 John Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- 2 Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 33.