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Four College-Level Writing Assignments: Text Complexity, Close Reading, and the Five-Paragraph Essay

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In *Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay*, Campbell and Latimer claim they “have found that students can use the [five-paragraph] formula to say very little in a very organized way” (95), and our experience as teachers and scholars in English education and composition studies confirms the same observation. We’ve examined writing assignments inviting students to explain three transportation modes for traveling to school, to describe a coffee mug in terms of shape, color, and texture, or to list the steps of turning up the TV or making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. To what end, one reasonably wonders. And though these assignments undoubtedly seem extreme, they are nonetheless *real examples* and not much different from the following only slightly more complex variations: describe three differences between the film and written versions of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, give three reasons why open adoption promotes social justice, or analyze three scenes that prove alienation is a theme in *Divergent*.

Why does the five-paragraph essay persist? According to Campbell and Latimer, the answer lies in several deeply ingrained myths about writing pedagogy, including one myth that *T/W* readers have certainly heard: Five-paragraph essays provide a scaffold that helps to “prepare students for college writing” (8). Brannon et al. argue that these myths about five-paragraph essays are powerful, pervasive, and even “seductive” (16), and they are particularly well represented in the not researched, but seemingly commonsensical claims of Byrung-In Seo and Kerri Smith, whose essays appear in the “In My Opinion” section of *English Journal*—a highly respected venue. In an attempt to debunk these myths and others like them, Campbell and Latimer cite relevant studies (see Courtney 2008; Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese 2010; Kidwell 2005; Moghtader, Cotch, and Hague 2001; Moss 2002; Ransdell and Glau 1996; Rorschach 2004; and Smith 2005), and they share testimonials by college professors and students alike, all indicating how unhelpful and even detrimental the five-paragraph essay is for college students.

In further support of overturning the “five-paragraph essay as stepping stone to college writing” myth, we offer here four authentic college-level writing assignments from our institution—a Midwestern Division I university. These four assignments bear no resemblance to writing prompts that lead students to write five-paragraph essays, so they provide models of alternative assignments that Kathleen Duddens Rowland in “Slay the Monster!” argues teachers so desperately need to replace the five-paragraph theme in their curricula (53). Moreover, and as we later explain, the four college-level assignments reflect results from a long-term assessment of university writing at our institution. Consequently, they are worthy of consideration as teachers design writing assignments leading their students ever closer to being “college and career ready.”

Four College-Level Writing Assignments

In this section, we showcase four college-level writing assignments: a rhetorical analysis in a 100-level composition course, a case study in a 200-level business law course, a primary source paper in a 300-level history class, and a series of ten summary/responses in a 400-level capstone course in a biomedical science program. Though these writing assignments are listed without classroom context or writing samples, anyone can see they invite students to write essays that cannot be successfully squeezed into the five-paragraph essay format because its “emphasis on organization over content squelches complex ideas [like those explored in college classes] that do not fit neatly into three boxes” (Wesley 59).

- **A Rhetorical Analysis in a 100-Level Composition Course.** *Your assignment is to choose an editorial on an issue of your choice from a nationally syndicated newspaper or magazine (i.e., Detroit Free Press, New York Times, Time, Newsweek) OR to choose an essay from a group presented to by your instructor OR to choose an electronic essay (blog, webpage, or other resource approved by your instructor) and to write a four- to six-page essay in which you analyze the editorial using critical approaches we will discuss in class and then evaluate the effectiveness of the editorialist’s argument. Based on your detailed analysis, you will decide whether the editorial is effectively persuasive or not. Although you may point out positives and negatives of the writer’s craft, you must make some overall judgment about the piece’s effectiveness.*
- **A Case Analysis in a 200-Level Business Law Course.** *On the Facebook page, you will find posted a number of articles and two videos in regard to the case of "Association for Molecular Pathology v Myriad Genetics," which is posted on Blackboard and attached to this email. The court's opinion starts after the portion of the case document labeled "syllabus." Your assignment is to write a 2- to 3-page paper answering the following questions: (1) What are the facts of the case? (2) What did the trial court rule, what did the court of appeals rule, and what did the Supreme Court rule? (3) What are the public policy issues at stake in this case? (4) What is your personal opinion in regard to what the court did? Answers to these questions should be based upon a careful reading of the case, as well as a close analysis of the articles, the videos, and class notes/discussion.*

- **A Primary Source Paper in a 300-level History Course.** *Find a document pertaining to witchcraft and between 4 and 20 pages in length on Early English Books Online (EEBO). Write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) analysis of it, complete with underlined thesis argument and with footnotes (or endnotes if you prefer); you do not need a bibliography. You will need to include a printed copy of the document about which you are writing with both drafts. Your document print-out can have your own notes on it, or it can be a clean copy. Once you have chosen a document, read it carefully. Figure out what the author or authors was trying to communicate. Then think about the document in the context of the readings we have done so far in class and all that we have learned about early modern witchcraft and witch-trials. Come up with a thesis argument and a method for organizing your evidence. Then write your paper, following closely the writing and citation guidelines we have covered in class and in Rampolla's *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*.*
- **Ten Summary/Responses in a 400-Level Bio-Medical Science Course.** *This assignment requires a close review and analysis of ten related professional readings assigned over the course of an intensive, three-week summer semester. Students were expected to read each article two or three times, to take notes as they read, and to research and report the credentials of the author(s), the "impact numbers" of the journal, and the meaning of unfamiliar terminology and concepts. In addition to conveying the author's purpose and all key concepts, students were expected to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the article for future course use and to generate discussion questions for their classmates' consideration during class sessions. The discussion questions might (a) seek clarification regarding a concept, (b) connect the new reading to a previous one, and/or (C) raise important issues for healthcare professionals.*

As previously indicated, these four assignments reflect the major results of a long-term assessment of college writing at our institution (See Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, & Kreth 2010 and Taylor, Crawford, Kreth, & Brockman 2011). First, our assessment demonstrates that professors believe college writing is a developmental skill, and the four writing assignments collectively reflect this finding as each new assignment increases incrementally in rhetorical complexity. Second, our assessment reveals that standards for "good" writing vary by discipline, and each of the four assignments represents the rhetorical demands of a different discipline. Third, our assessment indicates that the reading-writing connection is crucial in college writing, and all four assignments require close reading—a topic to be addressed shortly.

In addition to the three previously mentioned assessment findings, a final one of special significance exists: Not a single professor in the long-term assessment work named the five-paragraph essay as a college-level writing assignment or identified it as a stepping stone in learning to write for college. To explore why, let's take a closer look at the four assignments in relation to five-paragraph essays.

The College-Level Writing Assignment and the Five-Paragraph Essay

What distinguishes the four college-level writing assignments from five-paragraph essay assignments? To provide one answer, we explore in this section several key overlapping elements the four college-level assignments share: an authentic purpose, with a thesis generated about a single text by means of a critical lens or framework; a primary focus on content that requires the student-writer to take intellectual risks; and an organizational pattern that is more sophisticated than a list of three reasons or elements, with each reason or element limited to a single paragraph. Finally, none of the assignments requires student-writers to take a hard “yes or no” stand on an issue—a not uncommon feature of many secondary-level writing assignments. As we later demonstrate, each of the elements found in the college-level writing assignments could be easily adapted for the secondary-level context.

Each of the college-level writing assignments has an authentic purpose: to evaluate the effectiveness of a newspaper or magazine article, using rhetorical appeals clarified in class; to review a law case, using questions typical of the legal field; to analyze a primary source about witchcraft, using newly acquired disciplinary tools and writing norms accepted in the field of history; and to summarize and critique a series of recent articles regarding immunization, using disciplinary tools and writing norms learned during an undergraduate program in biomedical sciences and accepted in the field. To undertake each of these purposes, the student-writer must begin recursively and intentionally delay “thesis making” by first examining the single text in question and then by “reading” in two, and potentially, three overlapping ways: (1) for overall comprehension, (2) through a critical lens or framework taught in the course or program, and, when required, (3) in light of relevant supplemental readings strategically chosen by the professor or student because they shed light on each other and the original required reading. Only after this recursive close reading of relevant texts and critical concepts can the student-writer begin generating a thesis based upon his or her understanding of the intersection between the assigned reading in question and the required critical framework or lens introduced in the class.

These initial “academic moves” require intellectual risk taking—far more than starting the writing process by “taking a stance” on making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or “arguing” that three differences exist between the written and film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (to return to two of our opening examples), both of which are either self-evident or foregone conclusions before the student even begins to write. In turn, the overall shape of the emerging college-level papers is inherently different from that of a five-paragraph essay. Most obviously, content matters. It. Really. Matters. We’ve all heard anecdotes of students being encouraged to “plug in” fictitious facts or imaginary data to demonstrate a generic, all-purpose ability to support claims with concrete evidence, but this approach would never be rewarded in college-level courses in which the substance of the student’s thesis and content wins the day. Further, the supporting evidence is unlikely, in effective essays, to take the shape of three distinct reasons or elements, each one limited to a single paragraph and arranged in ascending or descending order of importance.

In addition to the previously mentioned elements, a final one is worth highlighting because of its noteworthy absence: a yes/no question to which students must either fully agree or disagree, with a perfunctory nod to the opposing side. To clarify, consider the following not atypical writing prompts: *Is the American Dream possible today? Was the*

Supreme Court right to legalize gay marriage? Should the local school board purchase laptops for all students? Is alienation a theme in Divergent? An unanticipated consequence of such assignments is inevitably a five-paragraph essay because student-writers tend to answer “yes” or “no” and then list three reasons why (one per paragraph). A second unanticipated consequence is often shallow or so-called fake reading (Tovani) because students tend to cherry pick information from random sources to support their opinion or, in the case of the *Divergent* or any literary example, isolated scenes or chapters that were likely discussed in class and, subsequently, not fully or even partially read by the individual student-writer.

In *Rewriting: How To Do Things with Texts*, Joseph Harris provides further insight into limitations associated with yes/no writing prompts:

We live in a culture prone to naming winners and losers, rights and wrongs. You’re in or out, hot or not, on the bus or off it. But academics seldom write in an all or nothing mode, trying to convince readers to take one side or another of an argument. Instead, their work assumes that any perspective on an issue (and there are often more than two) will have moments of insight and blindness ... This is more complex and interesting work than simply taking sides in a debate, since it involves thinking through the potential uses of a number of positions rather than arguing for or against a fixed point of view. (24-25)

In advocating for more “nuanced” thesis statements than a yes/no writing assignment typically fosters, Harris is closely aligned with the National Writing Project and its new College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP)—an innovative program with a proven success record in teaching students how to manage nonfiction source materials when making arguments in both daily life and academic essays (<https://sites.google.com/site/nwpcollegereadywritersprogram/home>). The first three chapters of Harris’s *Rewriting* are required reading for the teachers participating in the CRWP primarily because of four academic moves that Harris introduces, including forwarding, authorizing, extending, and countering; however, a required CRWP formative assessment tool prompts teachers to begin the review process with an analysis of the student-writer’s ability to generate a thesis that is not merely debatable and defensible, as teachers might predict, *but that is also nuanced* (our emphasis). This standard is consistent with assessment results at our university, so we urge teachers to reconsider the importance of yes/no writing assignments that guide students towards taking an “all or nothing” stand, as Harris explains is seldom done in academic writing. (For more information and strategies regarding writing nuanced thesis statements, see Chapter 4 of Graff and Birkenstein’s *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*).

Teaching Implications

What take-away lessons can *T/W* readers glean from the four college-level writing assignments? Before answering this question, we first acknowledge that these assignments represent a very specific kind of academic discourse that does not encompass the entirety of the rhetorical and personal writing tasks students will undertake in high school or college. The assignments do not include creative, professional, or personal genres—the rich array of assignments that students are invited to undertake. We have no doubt, for

example, the four assignments would not pass muster with Nancie Atwell, who advocates for real-world genres outside of academe (604-606), and it's difficult to say without classroom context how the assignments would fare in light of Erika Lindemann's well-established criteria for effective assignments (212) or Troy Hicks's more recent MMAPS heuristic (55-58). And, of course, the four assignments are designed for college, and not high school, students. Nevertheless, we're confident the four assignments are worthy of consideration, especially for teachers who want to move beyond the five-paragraph essay to better prepare students for college writing. As such, we offer the following observations.

Close reading is the cornerstone of all four college-level writing assignments, so we begin, perhaps surprisingly, by celebrating book whisperers (Miller) who foster voracious independent reading among their students—a crucial first step towards learning to become a close reader. In this endeavor, we naturally recommend that teachers peruse Donalyn Miller's *Book Whisperer: Awakening the Reader in All of Us* and Jeff Wilhelm, Mike Smith, and Sharon Fransen's *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want and Why We Should Let Them*, but we also recommend Tim Pruzinsky's "Read Books. Every Day. Mostly for Pleasure," which provides a brief, but substantive, overview of a highly successful independent reading program.

Of course, voracious independent reading is not synonymous with close reading. A baseline strategy for English teachers is to consider the CCSS reading standards. After all, the four college-level assignments, arguably, reflect the CCSS (Taylor and Brockman 2015) by collectively demonstrating a spiraled curriculum, writing across/within the disciplines, and, most relevant here, the reading/writing connection. More specifically, they evolve from close reading and analytical reasoning using one or more texts.

CCSS Reading Anchor Standards

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Standards 1-3 all focus on close reading to grasp the content of a text, to make logical inferences, to evaluate the evidence, and to make connections to others writing on similar topics. Likewise, Standards 3-6 involve close textual analysis as students apply strategies for determining *how* a text's structure and technique further its purposes. Finally, Standards 7-9 focus on how students use their reading to evaluate and make comparisons to other texts, including to their own emerging texts. While the standards do not focus on specific reading strategies, we acknowledge, along with Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman, that high-level comprehension requires explicit instruction:

Undoubtedly students will need explicit instruction in higher-level comprehension. They'll need a repertoire of strategies that undergird these reading skills. They'll need the skills broken down into manageable steps, and they'll need to practice these steps and get expert feedback along the way. They'll need lots of repeated practice, on a variety of texts. As they do this practice, teachers will need assessments that will allow them to carefully calibrate their teaching, to move kids up levels of skill and text difficulty. They'll also need structures that will make reading work visible--structures such as reading partners and clubs, which give students opportunities to have the rich literary conversations about fiction and nonfiction that the standards call for. Teachers will also need to focus on methods of giving feedback while kids are practicing these skills, with gradual release and decreasing scaffolds, to lead students to internalize these skills (29-30).¹

¹ Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman admit that, particularly for teachers in disciplines other than Language Arts, strategies for teaching these high-level comprehension and analytical reading skills may be very unfamiliar. They suggest creating learning communities within schools for practicing and studying, possibly in partnership with the National Writing Project (29). Go to the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at <http://readingandwritingproject.org/> for invaluable resources and professional development opportunities.

Within the context of writing assignments, this kind of close analytical reading practice occurs when students are assigned many short low-stakes writing opportunities, including those that invite students to integrate ideas across texts. NWP's previously mentioned College Ready Writing Program encourages this kind of informal writing practice as an essential step in learning to manage nonfiction source materials. Another excellent, but more formal, practice opportunity could be based upon the new SAT essay (College Board) because it requires students to read carefully a single nonfiction text on an unfamiliar topic and then generate a thesis, not focusing on whether the student agrees or disagrees with the author (a yes/no prompt), but instead on the rhetorical devices the author uses to build an argument to persuade his or her readers. The student is then scored on three overlapping features: writing skills, analysis ability, and *reading comprehension* (our emphasis). In the sample essays posted on the SAT website, the successful student-writers are commended for an ability to capture the author's central claim and paraphrase major details, identify the connection between the major details and the author's purpose, identify strategies that appear especially adapted to audience members' needs, and avoid errors of fact or interpretation. Our four assignments suggest that these skills of close reading will be rewarded not only on the SAT but also during college coursework.

Most obviously, though, the four college-level assignments suggest that college-bound students should be encouraged and supported to take intellectual risks in their writing—something the average five-paragraph essay doesn't require. This basic claim, then, calls into question the sample assignments listed in the introduction of this essay, and it also suggests that teachers should seriously reconsider the value in assigning yes/no writing prompts. As the four college-level assignments demonstrate, however, intellectual risk taking doesn't require that students generate long papers or incorporate dozens of source materials, as overtasked teachers may mistakenly believe. On the contrary, the assignments suggest that one means of intellectual risk taking is to examine closely a single text in light of a guiding lens or theory. Clearly, this assignment approach could take many shapes and forms, and we firmly believe the classroom teacher is best equipped to help students select texts and strategically place them alongside critical frameworks. To clarify, consider these classroom examples:

- Donalyn Miller, author of *The Book Whisperer* and former 6th grade teacher, reported in a keynote address at the Chippewa River Writing Project's 5th Annual MLK Day Conference, that she asked her students to sort books in the classroom library by genre and then to explain the rationale for the genre choice—a perfect example of closely reading a single text in light of a guiding lens or framework (in this case, genre).
- Brook Richelle Holland reports in “Classical Rhetoric in Atticus Finch's Speeches” that her students read *To Kill a Mockingbird* via a Classical Rhetoric lens. More specifically, students apply rhetorical conventions associated with Cicero's Plain Style, Middle Style, and Grand Style when Atticus speaks to, respectively, Scout when she wants to stay home from school (7-79), Mrs. Dubose after she has taunted Scout and Jem (80), and the jury members during Tom Robinson's trial (81-82).

- Nick Enders, a student teacher placed at Davison High School in Davison, Michigan, invited his 10th graders to analyze Tim Burton’s *Vincent*, a cartoon telling the tale of a young boy who wishes he were Vincent Price. During the first viewing, students’ purpose was basic understanding and pure enjoyment; during the second viewing, they explored how the cartoon reflected tenets of dark romanticism, which is the literary framework Nick taught in class.
- Rebecca Send, a student teacher at Vestaburg High School in Vestaburg, Michigan, asked her students to compare the written and film versions of Ben Hurst’s “The Interlopers,” and to name three differences—a task that could inadvertently lead students to five-paragraph essays. However, Rebecca was receptive when her English Department supervisor proposed revising the assignment so students selected just one difference for the purpose of determining its impact in the ironic outcome of the narrative. Here, the selected difference functions as a single text, while the plot structure of the two literary versions is the guiding framework. Because writing prompts inviting students to compare two versions of a literary work is such a common secondary-level writing assignment, the outcome of Rebecca’s example is noteworthy; it challenges teachers to render similar assignments more complex by inviting student to select just one similarity or difference and to determine how it does/does not impact the final outcome of the literary work.

As these examples suggest, the key takeaway from the four college-level writing assignments is that college writing often demands that students focus closely on an idea and develop it through textual connections that explain—and add to—a given disciplinary conversation. Unlike the common sense understanding that students need to start big, narrow their topic, and then explore it through the basic structure of three (fairly simple) reasons, we suggest that students start small—with a single text or research question about that text—and explore the complex and interesting angles through reading closely and via a critical framework before coming to any conclusions.

Final Words

As Thomas McCann notes in *Transforming Talk into Text*, “there is nothing new about cautioning against teaching students to rely on the five paragraph formula” (22). More than forty years ago in 1971, Janet Emig denounced the five-paragraph essay in her landmark study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Though Nelms, Schrieiner, and Voss have each critiqued her work, Emig’s comments about the pervasiveness of the five-paragraph essay still resonate:

A species of extensive writing that recurs so frequently in [schools] ... that it deserves special mention is the five-paragraph theme, consisting of one paragraph of introduction (“tell what you are going to say”), three of expansion and example (“say it”), and one of conclusion (“tell what you have said.”) This mode is so indigenously American that it might be called the Fifty-Star Theme. (97)

Twenty-five years later in 1996, D.R. Ransdell and Gregory Glau published an *English Journal* essay that dovetails with Emig's findings. In a study of more than 250 first-year college students, they report results calling for, among other secondary-level curricular reforms, more complex writing assignments and the elimination of the five-paragraph essay. As one participant succinctly claimed: "Don't teach the five-paragraph essay. They don't exist in college" (19).

Fast forward yet another twenty years to the present day, and we are making essentially the same claim as that of the outspoken, anonymous student in Ransdell and Glau's study. As previously indicated, the four college-level writing assignments are aligned with a long-term assessment of university writing in which not a single professor named the five-paragraph as foundational in helping prepare students for college writing. In her 1971 study, Emig unfairly accused teachers of "illiteracy" (98) for the pervasiveness of five-paragraph essays, but we argue Campbell and Latimer have the more accurate understanding of the pedagogical situation. Powerful myths supporting the value of the five-paragraph essay are pervasive, so pervasive that the pseudo-genre persists in American schools, despite more than forty years of composition research. However, more recent university assessment initiatives cited here and elsewhere (see especially Sommers and Saltz) provide evidence that we can put one myth to rest: Five-paragraph essays do not provide college-bound students with adequate preparation for the challenges of university writing assignments.

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