

Writing for the General Education Curriculum A Practical Guide for Teaching Fellows



Harvard College Program
in General Education
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
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Introduction

Principles of Teaching Writing in the General Education Curriculum

Before we get into teaching writing in a General Education subject, it's helpful to start with a few tenets about writing. Here are three useful ones:

- 1) Writing is a skill that can be learned, and this means you can teach it.
- 2) There is an established vocabulary for teaching writing, and this means you can use objective criteria for evaluating it.
- 3) We've derived this vocabulary from professional articles and books, and this means you can use your course's reading materials not just as intellectual content for your discussions but as models for academic writing.

The first tenet here may give us some relief that our jobs are, indeed, possible, and the third tenet may indicate that teaching writing isn't necessarily an addition to our day job teaching a subject. However, the most important of these tenets is, arguably, the second: using an established, stable vocabulary to teach and evaluate student writing turns what may appear to be a subjective enterprise into a more objective endeavor. It may not quite create a science, but it is far more impartial than what most students (and even many of us) might fear.

The possibility of students feeling at your whim heightens because of the General Education context: for the most part, these are students taking courses outside their intellectual homes, and they therefore might feel at the mercy of disciplinary "irregularities." What constitutes analysis in poetry is downright alien to the data-driven sociologist. But even within disciplines there are divides: the scientifically inclined archeologist might not understand the evidence a cultural anthropologist uses.

What to do in a Gen Ed classroom full of budding poets, chemists, and psychologists? How do you teach writing so everyone knows not only what they're supposed to learn but why your evaluation of their writing is reasonable?

This guide to teaching writing in the General Education curriculum aims to answer these questions by discussing these strategies:

- knowing your audience;
- identifying, naming and describing your expectations for student work;
- using your existing course materials as models for academic writing;
- being transparent with your students when it comes to expectations and grading criteria;
- using an established, transferable vocabulary to teach and evaluate writing.

introduction

Five Strategies for Teaching Writing

Know your audience. Students taking General Education courses are likely not concentrating in your field. They'll be as unfamiliar with the conversations in your discipline as they will be with its conventions. As a teaching fellow you might have implicit assumptions about how you expect students to write in your discipline, but you should remember that this is not a course whose primary purpose is to introduce students to the conventions of your field. You should not, in other words, expect students to write the way that they would for a concentration course. Knowing that your students aren't in your field means you'll need to...

Articulate Your Expectations Explicitly. Students unfamiliar with an area of study will need explicit guidance on many issues: from citing sources to the kinds of sources you rely on; from what close analysis means to the extent that empirical evidence is useful and necessary; from how a paper ought to be structured to the use of subtitles and sections. To help them understand your expectations, you'll want to...

Rely on Models. The best models for writing are the readings you're assigning in your classes. Spending just 5-10 minutes in section to show students how other writers typically structure their articles, or how literary scholars connect close analysis to larger claims, will help students see that you're not asking them to do something peculiar to you or your class. Showing them how the "pros" write will help you to...

Be Transparent. Tell students what you expect in their writing beyond the length of the paper and the texts they can use. Indicate the kind of writing they'll need to do (close analysis, text in context, research) as well as the kind of intellectual moves you're expecting from their writing (putting a text in context, testing a theory, taking sides in an academic debate). Transparency helps when it comes to reading their essays and commenting on them. And to make sure your students understand your comments, you can...

Use a Stable Vocabulary for Writing—and then evaluate student writing according to that vocabulary. Students can often feel that grades are subjective, and that no independent system exists to objectively evaluate writing. Using a regular and stable vocabulary to talk about writing helps not only to teach and evaluate writing, but to learn writing. This vocabulary ranges from thesis and analytical problem to evidence, analysis, and structure.

Section One

Strategies for Teaching Writing in the General Education Curriculum

Knowing Your Audience

As the TF, you're the instructor on the front lines students will turn to if something is puzzling them. So the first step in shepherding your students through the writing component of the course will be to understand the sources of their difficulties. To learn what those might be, you can spend some time in section reviewing the essay prompt. (You'll want to do this well ahead of the essay's due date.) Asking the students to summarize in their own words their understanding of what the essay entails is a good way to gauge what you might need to flesh out or clarify about the prompt.

One factor that predictably poses a challenge to many students is the impact of disciplinary difference on academic writing. You can't expect students studying a subject in the General Education curriculum to be familiar with the conventions, forms, and analytic modes of academic argument as it is practiced in your discipline. To you, those conventions are probably second nature, but it's important to remember that they will be foreign to many your students. A social science concentrator who is being asked to write about literature for the first time since coming to Harvard may be baffled by textual analysis; a literature concentrator taking his first science course may have trouble organizing an argument that it is not built around an interpretive claim.

In this respect, your job is different from what it would be if you were teaching an intermediate course offered by your department; you will likely have to spend more time with individual students or collectively in section clarifying a few of the basic premises of academic argument as it is practiced in the course's discipline, or explaining the genre of essay they have been assigned. But remember that the goal of a General Education course is not to teach disciplinary writing conventions, and you should not therefore aim to have your students master those conventions. Rather you should take advantage of the fact that underpinning those disciplinary differences are features common to all academic argument. Practitioners in all disciplines make arguments, advance claims, marshal evidence, entertain counterarguments, etc. By focusing on these common features of academic writing, you can help your students write cogent arguments without asking them to adhere too strictly to the conventions of a particular discipline. A catalogue of some of the features common to academic writing across disciplines is provided by the "elements of academic argument" used in the Harvard College Writing Program.

This is the same vocabulary you can use to frame your evaluation of the essays and that's used in the sidebar that follows this section. Students are introduced to this vocabulary in Expository Writing 20, which is required of all Harvard freshmen. Be aware, though, that roughly half of all freshmen take the course in the spring term. This means that if you are teaching in the fall term, you may have freshmen in your section who have not yet had "Expos"; those students might need extra help decoding the essay prompt and your further explanations.

Section One

What Your Students Need to Know About Your Expectations for the Paper

One strategy for communicating your expectations is to address the following set of questions, either through a handout or through discussion:

- What kind of claim constitutes a good **thesis** for this assignment? Should the writer make an interpretive claim or a causal claim? (Or, instead of presenting a claim, should the writer posit a hypothesis and announce her position only at the end of the essay?) You could also give the students a few samples of a strong thesis for a hypothetical essay on a different subject; that can help them see the type of claim they are expected to develop.
- What does the essay's **introduction** need to accomplish? How should it frame the subject of the essay and lead the reader to the thesis? Should it, for example, pose an explicit question or identify a scholarly controversy to which the essay will speak? Should the thesis be motivated by a problem? Should the introduction announce the essay's plan?
- What kind of information typically provides **evidence (texts? statistics? logical inference?)** for this assignment? What particular modes of **analysis** are expected? (Students used to working exclusively with texts might need guidance about working with data and vice versa.)
- What kind of **conclusion** should the essay feature? Should the writer merely restate her main points, or is the conclusion better viewed as an opportunity to reflect on further possible implications of the analysis? Is creativity in the way the essay achieves closure desirable or rewarded?
- Are there particular **stylistic conventions or preferences** that students should try to emulate? (If so, you can provide them with a sample or two of what you think constitutes good prose in this field.)
- What are considered appropriate and reliable **sources** for this paper? If the students will work with secondary sources, should they be aware of any particular indexes that can lead them to good articles or books? What is the course policy on the use of on-line publications as sources?

To further students' understanding of your expectations for their writing, you can also use assigned readings as instructive models. That is, you can use your course materials not just for their intellectual content but as models of good writing. That is just one way in which you can use the course content, and the section meetings that you lead, to teach writing skills. By making the connections between the source materials through which the students learn the subject matter and the essays they will write, or between the ways of thinking they are engaging in as they learn the subject matter and the intellectual moves they will practice in their essays, you will be teaching them how to become good academic writers.

Section Two

Strategies That Let Section Meetings Turn Students Into Better Writers

Use assigned readings as models of good writing.

Models are very helpful teaching tools because they show students a way forward. You will of course have some professional models of good academic writing in the form of assigned readings. These essays can show students how to work with evidence, how to frame an argument, and how to use transitions and signposts to help guide a reader through an argument. As you teach and discuss readings with your students in section, think about those sources not just as content you want the students to absorb, but also as models for academic argument.

You can lead the discussion of assigned readings in a way that furthers students' understanding of the content and trains them in academic argument at the same time. For example, asking students to summarize key claims and identify the evidence the writer presents in support of those claims can perform that kind of double duty. Encouraging students to analyze the way an argument is framed and supported, or asking them to evaluate the writer's evidence and identify her premises and assumptions, hones students' critical thinking skills in ways that can positively inform their understanding of the reading and their ability to write intellectually engaging essays about that reading.

When you draw attention to the connections between what students are reading and what they will be writing, you help them to connect content with a writing practice. For example, if the author of an article you are discussing spends time defining a keyword, you can use that occasion to talk about why such a step may be useful in their essays. If you are teaching a course centered on literature or art history, you can zoom in on a section of a reading where the author closely reads textual or visual evidence in support of a claim, and point that out as an example of the mode of analysis students are expected to adopt in their essays. When you can, use the language of the essay prompt in your discussion of an assigned reading; that, too, will help students recognize the relevance of what the professional scholar is doing to what they need to do as apprentice scholars.

Shape section discussions in ways that model the critical thinking and intellectual moves students need to accomplish to write a strong essay.

You can lead section discussions in terms that reflect—and engage students in—the kinds of thinking the essay assignments will require of them. Here are some examples:

- Will they be writing a comparative essay? If so, spend some time in section comparing two sources. Ask students to identify grounds for comparison between the two sources and to suggest and discuss possible meanings or implications of observed similarities and differences.

- Will they be writing a close reading essay? To prepare them for it, zero in on a single passage for part of a section meeting and collectively close read it. (You can repeat this exercise with a different passage for more practice.)
- Will they be writing a multi-source essay that requires them to integrate primary and secondary sources? In this case, ask them how a primary source assigned one week might complicate or challenge or support a secondary source they have also been asked to read. If you are discussing several sources in one section meeting, you can organize the discussion and transition between the readings in a way that models productive integration of multiple sources.

As you're wrapping up a section meeting, you might briefly point out the relevance to an upcoming writing assignment of the ways the group has approached the material in that week's discussion. That can help students carry forward into the essay what they have learned to do in your classroom.

Have students prepare for section discussion in ways that require them to practice modes of thinking or writing that are applicable to the essay.

You may find that you need to give your students instructions, or even assign small tasks, to help them get a handle on what they will be reading for the next section meeting. You can frame those instructions in a way that prepares students for writing the essay at the same time it prepares them for the upcoming discussion. For instance, if the essay assignment asks students to identify and weigh in on a scholarly controversy, and next week you are going to discuss articles that take different positions on a common subject, you could tell the students to come to section prepared to present the academic debate reflected by article 1 versus article 2. That allows them to practice a move they must perform in their essay.

Think about the kinds of thinking and writing needed to build the upcoming essay.

- Will students need to summarize briefly a scholarly argument?
- Will they need to identify passages in a text that highlight a particular issue?
- Will they need to identify an issue or problem worth discussing by finding sites of contradiction in the evidence?
- Will they have to do some brief research into the historical context of a source?

Those are all things you can ask a student to do to prepare for section discussion. Aiming the preparation you ask students to do in a direction that fosters modes of thinking or writing applicable to the essay is just another way to connect the course content and writing practice.

Just as students need to prepare for conference, so they can prepare themselves to write the essay. Since this preparation should begin well ahead of the essay's due date, a practical way to help your students with the course's writing component is to identify (and encourage them to begin) the preliminary work that will allow them to write a successful essay.

Section Three

Helping Students Through the Writing Process

Writing as Sequence

Practiced writers know that good writing involves a great deal of work that precedes the putting of pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) to compose the final product. Novice college writers used to the simpler assignments assigned in high school might not fully grasp that fact yet. It's also the case that Harvard undergraduates are very busy with their array of courses and extracurricular activities, and some are prone to procrastination as well. Many an essay suffers from the fact that the student has tried to do all the work more or less at once, at the eleventh hour. So one of the most practical ways in which you can help your students is to assign early in the term the kinds of preliminary work they will need to do in order to produce the particular genre of essay they have to write.

For instance, if they have been assigned a research paper, two of the preliminary steps will be hunting for appropriate sources and reflecting carefully on the sources selected for inclusion in the paper. For a one-source essay, two preliminary steps will be finding a focus for the paper and selecting fruitful evidence. As a practiced writer, you can help your novice writers see that this work can be broken down into steps and scheduled. You could devote part of a section session to identifying those steps and suggesting a possible timeline, or you could create a handout that outlines the process and proposes a schedule. Especially for freshmen overwhelmed by the length and complexity of the writing they are assigned at Harvard, learning that they can break the work down into a sequence of steps that leads up to the composition of a draft can be enormously helpful.

This will be particularly important in a course where the students write one large essay that is due toward the end of the semester. How you can best help students approach their writing as a process will depend to some degree on how the course's writing assignments are scheduled and sequenced. Here are a couple of typical scenarios:

Scenario 1: a single, longer essay due in reading period

Your challenge here is to keep students mindful of that essay throughout the term, even though the due date probably seems very far away to them in October or March. So for example, if sources you are discussing in section in week two are sources on which students might usefully draw for their essay due in reading period, calling attention to the readings' potential role in the essay is a helpful reminder to students to think about course readings in relation to the writing assignment as well as in relation to class discussion. With this scenario, it's especially important to identify those preliminary steps students should be performing in the weeks and even months leading up to the essay, so that they don't run out of time and wind up with an underdeveloped argument. See the section below on devising pre-draft assignments that can get students working toward the essay earlier in the term.

Scenario 2: a relatively short one-source essay due in the middle of the semester followed by a longer multi-source essay due in reading period

With this scenario, you have the opportunity to do more directed work with individual students to help them develop as writers. That first essay will give you a sense of a particular student's strengths and weaknesses, and your comments on the first essay can signal to the students what they can build on as well as what they need to improve when they approach the second essay (see section on "Responding to Student Writing"). But for the class as a whole, you can call attention to connections between the assignments that might not be obvious to the students. By showing them that what they learned to do in the course of writing that first assignment can help them accomplish what the second essay requires, or part of what it requires, you can capitalize on the opportunity a sequence of writing assignments provides.

For example, if that one-source essay is a close reading of a single text or a visual analysis of an image, while the longer essay requires them to construct a more extensive and ambitious argument, they may not realize until you point it out to them that the skill they acquired and practiced for the shorter essay is a move they can deploy in one part of the longer, more ambitious essay. While essay genres vary, writing practices central to one genre can play an important supporting role in another. Help your students view the earlier assignment as a step in a process that is allowing them to grow as writers in the course of the semester.

Working With Students To Develop Their Essays

Your course's writing assignments may be sequenced in such a way that students are required to submit specific preliminary work (such as an outline or a draft) for your review and feedback. If that's not the case, encourage students to seek you out if they need help developing their essay, but also explain that it is their responsibility to come to you with ideas or preliminary work to which you can respond. (The most novice writers—first semester freshmen who have not yet had Expos—may need you to suggest ways to start the process before they come to you.)

Things you can offer to do when students are developing their essays include vetting a tentative thesis statement; discussing with them the way they plan to use one or more of their sources or the way they plan to relate their sources; and reviewing an outline. Review of a draft, if you can manage it, would be a great benefit to students organized enough to get one to you in time.

Whatever you are willing to do on a one-to-one basis, set parameters that are reasonable for you and for the students. If you are willing to review and comment on an outline, for example, announce a date by which students need to get you that outline and what level of detail you expect it to include. Set deadlines that allow time for the revisions or course correction your response to preliminary work may require.

If one of your students appears to be struggling especially hard with a writing assignment, you can refer her to the Writing Center for supplemental help. Peers tutors staff the Writing Center, and they meet with students at any stage in the writing process. Students can book appointments on the Center's website. (See Addenda for details.)

Designing Response Papers

If your course requires or allows you to assign response papers, it's helpful to think of them as “pre-draft” exercises that directly feed into the essays your students are developing. How do you do that? Think about those essential preliminary steps that lay the groundwork for a well-developed argument, and construct an assignment that helps students complete one of them. Here are just a few examples:

- To help students find a focus for their essay or locate useful evidence, ask them to identify several passages that speak in different ways to a central theme or idea of the work, or to identify and discuss a thorny passage that raises an interesting question.
- To get students performing preliminary analysis of materials they will be discussing in their essay, instruct them to annotate or gloss an important passage in a primary source, or to identify premises or assumptions underpinning an argument presented in a secondary source.
- To get students going on source selection for a research paper, you could assign them an annotated bibliography.
- To help students launch an essay that requires them to weigh in on a subject of scholarly contention, ask them to compose a comparative summary of opposing interpretations of a text or of an event. That can turn into the actual essay's introductory framing.

An added bonus to taking this approach to response papers is that it helps the students see the point of these smaller assignments. Their motivation to invest time in a response paper increases if the work produced brings them a step closer to the completion of the more daunting (and more heavily weighted) essay.

Section Four

Responding to Student Writing

A Few Principles

Your comments on student writing should clearly reflect the hierarchy of your insights into the paper. Major achievements and principal issues in the paper should be treated primarily; minor issues, if treated at all, should receive brief commentary or be limited to a few marginal comments. There is a readily identifiable hierarchy, for instance, when it comes to a problematic essay structure and a handful of grammatical issues or even sentence-level stylistic choices. There is, however, an equally identifiable hierarchy among the elements of academic argument. An absent thesis should get more of your attention and commentary than a confounding essay structure. Students likely cannot organize their ideas until they have an arguable idea to organize.

So what to do?

We recommend that you comment explicitly, substantively and in detail about two or three important matters rather than superficially about many issues. Indeed, this is more helpful than commenting explicitly, substantively, and in detail about many issues. Many veteran readers find the experience of responding to student writing to be one of constantly deciding not to comment on less important issues. Such restraint allows you to focus your energies on just a couple important points, yields a cleaner and more easily intelligible message for students, and allows you to do your work more efficiently.

To restrain your comments, you'll need to know what is most important in a given essay, and to know what is most important, you'll need to identify what your essay prompt is asking students to do. In Expository Writing courses, for instance, most of the early papers involve an argument about a single text. To get to an arguable thesis, students closely read that text as a piece of evidence. What many of us are therefore stressing in these early papers is how problematic evidence can raise important intellectual questions, how those questions can be resolved through analysis, and how analysis can lead to a thesis. In these early papers, then, we're likely reading for achievements and issues surrounding these keywords:

- **thesis**, which responds to an...
- **analytical question or problem**, which is often based on difficult, contradictory or puzzling...
- **evidence**, which is resolved by...
- **analysis**, which together with evidence form a paper's...
- **argument**, which is developed by a coherent and transparent...
- **structure**, all of which probably gives the student the best chance to do well on this particular paper.

Other kinds of papers will inevitably stress other elements. A lens, text-in-context, or comparative essay, for instance, will invariably put more weight on a paper's structure, transitions and signposts, while a research assignment will need to be

scrutinized for its use of sources.

Writing Marginal Comments

Marginal comments are your opportunity to engage with a student's ideas and her writing. It will help demonstrate that you attentively read the paper and help connect what they wrote to what you're going to say about it. If you tell a student in the final comment that he or she needs more analysis, for example, you should have one or more specific, substantial sites in the text that highlight this.

Here are a few helpful principles:

- **Make positive comments.** “Good point,” “nice idea” and “great move here” mean a lot to students, and so do your comments that evidence you are intellectually moved by their claims. Students need to know what works in their writing to repeat successful strategies. Repetition will help make those strategies a part of their repertoire as writers. They're more likely to work hard to improve when they know they can improve. Having just one positive feedback per page goes a long way to showing them that they can.
- **Comment primarily on patterns**—whether those patterns represent strengths or weaknesses. Noting patterns, and marking them once or twice, helps you strike a balance between overwhelming students with red ink and underwhelming them with a few scattered check marks. The “pattern” principle applies to grammar and other sentence-level problems, too.
- **Use a standard vocabulary.** “The Elements of Academic Argument” can help you construct marginal comments that use the vocabulary you are using to evaluate the essays themselves. Using a consistent vocabulary helps students see the connection between your marginal comments and your final comments and see patterns of strengths and weaknesses in their writing.
- **Don't be overly terse or cryptic.** Writing more explicit comments will move you away from the inherent bite of a terse comment (i.e., “weak thesis,” “more analysis needed,” “evidence?”); and, second, it will get you to more clearly convey your impressions. If a student has written a weak thesis, presumably she needs to know more than simply that the thesis is weak. She needs some guidance about how the thesis is weak and perhaps some direction about how to improve it. It's helpful here to use the if, then clause: if you do x, you'll be able to y.
- **Ask questions.** Asking engaging, intellectual questions in the margins promotes both a useful analytical technique and a richer conversation to happen between you and your students. This kind of analytical questioning often can show back up in sections: students will begin to ask each other questions that consider counter-arguments, exceptions, or deeper ramifications.
- **Use a respectful tone.** It might seem to go without saying, but in the face of fatigue and frustration, it can be easy to slip into an attitude that is less than respectful. Your students are your junior colleagues.
- **Write legibly**—or use the “comments” function in Microsoft Word. Students typically won't struggle to read what they can't. Red ink, by the way, is the color of “correction,” and doesn't represent the kind of intellectual responses expected in college.

Reading the Paper

You may want to skim through four or five papers to get a sense of the pile in front of you. This is like glancing at an architect's floor plan before scrutinizing a detailed drawing of the eaves or doorways. Many instructors, after getting a sense of the pile in front of them, will also skim through a paper before making any comments, perhaps reading the introduction and the first few sentences of each paragraph more carefully to get a sense of the paper's argument and structure. Whether these elements seem strong or possibly problematic, these instructors are already beginning to identify what they need to focus their comments on. It helps, then, to keep a few categories and questions in mind as you assess a paper's strengths and weaknesses:

- **Thesis:** Is there a main argument in the paper, and is it arguable/debatable? Is the thesis clearly stated near the beginning of the paper? Is it complex, debatable, and sophisticated? Is it argued throughout the paper? Is the thesis responding to an...
- **Analytical Question or Problem:** Is a context or situation for the thesis established at the start of the essay? Does it establish that the thesis isn't merely obvious? Does it set up a genuine intellectual question, problem or dilemma? Is it based on difficult, puzzling or contradictory...
- **Evidence:** Do the facts, examples, and quotations in the paper support the thesis? Has the paper overlooked any obvious or important pieces of evidence—or counter-evidence? Is the evidence situated, resolved, or explicitly linked to...
- **Analysis:** Does the paper analyze, interpret, take apart, or otherwise grapple with the evidence? Does the analysis indicate the significance or implication of the evidence not apparent to a superficial view? Do the evidence and analysis add up to an...
- **Argument:** Does the paper establish a series of interconnected claims? Does the thesis develop over the course of the paper? Is the writer reflecting on her ideas by defining keywords, acknowledging assumptions, considering counter-argument, or qualifying the case she's made? Is the argument developed through a coherent and transparent...
- **Structure:** Is the paper organized, and is that organization made explicit? Is the order of the paper easy to follow? Do transitions relate the claim of one paragraph to the previous paragraph? Do the claims come one after the other, or does one claim come because of another?

Writing a Final Comment

Your final comment is more than a critique of the paper. It is also where you have the chance to show students what they are achieving and learning in your class. In this sense, the final comment can indicate to them where their papers are modeling the kinds of intellectual moves you are asking them to make. Final comments thus become slightly less about the paper they wrote and slightly more about the papers they will write in the future.

The following simple structure will help you present your comments in an organized way:

Reflect back the paper’s main argument: By reflecting back your understanding of the argument, you let the student see that you took the paper seriously. This reflection of the argument need not merely be a summary; it is also a space where you get to think alongside the student’s ideas, perhaps indicating the kinds of intellectual questions the student is implicitly raising.

Discuss the essay’s achievements: Struggling writers need to know they are making strides toward learning how to write, and even very good writers need to know what their doing well so they can do it again in the future. Citing a specific example of their achievement, quoting a short sentence, will both ground your comment in evidence and treat their papers like valuable, intellectual “warehouses.”

Discuss the paper’s main weakness: You don’t have to comment on everything that might be weak in a paper. Instead, choose a limited number of important areas in which the student needs to improve; one or two principal areas is sufficient, especially if you can relate either of these to other, possibly less important issues. It is helpful here, as elsewhere in these final comments, to concentrate on that established vocabulary for evaluating writing: thesis, analytical question, evidence, analysis, argument, structure.

Give them a way forward: Connecting their weakness to a viable, manageable and even “material” way to go about addressing it can minimize the sense that any one paper encapsulates their abilities. These steps, in other words, help you define how they’ll write more effective papers in the future. Remember that the elements of academic argument are interconnected, and thus a problem with one element suggests how another element can help the student resolve the issue. If the paper doesn’t have an arguable thesis, it likely doesn’t have an analytical problem; if the paper doesn’t have analysis, it likely is looking at evidence that isn’t difficult, problematic or puzzling.

Reflect on their growth as scholars and writers: Your final comment should give them an overview of what they’ve achieved both in the paper and in the class. This is a good place to give them feedback on their class participation, especially if you can position the classroom as an idea laboratory: a place where students can test out the elements of academic argument with their peers. Connect what you’re suggesting to tangible results: when you start doing x, you’ll be able to do y.

Type your final comments: It will make legible your engagement with their ideas, and will more likely result in intellectual growth in their written assignments.

Addenda

Additional Resources for Teaching Fellows

Harvard Writing Project workshops on teaching writing. The Harvard Writing Project (HWP) works with faculty and teaching fellows to develop effective ways of assigning and responding to student writing. Harvard Writing Project consultants can help teaching fellows learn how to encourage their students to write better, more persuasive papers. HWP consultants are available to help organize special TF training sessions, lead workshops on responding to student writing at staff meetings, and develop course-specific teaching guides. For more information about working with an HWP consultant, contact James Herron, HWP Assistant Director, at jherron@fas.harvard.edu.

Additional Resources for Students

The Writing Center. The Writing Center, part of the Harvard College Writing Program, is a place for Harvard undergraduates to get help with any aspect of their writing, from specific assignments to general writing skills. The Writing Center is staffed by trained undergraduate tutors who provide individual conferences at no charge to the student. Students don't have to be finished—or even started—to come for a conference, and can come with ideas, notes, or a draft. To learn more about Writing Center, please visit the website at <http://sites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k33202>.

Elements of Academic Argument (Gordon Harvey, adapted by Karen Heath)

What the essay is about:

1. **Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the main proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable; be limited enough in scope to be argued with available evidence; and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early and it should govern the whole essay.

Why it matters:

2. **Question, Problem, or What's at Stake:** the context or situation that you establish for your argument at the start of your essay, making clear why someone might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued (why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other theses might be less persuasive). In the introduction, it's the moment where you establish "what's at stake" in the essay, setting up a genuine problem, question, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma or violated expectation that an intelligent reader would really have.

What the thesis is based on:

3. **Evidence:** the data – facts, examples, or details – that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be enough evidence to be persuasive; the right kind of evidence to support the thesis; a thorough consideration of evidence (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); and sufficiently concrete evidence for the reader to trust.

What you do with the evidence:

4. **Analysis:** the work of interpretation, of saying what the evidence means. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: taking it apart, grappling with its details, drawing out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a thinking individual, in the essay.

Evidence and analysis add up to. . .

5. **Argument:** the series of ideas that the essay lays out which, taken together, support the essay's thesis. A successful argument will do more than reiterate the thesis, but rather make clear how each idea develops from the one before it (see "Structure," #7 below). The argument should show you not only analyzing the evidence, but also reflecting on the ideas in other important ways: defining your terms (see #8 below) or assumptions; considering counter-argument – possible alternative arguments, or objections or problems, that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; offering a qualification or limitation to the case you've made; incorporating any complications that arise, a way in which the case isn't quite so simple as you've made it seem; drawing out an implication, often in the conclusion.

Where the evidence comes from:

6. **Sources:** texts (or persons), referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. In some arguments, there will be one central primary source. In others, sources can offer (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the things you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts.

How to organize the argument:

7. **Structure:** the sequence of an argument's main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order which is apparent to the reader. But it should also be a progressive order -- they should have a direction of development or complication, not be simply a list of examples or series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). In some arguments, especially longer ones, structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.

The argument is articulated in part through:

8. **Key terms:** the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon. An essay's key terms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout; they should be appropriate for the subject (not unfair or too simple -- a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). These terms can imply certain assumptions -- unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. The assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

You keep the reader clear along the way through:

9. **Transitions and signposts:** words that tie together the parts of an argument, by indicating how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous (transitional words and phrases); and by offering "signposts" that recollect an earlier idea or section or the thesis itself, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing earlier key words or resonant phrases.

. . . and through:

10. **Orienting:** brief bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient readers who aren't expert in the subject, enabling them to follow the argument, such as: necessary introductory information about the text, author, or event; a brief summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned.

Addressing your readers involves:

11. **Stance:** the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of format and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and should stay consistent.

. . . **and:**

12. **Style:** choices made at the word and sentence level that determine how an idea is stated. Besides adhering to the grammatical conventions of standard English, an essay's style needs to be clear and readable (not confusing, verbose, cryptic, etc.), expressive of the writer's intelligence and energetic interest in the subject (not bureaucratic or clichéd), and appropriate for its subject and audience.

And last (or first):

13. **Title:** should both interest and inform, by giving the subject and focus of the essay as well as by helping readers see why this essay might be interesting to read.

Practical solutions to common writing issues

If the problem is... **A student might want to focus on...**

Thesis

Analytical Question or Problem. Asking harder questions, and perhaps even articulating those questions you want to answer or resolve in the paper. These kinds of analytical questions or problems will most likely come out of identifying difficult, puzzling or contradictory evidence. Scholarship, in the end, is all about defining complex problems that you can then work to resolve—and that’s the thesis.

Analytical Question/ Problem

Evidence. The heart of all scholarship is resolving complex and therefore interesting questions and problems, and we usually find those questions and problems in puzzling, difficult or even contradictory evidence. By focusing on where the evidence is “grey” in a text, issue or topic, you’ll implicitly be focusing on raising an interesting question or problem—and thus showing your audience why your argument in this paper matters.

Analysis

Use language that signals analysis. This is what moves observation into insight—and insight is what lets you develop your argument. In the next paper, it might be helpful to think in terms of “this suggests that...” or “this implies that” or “this hints at” or “this speaks to.” Each of these phrases will help you show your audience what the evidence is saying under its surface and connect that analysis to the larger claim you are making. By foregrounding what your observations mean, you’ll be tying your insight back to your thesis, and thus implicitly developing your argument.

Argument

Paragraph mapping—that is, summarizing the argument in each paragraph in one sentence and using that sentence to lead off the paragraph. This will help foreground your argument and help your audience make connections between the “local” point of a paragraph and the larger point of the paper. And the good news: all those arguments are here. It’s just a matter of floating them to the top.

Argument (cont.)

Define Keywords. You’ll notice that I’ve pointed out a number of spots that you could define your keywords—even a couple of sentences will help to clarify, elaborate and otherwise develop the strong ideas you are working with. You can think of keywords as analytical “slogans.” Defining those analytical slogans will help to develop your central claim because you will be showing your audience what those keywords imply

Transitions. You can do this by relying on stitching (carrying forward keywords from one paragraph to the next), or by using “this” as an emphatic adjective to remind us of the idea you are carrying forward (“This idea of bildungsroman, for instance, is...”). The idea here is to call your audience’s attention to how the paragraphs connect. The more you make these connection explicit, and the more you talk directly to your audience, the more your paper will have an inherent organization to it.

Structure

Paragraph mapping. That is, writing a one-sentence summary of the argument of each paragraph and using those sentences to start the paragraphs. This will also give you a bird’s eye view of the paper and allow you to readily evaluate how paragraphs are working relative to your thesis (evidence, counter-argument, premise). And once you get a sense of the main sections of the paper, you’ll be able to tell your audience how they connect.

Transitions. You can do this by relying on stitching (carrying forward keywords from one paragraph to the next), by using “this” as an emphatic adjective to remind us of the idea you are carrying forward (“This idea of bildungsroman, for instance...”) and by foregrounding the idea that the paragraphs share. This just means that in unit three, I want you next be conscious of why your thesis is developing the way it is, and then communicating that logic to your audience.

**Structure
(cont.)**

Signposts. These are comments that are directed at your own audience and that tells it what’s important about your analysis or why your argument is going to move in a new direction—or, in this case, what your analysis means for your thesis. These can be any one of the following: The point here is this:... or It is important to remember that... or even Thus far this paper has argued that... These notes are as important for your audience as they are for you. It will keep that great thesis in the forefront.

John Harvard: A sample comment

Your Argument

This paper argues that Neruda’s “I Explain a Few Things” represents a breaking point in poetry—what poetry can address, how it can address that, and what precipitated the breakage in the first place. Part of the argument here is that while this particular poem is reacting to historical violence, it doesn’t mean that its poetry is completely lost to that history or violence. The poem still relies on “sound and appearance...to describe the atrocity” (4) of war. Does this suggest that poetry may still be functioning, still be expressive? Does poetry survive atrocity?

Your Most Important Accomplishment

Evidence. It’s apparent that you’re starting to understand what evidence is, and how to analyze it using the four levels of reading—great job. This is particularly evident in your paragraph at the bottom of page 3, where you end up claiming that “Each stanza becomes fragmented as each line stands as a single, horrible thought.” Here, you bring your observations and analysis to bear on your thesis, meaning you understand how this particular piece of evidence relates to the bigger point you are making.

If You Had One Extra Day to Work on It

You’d focus on **structure**. You’d want to ask yourself: how might each paragraph develop my thesis? One place to consider this is on page 4, when the paper begins to restate what you’ve already established. On page 4, you provide your audience with another example, and to transform that example into evidence that furthers your argument, you might want to consider how it expands, narrows, challenges or redefines that thesis. This “furthering” is what I mean when I say you want to focus on structure. It will help you develop the argument of the paper, rather than reiterate it.

How You’re Going to Go About It Next Time

Paragraph mapping. This means that you’ll write a one-sentence summary of the argument of each paragraph to see if the paper is falling into repetition or if it is moving forward. It also means that you’ll consider the thesis not as a ‘single unit’ but as complex statement made up of component parts. Your job will then be to argue those parts relative to each other. This will allow you to develop your ideas in an organic way—by demonstrating them, expanding them, contracting them, and testing them—and to link those ideas together in substantial ways.

Your Growth as a Writer & Scholar

When you let the structure of your paper move your argument forward, you are going to demonstrate just how insightful you are. I want you to get your feet even more planted in the academic world so you can succeed at Harvard; your development in unit one has shown me that you have the promise to do just that.

Grade

I'm looking forward to working with you,

—Melissa

