

## Teaching Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

### The Intersection of Academic, Civic, and Public Genres

What it means, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to “teach writing” is a matter of some debate. Should writing teachers stick to teaching students how to do academic, “school” writing? Or should we concentrate on the genres necessary to compose as active citizens? And should we shift our attention toward including technologically-enhanced and multi-modal-genres within our purview?

The following “overview of the research sequence” demonstrates an approach to “teaching writing” takes into account all of the above. It is meant to help students see the intersections between their work as academics, their role as citizens with the special expertise supplied by a college education, and the need to compose in multiple modes in order to meet the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Audience.

Also included are some examples of the public, multi-modal genres that students produced based upon their previous academic papers. These examples demonstrate how the students went public with the learning they did in an academic writing course, and so transferred their school learning into civic activism.

### Overview of the Research Sequence:

#### From Academic Research to Public Presentation

#### Part 1

##### *The Proposal Stage: Making the Case for Exigency*

**GOALS:** This unit of the course will help you to extend your understanding of research beyond that which may have informed your previous writing of academic “research papers.” Academic research papers teach you very important skills; but when the process is a mechanical one, one that does not fully engage you in real problem-solving, your work is not as effective as it could be. Research is not a mechanical process by which you produce a paper with a specified number of sources that you incorporate into your paper, sometimes in very superficial ways. Research is a process that begins with curiosity (a desire to know more or to solve a problem) and that ends with **writing that would interest others, and that you feel would benefit them in specific ways—that is research and writing that has “exigency,” i.e., a real purpose.**

So in this part of the course, it is your job to find a topic that you sincerely care enough about that you’ll want to educate yourself (and others) on that topic. To do so, you will draw upon you’re the skills we have been discussing so far in our joint research on our shared topic. You will also continue to learn more about the writing techniques that are crucial to producing polished and persuasive writing.

The *genre* (i.e., kind of writing) that we will use in this unit is the *proposal*. A *proposal* is a piece of writing that invites approval for future action--and at its best, invites others to participate in that action as well. As is detailed below, this unit of the course will ask you to write several types of proposals: an informal topic proposal, a sophisticated, well-researched topic proposal, and an oral proposal that argues for the value of your research to your classmates and invites their response and suggestions.

As we complete the first unit of the course, you should start to consider the focused and limited area you'd like to research, the types of investigation that will likely breed the most important and reliable information, and your approach to that topic, keeping in mind not only what you need to know, but what your audience needs to know and what will best serve your purpose. You will first propose your topic in a relatively informal and brief essay that identifies the topic you'd like to investigate and explains to us why it is worth doing. Your classmates and I will respond to this piece by helping you to focus your topic, purpose, and audience. We will, in our comments and through individual conferences, help you to think further about the topic and to continue the process of research likely to breed positive results. That's our role in this community of researchers and writers.

After we've agreed that you have identified an area of investigation and a specific research question, you will continue your process of becoming "information literate." That is, you'll use the skills of information-gathering and evaluation we've been discussing to find and assess various sources of information that will be useful to your project. You will then write a "**sophisticated topic proposal**" that includes

- a statement of the problem you are investigating,
- an review of the literature on the topic you have found so far, along with any primary research you are planning—research like interviews, surveys, experiments, case studies, etc. that you will do yourself. (Here, you can draw upon our practice review of the literature in the first part of the course), and
- an annotated bibliography of sources that briefly summarizes each source, explains why this source is credible, and explains why this source is relevant to your topic.

You will then have the opportunity to present an **oral progress report** to the class, and get their feedback on the direction of your paper. This report will be more formal than the previous ones and will include visual aids including PowerPoint and/or other appropriate techniques of oral presentation. Your instructor and your classmates will also have the opportunity to question you about the plan for this paper and the validity and relevance of the sources.

**Here are the details:**

**Initial Topic Proposal (Notebook Entry 6: 30 points):** In this informal proposal, you'll

- outline your research topic as specifically as you can,
- tell us why you're interested in this topic, who else might be interested in it (audience)
- ask some questions and raise concerns so that we can discuss your topic with you

Ultimately, the goal is tell us enough about your goals so that we can respond to you with helpful advice, after which you can get to work on the more "sophisticated" or developed proposal.

### **Sophisticated Proposal/Annotated Bibliography (100 points)**

The sophisticated proposal is a formal request for permission to proceed with your research, permission we will grant based upon our being convinced that:

- 1) the topic is sufficiently focused and limited,
- 2) the research has clear goals,
- 3) you've articulated a plan for research that is likely to succeed and which fits within the research expectations of a particular academic discipline
- 4) the research will lead to a substantial, well-researched essay

5) you've found enough credible, relevant researched information to this point to demonstrate that the project is likely to succeed.

6) you've identified a public audience beyond the academic community that could be influenced by your work on this topic, and a likely mode of presentation to that audience, which can be anything from an opinion piece like an editorial to a website, video, brochure, artwork, etc. which has a real purpose and whose genre is likely to influence that public audience. This "public genre," discussed below, will likely continue to develop as you do your research.

**Goals and Purpose:** The sophisticated proposal is your chance to articulate as precisely as possible your research goals. Before you write your proposal, you will have the opportunity to discuss your topic and lines of research both with the class and with me individually. This proposal will then be a type of progress report, in which you argue the value of doing this research based upon what you have found so far.

The proposal looks both backward (describing what you have accomplished so far) and forward (detailing what is left to do). You will clearly identify: your specific, limited topic (which might have changed significantly from the first, informal proposal); the audience that would most benefit by reading your research; the exigency of this research (why it is important for this audience). You will also outline your ongoing research plan, including the key questions that you are trying to answer, a rough timetable for completing the research and writing, and sources of information (in the form of an annotated "working bibliography") that you found thus far. You should also look forward, describing what research still needs to be completed.

And, finally, you should speculate on the "public genre" into which this research might eventually fit—the type of format that would be best allow you to reach your target audience (brochure, website, wiki, blog, video, audio, poster, and so forth) and why that genre fits your purpose and audience. We'll discuss this with you further, but you might also peek at Part 3, below, for more information.

**Guidelines:** The key here will be formulating a good research question (what is it, in a single question that you and your audience want and need to know? What is standing in the way of solving a problem? What is keeping a current program from achieving its full goals?) and a solid sense of exigency (why is it important that this topic be investigated?).

Your sophisticated proposal will have two components:

**1) An argument that**

- describes the limited topic that you are planning to investigate,
- shows value of this research to yourself and to an academic, disciplinary audience (ideally, an audience within your major field of study or a field that you are considering for your future work),

- a summary of information that you have collected so far and how it has impacted your thinking, and
  - a discussion of the next steps in the process, including a rough timetable of upcoming work.
- 2) An annotated bibliography, i.e., a list of sources of information that you have found so far (at least 6-8), properly formatted in MLA or APA style, followed by an annotation that has three components:
- A brief (1-2 sentence) summary of the piece
  - A brief (1 sentence) description of why this piece should be considered authoritative or reliable (and/or any biases you might have noted)
  - A brief (1-2 sentence) description of the pieces relevance to your topic—why it will be useful to your specific topic and how you plan on using information in this piece.

**Assessment:** The sophisticated proposal is a formal request for permission to proceed with your research. For that reason, your grade will be based upon the degree of confidence I have at this point about the success of the project. Permission to proceed will be granted based upon our being convinced that:

- the topic is sufficiently focused and limited.
- the research has clear goals.
- you've articulated a plan for research that is likely to succeed.
- you've found enough credible, relevant researched information to this point to demonstrate that the project is likely to succeed. This will be demonstrated largely through your annotated bibliography and discussion of those bibliographic items in the proposal itself
- the written proposal is clear and focused, demonstrating the qualities of good writing we've been discussing
- the citations are properly formatted and the proposal is free of significant errors in standard written English
- the research will lead to an essay that fits within a specific academic field as well as an alternative, public presentation that has a real purpose.

### **Oral Presentation of Proposal (75 points)**

**Goals and Purpose:** As noted above, researchers rarely work in isolation. In fact, researchers in various fields gather regularly at conferences to present their work-in-progress and to solicit the feedback of others on this work—feedback that can then inform continued research. Your oral presentation will give you the opportunity to present what you've learned about your topic so far and to get feedback from your classmates and teachers.

**Guidelines:** Your presentation should be approximately 5-8 minutes long, followed by about 5-8 minutes of discussion. It should include visual aids including PowerPoint and/or other appropriate techniques that support your proposal. Your instructors and you classmates will have the opportunity to question you about the plan for this paper and the validity and relevance of the sources, and will offer suggestions for its continued success.

**Assessment:** Your oral report will be assessed in a number of ways, including:

- The clarity with which you explain your topic and purpose
- The clarity with which you explain your findings to date
- Your ability to invite feedback and discussion, and to respond to questions
- The quality and usefulness of your use of visual aids

## **PART 2: Writing the Academic Essay (200 points)**

After the proposal activities described above, you'll be ready to make your own statement on the topic you've been investigating. You'll have all the pieces in place to write a strong academic essay that advances our knowledge on a particular topic. You'll have read and written and talked about your topic, learning about specific modes of writing. You'll have considered how that reading and writing and thinking has extended or changed your views. And you'll have considered how that new information might help to inform your specific audience (and in some sense, to change them—since all reading and writing changes us).

The final segment of the course will be devoted to skills of organization and other stylistic techniques that will help you to construct a credible and readable essay. We'll talk about stylistics and do frequent workshops in class, using previous papers as examples to work upon. Since you've spent a good deal of time "getting up" on your topic, your job will now be to use the rhetorical skills you've learned both this semester and previously to express that which you've learned to an informed, academic audience, and to show them why that knowledge is important.

**Goals and Purpose:** The researched essay's main goal is to **add to** the knowledge on a topic based upon the research you have conducted; it is not enough merely to report on that research. Since we'll have had many conversations about your research in advance of your writing the paper—in writing, conferences, and the oral presentation period—your purpose and argument should be relatively clear before you write your essay, though your opinions and directions are likely to change somewhat as you write. (That's a good thing; it shows you're learning.)

**Guidelines:** Though the length of your essay will vary somewhat based upon your topic and purpose, I would expect that the piece will be at least 7-10 pages (longer if necessary), that it include a sufficient amount of secondary and/or primary research, and that it be written in "academic" or "manuscript" style, using the format that is accepted in scholarly setting, relatively formal (but not stuffy) language, a citation system such as MLA or APA to document your sources, and careful editing so as to avoid stylistic and grammatical rough spots.

**Assessment:** Your paper will be assessed by the following criteria:

- Does it demonstrate careful, serious, and sufficient research to build its case?
- Does it make a clear, focused argument based upon that research?
- Is its purpose clear?
- Is it written in a consistent style appropriate for its audience and genre (academic writing)?
- Is the paper organized in a way that makes it easy for a reader to follow its line of reasoning?
- Are the arguments carefully organized into coherent and cohesive paragraph structures?
- Does it make use of clear and effective sentence structures?
- Is it sufficiently revised and edited so as to avoid stylistic and grammatical errors?
- Are sources cited properly, using either MLA or APA style?

## **PART 3: Going Public: The Public Genre Project (150 points)**

**Goals and Purpose:** Scholarly research of the type that you will complete in your researched essay often also has public purposes—to solve a social problem, improve upon the work of an organization, help to build better communities, and so forth. In this project, you will apply the research you have

compiled in your researched essay and put it into a form that best suits its rhetorical situation—its topic, purpose, and audience. After all, most public writing is not presented in the form of an academic essay (though it is bolstered by that kind of research). This assignment will give you the chance to mount a creative argument, using the various media that are at the disposal of 21<sup>st</sup> century writers, and to use those media to serve a real social purpose.

The purpose of this assignment, then, is to use the research that you have done in the academic essay to construct a more public argument. Though doing “school” or “academic” research might sometimes seem disconnected from the larger world, nothing could be further from the truth. The research done in academia has many applications for the wider public. But in order to appeal to that wider public, we need to think about the “genre” that best fits the occasion. So, the overall purpose here is to translate what you have learned and expressed in academic terms into a product meant for consumption by a wider group—and which serves a real, public purpose.

**Guidelines:** We will discuss the alternative genre project with you throughout the course, and help you to find a “genre” (a kind/style of writing or multi-media presentation) that best suits your overall purpose and exigency of the topic. For some, that might mean writing an op/ed piece for the newspaper; for others, it might mean constructing a website, blog, or wiki. If you have the know-how and the tools, you might develop a video presentation—a Public Service Announcement, for example. If you’re more interested in paper texts, you might create a brochure. If you love visual presentation, a poster or an advertisement or a work of art might be for you. The possibilities are very wide.

Besides the thing itself (whatever form it takes), you will also be asked to write up a reflective cover memo that describes your purpose, audience, the processes you used to develop the piece, and a brief self-assessment—including a discussion of how the research you did helped to inform this more public piece. Remembering that you will have limited time and resources, you might describe also how you would improve upon it given more time and resources. We’ll also ask that you present your project to the class; we’ll set up a class website to which you can link your work so that your classmates and others can view it.

**Assessment:** Since the possibilities here are very diverse, we’ll need to customize the assessment of your alternative genre project somewhat. As we discuss your project with you, you’ll let us know what you think you will be producing, and we’ll let you know what we’re expecting in the project. But in general, this project will be assessed by:

- The appropriateness of the genre to the purpose and audience
- Your ability to employ the research from your previous project in ways that are palatable to a more public audience (but which still provide the key information)
- Your creativity in developing this alternative genre
- Your reflections on the project both in presentation to the class and in a cover memo to me describing what you’ve learned from the project.