



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Writing Across the Curriculum With an Essay Test on Day TWO!

Imagine taking an essay test on the SECOND day of a college course. Imagine that test being on the content of the course syllabus distributed on Day One. I couldn't imagine *giving* an essay test on the second day of classes, much less *taking* one—until this most recent term, that is.

While attending "Smoky Mountain II," a University of Michigan-sponsored seminar on college teaching and learning, I discovered the value of writing an explicit, detailed course syllabus. Until that seminar, I had always assumed that a syllabus consisted of a calendar of class meetings, topics, and test dates. I had my eyes opened to the benefits of communicating in writing considerably more than dates, topics, and office location and hours.

For example, I now include a description of my educational philosophy and teaching methods. I provide a statement of rationale for the course, an explanation of why the particular texts and readings were chosen, and a description of testing (feedback). As a result, my syllabus is now 8-9 pages in length (from a former 2-3 pages).

Why include this much detail in a syllabus?—to make clear in writing what is expected of students and in turn what they may expect from a course. What is the value of this much detail?—to provide students with a document that tells them about the instructor and his/her seriousness in teaching that particular course. Students take several classes, and it is difficult to recall the different requirements and expectations among the various subjects and professors. A detailed syllabus becomes a useful reference document for both instructor and students throughout the course.

Do students take the syllabus seriously? Do they really read it? The answer all too often is "No." How do we as teachers convey to students the importance of *anything* in our courses? We suggest: "This may be on your next test." So assign the syllabus as part of the reading on day one of classes for day two; then announce: "Tomorrow there will be a test on the syllabus!"

I've followed this procedure regularly for several years as a way of assuring that students will read the syllabus. Until this most recent term, however, my "tests" were "quickie" true-false and completion exercises that took about 10 minutes of classtime; furthermore, students graded their own work. This "pop" test on the syllabus served as a point of embarkation for explaining orally, in further detail, certain key points I wanted to stress about the course. I also informed students that I wanted them to become knowledgeable and comfortable with the requirements of the course by the third day of classes—hence, the assignment of "study the syllabus" and the time spent testing on it.

For the first time this past term, it occurred to me to test, in essay format, the students' comprehension of my now-expanded syllabus. I asked them to write a four-paragraph, in-class essay—a "letter" to a friend. The first paragraph was to establish a thesis and describe the course content in general—a topic covered orally on day one, as well as explained in the syllabus. The second paragraph was to describe course requirements—tests, papers, etc. The third was to describe the teacher—this "strange professor who thinks that students should write essays in a *history* class, avoid being late to class, and never chew gum!" Finally, the concluding paragraph was to contain some expression of the student's individual hopes, expectations, concerns, and/or fears in regard to the course. Students were given 10 minutes in which to complete a full-page or one-and-one-half-page essay; those who turned in acceptable essay-letters would receive one extra-credit point in the course, but there was to be no penalty for unacceptable letters.

What were the results of this exercise? Most essays covered the course content well and in sufficient detail to assure me that students had studied and understood the syllabus. The essay-letters also gave me a quick glimpse at my students' writing abilities. I had the opportunity to note in the margins how students could improve their writing (in anticipation of the three major



writing assignments in the course). Many students omitted creating a clearly written thesis statement in their opening paragraphs. Others skimmed on specifics. Some failed to use paragraphs and an essay format. Therefore, in returning the papers to the classes, I debriefed the exercise and explained such matters as, "Raiford likes DETAILS; you MUST write in paragraphs; spelling and grammar, as well as punctuation, WILL count in this course!" In short, not only did I get a feel for students' writing capabilities, but in my providing feedback I gave them a feel for just how serious I am about their writing well.

This exercise gave me a chance to introduce our Writing Center at the beginning of the semester, not "after the fact" of the first major essay test (in the third week of the course). The benefit to the students is obvious: With my pointers on composition and those from the Writing Center, students should be able to turn in improved papers throughout the remainder of the course. The benefits to me as the instructor are also

obvious: Essays are easier to grade, and frustration over poor composition is reduced.

The purpose of this exercise was not to frighten or discourage students from staying in the course. No one dropped because of the writing requirements in the course! It was to instill, from the start, the necessity of putting to use in this course what students have been taught for years in their English classes. The results have been gratifying. Of 40 essay-letters, 30 proved acceptable and earned the extra-credit point. Also, in subsequent weeks of the term, eight of the students actually went to the Writing Center for assistance. I also collected the essay-letters and compared them with the first major essay assignments; 50% of the students who exhibited deficiencies in the initial essay-letters have now demonstrated rectification of those deficiencies. My time and frustration in subsequent grading has diminished accordingly—not a bad payoff for following a whim and for spending a little extra time in grading essay tests on day two of classes!



Essay Test On The Course Syllabus

Compose a four-paragraph essay about this course in the form of a letter to a "friend," real or imagined! Be sure to establish a thesis in your introductory paragraph. Describe the course content in your second paragraph. In your third paragraph, comment on various specifics about how the course is managed and taught. In your final paragraph, comment on your expectations, hopes, fears, etc., regarding the course, and offer a conclusion. Remember: grammar, spelling, and punctuation will be considered in the grading of your essay-letter. You have 10 minutes to write 1 to 1-1/2 pages.



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