

Singing Through Freshman Composition

During my first semester teaching English Composition at Wake Technical Community College, I was surprised to find that over half of my students did not have the textbook by the second week of class. When we began reading and analyzing articles in the text, these students were left behind. Some tried to share books or took pictures of other students' books. More innovative students found the same articles free online! I began to investigate which articles in the text were accessible online and allowed students with electronic devices to access these resources. When I provided links to class articles, more students began participating in discussions, turning in papers, and experiencing success! This was an epiphany for me. Textbooks should not be a limiting factor in a student's success because of financial struggles.

To ensure that students were not being left behind at the beginning of the term, I designed an open resource assignment for the first few weeks of class. This assignment asks students to summarize and analyze their favorite song in a series of steps that helps them become stronger writers.

While students search for the perfect song, I provide online lessons on MLA formatting, writing a thesis, how to summarize, the difference between summary and response, writing using third person pronouns, and essay organization.

Pre-Writing

First, I ask students to read the lyrics of their song and write a summary of what the words say in their own, original words. This part of the assignment familiarizes students with my expectations for summary writing. They must use a formal tone, include facts as opposed to opinions, and avoid the use of personal pronouns or contractions. The summary paragraph must be 10 or more sentences.

Essay Directions

Next, students must expand their summaries into a two-page essay that includes citations. The goal of this assignment is to inform the reader by summarizing and explaining one song and by providing a clear, reasoned, and personal response to the song. Another goal is to help students understand and apply the key principles

of essay organization and development.

Here is a list of my expectations for this assignment:

- Students write about one song (must have lyrics!).
- Using an outline, students plan the essay that includes an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Students develop a suitable thesis statement and topic sentences, and use transitions to show connections between ideas.
- Students provide a summary of the song lyrics.
- Students respond to the song using personal opinion and adding quotes from the song or critics.
- Students present in-text citations in the response and create a properly formatted citation page.
- Students demonstrate standard written English proficiency—including avoiding misspellings, agreement errors, fragmented sentences, comma splices, and improper verb forms
- Students submit their essays to Safe Assign, a plagiarism prevention service, for analysis before submission. Knowing that this service will be used deters students from plagiarizing.

Organizational Pattern

Because this is a freshman English class, I also break down each paragraph and provide a road map for students, including the goal for introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions, the number of sentences that should be in each paragraph, and tips for transitioning between paragraphs. More advanced students may not need this extra direction, but students who do need extra structure find this very helpful.

Introduction (6-10+ sentences):

I ask my students to identify and contextualize the song, its artist, and its importance. Who is this artist and what credentials does he or she have? Look at the lyrics as a poem or story. What is the subject and what is the author's attitude towards the subject? I emphasize the importance of including a thesis at the end of the introduction.

Body (7-15+ sentences in each body paragraph):

First, I ask my students to include a summary paragraph. This is usually an expanded version of their pre-writing exercise. They summarize and explain the song lyrics with an emphasis on facts instead of opinions. They provide transitions between body

paragraphs, and between important ideas within the paragraphs, as they summarize.

Next, I ask students to respond to their summaries. This is a paragraph of opinions to explain why this song is special, what the song means, and if they agree or disagree with the artist's intention. The response may be supportive or critical, but either way, reasons and explanations must be included. I encourage students to search for online reviews of the song, artist, and music video, as well as for interviews with the artist discussing the purpose of the song and what it meant to the artist when he or she created it.

Students must include at least one direct quote in the essay. The response paragraph is an excellent place to include this quote. I remind my students to properly introduce their quote signal words and to use the quote sandwich model. In-text citations and a citation page are mandatory.

Conclusion (6-10+ sentences):

In their conclusions, students should not revisit their thesis exactly, but discuss the topic with their opinion added. One idea I provide is to discuss their song's possible effects on or correlations with American society today. Is this song relevant today? Why or why not?

Peer Review

Peer review is a crucial step in the process of writing this first essay. It familiarizes students with the process of giving and receiving feedback and lets them get to know their peers. Students are prompted to check each other's papers for organization, MLA formatting, and in-text citations. I also ask that they provide more open-ended feedback about the essay's cohesion and what it might be missing. After the peer-review, students edit their essays one more time before handing them in.

Conclusion

This assignment is an excellent way to teach basic essay writing skills without the use of textbooks. If you're worried about your students having access to course materials early on in the term, an assignment that uses open educational resources can be a perfect substitute!

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