



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

February 1, 2018 ♦ Vol. XL, No. 3

## Essay in Progress: Process and Application in Composition Writing

When it comes to writing, I believe two things: there's more than one way to write, and with practice and application, anyone can be an effective writer. Being a "good" writer seems to carry an elusive, mythic reputation, especially in my Composition I classes where most of the students are new to college-level writing. Some of my students assume all good writers obtain their skills naturally rather than by constantly committing to practicing the craft. However, the issue isn't genetics or the dichotomy of being either good or bad at writing. The issue is that students lack the ability to make connections between the process, application, and end product when writing an essay. Thus, seeing the need to help students make that connection, Essay in Progress (EIP) was born.

Before Essay in Progress, I taught the elements of writing an essay in my Composition I class by breaking them down into small components paired with application, quizzes, and discussion boards. However, when assigned the task of writing an essay, a certain percentage of students still could not complete the task. They completed the initial exercises involving the small components, but they still didn't know how to achieve the ultimate goal of writing a high-quality essay.

The EIP provides an avenue for students to take the recognizable puzzle pieces involved in writing an essay, line up those edge and corner pieces, and begin to fill in the middle with the more complex, colorful pieces that meld and blend into a complete picture. While thesis statements are extremely important, they are just a piece of the whole puzzle. Transition sentences provide the flow and the bridges needed to navigate between paragraphs. Yet, those too are just pieces of the puzzle. When the applicable combination of ideas and theories are joined together piece by piece, students can write an actual essay.

### The Process

An EIP involves constructing a draft essay by building one exercise onto another, while teaching the various components of a basic essay. By the end of the process, students have written an essay, participated in a peer-editing session, and turned in the final copy of their essay for a grade before they even realize they've participated in an essay cycle.

In my Composition I classes, I have students complete the building-block assignments of the EIP using discussion

boards. However, these individual assignments can be completed in other ways as well. I chose discussion boards primarily because students need to have continual access to the assignments they submit. They are also able to keep a working electronic copy they can refer to at their convenience.

The first assignment of the EIP is the thesis statement exercise. At this point, we have already completed the thesis statement lecture portion of the course, which provides students with the knowledge they need to complete the assignment. For this discussion board, I let my students construct a thesis statement using a topic of their choosing. I tell them ahead of time that this is the beginning of the EIP, and that they need to develop a thesis they can eventually expand into a 500-word essay. Using the discussion board, they have to demonstrate how they narrowed their idea down from a broad subject to a more manageable, specific topic. For example, let's say the general subject is education, which is an extremely broad topic. The student then comes up with three to four more increasingly specific topics (e.g., higher education, selecting a major, communications degree path), followed by selecting a topic based on the reduced list (e.g., jobs that require a communications degree). The student then writes a thesis statement based on that topic. The simple equation I teach for constructing a thesis statement is topic + opinion = thesis statement. Once the student has completed the thesis statement assignment, I provide feedback and suggestions and we move on to the introduction, conclusion, and paragraph development sections.

The next assignment involves creating an introduction paragraph in the discussion board. In this assignment, students need to use the thesis statement they've already created from the previous discussion board and include that thesis statement in an introduction for their budding paper. Within this section of the lecture, students learn various approaches to writing an introduction and are encouraged to pick a new type of introduction to write for this assignment. Students receive corrections and suggestions on this portion of their essay so they can adjust aspects of their draft as they progress.

The next and final discussion board assignment is the lengthiest, but it feels most like a traditional essay writing exercise. In this discussion board, students take their introduction from the previous assignment, updated with corrections, and write at least two paragraphs and a conclusion to round out the essay. The focus of this assignment is for students to include topic sentences and transitions so they create a seamless connection within this lengthening text. Alternatively, for scheduling purposes

or if students need additional time, it's possible to break up this assignment into two separate exercises—one for the paragraphs and another for the conclusion. Once students have completed this assignment, they are again provided with feedback, after which they bring a copy of their essay to class for a peer-editing session.

In all of my major essay assignments, I have students complete peer-editing sessions that are comprised of global and local components. Global peer-editing sessions focus on elements such as content, organization, and paragraph development. Local peer-editing sessions focus more on grammar and punctuation (i.e., more “localized” or smaller corrections). This portion of the EIP allows students to practice preparing a draft for peer editing, understand the role of a peer editor, and analyze feedback provided about their newly formed essays. For a final grade, once peer editing is completed, students make the final corrections to their draft and submit a final copy of their essay along with the draft from the peer-editing session. In my class, the final copy with the peer-edited draft carries more weight than the discussion board assignments, but less weight than a traditional essay.

In all, the EIP will have four to five smaller exercises, a peer-editing session, and submission of a final copy. Most importantly, though, students gain confidence from practice, feedback, and completion once they finish the EIP.

### Application

The EIP provides students with the time and practice to produce a complete essay cycle before diving into their first traditional essay assignment. While not every composition class is taught the same, nor are the same essays always assigned, the basic concepts for constructing an essay remain the same. The prompt and assignments for the EIP are flexible and adjustable depending on the structure of the particular course and perspective of the instructor. The steps don't change—students practice and complete the entire essay process interwoven into that portion of the course.

I have taught the EIP in my Composition I classes since 2016. Since that time, I have noticed a significant and positive difference in the quality of my students' essays, as well as their increased confidence in being able to write an excellent essay. I also gathered anonymous feedback from my classes regarding their perspectives about the EIP, and the majority of them agree that trusting and completing the process made a big difference in their confidence and production of quality work.

One question I ask my students repeatedly through the course regarding their essay prompts, arguments, and overall direction of their essays is, “So, what's the point?” It seems sharp, but it makes them think about *why* they are making certain decisions in their compositions and arguments. In regard to the EIP, as an instructor, I ask myself this same question. So, what's the point? It is important for students to practice these composition concepts we teach and to be able to successfully complete and identify parts

of an essay. However, it is more important for students to have the self-assurance that experience brings when they are constructing a major essay. This confidence is derived through the EIP. Building better writers is the point.

### Overview

EIP was created because there was a distinct need. Students need to understand the link between the process and the application. In my classroom, students were completing the benchmark assignments as we navigated through the various parts of writing an essay. However, many of them floundered without the experience of tying ideas together to create something cohesive. Asking students to go from completing seemingly isolated tasks to writing essays revealed they needed a bridge to connect the assignments. The EIP provides students with the tools to translate isolated essay assignments into writing well-rounded essays.

*What techniques do you use to help students write essays? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook](#)!*

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