



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

WHO'S YOUR AUDIENCE?

When I first began teaching full-time, the prevalent attitude of my students was “if it’s not relevant, don’t bother me.” This attitude seems to be present in college students who generally question why they are required to take a course in which they have no interest. That is nothing new; I felt the same way as a college freshman. What no one explained to me was how all the classes in a curriculum create a well-rounded student. Had more of my teachers considered me their “audience,” perhaps my initial efforts at education would have been more successful.

A lesson I learned in my first year of teaching taught me to pay close attention to my audience and create assignments that have relevance. In fact, a vocal group of students forced that concept on me, compelling me to change the way I taught, as well as the assignments I used. That first class was a group of lower-level students enrolled in Basic Composition; their objections to “kiddie stuff,” as they called it, made me realize their needs were not being met by the textbook assignments. So, I began developing my own. In the years since, I’ve continued to adapt to my students’ interests and needs.

In response to those initial objections, I changed the class to be more in line with Freshman Composition I, and then realized that those particular students needed more of a technical writing, job-oriented approach. Additional changes led to that class being transformed into what later became “Technical Writing I.” By the time the official changes were made, I had written assignments, using standard technical writing formats, which were more appropriate to my technically oriented students.

The first assignment was a cover letter and résumé. The response was very positive because all of the students had post-graduation jobs and careers in mind. Another way that students were able to connect more with their assignments was by using content from their field of study. Since writers perform better when dealing with known information, more time could be spent explaining technical writing formats, purpose, and document design.

In contrast, dealing with Freshman Composition I students was a little more difficult—student diversity, different programs and majors, a spread of ages, and interests. I acknowledged that diversity by asking students to write about their passions, which were as varied as they are. Rather than asking them to respond to textbook readings or professionally written short stories and essays, I asked students to write about what is important to them, while adhering to a set of standard guidelines for a freshman essay. Allowing students to write about their passions and interests let them know that their opinions matter.

In fact, many students voice surprise when they discover they can write about restoring their first car, making their first deer-hunting kill, having a newborn baby, or being a computer gamer. One of the writing assignments is “stump the teacher.” Students are required to assume that I am totally ignorant of their topic (and I often am!) and they have to explain the importance or significance of their topic, as well as their perspective.

Another freshman composition assignment that creates really entertaining writing, as well as reading is the classification essay. Rather than requiring students to classify and divide something artificial, I ask them to classify a limited number of their teachers, without using the teachers’ real names. What I get are names like “Mr. Sports Center,” “Ms. Perfect,” “Mr. Out There,” and “Mrs. Mom.”

Students, of course, must make a point with their essay and explain, through their examples, what their perspective is on these teachers and how they view them; the positive aspect of this assignment is that all students can recall teachers, good and bad. The assignment becomes less intimidating and gives me an insight about what students think. Students are allowed to present their ideas and opinions in a non-threatening manner.

The most successful adaptation to viewing my students as audience came recently when I taught a Technical Writing I class of Muscogee (Creek) Nation Lighthouse Police officers. Knowing they were already familiar with memo and report formats, I had them focus on their culture and their law enforcement experi-



ence, using established technical writing formats. The combination of documents and topics was very successful. At the end of the semester, I had students combine, revise, and edit all their documents into one formal report. Once those were turned in, I published a book of all the students' reports, with the assistance of the College of the Muscogee Nation. The final product was not a series of documents, but a slice of current tribal history, as recorded by my class of tribal police officers.

The lessons an early writing class taught me are still influencing my teaching. Students want relevance. As a writing instructor, I constantly talk about "audience." I would be remiss if I ignored that concept and required students to write about irrelevant topics. Creating relevant assignments is an ongoing process; students change and so do the assignments. Ideas I used five years ago have been abandoned. I seek relevance for my current students. It is, after all, what I am hired to do.

Stuart Tichenor, *Instructor, Arts & Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at Oklahoma State University, 1801 E. 4th Street, Okmulgee, OK 74447. Email: stuart.tichenor@okstate.edu

ACCLIMATING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS TO COLLEGE COURSEWORK EXPECTATIONS

The majority of students who take my Composition I course are in their first year of college. For most, this is their very first college experience. These students are diverse in age, nationality, social background, and preparedness for college work. Recognizing this, I plan a number of smaller, focused, directed assignments during the first two weeks of class to help students acclimate themselves to coursework expectations. For example, one of the assignments is to go out into the campus, find something which interests them, and then describe this object in a paragraph. This paragraph is written partially during the assignment time (in class), brought into the next class, and shared in smaller peer groups. We make this fun by having a little competition for the most descriptive paragraph from each group. I offer a full dinner package; it is only after the judging that my students discover that the "dinner package" is a bagged lunch.

There are five such assignments in the first two weeks of class, and each is worth five points (in total of 500 for the entire course). These early assignments include:

1. Name six things you notice about the way our text is organized.
2. Write a paragraph describing something on campus.
3. Describe a scene on campus you observe regularly.
4. Answer five questions about one of the essays in our text.
5. Share the essay you have chosen with someone outside of class; write a report about your discussion.

What do these assignments accomplish?

- Each of these assignments is short, and students feel comfortable with their ability to accomplish assigned tasks.
- Students get used to the idea of producing work on a regular basis.
- Students get used to formatting (word-processing) their work properly.
- Students get used to sharing their work in the non-threatening environment with their peer groups.
- Students are learning description and narration basics, as well as opening a dialogue about their school work.
- These early assignments are worth five points each, and most of the students get full credit for them, along with personal satisfaction and confidence.
- Some students do not buy into the "homework on time" concept at the start of their college career; however, they will not be penalized an enormous amount, and I can intervene early.
- These are shorter, more focused pieces; therefore, I can concentrate on the students' ideas and identify students who have difficulty approaching the writing process.

By focusing my students' work on the basics at the beginning of the semester, and by giving them smaller, easily accomplished goals, they develop the tools to move on to longer, more involved writing assignments later in the semester.

Michael F. Latza, *Instructor, English, and Editor, Willow Review*

For further information, contact the author at College of Lake County, 19351 W. Washington, Grayslake, IL 60030. Email: mlatza@clcollinois.edu