

## TEACHING ESSAY WRITING THROUGH SEQUENCED ASSIGNMENTS

Linda Briskin, Foundations Co-ordinator

August 2005

A survey of Foundations courses undertaken in 2002 demonstrated that almost without exception all courses include an essay assignment, and focus on improving students' ability to do university-level research. Hopefully this handout on *Teaching Essay Writing Through Sequenced Assignments* will be of assistance in this undertaking. This handout is divided into four parts:

**Part One** includes some general comments about teaching critical skills by sequencing assignments.

**Part Two** offers some suggestions about teaching the sequenced essay assignment included in this document.

**Part Three** is an example of a generic sequenced essay assignment which can be easily adapted for most courses. It is used in conjunction with *Essay Trouble Shooting*.

**Part Four** on *Essay Trouble Shooting* is a handout for students which addresses the essay-writing concerns most frequently raised by students, identifies the most common problems found in student essays, and recommends some solutions. It can be used in conjunction with an essay assignment.

This material is available in printable formats on the Foundations website [www.arts.yorku.ca/sosc/Foundations](http://www.arts.yorku.ca/sosc/Foundations). Feel free to adapt the material to make it relevant to your courses.

## **PART ONE: TEACHING CRITICAL SKILLS BY SEQUENCING ASSIGNMENTS**

Excerpt from Teaching Critical Skills: A Manual for Course Instructors (Tom Greenwald, Joan Page, Jan Rehner and John Spencer, Centre for Support of Teaching, 1992, pp. 57-59).

### **SEQUENCING ASSIGNMENTS**

Assignments not only provide an opportunity to assess students' performance, but, by allowing students to apply and practice the course's critical skills, they are also an invaluable teaching tool. This teaching function can be promoted by creating evaluation criteria appropriate to the assignment's purpose and by the feedback provided when the assignment is returned. Sequencing assignments, that is, designing a series of assignments which build on and reinforce each other, is also an effective means of teaching critical skills since staged tasks allow students to apply what they have learned from the instructor's comments on previous assignments to subsequent ones. Sequenced assignments are also very useful for teaching the process involved in accomplishing a task.

#### **Basic Principles of Sequencing Assignments:**

- sequenced assignments involve a series of assignments in which each assignment in the sequence builds on the previous one and prepares for the subsequent one
- sequenced assignments can be an effective means of teaching critical skills processes
- feedback should be provided for each assignment before the next is assigned
- grades may be given for each assignment and/or for the sequence as a whole
- the complete sequence should be explained when the first assignment is given
- the sequence's overall critical skills purpose and relation to course goals should be explained to the students

#### **Examples of Sequenced Assignments:**

##### **1. Sequence Process**

Teaching students critical skills often involves teaching the process involved in accomplishing any task, that is the methodology, procedures, strategies and tactics to be used. One means of teaching this is by breaking the overall process into subprocesses and building an assignment around each stage. Listed below are some examples of sequenced assignments designed to teach the process involved in writing an analytical paper.

- 1. a. writer-based draft  
b. reader-based draft  
c. re-write**
- 2. a. pre-writing guide  
b. analytical paper**
- 3. a. annotated bibliography  
b. thesis  
c. plan  
d. analytical paper**
- 4. a. interviews  
b. observation  
c. library research  
d. analytical paper**

## 2. Sequence Disciplinary Process

One effective way of teaching process is to design a series assignments which mimic the process of research, interpretation writing used in your discipline. Professor James Brown has created such a sequenced assignment for his 4th year English class. He started by thinking through the typical process of inquiry and writing used by professionals in his discipline: first, define meaningful problem; second, read appropriate primary texts and posit a tentative solution; third, read appropriate secondary sources and relate them to the tentative interpretation; finally, write a paper arguing for the interpretation within the context of the previously published sources. As with many models, this one describes what is an essentially recursive process in overly linear way, but it nevertheless provides the basis for creating an effective three part sequenced assignment designed to help students understand and apply a key methodology used in the discipline.

Professor Brown's assignment sequence starts with a problem "What is the relationship between the state of innocence and that of experience in William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience? Each student provides a tentative answer to the question, along with supporting arguments, in a short paper. These are returned with comments. Stage two has the students work together compiling a bibliography of articles and scholarly texts which discuss the assigned problem. Each student summarizes a different article and these are distributed to the class as a whole. The final stage involves each student writing a six page essay which argues her interpretation within the context provided by the summaries of the secondary sources. By learning and applying the process in the sequenced assignment, the students are now better prepared to write the longer research paper in the second term.

## 3. Sequence Levels of Analysis

Sequenced assignments can also be used to teach students to be more analytical in their thinking and writing. Simply understanding the difference between description and analysis is a key skill for students to learn. This distinction can be taught through a simple two part assignment: first have the students write a descriptive essay about a particular topic for which they merely gather information and report their findings. After returning these papers, the students then transform their descriptive essays into analytical ones built around a central controlling argument. An appropriate intermediary step might involve having the students submit their thesis for feedback before they write the final version of the analytical paper.

An assignment sequence can also be used to teach students strategies for creating deeper analytical perspectives on issues. One such sequence might be as follows:

- a. define a problem
- b. analyze a text in the context of that problem
- c. analyze a number of texts within that framework
- d. analyze texts and apply course concepts to the problem
- e. apply the developed analysis to a specific situation
- f. write an analytical paper

Within this sequence, each stage would be submitted and returned with comments before the subsequent stage was tackled. Ideally, each submission would refine the problem and provide a deeper analysis.

## PART TWO: TEACHING THE SEQUENCED ESSAY

Four your information, I space the three parts of the essay assignment over many months: Step One due in early Nov; Step Two in early Jan and Step Three in late Feb. This allows time for a critical reading assignment in Oct and another small assignment in March.

### ON SOURCES AND BUILDING AN ARGUMENT

Students often complain that the sources do not discuss all sides of a question. In some cases this is true; in some cases, students are lazy about finding sources. What is important is to teach students how to look through sources and be creative about building an argument. So for a question on women and sports which focuses on women only or mixed sports activities, articles on women's different physical capabilities (which might make them less able to compete with men) would help students build their arguments even though this material is not directly focused on the issue of single or co-ed sports. Students can also construct the negative argument out of the positive, that is, many authors who might agree with co-ed sports will address the arguments used to reject this approach.

In order to encourage students to find and use available library sources, ask students to bring to class one or two books for their chosen topic. Spend some time showing them how to look through the sources to see if they are useful in their research. And also how to do a proper citation for the material.

### STEP ONE OF ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Bring in an essay question which is not part of the assignment. Have students work in groups and create an "Outline Based on Question" to help them understand Step One of the essay assignment.

### STEP TWO OF ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

**i) Essay Topic Groups:** After students have handed in Step #2, divide them into discussion groups by essay topic. See exercise below. It is also available as a PDF file on the Foundations website.

**ii) Opinion versus Informed Point of View:** Once they have done their research, you might spend some class time discussing the difference between an opinion and an informed point of view.

**iii) Outline Exercise:** Have students exchange their point of view statement and the outline from Step Two. The reader should identify and discuss two queries for the writer with a focus on the logical presentation of the arguments, and the integration of the point of view into the structure of the essay. Also have the readers check that the outline contains an effective thematic and organizational structure.

**iv) Citation/Plagiarism:** Emphasize the importance of 'giving credit'. Point out that the Oxford English dictionary indicates that the original Latin term 'plagiarius' meant to 'kidnap'. Go over the course outline attachment on Academic Honesty.

Suggested exercise: Photocopy a page from an article in an anthology, and the title and copyright page of the book. Also a page from a full length text.

- i) Have students write a bibliographic reference for the article and the text.
- ii) Have students write a paraphrase for a part of a passage and then footnote it.
- iii) Have students write a paragraph using a direct quotation from a passage and create a citation for it.

### AFTER STEP THREE: PRESENTATION BY ESSAY TOPIC

Once students have finished their essays, you might divide them down again by essay topic and have each group develop a group presentation for the class. This will allow them to demonstrate and share their expertise.

## **ESSAY TOPIC GROUPS: A HANDOUT FOR STUDENTS**

**\*\*YOU WILL HAVE ABOUT 35-40 MINS FOR THIS EXERCISE.**

**\*\*ASK ONE PERSON IN YOUR GROUP TO MONITOR THE TIME.**

1. Identify the two positions on the topic that your essay question addresses. (5 mins)
  
2. Do a round. Each person should share the point of view that she intends to argue in her essay. (5 mins)

3. Structure a debate:

- i) Divide the group into two, each small group representing ONE of the two positions. In choosing a group, it doesn't matter what your own position is. In fact, it would be a better learning experience to try to defend the position you do not agree with.
  
- ii) Working separately, each small group should list all the arguments in favour of the position it is representing. (5 mins)
  
- iii) Come back together as a whole group. One small group should start by presenting one argument. The other group should respond to it. Then the second group should present an argument and the first group respond. Continue until you have exhausted your arguments. (10 mins)

4. Revisit your point of view. Do another round. (10 mins)

Each person should

- i) comment on whether the exercise shifted her point of view in any way; and
  
- ii) identify the most important insight she had from the discussion.