Contents

1 About This Document 2
2 General Comments 2
3 Some hints about the conduct of classes 11
4 Peer Teaching and Small Group Work 13
5 Designing a syllabus 14
6 Textbooks 19
7 Diagnostic Essays 22
8 Assignments 23
9 The Research Paper 30
10 Revision 32
11 Grammar 33
12 Conferences 34
13 Evaluating Writing 35
14 Final Grades 40
1 About This Document

This document has appeared in many incarnations over the years. Much of it was written for instructors of the Freshman Writing Seminar, the program which preceeded the current University Writing Seminar. The oldest parts of the document were written by Judith Ferster almost twenty years ago. Another stratum was written by her successor Judith Lee. And a great deal was written by me at various points during my own tenure as director of the Freshman Writing Seminar from 1984 to 1992. (An astute reader might be able to pick out which strains are to be attributed to which author.) I have added considerable amounts of new material to this edition, and have tried to bring it generally into conformity with the guidelines of the current Brandeis program. This is not to take the place of more general books about the teaching of writing, such as the excellent St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing or The Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook. Nor does it cover the material disseminated at our staff meetings, placed in the file cabinet in Rabb for your use, or broadcast over the writinginst list. (If you want to be added to the writinginst list, please email me at burt@brandeis.edu.) But it does bring together some general reflections about common issues in our course that might serve as a local guide.

2 General Comments

The University Writing Seminar is a required one-semester course in prose rhetoric. Its central purpose is to provide students with practice in academic writing, an audience of peers, and the continued guidance of an experienced critic. Enrollment is limited to seventeen, and the central text in each seminar is the students’ writing. Although each seminar is designed by the individual instructor, all address the following:

- topic development
- organization
- rhetorical principles
- analysis
- argumentation
- essay exams
- revision
- critical reading
- diction, syntax, grammar
- documentation and bibliography
All students write 25-30 pages during the semester, comprised of graded and ungraded assignments ranging in length from 1-10 pages. A large percentage of the class meetings are workshops in which students read and critique each others’ work; in other class sessions students study other texts and practice the basic methods of organization and revision.

The University Writing Seminar has an important place in the students’ education at Brandeis, but it is a special and limited place. Most students and instructors bring unrealistically high expectations to the seminar. It is unrealistic to expect that in three months all the students will transform their writing, that they will suddenly find it easy to write, or that they will all, as a result of the seminar, be writing “A” papers. It is reasonable to assume that the practice in, and continued response to, writing during these three months will enable students to become more productively self-conscious as writers, to be better critical readers of prose—both their own and that of others—and to be more independent and versatile writers.

We are doing a number of things in the University Writing Seminar. We are providing an environment in which students practice writing using different methods of organization and development, in different forms of discourse, for different purposes. We are teaching them to use the conventions of argumentation and documentation as tools, rather than to regard them as prescribed rules or recipes. We are educating students to think of their writing not in terms of correctness but in terms of effectiveness, to think not of prescriptions but of alternatives. We are bringing students to an awareness of the methods of persuasion and of their responsibilities as persuaders.

To understand the agenda of UWS one must call to mind the distinction between a course that uses writing as an instrument of instruction in another subject and a true writing course. Both are respectable ways of acculturating students to the world of academic writing, although each kind of course has its own strengths and weaknesses. In the first kind of course the subject matter — the readings, the writing assignments, the class discussions — is dictated by the structure and concerns of some discipline other than writing. Teachers of such courses do pay attention to writing; they help students develop their papers, they provide practical instruction in how to approach the problems of a specific discipline or of a specific kind of paper in that discipline, and they help students revise and rethink their written work. But teachers of that kind of course do not concern themselves greatly with writing as a subject in its own right; they do not have to acquaint themselves with the research literature of the discipline, nor do they reflect upon some of the constructs in whose terms writing as a subject is discussed — concepts such as the reasonable opponent; logical, ethical, and pathetic appeals; fair and unfair uses of emotion; the distinction between an interlocutor’s point of view, and interlocutor’s character, and an interlocutor’s convictions; analysis of rhetorical acts, scenes, agencies, means, and purposes; the interplay of claim, warrant, and evidence in the construction of an argument. At their best, such courses initiate students into writing without their being aware of what they are learning, roughly in the way one is initiated into speaking one’s native language. At their worst, such courses treat writing only as an occasion for students to make their characteristic mistakes (so that they can be corrected by the instructors) and do not provide students with any way of reflecting upon the rhetorical relationships among writer, subject, and reader. Such courses can descend into a kind of cheating, in which the instructor teaches one subject and
pretends to be teaching something else. The bane of composition programs everywhere, for instance, is the course that is really only a course in literary interpretation. Instructors of such courses often justify what they are doing by claiming that they are teaching a course with more substance (their word) than a composition course has. But what they mean when they say this is that they are teaching a course about literature, about which they know something, rather than about writing, about which they have not bothered to learn anything.

UWS is a writing course, not a course in something else that uses writing. This means that it uses readings and invents occasions for writing which are designed to isolate and bring to the forefront of attention some of the central constructs of a rhetorical intellectual culture. Whether one is analyzing a reading, or planning a piece of writing, one asks some of the same questions: who is the imaginary person, the persona, who is constructed as the author? What is his or her role and task? What is the genre of the text? What are its tasks? What are its rules? What is nature of the language-game that unfolds between author and reader? How does it develop the relationship between these two imagined parties? What are the expectations in the minds of potential readers (who are likewise assuming a persona)? How are these shaped and modified by the unfolding structure of a piece of writing? How does the writer imagine his or her way into the things that are left implicit or unsaid in what the reader already knows? How does the writer fairly manage the complicated dance of agreement and disagreement that develops in every persuasive exchange?

It is always debasing to a subject for it to be treated merely as a skill instrumental to learning some other subject. Calculus, for instance, has been debased as a subject because it has been treated only as a preparation for engineering and physics, not as a part of mathematics. Organic Chemistry has been debased by being treated only as a requirement for admission to medical school. Both subjects are redeemed when they are treated not as skills but as arts. (In the case of Organic Chemistry this usually happens in special sections of that course, reserved for Chemistry majors.) Only sub-intellectual matters are taught as skills; intellectual subjects are taught as arts, which require not merely correctness but insight, connoisseurship, and phronesis. Organic Chemistry and Calculus have artistic disciplines of which they are a part, and through them one can learn how to think like a chemist or think like a mathematician. But the artistic discipline of which composition was once a part, what in the nineteenth century was called Moral Philosophy, no longer exists. And the relationship between composition and literary criticism (or between composition and literary scholarship — a slightly different thing) is not analogous to that between calculus and higher mathematics. To teach composition as an art requires one to invent a discipline that at the moment has no place in the curriculum, a discipline concerned with the expressive, persuasive, and reflective uses of language. Over the last decades everybody who has taught this subject has had to cobble it together, borrowing pieces from literary theory, cultural criticism, cognitive psychology, common-language philosophy, and aesthetics. None of these cobbled-together forms has proven so influential as to gain widespread acceptance among the community of practitioners. But each has contributed to the informal know-how, what Steven North calls “lore,” which underlies most contemporary instruction in composition. Lore may be opportunistic, and may lack rigor, but it is not
unreflective and not without effectiveness in shaping a more or less useful pedagogy of writing. Lore can only differ from superstition and incantation, however, if it is always paired with a critical rationality which, while not perhaps seeking lost disciplinary first principles, is at least capable of seeing lore’s constructs from a somewhat more abstract point of view.

American higher education generally, and writing instruction specifically, still bears some of the marks of the quarrels between the different kinds of institution that went into the modern University. The three kinds of institution out of which a modern University is built had three very different ideas of what education is, and very different ideas about the society that that education is designed to equip one to enter. The oldest strain, the pre-Civil War liberal arts college, sought to equip its students with the intellectual commonplaces and stylistic graces they would need to assume positions of leadership in the communities of which its students were a part. Before we rush to jeer at that ambition, we should notice that the education it offers is more moral than technical, more about mores than about information. They were not only a kind of finishing school in which one learns to sound like someone who has read the Classics and makes the social connections one will exploit in later life; they were also a kind of initiation into the moral and intellectual habits of serious, civic-minded adults who were to define useful callings for themselves in the terms those habits and mores spelled out. At its best, this sort of institution sought not merely to inculcate small town gentry with genteel behaviors but to shape those gentry into liberal-minded and worldly citizens. The surviving strains of this allegiance to values of liberal-mindedness and worldliness are still very much a part of the modern University. One hears the echo of the pre-Civil War liberal arts college whenever one hears the demand that education be broadening and broadly distributed among disciplines and cultural traditions. One hears that echo also when one hears the insistence that education should be more than job training, and more even than knowledge-making, but should also expose students to the kinds of experience which will make them more humane and more rounded adults. Curiously, this commitment to what at first looks like gentility and breeding, is absolutely unique to American higher education, and is found nowhere except where American educational values have taken root, perhaps because it’s only in America that gentility and breeding could not be taken for granted in a certain class, and it’s only in America that anyone might have entertained the notion that gentility could be taught to those not born to it. (It’s not for nothing, for instance, that liberal arts colleges sprung up West of the Alleghenies in numbers far out of proportion to the population of that region. The historian Frederick Rudolph once quipped that the people of the early nineteenth century trans-Allegheny invested the same kind of grandiose boosterism in the founding of small colleges that they invested in the digging of canals, and for the same reasons.)

The role that rhetoric would play in such an education is easy to imagine. Nineteenth-century America had a terrific appetite for public oratory and for public disputes. Trials had something of the aspect of sporting events, as people would gather to hear the attorneys strive with one another, and hearers would also flock to hear extended fits of eloquence from the pulpit or on the hustings. The speeches of Webster or Clay (or of Jackson, for Democrats) had the kind of prominence in nineteenth century parlors that expensive coffee table books do in our own day. Widely available books like The Columbian Orator...
trained humble people without means, people as diverse as Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass (who both used that book), to play large roles upon the world stage. Training in rhetoric was training to enter the world of public dispute; it was not merely catching on to a series of debater tricks, but developing one’s acquaintance with the only partly conscious ensemble of values and allegiances in whose terms these disputes were phrased.

A second strain in American higher education is the land-grant University, such as were first created in all of the states by the Morrill Act in 1862. The original ambitions of the land-grant schools were primarily technical, to spread the techniques of scientific farming and soil conservation among farmers, to train civil engineers, to train managers. One can see immediately that the genteel ethos might have some role to play in such an educational institution, but one can see at the same time that the tendency of that kind of education would be to put the value of eloquence in some tension with the value of correctness. Language has a more utilitarian role in such a curriculum; it is not the index of a habit of being or the means of entry into a world of complex and never fully articulated allegiances and values but a tool needed to perform certain kinds of act and to do certain kinds of business. Artistic uses of language under this view of writing becomes proper only to professional artists or to the leisure moments of non-artists, and eloquence as it is traditionally understood becomes even in the professions where it matters — law and divinity — a matter not of genteel connoisseurship but rather either of God-given genius (to those who approve of it) or of suspect embellishment (to those who do not). Only once this vision of writing is established is it possible to see style as merely an embellishment rather than as the hallmark of a way of thinking, a way of standing in relation to specific kinds of others, or a way of being in the world.

A third strain of American higher education is the research university, of which the first was Johns Hopkins, modelled after universities in Germany. The aim of this kind of University is the production of new knowledge by its faculty, not the inculcation of gentility or of technical skill. Students at such a university are trained as makers of knowledge, not as practitioners of useful arts or as genteel participants in public discussion. One can see immediately the attractions of this vision of the University for faculty and for graduate students. But one can see also how this same vision brings with it interminable arguments about the tension between teaching and research in the life of the professor. And one can also see how in this kind of university, rhetoric, far from being a central part of the vision of what education is, becomes a mere skill, something one must master before one is allowed to do anything serious. One of the hallmarks of the research university is that rhetoric as a discipline begins to take on a remedial flavor. (One of the reasons Willa Cather writes so persuasively about these tensions in her novel The Professor’s House is that she was herself an instructor of Freshman Composition at the University of Nebraska. Among her students was John Pershing, who later led the US Army in World War I.)

Modern universities do not for the most part develop only one of these three models. In most Universities (Brandeis included) all three sorts of institution are still visibly in play, still quarrelling about what education is, and what part rhetoric has in it. (Unfortunately for rhetoric, the model in which it has the noblest role to play is also the model which has the least prestige.)
The institutional pressures within the American University give rhetoric an anomalous position, and one in which a host of forces combine to undercut its authority. In the first place, because in the Research University Writing essentially has a remedial role, every Professor who believes he or she knows how to write well also believes that anyone who won’t tolerate mistakes can teach it, and that student writing problems are the consequence of laziness or softness (sometimes programmatic softness) by writing instructors. Such Professors are rather like the small businessmen who believe that since they have balanced budgets at their companies that they could easily balance the federal budget simply by standing firm against “waste, fraud, and abuse.”

Instructors often respond to this pressure in various self-destructive ways. The first is to transform their course from one about rhetoric into one about literary interpretation or literary theory. This gives the instructor access to a discipline that has the prestige rhetoric has lost, and it also enables the instructor to teach a subject in which he or she has some experience (since most rhetoric instructors are trained in English, and most were exempted from composition courses when they were freshmen). Or the course can be transformed into courses in various other disciplines: into creative writing courses, into courses about contemporary politics, even into amateur psychotherapy.

The attractions of such courses are not entirely illegitimate. Rhetoric is, after all, a literary subject, although it is not literary in the way that the study of English Literature or Literary Theory is. And it is an expressive subject, in which many of the values of a Creative Writing course are naturally in play, although it uses some of the categories of Creative Writing in the service of different ends. (The authorial persona and the reader are, after all, literary characters, and what goes on between them has some of the features of a plot. The difference is that the reader, although a fiction, must also in some sense be real, must be an actual person under a description, or an actual person playing a particular game, entertaining particular unfolding sets of expectations. In rhetoric the term “accurately imagined” is not oxymoronic.) And of course since rhetoric is about disagreement, contemporary politics is naturally one of the subjects of interest to it.

The difference between a course that “cheats” in these various ways and a course that uses the means and methods of these other disciplines is that the latter kind of course is one that has adopted what Wayne Booth calls a rhetorical stance; it attends to the consequences of the fact that reasonable, well-intended, intelligent people inevitably have different views, and that when they give reasons for those views they might not reach agreement, although they will develop their disagreement with greater nuance and power. The key difference is the difference between interpretation, in which (say) a learned authority decodes a sacred text from a special language into the vulgar tongue, elaborating its implications for a weltanschauung other than that in which it was composed, and persuasion, in which reasonable people with different views seek to come to grips with each other in terms of common premises. The interpretive stance and the rhetorical stance have different attitudes toward the otherness with which they are engaged. The interpreter must grapple with the fact that the text’s world is irreducibly other than the reader’s world, and that for all the interpreter’s expertise the interpreter cannot enter that world and cannot know whether his or her view of it is wrong until long after the interpretation is complete. The persuader, in contrast, is always immediately engaged with an other by whom he or she can
be rebuked, and although that otherness is never exhausted by the developing conversation among them they both have means of giving justice to each other and exacting it from each other. The otherness of those with whom one is in a persuasive relation is irreducible, insofar as one can never predict how the relationship among persuaders will unfold. But persuaders are inescapably in live relation with each other in ways that interpreter and text never can be. (Whenever one argues, one lays one’s self open to a rebuke from the interlocutor, a rebuke that one may well be brought to see the justice of. That is why one never really argues with somebody whom one cannot imagine having the better of the encounter. What one does with such a person is called screaming, not argument.) A course about rhetoric is a course that foregrounds the ways in which people with different views elaborate habits of engagement with each other. The study of these patterns of engagement, of agreement and disagreement, is a literary study, although it is neither literary criticism nor literary theory.

Students frequently complain about taking UWS. Many of these complaints we can do nothing about, for they are inevitable in any required course. Some students feel that enrollment in UWS is an announcement of their inadequacy as writers; others want more flexibility in their schedules and resent yet another required course; others feel that by taking UWS they are being deprived of the chance to take a more advanced or challenging course. The point is that we can be most effective if we recognize much of the student indifference as a desire to learn, and if we address this need rather than let their resentment develop. It is also important not to assume that the majority of your students do not want to be in your seminar; many students are pleasantly surprised at the relevance of the seminar when they are asked to share responsibility for planning their work and when they see a clear difference between this course and their high school writing course, when in particular they see that their work is taken seriously. One of the ways to do this is to make clear what your own intellectual agenda in the course is. When students complain that a reading is boring (a reading that may not have struck you as boring at all) what they are really complaining about is that they do not know what they were supposed to be looking for when they read it. When they complain that an assignment is pointless, what they are complaining about is that they are not sure exactly what they are supposed to learn by doing it. But one doesn’t get what they are supposed to learn across simply by telling them what the moral is. One gets it across by pointing out more or less inventive ways of solving the problem posed to them by individual assignments, by showing them what the easy way is (so that they can see that there’s no excitement in taking it), and pointing out also some tacks they might try that would bring out the artist in them. As one understands a work of art by gaining some sense of what the author had to cross out in order to write what got written, so one understands a writing assignment by developing a nose for promising and unpromising avenues of exploration.

The single most frequent complaint from students is that their class meetings are neither useful nor interesting. This feeling may derive in part from the fact that students who are used to lecture courses tend to measure the value of a class by the information given, perhaps by the number of pages of notes completed in 50 minutes. The very nature of a writing seminar is different, and we must not only learn, ourselves, how to fulfill our role, but we must educate our students how to use the class meeting productively. It is,
quite simply, neither productive not appropriate for you to speak for any full class meeting; telling students what they “should” do in organizing or developing a paper, or telling them what the rhetorical principles of an essay are, accomplishes almost nothing. This is not to say that you should not stimulate and challenge your students, or that you should not introduce them to new ideas and new ways of thinking, of course. The class meetings should be “workshops” in that they provide students the chance to learn by doing. Whether the subject under discussion is a student paper, an essay, or principles of organization, plan on having the students do something in class. Class preparation should, then, include not only the subject and what you want to say about it, but an exercise or project which students can do in class to demonstrate or practice the principle you are trying to teach them. Think of the writing class as not only a time when you give students information, but as a place where they work together in the practice of writing and/or on a particular critical problem:

Students consistently evaluate as most useful those classes in which they read and critique essays written by their fellow students. Those who find these classes not useful complain that they do not learn from the mistakes of others and would rather spend more time on their own writing. It is important to remember that students do not automatically know how to read or respond to papers; part of your job is to teach them how to do this. Again, beginning with a structure, with a series of questions, will help give students some direction in this process. Remember that their initial instinct is often to point out what is incorrect in a paper, and we are teaching them how to read a paper for its possibilities, how to make useful suggestions for revisions, how to understand how papers go wrong. You will find that relatively neutrally-toned descriptive comments (“I understand your main idea to be X. You take your starting point from Y. But you can also press on to Z.”) often convey more useful evaluative advice than comments written in a more judgmental tone. See the section on “Evaluating Writing” below for some suggested questions. In order to develop an atmosphere in which students respond honestly to each other, however, you might want to begin with simpler questions:

- What to you think is the main idea of the paper?
- What do you like best about the paper?
- Where would you suggest the writer begin in revising the paper?

Encourage students, too, to share the difficulties and problems they are having or have had in writing a paper: this will help focus the other students’ discussion and will encourage students to try writing projects which might be more difficult or complicated than they think they can handle. They may learn that if they have no difficulty in writing an essay they may not be learning anything.

I encourage you to use class time for small-group work; that is, have students work in small groups either on their own drafts or on a particular writing problem. You can then visit each group or be available for questions, and the groups can share their work at the end of class. Again, students will need to learn how to work together, and this method will be effective only if you provide structure and if you are able to tolerate two or three awkward meetings.
Don’t be afraid to challenge your students; simply use your time together helping them learn how to write about difficult subjects in new ways.

Not every class is going to be, or necessarily should be fun and exciting. (For one thing, good teaching is not like performance but like thinking, and thinking is ruminative, temperate, even a bit repetitive, since it must turn an idea over and over in order to bring it into imaginative focus.) Nor do students necessarily improve in a linear progression. They will all, probably, reach a plateau which may last several weeks, possible most of the semester; as they become proficient at a particular level, moreover, they may do inferior work as they begin to do more difficult work. (You may notice, for instance, that their grammar begins to fall apart as the agenda of the course shifts from more narrative and personally oriented forms to forms that require distanced argumentation.) This is natural to the learning process; it’s simply important that you do not get discouraged or frustrated. All students who do the work improve their writing, and most gain confidence in themselves as writers. There’s no reason to feel that you have to entertain students, nor is there any need to burden them with too much work. It is up to you to establish an environment in which students practice writing and receive continual response to each stage of their work. You are the authority in the seminar, which does not mean that you must be authoritarian, but that you provide the necessary structure and guidance within which students can learn. You should know, and be able to explain clearly and precisely, the purpose of each class, its relation to what has gone before it and to the current assignment, and where it will lead.
3 Some hints about the conduct of classes

- Teaching is like a religious vocation. It requires all of your virtues, and also all of those human qualities which are most crucial to you and which make you worthy of being yourself. At the same time, however, how you teach is no measure of your personality, and it is particularly important never to allow yourself to believe that how you have taught on particular days is either a vindication or a condemnation of your personality. When you teach badly, this is to say, it is because you have taught badly, not because you are a bad teacher.

- It is better to face the question of your authority than to evade it. You have a choice of how to exercise your authority, but you have no choice about exercising it.

- It is best to make the agreements you have with your class as explicit as possible.

- Students will let you dominate the discussion, but they will blame you if you do.

- The art of the classroom is the art of the question. Try not to ask questions which you yourself cannot learn from. Ask questions which lead on to other questions rather than ones that end the discussion once they are answered. The second question you ask of a student is often especially important, particularly when the student has been fumbling a bit with the question. It is usually better to ask a student who fumbles a bit a second question of a somewhat more specific kind than to pass on to another student. Often when students fumble it is not for lack of knowledge or insight but because of their uncertainty about what your intellectual agenda in asking the question is.

- Restating a student’s reply is often a good way of clarifying it. But be sure to ask the student whether you got it right. Restatement is also a good way to tie a response to the major themes of the class.

- When students disagree, ask them to define their views and to describe what kinds of arguments both sides might be able to bring to bear in support of their own views.

- A question should direct the attention to something specific and crucial which might have been otherwise. You should not ask “What do you think of this essay?” unless you follow with “What, in particular, gave you your impression?” But you might ask “Why does it start with X rather than with Y, where other people might have started?”

- To focus upon what might have been otherwise is to highlight the characteristic and specific choices the author made in composing the essay and the characteristic and specific choices the reader makes in interpreting it. Crucial choices appear at a variety of scales and can be brought out by a variety of questions, such as: Why has the author chosen this term rather than an apparently synonymous term? Why has this author chosen a highly paratactic syntax? Why has the author put this observation in a main clause and that observation in a relative clause? What expectations has
the author excited by starting this essay in this way? How does the author frustrate or modify those expectations? What are the major turning points of the argument of this essay? How are these turning points mediated, and what further turnings do they motivate?

- One good technique to teach students to look for the crucial moments is to have them choose, before class, what they think to be the central paragraph, sentence, and word of the piece. These three items need not be concentric.

- Be prepared to provide alternative versions of key sentences. This method can highlight slight variations in tone, in assumptions about the subject matter, in the sense of the nature of the reader, and in aim. This method can also show exactly what is at stake when the author’s presentation becomes pointedly discontinuous, and can show what the author is up to when the course of the presentation runs with or against the traditional course the subject matter elicits.

- It is usually best to follow a student’s answer to one of your questions with another question, even when the first answer was ill-considered and unsatisfactory. Students often respond with nonsense in perfectly good faith, for they fail to make what seem to you to be the essential discriminations, and a second question can lead the student to make that discrimination without humiliation. There is usually a core of sense even in the most apparently ill-considered response, and it is up to you to bring it out.

- Vague answers are often studded with code-words charged with a deep but unconscious meaning which a second question can make explicit.

- Questions should lead to further questions: up to higher levels of abstraction, down to the telling particulars, back to earlier essays, out to common experience, in to deep assumptions.

- A question should guide inquiry, not test performance. Ultimately, questions should be the class’s property, not yours.

- Every classroom has factions. A good line of questioning can enlist those who are most skeptical either of the text or of the prevailing thought about it, transforming their skepticism from a simple threat to the class or to you into that opposition which makes discussion hot and interesting and makes the class into everybody’s s class.

- Repetition of the major issues in a discussion should be like returning to the tonic in music. Restatement of a student’s ideas should be a way of affirming that that student’s remarks have a place in the class’s ongoing conversation.

- To read a passage aloud is not only to impress it upon the students’ minds but also to suggest an interpretation of the passage and to demonstrate that interpretation is a living art.
• It is useful to clarify the terms of an argument by presenting it on the blackboard. This is especially useful for complicated disagreements.

• It is surprising how important things like the shape of the classroom turn out to be. You will find discussion freer and easier if your students sit around a table with you than if they face you. But this may be not under your control, since you don’t for the most part have the opportunity to choose your own classrooms.

• I have always found it wise to sit when I ask questions or lead a discussion, and to stand when I lecture. If I ask a question standing, my students assume they are being examined. If I lecture sitting, they assume I am digressing. Your experience may be very different.

• Your class plan should be written out so that you will have it when you need it. But you should never treat it as holy writ, and if your students happen to start an interesting rabbit, you should follow it down its hole.

• The important thing to teach is that your students must take some responsibility for what they argue. Collaborative learning (see below) is one way of encouraging this. In general discussion one might have students imaging how they would attack their own positions and describe the weakest points of their own line of argument.

4 Peer Teaching and Small Group Work

Sooner or later your students will have to learn to read their papers acutely and critically for themselves, not only because you will not always be reading their papers, but also because one of the goals of the course is to enable them to take responsibility for their writing. Their own literary consciences and sensibilities should ultimately become more demanding and acute judges of their prose than you are. One of the best ways to develop those sensibilities is to encourage them to work out their methods of judging writing explicitly together in small groups.

Left on their own, students in small groups are likely to go astray in a few predictable ways. They may confine their remarks to polite generalizations, consider only errors and blunders, or criticize the papers in such broad and unspecific terms that their attack appears to be an attack upon the writer’s personality. It is up to you to provide direction to these groups, being careful to observe the distinction between providing direction and imposing your will. One method which Kenneth Bruffee has found successful is the following:

Each group is give a written sheet with certain specific questions such as “What is the major claim of this paper?” “What warrants and evidence does it provide?” “How does its tone advance or retard the progress of its argument?” “What is the crucial sentence?” and so forth. Each group is to appoint a secretary, who will record (and present to the class afterwards) only those remarks about which there is consensus within the group. They should also record what
they regard as the specific strengths and weaknesses of the paper, and the secre-
tary should be instructed to press for a clear definition of any objection or
item of praise that seems unclear.

The details of how you work out your small group conferences are of course up to you.
You should not feel discouraged if the first one or two seem unproductive, nor should you
feel guilty about the fact that group conferences are less demanding on you than other
sorts of class are.

Be aware also that there are whole textbooks based on the peer conference. The pioneer
text is Kenneth Bruffee’s *A Short Course in Writing*.

5 Designing a syllabus

The general design and goals of all the Freshman Writing Seminars are the same, but
the structure you choose for your own seminar will of course depend upon your own idea
of what the course is about. All students are doing essentially three things concurrently
throughout the semester:

1. learning to develop and organize their ideas

2. learning to control their style and diction to achieve grammatical correctness, clarity,
   and a certain degree of elegance

3. learning to interpret, analyze, and evaluate written texts

Richard Gebhart has defined three kinds of choice which you must be continuously
making throughout the semester:

1. Choosing between an emphasis on forms, patterns, models, and standards, and em-
phasis on the freedom of individual students to choose their own subjects and meth-
ods. In either case, rhetorical patterns would form the basis for assignments, moving
from simpler modes (narration, description, informal persuasion) to the more difficult
modes (classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect).

2. Choosing between the assumption that one thinks through a subject before begin-
ning to write, so that emphasis is on shaping and organizing one’s paper, and the
assumption that one discovers what one thinks and wants to say by writing, so that
emphasis is on pre-writing and “free writing” and on personal forms of writing.

3. Choosing between emphasis on revision and a progressive series of ungraded assign-
ments before evaluation, and emphasis on evaluation of the structure, and Content
of the final paper.

However you decide these questions, you should work with students at each stage of
writing a paper, and discussion of student essays should alternate between discussion of
larger organizational principles and more specific questions of syntax and diction.
The divisions of your syllabus will reflect the parts or aspects of the implicit theory of rhetoric which governs your course. Whatever your theory, your course is likely to have two parallel agendas which would sometimes reflect each other and would more often be linked arbitrarily.

One of these agendas we might call “Composition” and it would include such matters as:

1. Sentence matters
   (a) Basic pattern
   (b) Predication
   (c) Subordination and Coordination
   (d) Sentence Combining
   (e) Compound-complex, cumulative, and periodic sentences
   (f) A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence (Christensen’s model)
   (g) Transition markers beyond the sentence.

2. Paragraph matters:
   (a) Large scale subordination and coordination
   (b) Sequence, expectation, subverted expectation, shaping of expectation
   (c) Levels of generality
   (d) Specifying the relations between sentences.
   (e) Tampering with the structure of given paragraphs.
   (f) Closure and projection beyond momentary closure.

3. Diction:
   (a) Tone
   (b) Level
   (c) Assumptions about reader, self presentation and self-betrayal
   (d) Making private meanings public
   (e) Anglo-Saxon and Latinate Diction, abstract and concrete Diction
   (f) Dead Metaphors
   (g) Frankness and Courtesy

The other agenda we might call “Rhetoric,” and it might be broken down in several ways, none of which necessarily exclude the others. Here are a few patterns for you to consider:

1. The Elementary Rhetorical Processes
(a) Invention
   Freewriting
   Clustering
   Hierarchies
   Brainstorming and claim lists
   The classical topoi
   The Young-Becker-Pike grid
   The Burke Pentad
   Research techniques

(b) Arrangement
   Outlines and Hierarchies
   Scale
   Assumptions which inhere in arrangement
   Making private structures public
   Spatial and temporal organization: the shape of an idea and the shape of a presentation

(c) Revision
   Answering the reader’s needs
   Discovering unconscious ambiguities
   Control over tone and diction
   Discovering an implicit thesis beneath the explicit one

2. The Rhetorical Modes. The standard syllabus for the last hundred-odd years. Currently in disrepute, but still a powerful method. The modes — Description, Narration, Persuasion, and Analysis — are an 18th century version of the classical topoi. They differ from the topoi in that they were intended as patterns of arrangement rather than as spurs to invention, but they remain useful techniques for examining the kinship between invention and arrangement, between the ends of rhetoric and the available means. A finer division of the subject might be as follows:

(a) Persuasion
   Logical, ethical, and pathetic appeals
   Syllogism and enthymeme
   Necessary prior agreements
   Scale and other marginal considerations
   Argument by identification or metaphor
   Material fallacies
   Deduction and Induction

(b) Narration
   Episodic versus analytic narrative
   Process and analytic narrative
   Narrative time and space
   Argument as a form of narrative
Narrative paradigms: Turning, changing, judging. Final and material cause. “Pointedness”

(c) Description
   Physical description
   Abstract description
   Character
   Value
   Category

(d) Analysis
   Definition
   Genus and Species Contrast, Variation, Connection
   Anatomy
   Internal structure and external relation

3. Parties to Rhetorical Transactions. This organization describes a different pattern of rhetorical modes, defining each mode by the particular light it casts on the rhetorical transaction.

   (a) The speaker: Expressive discourse
       Journal, commonplace-book, case history, personal response, etc.

   (b) The matter: Exposition and Scientific Discourse

   (c) The audience: Persuasion and Argument

   (d) The language: artistic discourse


   This is the implicit division of rhetoric which governs such readers as the Norton Reader and the Little, Brown Reader. This is a form of organization which offers the temptation to organize your course around issues rather than around the problems of rhetoric, but the temptation can be resisted so long as issues of rhetoric can be organized in a thematic way.

5. Concentric Tasks Each of these tasks depends upon those which have been covered before it.

   (a) Definition

   (b) Substantiation

   (c) Evaluation

   (d) Recommendation

see Caroline D. Eckhardt and David Stewart, “Towards a Functional Anatomy of Composition” in The Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook (first edition) for more information on this sort of syllabus.
6. The Burke Pentad

As with the Modes, the divisions of this syllabus are at once heuristic spurs to invention and patterns of emphasis which govern organization:

(a) Act
(b) Scene
(c) Agency
(d) Means
(e) Purpose

These five things interact with each other in complex ways Burke calls *ratios*.

7. Across the Curriculum Currently all the rage. Emphasizes the different rhetorical problems of each discipline. Can be fruitfully combined with almost any of the others. Readers and rhetoric texts are available for this kind of course. My experience is that the science readings in these texts tend to be popular science articles, and don’t much resemble the articles in truly scientific journals.

Whatever your syllabus, certain special topics such as the Baconian essay, Stichomythia, Imitation, the Commonplace book, and so forth are useful and interesting. In addition, every course should cover the formal research paper, and should pay some attention to logic, treating the classical syllogism, elementary symbolic logic, the material fallacies, tropes of ethos, logos, and pathos, induction, and the relations between claim, warrant, and evidence.

It is important that you have a syllabus ready for your students on the first or second day of class: it gives them a sense of structure and it helps them understand what will be expected of them and when. It also forces you to think through the course before you begin, so that even the early classes have a context and a clearly-defined purpose within the larger design of the seminar. You are not committing yourself, of course, to following the syllabus exactly throughout the semester; you will almost inevitably have to make some changes, but those changes will be easier to make if you have a basic plan from which you are working.

The syllabus should include the names of the texts, a description of your goals, and a statement of your policy on grading, late papers, and revision; the dates when assignments (at least the major ones) will be due should also be indicated. Include as well your office number and office hours, and a phone number where your students may reach you or leave a message.

The detail with which you outline the schedule of classes and assignments can range from a day-by-day summary to a weekly summary, and may include the entire semester, the first half, or three-to-four-week segments. Your choice should depend not on how much or how little you have thought through the course, but on the degree to which you wish the assignments and classes to grow out of the students’ work. Even a general outline should, however, include a schedule of assignments: students rely on this timetable more
than we realize. For your first two semesters of teaching UWS I ask you to give me at least
a week-by-week syllabus at the beginning of the semester.

In scheduling assignments, take into account that most students have particularly heavy
assignments in other courses during the fourth, eighth, and twelfth weeks (USEM papers
are usually scheduled to be due during those weeks), and they are usually overwhelmed
with midterms during the fifth and sixth weeks. Thus, any workshop on essay exams should
be held before the fourth week, and weeks 4-7 provide a good time for revisions, for work
on the paragraph-level, and for classes that do not require that students do a great deal of
preparation.

Although a formal research assignment is now part of the USEM course rather than
of the UWS course, you should feel free to introduce students to the kinds of engagement
with scholarly conversations that take u a major part of the intellectual life of academia.
Schedule a class during which the students visit the library during the first half of the
semester. Appointments can be made with the Reference Librarians, who are glad to take
the students through the library; they will emphasize any particular area you request: if
you have defined your research project, or know your students' planned concentrations, the
library tour will be most productive.

Several syllabi from other Freshman Writing Seminars are on file in Rabb 144. Take
some time to peruse them as you work on your own syllabus

6 Textbooks

Textbooks have been designed to suit almost any of these syllabi, and most can be adapted
to any of them as well. Textbooks used in UWS come in several varieties. All courses
should have one book from each of the first three classes.

I. Rhetoric texts

These are fairly large, formal texts which usually treat both the processes of rhetoric
and the rhetorical modes. They always include some treatment of the units of expression
(sentence, paragraph, and essay structure) and almost always include formal but elementary
discussions of logic. Many include a handbook of grammar and usage as well.

These texts reflect modern theories of rhetoric ad composition, and are both especially
good on Invention:

• Packer and Timpane, *Writing Worth Reading*

• Memering and O’Hare, *The Writer’s Work* (which includes a grammar handbook
and a fully developed section on sentence combining)

• Axelrod and Cooper, *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing*

• Winterowd, *The Contemporary Writer* (which has no grammar handbook but is more
catholic in approach than Memering and O’Hare).

The following texts are solid but old-fashioned:
Hall, *Writing Well*

Gorrell, Laird and Urie, *Modern English Handbook*

Crews, *The Random House Handbook*

Heffernan and Lincoln, *Writing, A College Handbook*

The following texts have interesting and unusual programs that might involve some risk but which might also prove tremendously exciting:

- Scholes and Comley, *The Practice of Writing* A superb, high-level, slightly zany book. It has been very well received at Brandeis.

- Corbett and Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* usually considered too hard for Freshmen, it has nevertheless had a large cult following at Brandeis. You should own a copy even if you don’t assign it, because it is a very intellectually rich book and one you can mine for ideas.

- Rothenberg, *Elements of Argument*

- Fahnestock and Secor, *A Rhetoric of Argument* (these last two books are particularly strong on the Toulmin model of argument)

- Kinneavy, McCleary, and Nakadate, *Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition*

- Young, Becker, and Pike, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*

You are encouraged to look at the various texts collected in the work room in Rabb. They are a good source of ideas and illustrations even after you have chosen the text you will use.

**II. Informal Books on Style and Writing**

The ancestor of all these books is Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*. Other books of this type include

- Donald Murray, *Write to Learn* (my own favorite)

- Williams, *Style, Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (another great book, widely used at Brandeis)

- Trimble, *A Writing with Style*

- Marius, *A Writer’s Companion*

- Lanham, *Revising Prose* (which you ought to read for pleasure)

- Flower, *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing* (despite its title a good book)

- Horton, *Thinking through Writing*
II. Readers. These come in three major classes: 1. Rhetorically-organized readers. The readings are very short, forcing the teacher to discuss rhetorical matters and thwarting the temptation to argue about the subject matter. The sections of the book have introductory apparatus describing and providing an anatomy of that mode which the readings exemplify. Good texts of this class include:

- Kennedy and Kennedy, *The Bedford Reader* (unusually well-written apparatus and well-chosen readings)
- Scarry and Scarry, *The Holt Reader* (At the same time a modal and a thematic reader. Has some good exercises and apparatus.)
- Burt and Want (no relation) *Invention and Design* (usefully subdivides the different rhetorical modes)
- Zender and Morris *Persuasive Writing*
- Berke *Twenty Questions for the Writer*

2. Thematically-organized readers. These books often include a “Rhetorical Table of Contents,” but generally lack apparatus other than questions at the end of the readings. The organization of these books plays into the hands of one’s temptation to teach a class about a particular theme rather than about writing about a particular theme. The large numbers of selections, however, enable teachers to use these books for almost any purpose, and the best ones give the reader a taste of some of the classic prose writers of the past. The following three are my own favorites:

- Brereton, Peterson et al., *The Norton Reader*
- Muller, *The Random House Reader*
- Barnet and Stubbs, *The Little, Brown Reader*

3. Author-organized readers Good for giving one a taste of some great essayists and for showing what is constant and what changes in the sensibilities of particular writers.

- Smart, *Eight Modern Essayists*
- Clifford and DiYanni, *Modern American Prose*

4. Two Special Cases.

- Bartholomae and Petrosky *Ways of Reading* This is a very astute and very high-level book. It has a strong agenda (cultural criticism), but it’s readings are unmatched for sophistication. This is the reader you should consider first.
• Jacobus *A World of Ideas* Another reader with excellent readings from classical times to the present. You can probably find something that will tie to the themes of most USEMs in this book without stretching.

IV. Other Grammar Handbooks:

• Kirkland and Dillworth, *Concise English Handbook* Required at Brandeis.

• Crews and Schor, *The Borzoi Handbook*

• Marius and Wiener *The McGraw-Hill Handbook*

• Hodges and Whitten, *Harbrace College Handbook*

• Millward, *Handbook for Writers*

• Hacker *Rules for Writers*

• Glorfeld, Lauerman, and Stageberg *A Concise Guide for Writers*

7 Diagnostic Essays

During the first two weeks of each semester every instructor is asked to give two or three assignments for the specific purpose of assessing the students’ strengths and weaknesses as writers; on the basis of these assignments. Some students might be required to enroll in ESL instruction or in Basic Composition. Each of these assignments should be short. Each should ask students to perform a different task, and one should be written in class. Each topic should be accessible to your students, limited enough to be written about in a designated period of time, and yet complex enough to test the students’ experience in analysis and organization. The rhetorical task should be fairly simple (comparison/contrast, illustration), but it should require some analysis, interpretation, and use of evidence. Your purpose, expectations, and criteria for evaluation should be very clear.

One of the diagnostic essays should ask students to respond to a text — either a single statement or a short passage. In choosing a text, avoid any that are too abstract (“Knowledge is power.”) or which state a commonplace. The best kind of text poses an opposition in concrete terms that is unexpected or controversial, so that simple agreement or disagreement is impossible.

The following are some suggestions for diagnostic essays:

• Ask students to write a brief essay (2-3 pages) in which they introduce themselves as writers — describing their experience, explaining their strengths and weaknesses, asserting what they expect to gain from taking the seminar.

• On the first day of class, pair students and ask them to interview each other. Then ask them to write up the interview, organizing their “data” according to their own categories.
- An altruist is a person whose motives for doing things are not selfish; s/he takes action and makes decisions for the good of others rather than in his or her own self-interest. Think of a person who either is or is not an altruist, and write an essay in which you demonstrate your view. The person you write about may be a well-known figure in business, politics, international affairs, or may be someone who is known to you personally. Give enough detail to convince a reader who is not familiar with the figure that your judgement is valid.

- You assume various roles in your life: student, worker, friend, son/daughter, sister/brother. Describe several of your different roles. How are they different? What do they have in common?

- All of us have been influenced — positively or negatively — by several people in our lives, people we know personally or public figures, or even characters in fiction or film. Is there someone who has had a particularly important influence on you? Explain the effect this person has had in your life, using details to illustrate the significant and identifiable changes that knowing this person—or knowing of this person — has made in your life.

- Please write a short piece in which you explore the implications of one of the following passages. Whether you agree or disagree, use your experience and your interests to test the accuracy or adequacy of the passage you choose.

  - Every great advance in natural knowledge has involved the absolute rejection of authority. (T. H. Huxley)
  - The surest way to corrupt a young man (or woman) is to teach him to esteem more highly those who think alike than those who think differently. (Nietzsche)
  - The existence of the Jew merely permits the anti-Semite to stifle his anxieties at their inception by persuading himself that his place in the world has been marked out in advance, that it awaits him, and that tradition gives him the right to occupy it. Anti-Semitism, in short, is fear of the human condition. The anti-Semite is a man who wishes to be a pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt—anything except a man. (Jean-Paul Sartre)
  - All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That is his. (Oscar Wilde)

8 Assignments

All students in University Writing Seminars write about 20 pages during the semester. These pages can be distributed in any way you wish (although the distribution should be indicated in your course description). You may require a 3-5 page essay each week (with some weeks being for drafts and revisions) and a 7-10 page research paper at the end of the semester. It may be more productive, however, for some students (especially inexperienced writers) to write shorter papers more often for the first few weeks of the semester (a page
or two for each class and a 2-3-page essay each week, for instance) before moving on to essays. More experienced writers may, on the other hand, be asked to write fewer and more complex essays less often.

Before considering questions raised by different kinds of assignments, there are a number of practical matters to consider:

1. Directions for every assignment should be typed and should specify the date due, the length, purpose, and criteria for evaluation. Do not rely on verbal assignments.

2. The purpose of each assignment should be clear to both you and your students. This purpose may be defined as a task, a method of organization, an approach, or a problem.

3. The connection between each assignment and the ones preceding it should be clear, even explicit. One of the basic differences between a writing seminar and a course in which writing is assigned is that the papers represent distinct but interrelated stages in a continuous process, rather than separate and unrelated productions.

4. Return graded papers to students within ten days (a week is better) after they are submitted. (Establish due dates with this principle in mind.) There may be times when this is impossible, but you should set yourself a stringent deadline. Students must receive their papers before submitting their next assignment. Your consistency will establish a structure and will reflect how seriously you take your students’ work, which will in turn help them to take it seriously.

5. Establish a policy about accepting or not accepting late papers and be consistent. Some instructors allow no late papers, and will accept no papers that are not handed in by a certain date and time; others lower a paper by a grade or half-grade if it is late. I usually tell students that they may have a limited extension if they make arrangements with me beforehand, but that late papers will otherwise be lowered a half-grade. The point is not to be inflexible or authoritarian, but to be fair in creating a structure for the students. Working within a deadline is, after all, one of the things they are learning in the seminar.

6. If students are enrolled concurrently in a course that requires writing, ask them to bring you copies of their assignments; their other work can provide a context for practical application of the principles you are discussing.

7. Assignments that are or have been given in other UWS sections are invaluable in developing your own assignments, and many instructors learn a great deal from each other. Remember, however, that to minimize the risk of plagiarism, you should design your own variation of any assignment.

**Kinds of assignments**

There is widespread disagreement about the place for autobiographical writing (i.e. the personal narrative) in a seminar on expository writing. Any assignment should, of course, ask that students draw on their own experience and knowledge. Personal narrative
may be a useful means by which students break the writing barrier (writing about what they know will enable them to develop the confidence to write about what they know less well). Autobiographical writing can also be used as the basis for a later assignment in which students revise their narrative as part of an argument or analysis. Narrative and description are important forms of discourse with which students should have facility; they are, after all, the basis for such assignments as lab reports and research reviews.

Nevertheless, in Freshman Writing Seminars, autobiographical writing should be subordinated to the kind of analysis and argumentation that students must learn to do in their academic environment. Use these forms to focus on such issues as defining an audience, choosing detail and examples, differentiating between observation and interpretation.

There is also widespread disagreement about whether to assign topics or to leave them open; our students in general prefer to formulate their own. There is some value and some limitation in whichever approach you choose, and ultimately your decision depends on your own predisposition, and on your students.

**Open topics**

The argument in favor of leaving topics open assumes that students are learning in a writing seminar to define an appropriate subject, take a position, and develop it. They will discover through trial and error how to shape a paper and a subject according to the requirements of time and form. They are also more likely to write about subjects that engage them, which means that their papers may be more interesting and may elicit their best writing. This approach can also leave room for the students to do genuinely interdisciplinary work. Leaving the topic open gives the students more responsibility and allows them to discover that their own interests and ideas are in fact valid subjects for academic discourse. The time spent floundering in search of a topic can be an important part of the learning process central to a writing seminar.

The assignment of open topics must always, however, be accompanied by a built-in structure; not only do students need guidance (remember, they don’t automatically know what will lead to a good paper and what won’t), and you must minimize the possibility for plagiarism. At the beginning of the semester have each student write a list of ten to twenty subjects that might be the basis for a paper (reading, hobbies, other courses, career aspirations, current issues, etc.) and use this list as a resource if a student is having trouble finding a topic for a particular assignment. Use conference time to develop topics with a student; through dialogue with you a student may find that s/he has censored several perfectly good topics, or has chosen one that leaves no room for development.

A vague assignment is not the same as an open topic. Students should always be very clear on what your standards are, and their choice of topic and thesis should be one of the factors in evaluating their essays.

**Assigned topics**

Topics may be specified either by methodology (comparison and contrast, illustration, cause and effect, etc.) or by subject. Any assigned topic should include 2-4 choices which are equivalent in difficulty and which can be evaluated according to the same criteria. There are several things to remember in defining topics for your students:

1. Topics should not be stated so vaguely as to leave the students no direction. Asking
students to define Freedom or Love or Beauty, for instance, can leave them un-
derstandably wordless. It’s a good idea to sketch some notes of your own for an
assignment you design just to see how reasonable it is.

2. Topics should both enable and demand that students go beyond generally accepted
assumptions and cliches. We are hoping to educate students to examine not simply
restate generally accepted opinion on any issue. Student should understand that a
subject itself is less important than the ways of looking at it.

3. The main purpose of any topic is to encourage the students to write with some
purpose; an instructor gives a topic rather than leaving it open in order to give the
students a focus and a point of departure. A topic does this only if it generates
questions. (Remember that a topic is not a thesis. You may assign a topic, but only
the student can discover a thesis.)

4. An assignment which asks students to analyze a hypothetical situation (as in a case
study) can be very useful, but be sure that the “case” is within the students’ grasp
and experience.

5. If you ask students to write an analysis or interpretation of a text, be sure that it
raises issues that are accessible to them; a number of approaches to the text should
be possible, and complete agreement or disagreement should be obviously impossible.

6. Specifying the number of pages for an assignment also has its purpose and value,
even though students may find this an impossibly rigid and unpleasant requirement.
The number of pages in an assignment defines the scope and complexity of an essay.
(Mention early on that you are not so stupid that tricks such as using large fonts,
large interline spacing, and large margins will fool you. It might be a good idea
to specify the length of assignments using word counts rather than page counts.
Most modern word processors have word counting utilities.) Almost every writing
assignment students will do in other courses will have guidelines, moreover, and they
need to learn how to use these guidelines as just that, not as rigid limits. They also
need to learn how to generate ideas in order to “fill in” a draft that is too short, and
they need to learn how to evaluate their priorities in a draft that is too long.

In designing your assignments, remember that we are trying to provide a context, within
which students will be become articulate and versatile writers in an academic environment.
Our assignments should challenge them intellectually, teach them how to use the conven-
tions of academic discourse, and elicit their best writing. They should allow students to
build their facility for observation, analysis, and argumentation with increasingly complex
subject matter.

Some methods of generating topics

The series of assignments you propose itself implies a rhetorical theory and therefore
requires that you make explicit, at least to yourself (although it would probably be better
to make it explicit to your students as well), the structure of your thoughts about rhetoric.
The techniques of invention that you teach, for instance, are at once a method you can use
to generate topics and a method your students can use to interpret those topics in fruitful ways. One very useful method is to assign papers in pairs, where the papers only differ in some important rhetorical variable. In this way, you are able to isolate that variable and see how different versions of it alter the course of the paper, thus bringing home the fact that the writer does have a choice about how the paper goes and specifying a few of those choices as well.

One might, for instance, ask for two descriptions of the same scene in different tones, or from different physical points of view, or at different physical or temporal scales. One might present different “process descriptions” varying only in the writer’s attitude toward the process, or in the writer’s estimate of the reader’s intelligence or good faith, on the the writer’s aim (say, to impress the reader with the difficulty of the task, or o divert and please the reader by considering the interesting byways of the process, to alert the reader to the dangers of the process without scaring him or her away, or to excite the reader’s disgust.) Rhetorical paradigms such as the classical topoi, the Burke pentad, or the Young-Becker-Pike grid are useful source s of variables.

Here are a few assignments which I have found interesting:

1. You are an archeologist from some epoch in the distant future. You have just found one United States Quarter Dollar. What do you know now? (Try to talk them out of employing a lot of hokey science-fiction apparatus, or speculating upon the disaster that ended American civilization — they should stick to the coin. Other material may be of importance to the essay, but it should appear only in the unstated background of the common assumptions of the writer.) You might consider how the text you produce might be altered by changing a few of the following things:

   • The history (or the author’s knowledge of the history) of the U.S
   • The history of the author’s nation.
   • The author’s nation’s religion or political structure.
   • the author’s knowledge of languages (would you conclude that Latin is a spoken language in the U.S?)
   • The prevailing theory about American culture which is held among the author’s colleagues.
   • The author’s familiarity with artifacts. Does the author know what a coin is?

2. Take a story from a recent newspaper and rewrite it from any three of the following points of view:

   • The National Enquirer
   • The Decline and Fall of the united States (pub. 2150)
   • The Lost World of Our Grandparents (pub. 2070)
   • A personal letter from your mother
   • As read aloud by a character in The Cherry Orchard
3. English to English translation: Translate
   - A Shakespeare sonnet into a personal letter
   - A passage from Hemingway into James
   - A passage from James into Faulkner
   - A passage from Milton into Chaucer
   - A diary entry into a paragraph in your autobiography

4. Write a personal letter to yourself from someone close to you with whom you have had a difference.

5. A Cliff’s notes summary of your life: major themes, genre, turning points, essay questions, etc.

6. Personify two polar abstractions and have them write character descriptions of each other. Then have a third personification write from a neutral but not necessarily superior point of view.

7. Write the “Science and the Citizen” article in *Scientific American* describing the invention of the hammer.

8. Describe how some person you do not know eats, making sure that you reveal something interesting about that person which you might not have learned otherwise.

9. Describe a neat, empty room as it appears through the doorway of the noisy crowded room next door in which a party is going on (without mentioning the party or the noise). Then describe the same room as it appears through the window from outside, in the dark and snow (without mentioning either the dark or the snow). Variation: describe the side of a barn as it appears to a farmer whose son has just died, but do not mention the son or his death. Then describe the same barn as it would appear to a farmer whose son has just been born.

10. Describe some room familiar to you as it would appear to somebody
   - Familiar with it before you knew it
   - Seeing it for the first time
   - Filled with a justified sense of foreboding
   - Wondering whether it will suit his or her purpose
   - Seeking to discover the philosophy of the architect

11. Write an essay on the true meaning of some crucially important abstract term not yet existing in English. (“Morkle as Frannis: A Contemporary Ideological Theme”)
I have found it useful to make my assignments as offbeat as possible. This is a controversial step — one can argue that since we are training students to write term papers most of our writing should resemble term papers — but I think it is also an easily defensible step. For the purpose of an offbeat assignment is not simply to pique the student’s interest but also to highlight and bring out for examination rhetorical choices which are already implicit in less offbeat expository work. If you have a clear rhetorical lesson in mind, you are teaching students to write term papers whatever you assign them. Also, this method of generating contrastive sets of short assignments that differ in some rhetorical variable is easy to adapt to more traditional assignments. For instance, literary interpretation often starts with the gambit “how would this text be different if the author had done X rather than Y” (where X is something that at first glance seems rather similar to Y).

In addition to your regular assignments, it might be a good idea to encourage your students to keep commonplace books, if only to get them into the habit of frequent informal writing. (An entry in a commonplace book is a brief passage from something the student has been reading, followed by a brief commentary. The commentary is not to be a mere reaction — how it feels to me, what it reminds me of — but an explanation — the key point here is, the unusual turn is, what I must be sure to remember is, what’s new here is . . . .) A commonplace book entry is not precisely a “reaction paper,” because a reaction paper is focused for the most part upon the student’s feelings or upon his or her anecdotal experience of situations similar to those represented in the text at hand. A reaction paper is hard to judge, and hard to teach with, because it all to often becomes merely a display of the student’s moral earnestness or of the depth of the student’s feelings. Earnestness and feeling are good things, and it is important not to lose sight of them in academic prose. But one of the purposes of learning to write academic papers is to step out of one’s own egocentricity, and that means that one must be prepared to enter the space where one gives and asks for reasons concerning one’s convictions, a space where earnestness is necessary but not sufficient virtue. To say that it is better to ask “what do you notice?” than “what do you feel” is not to argue that the intellectual world is a place where feeling does not matter; it is to say that whatever feeling is, it is something that is given depth, subtlety, and nuance by distanced and disciplined critical reflection.

Narrowing a Thesis

When a student proposes a topic which seems to us to be unwieldy or intractable we often propose that the student divide that subject into its natural parts and choose a more tractable subject at some lower level of abstraction. “Narrowing” thus becomes a version of that rhetorical art we call “classification.” This procedure depends upon several unexamined assumptions (the most obvious one being that important things need to be said in many pages and that only trivial points are capable of being made in a pithy manner), and forces one to run certain risks needlessly. Four of these risks seem to me to be particularly serious:

1. This procedure makes it all too easy to allow students to ignore the crucial distinction between topic and thesis.

2. It encourages them to choose only the most trivial of subjects.
3. It persuades them that “Big topics are for professionals, not for small fry like me.”

4. The procedure will not find any natural stopping place anywhere between the mind of God and the quarks. New information appears at the new scale that was not relevant at the coarser scale, for information only inheres in the structures which are crucial at the chosen scale, and those structures are not crucial at finer or coarser ones.

A subject can be narrowed by confining one’s attention to those things which are most telling at the level of abstraction one has chosen. Ask not “What are the parts of this subject?” but “What is the crucial discrimination upon which this subject turns?” One can talk about large subjects in a small compass, and one does not have to be Solomon or Bacon to do so. The way to do so is to discover the central distinction or the most telling and pointed fact. To do this is to resort to a part which gives one the whole, rather than to retreat to a part in terror of wholes.

9 The Research Paper

Every University Writing Seminar includes some instruction and practice in research methods, uses of evidence, documentation and bibliography, even though a formal library research paper is no longer part of the requirements for the course. There are a number of alternatives to this part of the seminar:

1. a long (8-10 pg.) research paper, on a topic of the student’s choosing, which is begun at mid-semester and on which the instructor supervises each stage—formulating a topic, finding sources, note cards, outline, bibliography, rough draft, final draft. In some seminars, the class may choose a shared topic, or the research papers could be centered on a common text or problem. In other seminars, students are divided into groups which debate two sides of a chosen issue. Class presentation have proven a valuable heuristic in teaching research, but they have been most successful if they have been given in a class before the last two weeks of the semester.

2. two shorter (5-6 pages) research papers, one just before midsemester, one at the end of the semester. This choice gives students the chance to practice — and therefore to see — what they learned in the process of doing their initial research project.

3. three or four essays which require documentation; particularly in the spring, this as proven a useful alternative for students who already have some experience in handling larger amounts of material and who need practice in honing an argument and in responding critically to alternative viewpoints.

4. a documented essay that is a revision of an argument; this is really a two-part assignment: in the first part, students research the issues and problems in a subject about which they wish to persuade their reader; in the second part, they revise that essay incorporating the opinions of selected authorities.
5. Here is an assignment that used to be used in the old “Writing Lab.” It may not fit under the current curriculum, but you may find it useful in other parts of your career:

The critic Kenneth Burke compares the development of scholarship to a conversation at a party. You arrive at a party that began long before you got there and will be continuing long after you go. Knots of people at the party are intently engaged in conversation with each other. Sometimes people pass from one knot to another, and people are entering and leaving the party continuously. You draw near one such group of people, and listen until you get the drift of the conversation. Finally, you put in your oar. When you do this, you are engaging in a complex act. On one hand, what you say must somehow engage the unfolding issues with which the conversation has been concerned. But on the other hand what you say must also introduce something novel into the conversation, something which might never have been introduced had it not been for you, but which must seem to have been an inevitable development in retrospect.

Engaging in this complex dance between continuity and change is the work of the review of the scholarly literature which occurs early in the course of every scholarly publication. For this assignment, you will be directed to a handful of important secondary works on the texts we have considered this term. Look carefully at the sections where the author defines his or her place in the ongoing scholarly literature. First, define carefully the authors understanding of the state of play before his or her own intervention. What new opportunities has some recent development in the literature created for extending or rethinking the subject? What new themes, ways of thinking about the subject, methods of interpretation, or insights does the author promise, and how are they latent, or present in not fully articulate ways, in the literature the author found before he or she prepared to write? Second, having done this, go to the Citation Index for your field (a reference work in the library such as the Arts and Humanities Citation Index), and look up four or five of the recent works that have cited the work of scholarship you just were examining. What use do they make of that scholars text? What opportunities for their own work do they see opened or foreclosed by that earlier piece of scholarship? Do they understand the original scholars point in the same way he or she did, or in the context of this later time does the scholars point seem somehow different, as if the real import of that work was something that only became obvious later?

Now, write an essay of 8–10 pages assessing the place of that article in the developing scholarship, considering how it changed the concerned that were under discussion when it appeared, and what opportunities it created or foreclosed for later writers.
None of these alternatives is inherently more valuable than any other, and indeed, you may come up with your own version. You may want to ask your class at the beginning of the semester which of two or three alternatives they would find most useful. In the fall you are more likely to have students who need the experience of working with a large amount of material, sorting fact from opinion and formulating a sizable project; in the spring, the shorter, more analytical assignments may be more useful. Note that whatever the particular assignment, it is important to distinguish between a research paper that must synthesize a number of different facts, and one that must synthesize a number of different opinions.

10 Revision

Revision should be an important and integral part of the work of any student in a writing seminar. We are, after all, teaching students how to read their own work critically enough that they will not need a writing instructor to tell them how to reshape or develop a paper. Most students need to “improve their writing” by learning to finish their papers, and frequent revision both helps them learn that and helps them develop the habit of rewriting their papers. Part of the demystification of writing that takes place in a writing seminar is the recognition that a writer is able to express what s/he thinks only by looking again (and again and again) at what s/he has written.

Most instructors include revision as an element in their seminars in one of the following ways:

1. One paper may be revised as a new paper to be graded anew.

2. Students may have the option of revising any paper; in some cases the two grades are averaged together, in others the second grade is given more weight, while in others the second grade replaces the first. It is essential in using this method to make clear that merely “correcting” a paper or responding to your comments does not constitute “revision.”

3. Every third or fourth paper may be a revision which is graded (i.e. students write two or three papers and then revise one for a grade).

4. Students may hand in a portfolio of papers for a grade two or three times during the semester. This allows a certain amount of time to pass before revision, which gives students a better perspective on their own work and allows them to utilize more

5. Most instructors require students to revise any essay that is not of passing quality because of grammar, organization, or subject matter. This is a good way of giving students the experience of knowing what a “finished” paper is, and it it enables you to avoid grading form and content separately.

How you use revision in your seminar depends on your conceptual framework and on your students. Remember, it is a tool that you use to teach certain aspects of writing and
to allow students practice in writing. Making it part of your seminar requires that you be consistent and fair in your evaluation of all your students, and that you be especially clear in defining your criteria for evaluation.

See “Grading” handout for further comments on ungraded work.

11 Grammar

All of us involved in the teaching of writing feel frustrated when other faculty members turn to us and demand to know why their students — and ours — continue to make grammatical errors. “Why can’t you teach them how to use commas and semicolons?” they will ask, while we meanwhile are bogged down with more complex matters and feel demeaned and misunderstood as technicians. Nevertheless, in teaching a basic course in the university we have the responsibility both to insure that students have the knowledge they need in order to avoid error, and to create an environment in which they get in the habit of checking themselves for error.

Students frequently assume that because they make no grammatical errors they have learned all they need to learn about writing papers in college and that any writing seminar is unnecessary. This assumption is often coupled with the belief that there is something shameful about making grammatical mistakes. Neither view is useful or valid. We assume that university essays will be grammatically correct, and we have the responsibility to give students the information and practice they need to correct their own errors. There is a difference between having an enlightened view of grammatical error and dismissing such error as therefore unimportant. Nothing marks any writer as a second-class citizen more obviously than grammatical error; to deny its importance is naïve and unprofessional.

This is not to say that a grammar review, or grammatical exercises should be a significant part of your seminar. In order to judge how to address grammatical error, it is important to recognize its cause(s):

- lack of knowledge — some students are inexperienced writers and do not know the difference between a sentence and a subordinate clause, or between singular and plural verbs. Most students at Brandeis do have this basic knowledge, but many of them have little sense of punctuation.

- imprecise thinking — many times run-on sentences and vague pronoun references, for instance, reflect unfinished thinking and can be dealt with best by focusing on the conceptualization rather than on the grammar itself. Faulty predication normally is also not a consequence of lack of grammatical knowledge but rather of the student’s lack of a firm conceptual grasp of the argument of the paper.

- carelessness — spelling and typos are the most obvious signs of carelessness. Many of our students come to us with the assumption that such trivial matters don’t count except to eccentric English professors, and that their other instructors are interested in their ideas (with self-righteous accent) rather than with form. In requiring them to take care in their writing we are teaching them that form and content are in fact
interrelated and we are helping them develop habits that will avoid trouble in other courses.

- difficult subject matter — very often students’ writing will become convoluted and full of errors because they are still in the speculative stage in their writing, and have tried a project more ambitious than they were prepared for. Such writing can be treated as unfinished work. This is probably the origin of most of the grammatical errors you will encounter at Brandeis. When students are attempting new kinds of tasks — and the somewhat distanced, argumentative form of writing one does in college courses is a new task to them — they will make grammatical errors they do not make in other contexts. *Pounding grammatical correctness into such students will not solve their problem, because it is not grammatical knowledge but rhetorical know-how that they lack.* What they do not know is what counts as an interesting question, what counts as evidence about that question, and how the answer to one question leads one to entertain new questions that were not within one’s horizon before the first question had been answered. What such students need is not grammatical instruction but ways to sharpen their sense for interesting questions. The hard part is, that there is no perfectly reliable method for developing this sense, and in principle cannot be, for a large part of one’s sense of where interesting questions lie is one’s intuitive nose for the surprising (or counter-intuitive) turns an ongoing investigation can take. To discover a formula for generating new questions would be to stultify the asking of those questions, because interesting questions are always gifts and surprises; they are not available except to minds that have prepared themselves to receive them, but it is their essence not to appear on cue and not to have a shape one might have predicted at any time before one bumps up against them.

### 12 Conferences

The student conference is a required part of the University Writing Seminar, and indeed many students and instructors consider it the most important component. The current rule of thumb is that each student should have at least four 20-minute conferences per term.

The conference is a time for dialogue; think of it not as a time when you can tell students everything they need to know, but as a time when you can listen; this is the time when they can raise questions problems, ideas, about their own writing or about the seminar itself, to revise or explain what they have written or to speculate about what they plan to write. Remember, our job is not to tell students what is wrong with their writing, but to discover why students have written as they have and to show them how to go about expressing what they want to say more effectively.

The conference should not be merely the verbal equivalent of your written comments. And using conference time to go over a student’s paper sentence by sentence from beginning to end is not always the most productive and efficient way to spend your time together (unless, of course, such a close reading serves a specific purpose). Organize your own ideas about the student’s writing before the conference (you may use your comments on the student’s paper for this), establish your priorities, decide upon questions you can ask the
student. Where were you confused or misled as a reader? What problems have appeared before and seem to remain? How does the paper reflect the student’s understanding of the class discussion? Of the assignment? What does the paper do better than the previous one? What does it indicate is the student’s next step in improving his or her writing.

It’s a bad idea to have a student hand you a paper “cold” and sit there twiddling his or her thumbs while you read it. For one thing, it sets up a bad dynamic: find everything that’s the matter with this paper right now, or I will complain later when you don’t give me an A. For another thing, it forces you to comment upon the paper only in a sentence by sentence way, when what is usually wrong with such papers (particularly at the early stage of their evolution where you will be reading them “cold”) is some large scale problem with their formulation of a thesis. If they haven’t yet grasped the difference between a topic and a thesis, sentence by sentence correction of their writing won’t give them the help they need most. If they haven’t grasped the difference between a novel take on a text and repetition of the reigning commonplaces, sentence by sentence revision will improve their writing only marginally. Start by having them describe to you what they think the point of their paper is, and how they make their point, before you look at a word yourself.

A conference may be productive as a teaching session if it is spent going over one aspect of the student’s paper; the two of you may work together on one section. A student may bring to conference a revised section of the paper; during conference a student may be asked to correct grammatical errors or to do grammar exercises.

The first conference of the semester should be used to discover the student’s background in writing, his or her attitude toward writing and toward the course, what subject areas might be useful topics for essays. At this conference you can also explain what, on the basis of the diagnostic essays, a student should work on in writing.

Conferences may also be used to do the preliminary work “pre-writing” with a student; brainstorm with a student for a topic, develop a rough outline, and pose alternative organizational strategies. This will enable you to discover where in the process of preparing a paper a student needs help.

It is a good idea to have students write their own evaluations of their papers, which they can either submit with their paper or bring to conference. Such an evaluation might consist of just a few questions, such as:

1. What, in one sentence, is the central claim of this paper?
2. What was easiest to write in this paper? Where was it hardest going?
3. What are the chief strengths and weaknesses of this paper?
4. What about what you have written surprised you?

13 Evaluating Writing

1. Content Does the writer have something to say? Are there enough specifics and examples to enable you to understand what is important about what the author is saying? Does the writer have a well-defined and consistent purpose? Is the writers’s thesis and
framework clear to you? Is the subject interesting or relevant to the prospective audience? What evidence is used?

2. **Organization** What is the writer’s organizational strategy? Does it work with the writer’s purpose, undermine it, or seem unrelated or arbitrary? Does the essay seem choppy or confused? Does each paragraph follow from the one before it? Does the introduction work? Does the conclusion do more than summarize? Do any of the paragraphs seem out of place?

3. **Audience** Does the writer define an audience? Are the tone and focus of the essay consistent with a conception of an audience? What is the writer’s attitude toward the audience? What are the expectations the writer assumes the audience will share? How does the writer address, modify, or subvert those expectations? What kinds of promises has the author made to the reader in the opening paragraphs, and how are those promises met or modified?

4. **Tone** What is the author’s attitude toward the subject? Toward the reader? Is the tone consistent throughout the paper? Is it appropriate for this subject and purpose? Is the language clear and pleasant to read? Does the writer vary language and sentence structure? Is the vocabulary adequate for the subject?

5. **Mechanics** Are there errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation? Are any specific errors repeated so as to warrant extra grammar review? To what extent do these errors detract from the essay?

6. **Scope** Has the writer attempted a challenging subject and thesis? Are the writer’s assertions predictable or thought-provoking? Where does the writer settle for summarizing generally received opinions? Where could the essay be expanded? Where could it be condensed?

**Grading**

Grading will never be easy; there is no secret formula that will determine the students’ final grades. Any grade is a judgment, and you would not be teaching if you were not considered capable of exercising that judgment. It’s just important that you grade what both you and the student consider a finished piece of writing, and that both of you know why you are giving the particular grade.

Too often the hesitation to grade is the hesitation to affirm your real contractual relationship with the students. Part of our job is, after all, to evaluate our students’ work, honestly and fairly; if we evade that responsibility the students are likely to be unsure about their responsibility. Remember, no matter how many mistakes and false steps you point out in their work, you are kinder to them than any reader outside of academia will be, because unlike most readers they will deal with, you are concerned with making them better writers, and because you at least will read through to the end everything they have written, and will do your best to make sense of it without dismissing it. As anybody who has ever written a job letter knows, the fate of most writing is to be dismissed out of hand.

It is often easy to feel that if our students do not do well, if we have to give low grades, that we have failed. Remember that you are grading their work; what they have accomplished or not has been their doing.

In reading a paper to evaluate it, you must of course read it more than once; you should, if possible, recognize the “logic” of its errors, and see that the student was trying to do, in
addition to measuring where it fails. In the final analysis, however, you have to grade it on what it accomplishes, on how well it does what it sets out to do. It is ultimately dishonest to "read into" the paper in order to prove oneself sensitive and understanding. If a paper is confusing or boring, we should recognize why this is the case, but we must evaluate it as confusing and boring. If a paper requires several readings the student should be aware of this; we cannot grade a paper on what it "might have been," but on what it is.

Remember that many of our students are coming to Brandeis from positions at the top of their classes in high school; many of them received A's in writing and have been told how brilliant they are. They assume that they begin with an A and work down. The problems with this view should be obvious. The chief one is that it assumes that you have a fully formed paper in your mind beforehand, and it is the students' task to imitate that paper as closely as possible. Perhaps no question a student can ask you is as disheartening as "What do you want from this paper," if the student who asks it really means only "What mechanical set of rules can I follow if I want to get an A?" When students demand clarity from you in your writing assignments, they of course have a right to expect it. But a demand for clarity does not mean that you have to dumb down your papers or that you should assign your students either to repeat the class's party line or to go through the motions of writing a paper on a pre-formed theme. (Students sometimes arrive at college with half a dozen paper topics in their minds, studying the readings only in order to find something that might provide them for a jumping off place for a prefabricated theme.) A good assignment should demand enough novelty from students that you cannot tell them in advance just what you are looking for in the paper: you want them to say something that engages the ongoing themes of the class, but also to say something that it took them to say, something that might not have been said had they not said it but which also, in retrospect, is clearly something that should have been said. A good paper should be unpredictable enough to be novel without being so unpredictable as to be unintelligible. One good starting point would be to ask the student to imagine what would count as a good turn in a conversation with someone who has been through the class with him or her and has already done all the reading. What would interest such a reader has a good chance of being both intelligible and novel enough to please the instructor.

A lot of the uneasiness with grading may come from being unsure about your own criteria for grading. Read a lot of student essays just to get a sense of what's "good," and note for yourself what your priorities are for any given assignment. Think about grades only after that. Students have given mixed responses to the value of doing ungraded work: some say they put little or no effort into it, others say it gives them the opportunity to experiment. This does not discount the value of postponing grades, but it points to the fact that you need to be clear about the purposes for which you are using ungraded work.

Remember, if you are going to relax conventional structures (which has real value) you must compensate with other kinds of structures. If you are not going to grade every essay, or you are not going to give grades until midsemester or the end of the semester, you must give clear and detailed responses to students. Any student should be able to ask you at any point to compute his or her grade. Students can tell whether you are not grading simply because you don't know what criteria to use, and that undermines your entire effort. It's fine to educate students to care less about grades, but it's unfair to ignore their concerns
and values.

Some instructors simply list, in addition to their comments, at the bottom of a student’s essay those aspects of writing to be evaluated (i.e., organization, coherence, grammar, originality) and place a check, check-, or check+ after each one, so that the student knows where improvement has taken place. Again, use what tools you can to give students the most complete and helpful response possible.

**Marginal and Terminal Comments**

The comments you write on the margin of a paper are different in kind from the comments you write at the end, and the comments reflect two different roles. Richard Lanham describes the marginal commentator as the best kind of satirist. What he means by this is not that the marginal commentator should make fun of the author, but that the marginal commentator should bring the author to him or her self, pointing out where the author runs against his or her own best instincts by inflating diction, by passing over unexamined assumptions, by too obviously catering to what he or she assumes to be your prejudices, by mounting the Pegasus of private language and disappearing into the blue, and so on. It is of the utmost importance that these comments be written in the plainest style, for one of the temptations you must lead your students away from is the temptation to write in a “poetic” style which has nothing to do with the way their minds (or most other people’s) work but which they assume is how learned people sound. Your incomprehension is a powerful resource, and you should not hesitate to note where you fail to understand what the author is getting at. It is also important to imagine your comments as your half of a conversation, for one of the skills you are trying to impart is the ability to imagine how one’s readers are reacting to what one says, and the marginal comment is essentially a set of those reader responses which you are training your students as writers to anticipate.

Comments should, where possible, be complete sentences. It is also a good idea to avoid the special language of composition except where it is clear in context. Don’t just write “Faulty predication” write “Faulty predication: do elephants imply?” Finally, do not hesitate to write such things as “yes,” or “I understand” or “I had never thought of it this way before.” Writing differs from conversation in that (among other things) it has no “back-channel” no nods and winks and skeptical scratchings of the chin. Your comments are like the training wheels of a bicycle — you supply the “back-channel” until your students no longer need one.

If the marginal comment is like a satire, the final comment is like a sermon. It should always begin with some sort of summary of what you take the author’s main claim to be, and it should list each supporting claim, with the strengths and weaknesses of each. You should be tactful, but you should also be frank. Remember that however severe you may be, no reader will ever be so kind to your students again, for other readers will not take flawed work with your seriousness. You are also the one person whose job it is never to confuse “the author of a bad paper” with “a bad writer.” Those who read their job application letters may not correct their grammar, but they will think ill of them if they find their grammar faulty.

Terminal comments often begin with ritual praise before they pass on to criticism, and they often end with ritual praise to take the sting out as well. The formula might be summarized as “This paper is great, except that it’s really terrible, but it’s still great.” As
a form, this is as lifeless and as disingenuous as the “funnel opening” our students were taught to write in the sixth grade, that form which so often causes us to sigh and fix a cup of tea before going further with the paper. Our students are on to the fact that ritual praise is no more than that, so don’t expect it to fool them. It’s better to start with a relatively neutral description of what you understand the ambition of the paper to be.

One final note: red ink is for horror movies. Correct in blue or black or anything but red, unless you write in red ink always. Correcting in pencil gives you the freedom of changing your mind.

Papers that offend

Occasionally students will write papers that you think of as offensive, especially on fraught political topics, arguing something that seems not only far beyond the pale of things reasonable people can disagree about, but arguing it in a manner that seems designed not to persuade but to assault. It would be worth knowing whether a student who writes an offensive paper is doing it to pull one’s chain or whether the student intends seriously to argue for the position you find so hard to take. In either case, getting high and mighty about it would most likely be self-defeating, both politically and pedagogically.

Let’s assume the student S seriously intends an argument about position X, that teacher T finds deeply offensive. Rhetoric is chiefly a discipline about persuasion and opinion, which means that its domain of practice is the set of things about which reasonable persons may reasonably disagree. T should say to the student that it is his/her job to address T’s sensibility and to demonstrate that T is mistaken about X and can reasonably embrace X without a fatal sacrifice of T’s own values. T can fairly judge whether S has come to grips with T’s convictions in a faieminded way. (S, by the same token, can fairly judge whether T’s view of S’s convictions is a fair statement of them.) If S makes no effort to engage T’s convictions then S is not really engaging in persuasive rhetoric. If T hastily concludes that S is irrational or stupid or wicked, then T is also not engaging in persuasive rhetoric. T has more at stake in this conflict, since T is a teacher of rhetoric, and it is up to T to address S in a way which, however much T may disagree with S, nevertheless preserves the persuasive economy between them.

To put this less abstractly: if I blast a student because s/he says something I can’t imagine a decent person saying, I don’t make that student a decent person; rather, I persuade him/her that I will never give persons with that kind of conviction an even break. Doing that hardens that person in that conviction, which is certainly counterproductive as far as my role as a teacher is concerned.

It’s also important to see whether the student really means by that conviction what the teacher thinks he or she means. I say this because further conversation with such students often reveals that their claims are a little different from what they appear to be, or are illegitimate extensions of claims which within their limits are within the pale of legitimate disagreement. If I blow up, I foreclose the ability to find that out, and that student is lost to me pedagogically (and politically too, to the extent that that matters).

I say this because it is all too easy to blow up too early. Having a hair-trigger is one of the ways we impress each other with the depth of our own convictions. (And squeezing the hair trigger is sometimes a way of demonstrating before the world that our own convictions are less shaky than we inwardly know them to be.) In other words, we have all sorts of
incentives to blow up too early. Doing so enables us to play an impressive role on that high secret stage where we both sing the aria and applaud it from the expensive boxes. But we shouldn’t do so until we are really sure we have to, and that time is not soon.

I do not mean by this to deny that there are positions that are so far beyond the pale that we cannot reason with persons who seriously take them—if it matters, we must finally exchange blows, not arguments, with such persons. But such positions are far more rare than they might appear to be, and that is why in practice when faced with this it is important that you make an effort to see whether the student’s conviction really was what it appeared at first glance to be; in most cases, through defensiveness and the desire to appear resolute, the student was taking a harder line than s/he in fact believed in, and on our side sometimes we, through a similar defensiveness and a similar desire to appear resolute, also take a harder line than we in fact believe in.

14 Final Grades

Grading in a writing seminar forces us to confront issues that do not arise so obviously in other courses: how to moderate our own inevitable subjectivity; how much and how explicitly to incorporate improvement, participation and effort — none of which can be measured precisely — in the final grade; how to define precisely the criteria for a grade without being mechanistic or negative. It is a mistake to promise more precision in your syllabus than you can deliver in your grading. (One vague but useful rule of thumb to use for an end-of-term grade might be: give the grade which will least surprise the next professor who reads that student’s writing.) Grading inevitably — and usefully — requires that you regularly address the purpose and objectives of your seminar.

Beware giving grades as “gifts”; we do want to show students that they have improved, but that is sometimes best shown in comments rather than in grades. If you give a student a “gift” of a B+, chances are s/he will wonder why s/he didn’t receive an A-. We all, of course, inflate or deflate grades in a small way to register improvement or lack of it, but since so much of our evaluation can’t be quantitative — and students know this — we need to be as precise as possible in our explanations and responses to students. At base it’s a question of trust — they need to know that you are being fair and consistent in your judgment.

The following are several different grading systems. Students do not seem to prefer one over the other as long as they know the reason for it and the instructor is consistent:

1. Grade each paper each week, beginning with the first or second assignment. Weight the grades at the end of the semester more than those at the beginning. This method has the advantage of giving students continual information about their work; it has the disadvantage of making early grades somewhat artificial and of making students very conscious of their grades, seeing you only as an evaluator rather than as a consultant.

2. Begin grading each weekly paper only at midsemester or after three or four weeks, by which time students can be held responsible for the principles of writing, and
they know their audience and what is expected of them. Some instructors grade only the last three of four papers; the advantage of this is that students concentrate on improvement rather than on grades; the disadvantage is that they are sometimes misled as to where they stand and feel that they have no time at the end of the semester to improve.

3. Grade only revisions. This can be done in a number of ways:

(a) assign a revision every third or fourth week which is graded;
(b) ask students to submit a set of papers at midterm and final time;
(c) treat each weekly essay as a rough draft and each bi-weekly essay as a revision that is graded.
(d) all papers during the term are considered drafts. Students compile a portfolio of final drafts for a grade at the end of the term (there is an extensive literature about portfolio grading, which has indeed become popular in writing programs everywhere).

No instructor likes to fail a student, but remember it is the student who fails. The nature of a writing seminar is such that if a student does not complete the work on an ongoing basis, s/he cannot pass the course. If you feel that there have been mitigating circumstances for missed work, and that the student should be allowed to make up the work, write out the terms of your agreement for your records and for me. If a student misses more than two sessions, you should fill out a report about that student and send it to the office of Academic Affairs. If you have any questions, please feel free to see me about it.