

Week Two: Exploratory Writing--The First Draft

Introduction

The essays in *The New Humanities Reader* are exploratory—they use writing as a way to investigate and then evaluate a variety of perspectives on a specific theme or idea. We believe that the essays you write in response should be equally exploratory. So, we invite you to think of your own writing as an opportunity to work on and to work out your own ways of thinking about the issues under consideration. We encourage you to set yourself the goal of using your writing to explain *how* and *why* you have reached a particular position on the issues addressed.

We recognize that, for most people, there's nothing “natural” about responding to reading by writing. We don't know anyone, for example, who, after reading the morning paper or a magazine, feels compelled to produce a series of five-page essays about what they've read. In most every reading situation, both inside and outside the academy, reading is followed by silence or by discussion or by an examination, but not by writing. Given this, it's reasonable enough to wonder why colleges and universities require their students to master the activity of writing cogent essays on demand.

If you think of the essay as nothing more than a place for you to repeat what you've read—as a kind of slow motion and rather inexact form of xeroxing, then it is hard to see the point of writing after reading. If, though, you think of the essay as a place where you work out your own thoughts in relation to the ideas and issues that are raised by what you've read, the central importance of learning how to write essays becomes clear: the essay provides the arena where you have the opportunity to make your education your own.

Making sense of the assignment question: “Working with the Readings” versus “Saying What the Teacher Wants to Hear”

The assignment question is what sets in motion the process of responding to reading by writing, so it is particularly important that you devote time to reading the assignment creatively. In our experience, we've seen that, for good reasons, most students treat assignments as requests to “say what the teacher wants to hear.” When assignments are read in this way, your job becomes a mixture of guessing at your teacher's hidden motives and trying to parrot what you think your teacher wants to hear. In order to make better use of the assignment question, though, we recommend that you read the assignment not as a request for you to *say* something in particular that you think your teacher wants to hear (e.g. “biotechnology is bad” or, conversely, “biotechnology is good”), but rather as a request for you to *do* something in particular—that is, to do a particular *kind of work* with the assigned readings and with your own thoughts and responses to the assigned readings. You should think of assignments, in other words, as freeing you to say whatever you please, so long as you *do* what is required with the assigned readings.

To read an assignment question in this way, we recommend that you first identify the different parts of the assignment, the kinds of questions asked, and the key ideas you are being asked to focus on. Below is a sample first essay assignment for Michael Pollan's “Playing God in the Garden”:

In “Playing God in the Garden,” Michael Pollan discusses the impact of biotechnology upon several constituencies, including traditional and organic potato farmers, producers of biotech products, and American and foreign consumers. Each of these constituencies has different ideas about how biotechnology should be used; often these claims are in direct competition with one another. The difficulty of mediating among these competing ideas stems from the differences between the industrial and ecological paradigms used by each group.

Using direct quotes and examples from Pollan’s essay, develop a methodology for addressing these competing interests in the uses of biotechnology. What criteria should be used to determine how biotechnology is deployed? Why should these criteria be used? How would you prioritize these criteria and why? How would the major constituencies identified by Pollan be affected by these methods of decision-making?

Notice that this assignment has two parts: the introduction and the set of questions to be addressed. The introduction can give you important clues to the context and parts of the essay you are being asked to focus on. In this example, the introduction points you toward the sections of the text that identify how different groups believe biotechnology should be used. The introduction also asks you to make a distinction between “industrial” and “ecological” paradigms, so to do a good job with this assignment you will have to define what these “paradigms” are. Thus, the introduction lays down the ground rules you need to follow in constructing your response. In the assignment above, you are being told that, before you begin writing, you need to be able to identify the different approaches to biotechnology Pollan discusses and you need to be able to explain why the industrial and the ecological approaches to biotechnology are in conflict.

The second part of the assignment—the set of questions—describes what it is you are supposed to do after you’ve met the conditions established in the introduction. In this case, you are being asked to think about “criteria” you would use for determining appropriate uses of biotechnology. Given the guidelines laid out in the introduction, one good way to begin your investigation of the appropriate criteria would be by looking at the needs of the different groups listed in the introduction. You might also start by examining the criteria associated with the industrial and ecological paradigms.

While not all of your assignments will take this particular form, all of your assignments are best read in this way: not as an invitation to repeat the author’s position (e.g., “Pollan has reservations about biotechnology.”) nor to reproduce what you believe the teacher wants you to say about the assigned readings (e.g., “Well, she assigned Pollan, so she must think he’s right, which means I have to write a paper that says Pollan is a genius.”), but rather as a request that you do a certain kind of work with the assigned reading--work that involves *using* the assigned reading to help you develop your own thoughts about the issues raised by the reading.

After you've read the assignment: Developing a position/planning your draft

A position is a provisional claim you make about the relationships between the issues raised by the assigned readings and by the assignment. Your position is *provisional* because your claim may change as you write and work through your ideas. A position establishes a *relationship*; it addresses the questions of *how* and *why* ideas and events affect one another. We recommend that you try the following techniques to develop a position for your first draft:

- 1) Make a list of the key concepts emphasized in the assignment question. Define those concepts in your own words.
- 2) Rewrite the assignment in your own terms, making certain that it includes the key concepts from your list. What, exactly, is it that you are being asked to do? What ideas are you being asked to connect? What relationships are you being asked to consider?
- 3) Make a list of the passages in the text where each concept is addressed.
- 4) For each concept, consider the following set of questions:
 - Who adheres to that concept/position and why?
 - How does the concept change when it is moved to a different context?
 - How and why is the idea related to other concepts in the essay?
 - How do you evaluate the concept? Does it usefully explain the situation addressed in the essay? How would you modify the idea?
- 5) Develop a preliminary position statement that explains your initial response to the assignment question.
- 6) Develop a preliminary outline focusing on the places in the assigned reading that have served to define, add to, or alter the ideas that shape your position.
- 7) Generate a list of questions that you anticipate being raised about your position. Which of these questions are the most challenging for you to answer? Which are the most important ones? Which questions lead to further discussion and insight?

Writing your draft

- Make sure you schedule a substantial amount of time for drafting your essay. A good rule of thumb is to allow at least one hour per page. Writing is hard work, so you should break up your writing time into separate sessions.

- Be sure to include direct quotations from the assigned reading(s). Explain each passage by defining the concepts it introduces, interpreting its meaning, and identifying how that meaning supports or challenges your position.

Revising your draft

Although this is only your first draft, the more work you do on this draft, the better your paper will be in subsequent drafts. Use the following suggestions to focus and revise your first draft:

- As you re-read, check to see if your position changes as your paper progresses. Is your position more complex and nuanced by the end of your paper or have you used your paper to repeat and maintain your position throughout? Can your introduction be revised to prepare your readers for the evolution of your position over the course of your paper?
- Look for gaps in your reasoning and add paragraphs to address those gaps.
- Are there any paragraphs that now seem irrelevant to your position or simply repetitive of your position? Cut those paragraphs to make room for developing your position further.
- Are there any new ideas or perspectives you need to take into account? Are there places where your essay might be more ambitious? Where it might tackle a more difficult piece of the assigned reading or respond to objections that might be raised about your own argument?

Conclusion

In order to write a solid first draft you must do the following:

1. Read the assignment creatively and see it as an invitation to do a certain kind of work rather than a request to repeat what the author has said or what the teacher might be perceived as wanting to hear.
2. Develop a position in response to the assigned readings.