Resource for TAs in the Arts – Resources and Lesson Ideas to Improve Student Writing Skills.
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Context:
This is my second year as a T.A. for first year music classes: MUSI 1520- Contemporary Black Urban Music and now MUSI 1200- Music and Cultures. After marking essays, leading tutorials, and having discussions with Professors and fellow T.A.s, I have determined that there is a need for a ‘starting point’ resource targeted at teaching writing skills to undergraduate arts students. Prior to my role as a TA at York, I worked for fifteen years as an elementary and secondary teacher with the Durham District School Board. In my experience, students have difficulty competently expressing their ideas in writing, and writing skills are seldom specifically targeted and taught.

Many first-year students are following the ‘hamburger’ model for essay writing that they learned back in elementary school, and trying to apply this to university level papers. The ‘hamburger model’ is frequently used to introduce middle-school students to essay writing: the introduction and conclusion are the buns, and the three body paragraphs are the meat, cheese-lettuce-tomato-pickle-additions, and the condiments. The introduction and conclusion are virtually identical: here’s what I’m going to do, and look I’ve done it. It works well in grades six to eight as one of the “variety of forms” of writing the students are expected to learn according to the Ontario Curriculum. But, applying this simplistic formula to academic writing doesn’t work. For me, the biggest challenge in helping students move beyond this model was in teaching them how to make their introduction and conclusion function differently and independently in their writing.

In general I have found that students are not well-equipped to write in a variety of different styles, depending on the purpose of the paper or assignment, and in particular are not sure how to conceive of a piece of writing that analyzes a musical example or concept. I suspect the same might be true of visual art, theatre or literature students. Students would benefit from learning to read scholarly texts as examples of good writing, and therefore as models for their own writing. With this resource my goal is to provide some suggestions for TAs for how to improve writing skills in their students. I have listed some resources available through York U, included some links to other resources, and suggested some lesson plan ideas and tutorial activities which target improvement of writing skills.

Resources:
Learning Commons – This is the ‘umbrella group’ for all workshops and services related to students’ academic skill development, located in Scott Library, 2nd floor. Students can attend workshops on a specific topic, they can make an appointment to work one-on-one with a tutor to edit a piece of writing prior to handing it in as course work, and TAs in consolidation with their profs can bring a group of students to the Learning Commons for a workshop which targets skills specific to your course content. I discovered that if you ask questions about the services provided, they are very helpful and accommodating to individual needs. http://learningcommons.yorku.ca/

The Learning Commons also has online resources you can access without going to the Scott Library in-person.
SPARK – online tutorial offering step-by-step instruction in writing a paper
http://www.yorku.ca/spark/

Writing Centre – workshops, one-on-one writing support, online writing support
http://writing-centre.writ.laps.yorku.ca/

Learning Skills services – workshops, drop-ins, one-on-one session for study skills, critical thinking skills, time management, goal setting, etc.
http://lss.info.yorku.ca/

Other resources are also available. For example,

SMIL – The Sound and moving image library provides access to films and recordings to use here or borrow. You can order recordings and digital media from other libraries. There is a conference room available for group screenings of films – you could bring your tutorial to SMIL to watch a related film together. The music librarian is Rob van der Bliek. This is located in Scott Library, first floor beside the escalators.
http://www.library.yorku.ca/web/smil/

York U research guides – http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/content.php?pid=220564
Note: the link to the film critique writing guide doesn’t work from the York U site, so here is an alternate resource on writing in this style - http://www.wcu.edu/Book_film_critique_REVISED.pdf
This is a valuable collection of online resources and guides on how to write different types of academic papers. In other words, these are online guides for how to structure a specific form of writing. There are also resources on how to cite sources and create a bibliography as well as style guide for how to write about a particular academic discipline such as fine arts, humanities, social sciences, etc.

From the home page, go to the heading ‘Writing and Citing’ to find ‘Academic Writing Guide’. From there you can choose the tab to learn about a specific type of writing. Examples of this include compare & contrast essays; reflective writing; research essays; literature reviews’ and reviews & critiques. Students can find an explanation of the parameters and requirements for different types of writing, as well as guides for how to produce each of them.

I found that coming out of high school students do not necessarily have experience writing for a variety of academic purposes. Mostly, they have written pseudo-thesis essays where they find three character traits and give evidence from the novel to support their claim, or describe three events in history with historical background facts to support their ideas. Critical thinking skills and students’ creative use of information are lacking because students have been taught to write following a set formula with a pre-determined check list rubric. So, they feel that if they include all the items in the rubric, they will achieve a ‘Level 4’ or an ‘A’ grade.

In general, my first year students thought that critical thinking meant they could tell me what they thought about the material by comparing it to their own experiences. They were not able to gather information, viewpoints and scholarly claims on a topic, and then consolidate this information to craft an argument.

In response to the areas of weakness, common errors and gaps in student knowledge I have seen, I created a list of eight activities I used in tutorial to help improve some aspects of writing skills. Time is of the essence, and we often have so much content to deal with, there is not time for skills development. However, if we do
not address the issues in writing, students will continue to struggle and make the same errors throughout course of their degree. I’m not suggesting that you make it a mission to work on writing skills every week, but maybe you will find one thing to try which ‘fits in’ to your tutorial schedule.

Lessons and Activities:

1) **The ‘One-Sentence-Summary’**. To begin the tutorial, have students work in pairs or triads to review their lecture notes, and discuss what they feel was the main theme of the lecture. Each group will share the ‘one sentence’ they have created to summarize their notes and discussion of the lecture. You may wish to write and display these on the data projector. After each group has shared their sentence, allow time for whole group discussion to clarify and elaborate. In essence, you are asking students to review their ‘data’ and decide what they feel the professor’s thesis was for the lecture.

2) **Mock Exam Question**. Work with fellow T.A.s or with your professor to create 3 possible long answer exam questions. Allow class time during tutorial for students to write their responses to one question of their choice following the same format as the required in the exam – hand written if required, same time allowed, etc. Mark and return, allowing time for questions, clarification and discussion. This will allow you to see trends, strengths and areas of weakness in their writing, and will allow students to improve prior to evaluation. Use this as a practice run before the mid-term and/or final exam.

3) **Abstract writing**. Use one article or reading from the course reading list. Instruct students to read ahead of time so they are familiar with content. Following a brief and general whole group discussion about the reading have students work in small groups to extract the key arguments, findings or conclusions. Share in whole group. Return to small groups to create a 200 word abstract/summary of the reading. Share abstracts with other groups. You might suggest that students might wish to create an abstract on their essay topic before they write the paper, especially if they are having trouble getting started, if their paper is too long, or if they are having difficulty narrowing the topic down into manageable sub-topics.

4) **Debate Notes**. Whether you engage your students in a form of the ‘for and against’ debate, or an inner circle-outer circle debate, or some variation, having students create notes for each section of the debate is an effective way to gather facts to form an argument. Debate notes will include a list of arguments and the process of developing an argument, and are therefore easily transferrable into a thesis paper.

5) **Editing Carousel**. Have students prepare a short piece of writing to bring to class, for example a film/book/article review on a required text. Set up a 4 person circle. Following an explanation describing each role, each person will edit for a different specific purpose for example: spelling and grammar; references and content; sources and citations; coherence and voice. Often students don’t know what to look for, or how to be helpful as a peer editor. Here, you have given them four ways to edit, which they can also apply to editing their own work. You can change the editing criteria to reflect your students’ needs. Alternately, students can create the writing together in class, each person adding a paragraph to create one finished film review. Then trade to read writing created in other groups.
6) **AMS. Aim. Method. Scope.** Thinking about a writing project in these terms can help students plan, research and structure a paper. Do a ten minute mini-lesson explaining these terms, then have students apply it to a reading from course material. Reading good writing, and understanding the elements of good writing helps students become better writers themselves.

**Aim** – goal, purpose, what are you trying to say/accomplish, what’s new, basis of inquiry

**Method** – style of writing (book review, personal narrative, comparison, thesis, lit.review, analysis, response journal); research and how to use it, primary, secondary and tertiary resources; citation format

**Scope** – lens, range, time period, context, situate in a particular discipline

7) **5 W’s + H.** Use these questions as an outline for writing, and/or as a planning tool. Suggest to students that they need a clear idea of their own answers to these questions before they start writing.

**Who:** who you’re writing about – biographical info; who else has written on topic – lit. review, who is your audience?

**What:** clearly defined topic. Scope of research, parameters of topic. Manageable and specific

**When:** socio-historic context, genre and/or era of music/art/literature/media being discussed, when in the author/artist’s career or cannon?

**Where:** regional styles, dialects, geographic, economic, ideologies – ist, ic, ism, ology – where does this topic ‘sit’ in academia?

**Why:** importance, purpose, so what and now what?

**How:** methodology, form of writing, conventions, citations.

8) **Top 10 List.** Use lecture notes, or one reading from the course reading list. Have students work in pairs to create a list of the ten most important terms from that source. Stop there, you’ve done a great consolidation, or … Next have students write a short definition for each term. Stop there, or … Either in class, or as an assignment, ask students to create a short piece of writing (two or three paragraphs) which includes all ten terms. You have asked them to extract, consolidate and reconstruct information with this activity.

Additional References:


Total Participation Techniques, strategies for student engagement