

Breaking papers down into parts:

Active learning and writing in the first-year Western Civ survey

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The Problem:

Incoming first-year students are not always well prepared in terms of the expectations for college-level writing. Assigning papers in first-year survey courses can potentially overwhelm students uncertain of the analytical and writing expectations

The Context:

Hampden-Sydney requires all students take three-semesters of Western Culture, and each semester must include twelve pages of writing. Like many other instructors, I assigned first-semester freshmen two six-page papers. In student feedback, students noted that they were uncertain how the stated expectations (analyzing a text) fit the expectations for papers. In other words, the expectations of writing level were not clear.

Seeking a Solution:

To address this, I introduced six “writing workshop” assignments. Each assignment wasn’t a *paper*, but the “parts” of a paper. The first assignment, for example, has five sections that separately ask the student to engage vocabulary of the reading; to summarize the text; to paraphrase a paragraph; to closely read a passage; and to find points that would support a specific thesis I provide.

These skills correspond to elements of Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy (below), with “lower order” skills introduced first. As students gain confidence and ability, later assignments introduce new skills (see the curricular map, bottom).

This assignment structure offers several advantages:

- Feedback can be given separately on each section;
- Feedback is specific to each skill, allowing students to see clearly areas of strength and weakness;
- Easier assessment of class performance regarding specific skills;
- Easier adjustment of assignments (e.g., continuing or curtailing sections calling for specific skills);
- Students can more easily draw links between skills in this assignment and the writing they do in the rhetoric courses in the core curriculum.

Category in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy	Skills emphasized in assignments
Creating	
Evaluating	Evaluation of a text Applying a text's ideas
Analyzing	Close reading Using texts to support argument
Applying	Paraphrasing Summarizing
Understanding	Reading for vocabulary
Remembering	

Results

First-year students have found the structure and expectations for the revised assignments easier to understand. Similarly, they seem more receptive to feedback focused on the discrete skills as opposed to the more holistic feedback I give on a six-page paper.

Although teaching “parts of a paper” is not a replacement for formal paper assignments in writing across the curriculum, it provides a way to introduce first-year students to writing expectations and complement first-year writing programs. It can be implemented in any suitable class by identifying the skills desired, mapping

Workshop assignments: Curricular map in WCUL 101

	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Sixth
Application	Application	Application	Application	Application		
Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Application		
Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Analysis	Evaluation
Paraphrase	Paraphrase	Paraphrase	Paraphrase	Analysis	Application	Analysis
Summary	Summary	Summary	Summary	Paraphrase	Analysis	Analysis

how these skills should be developed over the semester, and structuring multiple assignments to focus student attention on the “parts of a paper.” A sample of such is on the reverse (from WCUL 101 in Fall 2013).

Appendix I:

Fifth Writing Assignment (20 points)

Due: Monday, November 18, *in class*

Your fifth writing assignment is due, in class, on Monday, November 18 at the start of class; e.g., it should be turned in *before I take roll*. Your assignment must be typed and printed; I will not accept handwritten or electronic copies. (I have been generous on the latter; I will *not* accept them for the fifth assignment except in the case of extensions).

Formatting

- Margins should be 1" on all sides.
- Do *not* add an additional space between paragraphs.
- You must have typed page numbers.
- Label each answer. Your summary should be labeled as "A," your paraphrased paragraph as "B," and so forth. For C, D and E, number these as well. (So C1, C2, C3, C4, D1, etc.)
- Double-space.
- You must label your assignment.
- You must staple your pages.

Rhetoric

Review and examine your paper for writing errors. Review *carefully* for the "Seven Deadly Mistakes."

A) Close Reading of a text. (4 points).

Read carefully Book I, Title I and Book I, Title II (pages 1-3) of the *Visigothic Code*, which set out the nature of "lawmakers" and "the laws." In not less than 100 words, explain what *problems* this section of the text suggests exist in Visigothic society. In other words, by explaining how things *should* be, what does the text reveal about the ways things *were*? Give no fewer than three specific references to the text in making your argument, and possibly more as needed or useful. (Cite by page and paragraph number: e.g., 1-V for the fifth entry on page 1).

B) Application (7 points).

You are informed that an inebriated Hampden-Sydney Burgundian student* engaged another student in fisticuffs during a Saturday night party on the hill. Prepare a report (of not less than 200 words and no more than 250) for the Dean of Students, informing him what laws of the Burgundian Code are most relevant to the issue at hand; cite in your report the five most important possible laws that may have been broken, how they relate to the case, and specific points which the Dean should investigate (e.g., "did animals cause any injuries during the brawl.") You are aware you do not have all information at hand, so you may wish to point to laws that were *potentially* broken by the events at hand; be judicious in this. (Cite by page number and law number; e.g., injuries caused by animals is 39-XXIII).

C) Analysis (9 points)

In not less than 300 words, respond to the following prompt. "What are the root principles that define justice in the *Visigothic Code*, and how do these compare to the root principles in the *Burgundian Code*?" This should be a formal essay, with a title, a strong and original thesis and supporting paragraphs. *Hint: think about how the concepts of justice, proof, restitution and criminal punishment, among others, are defined in the respective documents. Use the class discussion to tease out these concepts this week.* (Use the citation styles specified above for *Visigothic Code* and *Burgundian Code*.)

* Above 21 years of age, of course.