Tools for Structuring FreshmanComposition: Peer Writing Groups, Analysis Sheets, and Critical Questionnaires

by

Greta Gaard

: the last decade, composition journals have prominently featured
:les on theory, demoting the pragmatic, "how-to" articles to the back
:s. And while scholars' reputations and tenure depend on writing for
front pages, it is to the back pages that most novice composition
ructors and graduate students turn when faced with teaching their
Introductory Composition course. In fact, it is these people - the
-timers and the graduate students - who do most of the teaching in
ıer education. In *Tyrannical Machines* (1990), Lynne Cheney, Chair
ıe National Endowment for the Humanities, cites a 1989 walkout of
hing assistants at the University of California at Berkeley, which
ed down nearly 75% of classes. So in the "race for theory," the losers
those who carry the bulk of the teaching, with the least amount of
ance. This article takes those teachers as its primary audience, and
oses to present a plan for teaching Introductory composition - a plan
:h, though it is the result of recent advances in composition theory,
lls rather on the practical strategies of teaching. These strategies
: been implemented during the last ten years in Composition classes
ın Minnesota: at the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis and St.
l campuses, at Augsburg and at Hamline colleges, and at Inver Hills
ımunity College.

result of teaching composition at these Minnesota colleges, I have
ıd that audience is the most important concept college freshmen
l to learn in their first-year writing class, and thus I set this single
:ept as my primary goal in teaching freshman composition. To
municate the concept of audience, I have found these three tools to
he most effective of the many I have tried: peer writing groups,
ysis sheets, and critical questionnaires. In addition, as Peter Elbow
gests (*Writing Without Teachers* NY: Oxford University Press, 1973),
:r my own writing process as one example of these tools in action.

· *Writing Groups*

basis strategy I use in freshman composition to communicate and
:tice concepts of audience is the peer writing group or conference
ıp. There are a number of ways to establish a conference group, and
ıgh you can ask students to select their own groups at random, I find that making conscious choices about the constitution of writing groups based on the students' writing styles, writing techniques, writing structures, syntactic abilities, or some combination of the preceding, allows me to create groups with the greatest likelihood of success (see Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing,* 2nd ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985). I prefer groups of four, and not less than three, because this number is large enough to provide students with a diverse sense of audience, yet small enough to remain efficient in the weekly peer review of drafts.

On the first day of class, I ask students to take fifteen minutes and "fill a page," telling me three things:

- what kinds of writing they have done in the past;
- what strengths and difficulties they see in their own writing; and
- what skills they hope to obtain from this class.

In this way, I obtain a writing sample in which students both tell me their writing abilities as well as demonstrate them. I find that students are not self-conscious in this kind of assignment; the focus stays on what they are saying, so that how they are saying it becomes automatic. I then am offered a realistic assessment of where I need to begin with each student writer.

When I read these essays, I categorize them in four different groups, which I have found to be the most helpful:

- articulate - fills the page (or more), has little difficulty finding things to say, may need some structure for writing;
- structured - organizes the essay exactly according to the information requested, may be too brief as a result of over-control;
- alienated - reports that all writing has been assigned, and as a result finds little to say;
- grammar trouble - may have difficulty with comma splices and sentence fragments, usually essay is very brief.

I then establish peer writing groups composed of one writer from each of the four categories. In this way, I find that students will be able to draw from each other's writing strengths, and will offer diverse kinds of feedback on each writing draft.

The Analysis Sheet

The second technique I introduce at the beginning of the term is the analysis sheet, an analysis of the writing situation which I derived from Maxine Hairston's *Successful Writing* (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981). This sheet has four elements which the students must describe for each essay they produce:

udience - who is my audience? do I have one kind of reader, or veral? what do my readers already know about the topic? what nd of language can I use that reflects their experience, and yet does ot exclude them?
urpose - why am I writing? what do I want my readers to do after ey have read my essay?
ersona - who am I in this essay? what voice, what image of myself I want to portray?
essage - what am I saying in this essay? in one sentence, what do want my readers to know from reading this essay?

nalysis sheet reflects the goals students have set for themselves in essay, and the feedback students receive is based on how well they achieved their own goals. In this way, the writing process is ored in the students' own needs, and they see themselves as more sted in learning effective writing strategies.

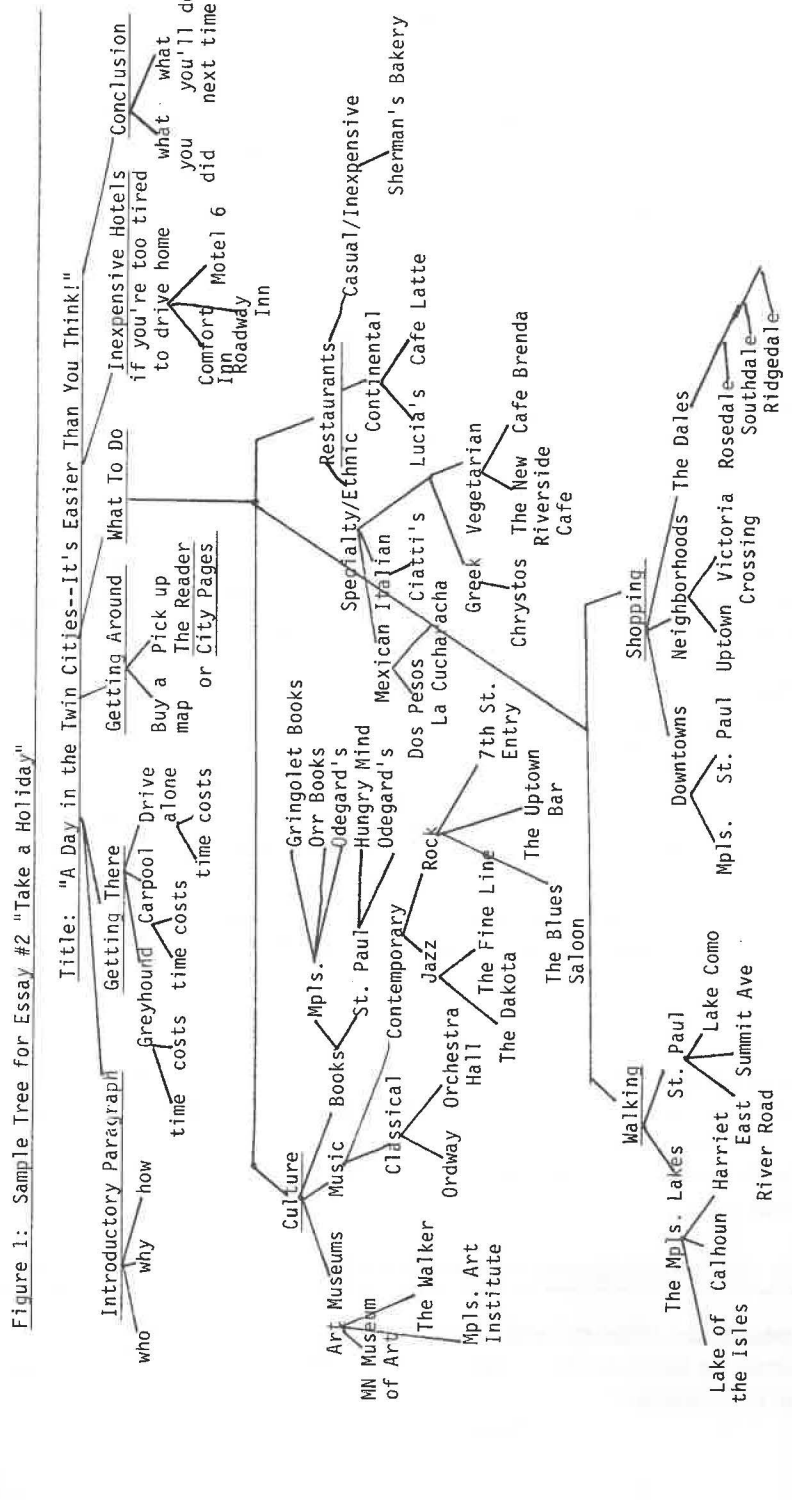
eling Invention

her item I request of students with each rough draft is their "tree" e essay. Like "clustering" or "mapping" (respectively, see Steven elman & Harvey Daniels, *A Community of Writers,* Portsmouth, NH: enmann, 1988; Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*), ing" is a less structured method of outlining (see Figure 1 on next). For every essay assigned, I work a sample topic through the four tions of the analysis sheet and then create a tree on the blackboard the help of the students. Questions as simple as "what do the ers want to know?" and "what is most important to them?" allow ents to list and then prioritize the various branches of the tree. The conference questionnaires ask student readers to draw a tree of the r's essay as it is presently, and then draw another tree for another ible audience. Students looking at a tree can more readily view the epts at work in a writer's essay, and make suggestions for elaboration or revision.

ing" topics with my beginning composition students has been an uable technique for me. As one student told me, "I've seen math ers figure out problems on the board, but I've never seen a writing er think out an essay before." By opening up the actual processes vention, teachers can model the creative process for their students.

ng Assignments

en-week quarter, I bring students through five essay assignments, essively structured in difficulty and kind. I think this is the most le section of the package that I offer here; teachers may tailor the s to their own styles. I continue to use these topics because they



destruct": that is, as soon as the student begins to think about ıg, the topic assigned has served to point them in a direction rather make a choice for them. The real topic choice remains with the ent. These, then, are the topics for their essays:

)efend Your Profession" requires students to pick a profession and form and persuade high school students that this may be the ofession for them, based on education and experience needed as eparation, earning potential, and the typical workday of a person that profession.

Take a Holiday" asks students to persuade the audience of their ıoice to take a vacation someplace that student has visited, taking to consideration the cost, travel arrangements, accommodations, ıtertainment, and activities offered on such a trip.

he Critical Review" is an essay in which students appraise an event, place, or an experience of their choice for a specific audience. In this ssay, students also select what kind of publication would serve as vehicle for conveying their essay to their chosen audience.

resent Your Argument" is a version of the standard research paper, oken down in to the stages of expressing your own opinion (draft 1), reporting on their opinions of others (draft #2), incorporating ur opinion into the context of others, and using facts to advance ur theses (drafts #3 and #4).

Writing About Literature" is an essay for which the entire class reads ıe same novel, and after several class periods of discussion, students elect their own themes to address.

Final Exam, which is a requirement at our university, is a critical w of another student's research paper. When students submit the draft of their research papers, I ask for two copies. I then remove ıames from the second copy and set them aside to be redistributed he final exam. I also make a copy of each student's final exam, ving the names, and return the review to the original research r's author as a final piece of feedback from this course.

schedule ensures that, once the quarter is underway, students are ys engaged in several different types of writing tasks: invention, ion, or peer review. Though at first students believe this schedule e overwhelming, in practice they find it helps them write: if they are ked in one particular kind of writing, they can simply switch over to her type.

2: *Conference Questionnaire for Essay #1, "Defend Your Profession"*

ook at the title; did you like it? Did it catch your attention? Did it orrectly forecast the paper's topic? What suggestions do you have or its revision?

(Continued Next Page)

2. Briefly summarize your understanding of what this paper is about - that is, what does the purpose of the paper seem to be to you, the reader? Do not consider the writer's analysis sheet when answering this question.
3. Based on the purpose you've stated in answer #2, do you think the essay is organized in the best way to support that purpose? In order to answer this question, sketch out your perceptions of this writer's tree for the essay. Would you suggest any changes?
4. Now, consider the writer's analysis sheet. Do you think the paper addresses the audience it plans to address? Is the message clearly communicated in the essay? Is the persona suited to the audience? What could you tell about the writer's persona, just from reading the essay?
5. Mark with a number 5 the parts of the draft you felt were most convincing. Why did you like these parts?
6. Mark with a number 6 any parts of the draft where you were confused while reading, did not understand the writer's meaning, or thought the writer needed to give you more details or information in order to be convincing. What would help to improve these parts?
7. Based on your comments to questions 1-6, and any other responses you have to the paper's organization, make concrete, specific suggestions for revision.

Peer Conferences

These conferences always take place during class, and usually require approximately 30 minutes minimum, or between five and ten minutes per paper. Part of the learning in freshman composition involves training students to critique various texts, provide specific feedback, and offer suggestions for improvement. Students may have a reaction to a text, but be unable to articulate that reaction because they do not have the language to do so. Accordingly, I provide students with a conference questionnaire for each essay draft. Students receive these questionnaires when they exchange rough drafts, and must come to conferences having read one another's essays and answered a questionnaire for each paper. These questionnaires invite increasing levels of critical thinking, beginning with fairly simple questions, and progressing with each essay to more sophisticated kinds of analysis and feedback. In figures 2-5, I have listed the questions from each conference questionnaire for the first four of the five essay assignments.

Fig. 3: Conference Questionnaire for Essay 2, "Take a Holiday"

1. Does the title catch your attention? Does it adequately state a topic? What suggestions do you have for its revision?

(Continued Next Page)

ead the opening paragraph. Does it conform to the requirements
e've set? Is it unified? Does it develop from general to specific? Does
ne first sentence grab attention? (You may want to state whether or
ot you believe you are the intended audience, but don't refer to the
nalysis sheet yet.) Is the last sentence of the paragraph the thesis
entence, and does it adequately lead in to the essay? Overall, does
he opening paragraph create a need in the reader to read the essay?
Jow look at the concluding paragraph. Does it match the opening
aragraph in tone/idea/image? Does it seem to offer a fair summary
f what the essay is about? Is the thesis echoed, but not repeated
vord for word? Offer suggestions for improvement.
ow you may read the body of the essay. On the left of each paragraph,
riefly note the main idea of that paragraph. If there are any
entences in a paragraph that do not seem to be about the main idea,
ircle those sentences. Should they go somewhere else in the essay?
Should they be developed into a paragraph of their own? Or should
hey be more smoothly integrated into the paragraph in which they
urrently appear?
fter reading the essay, consider the writer's analysis sheet. Does the
ssay address the audience which the writer intended? Does the
ssay address the needs of the reader or does it focus on the place/
opic instead? That is, is the essay reader-based, or writer-based?
Would someone be able to use this essay to plan a trip?
Mark with a number 6 the parts of the draft you felt were most
onvincing. What is the writer doing in these parts that really works
or her/him?
Mark with a number 7 any parts of the draft where you were confused
while reading, did not like the writer's persona, or thought the writer
needed to give you more information in order to be convincing. What
would help to improve these parts?

---

le the questionnaire for essay #1 (Figure 2) asks fairly simple
stions about the essay's title, content, and organization, the ques-
naire for essay #2 (Figure 3) asks additional questions about the
ucture and effectiveness of the opening and concluding paragraphs.
questionnaire for essay #3 (Figure 4) is even more detailed in its
stions on organization and paragraph unity. By the time they write
ay #4, students understand the fundamentals of writing and are
pared to think about the differences between reporting and research,
uments and rants - topics which are addressed in conference
stionnaire #4.

h the help of these conference questionnaires, students benefit as
h writers and as readers. In each case, the writer benefits from having a real audience give immediate feedback; as the quarter progresses, writers begin to internalize the various viewpoints of their peer group members. In this sense, the peer group members serve as co-writers, editors, readers, and idea generators for each other. As readers in a peer group, students gain by developing critical thinking skills as well as a sense of community. For all participants, benefits include shifting the roles of inventing, revising, critiquing, and editing from teacher to student; students find it easier to generate text when they can exchange ideas and drafts with peer writers; and students use and internalize writing-specific concepts and language, both within and outside of the classroom (Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*; Jeff Golub, ed., *Focus on Collaborative Learning*, Urbana: NCTE, 1988; Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*)

Fig. 4: Conference Questionnaire for Essay #3, "The Critical Review"

For this draft's feedback, you will need yellow, green, and blue markers.

1. With the YELLOW marker, highlight the last sentence of the opening paragraph, and the first sentence of every paragraph in the essay.
   Read the yellow sentences. The first should make a claim which is supported/developed/exemplified by the following sentences; does this happen? Do you think the sentences have been arranged in order of importance to the reader? Offer any suggestions you may have for improvement.
2. With the BLUE marker, draw enclosing triangles around both the opening and concluding paragraphs.
   Read what has been enclosed in blue. Does the first blue triangle capture attention? Does the last blue triangle offer the final evaluation, and a final "twist"? Do the triangles match in tone/idea/image? Offer any suggestions you have for improvement.
3. With the GREEN marker, encircle the last sentence of every body paragraph and the first sentence of the following paragraph.
   Match the yellow and green sentences within each paragraph. Does the yellow set out to express an idea which the green concludes? Do you have suggestions for improvement?
   Compare green and yellow concluding and topic sentences between paragraphs. Does the essay need clearer transitions, or are these already smooth?
4. Finally, you may read the essay. Does the audience for the essay match the audience intended on the writer's analysis sheet? Is the intended message clearly expressed in the essay?
   Most important, are you persuaded? Would you go/read/visit this? If not, why not? What has been omitted that would influence your decision?

---

onference questionnaires for essays four and five are intentionally er than those for essays one through three, the reason being that tion of the questionnaire is set aside for students to request ack specific to their own papers. Ultimately, writer-produced tionnaires become more effective as students become more sophis- d writers and readers; questions growing out of the writer's own for feedback, combined with standard questions of style, syntax, udience, are best suited for students in the later part of the quarter.

5: Conference Questionnaire for the third draft of Essay 4, "Present Argument"

e you read each essay, write down what your existing viewpoint is at paper's topic. You should be able to tell the topic from the title e. Does the title catch your attention? Does it sound biased, or stigative?

ead the opening paragraph.

oes the persona sound as though the writer is entering the essay an open mind? That is, does the thesis statement have the feeling vestigation," or of "opinion"?

Who could the audience be, given this opening paragraph? Does the graph offend or alienate a particular type of reader?

Now, read the concluding paragraph. Does it show the investigation been resolved? Does the last sentence leave you thinking?

Now, read the essay. Are you persuaded? Why or why not? Is the y an argument, or a rant?

What do you think about the essay's organization? Is it arranged so it addresses the opposition's arguments, from strongest to weakest? ne transitions between paragraphs logically connect the paragraphs' ideas?

Check each paragraph for unity, matching topic and concluding nces. Does the topic sentence open a point of investigation, which oncluding sentence resolves?

o the outside sources appear primarily in the body of the para- h, instead of in the topic or concluding sentences? Are the sources duced in a way that will mean something to the reader? Do the de sources support an argument the writer already has estab- d? Or, do they dominate the essay? In other words, is this a urch essay or a report?

re there instances when the writer is quoting, when s/he could be phrasing instead?

ook at the endnotes. What type of bias is revealed in these sources? the writer used a variety of recent sources from both sides of the e?

Facilitating Peer Writing Groups

At the start of the term, as well as throughout the quarter, I spend some class time on reading a shared text, perhaps a short three-page essay, and lead a discussion on that essay's strengths and weaknesses. By modeling appropriate conference behavior, I also teach students how to interact with each other in their small groups. During the peer group conferences, I move from group to group, listening to the feedback and, when possible, sharing in the discussion of at least one paper per group.

Once students have begun writing, I create handouts composed of selections from various student texts. For example, once the class arrives at the topic of opening paragraphs, I create a handout composed of six or seven opening paragraphs from the last batch of student papers. Though the handouts are presented anonymously, students know that the writers are present, that they can gain from helpful feedback, and that they can also be hurt by malicious remarks. Sometimes a student will receive jovial support from her/his peer review group after a classroom conference session, for these whole-class examples are always presented as single instances of common phenomena. Since those students whose essays are excerpted receive special help, this technique is often regarded as a boon.

Reinforcing Audiences

By using the combined techniques of the conference questionnaire, the analysis sheet, and peer writing groups, students are encouraged to think about audience during every stage of the writing process, from invention to drafting, and from revision to editing, proofreading, and providing critical reviews. The best way I know to reinforce these tools for understanding audience comes from Peter Elbow, who suggests that as teachers we share our writing processes with our students. In writing this essay, for example, I have had to choose an audience, and the choices I have made are ones that I can also teach my students.

While there are many levels of audience, in this particular essay, my primary audience has been the temporary faculty at my University (and other universities like it), who are often given two-days' notice that they will be teaching, handed a department-authorized syllabus and reader, and told to follow the format. These frustrated teachers have shown up in my office at various stages throughout the quarter, and have returned to report their success with using the strategies outlined in this essay. Because my department, like so many others, controls the way freshman composition has been taught, I have repeatedly sought out ways to offer these novice and experienced teachers a packet of alternative strategies that will combine proven techniques with each teacher's particular style of teaching.

'e is also a secondary audience, which I can only imagine: the ers of *Minnesota English Journal* who may share characteristics and ·ests of the primary audience, and who may go on to offer the :egies I present here to the instructors they will train. Finally, in r to reach this other audience, I need to get past yet a different group :aders - the reviewers and editors. For this essay, then, there are ıdy three types of audience.

mulate these levels of audience, I use a peer writing group composed ven faculty members from the colleges and universities in my area. fact that we represent different disciplines enriches our responses ıe another's writing, and helps us see beyond our particular realms ıowledge. When we send out a draft before our meetings, we attach ver sheet listing the kinds of questions we want answered for that e of writing, and describing its chosen audience. In this way, my own ing process makes use of audience analysis, peer writing groups, critical questionnaires. When students understand that I am above *writer* who teaches writing, they are more likely to approach these s with enthusiasm.