FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY EXAMINATION

by Steve Swanson

After having taught Freshman English for 15 years using every approach from grammar-school-marm fussiness to creative writing seminar permissiveness, it finally occurred to me what freshman writers in a liberal arts curriculum really need. They do not necessarily need to make me happy by writing imaginative and engaging essays, nor to make my reading job easier by writing flawlessly--laudable as these abilities always seem. What freshman writers really need in order to survive their next three years is skill in two specialized kinds of writing: answering essay examination questions and writing research papers. A unit on doing and writing up research has been a part of most freshman writing classes as long as I can remember, and research techniques remain a concentration in my sections. Teaching specific skills in order to help students write better essay examinations seemed, when it occurred to me, a new approach.

I started by trying a few experiments with essay examination question assignments during the same term as the idea emerged. The students were so appreciative of a focus specifically on that skill that I spent some of the following summer designing an entire course aimed at this set of techniques.

The first concern was the reading list. To be most useful, such a course would not focus only on literature (my specialty) as freshman English courses often do. Students in a liberal

arts program often have to write exams in four or five different disciplines each term. I therefore set up some very broad distribution requirements, trying to find materials that represented several academic disciplines and that would be readable, comprehensible, and interesting to any reader, including college freshmen.

In the first term the reading list included the following items representing several departments and approaches:

1. A reprinted article on the effects of alcohol, age, and speed on highway accidents, deaths, and automobile insurance rates. (Sociology, Ecology, maybe Economics)
2. Ole Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth. A pioneer novel. (American Literature and History)
3. Farley Mowat, Never Cry Wolf. (Outdoor Education, Biology, The Scientific Method)
4. Lewis Thomas, The Lives of a Cell. (Biology, Genetics, Anthropology) And a related video tape, Mysterious Castles of Clay: The Fascinating World of the African Termite. (Entomology, Sociology)
5. An article on the fine arts. (Aesthetics, Imagery, Our Visual Apprehension of the World)

These were chosen not only because they were readable and engaging but because they had recognizable theses or presuppositions that could be exploited in essay examinations.

The students showed remarkable improvement in writing their first few essays. We printed several of each set for class discussion and tried to see how a given answer succeeded

or failed in

1. analyzing the question,
2. recognizing possible approaches,
3. then outlining and writing according to an appropriate approach (temporal-historical, comparison-contrast, analytical, etc.).

We also discussed teacher expectations, the use of appropriate supporting quotations and allusions, suitable styles for various disciplines, and more. They caught on quickly.

After we were well into the course I could see that my students were getting practice in writing essays based on reading comprehension, but they were getting no experience in writing essays based on lectures. I announced a new assignment. I had a book in galleys on health, exercise, and nutrition so I read them the nutrition chapter and asked them to take notes, then to write a short essay examination (as if for a home economics course) based on that lecture and their notes--ALL IN THE SAME CLASS PERIOD. I asked for their notes as well as their examination essays, made written comments on both, and again printed a few examples for class discussion.

Another technique evolved. Toward the end of the term we discovered that a corollary skill in writing essay examinations was trying to get as much focus and direction as possible from an instructor beforehand. We prepared a list of questions called PUMPING YOUR PROFESSOR ranging from such mundane entries as "Is it going to be open book?" and "Can we bring dictionaries?" to the more disarming foreign student's question, "Could I write it, please, in German?"

In a typical series of ten class periods, about three would be spent writing in class, two discussing the reading after it had been written about, four in analyzing printed examples of the most recent writing (we tried to print at least one of each student's papers during the term), and one with a visitor: a research librarian, the author of a book, a local critic or expert in the field under consideration.

The advantages students are apt to see in this approach are:

1. successful progress toward a limited but useful goal,
2. the reading of a variety of materials that could be useful introductions to other courses, and
3. very little of that feeling that the English Department is stuffing them with a literature that the professor may love but they may not.

The main advantages to the instructor are that the course almost teaches itself; the goals are understood; there is variety in the several ways the class periods are used; the reading list is inexhaustible--and should be interesting to a broad spectrum of students, and to the instructor. Since all writing other than the research papers is done in class, our natural tendency to suspect plagiarism and ghost writing is all but eliminated.

Finally, it is patently fun to bask in the appreciation students express when what we do is clearly and immediately useful in their broader experience of education. Like the exuberant girl who ran up and hugged me at mid-term in the semester after our exam course. She was fairly bubbling over. "I did everything we learned," she said, "and I got my first A."