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[Next: Harmonizing the Writing Process](#)

HEURISTICS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM: WORKING THE PROBLEM OF DRAFTING THE RESEARCH PAPER

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Of the vexed issues confronting teachers of the first-year writing sequence, none is more frustrating than that of getting students to write in the drafting stages. And not just *to* write, but to write the right thing. By this, I do not mean that the problem is getting students to write "what the teacher wants to hear" but getting them to draft content that will actually enable them to successfully fulfill the terms of the writing assignment. The problem is compounded when students have a history of "not being *able* to write," that is, have a history of paralysis when confronted by the blank page.

And unfortunately, in many universities and colleges the problem of knowing what to write can persist right through upper division courses for students who go on to become English Lit majors. This may seem counter-intuitive, as our majors are more likely to self-select (we hope) on the basis of their interest and skill in writing and reading, but the void of beginning can stymie even experienced, motivated writers. It should be no surprise, then, when some simply do not know how to begin, or having begun, how to develop content. As two of my colleagues put it about *some* of their students: "They can repeat/apply ideas I present in class but cannot seem to get beyond that" and " . . . it's not just 'generating content' . . . but the kind of content they come up with that's at issue" (Brown; Buehrer).

The solution that the Composition literature offers to the problem of fluency and content development is process. That is, the general consensus is that writing is a five-stage process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing. (To the extent that our students received writing instruction in high school—and that is by no means certain—this is the model they most likely have been inculcated in.) I don't know of any rhetoric teachers who would disagree that drafting, revising, and editing logically follow one another, although I know few who teach, or use, pre-writing or who think in terms of publication (we tend to think in terms of something like "polishing" a draft). For teachers of first-year writing who have been trained by compositionists, however, they may use pre-writing, encouraging students to brainstorm, freewrite, concept map and so on.

No doubt, the latter kind of activity will help students get *something* down on paper, and it seems to me that those processes are particularly useful when the writing assignment is expressivist, and students have been invited to write what is in, or on, their minds. When it comes to the research paper, however, I have found these approaches generally unsatisfying *because* they are process-oriented. That is to say that while they may teach students *how* to write, they offer little guidance on *what* to write, other than what's in the student's head, and that may be only marginally useful in writing the research paper. So, in consequence, students who need to generate content may have developed skills in putting words to paper but without having any degree of certainty that they are putting the *right* words to paper.

Fortunately, Rhetoric offers an alternative to Composition's process approach in the form of invention. For the Greeks, invention was the most important of the five canons of rhetoric (the other four being arrangement, style, memory, and delivery). That is, as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee put it, invention was "a means of discovery" (75) of what speakers wanted to say and, hence, the Greeks practiced copiousness:

Because ancient rhetoricians believed that language was a powerful force for persuasion, they urged their students to develop *copia* in all parts of their art. *Copia* can be loosely translated from Latin to mean an abundant and ready supply of language—something appropriate to say or write whenever the occasion arises. Ancient teaching about rhetoric is everywhere infused with the notions of expansiveness, amplification, abundance. (Crowley and Hawhee 32)

Crowley and Hawhee go on to point out that contemporary intellectuals, in contrast to the Greeks, emphasize economy: i.e., "never use two words when one 'will do'" (are we really thinking about what we are saying when we say "will do"?). As they so aptly put it, "Of course, the modern preference for economy in composition is connected to modern insistence that clarity is the only important characteristic of style" (32), a very recent development in the history of language and literary endeavor. (I have reams to say about the contemporary fetish for clarity, and why it is both so rhetorical and anti-intellectual, but that's another essay altogether.)

As a rhetorician who has found classical rhetoric a particularly useful means of teaching writing, Crowley has long used *heuristics*, a system of investigation, and what she calls a "means of discovery," as a strategy for creating writing assignments that students could more successfully complete in the drafting stages. In addition to developing the writing assignment and the expectations for student completion, Crowley also developed a set of questions (the heuristics) to guide note-taking for each assignment. This latter is predicated on the notion that heuristics are "a means of taking more copious and better notes than you normally would on your own," something that I have often heard Crowley say in professional as well as in more informal settings.

Fortunately, as Crowley's colleague at Arizona State, I had the opportunity to learn from her how to use heuristics with my students and have been doing so for the last eight years. In the process, in addition to their value in providing content for drafting, I have discovered that heuristics have another enormous advantage for the student, and that is that they guide student research. From first-year writers, one of the most common queries (complaints) I have is "what should I look up?" The less experienced they are in doing research, the more daunting the task of knowing where to begin, and it has been my experience that even when they have had library instruction this particular problem is often not mitigated. The heuristics tell students what questions their paper needs to answer, and hence, what lines of research to investigate, where to start, what to look for. As a consequence, for every major paper assignment that I give my students now, I construct a set of heuristics tailor-made just for that assignment.

As a rule, I require my students to answer the heuristics in stages and turn them in. I don't grade them for content, as they *are* notes, and as such should be useful to the student, not to me. I do, however, evaluate the extent to which they are engaging the assignment and give them points for that. I count "engagement" as writing paragraphs and the extent to which they are taking "copious" notes. Lists and one- or two-sentence answers simply are inadequate (stinginess is not rewarded) because they are not developing content that can either be dropped directly into their first draft, or with a bit of revision, become part of that first draft. Answering the heuristics in stages helps keep them on track to completing the assignment appropriately and keeps them working steadily.

There is one other significant advantage to having students turn their heuristics in in advance: it is much easier to determine if students *do* understand the assignment well in advance of their first drafting attempt, *and* just as important, when they are first learning to use heuristics, whether they understand how to work with the heuristics themselves. When students turn in their heuristics, I am certainly concerned that they are engaging the assignment, but as I give them a quick read, I am also looking for evidence that they understand the assignment. Sometimes, when the assignment is so totally out of the realm of their experience, they struggle, even *with* the guidance and assistance of the heuristics. But I know that if they are not able to answer the heuristics, their drafting will be an even worse disaster. This is what happened when I assigned my students the Rhetorical Analysis project.

As a small regional university, our students sometimes have wildly varying levels of preparation for the university (although my English Department has good SATS). We draw from the metropolitan Atlanta area, as well as from a variety of schools across Georgia, ranging from very small rural schools to very large urban schools. A distressing number of my students tell me that they did very little writing in high school (and not just in rural schools, some of which have good writing programs), and if they had writing instruction, most of it was literary analysis. It is mainly AP students who have had any experience with research papers, but even they have rarely heard the word "rhetoric." So a rhetorical analysis was not only a new experience but for some of them akin to being asked to write a treatise. (A new kind of assignment is one reason why heuristics are crucial.) I think it no exaggeration to say that some of them found it just plain scary.

As students worked on the heuristics and began to ask me questions about them, I could see that they were insistent on evaluating the essays on the basis of their literary quality rather than doing a rhetorical analysis, in all likelihood because this was all the experience they had to draw on. By working with them both individually and collectively, I was able to get most of them on track. My best student in one of my classes started her heuristics over because she had so far done them "all wrong," according to her own description, but she ended up turning in the best paper in the class, and her "revised" heuristics disclosed why.

Further, some students struggled with the form of the heuristics themselves because this was their first assignment in my class and the process was entirely new to them. I had told them that some of the questions asked for similar information in a different way, and that if they felt they had already answered the question to skip it. Nevertheless, a surprising number of them felt compelled to answer the question again and then complained that they had already answered the question.

At first, I was just perplexed by their behavior, but I quickly realized that these students were so rule-bound and so inculcated in a system of training that required them to "answer every question" that they simply could not let go of those habits of mind. I had to back up and talk about why they might be asked to approach a question from more than one direction and what to do when that process frustrated them.

Hence, an important advantage to using heuristics is that watching students work, and struggle, with them can give the teacher tremendous early insight into the intellectual processes that students are engaging in as they approach their assignments. It can tell you quite a bit about their limits and training and how much instruction and coaching they are likely to need. It also affords an opportunity to encourage students to take risks in a very safe way. The only quality their work will be evaluated on is how much they push themselves, not on the content of what they do, and so you can encourage them to try out things that they might not feel willing to try if they thought it would "cost" them points otherwise.

Further, because it offers a fertile opportunity to coach and re-direct their work, it is the perfect opening to build confidence that they *can* do this difficult task that has been laid out for them. Because so many of my students have had "bad" experiences with writing, confidence-building is crucial to their success as writers. I have too many students who should be accomplishing more who have been so completely demoralized by poor instruction, no instruction, or teachers telling them "they can't write," that a major task is to give them the confidence that they *can* write if they are simply willing to stretch. The heuristics are a good place to start that process.

If they engage the heuristics, producing copious notes—and I push them to produce much more than they can possibly use in their polished draft—by the time they are ready to draft, the draft practically writes itself. I know from experience that students who engage the heuristics do much better at drafting and producing polished papers than students who do not. Indeed, I can predict with near certainty who has done the heuristics and who hasn't just by reading a first draft (which is why I now require them to do the heuristics in stages and give them points for engaging the assignment).

In order to demonstrate the relationship between the project assignment and the heuristics, I am including links to my website for two sample assignments that I have used in my English 1102 course, which is the second course in the first-year writing sequence at my university. (I also include [here](#) the link I created for my students to introduce them to the concept of heuristics.)

The emphasis in the 1102 course is on the research paper. The first paper project in the course is designed to teach basic analytical and persuasion skills that they will need to complete the other assignments, and then I use a three-paper sequence where they develop a thorough understanding of one issue.

This [Rhetorical Analysis assignment](#) was designed by Katherine Heenan, a colleague at Arizona State University (and

not incidentally the best teacher of undergraduates that I know). She based the assignment on one developed by Christine Alfano and Alyssa O'Brien as a web companion to their *Envision* textbook. (The original assignment can be found [here](#) and Heenan's redesigned version can be found at her very useful website [here](#).)

I have further modified her assignment to fit what I am doing at my current university, but I have kept the basic Heenan/Alfano/O'Brien design. This particular assignment is not research-based but is designed to teach students how to analyze a text so that when they get to the research papers they will be more effective at critically reading and analyzing the documents they confront as researchers, as well as more skilled at making successfully persuasive arguments of their own.

While this assignment asks for a *rhetorical* analysis aimed at students in an 1102 rhetoric class, I think it has real potential for modification as a *literary* analysis assignment for a lit class by reversing its focus. It would be a relatively simple matter to revise the heuristics to ask the questions from a literary perspective, rather than rhetorical, and to revise the section of the assignment sheet that discusses how a rhetorical analysis is different from a literary analysis. In fact, however, most of the questions for investigation would work as well in an English lit class as in a rhetoric class.

I used this assignment for the first time in Spring 2009, and following Heenan's lead, I did not require my students to turn in their heuristics in advance. I had misgivings about that because she teaches at a large public university, while I teach at a small regional university, and the preparation of our students for the university experience is very dissimilar. As a consequence, I had a number of students who did not do the heuristics, and to a person, they struggled with the assignment and did not perform as well on it as I had hoped. On the other hand, every student who did the heuristics performed much better on the assignment, so in my view, the problem was not with the assignment itself, but with the ability of students to complete it without more guidance than the assignment sheet alone provides. The next time I teach this assignment, I will require the heuristics be done in two stages and turned in in advance of the first draft.

Following that assignment, students do a three-sequence paper assignment, each of which is 4-6 pages long, producing in effect one long paper of approximately 12-18 pages by the end of the semester. The first paper is a History and Origin paper in which they explore the history and origin of a problem or issue that interests them (an assignment designed by Crowley); the second, an Arguments in Circulation paper in which they explore the arguments that circulate around the problem or issue they have chosen (also designed by Heenan), and the third a paper Proposing a Policy/Action that I designed to address the problem or issue they have been working on. (The latter is located [here](#).)

In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that my first-year students almost always report on student evaluations that they "hate" the heuristics, but the ones who do them thoroughly also universally report that I was right about the drafts writing themselves and that papers were much easier to write because they had done the heuristics. The ones who treated them as busywork always tell me in class something like . . . they are busywork. So the main problem is getting students to trust—and use—the process. If I can get them to trust the process, and they see the results reflected in their grades (the almighty motivator), they are usually willing to try it again. I should say, however, that my upper division students are more appreciative of the heuristics, as they often find it easier to embrace them as an "experiment" from the outset.

Moreover—and this is no small thing—if done well, heuristics will generate much more content than students can use, and asking first-year students who have produced seven or eight pages of notes to set aside some of those pages is akin to asking them to give up their cell phones for a week. It is sometimes difficult for them to grasp that not all those pages will be good, useful, or on focus, and that part of the drafting process is learning how to make those distinctions. I do tell them, however, to never delete anything because they never know when it might be useful later, and that seems to lessen somewhat the sting of not being able to use all their notes in the current paper.

Now, what about using rhetorical strategies to teach lit majors?

While it has disappeared from the training of American graduate students in literature, there was a time when it was presumed that no competent student of literature could claim to be well-educated without a thorough knowledge of rhetoric. I am certainly not proposing that we start training all our lit majors in rhetoric again (although I think it a splendid idea and one that could animate the field at a time when it is looking for new directions), but there are aspects of rhetorical training that could greatly benefit students who struggle with writing. Learning to use heuristics is only one of those but, I think, an especially valuable one.

Finally, I would be remiss not to say that using heuristics to structure the writing experience adds a layer of effort on the front end to the writing teacher's already heavy burden (all writing teachers know that their positions are the most labor-intensive among all university faculty). However, what I have discovered is that there is huge pay-off on the backend of the writing process. I get better papers, which I find easier to grade, which we all also know is the most onerous part of our jobs, and because I teach a three-paper sequence, I can see student papers get progressively better over the course of the semester. One would expect this to happen under any circumstance (or at least hope so), but it has so far been my experience that the kinds of improvements I get are qualitatively different than what I was getting prior to using heuristics.

To be sure, it took me awhile to get the hang of the most effective way to use them and to become skilled at writing the best kind of questions (and I still don't always get it right, which is why I continue to share assignments with a trusted colleague). I encourage you, however, to try heuristics. You might try to recruit a colleague to work with you, as another pair of eyes is likely to help you produce better results. But given a fair chance, I think you may discover that the heuristics make your job easier in the long run, as well as improving papers. Any relief at all from the tedium of "bad" papers is worth it, and seeing any real student improvement at all makes the job of teaching writing just a bit more rewarding.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#)

[Next: Harmonizing the Writing Process with Music Training Techniques](#)