

LESSON PLANS

for **Teaching**
Writing



Edited by
Chris Jennings Dixon

Foreword by
Kathleen Blake Yancey

- Writing Process
- Portfolios
- Literature
- Research
- Grammar
- Writing on Demand
- Media

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LESSON 14

“IT’S MUSIC TO MY EARS”: GROWING PARAGRAPHS INTO ESSAYS

Thomas J. Hargrove

Purpose

- To construct essays from paragraphs using external sources

Preparation

This is a composition class exercise that can be used fairly early in a course. This assignment is intended to teach essay building and the use of external sources. It is preceded by a paragraph-level assignment in which students write about a favorite type of music and explain why they like it. Their individual music paragraphs are posted to a class discussion board for everyone to see. Each student then collects at least two paragraphs written by classmates.

Props/Materials

- It’s Music to My Ears handout (Figure 1.8)
- Instructor and student use of computers
- Posting instructions as an assignment in Blackboard
- Setting up a discussion board for students to post their works in progress and their completed work

Note: Although I work in a computer classroom, this activity can be adapted for any teaching environment.

Process/Procedure

Students start with three paragraphs written by three different students. They must revise these paragraphs so that they sound as if they come from one voice. The process ends with each student composing a traditional five-paragraph essay—one paragraph at a time.

Pointers or Pitfalls

In itself, this appears to be a fairly simplistic exercise. However, it is another training session in basic content organization for presentation to an audience. It introduces using source materials and adapting them for the student's own purposes. As such, it represents a practical content development tool when understood and applied consistently. If students become confused as the assignment progresses, guide them individually to compare and contrast the content in given paragraphs.

Ponderings

The choice of topic—personal musical tastes—is an easy one for most students to write about. They all have favorites. Comparing and contrasting three different sets of musical preferences occurs with little need for instructor prompting and leads to interesting and active class discussion. Many students are surprised to find they have written a complete essay with relatively no pain.

It's Music to My Ears

This assignment is intended to help you practice several different aspects of written communication. First, we need to agree on some new vocabulary; not just as words, but as tools.

Background

Paragraphs are similar to sentences in that they are designed to deal with one point or idea at a time (one thought, maybe?). They just deal with bigger points and ideas. While they don't have the same set of grammatical labels as sentences for identifying problems such as fragments and run-ons (too little or too much), they do have the same problems. So we are going to borrow a few labels.

We will have "paragraph fragments" when what looks like a paragraph doesn't completely develop a thought. The fix is to revise and expand the paragraph to create a complete thought package; revise it for inclusion in an existing paragraph or simple elimination. Elimination represents a decision that the partial thought doesn't fit in, or fit in at this point. The solution will be driven by your message and what you are trying to do with it. If it supports the mission but doesn't do it well, revise. If it doesn't support it, delete.

We will have "run-on paragraphs" when more than one complete thought is present. If there are two complete thought packages, we have a fused paragraph. The fix is to break it into separate paragraphs for each thought. If we have more than one completely developed thought but not really two, the extra material has to be reworked. This could involve rewriting for inclusion in the now expanded original paragraph; deleting it as unnecessary; or, rewriting and expanding it into a separate paragraph. Once again, the solution will be driven by your message and what you are trying to do with it.

Now, the assignment:

1. Your first paragraph is a stand alone explanation of one type of music you enjoy and why you enjoy it. There is a discussion board forum set up for this assignment. Post your paragraph there and read the other postings to see what others think is good music.
2. Using copies of two other paragraphs written by your classmates, construct an essay in the basic five-paragraph mode: introduction, body one, body two, body three, conclusion. But you can't simply put the three paragraphs you have together and tack on an introduc-

Figure 1.8

Figure 1.8 continued

tion and a conclusion. Why not? The paragraphs you have are independent constructions by different authors. The actual number of body paragraphs will depend on how many paragraphs you have to start with and how you decide to use them. For example, if two people both like the same music, you might consider discussing them both at the same time. (More than five paragraphs is always acceptable, of course.)

3. This is your essay, so you have to write it. You should retain and accurately reflect the thoughts of all authors you use. However, you have to revise them so that the resulting text is your own and reflects who you are as a writer with your unique style. You are the one writing your essay.
4. Your own paragraph and those of your group mates are your raw material. How you design and build your essay is up to you. The normal way to approach this would be to use comparison and contrast; using your musical tastes as your base for discussing similarities and differences.
5. You can use the material in the different paragraphs almost as written. You will need to change some of the phrasings since you are the one doing the talking. One simple way to introduce another person's position would be: "Tamika says . . ." "Tamika's favorite music is . . ." "While I like . . . Stephanie prefers . . ."
6. Your introduction introduces yourself and your intentions in the following discussion. It reflects your basic position on good music. The body of your essay grows from your three core paragraphs. You need to interconnect them. At a minimum, you need to ensure that you have smooth transitions from one paragraph to the next. Using more substantive linkages, such as parallel treatment of points within and between the paragraphs, is a definite plus.
7. Your conclusion will recap where you are coming from and request that your readers consider reassessing their views about music based on what you have said.

LESSON 15

CREATING PULLOUTS: ENHANCING ESSAYS

Elizabeth H. Beagle

Purpose

- To create eye-catching pullouts to enhance essays and emphasize major points

Preparation

Students need access to computers; therefore, schedule time for the class in a computer lab. Conduct a mini-lesson on how to create text boxes using Microsoft Word. (See Figure 1.9.)

Props/Materials

Provide practice exercises using Drawing and Text Box features in Word and reserve access to computers.

Process/Procedure

1. Students must have written a rough draft of any type of essay already.
2. Students peruse magazines and newspapers to identify

Creating Text Boxes

1. On the **Drawing** toolbar, click **Text Box** . (A toolbar is a bar with buttons and options that you use to carry out commands. To display a toolbar, click Customize on the Tools menu and then click the Toolbars tab.)
2. Click in your document (or drag the icon to) where you want to insert the text box. (A text box is a movable, resizable container for text or graphics. Use text boxes to position several blocks of text on a page or to give text a different orientation from other text in the document.)

You can use the options on the **Drawing** toolbar to enhance a text box. For example, change the fill color—just as you can with any other drawing.

Figure 1.9

use of pullouts and to note how they are used to provoke interest in reading the entire article.

3. Provide practice in creating text boxes or pullouts.
4. Assign students to create three pullouts for their selected essay.
5. In small groups, have students review the use of pullouts and comment upon the effectiveness of this technique.

Pointers or Pitfalls

Students should be told that the pullout is not actually “pulled out” of the essay. Demonstrate how magazines, newspapers, etc. use pullouts as hooks. Also, ensure that students have thought about the most effective pullouts and where to place them strategically within the body of the essay.

Ponderings

This is a great way to get students to think about and demonstrate the focus of their essays.

LESSON 16

YOUR PAPER: IMPROVING PERSUASIVE WRITING

Ramona Clark

Purpose

- To improve a persuasive essay with guided directions
- To analyze the accuracy, relevance, and organization of evidence

Preparation

Prepare the students for this activity by reviewing the elements of argumentation in writing a persuasive essay. Sequential steps of persua-

sion/argument should include: (1) choose a position or side of an issue or problem, (2) understand the opposite viewpoint of your position and counter it, (3) provide specific and convincing evidence that appeals to reason, (4) structure your essay to convey purpose and topic using examples that enhance meaning, (5) conclude your argument with a strong statement that reinforces the points you have made and suggests future action.

Props/Materials

- Improving a Persuasive Paper handout (Figure 1.10)

Process/Procedure

Assign students to read the student sample paper on the handout; then they are to pretend that they have written the paper. Students need to respond to the questions on the handout and revise the sample as if the paper is theirs. They are to hand in their revisions. In small groups, students may then discuss and review their individual responses and compare and contrast techniques.

Pointers or Pitfalls

Students need adequate background in persuasive techniques. Assigning the work to be done as a quiz grade may be needed to motivate the reluctant learner.

Ponderings

In general, students do very well with this exercise. They respond well to the guided nature of this assignment.

Improving a Persuasive Paper

Read the following student sample paper and then answer questions 1–8, pretending that this is your paper. Revise according to the directions below.

Sample Student Paper

- (1) Why do they have to treat us like children? Their plan is really bad. Why can't we make up our own minds about what we do with our own time? This really makes me mad.
- (2) Besides, suppose you got sick or something. Or suppose you broke a leg. It's not the same thing as cutting classes.
- (3) If I miss classes, I'm already getting punished because I have to make up the work anyway, and I might not get as good grades on my test because I missed stuff in class, and anyway some teachers give you a zero in class if you don't raise your hand a lot, so my grade would get lowered anyway. My grade in English got lowered last year because this kid kept talking to me and passing me notes and I didn't want him to. And if I'm willing to accept those consequences and still get a passing grade, why should the system make me lose credit for the course.
- (4) One of the things we're supposed to learn in school is how to be responsible. So we need to make our own decisions, or we'll never learn how.

1. Can my reader tell what the issue is and how the writer feels about it from the way the paper begins? What do "they," "really bad," and "this" refer to in paragraph 1? (If you don't know, no one else will, either.) Discuss the meaning of the words and then rewrite the paragraph.
2. Is paragraph 2 complete? Does the reader know what the writer is referring to? Is the transition word accurate? Add additional details.
3. In paragraph 2, the writer says, "It's not the same thing as cutting class." Has the writer really responded to the point of view of the other side? What should the writer add? Write the additional sentence or sentences.
4. Paragraph 3 begins with a sentence that is too long and difficult to read: "If I miss classes, I'm already getting punished. . . ." Break the sentence into two or more separate sentences and write the new paragraph.
5. What reasons support the writer's opinion? Write the reasons. Are each of the reasons supported? If not, what examples could you use from your own experience to support each reason? Write your examples or details here.
6. As the writer, do I need to give another reason for rejecting the attendance policy? If so, what sentence or sentences need to be added? What facts, details, or examples can you supply? Write the new sentences here as a paragraph with a main idea and supporting details.
7. Does this paper sound angry or calm? Is it respectful of the opposition? Identify the words that make the tone inappropriate and rewrite these sentences using different word choices.
8. As the writer, have I ended by stating what I want to happen or by suggesting an action? How could I improve my ending? Write the new ending.

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Figure 1.10

LESSON 17

EVERYBODY'S A STUDENT AND EVERYBODY'S A TEACHER: REFLECTING UPON KNOWLEDGE

David Meyerholz

Purpose

- To reflect and analyze personal connections to classroom content

Preparation

Begin by asking students to brainstorm in writing what has been most important to them in their class studies. Suggested prompts: (1) What topics or issues did you find the most interesting? (2) How do you think this topic or issue will affect you in your future endeavors? Ask students to fold a piece of notebook paper in half lengthwise and to make two lists—one on the left side for issues or topics of personal interest (this one will be the longest) and one on the right explaining personal connections (this one might take more prompting). Ultimately, students are directed to pick an area for further investigation from their lists.

Note: Here are two examples from my government class of sample topics, the students' connections, and the follow-up study:

- First example: Topic—"Unemployment in America" with student connection—"Get a better paying job" followed by—"Explore opportunities for employment at the VA Employment Center."
- Second example: Topic—"Personal Legal Rights" with student connection—"What happens when I go to court for a speeding ticket?" followed by—"Invite a policeman or defense attorney to class."

In English classes, topics may be developed using conflicts and/or themes from literary works.

Props/Materials

Students must verbalize their newfound knowledge with the assistance of visual cues, and they must be able to respond to reasonable questions from their peers and teacher.

Process/Procedure

Provide a suggested timeline for the entire process:

- Brainstorming Session—up to two weeks
- Discovery Period—two to three weeks
- Presentations—allow fifteen minutes for each student
- Reflection—typed paper in which students reflect on what they have learned and where they might go from here.

You should expect some students to change their minds about what they're investigating. As most writing is rewriting, much thinking should be rethinking. The "discovery" part of this task does not have to be prolonged, but it should be documented. I also require that this phase include interaction with a live human being, who either serves as an authority on the topic or gives an additional perspective about the subject under investigation.

Students must plan a fifteen-minute presentation on what they have learned. Presentations may include Power Point shows, guest speakers (in activities where students still take an active role), home-made videos, and other interactive formats involving the student audience, for example—a student version of *Survival*. To conclude this activity, students must reflect on their work by evaluating the experience and pondering how they can further pursue this area of interest.

Pointers or Pitfalls

I have found it doesn't work to cram all of these presentations into a set period of time. Instead, it works well for me to intersperse them with other planned activities. "Type A" teachers who need to have every minute planned three months in advance should disregard my previous suggestion.

Ponderings

I'm probably no different from most teachers in that there are times when I'm presenting a lesson plan that seems to be going exceedingly well, and I'll think, "Damn, I'm good!" Except, how do we really know that all of the young people on the other end are receiving the lesson in the same world-class way in which we are giving it?

I find that, despite my patient and well-reasoned approach, more than a few students do not share with me the same sense of importance over much of the subject matter in my courses. We can pretend this

doesn't exist and go about our business as usual, or maybe we take this reality and turn it into an opportunity.

We should be accessing out students' perceptions of relevance and connecting them with lessons in our curriculum. While I can't come close to claiming this activity is a success with 100 percent of my students, I can say that in intervening years more than a few have recalled this activity as extremely worthwhile. It does reinforce learning as a lifelong process.

LESSON 18

APPLICATION/SCHOLARSHIP: WRITING A PERSONAL ESSAY

Joseph H. Lemrow

Purpose

- To write a personal essay for application to a college or for financial assistance

Preparation

Ask students to take a personal inventory by stepping outside of themselves to determine those qualities others see in them that suggest persistence, leadership ability, dedication to specific tasks, and/or promise of success. Because of the difficulty of evaluating oneself, encourage students to ask friends, relatives, and former and present teachers for their impressions.

Props/Materials

Provide a handout with questions related to three broad categories:

1. Academics

- Were you ever on the dean's list?
 - Did you earn any academic awards?
 - Were you a member of an honor society?
 - Did you belong to any clubs or organizations?
 - What was your grade point average?
 - What was your standing in your class?
-

Did you excel in the arts, in the sciences, in the social sciences? Other areas?

2. Community Involvement/Volunteerism

Have you been active in church-related activities?

Have you volunteered at a local hospital?

Did you volunteer time/effort toward the completion of a community project (for example, Habitat for Humanity)?

Have you worked with the elderly?

Did you coach/train young people?

Have you worked to improve the environment?

Were you active in any political campaigns?

3. Work-Related Experience

Have you acquired any marketable skills on the job?

Were you given additional responsibilities by an employer?

Did your supervisor recognize your leadership skills?

Were you placed in charge of any project?

Did your employer recognize your work habits/job skills?

Process/Procedure

1. Essay Openings

Suggest students begin their essays by telling who they are and why they are writing. That is, mention the name of the college or group to whom they are writing and explain short- and long-term goals. These goals need to be clearly expressed. They may also explain what courses of study they intend to pursue or what degrees they intend to obtain. Students should try to create thesis statements that indicate what subcategories are intended to be discussed in the content paragraphs. They should strive to write an opening of three to five sentences.

2. Middle Paragraph Strategies

Students write separate paragraphs (however brief) for each of the categories (academics, volunteerism, and work experience). They do not merely list; rather, they explain what these experiences tell about them.

3. Summaries

Students write summaries, not conclusions, reminding the reader of their short- and long-term goals. They should stress what steps

they have taken to achieve their goals. They may mention how one or two skills have contributed to their achievements. Remind students to be aware of an audience, since a committee will usually judge who will be admitted to a college or determine who will be awarded scholarship monies. Finally, students should exit gracefully in their conclusions and tell the college or group that they will make them proud to have supported them.

Pointers or Pitfalls

Ask students to write with a degree of verve! They should show their personality and, above all, use strong, dynamic, descriptive verbs. Remind them to always mention the college or institution by name and to avoid the impression that they may be writing a generic statement to be sent to many groups. Moreover, they should be cautioned not to mention the word *money*. Instead, prompt them to use phrases like “invest in my future,” or “support my efforts.”

Ponderings

The aim of this activity is for students to write the sort of essay many colleges and universities require as part of an admissions package from prospective students or the sort of essay that may be used to ask a corporation or group for financial assistance to further their studies. Moreover, this activity can be modified for an application for employment by including a cover letter and resume.

LESSON 19

COLLEGE EXPLORATION: WRITING AN EXPOSITORY REPORT

Miles McCrimmon

Purpose

- To research objective source materials
 - To prepare an expository report demonstrating understanding of rhetorical modes
-

Preparation

Spend some class time surveying college websites in a computer classroom. Ask your career/transfer advisors and counselors to contribute the latest pile of mailings from colleges. The tactile experience of looking at brochures is still helpful. Get your students comfortable with the Aristotelian appeals (logos, ethos, mythos, and pathos) used by colleges. Also look at some examples of college admissions and scholarship application essays and prompts.

Note: For students who are not college minded, this activity may be adapted for a career search using job-related materials.

Props/Materials

- College websites, brochures, and applications
- College Exploration Assignment handout (Figure 1.11)

Process/Procedure

See the College Exploration Assignment handout for an outline of the three-step process. The entire assignment should take no more than four weeks. Students research materials to create a presentation of themselves for college or employer to determine their candidacy.

Step 1: Analysis of the college or university's image

Step 2: Personal statement

Step 3: Recap of strategies

Pointers or Pitfalls

Because I work with community college freshmen, many of whom are the first in their family to attend college, I frequently use higher education as a central site of analysis. This assignment works even better with my college-bound dual-enrolled high school seniors. For those of my students who are already seriously involved in the workforce, or who soon will be, I have developed a variation of this assignment that focuses on employers.

Ponderings

The application and scholarship essays I would otherwise be asked to critique for free I am now able to include as part of a graded assignment. Of course, the websites accessed in these assignments, whether from colleges, corporations, or the military, present ready opportunities to discuss audience, purpose, and context, as well as principles of visual rhetoric.

College Exploration Assignment

If you are planning to attend a four-year college or university in the near future, you might be interested in choosing this assignment. This project takes the form of an expository report that will have three parts. While Parts 1 and 3 are more private—not to be seen by the college—Part 2 should be composed as a public document.

You will research a college or university that you are personally interested in attending. You may even be on your way there; if so, you may want to pretend you haven't been accepted yet. Using materials from your chosen college's websites, mailings, advertisements, brochures, and/or tours, study the image that the college is trying to portray about its campus and faculty, its students and student life, and its academics and even its athletics. Also, using some reliably objective resources, gather and review some basic facts about your chosen college.

Part 1 should be an analysis of the college's or university's image, with a special focus on any discrepancies between facts you have gathered independently about the college (from the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, for example) and claims the college makes for itself in its own marketing. As you address how the college presents itself to its public constituencies (parents, students, alumni, faculty and staff, state legislatures/governors, boards of trustees), analyze its use of the four rhetorical appeals (logos, ethos, mythos, and pathos). See glossary of terms below.

Part 2 should be a "Personal Statement" of the type one frequently sees on college applications. You should write your personal statement honestly but with an eye toward what you have learned in your research about the type of student profile your chosen institution appears to desire. Try to balance the tasks of self-promotion required by this unique genre (establishment of ethos, evidence of potential academic productivity, etc.). If you would like to use an essay prompt from an actual application, feel free.

Part 3 should be a brief recap of the strategies you used in the personal statement to make yourself an attractive candidate for admission.

Glossary of Terms

Logos: facts, statistics, logic, reason

Pathos: emotions (usually hope or fear or some derivation thereof)

Ethos: the company's own credibility, reputation, tradition, trustworthiness

Mythos: commonly shared cultural beliefs like patriotism and religion

(This activity can be adapted to use with an industry search and employee application.)

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Figure 1.11

LESSON 20

THE FINAL WORD IS YOURS: ASSESSING THE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

David Meyerholz

Purpose

- To reflect upon and assess classroom experiences using constructive criticism

Preparation

After running into and reminiscing with more and more former students, I became increasingly convinced that some formal writing assignment should end the school year (and, for seniors, their high school careers) that brings their educational experiences into some kind of perspective. I, therefore, designed the writing assignment that follows to conclude the academic careers of most of my students. This is an end-of-the-year assignment, so preparation is having students get to this point.

Props/Materials

None; this is not an assignment to be researched or presented in advance.

Process/Procedure

I begin by expressing my hope that the school year has been educational and at least somewhat enjoyable. Then I direct that the last assignment is to review the year in a one-page *typed* paper in which students answer the following questions:

1. What subject matter (or topic) did you find the most and least interesting?
2. How could the class have been run better, and what did you like about it?
3. How do you think your experience in this class is most likely to affect you in your future endeavors?
4. What recommendations can you make about the focus, methodology, and teaching style for future classes?

Note: I reinforce that I'm interested in constructive criticism and not in pandering (we should leave that to the politicians). Students are encouraged just to be thorough and honest.

Lesson Plans for Teaching Writing

Why do students often graduate from high school unprepared for college writing? and What can we do about it?

These are the questions that a group of classroom teachers set out to explore. Over the course of seven years, a group of middle, high school, college, and university teachers participated in a federally funded writing coalition project to implement innovative approaches to teaching writing. Together they developed this series of lesson plans designed to make writing both fun and an integral part of diverse curricula.

“Practical” is the recurrent motif of each teaching strategy. Developed by real teachers in real classrooms, the lessons are grouped into seven categories: writing process, portfolios, literature, research, grammar, writing on demand, and media.

Each lesson follows a standard format that includes:

- Purpose of the activity
- Necessary preparation
- Required props and materials
- Process and procedure for implementation
- Instructional pointers and/or possible pitfalls
- Reflections from the teacher that provide “behind the scenes” insights

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