"Teaching" Writing: Instruction and Feedback

Obviously, providing students the opportunity to write is a necessary component of their developing writing abilities; theoretically, with world enough and time, opportunities alone may be sufficient. However, I don't know anyone with world enough and time, so it behooves professors to provide two kinds of help to guide and hasten the process of development. One is instruction, the other feedback.

Instruction

By instruction I mean specific advice and strategies that professor either provide students or in which they lead students. Providing can take the form, obviously, of textbooks or handouts: compilations of "how-to" materials or examples of target discourse. It can also take the form of lectures or presentations. More effective, however, than "providing" alone is when it's accompanied by "doing," when students are active participants. Following are several instructional activities. They presume, of course, a solid assignment.

How-to advice or strategies. What are strategies for generating and organizing ideas on a given assignment? How would expert writers go about doing this task? What are the characteristics of a successful piece of writing on this task? You might answer questions like these on a handout when you make the assignment, or you might direct the students' attention to appropriate sections of handbooks or writing guides. (The Writing Program has some, if you're interested.) Alternatively, you can give a few minutes of class time to explaining this. One useful strategy is talking about how you might complete the assignment.

Assign and discuss "small" exercises. Focus on a skill or feature needed in an assignment and create an exercise that has students practice it. For example, if the paper requires students to critique a reading, you might have them write a paragraph in which they introduce a quotation from the reading, cite it correctly, and write a response to it. You can use any number of response strategies, below.

Brainstorming sessions/idea generating sessions. You might use the day you give an assignment to have the class generate ideas for that assignment, in small groups or large. Perhaps you structure a debate, assigning students to represent various perspectives. Any ideas generated are free for use by anyone in the class. Even 10-15 minutes for this kind of thing is helpful. One strategy is for students to generate the qualities of an excellent paper on this assignment, and you can then have them compare their list with one you've generated. NOTE: If you'd like someone from the Writing and Research Center to lead such an exercise in your class, please contact us.

Models of published work. You might simply provide some works that are similar to the kind of writing that students are to produce. More effective, however, is lead some discussion of the features of the work. What are its parts? How does it begin? End? How does the writer develop ideas? What is the tone or voice? What about the documentation style? A useful question: how might the writer have gone about producing this work? What difficulties might he or she have encountered?

Example student works. Successful papers from previous courses are very useful, and you can discuss those with students in the same way you do published models. You can also bring in problematic papers from the past, but I'd take care to bring in at least "average" (not "terrible") papers and to talk about them in terms of how they could have been stronger.

Works in progress revision sessions. Have students email drafts of their papers before class, and choose one or two of them for discussions of revisions. The aim of such a workshop is for people in the class to give advice that might help students revise their papers. Alternatively, you can divide students into pairs or small groups to give feedback on peers' papers. For advice on how to make response activities productive, see below. NOTE: If you'd like someone from the Writing and Research Center to lead a revision workshop in your class, please contact us.

Systematic deformations. A powerful strategy is to give students two versions of a paper or parts of a paper and ask them to discuss which version they think more successful. Many things are more visible in contrast than they are in a single "good" or "bad" example. Even when students choose the version you think weaker, it opens a productive discussion, as they can then hear what you value. I regularly will create my own examples, either systematically deforming good writing (example B1 below, or improving poor writing, example A2 below.)

A.   The assignment was to write a 4-5 page paper that discusses some aspect of gender roles as portrayed in the popular media. Which of the following openings suggests a more interesting and effective paper? Why?

1. The role of women has changed dramatically throughout time. This is evident in society and in the media. Throughout recent history, women have made progress in how they are portrayed. It used to be that women were there only to clean the house, cook dinner, and take care of the children. The man of the household would take care of working, disciplining the children, and fixing all the appliances. I once heard that anything inside the house was the female's domain, and anything outside of the house was the male's domain. Now, women can do anything they want. Women are very successful in the work place. Even with all this progress, it is still okay to stay home and take care of the children. There are more options for women in recent times. They can choose whether they want to work, or stay at home. Women have not always had these choices. Sitcoms are a good example of how the role of women has changed throughout history. Sitcoms show people in real life situations, they just add a little twist. When looking at sitcoms, it is really easy to see how the roles of women have changed.

2. In one episode of *The Sopranos*, crime boss Tony comes home to tell his wife Carmela that she has to move out of the house, at least for a while. A rival gang has decided to kill Tony and his associates, and he fears for the family's safety. The surprising thing is that while Carmela protests, she does so only briefly before getting into practical questions: where should she go? How long will it be? How can she reach Tony? Her behavior is typical of her "the man is the head of the house" style of marriage. Fifty years after *Leave it to Beaver*, viewers each week confronted a TV wife who is surprisingly like June Cleaver. Carmela Soprano has lots of company; women on television have changed surprisingly little.

B.   Following are two versions of the same paragraph. Which do you think is better?

The phrase *academic bullshit* can mean academic writing that shows a reckless disregard for the truth—that it is   **A**
almost certainly full of things that are false. That accusation stings because professors are supposed to be truthful in their work, even if the very question of whether truth is objective or knowable has come under much scrutiny in the past few decades. But even that debate is a question of the truth about the Truth. If academic writing is seen as unconcerned about getting things right,   **B**
that is a problem. An additional problem may be that, as Frankfurt says, bullshit is not seen as a personal affront. Academic bullshit may bear no relationship to what is true or false, correct or incorrect. But no one is offended by academic irrelevancies anyway.

The phrase *academic bullshit* presents a double insult to academics. It can mean academic writing that shows a   **A'**
reckless disregard for the truth: writing that it is almost certainly full of things that are false. That accusation stings. After all, the traditional aim of the university is to seek the truth without interference of politics or other loyalties. To what degree truth is objective or knowable has come under much scrutiny in the past few decades. But even that debate is a question of the truth about the Truth. If academic writing is seen as unconcerned about getting things right, that is problem enough. Yet an even   **B'**
worse problem may be that, as Frankfurt says, bullshit is not seen as a personal affront. Academic bullshit may bear no relationship to what is true or false, correct or incorrect. But no one is offended by academic irrelevancies anyway.