

Introducing Students to Academic Writing

Children who attend schools that are tracked for higher education learn the components of academic writing gradually, over many years. The adults, young and older, who enter the community colleges, by and large were not privy to this kind of education. They must learn the myriad of reading, writing, and thinking skills that academic writing requires very quickly or forever be blocked out of any career that requires a Bachelor's Degree or higher.

Academic writing is a highly complex process that involves comprehending academic texts, integrating them into one's own writing, summarizing and paraphrasing them, not to mention the knowledge of rhetorical and grammatical conventions and the ability to manipulate many technical aspects of using sources. (One small example of a rhetorical convention of which most of my students are ignorant is referring to an author by his/her last name rather than first name.) The full blown introduction to academic writing occurs in English Composition I and II; however, if Developmental English students aren't introduced to these skills and processes before they enter English Composition, the majority will not survive college-level English.

The following account is how I initiate students into the world of academic writing with the Assata curriculum (included in this Curriculum Guide).

One of the themes in Assata's autobiography is her criticism of her own schooling, and by extension, U.S. public education. In chapter 3, she relays an incident when she played a small part as one of the cherry trees in a 3rd grade class play about George Washington. She describes how she and the other cherry trees had to sway from side and side and sing a song about the virtues of the first U.S. president. She relays the enormous impact it had on her when, as a young adult, she discovered that George Washington had been a slave owner. Later in the same chapter, she refers to her Social Studies education as "fairy-tale education", meaning stories where all the conflicts are resolved and always end with the "good guys" winning.

Another of her criticisms was that all the school subjects were presented as discrete unrelated topics. Therefore, rather than gain insight into the interrelatedness of reality and the process of inquiry, her schools fed her a thin gruel of disconnected facts and information, leaving her unprepared to understand or analyze society. As Assata grew up and educated herself within the black liberation movement, she comes to understand the degree to which she was mis-educated and how educational institutions serve to maintain social control. She learned that the public schools are far from value-free, politically neutral institutions, as is commonly believed.

After my students have read about a third of Assata's autobiography, I give them a supplementary reading assignment, a chapter about Christopher Columbus from *A People's History of the U.S.* by Howard Zinn, with questions embedded in the text—recall questions as well as questions that require judgment, analysis, synthesis, and prediction. The content of this particular text, lays the groundwork for students to be able to reflect thoughtfully on the distorted content of their own history education.

Before I distribute the Zinn chapter, I ask students to share what they know about Columbus. With the exception of a very few students, they generally recall random facts that are out of context, (like the year, "1492" and the names of Columbus' ships) and of course the main concept, "Columbus discovered America".

I seize this opportunity to teach about the importance of primary sources as the quote from Columbus' log that Zinn includes has a powerful impact on my students' opinion of the explorer. After describing the Arawak as an exceedingly generous, kind, and respectful people, Columbus concludes in his log, "With 50 men we could subjugate all and make them do whatever we want." After reading Zinn's expose, students are genuinely shocked and horrified to discover that this "American hero" stole land and resources, committed genocide, and began the slave trade in the "new world". I ask them to locate all the primary sources in the text and draw a conclusion about how reading primary sources impacted their reading experience.

This is also the time I engage students in an activity that helps them understand the critical reading concept of a writer's "point of view". I found the following idea in *A People's History for the Classroom* by Bill Bigelow: I prearrange with a student the taking of her backpack or purse when she is out of the room. When she returns I announce to the class that the backpack sitting on my desk "is mine". The students argue and I ask them to prove that it's not mine. "Who's labor earned the money to buy the things in the purse? What if I say, 'I discovered the backpack'? Would that make it mine?" They begin to see that all stories are told from a point of view and, by extension, that history is never value free or objective.

Then, I lead the class in a discussion of the "how" of reading this Zinn text. I first ask them how the reading process was different when they were reading to answer questions. I DO NOT RUSH THROUGH THIS INVALUABLE DISCUSSION as this is how students gain insight into what it means to read critically. This discussion fosters metacognitive awareness (an awareness of the comprehension process) and an understanding of how reading to answer questions facilitates close reading. Next, I ask them to work in pairs and go back to the text to get clear on any questions they couldn't answer for homework or weren't sure about. Then they share with the class what they learned from this partner work and how they figured it out. I have to prompt them to be very explicit. Vague and general answers, like "I just read it over", are not useful. I ask them which words they paid attention to this time around, or where specifically did they lose comprehension and why they think that happened.

After we discuss the questions I devised, I ask students what other questions came up for them as they were reading. This question yields evidence of active reading, active intelligent minds, gems of students' intellectual potential. Here are some of the answers I get: Why did no one seem to care about these Arawak Indians? What have the Arawaks done to deserve this cruel treatment? What does the author mean when he says that Christopher Columbus was a religious person? Ever since the world began, why do people always exploit people's weakness? Did the Indian people have any rights? Why do our schools lie about everything Columbus did? Why aren't we taught about the actual facts that happen in history? Were we taught other inaccuracies in school?... If the discussion goes well, it can reveal and engender intellectual curiosity—what true intellectualism is all about.

Now, students are ready to understand James Loewen's sophisticated points in his Introduction to [The Lies My Teacher Told Me](#). I supply students with a glossary. While they read along, I explicate the first two pages of the text. These pages discuss the

problem with the teaching of history in U.S. high schools—and how much most students dislike the subject. I read aloud, explicating, until the turning point where Loewen poses the question: “What went wrong?” Then I ask my students to predict what will come next. (The answer is that Loewen answers the question he’s posed—“What went wrong?”)

For homework, students summarize each of the next nine paragraphs. His introduction is densely written with many historical and cultural references which well-educated American youth are expected to know as part of their general knowledge. Without my direct instructional support, the majority of my students would be blown out of the woods by a reading like this one, even though it is part of the curriculum of some progressive high schools around the country.

After students have composed these short summaries for homework, we discuss them thoroughly in class, discussing the structure of the paragraphs (topic sentences, examples, etc.) as well as the content. I evaluate their summaries very liberally, with effort as a major factor in the grade.

This process and the writing assignment that all this reading is leading up to requires that they return *several times* to the nine paragraphs they summarized. Each time they do, they read it more fluently and acquire a more complete understanding of Loewen’s sophisticated ideas.

As a stepping stone to writing this first academic essay, I ask them to complete the following:

Preparation for the 2nd Composition

Directions

In your 2nd composition, you will relate Assata’s view of her education (particularly history) with the Introduction to Lies My Teacher Told Me and also write your own opinion.

- Find a quotation from Assata (p. 29 (bottom), p. 32 – 33, p. 35, p. 175, p. 176 (top)) that in some way relates to the introduction. Write the quotation here:
- Discuss Assata’s words. Restate them and explain them in your own words. What is your opinion about her point? Explain.
- Now, explain how her words relate to the introduction from Lies.... Refer specifically to two of Loewen’s points.

Doing this homework assignment requires that students reread Assata and Loewen *for a purpose*—the purpose of drawing a conclusion about the teaching of U.S. history in the public schools. Reading for a purpose is an essential component of critical reading and something that can only be taught through completing complex assignments, like this one.

Reading Zinn and Loewen equips students for the intellectual work of analyzing a passage about Columbus that is excerpted from a typical history text. What follows is the assignment I distribute as an in-class assignment.

What is the story that US history textbooks tell about Christopher Columbus?

Directions

Here is an excerpt from a U.S. history textbook used in many American High schools. How does it illustrate the points that James Loewen makes in his introduction to *Lies My Teacher Told Me*? Find at least three ways.

Born in Genoa, Italy, of humble parents, Christopher Columbus grew up to become an experienced seafarer. He sailed the Atlantic as far as Iceland and West Africa. His adventures convinced him that the world must be round. Therefore the fabled riches of the East — spices, silk, and gold — could be had by sailing west, superseding the overland route through the Middle East, which the Turks had closed off to commerce.

To get funding for his enterprise, Columbus beseeched monarch after monarch in western Europe. After at first being dismissed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Columbus finally got his chance when Queen Isabella decided to underwrite a modest expedition. Columbus outfitted three pitifully small ships, the Nina, the Pinto, and the Santa Maria, and set forth from Spain. The journey was difficult. The ships sailed west into the unknown Atlantic for more than two months. The crew almost mutinied and threatened to throw Columbus overboard. Finally they reached the West Indies on October 12, 1492. Although Columbus made three more voyages to America, he never really knew he had discovered a New World. He died in obscurity, unappreciated and penniless. Yet without his daring American history would have been very different, for in a sense Columbus made it all possible.

Working in pairs, students are asked to find at least three ways that Loewen's points relate to the passage. Thus, they are engaging in a complex thinking process—comparing two texts—one which is an example of the other—and keeping another text (Assata) in mind at the same time. Their conclusions are discussed at length during class.

I ask probing questions that make it explicit how to do a critical analysis, for example: “*Find the words that shed a positive light on Christopher Columbus.*” And, “*What was omitted from the textbook passage?*” In the case of the textbook excerpt, what was omitted, of course, leads the reader to the central conclusion—that Columbus had begun the slave trade and was therefore instrumental in shaping 500 years of modern racism in “the new world”. Now, because of their exposure to Zinn’s Christopher Columbus chapter, the textbook excerpt, and much class discussion, Loewen’s concepts about the teaching of U.S. history take shape in students’ minds. By engaging in this process, students begin to understand how ideas need to be elaborated in order to be convincing, an essential concept that cannot be taught didactically, only experientially.

Students need in-depth examples in order to think analytically about concepts. Reading the chapter from Zinn’s book gave them a convincing historical account of Columbus (with vivid primary sources) that didn’t white-wash the story. Reading the introduction from Loewen’s book exposed them to a sophisticated critical analysis of teaching and learning history that they could relate to their own school experience. Analyzing the excerpt from a U.S. history textbook helped them understand how a concept needs to be explained using examples—in other words, what elaboration is all about. And, all these supplementary texts were meaningfully related to Assata’s autobiographical experience, an individual whom the students had come to like and respect.

With much scaffolding, students are now ready to write a draft of the following academic essay assignment:

Composition #2

Assata/Lies My Teacher Told Me

Now, you will consolidate the work you have done into a composition that shows the relationship between Assata’s experience and Loewen’s analysis of the failure of US schools to teach history. You will conclude by explaining how you relate to these ideas.

First paragraph

Summarize what Loewen says has gone wrong with the teaching of American history. Begin your paragraph with an introductory sentence that includes the title, author, and main idea.

Second paragraph

Discuss Assata’s experience with education

- Begin the paragraph with a transition sentence that connects it to paragraph 1.
- Include the quotation you selected from Assata’s autobiography. Interpret and explain it in your own words. Then, explain how it relates to Loewen’s analysis.

Third paragraph

Discuss how you relate to Loewen’s and Assata’s ideas.

Discuss your own experience learning history in school.

The critical reading and thinking in which students engage, is essential preparation for this writing assignment. Students analyzed and synthesized texts, evaluated information, and made judgments about the point of view of different authors to prepare them to do original thinking and writing. They learned what it means to read closely and read for a purpose. They learned that ideas must be elaborated in order to be convincing. And, they learned that ideas matter, that they are relevant to their lives and the fight for a more just world.

Although some may argue that this was not a politically balanced assignment in that students were not assigned a text with an opposing viewpoint, I would counter that this type of assignment is a first and necessary step toward understanding argumentation.



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