Think Before You Ink

Two essay-based courses that develop the ART of writing
(Analysis, Research, Thought)

ROGER MOORE

Introduction

For years I have struggled to teach academic essay writing in my literature courses, a process
paramount to clear thinking and clear writing at the undergraduate level. At the beginning of my
academic career, I set essay topics, handed out model essays, and asked students to base their
essays on the template circulated. This was effective, except for one thing: often students did not
like or appreciate the suggested topics which, they said, were too dry, too academic, and too
teacher-biased. When I asked students to read a text and choose their own topics, however,
feedback showed that they had great difficulty in selecting and researching topics. The majority of
them did not even know where to begin.

I looked at the issue as if it were a pendulum with two extremes: with free choice at one
extreme and set topics at the other, then somewhere in between the two extremes there should be
a golden mean that enables students to exercise elements of choice. This allows teachers to
facilitate written expression of student choices, rather than dictate and structure set topics for
students. Choice, even at this level, is important because students must learn as early as possible to
write for themselves. In fact, academic essays can function as a means of both demonstrating and
gaining knowledge. I encourage my students to view essays from the latter perspective, since it
enables me to facilitate the students to assess the development of their learning process. It is
essential to develop this analytical ability if we wish to help students think about their university
education as a source of self-development and life-long learning rather than the acquisition of
credits.

Using the methods I will set out below, most students—if not all—can learn to develop and
think for themselves. When this happens, we are no longer working to develop skills for the few
who will follow our paths into graduate school; rather, we will assist all students in becoming more
independent and better able to express themselves according to their strengths, interests, analytical
and research skills. The initial aims of the two courses I will describe below are to develop
students’ awareness regarding choice of topic and to develop the students’ abilities to create
“ART”—the ability to Analyse, Research, and Think independently.

While writing this paper, for the fun of it, I sent Google the search question, developing essay
writing skills, and I received within seconds 4,830,000 potential suggestions. I read some of these
and was surprised at how the same key factors were repeated again and again. The more important
suggestions that I read, I am glad to say, were incorporated into our essay writing system at levels
compatible with the knowledge and skills of each individual student.
Choosing a Research Topic: Introduction to Spanish Early Modern Theatre (3rd Year)

At the start of this course, I asked the students if they would like me to set the essay topics or if they would like to choose their own. The students preferred to find their own topics, but they admitted uncertainty about how to do this. Thus I was faced with the problem that, given the freedom of choice on an essay topic, students did not know how to select a suitable theme. By extension, without explicit instructions on what to read and how to interpret it, they were unsure of how to proceed in terms of research and analysis.

I decided then, in consultation with the students, to approach this problem in a slightly different way: I set the mid-term examination as early as possible, which offered them a choice between five or six essay topics. Students were able to research several general themes, which we had outlined and discussed in class, but they did not know the exact phrasing of the essay questions. On the exam, I asked them to answer any two questions in essay format. I also asked them to sketch brief outlines of their essays on the blank side of the page. Each student must first select two topics from the five or six questions. Additionally, students must choose how to handle the outline, organization, and writing of the essays. Writing an essay under examination conditions also allows students to appreciate the value of time. The time constraints of the exam creates a set of pressures, including how much information to commit to memory, how to understand, react to, and choose the best questions, how to deal with missing facts, and how to separate one’s own opinions from that of authority figures.

When the examination was finished, I read and graded the essays. Then I sat down with each student to discuss my analysis of their essays. Because of these discussions, I was able to recommend that each student develop the ideas already present in the better of their two essays with further thought and targeted research. The examination essay emanated from a choice and thus expressed, to a certain extent, the student’s own ideas. These ideas were then ready to be developed with more Analysis, Research, and Thought (ART) into a final term paper which was then researched over the remainder of the term.

This method worked well. Students appreciated the comparisons made between their two answers and liked to see where one answer was stronger and why. Occasionally, students presented two equally strong essays: in this case, there was rarely a problem with selecting a topic and developing an essay since they were already present, quod erat demonstrandum. Likewise, students occasionally would present two poorly written answers: in this case, the student was asked either to go to the writing centre to pair up with a stronger essay writer, or to spend extra time, one-on-one, with the instructor. In all cases, however, especially after assistance, there was a clear improvement in the student’s essay writing. The students progressed consciously from the examination essay to the more formal research essay where they developed an idea or series of ideas in which they had already shown interest.

Developing ART (Analysis, Research, and Thought) in the Research Paper: Don Quixote (4th Year)

At the beginning of my fourth-year Don Quixote class, I asked the students what they expected to put into the course, what they expected to get from it, and what they wanted to get out of it; their answers surprised me. The students said that they wanted to invest their time in discussing the text in meaningful small group discussions, and learning how to write an academic research essay. This last point was quite surprising as many had done research projects in other courses focused on
writing, yet they were still not fully confident in their research abilities. We spent the first hours of the course discussing how we would achieve these goals, and together we agreed upon four basic principles: to engage students actively in the choice of their essay topics; encourage them to think deeply and carefully about what, how, and why they were writing; motivate them to plan and think ahead to avoid writing important essays at the last moment; and break the association of essay writing with the achievement of credits and grades and to look at it instead as an important form of self-development and self-expression that leads to life-long learning.

To achieve these goals, we agreed that the students would write one research paper that would be fairly substantial: 20 typed pages, 12 point, double-spaced. Endnotes and bibliography were extra and would not to be included in the page count. Students would write their essays while in the process of reading Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Discussions would take place in pairs, then small groups, and then the entire class. Grades would be awarded for individual instalments of the research essay while it was being written. As for reading the book, we developed the following reading schedule: two chapters a day, five days a week, for 12 weeks (120 chapters) with the final seven chapters being thrust into the last week.

**Schematic of Course Outline with Appropriate Deadlines**

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<th>Reading Schedule</th>
<th>Thought Process</th>
<th>Writing Schedule</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Weeks 1-3</strong></td>
<td>DQ I, 1-30</td>
<td>Choice of topic</td>
<td>First 5 pages of</td>
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<td>DQ II= Part II</td>
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<td><strong>Weeks 4-6</strong></td>
<td>DQ I, 31-52</td>
<td>Reading notes on</td>
<td>Revision of pages</td>
<td>Analysis, Research, Thinking = ART; start reading and research based on comments</td>
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<td>DQ II, 1-8</td>
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<td><strong>Weeks 7-9</strong></td>
<td>DQ II, 9-38</td>
<td>Reading notes on</td>
<td>Revision of pages</td>
<td>The link between the introduction / thesis statement and the rest of the essay became very clear, as did the need for specific research</td>
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<td>essay: pages 6-</td>
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Oral Defence

Initially there were some problems, particularly with the choice of topic. Possible topics arose from brainstorming in the paired, group, and open discussion. We agreed upon class protocols for smaller group discussions, and often students did not wander far from them. These protocols contained some basic civilizing procedures such as finding something to praise as well as something that should be improved. No attacks ad hominem or ad mulierem. These were small things, but they built confidence and the conversations generated were often carried on outside the classroom to the betterment of the course.

One technique I frequently used was to ask students a question and then allow them a minute or two to organize their thoughts on paper. This was followed by an oral exposé of their answer’s main points. Once students had something to say and knew what they wanted to say, they were able to organize their thoughts verbally. Clearly, it was much easier for them to put those thoughts down in writing. Students were then paired in class and asked to defend their choice of topics and their essay outlines. Often, a particularly good outline was then selected by the students and presented orally to the class. This defence of the outline soon became a powerful tool for analysing and developing writing skills.

As discussions became more detailed, students placed their possible outlines on the board and defended them before the rest of the class. The oral defence presented different pressures as some students started to realize they could not finish the exposé. This forced them to go back to the beginning and work on a new topic or outline. Working without time constraints introduced further pressures: how much to read, how much depth to seek, how many external sources to reference, how much time to spend on any one aspect of the paper, how to draft and redraft, how to polish and revise, and so on. It was possible to see an improvement in all three areas of academic work: the outline, the oral presentation, and the written essay. Scores of possible topics were examined and many essay outlines—not to mention thesis statements—were rejected during this dynamic period. It was a fascinating process as students’ initial ideas on the Quixote were turned upside down and inside out by the changing nature of the text. The themes of “appearance versus reality” and “madness versus sanity,” for example, were subjected to enormous changes and discussion as essays were developed and critical readings were analysed. We also approached the
text of *Don Quixote* from the point of view of a structured “work in process” that changed in nature as the text developed. Throughout the course, outlines rapidly became the basic building blocks for sentences and paragraphs, as well as for each portion of the essay. Most students would sketch an outline or plan of what they wanted to say in their oral presentations or for answering questions.

In the class surveys, and in one-on-one conversations with the students, the consensus was that they liked writing from a point-of-view they had chosen for themselves. They also grew to like the oral defence, provided they were not pressured by me to present according to my timetable. Practice in pairs—or in small groups—also helped strengthen their oral and written presentations. Incidentally, the cut and thrust of questions and answers was much more cut-throat when I was not involved.

In the oral defences, the necessity of a clear topic and thesis statement became obvious to all. It was also obvious that topics had to be severely and strictly limited. In this fashion, the topic of “Love in the *Quixote*” soon became refined; initially, it was reduced to “Love and marriage in the *Quixote*” before achieving its final formal synthesis as “Love and marriage: the relationship between Dorotea and Fernando in the *Quixote*.” This process of limitation was sometimes quite painful for the individual concerned; however, the problems of focus and limitation were shared and discussed openly by many students. I strongly believe that many minds, my own included, were opened to new ideas as we all struggled with the necessity of scaling topics down and limiting them to specific areas of research.

As the course progressed, students saw the essay writing process as a worthy investment. Each student developed a clear individualized writing process and a deliberate reading and research program. The students all thought a great deal about their reading and writing material over the twelve weeks of the course. Students became class experts in the specific topic areas they had chosen. Being recognized as an expert in a specialized area caused students to become more confident in sharing their opinions and research within that area. This process allowed students to share their ideas on several occasions before including them in their essays. Students who had not done their work were less able to participate and were exposed before their peers. The resulting peer-pressure did more to control work habits and participation than anything I could have done as an authoritarian, top-down teacher. Finally, as the term went on, the readings increased in depth, so the students were able to see how they had been betrayed by their first—and sometimes very casual—impressions. This often led to a very careful study of what they had initially said, what they really wanted to say, and how they wanted to say it. Thus, the revision process—especially of those first five pages and of the ubiquitous thesis statement—was continuous. Spoken and written presentations improved and, more importantly, students could see and record their own progress. The link between reading, research, and areas of expertise became clear, and the absolute necessity of having to “think before you ink” became a spoken reality, as did the desire to write down an outline before speaking. This process, much to the delight of some class members, came to be known as “inking while thinking.”

**Defining Moments**

One of the defining moments of this course came when I handed back the first essays in the fourth week of term. The essays had been sent to me electronically, and I was able to annotate them, word by word and in great detail by using the MSWord review and reference system. On occasion, the comments to the essays were longer than the essays themselves. I have been fascinated for years by students who receive a graded essay, glance at the grade, and occasionally “file” the essay and the comments—“file” being a local term for placing it directly in the garbage can upon exiting the classroom.
This time there was no “filing” of essays. Students looked in vain for their grades, but at the end of each set of comments was a simple request: “read these comments carefully, grade this paper yourself, based on those comments, and justify to me, next week, in a brief note (not more than 250 words) the grade you give yourself.” I had, of course, kept copies of my comments and of the potential grade of each student. When students returned their grades for the first five pages of the essay to me, I was delighted to see that they had all given themselves lower grades than I would have. This set the tone for a rigorous course in which the students responded to themselves and their own academic vision and demands—not mine.

Another highlight came when all participating students swore that they would never pull another “all-nighter” essay. There was, by the end of the course, a lucid understanding of the research and analytical skills that are needed in essay writing. The conscious process of improvement that is student directed and faculty facilitated emphasized thought, time, reading, research, and analysis. Classes continually threatened to overrun their allotted time and conversations and arguments were continued outside of class. All students became involved with their own writing process and presented and completed their own work. As a result, the likelihood of plagiarism was eliminated, as a firm understanding of both the essay as a learning process and the ART of Writing (Analysis, Research, Thought) system was developed.

Comments and Conclusions

In both of these courses, “Introduction to Spanish Early Modern Theatre” and “Don Quixote,” and more particularly the latter, I was able to provide several ways to encourage students to Analyse, Research, and Think (ART) about what they were writing. In addition, I encouraged them to take responsibility for, and pride in, their own academic work. This meant going well beyond the traditional setting, writing, and grading of essays in order to fulfill prerequisites and satisfy course and grade requirements. In fact, the “think before you ink” approach is important primarily because it encourages students to Analyse, Research, and Think (ART) well before they start to write. After experiencing the changes generated by the system I advocate, the students should know exactly what they want to write and how they want to write it before they put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

Students told me they gained confidence from making the initial choices and from having those choices confirmed. More importantly, once they started their research, review, and revision, they became interested and engaged in the thought process. Students became less dogmatic. They changed their minds. They took alternate points of view. They even changed topics. They began a process of self-determination and self-education which allowed them to think for a much longer period of time about ART (Analysis, Reading, and Thinking). This strongly encouraged them to move away from the concept of the essay as a “one night stand” that is handed in for grading purposes, but to embrace the essay as an academic exercise where they learned, with the assistance of their peers and the instructor, to develop themselves and their own analytical and writing skills.

Island View, New Brunswick
Works Cited


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