

First- and second-year Academic Writing Courses

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We split into three groups so that we could discuss the courses we were teaching with other teachers of the same course. We then came back for a whole-group reporting back. The reports below deal just with the course-specific courses of this session. A post scriptum at the end of this report briefly explains some decisions agreed by the English Department in July 2007.

Introduction to Academic Paragraph Writing:

Ellen Scattergood, Yuji Miyamaru

Ellen: The Writing Classes session again this year made me think about the names of the classes. Do we need a separate class for ‘paragraph writing’ and ‘essay writing’? One alternative is to simply separate the classes by year: 1st year students take “Introduction to Writing Skills” and 2nd year students take “Improving Writing Skills”. A worthwhile addition to the name I think would be “Introduction to Research and Writing Skills”. Focusing more on the research and less on whether the goals are paragraphs or essays – that is, making it clear in the names of the classes that the focus is on the process rather than the product – would, I think, be a worthwhile change.

That said, I don’t think the exit objectives need to be changed. Already, they focus on the skills and the process of writing. Having a goal of a 500-800 word essay by the end of the 1st year courses can be the minimum goal. With classes that move more quickly, two such essays can be a realistic goal.

There has been some argument about the spotlight being on the word ‘academic’. Does it scare the students (or teachers), and does it force us to squelch creative expression? I think those questions and many others about the nuts and bolts of how we teach the skills can be left up to the teacher to decide after s/he meets her class and finds out what they can do. Some classes may need a bit more time to explore, while some can probably jump right in to organized writing. But learning basic ‘academic’ stylistic aspects of writing (citing sources, using “an appropriately academic style”) is a reasonable and worthwhile goal for 1st year students.

I think we’re all on the same page regarding the importance of such skills as note-taking, summarizing, planning & organizing, drafting and editing. We seem to agree on the importance of a lot of free-writing and journaling. Continuing to share near-peer models of everything from free-writing to final drafts, as well as simplified or graded essays, notes, summaries, and news articles should be one

of our collective goals for this year. Having a box (real or virtual) into which we could add such useful pieces is one good idea that came out of Sunday's discussion. Do we need to create an actual manual? At this point, I don't feel the need for it. I thought about it over the week, and my conclusion is that we don't really need another textbook or manual. Source citation format may need to follow a set pattern, but other skills can be taught by the individual teacher how s/he is comfortable doing it. Again, though, sharing these products, examples, models would I'm sure help us all.

To sum up, the only real change I feel we need to make is in the naming: replace 'paragraph' and 'essay' with 'research'. Thanks to all for another thought-provoking and enjoyable retreat. *Ellen*

Introduction to Academic Essay Writing:

Andy Barfield, Meg Arai, Andy Martin

Andy M:

Use of handouts comprising of model essays, clear frameworks etc. Andy B. had thoughtfully prepared materials showing the handouts given to his students for their first cycle of academic essay writing. Unsurprisingly all agreed that models clearly showing the kind of expository / academic writing that the students should be aiming for are a good idea. Andy's materials show the steps involved, including a useful checklist to ensure that assignments handed in conform to an acceptable standard.

Notetaking Andy B. emphasized the importance of teaching note taking because it is arguably one of the cornerstones of mastering academic fluency. Hear hear. The importance of having students read it read and learn from each other's work was discussed. Again, Andy's very well designed materials enable the steps involved in having the students respond to each other's work to be easily understand by both students and teachers.

Academic fluency across the curriculum If amongst other things, we take this to mean a coordinated approach to teaching the four skills, some frustrations were expressed at the lack of coordination between teachers of speaking and writing classes with those teaching reading and listening. To put it simply, there seems little or no useful dialogue that might begin to move towards a fully coordinated curriculum. It goes without saying that this is by no means a problem unique to Chuo University. To illustrate the lack of fit between the two sets of skills I'm probably not alone in noticing the tasks set from the books used in reading classes at Chuo and other universities seem rather incongruent with the approaches and goals of the productive skill classes. We shouldn't however,

assume the approaches used in the speaking / writing classes are the only ones that are valid. Nevertheless, though keeping my questions as neutral as possible, from what students tell me, a fair amount of dissatisfaction is evident concerning what happens in some of their reading classes.

To conclude, more dialogue might enable both sides to work towards achieving mutually agreed goals, but....we all know this isn't likely to happen anytime soon.
Andy M

Andy B: I'm not sure that I actually *teach* note-taking skills. Rather, I have been providing students with many different examples of how students make notes, and encouraging them to compare and contrast what they do with these near-peer models do, so that my student can write reflections, discuss and set goals for themselves about this aspect of developing academic literacy.

Note-taking is one of the key processes across different courses that students will repeatedly be asked to engage in if they do research through English in their taught-in-English classes. I don't really see note-taking as a skill to be perfected before the students are asked to do something. It is however something that they learn to do more of, and better, as they become ever more engaged with researching content-based issues that interest them. In short: I ask them to dive into the water and notice how they and others dive (& swim), rather than practise on the side, without water, getting cold, waiting for someone to say "OK, let's try it with water now."

That difference of emphasis between skills training and engagement with content is something that interests me, because I don't think we are always on the same page as regards academic writing. There are times when it is useful to help learners focus on particular skills that they need for writing, but citation in itself or quotation for that matter is, I believe, best dealt with "at the point of need" to refer to an engaging book by Marie Nelson on such matters. One way is to teach citation skills before an essay is written (the dry option of practising diving on the side of the pool) outside of the learner's own engagement with content, i.e., social, legal, political issues that they want to write about. Another way is to help students look at how (and why) writers use the ideas of others *at the point where* student writers have been making notes, drafting and are starting to incorporate the ideas (and words) of other people into their own writing --- the wet diving-into-the-water-and-noticing what the self-and-others-do option).

I don't have any quick-fix solution for this. I just tend to see learning how to incorporate other people's ideas and information as a long-term process that students go through as part of their overall academic literacy development. The really interesting areas of discussion for writing lie, for me, in the differences of emphasis that we each put in seeing pedagogic challenges as discrete skills-focused events or complex content-focused processes for the learner. *AB*

Improving Academic Essay Writing:

Jean Pierre Chretien, Mark Broadbent

Mark: In regards to the writing courses, I was relieved to hear that I am in the same boat as other teachers when it comes to student levels. My students all have their own backgrounds and experiences with academic writing and it confirmed what I had expected: each student needs to be dealt with on an individual basis to a certain degree. Saying that, I do feel there are some general skills that can be worked on to the benefit of all students such as essay organization, summarizing, paraphrasing and note-taking. From what I heard, I am on the right track by approaching it in this way. In the classes so far we have looked at most of the above skills and I intend to revisit all of them in the following cycles.

I was interested to learn about the kinds of in-class writing activities that teachers attempt. As I feel students need time to write in class, this made me consider the idea of how much remedial writing should be done before getting stuck into the nuts and bolts of academic writing. Perhaps I could have done this rather than jumping head first into essay structure as I have done.

I was hoping to discuss how we approach peer correction, and even brought a homemade checklist to show, but somehow time didn't allow for that. With a large class of 20 or more, this technique can be one way to alert students to problem areas in their essays. I would have liked to have heard if and how others have used peer correction in their classes.

Like in the other courses, I was happy to hear about how group research projects can be employed in the essay writing courses. Although I only got a somewhat vague idea of exactly how to implement these, I did think that these projects would be a great way to link cross-curriculum goals as well as spark more enthusiasm for study and research in our already motivated students. I'd like to hear more about that for sure. *Mark*

Jean Pierre: With regard to the "Improving Academic Essay Writing" class, it would appear, after three years of observing and talking to other teachers, that many, if not most, of the students enrolled are unready to write extensively in English. Or, the class is composed of too wide a range of ability, experience, ages, need, motivation, university year; thus creating a problem of addressing all of the needs efficiently and effectively.

It might be best to rename the course or invent two different courses: one, designed for the inexperienced writer where various writing development techniques can be used: free-writing, dialogue journaling, observation, short "paragraph writing (in the style of Ellen's class for example) -- in a sense, a more

playful approach to putting word down on paper and then into a word processor. One way to offer academic writing is to perform a kind of “action research” topic on a local, approachable topic, something I am experimenting with now.

Another writing class could aim to offer an introduction to academic genres w for those who have not had the benefit of a university level writing class but who can demonstrate a certain degree of ability and experience in writing in English. For example, if they sign up they would bring specified samples of their writing to the first class. That task alone might guide them to understand if the course is appropriate for them or not. It would be best to hold down the number of students in these classes to 16 or less. *JP*

Post Scriptum: Course Changes for Academic 2008

For Academic 2008, first-year Kokki students (and those 60 or so Law & Politics students that opt to do writing in the first year as an extra English course) will choose either a *Grammar & Translation* or an *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* course. In the second year, from 2008, there will be three types of writing course: *Grammar & Translation*, *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* and *Improving Academic Essay Writing*.

Students will be able to move across the curriculum according to their choice of course in the first year, as they can at present. It is however now more likely that students who did a G&T course in the first year will be encouraged to take an *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* course in the second. Although some *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* courses will be taught in Japanese, others in Japanese and English, and some in English, they will share the same minimum exit objectives. We understand that there will be one *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* taught in Japanese in the first year, and four *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* courses taught in English and Japanese in the second year. By implication, second-year students taking an *Improving Academic Essay Writing* should be more likely in the future to have completed an *Introduction to Academic Essay Writing* in their first year.

Finally, second-year essay writing course descriptions will probably include some kind of more explicit written guidance about the connection between first-year and second-year courses. Your suggestions here would, as always, be very welcome. *AB*