

Unit Plan!

Writing an Argument about a Text: Words don't Mean, They Do!

This unit plan is for students in Writing 121 who have already gone through a unit on the more basic idea of constructing an argument! Or, perhaps, with adults in another scenario who have some of that basic knowledge, but are ready to take the next step.

Objectives!

Students will develop critical, persuasive tactics for writing about texts— and become more critical readers.

Move toward the fundamental tenet of literary criticism, and learn how to change how they perceive the capabilities of their own writing, as well as developing stronger skills for setting up an argument.

Develop commitment to citing evidence and using a text specifically to build an argument.

Resist the understanding of poems, words, stories, articles or sentences as Things that carry a stable meaning, and learn to see language as a set of referential tools that produces affects.

Improve confidence as a writer. Expand comprehension of the kinds of texts serious writers have written and write, who a writer is, how writers act, etc.

Develop skills to describe how a text is produces those affects

- Improve verb vocabulary
- Heighten level of insight
- Practice essay organization
- Develop argument-building techniques

Texts: “Good Country People” Flannery O’Connor (short story)

“Georgia Dusk” by Jean Toomer (short poem)

Articles from *East Oregonian* and *Oregon Wild*

“Poetry is not a Luxury” from *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde (short essay)

“In the Throes: The Precious Thoughts of an Author at Work” by Dorothy parker (short story/essay)

“A Letter to Women of Color who Write” Gloria Anzaldua (short essay/open letter)

Selections from *Bird by Bird* Ann Lamott (book on writing)

First Tuesday

<See Lesson plan>

Students come to class having read: “Good Country People” – Flannery O’Connor

Free write about O’Connor quote and brief discussion.

Introduce concept of words producing effects. Pass out double entry handout.

Do exercises as explained in lesson plan.

First Thursday

Before class read: “Poetry is not a luxury”

Free write, short discussion

Read together: “Georgia Dusk”

Hand out list of poetic conventions, devices, etc. we can look for.

Split class into small groups and give each group a stanza; or give each group a different aspect to focus on, like “Sensory details.” Or “The speaker.” Or “Geography.” Look for ideas, and then find places that give you that idea. Notice details. Take notes. Use the double column note taking format.

Come back to class together and share what we noticed. Emphasize utilizing notes from the two-column page format to examine how words are producing meaning.

Read: a short, critical essay about “Georgia Dusk,” with a straightforward argument, i.e. “It is about an idealized black community.” In small groups, discuss what you think the argument is in the paper, and do a reverse outline.

Hand out the essay assignment, and ask students to start thinking about it, but not to be too worried about knowing what they are doing yet. Mention the two helpful questions for starting your writing project: What is the exigency? And, where am I intervening?

Second Tuesday

Read: “In the Throes: The Precious Thoughts of an Author at Work” By Dorothy Parker (-very-short story about writer’s block)

Free write/short discussion, with the prompt: How is this an argument? Where is irony being used, and how is she using it?

Introduce concept: Bias/speakers/audience via explanation and then short video:

Ask students: how can we connect this idea to the poetic voice in “Georgia Dusk”? In Parker? In Lorde?

Look at two articles, one from Oregon Wild, one from *East Oregonian* about the shooting of two Imnaha pack wolves. Students free write about their own position and thoughts.

Small groups: hand out series of questions to tease out how the articles are producing meaning in specific ways. How do they describe wolves? Do they talk about people? How do they describe violence? Rights? Who is writing? Who is it for?

Then, have students take the opposite side than what they agree with, and write a paragraph arguing to either save or remove the Imnaha wolves.

Have time to share reflections/writing/thoughts. How did this change how you organized? How did you find evidence?

Ask students to bring in the article they want to write about to class next time.

Second Thursday

Read: “An Open Letter to Women Writers of Color” Gloria Anzaldua

Free write. Small group discussions with the question: “What is Anzaldua’s argument? How is she specifically using language to add to her argument?” This discussion should take more time.

Exercise: Argument organization.

Start by asking students to refresh us on what an argument is. Get out Toulmin’s model, and have students rehash what they know about it.

Then, ask questions about organization. Why is it important? What does it do? What do you need to have good organization in an argumentative essay?

Write ideas down on the board.

Have Students get in small groups. Hand out sample essay about marijuana legalization– five paragraphs, straightforward argument. Essay is cut into five different sections. Have students in their groups read the paragraphs, then organize them into what they think constitutes the best argument. Have students write outline of the essay they have constructed, explaining why.

Have time for students to start working on their introduction. Try and develop an idea for explaining what their argument is by the end of class. Have an example of a successful essay, and have time to look and ask questions.

Third Tuesday

Before class read: Ann Lamott, selection from *Bird by Bird*

Free write on thinking about writer's block. What is Lamott's argument about how to be a writer? What are your personal feelings on your own struggles with trying to write? How do you see Lamott's argument taking shape?

Discussion on some personal obstacles dealing with struggling to start writing.

Exercise: Close reading of a sonnet! Start with a general introduction/reminder about what's up with Sonnet form, and the idea that the poet is using language to construct an argument. Then, establish structure for how a group close reading can take place. Use a different sonnet, and maybe utilize a more outgoing/confident student to demonstrate. The pattern goes like this: read the poem, underline what strikes you, jot down observations. Then, if you notice something, like an alliteration, ask, "what's the effect of that?" And keep doing so, as you start to push interpretations out of the poem.

Have students get into small groups and practice this kind of close reading and analysis. It's ok to disagree! In fact, it's fantastic! Start practicing having confidence in your reading, which you can have when you can illustrate what the text is *doing*.

After small groups, take a minute to digest / reflect on your thoughts, and see if you can generate a sentence or two about what the poem is doing. Use specific examples from the text. Share them as a group, if you feel like it.

Save a few minutes for small group discussion about how your projects are coming along.

Third Thursday: Overview and Workshop Day

No reading. I will choose a couple quotes from one of the readings we've done so far and write them on the board, and ask students to spend a few minutes free writing and reflecting on it.

Class discussion in which we overview the different types of texts we went over:

1. Short story
2. Poem – 20th century American
3. Poem – 16th Century English
4. Personal essays
5. Informative article
6. Persuasive article (we can discuss the problematics of the distinction between five and six!)

Emphasize how all of these texts produced meaning by utilizing language. Talk about examples, favorites, least favorites of what we read. Why?

Workshop time: Have students bring in to class a “draft” of their essay. Emphasize (earlier) to not worry about how polished or finished it is – no pressure to be a mult-drafter if you aren’t one – but do emphasize that even if you don’t write in a traditional rough-revise-final draft style, you can be thinking, pre/free-writing etc. throughout, and that you should try out new ways of writing in case you find something that works.

In peer workshop groups, discuss one another’s projects. Then, do a reverse outline, or try and explain your argument in informal speech that you’d usually use.

Open question time for practical questions like citations/format etc.

Spotlight on One Day’s Lesson Plan

First Tuesday of Unit Plan – 90 minute class

Students read the Flannery O’Connor short story “Good Country People” before coming to class

5 minutes: Free write

Put quote from the story on board. Ask students to spend a few minutes free writing about their reactions to it. No big deal, you won’t have to share this/no one will see it.

10 minutes: open up class to talk about what they wrote, or to share a few general thoughts about the story and their experience with it. During this time, I can add in some important contextual information re: author, time period, themes, other work, etc, just to deepen our options with the text a bit.

5 minutes: Introduce the concept behind the exercise we’re about to do. “Words produce affects.” Denotations and connotations, subtext.

Then, split the class into small groups. Assign each group a character – Joy Hulga, Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman, or Manley Pointer.

5 minutes: ask the groups to discuss what they think about the character. What impressions do you have? Is Joy Hulga snobby, or naïve? Is Mrs. Hopewell manipulative? Is Manley Pointer scheming?

15 minutes: Ok, now that you have that idea – find evidence! Go through the story and look for evidence in the text that supports your claims about the character.

15 minutes: Come back to the large group, share our findings and our evidence. If we have disagreements, let’s focus there, and really push on the language.

25 minutes: Generate some lists together (if we aren't thinking of a lot, I have some on hand) – of literary devices and of active verbs that will help us come up with ideas about the text. Then,

Introduce double entry notebook set up. Afterwards, ask class to go back to groups, and focus on the evidence they found earlier, and then, try and form those ideas into actual sentences that say what the text is doing.

10 minutes: Debrief, have time to practice writing on your own some, questions.

Writing Assignment

Find a piece of writing about a contemporary issue – a news article, a political campaign ad, an organization's information on a topic they are invested in – that is coming from a *biased source*.

Write an essay (4-6 pages) in which you analyze how your text is making meaning with language, and how the text reflects the source's bias.

You will:

1. Create an argument about what your text is attempting to communicate to the reader – directly, and with subtext, literary devices, connotations, tone, etc.
2. Cite evidence to support your argument. You will get your evidence from your close reading of the text!
3. Develop background information about your text from at least 2 other sources.
4. Organize your ideas in a way that helps you achieve a persuasive argument.

For example: I could choose an *Eastern Oregonian* article about how Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife killed two wolves. The newspaper would, I can claim, be a biased source, because it reflects the ideas of livestock producers, and not the ideas of wildlife advocates. I could close read the article, and then demonstrate that the writer overly anthropomorphizes wolves in order to assign them more blame.

Or, I could choose an article about peaches published in a grocery store newsletter. I could argue that the newsletter is clearly focusing on the peaches superior juiciness as compared to other fruits because that grocery store is known to have an overabundance of peaches in stock, and are attempting to sell them quickly. I could find evidence of this in the way they describe peaches versus the way they describe oranges or strawberries.

I will provide a style sheet that shows an example of all the basic necessary format stuff you should have in your essay – margins, title, page numbers, etc! This information will also be on the course website.

We will go over examples as we continue leading up to the due date of successful past essays, and have time to brainstorm ideas/get feedback/practice setting up arguments. As always, all questions welcomed!