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What's the Point? Cultivating Critical Thought by Developing (Re-)Writing Skills

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Many students do not write poorly because they have nothing new to say; they have nothing new to say because they write poorly. Stylistic and structural problems often prevent students from developing their unexamined impressions into a coherent analytical argument. Awkward, convoluted, and vague sentences thwart discovery. Disorganized paragraphs and paragraphs sequenced without logic produce superficial, free-associative musings and prevent rational deduction. By learning to find and fix stylistic and structural weaknesses in their own writing, however, students can improve their capacity for logical deductive reasoning.

All too frequently, students do not develop their ideas beyond their initial reaction to the text. In their essays, they may claim to find their observations “interesting,” “surprising,” or even “fascinating,” and they can free-associate about their first impressions with ease. But they do not know how to analyze or interpret literature. They can describe the texts, or they can list a series of unrelated, unsubstantiated opinions about the texts, but they cannot identify and define a set of related textual examples and draw logical deductions from it. They may have learned to “brainstorm” or to write “stream of consciousness” essays, but they cannot articulate and defend an interpretive argument. They must now learn how to use the writing process to have a productive conversation with themselves.

Undergraduate essays often seem like first drafts because they are. Facing the requirement of producing a central thesis for the paper, students frequently formu-

late a claim prior to beginning the writing process. They superimpose their own attitudes and assumptions onto the texts instead of allowing the texts to challenge preconceived ideas and expectations. Asked to re-write, they will tinker with their sentences without developing their initial impressions. Many students have yet to discover the value of re-writing for promoting constructive thought. By striving to articulate, support, and sequence definitive statements, students can learn to think logically. They can develop their ability to discover and defend illuminating interpretive arguments.

To help my own undergraduates appreciate the causal relationship between essay form and essay content, I provide the following two handouts developed over thirty years of teaching Classical languages and literature to undergraduates. The first hand-out (below) defines and explains the following nine principles of constructive (re-)writing. Words and phrases quoted in the hand-out to illustrate stylistic problems all appeared in actual student essays.

1. Distinguish the writing process (devising a topic, pursuing an investigation, writing, revising) from the writing product (essay or paper).
2. Learn to identify “red flags” in your own writing. (Vague words and phrases substitute for and prevent thoughts. Often clustering in combinations, “red flags” expose the absence of an idea. By learning to ask and answer questions implicit in the “red flag” word or phrase, students make new discoveries.)
3. Distinguish descriptive claims from interpretive claims, and use descriptive claims to corroborate interpretive claims.
4. Present and defend just one interpretive claim per paragraph.
5. Avoid subordinating the main idea.
6. Sequence paragraphs not associatively but logically.
7. Avoid rhetorical questions.
8. Avoid the “Intentional Fallacy.”
9. Devise a thesis (overarching interpretive claim) to account for or explain all of the interpretive claims expressed in your paragraphs’ topic sentences.

The second hand-out sketches a basic pattern for a successful compare/contrast undergraduate essay. I encourage my students to devise compare/contrast essay topics, because the process helps them to distinguish descriptive claims from interpretive claims and encourages them to analyze rather than merely describe the text.

These hand-outs have helped students transform bad essays into good ones and good essays into excellent ones. Because students' needs and teachers' goals vary, however, I offer the nine principles and the essay pattern as suggestions only. I hope that instructors will find some of my ideas useful and be able to adapt them to their own pedagogical approach.



Handout 1

Nine Principles of Constructive (Re-)Writing:

1. **Distinguish the writing process** (devising a topic, pursuing an investigation, writing, revising) **from the writing product** (essay or paper).

The writing process requires numerous steps:

- » identify a topic (a question, theme, or comparison for investigation);
- » determine a set of relevant textual sources or examples;
- » write down your initial impressions;
- » then revise.

The final version of the essay should result from several sessions of revision.

2. **Learn to identify “red flags” in your own writing.** “Red flag” words and phrases signal vagueness, make sentences wordy and awkward, and usually substitute for and prevent the discovery of an interesting new idea. A “red flag” alerts you to a gap in your thinking. The presence of a “red flag” in initial drafts should prompt you to ask further questions. The effort to answer these questions will lead you to valuable discoveries.

Above all, ask yourself, what point am I trying to make? Always substitute a definitive statement. The final draft should contain no “red flags.” Common “red flags” include the following:

Vague (“empty”) words and phrases.

Vague assertions indicate the possibility of an idea but do not express one. Vague words include: “different,” “differently,” “similar,” “similarly,” “parallels,” or “contrasts.” Adding an adverb or adjective only advertises the problem - e.g. the phrases “quite different,” “starkly different,” “extremely similar,” “incredibly similar,” “surprisingly similar,” “striking similarities,” or “distinct contrasts” *still fail to identify any specific difference or similarity.*

Initial drafts may contain phrases such as: “... uniquely portrays similarities and differences between...,” “... many of the same qualities,” “These two characters could not be more different,” “Their responses manifest differently,” “... possess different aspects,” “... through different means.” Instead of merely observing that a similarity or difference exists, however, state it. e.g. *Both Aeneas and Turnus possess supreme fighting skill*; or *Aeneas seems reluctant to go to war, but Turnus seems eager.*

Other common “red flags” include: “certain,” “some,” “implications,” “effects,” “influence(s),” “hero,” “heroic,” “heroism,” “interesting,” “interestingly.”

Always delete the “red flag” word or phrase, ask yourself the necessary question(s), and substitute a definitive claim. For example:

- » “...certain characteristics...,” “... impart certain values to the audience,” “... provide important insight into...,” “The image demonstrates loud implications,” “... have an incredible impact on...” (Precisely which “characteristics,” “values,” “insights,” “implications,” or “impact” can you identify?)
- » “Dido embodies certain idealized traits.” (Which traits do you discern? Who *idealizes* them?)
- » “Aeneas possesses the qualities of a strong leader.” (Which qualities does he possess? What attributes define a “strong” leader?)
- » “...plays a major role in getting the message across” (What role? What message?)
- » “Interestingly, ...” (Why is this interesting? What does it contribute to your analysis?)
- » “... have a lot in common,” “Natural connections arise between...” (What exactly do they have in common? What connections do you see? Identify a similarity - e.g. *Dido’s people respect her authority as Aeneas’ people respect his.*)

- » “Virgil influences the reader,” “Virgil frames a certain idea in the reader’s mind,” “Virgil shifts the reader’s focus.” (Instead, define your idea - e.g. *By remaining with Dido as Aeneas leaves Carthage, the narrative focuses the reader’s attention on Dido’s suffering.*)

Passive verbs (e.g. “is shown,” “is seen”).

Ask yourself the appropriate question(s), and substitute an active verb to make a specific claim instead. For example:

- » “... is seen as ...” “... could be seen as...” “... is celebrated as ...” “... is said to be...” “... are interpreted as ...” “... is made evident when...” (Why should the reader take your word for this? What *shows* what?)
- » “Aeneas is known as...” (Who *knows* him as...? What *shows* him as...?)
- » “Dido is forced to...” (What *forces* Dido?)
- » “... is not granted...” (What *grants* or *does not grant* what?)
- » “Dido’s emotional integrity is compromised when...” (What *compromises* Dido’s “emotional integrity”? What does “emotional integrity” mean?)

Relative clauses (i.e. phrases beginning with “who,” “whose,” “which,” “that,” “how,” “when”). A relative clause often prevents you from identifying a precise idea or direct causal relationship. Substitute a definitive claim instead. For example:

- » “...which imparts a very Roman ideal.” (What “imparts” what? What ideal do you identify?)
- » “... which shows what Rome stood for...” (What did Rome “stand for” and what does that mean? Precisely which qualities does the text present as distinctively Roman or admirable?)

Forms of the verb “to be” (e.g. “is,” “are”). Often present with other “red flags,” this verb makes sentences wordy but expresses little or nothing. For example:

- » “It is through the mourning of Dido that we are shown...” (What *shows* what? Substitute: *Dido’s mourning shows...*)
- » “...are very representative of how...” (what *represents* what? What *reveals* what?)
- » “The first comparison that can be made is that...” (Just delete the entire phrase.)

“Red flags” frequently collaborate with other “red flags” to emphasize the absence of a precise idea. For example:

- » “While the themes are the same, the way Dido is portrayed is different.” (Which themes? What difference(s) do you discern?)
- » “...are very similar to...,” “There is a central parallel between...,” “... which parallels...” “...which is immense contrast to...” (Precisely what parallel or contrast do you discern?)
- » “There is a certain amount of...” (What is your point?)
- » “...the way in which Dido brings attention to this matter...” (What method(s) does Dido use? Precisely what matter?)
- » “What is fascinating is how...” (Why is this fascinating? What does it contribute to your analysis?)
- » “The behavioral traits are those that are typically attributed to women.” (Which traits? Who or what *attributes* these traits to women?)
- » “There is one scene that highlights the relationship.” (Which scene? What relationship?)
- » “... which is what makes Aeneas a hero.” (Precisely which attributes make Aeneas appear admirable?)
- » “... much like Aeneas being...” “... much like how ...” “... especially in how...” “This is a lot like...” “Another fun little parallel with Dido is that...” (Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.)
- » “The traits that Aeneas and Dido possess...” (Which traits? Substitute a definitive claim - e.g. *Both Aeneas and Dido show concern for the welfare of their people.*)

3. Distinguish descriptive claims from interpretive claims, and use descriptive claims to corroborate interpretive claims. A descriptive claim makes a factual statement about the text. (e.g. *Aeneas carries his father out of Troy*, or *Aeneas claims to have carried his father out of Troy*.) An interpretive claim draws a deduction from a textual fact or set of facts. (e.g. *Aeneas shows his filial devotion by carrying his father out of Troy*, or even, *Aeneas emphasizes his own filial devotion by claiming to have carried his father out of Troy*.) Descriptive claims incorporating textual citations, quotations, or paraphrases must immediately follow each interpretive claim (opinion). You cannot support one opinion with another opinion. You must provide textual evidence.

The effort to identify and articulate specific parallels and contrasts between two things will produce interpretive claims. For example, the two statements *Aeneas has fled from his home in Troy* and *Dido has fled from her home in Tyre* remain descriptive

claims. From these two descriptive observations, you might first have the impression that, “Aeneas and Dido are very similar.” The “red flags” (“are” and “similar”) then alert you to your failure to articulate any point of similarity. Revising, you might make a precise interpretive claim - e.g. *Both Aeneas and Dido have suffered exile*. Such a claim could prompt a further question: what compels Aeneas and Dido to leave their homes?

As you proceed to craft interpretive claims, always aim for concision and grammatical symmetry, because an abundance of extraneous details and an asymmetrical statement will obscure the point of similarity or difference - e.g. *Aeneas leaves Troy when the city is sacked, while Dido's husband gets killed by her brother and then she is told by her husband's ghost that she has to leave Tyre*. (Notice the “red flags,” the three passive verbs, in this asymmetrical formulation: “is sacked,” “gets killed,” “is told.”) This wordy, overly-detailed sentence prevents you (or your reader) from discerning either the parallel or the contrast within it. Grammatical symmetry, however, produces a nuanced interpretive claim - e.g. *Both Aeneas and Dido have suffered exile, but a foreign assault on his city impels Aeneas' flight, whereas a brother's tyranny and betrayal force Dido's departure*.

4. Present and defend just one interpretive claim per paragraph. State a definitive interpretive claim in the paragraph's topic sentence. Think of the topic sentence as a promise to the reader: this paragraph will argue and defend this interpretive claim and only this. A topic sentence must not merely describe the paragraph's topic but assert a precise interpretive argument. For example, the statement “Aeneas is seen in certain relationships with women” does not constitute a topic sentence. Note the “red flags” (“is seen” and “certain”) and argue instead, for example, *Aeneas fails to ensure his wife's safety but mourns her loss*. Or *Aeneas takes no responsibility for the deaths of Creusa or Dido*. Make one such explicit interpretive claim per paragraph and use the rest of the paragraph to provide textual evidence (consisting of descriptive claims incorporating textual citations, quotations, and/or paraphrases) to substantiate it.

Assert your interpretive claim (topic sentence) at the beginning of the paragraph. Do not leave your good ideas where you found them or relegate them to the ends of paragraphs. Your interpretive arguments will be more persuasive if the evidence follows rather than precedes them. Remember that descriptive details have no meaning for the reader, if s/he does not yet know the argument they support. Finding the argument at the end of the paragraph, the reader will then want corroborating evidence. In developing your ideas, you will very likely begin by listing descriptive details, and, subsequently, you will deduce an interpretive claim, but do

not put your reader through your process. Instead, assert the interpretive claim up front. Then list the evidence making it irrefutable. You should be able to imagine the phrase “For example,” at the beginning of each evidentiary sentence. If you continue to have new ideas as you assemble the evidence to support your topic sentence (and you will), use these ideas to improve the topic sentence or to craft a new topic sentence for a different paragraph. As you proceed, you will also discover ideas to improve your paper’s introduction, thesis, and conclusions.

5. Avoid subordinating the main idea. Assert the main point of each sentence in the main clause (consisting of a grammatical subject and a finite verb). In an early draft, you might claim, for example: “In being spurned she cursed him, revealing what damage spite can bring.” First, note the “red flags” (the passive “being spurned” and the vague “what damage”). Then notice that the main clause (subject and main verb: “she cursed”) describes the text. The subordinate clause (participle phrase: “revealing...”) expresses the interpretive idea but grammatically subordinates it. Instead, use the main clause to articulate your deduction (interpretive claim). Substitute, for example, *Dido’s curse reveals...* Then ask yourself the follow-up question: precisely what does Dido’s curse reveal? What damage can spite bring? You might claim, for example, *By initiating catastrophic conflict between Rome and Carthage, Dido’s curse reveals the vulnerability of communities to their leaders’ choices.* The main clause in each evidentiary sentence should also directly support the main clause in that paragraph’s topic sentence.

6. Sequence paragraphs not associatively but logically. As you write, ideas will occur to you by association. As you re-write, try to identify some pattern or logical sequence for your presentation and defense of these ideas. Do not simply list them as they occurred to you. Do not sequence your paragraphs as a list of unrelated observations. Topic sentences expressing *non sequiturs*, that is, failing to specify a logical relationship between ideas, usually contain several “red flags.” For example:

- » “The other point that is made evident is how...”
- » “Another way in which desirable traits are portrayed is through....”
- » “There is also another tendency to...”
- » “... which is another theme that...”

Instead, identify some logical connection between the argument in the preceding paragraph and the one following it. Ask yourself: Why do I need to place this paragraph here in the paper? Why not earlier? Or later? Is there a causal connection? An antithesis? A contradiction? For example, if your previous paragraph identifies a

similarity, and the next paragraph will specify a contrast within that similarity, you might begin the new topic sentence by asserting *Although both Aeneas and Turnus...* (i.e. briefly reiterate the preceding argument as you launch the new one), *only Aeneas...* Alternatively, perhaps the new idea results as a consequence of the previous one. You might claim, for example, *Since both Aeneas and Turnus..., both also ...* You must have and articulate a logical reason for the sequence you choose. The sequence of argument will depend entirely upon the content of the discoveries you make.

7. Avoid the Intentional Fallacy. Do not try to determine the author's *intentions*. This would require the supernatural abilities of a mind-reader. You cannot deduce the author's thoughts or intentions from a work of fiction. Instead, identify the effects of the text.

- » e.g. Instead of asserting, "Virgil is attempting to make the audience understand...", you might argue, *Aeneas' abandonment of Dido suggests...*
- » e.g. Instead of claiming, "The audience is supposed to sympathize with ...", you might assert, *Descriptions of warfare evoke sympathy for slain warriors.*
- » e.g. Instead of stating, "Virgil makes the conscious choice to...", you might point out, *Detailed descriptions of parents grieving over dead sons emphasize the costs of warfare.*

8. Avoid rhetorical questions. Devise answers instead. *Do* use rhetorical questions in initial drafts. They will help you to develop your ideas. In the final version of the paper, however, articulate answers instead.

9. Devise a thesis (overarching interpretive claim) to account for or explain all of the interpretive claims expressed in your paragraphs' topic sentences. Ask yourself, what pattern do all of my interpretive ideas reveal? Or, why is it useful to deduce all of these insights from the text? Or, what might explain or account for all of these ideas? The thesis must encapsulate all of your observations, not just some of them. (Most frequently in a compare/contrast paper, the parallels will justify the comparison, but the contrasts will lead you to a new, interesting insight.) Often, your most explicit and comprehensive interpretive insight occurs to you as you write your conclusion. Do not leave it there. Instead, move it to the end of your introductory paragraph, and revise your introduction to lead up to it. Then revise each paragraph's topic sentence so that each serves as a step or stage in your presentation of the overarching interpretive claim (thesis). The main clause in each topic sentence should directly support your paper's central thesis.



Handout 2

Basic Pattern for an Effective Compare/ Contrast Essay:

Introductory paragraph [Tell readers what your paper will argue.]

Body of the essay [State and defend your arguments.]

Conclusion [Tell readers what your paper has argued.]

Sample Topic: Compare/contrast the tale of the Trojan Horse in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Introduction (one paragraph):

1st sentence: Identify topic and sources - e.g. *Homer's Odyssey and Virgil's Aeneid both include an account of the tale of the Trojan Horse (Od. 8.62-104 Lattimore; Aen. 2. 81-453 Fitzgerald).*

Next sentences forecast paper's 1st section defining similarities between the two accounts. (The similarities justify the comparison.) e.g. *In both epics, the tale occurs in the context of _____ . In both versions, the Greeks _____ and the Trojans _____ . In both versions, the Trojan Horse causes _____ .*

Next sentences forecast paper's 2nd section defining contrasts between the two accounts. (The contrasts will enable you to discover an illuminating thesis) E.g. *Despite the two tales' shared emphasis on _____ , _____ , and _____ , Virgil's version departs from Homer's in suggesting _____ , _____ , _____ . Homer's version presents the Greeks as _____ and the Trojans as _____ , but Virgil's version depicts the Greeks as _____ and the Trojans as _____ .*

Next sentences forecast paper's 3rd section drawing deductions from the similarities and contrasts. e.g. *While Homer's version shows _____, Virgil's version shows _____. Homer's version commends _____ and _____, but Virgil's version commends _____ and _____.*

Thesis statement (last sentence of Introductory paragraph): e.g. *By revising an ancient Greek story, Virgil transforms Greek admiration for _____ into Roman admiration for _____.*

1st Section of Paper: 2-4 paragraphs defining and substantiating parallels and similarities between Homer's version and Virgil's version. Begin each paragraph with an interpretive claim (topic sentence) derived from the text. e.g. *Both accounts of the Trojan Horse include _____; or Both versions emphasize _____. Then supply relevant examples from both texts. Cite the exact passages (with line numbers) even when you paraphrase.*

2nd Section of Paper: 2-4 paragraphs defining and substantiating contrasts between the two versions. Begin each paragraph with an interpretive claim (topic sentence) derived from the text. e.g. *Homer's version shows _____, but Virgil's version shows _____. Then supply textual examples. Cite the exact passages (with line numbers) even when you paraphrase.*

3rd Section of Paper: 2-4 paragraphs. The nature of this section will depend on what you have discovered. It should develop your ideas about what the similarities and contrasts, taken together, reveal. Each paragraph might begin with a topic sentence identifying a consequence or deduction from your preceding analysis. e.g. *Homer's emphasis on _____ reveals _____, but Virgil's emphasis on _____ exposes _____. Or, for e.g., *By focusing on Odysseus' reaction to hearing the tale re-told, Homer invites the reader to _____, but by focusing on Aeneas' account of experiencing the event, Virgil encourages the reader to _____.* Each paragraph must provide textual examples in support of its topic sentence. Cite the exact passages (with line numbers) even when you paraphrase.*

Conclusion (one paragraph):

Reiterate your Introduction.

Re-cap the stages of your analysis presented in sections 1, 2, and 3.

Re-state your Thesis.

You might conclude the essay with a more far-reaching speculative claim - e.g. *Virgil's reinterpretation of an ancient Greek tale suggests that Greek ideas concerning _____ and _____ attracted Roman interest, but that Roman confidence in _____ and _____ led Romans to prioritize _____ and _____.*

Works Cited:

Author's last name, first initial. Date. Title (italicized).

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The schema suggested above provides only a basic formula. The structure of any sequence of argument must derive from the content of the discoveries that your investigation yields. You may find, for example, that each point of similarity also reveals a contrast, and you may need to sequence your ideas accordingly. Each paragraph might begin with a topic sentence as, for e.g. "*Although Homer's version and Virgil's version both emphasize _____, Homer implies _____ but Virgil implies _____.*"