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One Sentence Is Worth a Thousand: A Strategy for Improving Reading, Writing, and Thinking Skills¹

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I teach literature—which also means teaching how to write critical, analytical papers. Until I developed the assignment that will be presented in this paper, I was almost defeated by the quality of writing that students assumed to be acceptable, especially for their first essays in the course. The papers were disorganized and without a clear focus (or thesis); the writing style was grammatically poor and filled with vague, incoherent sentences and what passed as paragraphs; and there was no sense of evidence to support the statements being made. Since I had not initially established a common vocabulary for my expectations and their writing deficiencies, my endless corrections and comments on their papers had little meaning to the students who therefore learned nothing for all

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my time. Even individual conferences to discuss each paper were less than satisfactory in their results, though personal contact and rewrites of course led to some improvements. Then I tried the idea presented here, an assignment that addresses all the problems mentioned above, and more, and can help students write better papers in almost every course across the curriculum.

The assignment is simple, both to give and to grade: in answer to a question which I give the class with the first homework reading assignment, the student is to write a one-sentence answer and then to list three quotations from the reading to support the position presented in that thesis sentence. Obviously, this assignment can be used in any discipline, but for the purpose of this article, one of my own English classes will be used as referent.

Let us say that I am teaching a course in American literature and the reading due for the second class is Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Now we all know the plot of the story in which Rip goes up to the mountains to escape his wife and responsibilities, falls asleep for twenty years, returns home to find his wife dead and his children grown, and resumes his place in the community. That is the plot, and writing assignments should never deal with plot unless the class is on the most basic remedial level. Otherwise, the class discussions and the writing related to the literature should focus on themes and the function of such other elements as character, setting, images, and structure to reinforce the themes in the story. The same principle applies to the sentence to be done for homework. For example, the instructor writes the following assignment on the board:

Write *one complete* sentence answering the following question: In Washington Irving's story, "Rip Van Winkle," is Rip or his wife responsible for the quality (or nature) of their marital relationship? Then *list* three quotations from the text as evidence to support your thesis statement. (Put page numbers in parentheses following each quotation.)²

Explain to the class that the assignment must be followed precisely—one sentence, not a paragraph; quotations must

be correct; and so on. Answer any questions that the students have about the assignment: i.e., what you mean by "thesis statement," "evidence," and so on.

This question may appear to be simplistic and superficial, but much is involved in answering it. Since the community loves Rip and the wife is depicted as a shrew, the easiest answer would be to say that Dame Van Winkle is responsible for their unhappy relationship. After all, Dame Van Winkle is not known for her controlled temper and even dies of apoplexy from screaming at a peddler. However, a careful reading of the text reveals that the wife has every reason to be upset about Rip's behavior because he helps all the neighbors' wives and children, neglects his own chores, lets his family go hungry, and allows his farm to deteriorate. In most people's value system, these would be valid reasons for his wife's anger. On even closer reading, we find that Irving draws Rip with considerable irony as the judgments about Rip and his wife are based on unreliable sources like the gossiping women of the village and folklore tales. Moreover, the textual evidence points out the questionable qualities and behavior patterns in each character and therefore requires serious thinking about the question posed to the class. One of the issues, then, is whether either one alone is responsible or whether each one's personality exacerbates the weakness of the other. Not only can an interesting and valuable class discussion develop when the teacher uses the homework sentences to generate exchange of ideas among students, but the evidence required for the answer to this question demands that the students read very carefully indeed. They will also think more seriously about the story, the relationships, and the character of Rip than they would otherwise have done if they were only concerned with plot.

Obviously, there are any number of questions that may be asked about each piece of literature. The important point is that the question be based on the material in the course and on the reading assignment due the next class period. If your question is well chosen, this assignment will help students

- 1) to read more carefully.
- 2) to move beyond plot and into theme in their reading.
- 3) to synthesize the material and practice looking for the most important ideas.
- 4) to be prepared to defend their ideas with evidence from the text.
- 5) to write in complete sentences.
- 6) to become familiar with the idea of a thesis statement.
- 7) to begin to learn responsibility for basic documentation by including page numbers after each quotation.
- 8) to learn to focus perspective and improve coherence without being forced to make formal outlines.
- 9) to learn "where to begin" in writing a paper or essay exam. (Students should begin with a thesis which must be defended with evidence.)
- 10) to write more lucidly because their thesis, or focus, for the paper is clear. (When students know what they are writing about and what they want to say, their writing style will also be clearer).
- 11) to practice a style of thinking that is logical and sequential.

To be most effective, this assignment should be given as the basis for their first homework. This will require active, rather than passive, learning on the students' part, will begin to promote a coherent organization of ideas, and will establish your standards for reading and writing immediately. Also, because the students will come to class better prepared, they gain confidence about participating in the discussion while learning that no idea is wrong or irrelevant if it can be supported with evidence from the text. Furthermore, the use of this sentence/evidence exercise helps students gain access to the "mysteries" that they too often assume to be the nature of literature.

After numerous trials and experiments, I have found

the following techniques and schedule make the most efficient and effective use of this assignment:

1) At the first class meeting, assign the first sentence/evidence due the next class.

2) At the second class meeting, collect the papers. During the ensuing discussion, write on the board various ways students answered the question and, under each thesis statement, list the best evidence that can be chosen from the text. When you write the material on the board, reorganize it to reinforce the logical sequence of ideas for the students. This technique gives students confidence by letting them see that you value their ideas and gives them the chance to participate in class discussion without losing track of the conversation or material for their notes. Putting the ideas on the board not only gives students the sense of their importance but also offers those people who learn more effectively through visual means a better opportunity to grasp and remember the concepts. Furthermore, when they copy the material from the board, their notes (from which they will later study for exams) frame the ideas in an organized form. As this assignment and the discussion technique are repeated during the semester, this logical ordering of concepts and evidence becomes part of their styles of thinking—at least in your course.

3) Evaluate the papers and return them on the third day. You may or may not want to grade the first assignment; you may simply want to put a + or — with comment.³ However, briefly comment on the sentence—the validity of the idea, the grammar, and the phrasing. This establishes *your* standard for their writing and will make them aware of how clearly they express their ideas (this will be an advantage to you and the students when they write the formal paper). Then look at whether each piece of evidence does, in fact, relate to the thesis statement and whether the evidence chosen is the best material in the text to support that statement. As the students become more proficient with

this task, the time involved in correcting is greatly reduced.

4) Any error in writing or logic in choosing the best evidence to support the thesis as it is phrased requires revision which may be done on the same paper so that the instructor has the original and the revision for quick and easy comparison. Revisions are to be passed back to you at the beginning of class 4. Correct them again, and you are ready to give the next assignment for another piece of literature in the course.

This sounds like a long, involved process, but it is really very easy, and this sequence of assignment and revision must be followed from the beginning of your course. Thereafter, each assignment will be graded⁴ and any serious errors should be corrected by the student.⁵ During this process, explain how this assignment relates to how you want papers, essays, or lab reports organized: thesis statement will be part of the introductory paragraph, each piece of "evidence" will be part of the body of the paper and will often determine the "topic" of each paragraph, and then a paragraph of conclusion is added at the end. Outline this material on the board, i.e.:

- I. Introductory paragraph—includes thesis statement
- II. Body of the paper—includes evidence as part of subsequent paragraphs⁶
- III. Paragraph of conclusion—indicates the significance or implications of the thesis, rather than just a summary of what has already been said.

You may give this one-sentence assignment, which is quick and easy to correct, any number of times during the semester. It can be used as quiz grades, both for homework and in-class assignments. This may also be used as the basis for small group discussion: the students come into class with their sentence and evidence, and you break the class into small groups so the students may discuss the quality and validity of each other's thesis. This technique also improves their discrimination about the appropriateness of particular ideas and the best evidence to use in defending

their interpretations. Any number of variations for class activities may emerge from this simple thesis statement assignment (debates, devising a thesis by group, defending an alternate thesis, and so on).

However helpful I have found this technique to be, it does not solve all problems. In fact, this assignment is only effective in improving student papers if it is repeated several times for separate works before the first paper is written. Even then it does not guarantee all perfect essays, but it does promise that most of the papers will be more organized and therefore more lucid and coherent than they would be if you had not prepared the students. I would also suggest that the first couple of papers be very short (2 pages), that they be revised with the grades raised by the revision, and that the first papers be written in response to a question given by the instructor, much as the homework assignment is framed. This gives the students a sense of continuity between the homework and their writing of papers and also helps to give them some direction and confidence in their initial efforts.

How long it takes for a class to reach the point of writing a five-page essay or a longer research paper, for example, will depend considerably on the educational level and motivation of the students in a particular class. In junior high or high school classes, you may want to use this sentence technique as the first step in an evolving process leading up to a complete essay. For example, after giving students practice at writing thesis statements with evidence, have them expand a thesis sentence into an introductory paragraph which they revise until it is acceptable. One paragraph is much easier to grade than a long essay, yet students are getting practice at writing sentences, coherent paragraphs, and the introduction for a longer essay. Next, have them add a second paragraph incorporating a topic sentence related to the thesis and one quotation used as supporting evidence for their thesis. (You might want them to underline their thesis at first so that they keep their focus clearly in mind.) This process may be repeated several times for different literary pieces, each time before the literature is discussed in class. Then have them

write a complete two-page essay on a story or poem that may be discussed in class on the day the essay is due. They should be comfortable writing an introduction and other paragraphs, so the new challenge is with the paragraph of conclusion. By working with very short assignments and only gradually expanding the length of the essays, the instructor is not overwhelmed by long, badly written material, can explain errors more easily to students, can correct the papers more carefully and systematically, can require revisions for every writing effort, and can help students with serious reading and writing deficits to gain some confidence in self-expression and to improve through constant practice. Revisions are essential because the rewrite forces the student to address his/her own special problems, recognize the improvement resulting from further correction, and accept the revision process as part of the writing process. Since revisions are so much easier to grade, they also offer teachers relief from the endless hours of corrections while still giving students practice and additional grades.

Even when students are writing complete essays, I repeat the sentence/evidence assignment throughout the semester to reinforce the cognitive skills required and to ensure that the homework reading is done carefully. This offers students the opportunity to earn grades on a task that they have learned to do well, and it certainly enlivens class discussion.

I am convinced that one sentence, if used effectively, can be of considerable value to both teachers and students. If all English teachers from the seventh grade on used this method⁷—or one that is similar and designed to achieve the same goals—then students would recognize a consistency of approach and purpose in education, their organizational and writing skills would be reinforced in every class, the quality of their reading would be improved, and their literary orientation would be toward themes and structures, rather than simple plot. While all students can benefit from this approach, the college-bound students would be especially enriched as they look to an easier and more successful transition to college work.

NOTES

¹The concept and techniques in this paper were first presented at teaching workshops, sponsored by the Instructional Development Program and the Lilly Endowment, at the University of Rhode Island (Spring and Fall, 1981). Evolving versions of the paper were presented at the Lilly Teaching Awards Conference, Virginia (April 1981), at the Second New England Conference on Teaching Students to Think, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (November 1981), and at recent workshops at the University of Rhode Island. I am grateful to the faculty whose questions and suggestions at these sessions helped to improve this teaching method. I am also indebted to Professor Sue Vaughn of the University of Rhode Island Writing Program for her incisive comments and corrections of the present text.

²The question may be answered in numerous ways. For example: 1) Dame Van Winkle is responsible for the problems in the marriage because she was a mean and unpleasant woman. 2) Rip is responsible for the unhappy marriage because he ignored his family and let them go hungry. 3) Rip is responsible for the trouble in his marriage because he cared more about being admired by the people in his village than about accepting responsibility for supporting his family. 4) Since Dame Van Winkle seemed to make life miserable with her bad temper and Rip was too irresponsible and selfish to take care of his family, both of them apparently contributed to the problems in the marriage. 5) Because the judgments about Rip and his wife are based on unreliable sources like the village gossips and folk tales, we cannot know the truth and therefore cannot assign total responsibility to either one of the characters.

³The instructor may want to use the first assignment simply for practice, thereby giving the students some idea about how to do this exercise. Thus, the first homework assignment may not be collected but may simply prepare students for a lively class discussion. Thus, the teacher on the second day may discuss the statements and evidence that the students wrote but then give another question, due the third day, for the same story and on a theme not yet discussed in class. This second homework task of sentence and evidence can then be collected on the third day, graded overnight, then returned on the fourth day of class.

⁴Criteria for grading may be based initially on the grammatical correctness and relevance of the sentence to the question being asked and on the appropriateness of the evidence for the position taken in the thesis sentence. As the year progresses, just as your questions will gradually require more complex thinking and sentence structure for answers, your assessment of the quality of the sentence may also be based on the sophistication of the reading and interpretation of the piece of literature.

⁵ An effective grading strategy for me is to raise the original grade by averaging that grade with the revision for the first two homework assignments. Thereafter, all corrections are required, but the grade is not raised. If the student does not correct the assignment when requested to do so, the student gets a zero for the whole assignment. My rationale is that the revision is crucial in teaching students better thinking and writing habits. Eventually almost no revisions will be necessary, and students will experience the pleasure of competence and will enjoy doing this assignment.

⁶ As students begin to write subsequent paragraphs, the instructor must indicate the importance of a topic sentence for each paragraph and of effective transitions between paragraphs.

⁷ If all classes in humanities, languages, social sciences, and physical sciences, as well as English, used a similar method for reading and writing, such reinforcement and interdisciplinary approach to education would have numerous advantages for cognitive development in students.