
Scenario-Based Writing Assignments

by

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What Makes Writing Assignments Work Well?

Forty some years ago, when I was a soft-skinned student well on the way to flunking out in my freshman year at Southern Methodist, I read Newman's *Apologia*, where he says that the first building he would erect at a university is a dormitory. I took issue with him then, because I suspected that most of my vices as a student were directly attributable to living in a dormitory. That was the place where students learned to dissipate, not to learn. But I have since changed my mind. Dormitories and fraternity houses and dining halls and sports complexes--these are the settings for most student learning. Students often pick up more things they value in the breaks between classes than in the classes themselves.

What was missing in my own dormitory experience was that nobody conceived of living spaces as adjuncts to the classroom. If anything, it was the other way around: the classroom was an adjunct. The real purpose was to have fun. Nobody had taken the trouble to convince us students how the two could be complementary.

What we professors find before us when we face a group of college-age students is an unparalleled opportunity. Since they were two years old, these students have probably never been so open to new experiences and to new people; never again will they be so open.

We can exploit this opportunity by connecting our subject matter to events in the students' immediate environment. We can't take over and use all elements of the fun

culture: the booze, the sex, the animal energy, the glandular secretions. Nor would we want to. But we can tap into these sources of power. Instead of fighting the fun culture or trying to compete with it, we can subvert a part of it to our aims.

The Problem Of Teaching A Lot Of Content

The ideas I outline here came together when I was teaching the History of the English Language. This is an upper-division course populated mainly by English majors. Studying the History of the English Language presents students with a lot of problems. It deals with linguistic phenomena that students are not prepared to deal with. It deals with minor people they've never heard of. It deals with the long ago and far away. It is remote from the collegiate fun culture. As Lee Modesitt put it, "The History of the English Language does not sound like the most fascinating of subjects, even for English majors."

Teaching English Language of the Renaissance period (1500-1650) poses a special problem. In this period, the language changed rapidly. But after the relative excitement of the tawny Anglo-Saxon invasion, the heroic defense of the Island against the Danes, the Norman Conquest, and the rise and fall of the French language in England--relative excitement, I emphasize--the intellectual battles that occupied literary and scientific men in the Renaissance are apt to seem a bit dull. Students find it hard to relate to the problems that attracted scholarly attention then: recognition of the vernacular, standards of usage, establishment of orthography and enrichment of vocabulary.

The Lure Of The Old Way

The main problem I encounter when I teach The History of the English Language is my own culture lag. The subject is beautifully suited to the old method of teaching. There are a lot of fascinating old bones lying around.

A knowledgeable lecturer can talk indefinitely on any of a thousand abstruse topics. There are so many neat things to say, so many relics to fondle. The problem is that while fondling these old linguistic fossils, the course itself becomes a fossil.

In the old way of teaching this material, I would assign, say, Chapter 8, "The Renaissance, 1500-1650" in Baugh and Cable, *A History of the English Language*, then I would lecture and we would discuss it (or I would). Then I would ask students to answer questions like the following ones from Cable's workbook:

1. Define "Inkhorn terms."
2. What problems did the modern European languages face in the sixteenth century?
3. How did Renaissance scholars deal with the need to enrich the English vocabulary?

These questions and the classroom procedures they imply looked pretty standard to me not too long ago. But while questions like those may lead a diligent student to a systematic and thorough mastery of material, I would expect that few undergraduates would study 25 of them in a one-week survey of English language of the Renaissance. I doubt that many would try. Few would see the point.

The "Commingled Recyclables" Assignment

What I needed was an assignment to replace the study questions and the workbook assignments. I wanted an assignment that would get students to read the chapter and write a paper based on the material in it, or significant portions of it. What I came up with was the assignment I entitled "Commingled Recyclables." This scenario-based assignment on the English language in the Renaissance proved successful. Here's the assignment sheet:

Assignment on Commingled Recyclables

Scenario You and a friend have noticed that the bin outside Rounds Hall 203 is labeled "COMMINGLED RECYCLABLES." Your friend, whom you think of as a language purist and a conservative, has objected to the use of these words on the grounds they are new, unnecessary, and misspelled. Your friend comments as follows: "Those aren't really words in English; somebody just made them up. Besides, they are misspelled. They should be Co-mingled Re-cyclables--if anything."

By referring to the experience of language scholars during the Renaissance, write an essay in reply. Include all of the principles Baugh and Cable discuss (207-234).

Purposes The purposes are for students

- to become aware of how Renaissance language scholars handled the problems of orthography and enrichment.
- to see how the "letter devised by a Lincolnshire man" by Thomas Wilson 1) illustrates the "problems" of orthography and enrichment; 2) shows Wilson's shortsightedness; 3) suggests problems inherent in language reform.
- to find solutions to present-day language problems in the history of the English language.
- to become more habitual and insightful observers of the language.

Sources

Baugh and Cable, Chapter 8 (The Renaissance, 1500-1650), especially the sections on Orthography (207-213) and Enrichment of Vocabulary (213-234); lists of words in Baugh:

Elyot, 213-219, Wilson 218-219, Baugh's list 222-223, and Shakespeare 233; The Oxford English Dictionary.

Background

During the Renaissance, scholars attempted to make the English language more adequate by solving problems of spelling and by enriching its vocabulary. Yet many of the attempts were subject to criticism--some of which still seems valid. The same principles are at work today.

The Elements Of Scenario-Based Assignments

1. The Scenario. The scenario-based assignment works, I believe, because it shows how contemporary linguistic phenomena and issues have been handled during the history of the language. Students use the textbook as a source for the paper they write, not merely as a body of information to be learned and recited; they actually *use* the information they dig up. Students don't merely read, learn, regurgitate.

2. Specifications. The "Commingled Recyclables" assignment provides clear guidelines for students. The assignment demands well-focused work that students are capable of performing.

Specifications spell out my expectations. I tell the students the problem, suggest sources, describe the procedure to follow, and suggest a length. They know the goal they are working for.

3. Procedural Directions. The assignment explains the procedures students are to follow.

4. The Library Component. While students are required to use the text, dictionaries, and additional references, there is nothing in this assignment that smacks of the unproductive scavenger hunt.

Evidence For The Superiority Of This Assignment

When I first used the "Commingled Recyclables" assignment, I observed that students became engaged in classroom activities to a higher degree than usual. They seemed more interested in freewriting, talking, contributing ideas, passing their papers around. Afterward, students commented that they *liked* doing the assignment and got a lot out of it.

One student wrote:

The paper assignments were very useful because they made me realize that the material actually is useful.

Another wrote:

The "Commingled Recyclables" assignment was real world and applicable to *our* environment...A1. And a third wrote:

Because usually there was no right or wrong answer, we had to be confident of our own personal ability.

These are gratifying comments from students in a course that presents a heavy load of densely-packed historical and linguistic information.

The papers themselves show that the students were engaged and liked what they were doing. This combination of high interest, high satisfaction, and high quality is unbeatable.

What was most interesting to me was to watch the students learning to shift back and forth easily from the present to the past. During the course of the week that we discussed the English language during the Renaissance, they increasingly applied the lessons of the past to present contexts, thought of related issues and parallel examples, and discussed both the issues and the concrete examples. On their own, they brought in articles on recycling and talked about the language problem with outsiders. One student carried on a running conversation with a man who directs a recycling operation.

Developing Scenario-Based Assignments In Other Courses

The scenario-based assignment seems to work well in courses that require students to learn a body of material. When I teach my course in Ancient Literature again, for example, I'm going to apply the scenario principle. As before, I will want students to examine the text of *Genesis* to discover the relation between the people and the land. I used to give students a flatfooted assignment like this:

"Read *Genesis* and explain how people are related to the land."

But now I plan to change the focus and provide them a scenario.

A New Assignment On *Genesis*. My new scenario-based assignment will read something like this:

The government of Israel has claimed for almost fifty years that it has a right to Palestine because of the covenant between the Lord and Israel as recorded in *Genesis*. A friend of yours has commented, "They don't have any more right to the land than the Arabs." Examine *Genesis* to discover the basis for the Israeli claim. Considering the evidence in *Genesis*, what argument could you make to support their claim?

This assignment, I think, will engage the students more clearly in the issues. It might entice them to read beyond *Genesis* to *Exodus* and to search out the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

As a second example, when I teach *Deuteronomy*, I have typically asked students to read Deuteronomy 28, Psalm 1, and later works informed by the Deuteronomic Code, then to summarize, analyze, comment, and judge. A scenario-based assignment would likely engage them more, for example:

A friend of yours has said, "I suffered through the earthquake in San Francisco. We lost everything. I no longer believe in God." Respond to this comment. Show how this concept is related to the blessings and curses in the Biblical texts (Deuteronomy 28 and Psalm 1).

I haven't abandoned lecture altogether. I always spend some time in class explaining something or describing something. But the amount of time I talk is less than the time students work, in groups or independently. I also believe that students must memorize certain things, such as the periods in the history of the English language. That

way, they have a hook to place ideas on, and are not so apt to put Alfred and Malory and Johnson and Murray in the same century. I also believe in tests, for the same reason. Those are tried and true methods. But I don't use them nearly as much as I used to.

In completing a scenario-based assignment in the History of the English Language, students have learned a method of inquiry and the habit of asking and answering questions about the English Language. As other questions occur to them--or as they come up in their own thinking in years to come--they will have a method for finding answers.

I have found that these procedures give students a handhold on the problem, tell them what I expect, and coach them while they go at it. They work so well that I am going to continue to use them. There may be nothing new here; I borrowed all of the elements. But they make a powerful combination.

Like any good method, traditional or new-fangled, this new kind of assignment helps students master a body of information. But more than that, it helps students learn to use sources appropriately, ask important questions, become interested in the subject, discover a method they can transfer to other areas, synthesize material from various sources, see the relevance of the past, engage in peer review, practice process writing, and write to learn as well as learn to write.

By channeling some of the energies of the collegiate fun culture, perhaps we can build a community of teachers and learners that more resembles Newman's model of the university and less resembles my experience in 210 Atkins Hall at SMU.