For Freshman English: The Four Language Arts

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For kindergarden through "grade thirteen," James Moffett describes a series of assignments meant to create evolution from one kind of discourse to another, a loose structure allowing language experiences to reinforce each other. Thus he describes a continuum from spontaneous and planned dialogues to the essay and from interviews and surveys to research with documents. He also talks about the often overlooked need to simultaneously develop the four language arts skills--the two productive and two receptive activities: speaking and writing, reading and listening.

> Most striking are the bias and incompleteness of what schools have often called language arts of English. Despite some innovations it is heavily biased against the productive activities of speaking and writing, against oral comprehension and composition, and against nonliterature. Not only does it favor receptive activities--in particular, reading and literature--but it fills the curriculum with information about language that cannot be justified in teaching speaking, listening, reading, and writing.[1]

James Britton also writes about the need to "shuttle between" speech and written forms: to use visual spectating and talk-gossip to form perceptions and instigate writing. His gradual and continued learning out of the expressive to poetic and transactional discourse is contrasted to another, less successful option:

> There is always, of course, an alternative hypothesis to ours: that if you limp about long enough in somebody's language you will learn to walk in it.[2]

While these researchers advocate unity and progression in language arts, freshman English has not tapped such possibilities. Because it is a writing course, the class has centered on this activity, with students often hearing lectures on form or grammar and perhaps participating in whole class discussion. Readings have been models to enforce a writing technique or suggest ideas for writing. Active talking and listening combined with ongoing reading and writing, however, have not been typical nor have students been expected to refine their talking or listening outside of class. The course has also lacked the suggested progression: we usually begin and end by writing 500 word themes with an introduction-support-conclusion organization. Students often start with a personal narration or description, but then they march through the modes of exposition, each similar in length and structure.

This repeated "limping around" in the language of the fairly formal essay, then, is meant to produce competent essay writers. At my university, though, we must question whether this procedure is working. This fall quarter, 61% of our entering freshmen received the same grade or lower for the course as for the first two papers: thus only 39% received a higher grade. 10% went from B to A writing; 29% from C to B; and a larger percent, near fifty, started at our noncredit grade, equivalent to a D or F, and received a C in the course. These figures perhaps indicate that, except for those starting out lowest, the course measures what students know upon entering it: the "limping around" produces little improvement. Such results also show that students are not prepared for a quick move from description to exposition to argument. Indeed, since at many universities freshman English is a weeding out (i.e., high flunk rate) course, we are expecting students not to learn.

Why aren't students able to make the essay their own language? High school training cannot be expected to provide the needed readiness. For the basic students, preparation may mean repeated grammar courses aiming toward a state proficiency exam, not work with language or active participation. Because of overloaded classrooms and the many expectations placed on the English teacher, basic students frequently write just 350 words per semester and the average ones may not write much more.[3] And for the best students, "college prep" can mean lectures on literature and "limping around" in college forms and grading.

Finally we should not blame earlier classes but admit that we, their college teachers, do not build a continuum to teach the skills we aim toward. Although the course is for writing and thus has isolated this skill, improvement cannot be widely obtained without also talking, listening, and reading: such regular activities are crucial for success in invention, commitment to writing, depth of content, and revision.

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If the first quarter class is to begin with description and narration, students are usually asked to work from their own experience. The Bedford Reader, for example, instructs students to write four paragraphs describing a place, thing, event, feeling, abstraction, or person (a friend or roommate, a typical high school student, one of your parents, an elderly person you know, a prominent politician, a historic figure).[4] Students, however, don't necessarily write well on familiar subjects and lectures on description

techniques will not help much. For these beginning assignments, we should emphasize out-of-class and in-class talking, listening, writing and reading as required steps.

First, the assignment suggestions, like these from Moffett and Gordon Rohman, should stipulate not the subject but an integrated prewriting method:[5]

> Spontaneous Sensory Monologue - Choose a place away from school that you would like to observe, go there with paper and pencil and write down for fifteen minutes what you see, hear, and smell.
> Reporting an Event - Go to a meeting, sports event, or other event and take notes. Ask questions of the participants. Then plan for a report and analysis.
> Composition of Place - Begin writing in a place of significance to you. Try to observe the surroundings carefully. Go from the detail to your reactions.

Students should come to class with their written data collected by talking and listening, as professional journalists amass material before proceeding. Then in-class talk, critical reading, and listening should begin. Students can tell other members of a small group about their ideas and intended audience, decide on detail to add, and work on a focus and structure. They can circle the best details, try to write a thesis for other papers, guess what is being described, and hear or read a whole paper and write responses to different drafts. So, instead of generally discussing the assignment and reading one or two models, students can craft their own work, while reading published models as well as their own drafts and then revising. By collecting meaty data and working through it, students profit from all the language art skills.

If students are then to move to exposition, they should work on transition assignments involving these same skills--the jump should not be sudden and final. A fine transition from description data is the interview, teaching students to record visual and oral data and be involved through questioning, then to move to a thesis and support it with background reading, quotations, paraphrase, and judgments without following the chronological order of a narration. The football coach, mayor, World's Fair chairman, and even an Atlanta gigolo have made excellent subjects for these papers. Other assignments from Moffett move from description and narration to essays of ideas:

> Reporter at Large - Visit a place or business or operation and take notes. Write an account of the operation with a judgment of it.
> Chronicle - Write a narrative and analysis about a developing trend or situation that took place in a large group or community that you know about.

Again students can compare information--a group might deal with related issues--and together shape their final products. Here they can see the natural combinations of comparison, causal analysis, or classification that will best convey their information.

As the course progresses, or in a second term, students might further develop exposition, or essays on ideas, carrying over their regular thoroughness. Here Moffett's assignments show how generalizations and theory can be derived from specific observations:

Thematic Collection of Incidents - Tell briefly several different incidents that seem to you to have something in common, that are joined in your mind by some theme or idea. State the theme only as much as you think you need to.

Generalizations Supported by Instances - Make a general statement about some aspect of people's behavior that from your own observation seems true to you. Use a number of examples to illustrate your generalization. Draw your examples from among the things you have observed and read about that led you to this generalization in the first place.

If students choose to write on cheaters or roommates or afternoon jobs, they should be able to rely on detail to engender thoughtful analyses.

In this introductory course, students also need to work with controversial ideas--argumentation where refutation is needed. For this skill, they need to see the immediacy of their arguments instead of working alone on euthanasia or capital punishment. They might now extend their research--from interviews and surveys to pamphlets, journals, and books--to explain their point of view and to answer their group's probing questions. They should also be able to argue the other side--know their opposition. This investigation could lead to a preliminary writing assignment:

Dialogue of Ideas - Let two voices, A and B, discuss or argue some controversial issue. Set down this dialogue form without stage directions.

Dealing with complete information, students can form panels, take votes, and fight it out. With such complete language work, they can offer complex arguments to persuade an audience and move toward informed Rogerian compromises. Thus they discover fallacies or emotional appeals instead of hearing lectures on them and can really delve into funding for the soccer team, the plight of street people downtown, or the benefits given to campus athletes.

This structure of active small group learning--of talking, listening, reading, and writing--is also desperately needed in our writing about literature courses, often a second term. In these courses, students often hear lectures passively and the assignments lack a progression: students write themes of similar length on poetry, drama, and fiction. Common essays compare a student's experience to a character's, analyze the function of a character or situation, or argue for or against the position adopted by the story, play, or poem. The frequent class structure of lecture or large class discussion and the combinations of many genres and time periods often lead students to flat and unthoughtful papers (three reasons Willie Loman killed himself): the literature remains outside students' experience and writing expertise.

If students are to write from personal experience, they need to work with developed connections to the literature. They might use a composition of place approach, starting at the literature as a place and prewriting out the ideas it generates. Students can meet together to discuss their personal incidences and shape their writing.

To begin to deal with scenes or characters, students need thorough experience with literature, understanding how it works and means. Here Moffett especially stresses learning about literature from the inside. Students can perform play scenes in small groups, improvise scenes from a short story (or off-stage or summarized action), or imagine a scene from a year after the action. They might

transpose a poem into prose, change words and thus connotations, and write a response to its ideas. Groups can stage pantomimes, improvisations and rehearsed readings (story theatre, readers theatre, chambre theatre) and they can test ideas that emerge for argumentation. They can debate their interpretations, reading out their evidence and considering alternative opinions.

Our students do not need to be given interpretations in lectures; they need to learn through involvement. Assignments should focus on appreciating literature and relating experience to it, not on attempts, usually failed, at reproducing literary criticism. As groups work through ideas and writing, they might begin to choose their own readings and projects. They need not go right through assigned readings that usually appeal only to a minority. Such active work and responsibility can help with the motivation problem so many students experience in the course.

A third course, or perhaps a unit in one of these courses, is the longer research project. Usually students pick an author and read works and criticism to summarize a career; other courses focus on issues such as marijuana law or the draft. Then lectures follow on note taking, outlines, footnotes, and bibliography.

Research, however, should not be a separate unit of any writing course. Students should always be expected to back up their personal judgments with data of all sorts, from first paper to last. Longer papers should evolve when a student or group becomes interested in a complex issue. Students should see that research starts with a need for more information and that "doing research" means more than reading research. For a longer project on benefits given to athletes for on campus, example, research could include talking with campus recruiting officers, athletic department officials, and recruiting officers as well as conducting surveys of student opinions and reading magazine articles on situations at other schools.

Moffett's ideas on the four language skills may at first seem like accessories in a writing course, extra activities to add on a free afternoon. But they should instead be viewed as crucial for developing ideas, learning persuasion, and appreciating literature. Throughout the freshman year, students need to see writing as united with other language arts--a writing course must involve them all continuously. Instead of passively listening, students should talk and respond, read critically each day, and write from these experiences. Students do not need to be taught to write and to read literature; they need to learn to write, read, talk, and listen.

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Notes

[1]James Moffett, Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 13.

[2]James Britton, "Teaching Writing," Problems of Language and Learning, ed. Alan Davies (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 124.

[3]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. 14.

[4]X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy, The Bedford Reader (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 72.

[5]The composition of place comes from D. Gordon Rohman, "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," CCC 16 (1965), 106-12; and Donald C. Stewart, The Authentic Voice (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1972), pp. 104-25.

The other assignments and later ones in the article come from James Moffett, Active Voice: A Writing Program Across the Curriculum (New York: Boynton Cook, 1981); Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers; and A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).