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Supporting Students to Craft Specific, Complex, and Nuanced Thesis Statements

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Many students, especially those new to or unfamiliar with academic discourses, may face challenges with writing in specific, complex, and nuanced ways (Sullivan et al., 2017). Students are often expected to express ideas with “subtlety and nuance” yet might struggle with developing ideas in academically valued ways, including specifying meanings, acknowledging complexities, and distinguishing slight shades of significance (Schilb, 2001). Corrigan (2019) articulates a need for students’ writing “to have more complexity, more nuance, more insight, more depth, more critical and creative thought” (p. 3).

Engaging in a peer review process can nurture students to develop complexity and nuance in their writing and to recognize such qualities in others’ work. However, students may face difficulties with commenting meaningfully on others’ writing, raising a need for instructors to scaffold peer review in ways that encourage constructive feedback (Kim, 2015). By offering guidelines and support with the peer review process, instructors can sharpen students’ close, careful attunement to writing while honing students’ capacities to critically read others’ work (Chamberlain, 2009).

In this teaching tip, I share an exercise that immerses students in offering feedback on their peers’ draft thesis statements. Because thesis statements serve as a place for students to articulate and frame their

arguments, focusing on thesis statements can offer students a starting point for developing complex and nuanced arguments in the rest of the paper. Students often struggle with crafting thesis statements that acknowledge the complexities and nuances of a text or topic. Encouraging a closer attention to the thesis statement can support students in crafting more specific, focused essays. By annotating each other's thesis statements, students can pinpoint specific areas for growth or improvement, become more critically aware of their writerly choices, and reflect thoughtfully on the writing process.

Context

I teach this activity as part of a peer review workshop in a first-year college writing course at a university in the United States, and the activity is suitable for all students, including multilingual writers. The assignment sequence for this course consists of a literacy narrative, a rhetorical analysis essay, a research-based argument essay, and a multimodal composition. The exercise I present below supports students in crafting thesis statements for the rhetorical analysis essay. However, the exercise can also be adapted for other levels and contexts involving peer review.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will be able to craft more specific, complex, and nuanced thesis statements for a rhetorical analysis essay.
- Students will be able to recognize qualities of specificity, complexity, and nuance in their own and others' writing.

Course Format

This exercise, including the discussion and workshop portions, can be adapted for a face-to-face, hybrid, or online environment. Students need access to individual computers and a shared document platform like Google Docs.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers should prepare slides or handouts that explain the guidelines and criteria for writing a thesis statement, along with examples of effective student-written thesis statements from past classes. Teachers should also find examples of original and revised thesis statements from previous students; drawing on examples of student writing can help model for students what revising a thesis statement looks like. To model the process of commenting on others' thesis statements, teachers can show students the original and revised versions of the thesis statements along with the teacher's feedback on the statements.

Estimated Time

This activity takes about 60–70 minutes, including a whole-class discussion (10–20 minutes), a peer review workshop (30 minutes), and writing/revision time (15–20 minutes).

Procedure

1. The class period before the peer review workshop: Introduce the guidelines and criteria for thesis statement writing relevant to the assignment or task. For example, while teaching rhetorical analysis essay writing, I instructed students to draft a clear, specific thesis statement that articulates an original, unique, and nuanced insight that their analysis aims to demonstrate about the text students have chosen to analyze for the essay. Alongside the guidelines, I introduced three components of effective thesis statements:
 - a. Specificity—clearly defined or identified
 - b. Complexity—consisting of different yet connected parts
 - c. Nuance—characterized by subtle or slight shades of meaning or expression
2. As a class, discuss examples of effective thesis statements written by students from past classes. Ask students to evaluate each thesis statement based on the criteria of specificity, complexity, and nuance.

Possible discussion questions could include: Where do students identify qualities of specificity, complexity, and nuance in each thesis statement? What changes, if any, would students suggest that each writer make to the thesis statement to make it even more specific, complex, or nuanced?

3. Ask students to come to class prepared with one draft thesis statement; this may be a low-stakes assignment that scaffolds the full essay.
4. The day of the peer review workshop: To model the annotation process and scaffold strategies for commenting on others' writing, I share the original and revised versions of an example student-written thesis statement alongside my annotations on the thesis statement, using the comment function on Google Slides. To illustrate how the revised version of the thesis statement is more specific, complex, and nuanced, I also color-code words and phrases in the revised version that illustrate specificity, complexity, and nuance (one color each for specificity, complexity, and nuance). Appendices A and B show an example color-coded thesis statement and annotation.
5. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students each and have students offer feedback on each other's draft thesis statements.
 - a. Have each group collaborate on a shared Google Doc (you can ask students to share the doc with you as well).
 - b. Ask each student to copy and paste their draft thesis statement into the doc so that it is visible to the other group members.
 - c. Encourage students to annotate their peers' thesis statements using the comment function, with suggestions for improving the statement's
 1. specificity (clearly defined or identified).
 2. complexity (consisting of different yet connected parts).
 3. nuance (characterized by subtle or slight shades of meaning or expression).

Guide students to follow the annotation process you demonstrated in the previous step. You could encourage students to identify and comment on specific words and phrases in their peers' thesis statements that could be further refined based on the criteria of specificity, complexity, and nuance. You could also offer sentence starters for commenting on others' writing (e.g., "I wonder if you could specify" and "Could you explain this idea further"). If a student does not have anything to add to what the others have already written, you could encourage the student to identify commonalities across the peers' comments and to work together with their peers to support the writer in refining the thesis statement.

6. Invite students to discuss each group member's thesis statement and offer comments and suggestions for improvement.
7. Offer time for students to revise their thesis statements based on the feedback they received from their peers. You can encourage students to synthesize the comments they received to develop a plan for revising their thesis statements based on their peers' suggestions.

Caveats and Alternatives

Although I taught this activity as part of a unit on rhetorical analysis writing, this exercise can be adapted for different assignment genres, including argumentative essays, research papers, and other kinds of analysis writing. This exercise can also be adjusted for other elements of writing, including evidence incorporation and analysis. For instance, students could comment on a body paragraph, noting where the writer could incorporate evidence to support their ideas.

Depending on the goals of the assignment, students could collaboratively develop criteria for evaluating one another's writing. For example, engaging the class in a rubric creation exercise could nurture students' agency as writers while supporting them to refine their craft.

References

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