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## **Defining a “Good Writer”:**

### **A Unit on the Definition Essay**

#### ***Immediate Objectives***

This unit will result in the production of a 3-5 page definition paper by the students. Furthermore, because they will be defining “good writing,” the students will have to think about the act of writing, standards for its evaluation, and sources of authority in judging quality. It is hoped that, by thinking and writing about these matters, the students will move toward identifying themselves as writers and trusting their own judgment in matters of style. Also, the students will become familiar with the rhetorical genre of “definition,” through reading a model essay and writing a definition essay of their own. Finally, in reading Orwell's essay “Politics and the English Language,” the students will be exposed to a view of “good writing” that, while it is admittedly Orwell's own, is comprehensive and sensible, focusing on specificity, conciseness and clarity of thought.

#### ***Longterm Expectations***

In the longterm, the students' familiarity with the rhetorical genre of definition will help structure their reading and writing in other courses. Much academic writing employs definition to add new terms to the discourse of a field, to set up standards for evaluation, and to set up systems of classification or place objects within a pre-existing classificatory

scheme. The unit also sets up and then complicates the idea of “good writing,” ultimately allowing the students to define it for themselves rather than blindly accepting outside authorities. This will prepare students for the academic world by making them aware that discourses are to be questioned and the individual scholar has the right to establish new standards of evaluation. Finally, the unit brings in the idea of dialect, through Mencken's piece. Through dealing with how dialect interacts with standard language in producing definitions of “good writing,” the students will begin to see that language is a marker of identity and that they can identify themselves as scholars through using standard academic English in their writing for classes.

### ***Connection to Course Goals***

This unit meets Learner Outcome 5 in MSU's course proposal for English 100 by leading the students to “make informed choices about the appropriate uses of particular dialects, including those of their home languages as well as those valued in academic and professional contexts.” It is also a partial fulfillment of Learner Outcome 6, which calls for the production of “4 polished papers or the equivalent [...] that demonstrate both rhetorical breadth (variety) and depth (moving selected pieces through numerous revisions towards final polished form)”. The unit also employs Teaching Strategies 1-4 in that document.

### ***Procedure***

The following table contains a timeline of activities, assigned readings, and written assignments for the unit. The unit takes six days of class time, assuming an hour per class, and it is best suited for early in the semester. Most of the group activities are modeled on the classroom style of Dr. Jeanmarie Roughier-Willoughby, a professor in the Russian and Linguistics departments at UK who specializes in pedagogy, among other things. Thus, I

have participated in similar exercises and can vouch for both their effectiveness and their ability to fit into an hour of class time.

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Day One	Briefly lecture on the genre of a “definition” paper. Optionally divide into groups of 3-4 (i.e. students can choose to work in groups or alone). Within each group, develop a list of features which define “good writing.” Afterward, each group will present its list and these will be collected on the board. Assign Orwell's “Politics” as a reading. Remind them to annotate while reading.
Day Two	Briefly lecture on the use of definition in writing, i.e. to establish criteria for evaluation or classification. Optionally divide into groups of 3-4. Present the following questions on the board and assign one to each group. 1.) Summarize Orwell's definition of good writing. 2.) Does Orwell's political position and/or historical moment show through in this essay? How? 3.) How does Orwell's definition of good writing fit in with your own? 4.) Do any of Orwell's complaints about the state of English hold true today? 5.) Why does the state of the language matter, in Orwell's opinion? The groups will present their answers to the class for discussion. Assign the “Declaration of Independence” as a reading. Remind the students to annotate, and to think about how this document fits into Orwell's idea of “good writing.”
Day Three	Ask the students to write a short response paragraph describing how well the “Declaration of Independence” matches Orwell's idea of “good writing.” Remind students that this paragraph will form a part of their unit grade, and that there is no fixed “right” answer. Distribute H.L. Mencken's “Declaration of Independence in American” and give the students about ten minutes to read it. The students will optionally divide into groups of 3-4. Assign the following questions, one to each group: 1.) Which version of the “D.O.I.” is easier to understand? Why? 2.) Does Mencken's rewrite qualify as “good writing” according to Orwell's definition? Your own? How? 3.) Why does Mencken break so many of the standard grammatical rules in his rewrite? 4.) Is anything in Mencken's rewrite offensive or dated? Point out specifics. 5.) What happens when one rewrites a document like the “D.O.I.” in one's own dialect? Does identity come into play? The groups will present these answers for discussion. Assignment: (due next class meeting) Rewrite paragraphs 1-2 and 30-32 of the “D.O.I.” in <i>your</i> own everyday language. Use of dialect and slang is encouraged.

<i>Day</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Day Four	Let each student read aloud his or her rewrite of the “D.O.I.” Have each student outline (in list or traditional outline form) on paper how he or she would define “good writing” at this point. Then, the students will exchange papers. Each student will read another's outline and discuss similarities and differences in their ideas on “good writing.” Briefly review (through lecture) the structure of the “definition paper” genre. Look back at Orwell's essay and discuss how it fits into the genre. Pass out the “Content” portion of the rubric. Assignment: (due next class meeting) Write a paper in which you define “good writing.” The audience for your paper is the class. You are writing a guide that will advise them on how to write well for college. Draw from your own experience as a writer and reader. The paper should be 3-5 pages, double-spaced, in MLA format (approx. 1000-1500 words). Bring two copies to the next class meeting.
Day Five	Students will give one copy to the instructor and one copy to another student. The students are to review each other's papers and write comments on them. However, explicitly instruct them <i>not</i> to mark any of the following: grammatical errors, spelling errors, wording suggestions, or punctuation errors. Instead, their comments should ask questions of the author and mark points at which they don't understand what is being said. While they are doing this, the instructor will be marking each student paper in the same way. Also, the instructor will fill out the “Content” portion of the rubric for each student's paper. At the end of class, all the papers will be returned. Also, hand out the second rubric, including the “Form” section. The next draft will be due at the next class meeting, and again two copies are required.
Day Six	Students will give one copy to the instructor and one copy to another student. The students are to review each other's papers and write comments on them. This time, grammatical errors, spelling errors, wording suggestions, and punctuation errors are fair game. While they are doing this, the instructor will be marking each student paper in the same way. Also, the instructor will fill out the rubric for each student's paper. Hand out the full rubric, including the “Participation” section. At the end of class, all the papers will be returned. The final draft will be due at the next class meeting.
Day Seven	Final drafts due. Begin the next unit.

## **Assessment**

This unit is graded and uses formative assessment. The evaluation rubric is divided into three sections, “Content, “Form”, and “Participation.” The first section covers the ideas

in the paper, i.e. whether it rhetorically functions as a “definition” paper, whether it draws on the student's experience as a writer, and whether there is evidence or reasoning to back up the student's definition. The second section covers the formal aspects of the paper, such as grammar, punctuation and spelling problems. The third section gives students credit for having participated in the classroom activities leading up to the assignment.

In order to help the students prioritize, the whole rubric is not given to the students until the class day before the final draft is due. Instead, when the students are assigned draft one, they will receive the “Content” section. For draft two, they will receive the “Content” and “Form” sections. For the final draft they will receive the entire rubric containing all three sections. Their score for the unit will be determined by their score on the final rubric.

### ***Criteria for Evaluation***

	<i>Subscore</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Multiplier</i>
<i>Content</i>		To what extent does the paper present a clear definition of “good writing”?	3
		To what extent does the paper draw on the student's experience as a writer and reader?	3
		To what extent does the paper use reasoning and/or evidence to back up its definition?	3
<i>Form</i>		To what extent does the paper avoid errors in usage and syntax?	2
		To what extent does the paper avoid errors in spelling and punctuation?	2
		To what extent does the paper avoid errors in diction (i.e. misuse of vocabulary)?	2
<i>Participation</i>		Attendance = Number of days present / 6.	1
		Group activities = Number of activities participated in / 3.	1

	<i>Subscore</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Multiplier</i>
		Written activities (response paragraph, D.O.I. rewrite, outline) = Number of activities participated in / 3.	1
		Peer review = number of sessions participated in / 2.	1
<i>Grade</i>	sum(subscore * multiplier) / sum(multiplier)		

### ***Theoretical Rationale***

The structure of the entire unit (topic exploration, reading, response paragraphs, written assignment) is based on Irene Clark's model (535-37). The assumption of this type of writing lesson is that students will write better on a topic after they have become familiar with it. Since this unit asks the students to define “good writing,” the first several days are spent in familiarizing the students with the topic, first presenting the easy answer (Orwell's essay) and then problematizing it (the “D.O.I.” and Mencken's rewrite). This approach is similar to the “gradual yet deliberate unfolding of multiple and conflicting ideas” which Mary M. Salibrici has found to be effective in promoting critical thinking in the writing classroom (632).

The idea of working toward familiarity with topic and genre before starting a paper goes back, in Clark's view, to classical rhetoric:

A fundamental invention concept derived from the ancient rhetoricians [...] is that it is important to familiarize students with the topic they are going to be writing about, help them feel comfortable with the subject, and make sure that they understand what is expected of them. (84)

To this end, this unit lets the students “play” with the idea of good writing for several days

and gradually articulate, first through a group activity, then in outline form, what their own views are on the subject. In addition, Orwell's essay is explicitly presented as a model for the genre in which the students will be writing. Thus, the students are not being asked to invent the genre of "definition" on their own, merely to work within it.

Orwell's essay defines "good writing" the easy way, i.e. it is writing which has features X, Y, and Z and avoids doing A, B, and C. There is nothing wrong with that and I fully expect the student essays to come back with a similar structure. However, I do not want the students to accept Orwell's answer simply because of who he is, or the fact that I have assigned his essay. In order to complicate the situation, I have the students look at two versions of the "Declaration of Independence": the original and H.L. Mencken's 1923 rewrite of it "in American."

The first thing they will find is that the original "D.O.I.," while it is unquestionably "good writing," would not be considered so under Orwell's specifications. The vocabulary is highly Latinate, frequently uses a "long word where a short one will do" (Orwell 627) and is frequently redundant ("immediate and pressing importance," "light and transient causes," "abuses and usurpations," "injuries and usurpations" ["Declaration"]). This should signal to the students that Orwell's recommendations are not the last word on "good writing." Mencken's piece further complicates the issue.

When Mencken rewrote the "Declaration of Independence," he used a very colloquial version of English. It is chock full of slang, double negatives, bad pronoun agreement, curse words, and racist epithets. However, I think the students will find it easier to understand what is being said in Mencken's version than in the original. So, is good writing concise, as Orwell would have it? Is it ornate and powerful, like the original

“D.O.I.”? Or is it earthy but comprehensible, like Mencken's version of the “D.O.I.”? This question, if the unit has done its job, will remain unanswered in the students' minds. Once they have gotten past the idea that “good writing” is a standard that exists “out there,” I believe they will feel authorized to establish a standard on their own terms.

The actual prompt for the writing assignment draws from Julie Neff Lippman's recommendation for an effective writing assignment. Lippman argues that in order to respond effectively to a prompt, students should be given more than just a topic. In addition, according to Lippman, they should know the genre, “the purpose of the paper, the audience for it, and the situation within which it would be produced” (206). Thus, the writing prompt for this unit calls for a “definition paper,” a genre which has been modeled in Orwell's essay. It also establishes the situation, purpose and audience of the paper, i.e. the paper is written to define “good writing” for students in their class, in order to help them write better for college.

The method for dividing into groups is inspired by Dr. Rouhier-Willoughby's classes. She integrates group work into almost every class meeting, which gets the students engaged in the material. However, realizing that there are multiple learning styles, she also gives students the option of working alone if they happen not to be social learners. This allows students who are uncomfortable working with others to fully engage the material in the way that suits them best. The policy also has a basis in pedagogical theory. Theorists as early as Jung recognized the difference between “introverts,” who “like more individualized and reflective educational exercises” and “extroverts,” who “favor more interactive activities, such as small group projects” (Salter 110).

The “partial rubric” method and the limitations on first-draft commenting in this

unit are inspired by Nancy Sommers's ideas on responding to student papers. In her study, "Responding to Student Writing," she found that teachers often send mixed messages in their comments, calling for surface revisions and expansion and re-organization of ideas in the same draft (Sommers 235). Such commenting, Sommers argues, leads to a "misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity" (235). She recommends a more effective approach, in which the instructor's comments on the earliest drafts "respond as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text" (238).

To this end, there are two peer/instructor review sessions in this unit, which means the paper goes through two drafts before the final, polished version. The first peer/instructor review focuses on ideas. Using Sommers's recommendations as a guide, both students and instructor are only allowed to a.) ask questions of the author and b.) register points in the text where the meaning is not clear. Limiting the comments in this way will help prioritize the students' efforts in early revision, i.e. it will encourage them to worry about surface revision later and to get their ideas straightened out early. The second peer/instructor review session opens up the possibility of commenting on surface errors, to help the students produce a polished and edited final draft.

The formative assessment used in this unit is similarly modeled on Sommers's recommendations. As Lippman defines it, formative assessment "puts emphasis on shaping students' writing while they are still in the process of writing" (203-4). Thus, the first rubric the students receive as a guide to writing their drafts focuses entirely on content issues. It is hoped that this will encourage them to think of content in their earliest drafts and worry about mechanical issues later. For the second draft, the students receive an expanded rubric,

containing both the “Content” and “Form” sections. After working out their ideas in the first draft, they can begin to look at editing surface errors. The final rubric adds a “Participation” section, so that the students know to what extent the classroom activities they've been participating in will be reflected in their unit grade.

The rubric itself is modeled on those used for writing assignments by Dr. Robert Royar, at Morehead State University. It sets up evaluative criteria which receive subscores from the instructor between zero and one. These subscores are then multiplied by specific weights, so that the criteria form a hierarchy. Content receives the highest priority with a multiplier of three. Form issues are second highest, with a multiplier of two, and participation has the lowest multiplier, one. Once the subscores have been weighted, they are summed and then divided by the sum of the multipliers, resulting in a composite score between zero and one, which can be quickly translated into a percentage score and mapped onto a letter grading scale, e.g. 90-100 is an A, 80-89 is a B, and so on.

Using an analytical scoring rubric, available to the students as they are working, reduces both the real and perceived subjectivity of grading papers. The students come away with the sense that they have been judged fairly and the instructor has greater confidence that he or she has graded all the papers with equal and well-established criteria in mind.

Finally, the unit deals with the issue of language as a marker of identity, specifically colloquial dialect versus standard academic language. It is a concern of mine that the writing classroom is often a site of reproduction for “standard language” hegemony, in which students are given the impression, either explicitly or implicitly, that their home language is not a real language, is too informal for any use but between friends and family, and is inferior to the “standard language” of white, middle-class America. This

unit is designed to present standard language as but one choice for writers, specifically useful for when writers wish to identify themselves as academic. This idea is in line with Sharon Klein's characterization of language as "a club" (425), i.e. language marks the user of it as belonging to a particular group. Because of language's connection to identity, it is very important that we, as writing instructors, avoid causing students to devalue their native languages, including non-standard dialects of English.

This issue is particularly important in a unit which focuses on defining "good writing." The easy way out, of course, is to take Orwell's approach, and see "good writing" as a definable entity that exists "out there" in the world. However, to complicate the students' ideas with respect to standard language and "good writing," the unit follows Mencken's lead and asks the students to rewrite a portion of the "D.O.I." in their own everyday language. This may be standard English, but it just as well may be AAVE, Appalachian English, Spanish, a "youth" dialect or any number of other languages. The goal is to leave the students with the impression that, although it is important to mark oneself as an academic by using standard academic English in college papers, other languages are just as valid as forms of expression and carriers of meaning. Hopefully, they will begin to see "good writing" as a product of the choices one makes with respect to style, precision, and voice rather than adherence to a set of artificial norms. Furthermore, it is hoped that they will see standard English as the stylistic choice one makes to identify oneself as academic. This notion will let them work toward mastery of the standard language without interfering in their pre-existing cultural identities, which are intimately tied, in most cases, to some nonstandard form of English.

### ***Predictions***

My expectations are that the unit will result in the production of papers which tackle the idea of “good writing” in complicated ways which acknowledge both the stylistic norms expected in academic writing and the value and expressive power of nonstandard dialects. Furthermore, after the students have given thought to what “good writing” is, I expect the unit to have a lasting effect on their stylistic choices as writers.

### ***Follow-up***

Once the unit has finished, I intend to have the students write a ½ page which a.) describes the unit (to determine what they got out of it) and b.) makes recommendations for changes in the unit (to get ideas for revising the lesson plan). Furthermore, I will look at the series of drafts for each paper to determine how effective the “partial rubric” method and the limitations on comments on the first draft were.

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