

Deep Reading

Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom



Edited by

PATRICK SULLIVAN
Manchester Community College

HOWARD TINBERG
Bristol Community College

SHERIDAN BLAU
Teachers College, Columbia University



National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

IV. Conclusion

I thank Meredith Ross and also Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau for the opportunity to respond to Meredith's essay. As I write, I have not yet read the other student essays. Knowing the editors, though, I am sure these articles are every bit as wonderful as Meredith's, and so I am left with a great sense of confidence in the next generation. I look forward to following their reading/writing adventures, and particularly their efforts to make reading/writing teaching and learning benefit all students in this great, wide world.

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Seeing the Differences: Writing in History (and Elsewhere)

EVAN PRETZLAFF

University of California, Santa Barbara

I've learned from working with Linda Adler-Kassner that it's a commonplace for college faculty to say that writing is different in high school and in college. Certainly, that's been my experience. But what I've also realized is that college faculty don't always help students develop lenses to analyze *how* writing is different—what the differences are, why they exist, and what we can do to adjust to them. In this chapter, I discuss the experiences I've had learning to conduct this kind of analysis. First, I describe experiences with high school teachers who helped me realize that writing is, in fact, different in different situations. Then I talk about a framework, called "threshold concepts," that provides a lens that I have used to analyze expectations for learning and writing in a number of college classes with great success.

Writing in High School: Identifying Difference . . . Sort Of

Before high school, *good writing* was consistently defined as writing that included a thesis at the beginning of the essay and a topic sentence at the beginning of every paragraph. This formatting, rather than content, was seen as the most important quality of any essay. When I arrived in high school (which in my district started in grade 10), three teachers taught me that what had seemed so straightforward was actually much more complicated. Mr. Oster, my English 10 Honors teacher and subsequent AP Composition and Literature teacher, guided much of the development

of my writing style. Throughout my sophomore year, he honed our ability to analyze characters from the novels we read, the effects of the environment on them, the events that took place, and how those events relayed the importance of the novel itself. More important, he taught me how to make strong arguments by avoiding passive voice and through proper quote integration. What happened to my writing was a shift from simply writing to writing with a purpose. After his class, though, I realized that writing in English should consist of creating argumentative essays that didn't describe a text but instead analyzed it by clearly addressing a prompt and clearly arguing my points.

Mr. Oster's class was rigid. He gave the class a list of thirty rules that we could not break—things like “no passive voice” and “proper quote integration.” But while I sometimes chafed at these rules, this rigidity helped me in college because it taught me how to write what the person grading my papers wants to hear. Because we were asked to revise, the class also made me realize the importance of a strong argument and underscoring key points by answering the prompt correctly and thoroughly. It also taught me as the importance of constant revision.

If tenth grade was marked by the realization that writing needed to conform to particular rules and prompts, eleventh-grade English and history classes were where I learned there could be differences between “good writing” from one context to another. Once I entered college, this realization became especially significant. Mrs. Neagley, my eleventh-grade English teacher, sought argumentative papers that clearly hit the main points of the prompt; however, there were no “thirty rules” to constrain my style. I remember one day I asked her how best to format my paragraphs, to which she responded, “I don't care so much about the length or if they're all structured the same. Just do what you need to argue your point. There is no cookie-cutter method for a strong, argumentative essay.” A lightbulb went off: I realized that I didn't have to write five- to six-sentence paragraphs with one quote in them and move on. The length could be three sentences or it could be ten so long as the content was proper and thorough. But while these different writing assignments helped me realize that there was no *one* way to write, there were still strong similarities between them—they asked for a clear thesis

and topic sentences, proper quote integration, and conclusive evidence arguing and furthering the point of the paper.

At the same time that I was learning about the different ways to write an English paper, writing in my AP US History course, taught by Mr. Lee, helped me realize that writing in history was different, and that the expectations for writing within disciplines spoke to things that were valued *in* disciplines. In English we were given analyses of texts when our teachers discussed those texts with us; in our papers, our job was to develop those analyses. In history we used texts to develop our own analyses about events. Writing these papers showed me how the recontextualization of primary documents provides valuable insight not possible in a simple read-through and taking all the words at face value.

These differences were related to the “threshold concepts” of history, the theoretical framework I want to focus on here. These concepts are critical for epistemological participation within disciplines. Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land, education researchers who wrote regarding their research on “threshold concepts,” define them as “a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding . . . without which the reader cannot progress” (1). Threshold concepts play a critical role in shaping expectations for college-level writing because that writing needs to demonstrate the ways in which the writer—in this case, me as a student—understands and is able to employ these concepts and participate, even as a novice, in the discipline. In Mr. Lee's AP history class, I started learning some of these concepts in the discipline of history. For example, I learned that in writing for history classes, it's critical to interpret and recontextualize primary source documents, not just use them to fuel a description of “what happened” in a historical event or situation. It's also necessary to develop a thesis that makes an argument *about* a historical event and to use evidence to support that argument.

Threshold Concepts and College Writing

I came to understand these ideas *as* threshold concepts once I arrived at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In winter

quarter 2011, I enrolled in two history courses (because I'm a history major) and Writing 2LK, a required lower-division writing course. Based on my experiences in Mr. Oster's, Mrs. Neagley's, and Mr. Lee's classes, I started to think about differences in expectations for writing between history and English. Because Writing 2LK focused on the study of writing, I learned how to investigate these differences more systematically and consider their implications for my writing. Our section was a special class in which all students were also enrolled in History 17b (American History from 1840–1920).

In Writing 2LK, we used the lens of threshold concepts to analyze expectations for writing in history, especially in the second assignment of the course, which asked us to analyze materials from History 17b (syllabi, assignments, course materials) and to interview faculty or TAs teaching the course in order to identify threshold concepts. Then we had to analyze our own writing from a history course to identify where the concepts were or were not present. This explicit application of the threshold concepts framework encouraged me to think about where threshold concepts were—and were not—present in my essays and in the course itself. It also provided a useful lens for thinking about the expectations for writing in history and their relationship to those threshold concepts.

In my Writing 2LK research, I identified three threshold concepts that are especially important in history, concepts that absolutely must be incorporated into writing in history for students to be successful. These are: (1) history is subjective; (2) context is critical when interpreting primary source documents in history; and (3) revision is essential for the development of historical arguments. I'll include evidence from my analysis of these materials to illustrate these concepts. But in doing so, it's important to point out that this analysis of threshold concepts did double duty. While I was writing about threshold concepts in history, I was also engaging in threshold concepts of composition. One of the threshold concepts of that discipline is that writing is a subject of study. So I was studying writing in two ways as I analyzed threshold concepts in history and analyzed my own writing to find evidence of those concepts. Before taking Writing 2LK, this isn't something I had thought about at all; I understood

writing simply as something that students (or others) did to communicate their ideas to others.

Threshold Concepts in History

The first threshold concept I identified in my analysis of history texts is that history is subjective. In other words, history isn't a series of "facts"; it is an interpretation of events, documents, and experiences written through the perspective of informed authors. This concept is really foundational for writing in history because it's the basis of all analysis. It means that as a reader of historical documents, I have to pay attention to the context in which documents were created: Who wrote them? When? And why? And when I write history papers, I need to demonstrate that I am able to interpret primary documents in their appropriate context to create an interpretation. This is very different from just *repeating* what a primary document says, because it requires analytical thinking.

The first paper I wrote for History 17b illustrates how I applied the threshold concept that "history is subjective" in my writing for the course. This paper focused on the sectionalism crisis faced by the United States between 1820 and 1860. My essay argued that slavery was the heart of the sectional tension that tore the nation in two and led to the Civil War. I argued the points in my paper by bringing in documents and playing the role of historian in order to shape this perspective. I interpreted Hinton R. Helper's "The Impending Crisis," from a book that spoke to the Southern white majority about how only abolition could save the South from itself. I specifically focused on one line in the document: "If assaulted, [we] shall not fail to make the blow recoil upon the aggressor's head" (Helper). I argued that Helper meant that the North would not start the war, but should the time for war come, the North would retaliate with full force, crushing the rebellion.

Since historians create interpretations situated in their understanding of the document(s) and their own ideas, it's also critical that they locate documents in the contexts in which they were created. Historians don't just assume that a primary source docu-

ment represents “reality”; they think about how the documents and their creators were situated within a specific time period. Both of these ideas are conveyed to students when we are told to “think critically” when analyzing historical sources. But this is a fairly general phrase, and it’s not always well defined or understood. In history, “thinking critically” means situating primary source documents in their context and then making connections between sources and using them to paint a bigger picture. Once the analysis has yielded fruitful results, the paper more or less writes itself.

For example, in the essay I wrote for Writing 2LK, I identified how I analyzed historical documents in their context and used that analysis to develop my interpretation. First I reviewed how the South’s secession document provided reasons for Southerners to staunchly protect slavery and defend their states’ rights. I took from George Fitzhugh’s “Cannibals All!,” a document written by Southern slaveholders, the idea that advocates for slavery would be driven by their personal desire to maintain slavery and to do so through the use of legislation and dominance in Congress. Then I reviewed other documents such as Hinton Helper’s “The Impending Crisis.” Through reviewing these different documents and thinking critically about them, I gained a deeper understanding of the impending crisis.

A third threshold concept I identified in my analysis of documents from History 17b is one that applies to history, composition, and life as a student more generally: the idea that it’s critical to talk with experts—whether a course instructor, TAs, or whoever is outlining expectations for writing in a course—about which ideas are critical and how they should be represented, and then to revise writing with these expectations in mind. Remember, threshold concepts are gateways to better understanding the academic world, and what better way to gain entrance into these doors of knowledge than by developing deeper understanding of academic disciplines in this world. To quote my Japanese history professor: “Your first draft is never going to be your best work. Even your final draft can still be improved upon. Recognizing that revision plays a crucial role makes you guys better historians and writers.” I couldn’t say it better myself. Revision at its very core is a combination of mucking around, trying again, and constantly

improving. The improvement on paper reflects improvement in knowledge, understanding, and conceptualizing.

The importance of revision is evident in the writing I did in History 17b. In the initial draft of my first essay, I wanted to argue that conflicting ideologies of the North and the South led to the Civil War. I wanted to use George Fitzhugh’s “Cannibals All!” to demonstrate the North’s use of what he called “wage slavery” as both parallel to and more damaging than the South’s slavery, which he said was paternalistic. But in a conversation with my TA about my initial draft, he pointed out that I made no connection to the importance of the reading and how it tied in to the prompt. By reviewing the document within my paper, I developed the perspective that Fitzhugh’s argument was in fact a biting attack mocking Northern beliefs “in order to debase the North’s opinion of the South.” A modicum of detail and revision goes a long way in terms of understanding the meaning of a document.

Lessons Learned

What I’ve learned by thinking carefully about writing in history is that threshold concepts are reflected in the idea that the arguments put forth and the support of the arguments make the paper. Unlike an English paper one might encounter in high school, history papers are not telling a story; there’s no argument of the merits of totalitarianism in effectively controlling a society like that depicted in Orwell’s dystopian *1984*. An interpretation of hard facts and primary source documents, filtered through the historian’s informed perspective, is necessary to make the case. While an individual’s argument might not be new, despite the number of people in the lower-division history courses I’ve taken—more than 450—there’s still a chance to make a unique point, to have a different take. Creativity counts for a lot; history writing is as much experimental as it is structured. Paragraphs need not be the standard cookie-cutter five-sentence structure. Nor does a paper need to have a three-part thesis with three body paragraphs and a cute conclusion to tidy it all up. College

is a great equalizer, and what you put into your work is actually reflected in your grade. It's a simple truth, but one to live by and keep close, particularly for history writing, in which time is of the essence, and focus even more so.

Now that I've started to recognize threshold concepts in history, I actually see them everywhere. I was working with a friend of mine on a paper for an upper-division religious studies course. As we read through each other's eight-page, single-spaced final essays, we realized that while we were writing about the same thing, we were doing so differently. As a history major with an emphasis on prelaw, I analyzed the documents we were given for the assignment, thinking about the contexts in which they were created and incorporating evidence from them to support an argument about economic, social, and political reform. Dave, a psychology major, viewed the subject through psychological lenses, examining the motivations of individual actors and looking at discrete events. Another friend, Brittany, is a biology major. I read an essay she was writing for her Writing 2LK course, and I could see evidence of her experience with science writing reflected in that paper. Science writing is often about describing activities step by step, clearly addressing what went right and what went wrong, what changes could be made, and how certain results came about. This was also the way her Writing 2LK paper read.

Writing for history courses over the past two years has taught me much about my own writing and how to be a successful writer. I tool my arguments for individual disciplines by identifying their inherent and intrinsic threshold concepts. I'm then able to work with the overlapping basics such as the importance of theses, topic sentences, argumentative language, etc. However, the structure and content of essays, including all the time, effort, and revision put into them, are what make writing for history unique. It takes time and dedication to write history papers. Caring about the topic and really investing the time make a paper the best it can be.

Through formative high school experiences, significant "aha" moments, and the foundation that threshold concepts provide, I sought to situate history as a unique discipline, one in which threshold concepts define much of the writing I've done throughout undergrad and graduate school. Here are my takeaways:

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- ◆ Threshold concepts forever change how the subject, discipline, writing, etc. are seen. They can be a blessing and a curse; once you find them, they are engrained forever.
- ◆ Creativity serves as perhaps the most useful tool in structuring arguments, particularly for history. Creativity is not a formula; it is a mode of expression that requires much effort, personal time, and, yes, revision. The more creative, the greater the possibility for a good grade and a more fulfilling paper.
- ◆ Without revision a paper is of little worth. Time and consideration are two of a writer's best friends. Do not, especially for a history paper, make it a last-minute effort.
- ◆ Never be discouraged by a tough essay topic or final essay topic; those are actually the best challenges because they engage the brain; they take time and really hammer home the core values of the class, the subject matter, and the outer layers of knowledge.
- ◆ Writing styles will evolve naturally; the specific discipline will determine the views on course material and how best to incorporate (or not incorporate them) into papers.
- ◆ Easiest isn't always best. While writing is important for papers, it is good to look ahead toward the written finals for history courses, those where you have no material to work with but what is in your head before the test itself. Going the extra mile while working rather than taking the most convenient path will prove better and more useful in the long run.
- ◆ High school is very different from college in a variety of ways. College is harder and requires much more thinking due to generally more stringent grading and expectations.
- ◆ Improvements will come over time. I look back on papers and see what I could have done better, what mistakes I could fix, and how I could make my analysis even better for the next essay I have to write. Revision, even after a grade, is important.

In sum, have fun, enjoy your undergrad years, work hard, pay attention, and make time for fun and work. Balance in life counts a lot for your writing as well. As a final note, I'll reveal what I consider the ideal assignment. It's one in which the question is simple yet multitiered. I'm asked to answer rather than tell. I have a rough draft to turn in and then a final draft to turn in a week later. The question should really make me think and force me to

use primary sources almost exclusively, for, in my opinion, that's the heart of history and what it means to be a historian. There should be no set amount of sources required, and the page limit should be reasonable. We all have different styles of writing, we all come from different disciplines, and our strengths and weaknesses define the very character of our paper. It is the analysis and structuring of a paper within the framework of threshold concepts, as well as the writer's personal characteristics, that make for a detailed, unique, and strong paper.

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Shaping the Lenses: A Response to "Seeing the Differences: Writing in History (and Elsewhere)"

LINDA ADLER-KASSNER
University of California, Santa Barbara

Over the years, in conversations with colleagues inside and outside of the writing program, I've heard what I've come to think of as the "teach up" or the "blame down" countless times. The teach up is captured in the question: "What should I teach students in <my class> to help them be prepared for <your class or program>?" The blame down is a too-frequently expressed lament: "I can't believe I'm teaching my students <this thing>. They should have learned <this thing> in <a class, program, or school that came before their enrollment in my class or program>."

The teach up and the blame down are two sides of the same coin, a currency that reflects a persistent and problematic perspective of not only school, but also learning more generally. It says, in essence, that learning represents a relatively seamless trajectory, a series of steps whereby students amass one type of knowledge or skill in one site and then build on that knowledge or skill. It's not the idea of building and learning that is problematic. Instead, it's the reductive nature of the model of learning and transfer that is so challenging. As teachers and learners ourselves, we know that learning is more complicated. It involves learning knowledge and skills, of course. But the kind of learning that truly dazzles—the kind that causes us to remark on the amazing insights in the artifact we are reviewing that represents learning (whether a paper, a multimedia production, a poem, a work of art, or anything else)—requires engagement at the level of identity. That is: learners must find ways to connect with the epistemologies of the contexts where they are learning. This means, first, understanding what those epistemologies are, those lenses that people who are experts within the context use to see everything around them. Then, learners find ways to use these lenses for themselves, seeing things differently, anew. And then, finally, they represent these

ways of seeing, thinking, and interpreting. This development isn't accomplished as a straight, clean line. Instead, it's analogous to the sort of looping, back-on-itself idea of recursiveness that writing instructors think of when we discuss something like the best end point of a well-revised piece of writing: the ideas develop and then the structure and mechanics need more attention; those get attention, and the ideas develop more through engagement with the writing, and so on. Inviting learners into this process is a complicated matter, to be sure. And it happens across *multiple* contexts—in school and out, high school and college, and so on. But understanding learning as something that involves, in part, analysis of learning, and especially the expectations for learning within specific contexts, is an important step in that invitation.

Evan Pretzlaff's "Seeing the Differences" remains, to me, a testament to a learner (and writer) who has taken up this invitation and worked through it in the most engaging of senses. I met Evan in 2011, when he was a second-year student enrolled in a section of Writing 2LK (Academic Writing, UCSB's lower-division general education writing course)—the course, in fact, that he's writing about in his piece. During the quarter we worked together, Evan dove into the analysis he outlines here, of threshold concepts in history (and writing). And as he wrote this piece, he started to think about his experiences in high school courses, especially in English and history. His analysis is a testament to his own perception of the connections across those classes, to his ability to conceptualize learning across contexts and to make connections that clearly contributed to a way of seeing learning within both History 17b (the history class he discusses here) and Writing 2LK, and also beyond to other courses. For this, Evan draws on the idea of "threshold concepts" developed by researchers Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land. These are concepts required for continued development and learning within specific sites (in this case, the disciplines of history and writing studies/composition and rhetoric). Studying and ultimately hypothesizing what threshold concepts in these areas are (especially in history) enabled Evan to look back on his high school English and history courses to understand how the expectations there led him to develop particular skills and knowledge and to connect those things to expectations associated with threshold concepts in his

college courses. These kinds of connections provide a very different view of what learning looks like over time. Evan's careful reflection on his own learning, thinking, and writing, then, might provide a model for rethinking the blame down/teach up.

I should say, too: while this chapter reflects a close analysis of experience on Evan's part (because, after all, it's being published in a book for a broad audience and has been revised based on many rounds of reviewer comments provided over a number of years), his ability to analyze this experience is not especially out of the norm for students I've worked with using this approach and assignments like the ones that Evan writes about here. While I see it less often at the college level (and especially in the writing program where I teach—never there, in fact), I know there is still an occasional tendency on instructors' part to wonder if our students can embark on the kind of ambitious thinking and analysis that might be reflected in a piece like Evan's. To be sure, this assignment was given in a first-year writing class at a particular kind of university and is tailored to those students and this context. But for decades I've used assignments that ask students to reflect on the conditions for literacy that shape their experiences, whether they're tests placing students into so-called "basic writing" courses or threshold concepts in other classes in which students are enrolled. Whether at an institution like UC Santa Barbara, where I currently teach, or at Eastern Michigan University, a comprehensive regional university in southeastern Michigan where I used to teach, my experience is that students embrace the opportunity to investigate these conditions with a particular kind of gusto—particularly when the stakes associated with the conditions (as with writing assessments) are high. This kind of work, then, helps both students and teachers reflect on the broader contexts in which ideas of student practices and learning are shaped.