An Assignment to Satisfy Assessment Demands for Technical and Academic Writing

Composition courses, whether as a piece of a technical program or as a part of a college transfer requirement, meet important needs for the education of community college students. They are critical elements in establishing and ensuring fundamental writing techniques. An important duty of these classes is to provide a venue for instructing technical writing approaches or styles students may need and to prepare students through various writing approaches for higher order thinking, synthesis, and analysis (Alharbi, 2015; Sullivan, 2003).

But many community college instructors teaching college transfer composition classes struggle with balancing writing instruction for academic styles and writing for technical purposes. Composition courses for college transfer students are often shared with students in technical degree programs, creating conflicts in what areas (whether technical or academic) instructors should focus the teaching writing (Hassel & Giordano, 2013).

A particular challenge is how to blend different writing approaches into an assessment that will challenge students to use them appropriately. Typically, writing assignments are focused on single modes or genre approaches. They may be analytical or evaluative in nature, as many academic suited papers are, or they may require more reporting or synthesis of outside information, as many professional documents demand.

Combining these forms can be a good learning approach. One idea that will assess students’ abilities to work with formal, technical writing and also challenge them to provide an analytical piece for what will be a final course report, is the following assignment.

The author presents an assessment that requires students to engage in multiple writing approaches in a single document.
Context of Assignment

Writing skills needed in the workplace are often overlooked in composition courses which focus on more academic modes of writing (Mandel & Vassello, 1999). Important writing skills that a workplace writer will need are the ability to accurately synthesize and concisely report information. Students bound to continue their studies will need to produce the results of analysis and argue inferences based on data provided. A one-sided assignment falls short of providing a place for all of this, but a multi-part “Final Report” based on the development of the course provides one solution.

I have students in my composition course keep a journal that contains their drafts for the major writing modes, or genres, discussed in the course. I have varied the actual number of genres covered, but they have tended to include the Narrative, Analysis, Argument, and Evaluation as essay genres, and the Business Letter, Memorandum, Bibliography, and Report as technical genres. The Final Report serves as a capstone exercise (or a final exam) in the course to review and discuss student understanding and quality of proficiency in course material.

The Final Report Assignment (as addressed to students)

In your writing journal this semester, you have compiled drafts of different genres of the essay and of different examples of formal documents. You have collected these various drafts in a journal or portfolio to turn in at semester’s end.

For your final exam in this class, you will write a report on the contents of this journal or portfolio.

This will be a formal document of sorts and should follow the general descriptions of a report as given in the text chapter and in class discussions on the genre.

This report should include a brief introduction generally explaining the course and what the course goals or objectives were. This material can be found in your syllabus. For documentation concerns, consider the syllabus open course material and “boiler plate” text.

Create a header for each of the essay genres and formal documents you practiced in the course: Narrative, Analysis, Argument, Evaluative, Business Letter, Memorandum, Bibliography, and Report.

Under each of the headers:
- discuss briefly the purpose of each or how the genres are used;
• present your own impression of the versatility of each genre and how it can be used; and
• explain how effectively your initial attempts to use the genre were.

Finally, offer a general assessment of your writing accomplishments this semester. What weaknesses can be worked on?

Your primary source for this report is your textbook, and it should be included in the MLA works cited list for the report.

Uses and Discussion

I have had good results from students with this exercise. The pure reporting aspects of it (finding syllabi information, etc.) are not higher order analytical writing, the kind most requested for academic assignments, but students focus on providing adequate context for their writing and doing preliminary research to establish their more analytical, reflective contribution to the report. Having students review the genres for the course also reinforces their retention of specific qualifications of the genres, contributing to better familiarity with them.

The informational or reporting aspect of the assignment is also a component for much non-academic reporting that writers will encounter day-to-day in a workplace situation. Additionally, many workplace documents are not characterized by any one writing approach or genre. These practical applications of writing often demand a mix of genres within a longer document. An example might be a long report with sections reporting the status of a current project, another that synthesized outcomes from similar projects, and another analyzing the possibilities of the current project based on the information at hand. Creating assignments requiring students to maneuver various writing approaches will be helpful for them later.

As a tool of higher learning, the exercise includes analytical and evaluative aspects. These areas challenge students to go beyond reporting their experience in the course, to offer a qualified assessment of their understanding of course material, and to develop inferences about the uses of each of the genres the course explores. Using both self-reflection and evaluation as techniques, students can assess their own quality in the class and forecast the usefulness of their learning for their future field.

There are many variations that can be had with this one example. Instructors can fit it easily within their own curriculum, emphasizing one genre over another or adding those they see fit to suit the needs of the student body. However the assignment is used, it provides a flexible and effective approach to teaching important skills.
References


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