CRITICAL STRATEGIES

FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

CASES · ASSIGNMENTS · READINGS

CRITICAL STRATEGIES for Academic Writing

CASES, ASSIGNMENTS, and READINGS

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To our students and colleagues in the Veterans Special Educational Program and the Freshman Preparatory Program.

And to Ruth Kiniry and Susan Dolan, Rose Newby and Bill Newby

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Franklin Pierce Adams. Eventh from EPA Pro-

Preface for Instructors

THE RATIONALE FOR THE BOOK

The labels vary — critical thinking, academic discourse, higher-order cognition — but the fundamental issue seems to be the same. A high percentage of college students — from those entering community college to those enrolled in upper-division university courses — have trouble when they must generate concise definitions or summarize a scholarly discussion, when they need to detail a laboratory procedure, explain a method, or evaluate a taxonomy, when they're asked to compare two theories, analyze a text, or argue a position. Though some policymakers are beginning to label such activities "the new basics," these are, in fact, very sophisticated cognitiverhetorical activities — that is, activities that involve the complex interplay of thinking and writing. We forget, sometimes, how hard it is to learn how to do them. They require immersion in certain kinds of language use — ongoing practice, modeling, and successive approximation in settings where teachers have the training, time, and reasonable class load to comment and advise. We see the freshman composition course as a central place to focus on these thinking-writing activities, which we're calling here critical strategies. Such a course provides an opportunity for students not only to improve their ability to summarize, explain, and analyze but to step outside of such procedures and consider their nature and purpose. Critical Strategies is our attempt to provide an approach and a set of materials that can contribute to such a process.

To affirm the need for a curriculum focused on critical strategies is not to deny that students define and classify and analyze continually in their day-to-day lives. These are basic human activities. But many students have not had extended opportunity to engage in the particular kind of systematic defining and classifying and analyzing that occur in academic contexts, have not done so with academic materials in ways that are complex and exploratory rather than formulaic, have not had multiple opportunities to reflect on the very intellectual activity they're engaged in, have not been encouraged to complicate thinking and writing. This lack of experience will significantly limit them, of course, because the kinds of strategies they must command are not straight-

forward, mechanical routines but heuristic, generative, and flexible — they resist easy procedure.

Unfortunately, the most familiar embodiments of such critical strategies are the formulaic approaches and static models students find in traditional English textbooks. The dynamic act of comparing, for example, is reduced to two or three compare/contrast essay patterns or is represented in a fixed way through models to imitate, where the messy, interactive *work* of comparing is long since past and students have before them the closed and polished comparison essay. While we rely on familiar chapter headings — i.e., comparing, analyzing¹ — our book does not function traditionally. What we try to do is create conditions that encourage students to employ critical strategies flexibly and in combination, inviting them to engage problematic materials and seize interpretive opportunities, experimenting with and reevaluating the thinking and writing they do. Our goal is the development of a performative competence, a sense of how to take on certain kinds of intellectual work rather than merely to search for the correct form, the right answer.

THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK

Our curriculum began nearly twenty years ago in a preparatory course for adults entering college, but it has been influenced in more recent years by insights and procedures gained from two movements: English for specific (or academic) purposes — work emerging primarily from the applied linguistics and ESL camps — and writing across the curriculum. One exceptionally useful by-product of the English for academic purposes research has been the attempt to determine the kinds of writing tasks actually required of college students.²

¹ To avoid a confusion of static modes with dynamic processes, we tried to come up with a different labeling system for the strategies. We thought about following Mina Shaughnessy's lead and labeling by functional descriptions: For example, "This Is What Happened" instead of "Serializing" or "This Is Like (or Unlike) This" instead of "Comparing." But the functional descriptions got cumbersome as we got into increasingly complex activities ("Analyzing" became "This Is How Phenomena Change in Meaning as One Shifts Perspectives"). We thought, as well, about creating a new set of terms that would stress the heuristic nature of the strategies. But this resulted in a foreign terminology that created more problems than it solved. We decided, then, to stay with more familiar terms but to make them participles to indicate action, to modify and explain their varied nature in the introductions and assignments, and to use them in ways that illustrate their strategic, rhetorical flexibility.

² See, for example, Brent Bridgeman and Sybil B. Carlson, "Survey of Academic Writing Tasks," Written Communication 1 (April 1984): 247–80; and Daniel Horowitz, "Essay Examination Prompts and the Teaching of Academic Writing." English for Specific Purposes, v. 5 (1986), pp. 107–20. These fine-grained analyses divide academic writing tasks into more categories than we did. Bridgeman and Carlson's, for instance, breaks down assignments requiring comparing into "compare and contrast" and "compare and contrast plus take a position." Such analyses might also classify activities in different ways. Horowitz, for example, lists both "cause/result" and "similarities and differences" under the general heading "Display Familiarity with the Relationship between/among Concepts"; in our scheme, trying to establish cause and result is included in "Serializing" while considering similarities and differences comes under "Comparing."

An early survey conducted by one of us was influenced by this research, and it revealed — as have other such surveys — that students are commonly called on to define, summarize, compare, and analyze.³ And as the courses we taught and the programs we managed took us increasingly across disciplinary boundaries, we had opportunity to examine the contexts of written language use in the academy, and what we found was complementary with and given a public discourse by the writing-across-the-curriculum discussions emerging at our conferences and in our journals.

The tremendous value of these movements has been to increase teachers' awareness of the specialized reading and writing demands of various disciplines and, more theoretically, to move them to examine communities of discourse within the academy. One potential liability of these movements has been their tendency to represent writing instruction in a fairly service-oriented, productdirected way, that is, to assist students in learning the forms and conventions of sociology, biology, literature, and so on. Such instruction is valuable and sorely needed, and at places in *Critical Strategies* we try to provide it. But our sense is that, at least in some settings, it is not adequately critical and self-examining. It teaches, say, how to summarize material for a literature review but doesn't create the conditions for students to consider the act of summarizing. So while we see our book as oriented toward cross-curricular needs, we try not to imprison writers within those needs. Our attempt is to develop a curriculum that equips students to write well in college but is not simply functional in its orientation — a book that encourages critical reflection, that is intellectually unpredictable and vital.

THE BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

It is very hard, perhaps impossible, to teach complex intellectual processes through static print alone. What we have tried to do is to create a kind of sourcebook of discussions, cases, examples, readings, and assignments that can help establish the conditions to foster academic thinking and writing. Each strategy is treated in a separate chapter that begins with an introduction and is followed by a series of assignments. And each of these chapter introductions opens with an overview ("General Considerations") of the nature

We felt that dividing tasks into so many subcategories would make our book too difficult to use—though within discussions and assignments we try to reflect the variability represented by such subcategories. We were also reluctant, for the reasons stated earlier, to classify tasks in new ways. Though a more original classification scheme would have solved some problems, we finally felt that it would make the book too unfamiliar and, perhaps, less useful.

³ Mike Rose, "When Faculty Talk about Writing." College English 41 (November 1979): 272–79; and "Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal," College English 45 (February 1983): 109–28. For further discussion and application, see Malcolm Kiniry and Ellen Strenski, "Sequencing Expository Writing: A Recursive Approach," College Composition and Communication 36 (May 1985): 191–202.

⁴ See, for example, Mike Rose, "Speculations on Process Knowledge and the Textbook's Static Page," College Composition and Communication 34 (May 1983): 208-13.

and purpose of the strategy and its use in academic reading and writing. This overview is followed by one or more extended illustrations ("Cases") of the way one can use the strategy to think through an issue. By weaving questions and writing opportunities within these illustrative discussions, we invite readers to participate in a range of interpretive decisions, to consider the effects of varying contexts on such decisions, and to reflect upon how a particular strategy may prove inadequate. Ultimately, we hope to get students to think in fresh ways about critical strategies that, in their experience, might have been reduced to fixed models that cut short thoughtful engagement with problems. We want students to engage these strategies — use them in multiple ways, question them, turn them back on themselves.

Each chapter introduction is followed by a series of assignments, and here we are influenced by current research on the development of expertise. In an attempt to promote mastery of complex cognitive-rhetorical tasks, we provide multiple opportunities to use a strategy, with a variety of materials, arranged in a general order of increasing difficulty. Let us illustrate this pattern by focusing on four of the *defining* assignments from Chapter 1.

We begin "Defining" with an assignment that requires students to consider the ways in which familiar words can gain specialized meaning in particular disciplinary contexts. One such word is *performance*. We ask students to define its meanings in common speech and then ask them to determine and discuss, Erving Goffman's use of performance in a brief passage from The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. A middle assignment in "Defining" builds on the Goffman assignment (and others like it) by asking students to examine the range of meanings a word acquires in common and specialized use. We provide a list of sentences that contain the word light and ask students to operate like lexicographers and create definitions for each category of meaning that emerges in the sentences. This leads to a consideration of variation in meaning and the way meaning becomes established in dictionaries. A later assignment offers an account of the eugenics movement to encourage students to consider the inadequacies of typical dictionary definitions and to construct definitions that gain in meaning through the use of descriptive historical context. And in one of the last assignments we use an article on environmental policy to encourage students to consider the politics of defining: the way a particular definition — say of protection, restoration, or management — is determined by social and political forces. The amount and kind of writing students are asked to do builds as well: the first assignment requires no more than a paragraph; the last one is essay length.

The earlier assignments in a given chapter tend to be shorter and more focused than later assignments, and we encourage teachers and students to see these earlier assignments as *first passes* through a strategy — ones that can be used as rehearsals, done in rough draft or in journals, assessed as the teacher walks around the classroom. Following these "First Passes" come longer, more ambitious assignments and — in keeping with the nature of *Critical Strategies* as a sourcebook of materials — we offer a variety of *options*

for teachers and students to choose from. The materials contained in "Options," as with those in "First Passes," represent a range of disciplines — from biology to sociology — and can be assigned in a variety of disciplinary, thematic, or strategic sequences and also can be connected to research projects involving primary or secondary sources. We intend the materials in *Critical Strategies*, then, to contribute to a dynamic classroom in which students are continually discussing tables, texts, and primary data, writing about them, revising that writing, and presenting what they've written.

The second half of Critical Strategies is devoted to academic argument and consists of a general introduction and four miniature libraries for the development of sustained projects. The four collections cover cross-cultural explorations of gender roles, historical-literary considerations of a Hawthorne short story, the dispute over the origins and treatment of schizophrenia, and an investigation of the comic - thereby representing social sciences, humanities, and life sciences. In general, each of the four chapters begins with cases, primary materials, or overviews and is followed by theoretical and critical materials. A set of preliminary questions comes after the cases and primary materials, and a fuller set of questions comes at the end of the theoretical and critical texts. In various ways the questions invite students to apply and combine the critical strategies they've encountered in Chapters 1 through 6 — providing, thereby, an integrative and cumulative thrust to Critical Strategies. Having said that, however, let us also stress that Critical Strategies is not neatly linear. In the introductions, assignments, and, particularly, the teacher's manual, interrelations are drawn, and teachers are encouraged to make this book their own, drawing connections and creating assignments that fit the needs of their particular classes and institutions.

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