

Whether or not you are engaged in an outcomes study, you want to find out as quickly as possible how well your students write in relation to the goals of your course or program. These essay topics are designed, and have been used, as in-class writing assignments for the first day of class. Select one that is appropriate for your class, and it will give you important information you need to be able to teach effectively — as well as allow you to start the writing class with writing. Meanwhile, be sure to look at the last chapter of this book for a sophisticated way to use portfolios for an outcomes study, if you have the time and resources.

LITERATURE AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Since most teachers of writing have received advanced degrees in some field other than writing, they are likely to be tempted to substitute the content of those fields for writing instruction, particularly when they have had little or no training in rhetoric and think that writing instruction is a limited or even remedial activity. Further, a college course calls for substantial content and challenging reading; teachers, reasonably enough, want to teach what they know best. Yet students have enrolled for a writing course, not for one in literature or political science, and teachers and writing program administrators are concerned about truth in labeling, as are the students. While we need to maintain sufficient intellectual content in the writing curriculum, we need also to see the distinction between this material *supporting* the teaching of writing rather than *substituting for* the teaching of writing.

One helpful way to understand this distinction is by considering what sort of writing is assigned and how it is evaluated. Is writing integrated into the course as an end in itself as well as a means of learning the material? For instance, what proportion of class time is spent on such activities as prewriting, journal writing, evaluating drafts, small-group peer discussion of student writing, teacher-led discussion of sample student papers, and the like? Does the material allow reasonable scope for a variety of student interests, for a series of writing assignments with a coherent rhetorical purpose related to increasing student writing ability, for revision and development of student ideas? Do the syllabus and the evaluation procedure allow time for and reward revision of writing, and is student writing ability the main criterion for the final grade? Are student-teacher conferences about writing built into the course plan?

Or, on the other hand, is the course built around mastery of the content? Is most student writing evaluated as a product, such as a term paper that is largely the student's responsibility and is handed in at the end of the course? Are most

classes devoted to lectures on or discussion of the reading? Is the course grade wholly or largely dependent on tests or unrevised papers evaluated on mastery of the content?

For example, a Shakespeare course will define a group of a dozen or more plays by date ("early") or by kind ("tragedies") or the like. The students will spend their time reading the plays, perhaps writing an occasional limited short paper on one of them (the meaning of suicide in *Hamlet*, the clothing imagery in *King Lear*, or the hidden colonialism in *The Tempest*), and probably writing a term paper on some aspect of the plays read or on some topic relating the plays to early modern England. The students may read some Shakespeare criticism, see videos or live performances, or undertake other activities to deepen their understanding of Shakespeare. There will be a final examination, and perhaps a midterm as well, to evaluate the depth of their knowledge.

Such a course should not be called a writing course, even though it may include a good bit of student writing. The writing is there to support the learning and understanding of Shakespeare (as it should), and writing instruction is incidental to the major goals of the course. But it is not hard to conceive of a writing course based on Shakespeare (or any other content area). Such a course would use the plays to provide content for a variety of writing assignments. Perhaps one sequence could move from a description of a performance to a review of the performance to a research paper on classic performances of the same play. A comparison of *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Othello* (with their similar plot lines) could lead to a series of papers comparing comedy with tragedy as artistic forms or even as approaches to understanding experience. Class time would be spent largely on the writing problems posed by the course — though, naturally enough, some attention would be given to the reading of the plays. But now the understanding of Shakespeare would be ancillary to the student writing, and the students' grades would depend much more on their writing than on the depth of their understanding of the plays within the early modern context.

The issue is not to exclude literature from a writing course but to use whatever reading is assigned to support the writing process the students are learning to pursue. Since reading and writing abilities are interwoven in ways we hardly understand, careful reading surely belongs in a writing course. Numbers of books and handbooks are available to illustrate research and other kinds of long assignments on literature and other content areas; that interesting topic is beyond the scope of this book. But the two following assignments, scoring guides, and sample papers illustrate how impromptu writing based on a given text can support and allow for evaluation of student writing.