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ENGL 2600
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Final Project: Goals and Values

I'm not a big proponent of grading rubrics in part because I think they can reduce the work of writing an essay to a list of fairly vague criteria.¹ In the rubrics that I've seen (and written in the past²), the criteria for an "A" paper might read:

Includes a precisely worded, cogent thesis that is unique and well grounded, and that demonstrates perceptive analysis of the topic; ideas are clearly stated, logical, understandable, and organized with a clear progression of ideas; paragraphs are coherent, each fully developing an idea and clearly linking that idea to the others in the essay; written in lucid prose that is relatively error-free.

While I can certainly appreciate the desire to demystify grading, I'm not sure how close to demystifying we get with such a rubric entry. What does it mean to have "a strong thesis"? Does that mean stake a claim to argue for or against something? Or does that mean a statement that suggests an interesting project? And didn't we know that essays are supposed to have a strong thesis, be logical and well organized, with coherent paragraphs and few editing or proofreading mistakes? When you read a scholarly essay (or for that matter listen to music, watch a film, read a story), do you use criteria that focus on theses and paragraphs and sentence structure? Or do you instead focus primarily on ideas, lines of thought, and effects?

Some have become accustomed to having them (they are often required in the K-12 system) and believe they represent exactly "what the teacher wants." I think they can also make sure that the teacher doesn't get anything more than what s/he wants. I find that students are creative and interesting and I like to see what they come up with--how *they* chose to approach the assignment. To my mind, most of the productive, desirable mental labor comes from figuring out what you want to say, why you want to say it, and how you'll say it in light of what others have said and how other readers might respond. That said, I can tell you what I value in your work. (So this is an anti-rubric rubric.)

Exploration

"Essayer," the French word from which "essay" is taken, means "to try" --not to have the last word on, but to investigate, to question, to "problematize." That doesn't mean the essay can be all over the place as the writer tries out new ideas; instead, the essay follows a line of thought. (What does "follow a line of thought" mean, you ask? One beginning move of

¹ In case you are interested in what rubrics do and should do, I've added an article to the "Templates, Lists, and Links" section of our HuskyCT site.

² I've used rubrics, and there's a rubric attached to the group component of "Archive Portfolio Project" right now. When I do add them, it's usually as a way of articulating the individual components needed for the project rather than a description of the qualities a response to an assignment should have.

“following a line of thought” might be in the question “what would happen if we thought of _____ this way [in which ‘this way’ is defined]”?

Projectivity [Yeah, I made up that word.] Has the writer put together an essay for a class, or has the writer begun to sketch out a project—an interest that can be unpacked, refined, reinterpreted over time? This doesn’t mean anyone expects you to repeatedly interpret (for example) the way the endless catalogs of “things” are used in *Robinson Crusoe* for the rest of your career; instead, it means that the approach and issues grow out of your own interests and concerns, and that the scope of your work helps us to rethink our own cultural practices or to question our own assumptions.

Interpretive moves

As I hope you have gathered from my commentary on your work, I look for writing that goes beyond observation to interpretation. Interpretation, notes Culler, “cannot be obvious. . .it must be speculative” (65). Some questions that might help you think in an interpretive way: How was this [work, idea, issue, practice, event, thought, approach] shaped? Why has it been shaped in that particular way? What are the effects or implications of the shape or shaping? Generally speaking, a review of chapters 2, 4, and a read through the Appendix (“Approaches”) in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* may also help you.

Complexity The world is not divided into is and is-not (sometimes that’s called “black-and-white thinking”). In a complex analysis, you entertain conflicting ideas and see the nuances within someone else’s analysis. Literature is, by nature and definition, intricate, dense, even at times convoluted and the cultural contexts are similarly complicated. (It’s the “hyper-protected cooperation principle” that Jonathan Culler speaks of [see pages 26-27] that invites us to put up with and enjoy it despite its apparent impenetrability.) When you can attend to the intricacies without losing your line of thought, then you have written a complex analysis.

Participating in a Critical Conversation I am interested in what you have to say about the topic. Many writers (students and professors alike) believe that everything of interest has already been said about a text or a topic. I assure you, however, that your approach and your perspective are unique, and you will bring something new to the table. Think of the critical work (secondary texts) of others as something you want to “work with or bring pressure upon—whose particular implications and resonances you want to analyze, elaborate, counter, revise, echo, or transform” (Harris 22). Foreground your analysis of the topic and draw attention not so much to the texts themselves, but to the work you are doing with those texts.

Handling evidentiary matters

“Academic writing rarely involves a simple taking of sides, an attack or defense of set positions, but rather centers on weighing of options, a sorting through of possibilities” (Harris 25). Move away from the “forensic³” approach to argument in which you stake a claim and defend it so

³ “Forensic” rhetoric is “debate rhetoric,” the type of rhetoric used in courts and congress.

that you might identify and negate an opposition. Rather than quoting other critics to restate your position or as a punching bag against which you take a stance, use quotations as matter to be worked on—to see what your perspective of that critic (or text) can bring to the conversation. Rather than convincing a reader of your “side,” work on convincing the reader of the pertinence of your reading, your interpretation. When I read your work, I also consider how well the source material and the quotations fit your purposes. (When you read a newspaper account or listen to a friend’s argument, don’t you think ‘now that doesn’t really fit,’ or ‘that example doesn’t prove anything’?) I want to read things that make sense enough that I want to come along for the ride.

Precision Let’s face it, we all point out errors when we find them in writing and many make judgments about the writer. (Probably 1/4 of the snarkiness I read on Facebook, Twitter, “[Damn You] Autocorrect, or Tumblr [among others] is in the form of pointing out that someone has used the wrong word, made an obvious grammar mistake, spelled a word wrong, or hit the wrong key. (I see people correct the your/you’re and it’s/its all the time and I’m not hanging out with other English profs online.) This kind of correctness seems like a small thing, but the more precise you are in your writing (and editing and proofreading) the more credibility you can give yourself (or at least not detract from your credibility by publishing error-fraught work). This sort of care indicates that you have attended to the details. Yes, linguistic precision is second in line behind all the other things (above), but it allows the reader to focus on your ideas rather than on your missteps.

Works Cited

Harris, Joseph. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2006 .
Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.