

Lesson Plan: Turning Topic Outlines into Point Outlines

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Course: DNA and the Secret of Life

Objectives: Essentially an introduction to effective revision.

Beginning to shift students from ‘writer’s perspective’ to ‘readers’ perspective.’

Developing awareness of information flow from a reader’s perspective.

Analyzing writer’s intentions and strategies with the intention of pushing them further.

Time: 20-45 minutes, depending upon whether students work in groups.

Assignment underway: Any one will work; I use the first assignment because I return to this predraft strategy regularly and because my first assignment has the entire group considering the same problem. [Their assignment is to write the report of a genetic counselor to a particular family with some serious genetic diseases in their history.] Hence any insight during the session applicable to one student is immediately apparent as applicable to others.

Work completed before class: We’ll have been discussing the issues surrounding the assignment for more than one class, developing common language on genetics, considering the complications of counseling, and narrowing our focus to the particulars of the diseases in the pedigree. Students are asked to bring to class a tentative outline of their upcoming paper.

1) At some point in the discussion of the diseases and the problems surrounding the assignment, I deem it time to get specific, so I start assembling from their comments a composite outline. We immediately start to consider organization of the material and of essays; this assignment looks less like a formal essay than any other, yet by the time the temporary outline is up, we can see the common elements, most of which are rhetorical – the needs for an introduction, for establishing a consistent stance and voice, for defining the audience. I also complicate the outline, pointing out how each decision carries consequences for later discussions or pushes topics into earlier development.

2) I take a section of the outline and shift the focus from writer to reader, asking, ‘What are the points you want to make about X?’ The initial answers are pretty pedestrian – ‘that it’s important’ – so I become the gadfly asking ‘why? Why? Why?’ until eventually someone articulates an argument for why this information matters. Out of that comment I’ll pull an explicit point, which I put on the board. We’ll continue until we have the major points of this topic explicit, then start to revise the list of points – are they in a feasible order of discussion? Do they produce a need for prior development of other information omitted from the earlier outline?

3) We compare the two outlines, noting that while the point outline demands the complete discussion of every topic in the topic outline, simply discussing a topic doesn’t automatically lead to a point. I give them the second part of the pre-draft assignment, which is to take their topic outlines and make them into point outlines before beginning to draft; if time permits, we’ll break into small groups to discuss that transformation, but small groups aren’t essential.

Concerns and potential pitfalls:

Transferability:

- 1) I do this lesson on an assignment about which everyone is making a similar argument. That helps because a) everyone is prepared to participate and b) everyone can immediately transfer the lesson to the upcoming essay. However, it could be done with a single outline from a member of the class, asking the entire group to work on it. I've also done it with a hypothetical argument, one that we have collectively sketched out in outline form during class. Immediate transferability goes down as the particularity of the argument goes up.
- 2) Not everyone gets it the first time. A few do; most who don't understand that they want to be making points, but haven't figured out how to argue a point or even what constitutes a point in college level academic argument. They develop over the next essays, and I return to this predraft strategy.

“Plagiarism”

“If we outline points on the board, won't the slackers simply steal the argument?”

I don't find this a problem – even though ALL my students need to make ‘the same’ argument for this essay. Yes, some students find in the activity an idea or words that they might not have come to as quickly on their own. For example, a key term that emerges when we start looking for points is ‘informative’: we only perform medical tests that will tell us something that we need to know because we'll act upon the knowledge. The idea is central to making the argument, yet even when given the idea, the struggling writers can't work with it – and their struggles are immediately apparent. While there's a preferred course of action that this essay recommends to its audience, the crux of the essay is making the argument for the preference; a writer who knows the right answer but doesn't know why it's right is immediately apparent. Equally apparent is a writer who knows the right answer and the names of the grounds for it, but can't put them together into a cogent argument. So I find that ‘giving away’ more of the argument on this essay helps make the bigger point of the assignment – that writing is thinking, not simply putting words on the page.