

Lesson Plan on Choosing Verbs to Indicate Stance and Take Control of Sources

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WRI 107/8: Outcasts in Contemporary Culture (Princeton)

Lesson objective(s): To help students see that the careful choice of verbs, which might at first seem like a dry or mechanical task, is integral to the establishment of a writer's stance in relation to sources. These verbs help students show what they think about the sources they use; the catch is that in order to choose the appropriate verbs, they have to *know* what they think. So the mechanical exercise becomes a substantive one.

Total estimated time: 30-35 minutes

Additional outcome(s): Students develop a clear and nuanced stance, which is a crucial building block in the establishment of a confident voice.

Course work or assignment underway: Students should have written a draft of any writing assignment that involves working with sources. A variation of this activity could be done before they've written a draft as well. (I've done a similar version of this in a QC course, in which students were writing about Nabokov's *Lolita*.)

Work and/or reading completed before class: In this case, students have read a variety of writing related to popular culture and the sociology of deviance. As mentioned above, they've also completed a draft of an essay, on the political implications of a public representation of deviance.

Sequence of Classroom Activities

1. Distribute handout (see next page) with a list of strong verbs that might be used to introduce sources. Discuss the idea of establishing stance through verb choice and ask each student to choose two different verbs that indicate different relationships between writer and source. Tell them these relationships need not be opposing, just different. For example, "claims" indicates some doubt about the source's argument, whereas "illustrates" indicates neutrality. Discuss several students' choices. (5-7 min)
2. Ask for student volunteers to read my sample source introductions on the handout (again, see below) and tell students to circle all words that indicate stance (especially the verbs). After a student reads each example, ask others to explain which words indicate stance and how they do it. Generally students notice that the verbs work in conjunction with other words to create a general tone. I point out that choosing the right verbs helps a writer convey stance almost invisibly. The verbs "prime" readers to see from the writer's point of view. This is a useful and powerful rhetorical move. Students generally get excited by this idea. (5-7 min)

3. Ask students whether they think they're doing a good job choosing verbs to introduce sources. The answer is *always* a resounding NO. This gets students ready to evaluate their own work in focused and productive way. I ask them to take out their drafts and circle every verb they use to introduce a source, whether it is a quotation, a paraphrase, or just a reference. (I also tell them they can circle other words that seem to indicate stance—adjectives, for example.) When they've circled all the verbs, I tell them to discuss what they've found with one or two other students. Are there any patterns to their choices? How might they improve? (10-12)

5. To finish up, I bring the students back together as a group and ask people to share insights about their habits with regard to choosing verbs to introduce sources. Students generally share a variety of habits: using “to be” every time; failing to use verbs altogether; using only “neutral” verbs like “to write” or clunky and inaccurate ones like “to say”; using inflated and inaccurate verbs like “to personify” (to mean “to make an argument,” for example”). (5-7)

Reflection on the lesson's success or alternative approaches:

Generally, the students share a collective recognition that reflecting on the verbs they choose will give them more control of their writing, but that they're not sure they will be able to do it. I tell them I'll give them plenty of opportunities to practice! This works best if I then focus on the issue in subsequent writing they hand in and ask students in peer review groups to focus on it as well. It can also work well to add or substitute a step that asks students to identify and discuss stance-indicating verbs in some of their course readings.

Choosing Verbs to Indicate Stance and Take Control of Sources

Verbs commonly used to introduce sources:

acknowledges	comments	endorses	rails
adds	compares	grants	reasons
admits	confirms	illustrates	refutes
agrees	contends	implies	rejects
argues	declares	insists	reports
asserts	denies	notes	responds
believes	disputes	observes	suggests
boasts	de-emphasizes	offers	thinks
claims	emphasizes	points out	writes

What do the following introductions imply about the stance of the writer in relation to his or her material?

In his classic essay, “The Normal and the Pathological,” Emile Durkheim argues presciently that

In their essay, “Comedies of Transgression in Gangsta Rap and Ancient Classical Poetry,” classicist Ralph Rosen and family therapist Donald Marks stage a comparison between hip hop and Greek and Roman satire that nearly lapses into a parody of academic prose, but saves itself through the sheer insight of its analysis. In their words,

Even an avid hip hop fan like Dyson admits that gangsta rap is socially destructive:

Upon first listen, you might think the following lines were designed to elicit pathos. In Slim Shady’s words, “Well since age twelve, I’ve felt like I’m someone else / Cause I hung my original self from the top bunk with a belt” (15 -16).

In Tupac’s hands, personal history becomes political manifesto: “I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself / Is life worth living, or should I blast myself? / I’m tired of being poor, and even worse I’m black / My stomach hurts, so I’m looking for a purse to snatch” (“Changes” 1 – 4).

Group Project: Stance

1. First, find a sentence or passage that demonstrates the writing style of the author. What's distinctive about it? What relationship does it imply between the author and the topic? Author and audience?
2. Find a potentially controversial claim in your assigned source. What is the relationship between this claim and the author's primary argument (i.e., Is it the primary argument? A supporting point? A related argument? A diversion?) How does the writer support the claim? Are you persuaded, intrigued, suspicious, outraged, impressed, bored, or confused by the claim? Why?
3. As a group, write two introductory phrases to a single passage in which the author makes the claim, demonstrating two different stances in relation to it.
4. Next, make a list of points you'd need to discuss in order to develop and support the position implied by your introductory phrase.
5. Share what you found with the rest of us and be prepared to answer questions about the reading you were assigned.

Reading	Workshop 1	Workshop 2
<i>The Mismeasure of Woman</i>	Matt, Elyse, Laura	Okezie, Leonore, Byron
<i>The Red Queen</i>	Mike, Nicole, Joe	Kalle, Chris Gueits, Jonathan, Brian
Your choice of readings 6 - 11	Eric, Elizabeth, Darrol	JJ, Chris Lee, Daryl