

ENG 102 Scaffolded Assignment Sequence

Dr. Dominic Ashby

In teaching ENG 102, I wanted to introduce students to a research as an inquiry process. Many students seem to come to college with the idea that writing a research paper involves picking a topic on which they already have a strong opinion that they have no intention of changing, and that “research” involves finding sources to support their existing points of view. The result, I’ve found, is that neither they nor I find their projects particularly engaging and students continue in the idea that doing research is a boring chore to make English teachers happy—they already know everything about their topic so what is the benefit to them of researching it further?

An inquiry approach disrupts this view of the research project and redirects students to take risks and to teach themselves something new. It shows them the real potential (and dare I say fun?) of doing research—an inquiry approach introduces students to approaching research in the way an academic does, which is to answer questions and learn something the investigator doesn’t already know.

To facilitate inquiry, I linked the inquiry and writing process across several assignments, punctuated with individual conferences and several visits to the library and Noel Studio. Here is an overview:

Inquiry proposal: In this two page assignment, students decided on a topic. They needed to explain why they were interested in the topic and what questions they wanted to answer. I encouraged them to choose topics related to their major or to their homeplace, what I called local issue topics. They brought these essays to one-on-one conferences, where I helped them to further focus and refine. The main obstacle many students faced? They wanted to already decide what their argument was. During the conference I reminded them of how the inquiry process works and guided them back toward asking questions, reminding them that they needed to complete some research first before they could take a position or decide on an argument. I also used the conferences to push the students regarding their interest in the topics they had chosen—where they really interested or had they chosen something they thought of as an English-y topic or one they had researched before in twelfth grade? Some students ended up completely refocusing their topic as a result of the conference while others left with new questions about their topic that they were interested in trying to answer.

Annotated Bibliography: Following two visits to the library to learn about research methods, students further refined their research questions from their proposal and then began finding and evaluating sources. Through this assignment, students learned about library research and began educating themselves on their topic.

Revised Inquiry Proposal: After completing the Annotated Bibliography, students went back to their proposals and decided what argument they wanted to make and who their intended audience should be. As I explained to my students, they aren't really in a position to decide on an argument until after they've done their research. Selecting an appropriate target audience was important. I required students to choose an audience that would actually be interested in/benefit from the information *and* that would be positively disposed toward an academic style of writing (since that's what they would be using in their argument paper). As with the initial proposal, individual conferences were very helpful at this stage.

Argument Essay: The 8 to 10 page main essay, based on the research they've done so far. I ran a few workshops during the time students were working on this to help them with writing to an audience and with meaningful source integration.

Video Remediation: Students rethought their Argument Essays for a new audience and medium. Using Moviemaker or iMovie, students created 2 to 5 minute videos that presented their argument (or part of their argument) in a new way for a different (but still affected) target audience. For example, if the formal argument essay on cyberbullying was directed to high school teachers, the video remediation might be directed to students themselves. During this project, we talked about differences in genre the different appeals that video allows that don't necessarily work in print, and what things work well in print but not in a video—that is, the affordances of print and digital media. The remediation process also involved deciding how much information to present—not all information that shows up in a formal paper needs to be in a catchy video and might actually get in the way, so they needed to decide what to keep and what to cut. I also used this assignment to link intellectual property considerations to citation; although videos don't usually make use of MLA or APA style citations, they do still have a strong and established ethical (and legal!) tradition of source referencing along with other credits.

Final Portfolio: In the final portfolio, students made revisions to earlier work and wrote a short reflection on their research method.

As you can guess, the class stayed busy throughout the semester, but they rose to the occasion and produced really great projects. I enjoyed reading them and the students were interested in one another's work; more importantly, students felt that they learned a lot from the process. The inquiry approach brought them into the academic conversation and helped them to better imagine the kinds of projects they might do in the future within their disciplines. It taught research and research-writing in a way that would support work in multiple disciplines and for different audiences.