

Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

September 21, 2009

To Diagnose or Not To Diagnose

Thinking about using a diagnostic essay? Consider these suggestions:

1. Give students a choice of topics—the purpose of a diagnostic is to determine what students can and cannot do.
2. Provide topics that connect to the reading, theme, or other topics in the course.
3. Include with the topics a brief outline of your expectations.
4. Allow students enough time to plan and draft their response.
5. Consider providing time at the end for students to reflect on their response. Ask them to read their drafts and then explain briefly what they might do differently or, if they had more time, what they might do to improve their essays.
6. Consider allowing students to revise the draft as one of the assignments in the course.

As the above list makes clear, it is best to make the diagnostic essay part of the course.

Diagnostic essays are common in composition classrooms and programs. The idea behind them is simple: identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual writers as early as possible and use that knowledge to provide meaningful individual instruction and to shape the pace and curriculum of the course. Generally, diagnostic essay topics are brief and “content-free,” allowing students to generate text without any prior knowledge or specific experience. Some instructors have students write for as little as 20 minutes while others might devote an entire class period to the activity.

Experienced instructors know that early information about individual students is key to providing instruction that will help students develop into mature and effective writers. They also know that in the short-term (i.e. from quarter to quarter or even from year to year) those strengths and weaknesses are relatively easy to predict. Many students will have difficulty balancing the competing demands of focus and development. Some will write short, focused essays that seem to say in one paragraph everything the writer thinks needs to be said. Others will write with striking detail but little control over the coherence of a paragraph, or well-developed paragraphs that are ineffectively tied together into a discourse-level whole. Many will come hobbled with the “crutches” of what Buddy Roberts has called “meatball writing instruction” (c.f. the television series *M*A*S*H*)—quick-fixes like the five-paragraph essay, or “power writing” or the “hamburger paragraph.” And yes, there really is something called the hamburger paragraph—look it up if you don’t believe me. Often the instructor already knows the “diagnoses” that a diagnostic essay might provide.

Also, some instructors find the very idea of “diagnosis” anathema to education. While the word itself might have benign roots, its modern use is almost wholly associated with identifying problems, whether it be locating the source of an elevated T-cell count or pinpointing a misfiring spark plug. This emphasis on unhealthiness and malfunction connects our diagnoses as writing instructors to the deficit model of

"Doctor, do you see what I see?"
"Yes, inadequate development, lack of focus, garbled syntax."
"Is it?"
"Yes, I'm afraid this writer is terminal."

education—students come to us to be fixed, purged of their bad habits and bad ideas, faulty thinking and comma splices. Besides philosophical squeamishness, however, there is the very real problem of what is being measured by a timed writing exercise. All writing courses in the composition program at CSULA emphasize the process of writing, specifically the importance of planning, drafting, and meaningful revision. Students are not merely given the opportunity to revise, they are required to revise, and assessment recognizes that these revised products are works in progress. Given this focus, what exactly is being diagnosed by a brief “content-free” on-demand essay?

Each instructor needs to consider his or her needs in deciding whether to have students write a diagnostic essay. Ultimately, whether one calls it a diagnostic essay or not, what the instructor needs is a sense of where the students are, and what each student needs is early and meaningful feedback.