Shaping student writing:
Tools for triggering invention and revision throughout the process

The question of how to respond to student writing is better framed as a question of how we as instructors can facilitate throughout the writing process invention (the generation of ideas and forms), textual revision, and learning. In that light, there are many, varied tools we can use to structure and enrich students' work and ultimately to encourage the kinds of texts and the kinds of learning we aim for. The list below and the attached sheets suggest some of the tools at hand.

• **Task clarification:** Students and instructors often hold quite different notions of what a writing task should look like and what kind of work it should represent. Through written task instructions, classroom activities and discussions, you can work to clarify what you expect of a task, focusing on what you want students to do, what kind of learning you hope will be achieved, and what the final product should look like.

• **Modeling:** In class lectures as well as through readings and activities, you may be modeling the kinds of reasoning you expect, the types of topics/issues you hope to see, the kinds of critical reading and thinking you want students to demonstrate, the disciplinary values (e.g., detail, conciseness, originality, synthesis, application) that you want students to emulate, and so on. By explicitly drawing students' attention to how this modeling relates to assigned writing, you may help to both clarify the task and trigger further invention/revision/learning.

• **Resources:** The quality of students' writing is obviously related to the resources they bring to their work and texts. Facilitating access to textual, material or human resources will often enrich students' invention and learning. Examples of resources to consider include: pointing students to textual source materials (in general or to specific texts); setting up specialized library modules to aid in finding textual sources; encouraging collaborative work among students; structuring environments to aid students' observations; providing students with greater opportunities to observe or manipulate events/objects under study; and providing opportunities to discuss work with instructors or others (students, practitioners, community members).

• **Logs/journals:** You may ask students to keep logs in which they record observations, thoughts, and responses to/questions about readings. Journals and logs often serve as excellent resources for invention and learning. They also can prompt extended engagement in the writing process, particularly if they are turned in periodically.
• **In-progress reports**: If an assignment gives students a choice of topics, you may ask students to give a short proposal for topics so that you can review them. You might request various kinds of in-progress microthemes (see Bean). For term papers, students can write a thesis-support microtheme that provides a skeletal version of the argument (some weeks before the final draft is due). For laboratory reports, you may ask for a microtheme that summarizes findings and discussion or presents the solution to a problem and its rationale. At various points in the process, you may ask students to turn in progress reports on their reading, research, writing, or group collaboration. In addition to giving you an opportunity to respond to the students' work, all of these kinds of in-progress reports encourage students not to wait till the day before the paper is due to begin work.

• **In-progress response to drafts**: Peers, instructors or others may respond in writing and/or orally to students' drafts. This type of response is often particularly valuable in raising questions and pointing to problems. The need to produce a draft some time before the final paper both provides feedback and also requires students to engage in a more extended process.

  To be effective, peers normally need guidelines to structure response activities and goals. Guidance may be given through providing response sheets (see below), explicit instructions, and/or modelling of response.

• **Response sheets (see attached examples)**: Response sheets may be used for self-evaluation, to facilitate peer evaluation, or as a framework for instructor written response.

• **Cover memos**: You may ask students to write a cover memo to introduce their papers (draft or final). A memo may pose specific questions tied to the task (see attached sheet).
Sample Response Sheet
Self-evaluation of a proposal for a scientific experiment

1) Have you identified the purpose of your research and who would be an interested audience for it? Please state these briefly.

2) What are the key terms involved in your research? How have you defined them operationally?

3) Does your proposal address the following crucial questions on the experimental design? (Answer the questions briefly as you go along.)

   • How did you select the measures? Why do they fit the purpose of the experiment?

   • How did you select groups? Explain how your groups only differ on variables of interest to your experiment.

   • How will you sample from your groups? What procedure will you use for randomization?

   • What statistics will you use? Is your sample size adequate? (If n < 10, it is almost certainly not adequate.)

   • Is your methodology presented in sufficient detail that it could be replicated? (You might ask a classmate or friend to read it over before you answer this question.)
Sample response sheet: Peer evaluation of a draft of an experimental report
Name of writer:
Name of responder:
Date of response:
Exchange drafts of your papers on Friday. Read the draft and answer the questions below. You will have about 15 minutes in class to discuss your responses.

1) Is the purpose of the experiment clear to you? State it.

2) Does the report match the scientific format? Are all sections present? List them. Is the material in each section appropriate for that section? Note points you're not sure about.

3) Is the methodology clear to you? Briefly summarize it. If you have any questions, what are they?

4) Are the results clearly presented? Briefly summarize them. If you have questions or are confused on any points, what are they?

5) Does the discussion follow from the results and the stated purpose of the experiment? Briefly summarize it. If you have questions or are confused on any points, what are they?

6) Overall, did you find the paper interesting and enjoyable to read? Explain.

Suggestions: If you were writing this paper, what would you do next to improve it?

Writer's reflections (After discussing the response, the writer should respond fully to the following sentence. This response sheet should be turned in with your paper.)
Considering the written comments and the in-class discussion, I think I should take the following steps to complete the final draft of this paper. (Explain your answer.)
Sample instructions for a cover memo in an English class

When you turn in your final paper, please attach a one-page cover memo addressed to me that answers the following questions and raises any other issues you feel need to be brought up.

1) Overall, how do you feel about this paper? What part of the paper do you feel most confident in?

2) Briefly describe key points in the process of doing this paper (i.e., how and why you choose the topic you did, what parts of the writing process you spent the most time on, any major changes in your plans during the process, how your ideas developed and hopefully improved, and any particular problems you faced).

3) Did you research change your understanding of language and/or writing? If so, explain how it changed.

4) If you could start this assignment over or had further time to develop it, what would you do to improve it?

5) What issues are you particularly interested in having me respond to?

6) How do you see this paper relating to your future studies, work, or other activities?