Why I Don’t Ask Students to Write the Thesis Statement First

Anne Curzan  July 25, 2017

In the well-intentioned effort to help college writers find strong theses, we as instructors can put the cart before the horse. Let me explain. I was reminded of this problem a couple of weeks ago when I was reviewing an assignment sequence for a first-year writing course. The instructor had built in a lot of valuable process, where students would have the opportunity to get feedback on their ideas for the essay and then read drafts of each other’s essays in small workshop groups before turning in the final versions. As part of this process, the very first class activity asked students to bring in a draft of their thesis statement (which could be more than one sentence, which is great) so that students could work in small groups to provide feedback on each other’s thesis statements. This practice of having students draft a thesis statement first is so common as to be unremarkable — but I had to remark. I believe that if a student already knows the thesis before starting the process of drafting the essay, it is probably not that interesting a thesis. Why? Because we write academic essays to figure out what we think — not just to explain what we already believe we think. The UCLA historian Lynn Hunt puts it beautifully in her essay “How Writing Leads to Thinking”:

"Everyone who has written at any substantial length, whether prose or
poetry, knows that the process of writing itself leads to previously unthought thoughts. Or to be more precise, writing crystallizes previously half-formulated or unformulated thoughts, gives them form, and extends chains of thoughts in new directions. ... By writing, in other words, you are literally firing up your brain and therefore stirring up your conscious thoughts and something new emerges.

I want students to have that experience of using writing to explore and figure things out, even when they are doing it for a course assignment (i.e., a requirement). The best essays, I believe, start with questions: questions about something we are curious about, a puzzle we can’t seem to figure out yet, a position or a text or an event or a kind of human behavior that we are struggling to understand. I fear that when we ask students to start with a thesis — an argument or a defined position — rather than a question, before they even begin the process of writing, we are setting them up to write less interesting essays. And we don’t set up essays from the very beginning as a chance to explore. When I came to this realization, it changed my pedagogy. I now ask students to email me early on with the question they want to pursue in an essay, along with an explanation of why that question is compelling to them and how they plan to pursue it. We then talk in class about the importance of the first draft because it will allow students to write their way toward an answer to the question. And this is why we call it a first draft, not a final draft. The fact that the first draft involves writing our way toward an answer means that the “thesis” (an answer or a set of answers to the question we started with) will probably come at the end of the first draft; it will “fall out” in the conclusion. The next draft is then the chance to take that “answer” (or set of answers) and let it become the structuring argument or thesis of the essay. Once we have a clearer sense of what we think, of what the essay needs to say, we can better organize and craft a new draft of the essay and a more precisely
worded thesis statement. There are certainly alternatives to starting with a question. For example, instructors can ask students to come up with a “working thesis” at the beginning — but I worry that students may feel overly committed to the thesis despite the “working” status. Or instructors can ask students to start with a hypothesis, which will then get tested through the writing process. I recognize that students, especially earlier in their writing careers, need practice in recognizing and fulfilling conventions such as crafting thesis statements and incorporating evidence. It can be a lot to ask them to discover new arguments too, and that discovery process can be messy in a way that defies an organized essay. Let’s try to make sure, though, that if and when we are using more formulaic frameworks for practicing essay structure that we do not lose the idea that essays should be exploratory. Essays are a chance to think on the page (as we do when we write in journals or blog.) And if we can allow first drafts to be more messy and exploratory, working their way toward arguments, it actually can free students up from worrying about “correctness” too early in the process. It also reinforces why revision is so critically important. The key for me, in the end, is that students have the chance to experience discovery through the essays they write in college. I was reminded of the alternative a couple of years ago when I was writing a handbook entry about a topic I know well — and I was just going through the motions, walking through things I already knew about the field. I didn’t like the essay (to put the kindest face on how I was feeling about it), and I was remarkably unmotivated to make it better. I thought, “Oh right, this is often how students feel when they are writing required essays.” I stepped back and forced myself to find a new question that I could use the handbook entry to explore, and immediately the writing and revision became more interesting, as I tried to figure out what I thought I could justifiably say about this new question based on what I already knew about the topic. At some level, it’s a small tweak in our writing pedagogy to ask students to start with questions rather than thesis statements. Yet I
think it can remind all of us of why we write.