

How Should We Teach Educational History? *Teaching with the Writing Process*

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Four ways of transforming the traditional term paper into a more meaningful writing process:

1) **Organized Rambling**

This activity involves pairing students in class for 10 minutes at the early stage of a research paper assignment. One is designated the “rambler,” while the other takes the role of the listener and note-taker; the two switch half-way through the exercise. For two minutes, the first “rambler” simply talks aloud and brainstorms about the paper ideas forming within his or her head, while the listener takes the active role of attempting to organize these thoughts on paper, in three categories:

- What is the writer’s research question? How is it historical?
- What is the writer’s tentative thesis? What is s/he trying to argue?
- What supporting evidence does the writer have? Is it persuasive?

After switching roles, each of the pair finishes writing his/her brief notes, then takes turns verbally summarizing the other person’s ideas, in the format above. The students leave class having heard their own paper ideas repeated back to them and sketched out on paper, confirming what needs to be thought out more clearly. The exercise can work in small or large classes, and can be repeated midway through the paper assignment, with new pairs.

2) **Class discussion on evaluating effective writing**

This activity involves distributing one or two anonymous body paragraphs from a previous semester’s class, to engage students in a public evaluation of the criteria for effective writing. I hand out copies of the writing samples and also display them on an overhead projector. In my experience, students rarely have an opportunity to read each other’s writing, or to talk about it openly. By using samples written by students in previous classes, we focus on history of education content, and I can sequence this activity at an appropriate time when most students are just beginning to start their own writing.

3) **A criteria sheet for writing assignments**

This tool is simply a handout which lists the criteria that I use to evaluate the final papers. It lists six or seven questions which I ask myself when reading student writing about educational history:

- Do you pose an interesting historical research question which moves beyond the regular course readings?
- Do you propose a creative thesis which directly addresses your research question?
- Do you persuasively support your thesis with appropriate sources?
- Are your sections, paragraphs, and sentences well-organized?
- Is your word choice stylistically appealing?
- Are your references/footnotes/endnotes complete and accurate?

In fact, these questions (including blank spaces) make up the actual sheet upon which I write my comments, and I encourage students to staple it to the back of their final drafts. On one level, it offers students the literal guidelines for what I consider to be good writing, to help them rethink and revise their own writing. On another level, it is my attempt to make the evaluative process as

public and transparent as possible, *before* the grades are given, since all of us have different expectations and criteria for good historical writing.

4) Writing history for real audiences

This semester's experiment: for the second half of my current Hist of Am Ed course, 33 sophomores and juniors are team-writing papers and excerpting them for a public history exhibit, titled "Coeducating Trinity, 1969-1999."