

Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence

Confidence and Argumentation in Analytical Prompts and Theses in the Freshman Writing Seminar

Danielle Fuentes Morgan, Ph.D. Candidate (daf265)
Alex Harmon, Ph.D. Candidate (lah289)
Department of English, Cornell University

Introduction

Students in FWS writing seminars often express interest in writing essays grounded in their own interests; however, FWS students generally lack the confidence and ability to devise debatable essay topics on their own.

Objectives

- 1) Students will refine their process of writing theses to create statements that are argumentative, specific to the text, and engaging (thesis statements that address new issues rather than rehash ideas from class discussion).
- 2) Students will use these argumentative, specific, and engaging thesis statements to structure more dynamic, comprehensive, and focused papers.
- 3) Students will report higher levels of confidence in creating thesis statements after paper five than were reported at the beginning of the semester.

Methods

Students were led through the following assignment sequence over the course of three papers:

1. **In Class Activity:** Students received and discussed the handout, "Asking an Analytical Question."
2. **Homework:** Students brought in analytical questions of their own and evaluated them in class according to the criteria established on the worksheet.
3. **Group work:** Students created an essay topic for paper 3 as a class.
4. **Independent topic development:** Students wrote paper proposals, which were peer reviewed and redrafted. Students turned in proposals for feedback before writing.
5. **Pre/Post-Essay Survey:** Students completed the same questionnaires before and after writing and self-reported confidence levels in creating analytical prompts and analytical thesis statements. The questionnaire was given five weeks apart. This survey was conducted in both classes.
6. **Observations:** In addition to utilizing the quantitative data collected through student self-report, Alex and Danielle observed student group work and reflection to determine confidence levels in creating prompts and thesis statements.
7. **Rubric Analysis:** Researchers created a rubric to analyze 5 aspects of student performance in essay 3 (pre-lesson) and essay 4 (post-lesson). This rubric was applied to students in Alex's class only.

Rubric*

	0	1	2	Score
Topic question is answerable from the story through close reading	No close reading offered	1 close reading offered	2 or more close readings offered	
Topic is debatable (as measured by the presence of counterargument)	No counterargument offered	1 counterargument attempted	1 counterargument offered	
Author responds to counterarguments	No response offered	1 response attempted	1 response offered	
Topic is supported with evidence from the story	No evidence offered	1-3 evidentiary examples offered	4 or more evidentiary examples offered	
Essay is structured to provide support for the topic	No topic sentences	Topic sentences attempted: present but do not refer to the claim	Topic sentence in every paragraph that refers to the claim	
			TOTAL	

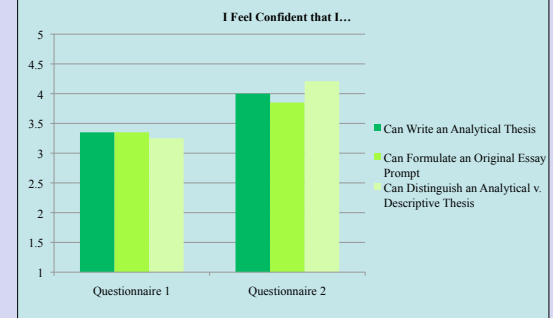
*Rubric used for analysis only. Not provided to students.

Student Quotes

- "I think I shifted from understanding the text and only somewhat interpreting to really trying to analyze specific parts in the text and combine them to discuss the broader implications."
- "This was the first time I ever had to generate an essay prompt and I really liked it. It required us to really analyze the text at a deeper level to search for common themes or motifs that would aid in formulating a good and well-developed prompt."
- "I think I've gotten better [creating analytical thesis statements] because my thesis is clearer and more specific which makes it easier to stay on topic."

Student Confidence Means

n=28 (both classes)



Observations

- The majority of students self-reported post-activity confidence levels at or higher than initial pre-activity levels on a scale of 1-5.
- Even in cases where students reported the same numerical confidence levels, when given the opportunity to write about their confidence levels students articulated feeling more confident in their ability to write engaging prompts and debatable thesis statements.
- Improvements in ability to articulate a clear thesis did not necessarily correlate exactly with a better grade, as students often had a host of other problems, including grammar, ability to incorporate sources appropriately, and difficulty with organization. With this in mind, we recommend this assignment sequence as part of a more comprehensive program that aims to target a range of areas of concern.

Conclusions/Implications

- Student self-report leads us to believe that, at least in some cases, the assignment sequence described here improved their confidence in their ability to write formulate essay prompts and respond to them with analytical theses.
- It appears that as student performance is positively correlated with student confidence. It is unclear, however, if this is an issue of causality or correlation only, or if it is a combination of the two.
- Although more analysis is needed to show statistical significance, our data suggest that student performance improved in all areas except in students' ability to write topic sentences that accurately reflected their stated claims. This leads us to believe that a separate workshop on topic sentences would make a productive follow-up to this sequence.

Student Performance Means

n=16 (Alex's class)

