

## Encouraging Students' Analytical Abilities in a Large Literature Survey

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**Summary:** Due to an increase in enrollment, a British literature professor redesigns a survey course to maintain the rigor and engagement of a small class and, more specifically, to strengthen students' analytical skills.

### Background

Major British Writers to 1800 (ENGL 312) is a survey course covering major British writers, genres, and traditions from *Beowulf* through 1800. While English majors are the primary audience, English education majors and other humanities majors and minors also enroll; students range from sophomores to seniors, with varying abilities. Most have a background in the study of English literature and/or creative writing; they typically are trained to analyze text, identify important authorial choices, and recognize the use of basic literary devices. There are usually a number of students who are capable readers but who have not yet been taught how to press beyond content to a more sophisticated analysis of the text.

The texts in this period are crucial because they lay the foundation of the English literary tradition. By understanding the beginnings and early innovations to this tradition, students are better capable to engage later poets and writers. Additionally, I view the course as a key place to teach textual analysis, because the difficulty of reading older texts forces students to engage with the words on the page (whereas, when reading novels or later literature, students might feel they can whizz through without taking stock of what they have read because of the language's familiarity).

In previous iterations, I had success with ENGL 312 as a mid-size (35 students) course; however, in Spring 2012, I faced the challenge of teaching a larger course with up to 70 students. Therefore, while I needed to rethink how to transform the in-class activities and discussion to work with the larger numbers, I also needed to revisit the essays I had used without sacrificing either rigor or some exposure to methods I consider vital to the field. In the past, the course employed both a short textual analysis essay (four to six pages) and a longer researched essay (eight to ten pages) to assess student ability, but I found that students often had difficulty effectively integrating scholarly research and textual analysis into their researched essays. I interpreted this to mean that students had difficulty focusing on multiple forms of analysis at once. Additionally, research papers are not requirements for our 300-level surveys, even though I have always taken the opportunities provided by smaller class enrollment to introduce students to research methods.

Therefore, I proposed to use Spring 2012 as a pilot program for an ENGL 312 course that focused on specific methods for evaluating a literary text that included primary research but did not require student research into secondary scholarship. I would continue to

expose students to secondary articles to supplement class readings, but, especially in a course primarily reading medieval and early modern English texts where language is a barrier, I decided to focus on textual analysis, because I believe that students must first begin with the text before they effectively can add a research component. Also, I hoped that the increased emphasis on the text would better prepare students for research-based courses later in the major by honing their skills in analyzing text and determining their arguments about its form, content, and use of literary devices first, before they began to grapple with other scholars' arguments.

## Implementation

In order to emphasize textual analysis, the essays I assigned to assess student learning were the main focus of my ENGL 312 redesign. Rather than replicating my prior assignments of one short textual analysis and one long essay with two different tasks (textual analysis and research), I shifted to more frequent short papers and a longer formal paper, all of which had the same task: analysis of the text.

The five short analyses, or “Crux Busters,” drew on texts read for and discussed in class. Students had to choose passages from a specific day’s reading that raised a crux issue about the text, such as the development of a theme or character, or a pervasive image or metaphor. Then, they would produce a two to three page analysis that used the text to develop and support their ideas and explain why the crux issue was important to understanding the work. These papers had rolling deadlines throughout the semester: students had eight opportunities to submit five papers and could choose on which text they wrote. If they wished, students could also turn in an extra paper and drop the lowest score. In this way, the first Crux Buster represented a low-risk assignment: if a student was unhappy with his or her performance or needed clarification on the demands of the assignment, there would be an opportunity to seek help and replace the grade through improved subsequent performances. Ideally, the Crux Busters would also prepare students to contribute to class discussion more readily.

I envisioned the Crux Busters as miniature versions of the final, longer formal essay in which students would, again, have to identify a portion of the text worthy of analysis and develop an argument through textual analysis. Unlike the long paper I assigned in previous iterations, this final essay was not a research paper, and students were limited in the secondary sources they could use (the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, to promote word study, or the *Norton Anthology’s* dictionary of literary terms). I provided students with a selection of texts to choose from, which we had not previously read for the course. On this list, I only included works that I identified as having multiple significant connections to authors, genres, thematic or narrative content, historical contexts, or literary devices that we had already studied in some detail in class. My rationale was that students would see enough connections to afford them some comfort, but that the diversity of options would give students a range of topics they might develop.

For example, students read multiple love sonnets in class, we discussed their conventions, and we also read John Donne’s “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” so they knew a bit about his life, poetic style, and unusual metaphors. One option for the final essay was examining his “Holy Sonnets,” which could be easily analyzed in a variety of ways depending on which methods, contexts, and ideas we had discussed in previous classes that students chose to deploy. Therefore, in producing their final essay, students would be able to apply to a new text the knowledge gained and the analytical skills honed throughout the semester. This process would test their ability to truly illustrate a mastery of textual analysis and allow students to practice the transference of old knowledge and methods to new works that they would need in future, upper-level courses when they

would be expected to demonstrate competence in textual analysis from the moment they entered the classroom.

During the course of the semester, in response to student performance on the Crux Busters, and because I saw students having very good ideas in-class that were not fully developed (due to time constraints and the short length of the assignment), I adjusted the final essay criteria. I provided students an additional choice: they could follow the original assignment (analyzing a new text) or they could develop their ideas on a previously read text, provided that their arguments moved substantially beyond what was discussed in class.

In order to clarify the grading expectations for the written assignments, I provided students with a list of characteristics typically demonstrated by papers at different grade levels. Students received this list with both the syllabus at the beginning of the semester and, in an abridged form, with the Crux Buster assignment.

Beyond the essays, I continued to use quizzes, homework assignments, and in-class discussions. I adjusted the quiz and homework elements mid-course to help students practice focusing on important terms and analytical practices, such as careful investigation of word choices by Edmund Spenser or John Milton. Since the Spring 2012 iteration was a larger course, I attempted to “shrink” the class while continuing to encourage large in-class discussion. I also used past strategies to draw quieter students into in-class discussions. For example, I would give students five to eight minutes in class to work out their ideas in pairs or ask groups to work on different homework questions, so that students had the opportunity to gain confidence in their ideas in smaller clusters and could be prepared if invited to share ideas with the larger group. Inviting students to contribute to open-ended class discussions meant that I could keep some of the responsibility for producing the analytical content of the course on the students, rather than falling into lecture-based teaching. Finally, I continued to use two exams (midterm and final) as additional modes of assessing student comprehension of texts and both literary and historical contexts.

## **Student work**

Overall, the final essays in which students completed the original assignment (analyzing a new work) showed the students developing a sense of what portions of a literary text are fruitful to analyze for meaning, beyond the narrative's literal level, even if not all students were prepared to argue for the importance or impact of their readings.

Students whose papers earned A's generally provided a clear, arguable thesis, tied the reading back to that thesis, and argued why their reading of the work was important. Some also positioned the text within larger conversations, such as contemporary views of Milton, or they related statements about culture or society to specific textual features. While students with B papers may have demonstrated some of these elements, for example, a clear thesis, they tended to not push as deeply into the material and to not argue as strongly, if at all, for the importance of their reading. They also tended to need more clarity, either in explaining the importance of quoted material or in supporting their own statements with quotations and analysis of the text itself.

Those who opted for the modified assignment demonstrated similar skills, albeit built upon analyses begun in the classroom. A-range papers typically provided interesting insights, detailed and original arguments, and engagingly-written clear analyses that demonstrated new explorations of familiar material. Again, students with B papers may have covered important points, but they did not necessarily push beyond the surface of the text, and did not show that the proposed thesis was arguable and important to the overall interpretation of the work or to a significant contemporary cultural issue.

I was not able to obtain permission to use exemplars of C papers, but those papers in both assignment categories tended to demonstrate a basic knowledge of the work and its content but lacked specific detail or analysis of the language of the text, focusing instead on the text's surface, and did little to effectively make the writer's case. I also was not able to obtain permission to reproduce exemplars of the three D papers in the course, all of which opted to analyze papers discussed in class. These papers often failed to move substantially beyond classroom discussions, and although all exhibited an attempt to meet the demands of the assignment, they reflected serious confusion about basic ideas or serious writing problems, such as a lack of evidence to support claims or problematic organizational structures.

## Reflections

I believe that we have a responsibility to teach all of our students, those who struggle, those who do well, and those in-between; I also feel that we must continually evaluate student performance in order to strike a fine balance between supporting them and encouraging them to rise to new challenges. As a whole, students in my Spring 2012 ENGL 312 course achieved about as much as those in previous 312 classes. Although there might not have been big changes in student learning, and the redesigned course elements differed in their success, there were positive outcomes to the overall redesign.

The Crux Busters gave students continued practice in engaging new texts and identifying fruitful topics for analysis. This continual skills assessment kept me informed about the degree to which students could grasp important concepts while choosing appropriate short sections to analyze in support of broader ideas. However, students expressed concern that five Crux Busters were too numerous and onerous. While I intended the papers to be short, low-risk assignments, some students approached each one as a major formal essay, while others approached them too informally. I also feel that the short length hindered students' ability to fully develop a complex idea or support an important argument. As a whole, the Crux Busters worked about as well as the single short essay assignment I previously used, without any tangible benefits (such as increased student participation or marked improvements in textual analysis) and with some inconveniences for both students and instructor. Therefore, in future iterations, I plan to return to the single short paper following a short, low-risk diagnostic essay that acclimates students to my grading standards. However, if I teach a large course again, in order to balance the grading load, I might stagger the due dates and assign specific texts to particular sets of 20-25 students so that not all 70 students submit their papers at the same time.

By creating a textual analysis final paper on a work not studied in the course, I offered my students a non-traditional assignment that worked for many. I was encouraged by the number of students who chose to do the final essay as assigned and by how successfully most of those students performed. The original assignment permitted students to engage a new text and demonstrate that they could apply skills learned throughout the semester to that new text, something we hope all our students can do when they leave our classes and move on to the next level. In general, it is an assignment I will keep for future ENGL 312 classes, with the option that students may write on a text new to them or one read previously for class. However, I will edit the assignment sheet to more clearly state that all papers must include a works cited section, not just those citing approved secondary sources, since some students across the grade ranges omitted this section.

I am persuaded of the assignment's efficacy based on the results produced by the majority of students. Although I remain concerned that weaker students may opt to write on a text we have analyzed in class and end up parroting classroom discussion rather than striking out on their own paths, nevertheless, those who tried the new assignment successfully moved out of their comfort zones and scored at least as well as their peers who did not try the new assignment.