Defining Writing Lingo
Using Interviews to Investigate Language about Writing and the Writing Process

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Abstract

In this project, students examine their previous definitions and associations with writing-related vocabulary and investigate the complexity of this terminology by interviewing other writers about their writing processes. The "Good Writing" Analysis is an argumentative paper that asks students to investigate a writing term and then argue for its significance to the writing process. As their evidence for this essay, students interview three people they consider to be good writers about how each writer uses or understands the chosen term as part of their writing process. This assignment is used in a first-year writing course which uses a Writing about Writing-based curriculum, but this assignment could easily be used in any unit that asks students to investigate the writing process. By completing this assignment, students broaden their definitions of writing vocabulary and its impact on good writing, they gain experience in conducting and coding interviews, and they develop metacognitive awareness of themselves as writers and researchers.

Introduction and Inspiration for the "Good Writing" Analysis

In first-year writing (FYW), many instructors are familiar with students' challenges to identify what counts as "good writing" and their preconceived notions of the terminology around writing. Students may have heard terms like brainstorming, revision, and audience, but they may have a one-dimensional understanding of those terms (e.g, that revision means sentence-level changes). These shallow definitions mean many FYW students lack the deep knowledge necessary for understanding the writing process and the ways that more experienced writers interpret and use this terminology themselves; as a result, students' understanding of what counts as "good writing" can often be equally shallow simply because of their limited grasp of what these terms mean and how writers apply them. As a composition instructor, I strive to instill greater writing confidence in students by having them investigate and expand on their knowledge of seemingly straightforward writing lingo. This project encourages students to analyze the writing processes of other writers through defining a specific writing term and examining its impact on their interviewees' writing processes.

The "Good Writing" Analysis (GWA) provides an excellent starting point for students entering the university, who often have varied past experiences with the writing process and writing terminology (Robertson et al., 2012). As students learn about a range of enacted brainstorming, drafting, revision, and research practices, they find that their initial understanding of their chosen term or concept is inaccurate or unable to capture the complexity of this term. Consequently, students develop a more nuanced definition of this term and of the complexity of the writing process. Further, through this introduction to primary research, students also learn that writing is "epistemic" (Perl, 1979/2020, p. 111) and creates new knowledge. Students engage in this meaning-making by reevaluating their term and arguing for its role in the writing process in their analysis of their interview evidence.

The GWA was designed as part of a FYW Writing about Writing (WAW)-based curriculum at a regional comprehensive university of approximately 6,000 undergraduate students, at which students took FYW as one 4-credit course. This university is a predominantly white institution, and many undergraduate students are graduates of local high schools. In class, students share that their writing experiences vary: some students had AP classes, some had only ever written 5-paragraph essays, and some had not written a paper since their sophomore year of high school.

WAW introduces students to Writing Studies research to illustrate that writing is a discipline that can and should be studied (Wardle & Downs, 2020). When students read scholarship that is foundational to Writing Studies, these articles challenge students due to the complex language and unfamiliar organization of this genre; as a result, instructors must devote time to scaffolded reading and discussion strategies to help students understand and connect these readings to their own experiences (Charlton, 2009/2010). Notably, however, discussions of students' previous experiences as writers help the students begin to recognize the variety of definitions they bring to key terms about writing, as well as how these writing terms impact the writing process. Additionally, even though there are relatively few models for undergraduate research of writing, WAW invites instructors to take up the challenges of understanding the collaborative relationship that is necessary for this kind of empirical research (Bird et al., 2019, pp. 4-5). Within this context, the GWA is designed as an accessible approach to undergraduate research through an introduction to the language of Writing Studies and then an investigation of this language through primary interview research.

Teaching the "Good Writing" Analysis

Defining "Good Writing"

As part of the first week and a half of the project,[1] students have in-class conversations about personal writing experiences and read scholarship to deepen their understanding of the writing process and Writing Studies.[2] As part of this process, students discuss a working definition of good writing that they use to identify writers that they could interview for their project. Though students initially use parameters such as perfect grammar to define good writing, they begin to focus not just on what good writing looks like, but what good writing does. Their definitions expand to include features like clarity, fulfillment of purpose, and audience awareness as important aspects of good writing. These conversations prepare students to apply this definition of good writing to writers in multiple contexts, such as email, advertisements, and social media. Though students initially might not have considered a friend as a possible interviewee because that friend is not a perfect speller, they reconsider this when thinking about this friend's clarity in social media writing. Additionally, students further examine writing terminology by reading foundational scholarship in writing studies. For example, by reading scholarship on writer's block, students investigate their beliefs about what writers do to create good writing and discuss how adherence to writing rules may negatively impact a writer's process (Rose, 1980/2020). As a result, students synthesize their class conversations about good writing with scholarly research, preparing them for the synthesis of their interview data and sources that they will do for their GWAs.

Introducing the GWA

After first selecting a term that personally interests them, students investigate their preconceived notions about this term and writing terminology more broadly. Students may examine something that has previously been difficult in their writing process, such as writer's block, to understand how real writers respond to writer's block during their composing processes. Other students may pick a term that feels more abstract, such as genre, which can help them reflect

on how writers understand these abstract concepts and use this knowledge to create good writing. In either case, this investigation challenges students to reevaluate their basic definitions of language about writing; by interviewing multiple writers and synthesizing this data, they consequently deepen their knowledge about the writing process and writing terminology.

When I first introduce students to the GWA assignment, I tell students that the primary goal is to create an argument about the term rather than just a definition. This is important to explain to students because when first assigned this project, many students believe that this will be "easy" because of the definitional aspect. Though this belief is somewhat misguided, this interpretation of the ease of the project helps students approach the project with more confidence. However, I remind them that as they talk to their interviewees, their explanation of the writing term's significance becomes much more important to students' arguments and their role in contributing to Writing Studies knowledge. Through this explanation, students are required to justify the importance of this term to the writing process in all the term's complexities and practices, creating a more complex argument rather than a simple definition.

Ethical Interviewing Practices and Interviewee Selection

To prepare for their interviews, students learn ethical interview practices and complete in-class practice interviews with peers. These activities introduce students to interviews as a method of data collection and to their role as ethical researchers. For this project in FYW, ethical research means students respect their interviewees' time, expertise, and autonomy when conducting interviews, creating a sound foundation for learning more specific research practices later in their academic career. Using a handout,[3] students review ethical interviewing in multiple modalities, including steps for informed consent for recording.[4] After selecting interview questions, students practice interviewing a peer in class. Many students have minimal experience with interviewing someone and initially feel intimidated by this part of the project, but this in-class practice with the provided handout increases students' confidence with ethical interview research.

Students apply their emerging definitions of good writing to select three interviewees. As their definitions of good writing becomes more complex, students expand their pool of interviewees beyond obvious authorities like teachers and authors to include friends, family members, coworkers, teammates, bosses, etc. This expanded interview pool allows students to examine good writing practices outside of education and further deepen their knowledge of who counts as a good writer and how these good writers engage with writing terminology. Some students have still sought out former teachers and counselors to participate as interviewees. For example, one student intentionally interviewed three former teachers who wrote in different disciplines: English, history, and biology. He wanted to evaluate the use of evidence in writing across these different disciplines. Other students contacted family members and friends who wrote creatively or in professions like real estate and health care. By selecting and explaining their choice in interviewees, students consider the rhetorical impact of their choices and how to justify the choices they make as writers and researchers, skills which are essential to learning ethical research practices.

Coding Interview Data

After collecting data, students learn the process of coding to select evidence and develop their argument about their chosen writing term. For this project, students only need a basic understanding of how coding works: they learn that coding is identifying common themes and sorting these common themes into groups. Students first practice this with a class coding activity of something familiar.[5] I often use the topic of monsters and ask students to give me

a list of 15-16 monsters for their example data set (King, 2023). Students then work in groups to identify 4-5 themes that they see in this data set (e.g., scary, humanoid, etc.). Then, they share their chosen codes and how they created them to metacognitively reflect on their process and illuminate their coding strategies for their classmates (King, 2023). After this activity, students are ready to practice coding with example transcripts. Using transcripts from my own GWA example,[6] I model developing codes for a GWA project by showing them how I looked for common themes across interviewees (rather than coding each interviewee individually) and explaining that these common themes became my codes. I explain that creating codes across interviewees allowed me to see commonalities in how good writers are defining the writing term and what is most important to understand. Students then practice coding by color-coding or underlining different sections of these example transcripts using the codes that I had developed for my own project After these in-class activities, students workshop their own codes for their interview data as the next step in analyzing this data as evidence. Coding then provides a foundation for further analysis, and students look for specific themes that help them understand their writing term and its impact on their writing process.

Drafting the GWA

Students are given a few strategies for approaching the development of their argument. One strategy that many students use is to focus their argument on the code that was most prevalent in their data. For example, one student chose to focus on style as a form of self-expression because this was the code that appeared the most in his data set. Another strategy that students chose was to explore the relationship between two or three codes (e.g., positive effects of writer's block and negative effects of writer's block). Other students selected a code that appeared less frequently but offered a new way of defining their term that they had not considered before (e.g., revision is for the reader, not the writer). By giving students options, they have more autonomy as they develop an argument based on what they find personally interesting in their data.

Once students have identified the new knowledge about the term and how it works, students begin drafting an IMRAD-style paper (i.e., Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), supporting their argument through interview quotes and secondary sources. Students engage in peer review and individual conferences with their instructor, supporting a learning goal of collaboration with writing. Students revise in between this feedback, which promotes effective revision strategies and encourages them to see writing as recursive (Perl, 1979/2020, p. 115). In peer review, students write comments about global concerns like the overall clarity of the argument and the effectiveness of the writer's analysis of their evidence. In conferencing and in-class workshops, students continue to revise using feedback from their instructor and peers. These collaborative practices encourage revision and deeper conversations about students' writing processes and projects.

Students' Experiences and Successful Outcomes

Students' experiences with this project seemed positive. As students conducted interviews, they deepened their understanding of terms that they were previously confident they understood. For example, students who chose to explore writer's block were surprised to learn that writer's block can have a positive impact on the writing process rather than a solely negative effect. Students used their arguments to explore the complexity of these dual effects of writer's block, directly contradicting previously held beliefs that writer's block has only negative effects and that good writers never experience writer's block. Another student chose voice as her writing term. She expressed that she wanted her own voice reflected in her argument, since her interviewees

talked about how vital voice was to them. By making specific rhetorical choices about her own use of voice in her writing, this student effectively transferred her knowledge about voice gained from the project, even as she was still engaged in it. Though this student initially considered voice as part of copyediting, she argued that instead voice should be a primary consideration at every stage of the writing process, leading her to push back against the way she was taught to write and value voice. Within the context of a WAW-based curriculum, these examples demonstrate the ways that students treated writing as a discipline to study rather than only a skill. After completing the GWA, students were more prepared to investigate their own writing process, challenging preconceived notions of themselves as writers and researchers.

Even as many students succeeded in learning more about writing terminology, there were limits and challenges to the GWA. For example, many students became frustrated when interviewees did not respond quickly or at all. This proved to be a valuable learning opportunity when students had to turn to back-up interviewees for their data, and they were empowered when they navigated these challenges successfully with support from their instructor and peers. Another limitation to this project was the challenge of new genre expectations. Many students were new to the IMRAD genre, since this genre was significantly different from the five-paragraph essay genre most students learn in high school. Though students successfully learned this new genre, the initial challenges this project presents can be overwhelming to students. Additional drafting and in-class workshops, as well as genre discussions, are necessary to help students feel more comfortable with writing their essay.

Future Plans and Strategies for Teaching

This project can be expanded upon in future FYW classes. If this project is the first assignment students complete, it could serve as a foundation for subsequent interview-based projects. Students could also be given more guidance for choosing interviewees by selecting one teacher, one classmate, and one friend or family member. These more specific guidelines would allow students to explore a broad range of writing experiences within their projects. Instructors could collaborate with fellow faculty, staff, and administrators willing to volunteer as interviewees to fulfill the learning outcomes of the project and increase community engagement. Additionally, the GWA has positive implications for transfer of professional skills, since students can transfer what they learned about effective interviewing to hiring processes.

There are also several opportunities for revisions to this project, specifically around coding knowledge, adapting the GWA to upper-level Writing Studies courses, and focusing more on cultural myths of good writing and good writers. First, students may benefit from a more detailed discussion about coding and different methods of coding for their analysis. For example, utilizing excerpts from texts such as *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2015) to discuss the broad range of coding options may be particularly useful when using the GWA as an introduction to a more detailed overview of coding and primary research. In addition, while this project is intended for a FYW course, the GWA could be adapted to upper-level writing courses by focusing on a particular kind of writing, such as workplace writing or social media writing. Students could write meaningful arguments about the role of audience or organization in these contexts, selecting interviewees based on their definitions of good writing in these contexts. Furthermore, since "good writing" is often a charged term for students, a strong revision to this project could focus on interrogating cultural myths around good writing and who counts as a good writer.

Both in its current form and in these potential adaptations, this assignment offers students an opportunity to complicate their understanding of the writing process and to confidently engage with primary research. As a result, the GWA teaches students to create complex argumentative

writing and practice skills such as interviewing that can be transferred to future academic and professional contexts.

ASSIGNMENT
"Good Writing" Analysis

For this assignment, you will be doing an analysis of a specific writing term (one that is important to your own writing process) and its significance to writing. To do this, you will interview (three) 3 people you would describe as "good writers." You will ask them questions about this writing term, how they understand it, and how these use this term in practice in their writing process. You will then analyze that interview data. The findings of these interviews will be the focus of the argumentative essay that you will create.

Learning Goals
- Develop a more complex understanding of the writing process and the terminology that we use to describe writing
- Learn to build an argument by selecting and analyzing primary data (from your interviews)
- Select relevant sources and integrate them to expand and contextualize your primary data findings
- Gain appropriate peer review practices for participating in a community of writers

Week-by-Week Schedule
Week 1 Introducing the Study of Writing and Readings on the Writing Process

Week 2 Understanding the "Good Writing" Analysis & Ethical Interviewing Practices

Week 3 Coding Interview Data and Developing Argument about Writing Term

Week 4 Rhetorical Source Use, Selecting Evidence from Interviews, & Drafting GWA

Week 5 Effective Peer Review Practices and Revision Strategies

Week 6 Individual Conferences, Revision Workshop, and Final Copyediting

What your Project is
Guiding this project is the question: "What is [writing term], and how is it important to the writing process"? In particular, this research question requires that you make two moves:

1. to identify and define the term, and
2. to explain how it impacts the writing process. Your purpose in this assignment is to make an evidence-based argument about a term related to writing and how it shapes the writing process.

What this Paper Should Look Like
Your paper should have an **introduction**, where you introduce the reader to your chosen writing term, and where you lay out your aim for the paper and how you will accomplish it. In particular, we are going to look at introductions borrowing from Swales' description of the "moves" of writing an academic paper's introduction, called the CARS moves:

1. Establishing territory (or background)
2. Establishing a niche or gap (a problem or "missing piece" to which you respond)
3. Occupying the niche or gap (or how your argument/paper fills this niche or gap).

Your paper should describe your process of data collection and analysis (e.g. the **methods** you used in order to answer your research question). Your paper should describe what you found as a consequence of following these methods in your **results and discussion** sections. You'll pull together two sources of information here: your interview data via transcriptions/notes and secondary sources describing the writing process.

Finally, your paper will have a **conclusion**, where you identify how this writing term applies to *your* writing process and why this term is important to understanding writing. You will also use your conclusion to further double-down on your definition of your writing term and its significance to the writing process.

Other Guidelines for Writing

- Paper length: this will become a paper of 1250-2000 words double-spaced in 12 pt. Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri font.
- You'll use at least 2 sources (no more than 3).
- You should document your source use in MLA or APA
- We'll take this through at least 2 drafts before submission: all submitted drafts should be complete drafts (e.g. 1250-2000 words, 2 sources, using some system of citations & including a work reference/citation page).

Based on our readings and conversations in class, we have several different writing terms that you can analyze and ask your interviewees about. I've provided a list below of options. If you want to analyze a term that is not listed below, you should first ask me about the term you want to use. This is so I am aware of what you want to do in your project and can make sure you still fulfill the goals of the assignment. Either way, you should select **ONE** term to analyze for this project.

You should choose a term that is significant to your own writing process. Think about what you do when you write, what you believe is important to good writing, and/or what you enjoy most about writing. After you've decided on **ONE** of these features of your own writing process, focus on this as your term.

Writing terms

Genre	Argument	Flow
Drafting	Revision	Planning
Credibility	Thesis	Evidence
Research	Audience	Voice
Peer review	Organization	Writer's block
Brainstorming	Outlining	Significance to the reader
Sources	Style	

Notes

[1] See the "Good Writing" Analysis Assignment that follows the essay for a Week-by-Week suggested schedule for a 6-week version of this project.

[2] Because I used the *Writing about Writing* textbook (Wardle & Downs, 2020), students read articles by Mike Rose ("Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language"), Nancy Sommers ("Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers"), Anne Lamott ("Shitty First Drafts"), etc. However, a variety of texts about writing could be consulted, including open access resources like *Writing Spaces*, Volumes 1-5.

[3] See the "Good Writing" Analysis Interview Questions supplemental file.

[4] IRB approval is not required for these interviews, as it is considered a class project and as such is designed for pedagogical purpose rather than for research dissemination. Instructors should consult with their Institutional Review Boards for best practices at their universities.

[5] See Coding Guidance/Activity supplemental file.

[6] My "Good Writing" Analysis Example: Partial Draft of Introduction and Methods is included as a supplemental file. Having my own example was extremely helpful for multiple reasons. Since I had done the assignment myself, I could anticipate and prepare for students' challenges. I also had example transcripts for coding and multiple drafts of my project to show meaningful revision in action.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i1.196.

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