Saying More with Less

Using Aphorisms to Promote Critical Reading and Authority in the First-Year Writing Classroom

Sean Barnette[1] and James A. Anderson, Jr.[2]

[1]Lander University (sbarnette@lander.edu)
[2]Lander University (janderson1@lander.edu)

Abstract

To help students in a first-year writing (FYW) course develop their ability to read and respond critically to complex texts, this assignment asks students to analyze and respond to an aphorism—a microtext that offers a witty and insightful expression about the human experience. We argue that the brevity and content of these microtexts makes them especially well-suited to help students work towards the goals of a FYW course. In particular, this assignment invites students to practice careful and critical reading and to reflect on their own experience and authority as writers in order to respond meaningfully to a text.

Introduction

Many students in our first-year writing (FYW) courses struggle reading lengthy and complex texts for several reasons. These reasons include the vast amount of information and unfamiliar discourse conventions found in academic texts, as well as a lack of experience attending to the language authors use to establish meaning. The challenges our students face are not unique: many postsecondary students recognize the academic value of reading, but perceive assigned course readings to be inappropriately "long and dry with no sense of what is relevant" and do not feel that they are taught the skills needed to read academic texts (Gorzycki et al., 2019, p. 504). In response to these concerns, we argue that aphorisms present an accessible and appropriate genre for students in a FYW course, and that by analyzing and responding to aphorisms, students hone their critical reading, critical analysis, and argumentative writing skills.

By "aphorism," we mean a microtext (typically 50 words or fewer) that offers a witty and insightful expression about the human experience, a definition synthesized from multiple sources (e.g., Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.; Collins, n.d.). Examples of aphorisms include John Irving's admission that "Half my life is an act of revision"[1] and Anaïs Nin's assertion that "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect" (as cited in Leibowitz, 2017). Despite their brevity, these microtexts offer remarkable potential for interpretation.

Our assignment asks students in a FYW course to respond critically to an aphorism about writing. Students produce an essay of roughly 1,000 words in which they interpret the aphorism and use their own authority to argue about the aphorism's truthfulness—that is, the degree to which their interpretation of the aphorism is coherent with their interpretation of their own experience as writers. While aphorisms are almost never literally true (e.g., they employ figurative language and, in some cases, offer prescriptions rather than propositions), we adopt a coherence theory of truth (Walker, 2001) and consider an aphorism true when it can be read as making a claim that parallels or illuminates the experience of the person reading it. Determining the truth of an aphorism thus involves a double act of interpretation: readers must parse both the aphorism's language and their own experiences of writing.

The assignment is part of the first semester of our two-semester sequence, when students argue from personal experience rather than from secondary research. Through this assignment,

prompt
a journal of academic writing assignments

Volume 10, Issue 1 (2026), pages 13–20.

DOI: 10.31719/pjaw.v10i1.216
Submitted June 19, 2024; accepted October 29, 2025; published January 30, 2026.

© 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

students have the opportunity to deepen their critical thinking and understanding of writing as a discipline, to analyze another writer's use of language, to evaluate the truthfulness of a claim, and to demonstrate authority by taking and supporting argumentative stances. While analytical and argumentative essays are ubiquitous in FYW courses, we maintain that the unique value of this assignment arises from two key factors: its focus on writing about writing and its use of aphorisms as microtexts.

Writing about Writing

For many teachers, a FYW course is obviously a skills course; students (so the argument goes) take English 101 to develop the basic writing skills they will need in their majors and in their careers. Undeniably, students should leave a FYW course with improved writing abilities. However, that claim leaves unanswered important questions of just what we mean by "writing abilities" and what sorts of instruction and assignments are most likely to promote the transfer of learning from a FYW course to future writing contexts. In response to those questions, scholars in writing studies have put forward persuasive arguments that FYW courses need to focus not on decontextualized writing skills but on inquiry into the act of writing itself (e.g. Downs & Wardle, 2007; Charlton, 2009/2010, an approach known as Writing about Writing (WAW).

In broad terms, WAW pedagogies see the FYW classroom as a place where students should read, reflect on, and engage in research about writing. One goal of this approach is to help students uncover and correct misconceptions about writing—misconceptions that are too often based on platitudes, unexamined commonplaces, or other "bad ideas about writing" (Ball & Loewe, 2017)—by examining what writing scholarship can tell us about writers, texts, and rhetorical situations. Downs and Wardle (2007) argue that helping students craft a "more realistic writing narrative"—that is, an understanding of how writing works—gives teachers "a theoretically greater chance of making students 'better writers' " than approaches which aim to cultivate a supposedly universal "academic discourse" defined primarily in terms of rules (p. 558).

In our course, with its focus on arguing from personal authority rather than secondary research, that "more realistic writing narrative" (Downs & Wardle, 2007, p. 558) is formed as students examine their own experiences as writers and then put that experience into conversation with another writer's claim (i.e., the aphorism). As Downs and Wardle (2007) put it, we want students to "learn to claim their own situational expertise and write from it as expert writers do" (p. 560). We argue that doing so has the potential to foster transfer, because "writing transfer . . . requires conscious (re)construction of prior experiences that can be adapted for new writing contexts" (Whicker & Stinson, 2020). For our purposes, then, WAW means that students who complete this assignment not only practice textual analysis but also develop an understanding of writing itself as a way of constructing knowledge and engaging with the world. This process better positions students to succeed in the future as they encounter novel rhetorical situations, because it gives them practice making critical rhetorical decisions based on a realistic understanding of writing, rather than following a set of decontextualized writing rules which may not apply to future writing tasks.

Aphorisms as Microtexts

Aphorisms seem to have been around as long as language itself. From Confucius to social media posts, this brief genre has stood the test of time. Hui (2019) accounts for the longevity of the aphorism this way: "Its minimal size is charged with maximal intensity" (p. 1). A well-constructed aphorism achieves brevity through semantic and syntactic features like figurative

language, connotation, parallelism, or contrast, and this brevity provides concise but rich opportunities for analysis, interpretation, and meaning-making. In other words, "the minimal syntax of an aphorism gives it a maximal force" (Hui, 2019, p. 3). This "maximal force" is an integral reason why we chose the aphorism as a genre for writing and analysis in our FYW course.

As we mentioned previously, our students often struggle reading lengthy and complex texts. Therefore, we argue that microtexts (such as the aphorism) are an ideal genre to help students develop critical reading and writing skills for several reasons. First, aphorisms about writing provide relevant content in a FYW course. Second, by analyzing the linguistic structures of the aphorisms, students can combine close reading with a deeper understanding of what writing can do. Finally, and most practically, the brevity of aphorisms allows us to explore multiple perspectives on writing in a relatively short time with focus and efficiency.

Teaching the Assignment

Prior to this assignment, students in our class have written their own aphorisms about writing, and it is from these peer texts that students select an aphorism to analyze for this assignment. We believe that this aspect of the assignment is beneficial because it increases student agency and engagement; however, the analysis assignment can also work with aphorisms by published writers. We begin teaching this assignment by modeling how students will analyze the aphorism they have chosen. In our class activities, we draw students' attention to two rhetorical aspects of aphorisms: their semantic features and their syntactic arrangement.

During the first week, we discuss semantics and present some of the more common types of figurative language found in aphorisms, such as metaphor, irony, and hyperbole. We also direct students' attention to the words' connotations. An in-class activity we have found useful is to ask students, "What synonyms could the writer have used here instead, and how would those other words change the way you read the aphorism?" For example, when we consider Umberto Eco's aphorism that "To survive, you must tell stories" (as cited in Leibowitz, 2017), we ask students to consider how the word "survive" creates a different rhetorical effect than other possible synonyms, such as "live."

The following week, we discuss syntax, showing students how writers use language to link their ideas together. The most common strategies we find are those of addition or intensification; sequence or consequence; and alternative, contrast, or concession. For instance, in Ernest Hemingway's aphorism that "As a writer, you should not judge, you should understand" (as cited in Leibowitz, 2017), we discuss how the contrast between "should not" and "should" not only places emphasis on the word "understand," but further nuances what Hemingway means by "understand" in this context; indeed, the contrasting structure defines "understand" specifically in opposition to "judging" and conveys the need for empathy towards one's subject. These in-class analyses help students see how the structure of an aphorism contributes to the claims it makes about writing.

During the third week, we guide students in evaluating the aphorism in light of their own experience. In a course focused on WAW, students will have been writing about and reflecting on their experiences as writers throughout the semester. As a result, by this point they already have a significant body of data to draw from as they compare the aphorism with their own experience. This is helpful because it means that students have already begun forming a narrative of writing based on their experiences, one which can inform their reading of the aphorism. Thus, to determine what the aphorism gets right or wrong, students must consider whether it matches what they already know about writing.

We call the text students produce for this assignment an "essay," and while we understand

that this term is potentially problematic and fraught with institutional baggage, we define the essay for our students as an exploration of an idea or question that the writer deems worth considering in depth and sharing with an audience. We thus make purposeful efforts in the course to expand our students' understanding of the genre beyond a merely formal structure (e.g., the five-paragraph essay). We want them instead to consider how the essay, as a genre, depends on the writer's authority—an authority that, for our students, arises from careful textual analysis and critical reflection on their own experience as writers.

As students compose their essay for this assignment, we ask them to consider which findings from their analysis seem most insightful. We stress that not every observation about the aphorism may make it into the essay and that students should choose which details to include. To help with those choices, we offer students a loose heuristic (included in the assignment instructions) for contextualizing their response. In particular, we ask students to think about why and to whom their response to the aphorism will matter. While we remind students that such contextualization may work well in their essay's introduction or conclusion, we do not give students a strict outline for the essay, leaving choices about organization and emphasis to their rhetorical discretion.

Student Work

Not surprisingly, students typically respond to this assignment with essays that examine the semantic and syntactic features of the aphorism. When they are successful, their responses demonstrate that isolating and attending to these rhetorical features allows students to produce coherent and insightful analyses. In the following examples, we offer illustrative quotations from student writing; all aphorisms and related analysis in this section come from students who provided written permission to quote their work.

One student in a recent semester, for example, wrote in response to a classmate's aphorism comparing writing to hay fever: "Writing is challenging, draining, and snotty like a symptomatic case of hay fever. But after the weakness and severe congestion are gone, I can finally breathe again." In her analysis, the responding student claims that the word "again" "suggests that writing caused a pause in breathing." Here, the student recognizes that "again" only makes sense if the action it describes had previously been interrupted. In this case, the student has analyzed how the implications of the word "again" contribute to the meaning of the aphorism. Her focus on this diction demonstrates that she is familiar with the process of careful, critical reading.

Another student chose to respond to a different aphorism written by a classmate: "Writing is a lifeline. When you feel you are drowning in life and need security, pick up a pen and start writing." His response begins with an accurate textual analysis:

> My classmate . . . uses two complete sentences with three different parts which express a complete thought. The aphorism . . . uses imagery, metaphor, and sequence structure to show the message of writing is a powerful tool. The first sentence . . . is the main idea of the aphorism.

This beginning sets him up to examine, in the rest of his essay, the meaning of the aphorism as it is created across its three clauses. In other words, by attending carefully to the language and the structure of the text, this student created the conditions that allowed him to make insightful observations and draw meaningful analytical conclusions—in short, to think critically.

In addition to unpacking the linguistic structure of the aphorisms, successful responses to this assignment typically demonstrate students' ability to synthesize personal perspectives and experiences with the perceived claims of the aphorism. The author of the "lifeline" essay, for

example, supports his reading by citing his own experience of writing, particularly journaling, offering him "a sense of security and control over [his] thoughts during difficult times." In his essay, he first considers writing only as a solitary act—one that benefits the writer. Toward the end of his essay, however, he offers an alternative reading of the aphorism, appraising the "lifeline" as a way "to connect with . . . readers"; he writes that he hopes he "was able to be the lifeline in this essay and give you [the reader] a deeper understanding." Here, his stance shifts; he is no longer responding to the aphorism as a solitary writer but has turned his attention to the conversational relationship between writers and readers. This shift in perspective suggests that he is reflecting on his understanding of the aphorism in a way that lends him academic authority.

This authority in his writing allows him to address the truthfulness of the chosen aphorism by comparing its claims to his own experience of writing. In doing so, he identifies a possible objection to the aphorism: "The aphorism does suggest writing can be a quick and easy fix, but the reality is writing can be a slow and difficult process." Rather than using this objection as an end unto itself, the student re-interprets the aphorism in response to the objection: "The statement 'pick up a pen and start writing' doesn't mean that writing is going to fix all your problems." He counters that writing "can be a valuable tool" in conjunction with other ways that people might deal with difficulties in their lives, such as exercise or therapy. Thus, this student is able to synthesize his own perspectives on writing with that of the aphorism, in order to clarify the validity of his own claims.

On the other hand, less-successful responses typically demonstrate one or both of two weaknesses: a lack of specific engagement with the words of the aphorism, or a failure to connect the writer's experience with their interpretation of the aphorism. For example, one student chose to respond to the aphorism, "Writing is like a web made of silk connecting to itself endlessly." In the introduction of the essay, the writer appears to make an initial interpretation and a claim: "This aphorism is writing about writing and what it means for writers. Writing can be many things; it can be academic or just for fun." Unfortunately, these claims do not connect clearly to the wording of the aphorism itself. Later in the essay, the writer does argue that "writing can be more than just a web," but fails to engage with the implications of the web metaphor, instead merely dismissing it. The writer also struggles to connect the web metaphor to personal experiences that might validate their claims about the aphorism. The writer offers, for instance, this use of personal experience: "The connection I have to the aphorism is when I write I like to brainstorm, and it becomes a 'web' of ideas, and it supports my thoughts about what I am writing." While there is a potentially rich connection to be explored between the web-like processes of brainstorming and the metaphorical web of the aphorism, the writer does not address this. Instead, the writer simply asserts, "Writing became quite easy for me when brainstorming came into the mix." Both of these common weaknesses—failure to engage with the language of the aphorism or to draw effectively on personal experiences—could be addressed in revision.

Conclusion

We recognize that the aphorism analysis assignment has some limitations. For example, unless students have been engaged in WAW prior to this assignment, their ability to respond to their aphorism is constrained by their ability to reflect critically on their own experience. Such reflection is a prerequisite, and it is a skill that requires guidance and practice.

Instructors might compensate for this limitation in two ways. First, they might ask students to respond to more than one aphorism, particularly to aphorisms making contrasting claims. This would bring additional perspectives on writing into the conversation and allow students to

synthesize multiple voices. Second, instructors could present a WAW unit, offering readings that provide accessible perspectives on writing, which students can draw from to augment their own authority (e.g, Cummins, 2012; Warner, 2016). Alternatively, students could analyze drafts of their peers' essays for this assignment as WAW texts in their own right. Doing so has the potential to help students recognize how differences in prior experiences can inform markedly different responses to the same aphorism—a recognition that may spur meaningful revision.

One of the aphorisms that we like to discuss with our students is Jack Kerouac's hope that "One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple" (as cited in Leibowitz, 2017). When our students succeed in this assignment, they often realize that the "right words" are not simple at all. But more than that, students realize they have the agency to engage with the apparent authority of such microtexts. Thus, without sacrificing rigor, this assignment allows students to practice interpreting and responding critically to meaning-rich microtexts, to develop the skills of critical reading and argumentation, and to enter conversations about what it means to be a writer in college.

ASSIGNMENT
Aphorism Analysis Assignment

Value: 30% of course grade
Down Draft Due Date:
Up Draft Due Date:

Rationale

This assignment is meant to help you deepen your critical thinking and understanding of writing by closely analyzing an aphorism on writing crafted by someone else. Your analysis of the aphorism will draw on skills that we have developed in this unit: 1) analyzing of the use of language in an aphorism; 2) evaluating the validity and truthfulness of an aphorism.; 3) demonstrating authority by taking stances on the meaning of an aphorism; and 4) using concrete evidence from the aphorism to support your stance. In addition, the work you'll do for this project addresses all of the course goals of ENGL 101.

Task Instructions for Aphorism Analysis

You are going to analyze one of the aphorisms written by one of your classmates. To complete the analysis, you will:

- Read over the list of aphorisms written by several of your classmates. Read through all of your classmates' aphorisms and select the one that you'd like to write about for this assignment.
- Annotate the chosen aphorism by focusing on the language and structural elements.
- Develop your interpretation and evaluation of the aphorism by thinking critically in the pre-writing process.
- Write an analytical essay in which you respond both generously and critically to that aphorism, explaining what you think the aphorism gets right and/or wrong about writing.

As you plan your essay, think about why you chose that particular aphorism to respond to. In

other words, why is it important to respond to this aphorism? What is it about this aphorism that—from your thoughtful perspective—needs to be amplified, corrected, or nuanced? Who needs to take this aphorism to heart, or for whom could it be misleading or even dangerous? These considerations might help you provide context for your response (in the introduction section of your essay) and/or explain why your response matters (in the concluding section of your essay).

Throughout your essay, pay careful attention to the precise wording of the aphorism. Make it clear how you interpret the aphorism (and that your interpretation is reasonable), and present relevant, specific support for your claims about what the aphorism gets right and/or wrong about writing.

Assessment

I'll assess your essay using a rubric that includes these criteria:

- Does the essay make clear, accurate, and insightful claims—both generous and critical—about the aphorism?
- Does the essay refer explicitly and purposefully to the most relevant language in the aphorism?
- Does the essay include sufficient evidence and reasoning to support its claims?
- Is the essay clearly and effectively organized?
- Does the essay demonstrate appropriate audience awareness?
- Is the essay revised and well proofread?

Notes

[1] At the authors' request, aphorisms begin with a capital letter regardless of the way they are syntactically embedded within surrounding material, to mark the aphorisms as complete texts rather than merely propositions.

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.v10i1.216.

References

Ball, C. E., & Loewe, D. M. (Eds.). (2017). *Bad ideas about writing*. West Virginia University Libraries. https://textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/badideas/

Cambridge University Press & Assessment. (n.d.). Aphorism. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/aphorism

Charlton, J. (2009/2010). Seeing is believing: Writing Studies with "Basic Writing" students. *Basic Writing e-Journal*, *8/9*. https://bwe.ccny.cuny.edu/Issue%208_9%20home.html

Collins. (n.d.). Aphorism. In *English Dictionary*. Retrieved June 17, 2024, from https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/aphorism

Cummins, D. (2012, May 24). Your metaphor is misleading me. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/good-thinking/201205/your-metaphor-is-misleading-me

Downs, D., & Wardle, E. (2007). Teaching about writing, righting misconceptions: (Re)envisioning "First-year Composition" as "Introduction to Writing Studies". *College Composition and Communication*, *58*(4), 552–584. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20456966

Gorzycki, M., Desa, G., Howard, P. J., & Allen, D. D. (2019). "Reading is important," but "I don't read": Undergraduates' experiences with academic reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *63*(5), 499–508. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1020

Hui, A. (2019). *A theory of the aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*. Princeton University Press.

Leibowitz, G. (2017, August 24). 50 Inspiring quotes about writing from the world's greatest authors. *Inc.* https://www.inc.com/glenn-leibowitz/50-quotes-from-famous-authors-that-will-inspire-yo.html

Walker, R. C. S. (2001). The coherence theory. In M. P. Lynch (Ed.), *The nature of truth: Classic and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 123–158). The MIT Press (Reprinted from *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, pp. 1-6, 25-40, by R. C. S. Walker, 1989, Routledge).

Warner, J. (2016, June 29). Why can't my new employees write? *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/why-cant-my-new-employees-write

Whicker, J. H., & Stinson, S. (2020). Axiology and transfer in writing about writing: Does it matter which way we WAW? *Composition Forum*, *45*. https://compositionforum.com/issue/45/axiology.php