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Editors' Note

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We are excited to offer our first issue of 2026, a collection of five essays addressing writing assignments in contexts including undergraduate accounting, first-year composition, intermediate technical communication, graduate-level linguistics, and a course on African American rhetorical traditions. As described below, tax memos, aphorisms, game- and case-based learning, and analyses grounded in Afrocentric rhetorical traditions take center stage in the essays and assignments featured in this issue.

First up, in Michal Horton and Betty Bin Xing's "Teaching the Tax Memo Genre with a Writing about Writing (WAW) Approach," we get an inside look at an undergraduate tax course designed for accounting majors. Students in the course not only learn the ins and outs of the tax memo genre—an emphasis that the authors argue is much needed in accounting education—but also use WAW heuristics popularized by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle to reflect on the genre's important emphasis on paragraphing, a key aspect in successful tax memo writing and something highly valued by CPAs and across the accounting fields.

Then, in "Saying More with Less: Using Aphorisms to Promote Critical Reading and Authority in the First-Year Writing Classroom," Sean Barnette and James Anderson, Jr., compellingly write for the value of asking students to critically analyze aphorisms about writing. Such a task, they argue, can contribute to students' academic reading success while also encouraging students to better understand their own beliefs about and experiences with writing. We appreciate the way this assignment—through exploration of peer-created aphorisms—can help students move beyond generalized notions of writing to gain an authoritative and more nuanced contextual understanding of composing processes and products.

In the issue's third essay, Justin Cook's "A Murder Most Technical: Gamification, AI, and Rhetorical Genre Studies in the Technical Writing Classroom" offers a valuable illustration of how AI can be used to generate technical documents for student interrogation. By providing instructor-facing guides, Cook enables less-experienced users of AI to see the work that contributed to his assignment design. For students, Cook argues, the prompt helps them understand the flexible, rhetorical nature of technical genres. Throughout the essay, Cook also shows how recognized technical communication concerns of collaboration, co-production, and distributed authorship must be reviewed considering AI's text-generating capabilities.

Next up is "Building Relevancy and Engagement through Case-Based Learning in English Studies," where author Joanne Addison describes her response to the declining number of English students nationally and at her home institution, University of Colorado Denver. Her prompt seeks to increase her graduate students' ability to apply tools of linguistics to answer real-word questions asked during her department's program review, including ones related to curriculum relevancy and other issues the discipline faces. We especially appreciated Addison's appraisal of complexities of this approach, even as she argues compellingly for its potential to help students recognize applicable skills and knowledge gained through humanities and English Studies coursework.

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Finally, “Expanding Graduate Student Rhetorical Knowledge: African American Rhetorical Analysis,” by Jamila Kareem, takes us into another graduate rhetoric and writing curriculum and offers an innovative assignment that emphasizes the ancient Egyptian Kemetic rhetorical tradition. Expanding students’ knowledge of African American traditions and what Kareem explains is the relationship between rhetoric, society, culture, and community, students theorize communication practices that are deeply rooted in Black communities but that many of us schooled in Western rhetoric do not recognize. By working toward helping writers demonstrate the practices and frameworks within the Kemetic tradition, students leave the course with an expanded understanding of practices in wide circulation in U.S. culture today.

Looking forward, we close this note by forecasting our Summer 2026 issue, which will be our second special issue focused on a range of assignments from a single writing program. The set of articles taking shape from the University of Arizona are wide-ranging but united by a common focus on the transformative potential of writing within and across disciplines. Therein, editors and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program directors Aimee Mapes and Emily Jo Schwaller will illustrate U of A’s commitment to WAC principles in tandem with linguistic social justice. Given our journal’s commitment to these same principles, we can think of no better way to share important pedagogical trends in an age when institutional allegiances to diversity, equity, and inclusion are under threat.

Teaching the Tax Memo Genre with a Writing about Writing (WAW) Approach

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Abstract

This essay shares a WAW reflection assignment that supports the development of writing knowledge for tax memos and for the accounting profession; it is taught in an undergraduate tax class for accounting students. Students develop an external tax memo and, following submission of that assignment, they write about their own writing in their completed memo. The emphasis on the WAW reflection is paragraphing, as this aspect of writing is highly valued in accounting and especially needed for an effective tax memo. Accounting education has long called for more writing-emphasis instruction in accounting courses, and this assignment answers that call.

Introducing the Assignment: A WAW Reflection on a Tax Memo

The tax memo is a genre of writing that all undergraduate accounting students learn at our university as part of their tax class. In fact, writing a tax memo is a hallmark assignment in tax classes across universities because it plays a central function in tax-related accounting: communicating the outcome of extensive research and assigning rationale for the outcome, citing the tax code to do so. A typical tax memo assignment is structured as follows: "[S]tudents are given a set of facts and then instructed to do research based on the tax issues that arise from those facts. Finally, they are asked to write a memo, and sometimes a letter, to a client that summarizes those findings, often with the assumption that there is one 'correct' answer to the case" (Esdale & Franklin, 2023, p. 99). The tax memo requires that students (and later on, accountants) blend technical knowledge with effective writing skills. As the tax memo demonstrates, writing is essential to the educational success of accounting students (Campbell et al., 2020), as well as to long-term career success in accounting (Campbell et al., 2020; Jones, 2011; Lawson et al., 2014; Roy & MacNeill, 1966; Stocks et al., 1992); supporting students in developing effective writing skills has therefore been a discussion point in recent accounting education scholarship (Esdale & Franklin, 2023; Noga & Rupert, 2017). Yet, calls to teach writing skills to accounting students has far outweighed answers to that call, and so this essay provides a resource for the targeted development of essential writing skills in accounting students.

A tax memo assignment from Esdale and Franklin (2023) asks students to identify errors in a poorly written tax memo, with the reasoning that "recognizing and communicating writing style errors is one way to improve a common significant weakness for students in professional writing skills" (p. 103). Whereas most tax memo assignments ask students to read a case and write up a tax memo in response, Esdale and Franklin take the position that identifying a poorly written tax memo might teach their students more about how to write a tax memo effectively. In this way, Esdale and Franklin's work recognizes that assigning writing is not the same as teaching writing, echoing the sentiments of writing and composition scholars who promote a

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study of writing-as-subject matter and the teaching of writing knowledge—not just the assigning of writing tasks (Boland, 2007; Downs, 2016; Miller, 2002).

Our assignment shares Esdale and Franklin's (2023) two premises: 1.) that identifying areas of improvement is a way to build knowledge about writing; 2.) that writing well means learning about writing, not just *doing* writing. However, rather than ask students to look for errors in an ineffective example, this assignment asks students to self-assess their own writing in the tax memo with a writing about writing (WAW) approach (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Wardle & Downs, 2013; Wardle & Downs, 2011). After students complete their tax memo assignment, they revisit it through the WAW reflection shared in this essay, in which they write about their own writing. The tax memo assignment still maintains its traditional focus of teaching students to conduct and report tax research, while the WAW reflection assignment creates a complementary focus on the writing done in the tax memo. In writing about their own writing in the tax memo, students can simultaneously develop stronger awareness of the tax memo as a genre of writing and a clearer sense of their personal writing practice. In their textbook on WAW, Wardle and Downs (2011) frame WAW to students as an approach for developing a "deeper knowledge of what's going on with your own writing and how writing works," and as a way to build "knowledge about writing that you can take with you to help you navigate other writing situations" (p. 1). This WAW positioning can benefit accounting students who need to develop writing skills and writing knowledge so that they can effectively execute their tax knowledge.

In their WAW reflection,[1] students are asked to outline the structure of their tax memo and assess the effectiveness of their paragraphing, locating the sequence of ideas within and across paragraphs to evaluate the effectiveness of their current paragraph organization. Students then articulate specific adjustments and areas of improvement in the writing that they need to implement to strengthen the efficacy of their memo.

Our emphasis on paragraphing comes from observation that students needed support in this area, which we elaborate on in a later section, as well as the priority on this writing element from the field of accounting. A study by Jones (2011) found that out of twenty-six writing skills, new employers ranked "effective sentences and paragraphs" as the most important for their new accounting hires (p. 256).[2] The field of accounting, and the tax memo in particular, upholds traditional methods of paragraphing. The tax memo opens with a claim, and this claim is supported by the highly focused and organized paragraphs that follow, each starting with a topic sentence that ensures each paragraph has only one key point. The tax memo is a tool for communicating information up the ranks of a tax firm. Senior managers and even partners will eventually review the information in the tax memo, and they expect that each key point will be easy to identify and that the energy required for information processing will be minimized by efficient writing. A former partner from one of the Big Four accounting firms confirms that highly structured paragraphing is a valued writing practice in tax memos (D. Winkler, personal communication, June 10, 2025).[3] We therefore teach students traditional paragraphing alongside a WAW reflection of the tax memo, simultaneously supporting student success in this important accounting genre, while contributing to the development of the more broadly needed writing skill of developing effective sentences and paragraphs.

Randall L. Waller (1988) places the study of paragraphing within the current traditional paradigm of rhetoric, which is among the most prescriptive. Because of its prescriptivist qualities, current traditional rhetoric might be regarded by some as merely heuristic—a way to build an initial foundation of writing knowledge (Berlin & Inkster, 1980). For example, elements of prescriptive writing like the topic sentence are sometimes taught to give novice writers a sense of paragraphing, even though not all writing calls for topic sentences;however, in business writing and in the tax memo in particular, a topic sentence is valued as a way to quickly deliver a key idea and manage information processing.

Drawing from the current traditional paradigm of rhetoric for its treatment of paragraphing is appropriate for the study of paragraphing in accounting, which enacts prescriptivist concepts that minimize the reader's workload. For example, Waller (1988) identifies "six major characteristics" of paragraphs that remain stable across studies of paragraphs and that are particularly reflective of a current-traditional value system (p. 61). Of these characteristics, four are directly applicable to writing the tax memo, and they are listed in Table 1 below. Before introducing the WAW reflection, we discuss with students these qualities of current-traditional paragraphing, but we adjust the terminology to use key terms that coincide with those used in their business communication course, which is a writing-emphasis course required for all business students (see Appendix A in Supplementary Materials). When reviewing paragraphing with students, the idea of *explicit reference* is replaced with *paragraph logic*. Instead of using the term *consecutive arrangement*, we discuss the sequencing of ideas through the known-new contract, drawing from Kolln and Gray's (2016) discussion of the known-new contract in *Rhetorical Grammar*. Finally, *overall unity* is replaced with *cohesion*, another terminological shift that echoes the vocabulary students use in their business communication course. Despite these terminological shifts, the definitions of these key terms are nonetheless doing the same work of the current-traditional paragraph qualities listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Four major characteristics of paragraphs (Waller, 1988, p. 61)

1	Explicit Reference	The bearing of each sentence upon what precedes shall be explicit and unmistakable.
2	Topic Sentence	The first sentence, unless obviously preparatory, should indicate the subject of each paragraph.
3	Consecutive Arrangement	Each statement should follow the plan of the paragraph and be in its appropriate place.
4	Overall Unity	A paragraph should possess unity which implies clarity of purpose and forbids irrelevancies and digressions.

This assignment is a collaboration between two faculty members, one teaching tax and one teaching business communication with a background in writing studies. It thus brings the fields of accounting and writing studies together by engaging students in accounting-centered values of writing, like traditional paragraphing, and by supporting this engagement with WAW. We recognize WAW as a pedagogical approach that flexibly supports the development of writing knowledge in response to "student population and instructor expertise" (Wardle & Downs, 2013, para. 10). As Wardle and Downs (2013) explain, the motivation behind their initial work on WAW was to "give language, voice, and community to principles of teaching that had been happening in various places for a long time but in fairly isolated ways" (para. 20). Likewise, the function of the paragraph review and WAW approach in this tax classroom is to support students with a language, voice, and community with shared principles for understanding writing in accounting, meanwhile recognizing that not all students may be in the practice of enacting these methods on their own. That is, we do not assume that students have a language for discussing the writing concepts in the tax memo, and so an aim of the assignment is to provide this language with the paragraph review to give voice to their developing writing and accounting knowledge as they complete the WAW reflection.

The benefits of this assignment include: 1.) the development of writing knowledge, through the review of paragraphing and the adoption of WAW; 2.) increased understanding of how writing knowledge supports the execution of tax knowledge, with the tax memo genre a site of enacting tax knowledge through writing; 3.) a growing sense of personal writing practice, through application of WAW to students' own writing in the tax memo. On the first point, this assignment reminds students that writing is itself a subject of study, which is why we ask students to study writing in the tax memo after completing the assignment (Wardle & Adler-Kassner, 2016); we want students to have a moment where they can engage in a focused study of writing *as* writing—that is, as its own knowledge system. We teach students about writing in accounting so that this knowledge development is discipline-specific. On the second point, the field of accounting requires skillful writing to convey complex tax research, which is why the tax memo is such an essential genre and a relevant site for studying discipline-specific writing. Finally, we want to foster self-awareness in students about their writing skills because, as just established, writing skills are essential to their career success. Reflecting on their own writing in the tax memo is a method for "*claiming and legitimating learning,*" as Yancey (2016) characterizes reflective writing (p. 305). Furthermore, in writing about their own writing, students can come to "claim" and "legitimate" their own writing knowledge by increasing their awareness of it. After all, writing development is both informed by values of a community, which in this case is the field of accounting, and executed through distinct positionalities and personal identities (Roozen, 2015; Scott, 2015). When students write about their own writing in the tax memo, we engage them in examining this dual engagement with the field's values and with their own knowledge.

Contextualizing the Tax Memo Reflection within the Genre of Tax Memos and Tax Research in Accounting

To show the importance of the WAW reflection of the tax memo, we elaborate on the importance of the tax memo genre itself, describing the purpose and process in which a tax memo arises. The tax memo genre, as shared in the section above, plays a central function in the accounting field. As a result, the tax memo should display the values of the field in being a product of rigorous tax research, logical thinking, effective communication, and client-centered service. When tax professionals perform tax research in service to clients, this research culminates in a tax memo, which tax professionals use to deliver their research results to clients or to share internally. These two uses result in two memo types—an internal memo and an external memo (see Appendix B and Appendix C for examples of each, respectively, in Supplementary Materials).

The audience of an internal memo consists of tax practitioners within the firm or practice. A tax professional may write a memo for their manager to review, or a manager may write a tax memo for a partner to review. An internal memo is highly technical, accompanied by detailed and comprehensive analysis. Its purpose is to share research findings, create documentation, and receive a review from colleagues before delivering results to a client in the second memo type—an external memo. An external memo is less technical in nature because it is written for a client. The external memo may consist of the information deemed most relevant by the tax professional, and it should be customized to the client. Client-centered service is not only a fundamental value but also the primary business model in the accounting profession, which is why so much weight is placed on learning the tax memo genre. Delivering an effective tax memo is closely connected to client satisfaction and likewise closely connected to a tax professional's career success.

The scope of possible tax clients is quite broad, ranging from individuals seeking tax advice on personal matters to executives seeking advice on company-wide financial matters. Clients typically request tax services for the following purposes: to determine the tax implications of major transactions, to devise tax planning strategies that align to their objectives, and to deal with tax authorities on audits or other compliance-related matters. Every tax professional must learn each client's specific objective and then determine the optimal course of action on the tax matter, which requires extensive tax research that is conducted across four distinct steps. These research steps are conducted for both internal and external memos. We share them below.

Step 1, Establish the Facts of the Tax Case. The tax practitioner needs to gain a clear understanding of the facts relevant to the client's case, such as the parties involved, the sequence of events or transactions, and the numerical values of account balances or income figures. If any of these aspects is missing or unclear, the tax practitioner will need to seek additional information from the client. The tax practitioner will later summarize these case facts in the "Facts" section of the tax memo.

Step 2, Identify the Fact Patterns of the Case. After forming a foundational understanding of the tax facts, the tax practitioner identifies all tax-related issues relevant to the case facts. Tax issues can be quite complex, as a single tax fact may have implications that affect multiple tax issues. For example, a salary payment may be a deduction from an individual's business income, and at the same time, it may be included as that same individual's taxable income. From these tax issues, the tax professional will begin to identify what are known as "fact patterns," which are the patterns of facts across the tax issues that later inform what sections of the tax code to use. In complicated cases, the tax professional may reference past tax cases demonstrating similar fact patterns, or the tax professional may need to conduct preliminary research on similar fact patterns to accurately identify all the tax issues that need to be resolved. The tax memo will later state all tax issues in concise and succinct form.

Step 3, Research the Tax Code and Other Tax Sources. After identifying all relevant tax issues, the tax practitioner searches the Internal Revenue Code (IRC), or the tax law of the country in which the tax practitioner resides, and locates the sections that apply to the case. In addition, the tax practitioner often seeks additional sources that relate to the fact pattern of the case; these sources can include court cases or rulings from tax authorities. The resulting tax code research goes into the tax memo's 'IRC' section, and the court cases and rulings inform the 'Authorities' section.

Step 4, Determine Tax Treatment. After conducting thorough tax research, the tax practitioner applies the research findings to the previously identified fact patterns of the case. Often, the tax professional identifies a set of conditions outlined in the IRC that must be met for a course of action to take place. This course of action is called the "tax treatment," and it refers to the tax action recommended based on the tax code and case facts. Before recommending a tax treatment, the tax practitioner may analyze the books of records[4] for additional support, or they may consult court cases for the interpretation of certain words or phrases from sections of the IRC sections. These findings are documented in the "Analysis" portion of the tax memo.

The tax memo must capture the logical reasoning for a tax treatment. When a specific tax treatment is warranted, then the analysis must clearly document that all conditions are met and why. When a specific tax treatment is not warranted, then the analysis must clearly identify the condition that is broken, explaining what the condition means and the reason behind this interpretation of the condition. The tax code is structured with exceptions within exceptions, making it critical that the analysis in the tax memo points to a clear logic and demonstrates a comprehensive research process. Indeed, the rigor of the research process is likely why most accounting instructors do not make time to teach writing alongside the tax memo—there is simply not much time for it.

The majority of any undergraduate tax courses needs to prioritize tax content, and this course is no exception. We strategically designed our assignment to economize time, functioning as a reflection of a submitted assignment and in anticipation of a subsequent assignment. Our positioning of the WAW reflection is a form of "*forward-reaching transfer*, whereby one mindfully abstracts basic elements in anticipation for later application" (Salomon & Perkins, 1989, p. 113). We ask students to complete a WAW reflection of their completed internal memo before they started their external memo, and this reflection involves looking back for areas of improvement and then looking forward to future applications. Our aim is to create a transition between the two memo types that helps students learn about writing in both genres through a single reflection.

Identifying the Exigence of the WAW Reflection

As noted across this essay, the breadth of tax content that needs to be covered limits the time that accounting instructors can spend on writing content, with most instructors omitting writing-specific content completely from the course; however, the tax instructor of the course under discussion here noted that student performance suffered because of underdeveloped writing in the tax memo, which is the exigence for the WAW reflection. While it is only one writing-emphasis assignment against an entire semester of accounting-emphasis content, we believe that inserting even a single assignment that is *about* writing into the accounting curriculum can make a difference in student learning. Indeed, the next section suggests it does. While general writing instruction matters, discipline-specific writing instruction is also important. Writing in accounting, and especially writing in the tax memo, is highly technical and typically follows a pre-defined structure. We created this assignment to support students in learning these aspects of writing for the course and writing in the accounting discipline. We also created this assignment in direct response to student performance in their tax memos from previous semesters.

Before designing the assignment, the tax instructor suggested that the business communication instructor take part in reviewing student writing from previous semesters. We conducted the proposed review, looking to identify common areas of improvement that we might address by developing a writing assignment for the tax class. We discovered that an overarching area of improvement in student writing was in organization, including the logical progression of ideas across sentences and paragraphs; we observed that the majority of students moved abruptly from one idea to the next, that their paragraphs lacked transitions, and that general principles of paragraphing were not observed. Frequently, students would submit exceedingly long paragraphs containing multiple key ideas, rather than the small-to-medium, highly-focused paragraphs required in a tax memo. As a result, we designed an assignment that explicitly addresses paragraphing, resulting in the WAW reflection that follows a review of paragraphing.

Reflecting on Assignment Outcomes and Implications

Within the Tax Class

From reading the WAW reflections, the tax instructor has seen students improving in:

1. Closely following the paragraphing principles discussed in class
2. Identifying for themselves key areas of improvement in their paragraph structure
3. Improving their logical cohesion and overall logical analysis
4. Organizing their paragraphs under one-main idea, while also creating more concise paragraphs more in alignment with the tax memo genre
5. Sequencing the order of ideas carefully at the sentence level, adhering to the known-new contract
6. Implementing connecting words to create transitions and explain the relationship between sentences, especially in important moments like the conclusion.

In reading submissions of the subsequent assignment, the external memo, the tax instructor has also seen students creating more intentional paragraphing there, too, and not simply submitting one large block of text as they previously did in this assignment; students are developing the practice of organizing their paragraphs around one main idea. Along with the continued use of the known-new contract, this intentional paragraphing has improved the logical cohesion across students' external memos.

Perhaps most importantly, students continue the reflective work that the assignment initiates. The instructor brings up paragraphing concepts from the assignment throughout the semester, both in class and when delivering feedback, to encourage continual reflection about writing. In doing so, the instructor finds that students are quick to engage in the development of their writing and writing awareness. Sometimes, students lead this process on their own, articulating a connection between the reflection assignment and improvements they need to make in subsequent tax memos or providing rationale for the writing choices they have made. The assignment thus initiates a semester-long conversation about tax memo writing and paragraphing, while encouraging students to be in the practice of continually reflecting on their writing.

Students have expressed appreciation for the WAW reflection in their course evaluations. Overall, they view the exercise to be helpful and even enjoyable. Some students shared that they have limited opportunities to receive writing training within accounting, and while their business communication course supports them in developing generalized business writing skills, they appreciated learning about writing within their area of study. Our WAW reflection is the only writing-emphasis assignment in the accounting curriculum, aside from writing support for job materials. We therefore share our WAW reflection so that other accounting instructors might also teach it or similarly respond to the overwhelming exigence for writing instruction in the accounting curriculum, both in scholarship and in our experience of teaching this assignment. We find our results merit more assignments like this one.

Within Business Communication

An unexpected effect of the assignment was one on the business communication course. While this assignment was designed as a WAW reflection for a tax class, it also provided valuable insight to the business communication instructor on what kind of writing accounting students do in their major. The business communication course is a writing-emphasis course designed for all business majors, and as a generalized course, students often take interest in discipline-specific examples of how writing concepts taught in the course can transfer to other contexts. The WAW reflection of a tax memo provided such an example, and the business communication instructor has used it as an example she can use while teaching paragraphing in the course. Student interest on the topic of paragraphing seems to increase in using this discipline-specific example of why effective paragraphing matters and how use of paragraphing techniques can manifest in professional documents. For this reason, we believe this assignment can be useful not only to accounting instructors but also to business communication instructors and anyone involved in teaching business and professional writing.

Acknowledging How AI Might Affect Student Engagement

Students may want to use ChatGPT or other forms of generative AI to both generate their tax memo and complete the WAW reflection; indeed, ChatGPT may produce what appears to be satisfactory results in the sense that it can deliver very polished writing. However, what is important in a tax memo is the demonstration of logical analysis that is the result of extensive, client-specific research. Writing a tax memo and conducting research for the tax memo are processes highly specific to a client case. Large language models (LLM) such as ChatGPT are trained on generalized and publicly available data, not the materials needed for client-specific tax research. Tax professionals therefore must conduct original research based on the case facts, locating relevant provisions in the IRC, finding other authoritative sources, and ultimately providing their recommended tax treatment in the tax memo. As the culmination of client-specific tax research, the tax memo also affords an opportunity to revisit the logic of their recommended case treatment. Reviewing the tax memo can uncover logical leaps, weak connections, and additional questions that need to be answered. In this way, the tax memo is first a mechanism for testing the tax professional's own logic and second a way to communicate that logic.

We want to note that accounting firms may develop their own AI writing tool based on current memos that exist within their firms; however, building an effective model will require careful consideration and substantial cost. We anticipate firms to adopt AI for some routine tasks in the next three to five years, but we expect full adoption to be a gradual process. Regardless of this progression into an AI-dependent model, tax professionals will always need to be trained in the ability to discern the effectiveness of writing in the tax memo for its logic and relevance to a specific tax case.

In addition to conveying the research results of a single tax case, the tax memo can train accountants in the logic of their profession, which is detail-oriented, thorough, and evidence based. We do not explicitly prohibit the use of AI in the tax class, but we do underscore that students' work in both assignments (the internal tax memo and the WAW reflection of it) is directly connected to their development of the reasoning skills that are essential to their career success. Students are encouraged to use ChatGPT for polishing and clarity, but if they want to develop in the critical analytical skills of accounting, they will need to do original thinking in their tax memo and WAW reflection. For accounting students, "writing to learn is just as important as learning to write" (Stocks et al., 1992, p. 196). We challenge students to approach their writing in the tax memo and in their WAW reflection as an opportunity to learn the logic of accounting, and because accounting is a highly competitive field, this challenge is well received by most students.

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With gratitude to Randall L. Waller, whose life's work was to support students in applying the art of rhetoric to achieve career success. His memory now inspires and motivates our work.

We also are indebted to Dr. Stan Laiken who not only teaches his students the principles of tax research but also mentors them in how to become a teacher of tax research, too.

ASSIGNMENT
The WAW Reflection Assignment

Directions

1. Create marginal comments in which you annotate one paragraph from your internal memo based on the best practices for paragraph structure discussed in class. Your annotations should be thorough, at minimum consisting of 4 different comments with 2-3 sentences per comment. Here are questions to guide your annotation process:

- Is the paragraph structured for clear information delivery?
- Is sentence 1 (or 2) a focused topic sentence?
- Do all ideas in the paragraph support and develop the topic sentence?
- Is there a logical progression from the topic sentence to the ending sentence (known-new contract)?
- Do transitions promote cohesion and create an easy reading experience throughout?

2. Write a 150-200 word reflection that 1.) analyzes the structure of the paragraph as it is; 2.) explains any needed revisions; 3.) identifies a takeaway for future memo writing.
3. Submit your document as a .pdf so that your professor can view the marginal comments easily.

Editors' note: As part of this assignment the author provided an excerpt from Spilker et al.'s text-book example of a tax memo, followed by example annotations and analysis for students to as a model for their own work. The excerpt and examples can be viewed with the assignment in the Supplementary Materials.

Notes

[1]While this assignment might be better termed a rhetorical analysis, we chose to call it a reflection to make it more accessible to accounting students who have not yet had their business communication course, where rhetorical analysis is a major course component; additionally, the accounting instructor had limited time to discuss writing alongside accounting content. We therefore needed to ensure that maximum time could be devoted to the assignment concepts of paragraphing and therefore selected a title least likely to pose a conceptual obstacle to students.

[2]Riley and Simons (2016) provide a thorough review on error botheration studies, many of which deal with more mechanical matters like grammar.

[3]We thank Derek Winkler for sharing his experience with us regarding the use of tax memos in accounting practices. He has held top positions at his firm for years, where he drafted tax memos, reviewed tax memos, and trained upcoming professionals in memo writing. We corresponded with him via email, asking him to provide a statement about his experience with tax memo writing and paragraphing in particular.

[4]*Books of records* is how the accounting profession refers to bookkeeping of transactions taken place in a business.

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.v10i1.222.

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Saying More with Less
Using Aphorisms to Promote Critical Reading and Authority in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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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,

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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.

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A Murder Most Technical
Gamification, AI, and Rhetorical Genre Studies in the Technical Writing Classroom

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Abstract
This article describes a gamified technical writing assignment inspired by the Hunt a Killer board games. Students solve a fictional mystery by analyzing AI-generated technical documents and are introduced to the most common deliverables and genres in the field of Technical and Professional Communication (TPC). Bolstered by research on gamification and rhetorical genre studies, this activity fosters experiential learning by using technical writing genres as structured and dynamic tools. In combining genre analysis with collaborative problem-solving, the assignment offers a novel approach to teaching genre in technical writing through its emphasis on flexibility and critical thinking.

Reflective Essay

> *Dear Investigator,*
>
> *Dr. Harper has been found dead under mysterious circumstances, and the case has left the scientific community in disarray. As part of the investigation, you will step into the role of a technical writer tasked with uncovering hidden clues within technical documents that may point to the truth behind this untimely death.*

These words begin the prompt for a semester-long assignment in my ENG 2135: Technical Writing course. But here's the twist: the documents students analyze have been crafted using artificial intelligence. Their challenge is not only to solve the case but also to navigate the nuanced genres of technical communication and decipher the narrative woven into these texts. Will they untangle the clues, or will the mystery remain unsolved forever? The truth lies somewhere between AI and genre.

In technical writing classrooms, AI-generated documents can serve as models and puzzles—texts to be analyzed for genre conventions, rhetorical moves, and audience assumptions. Such documents are especially useful when scaffolding student learning outcomes focused on genre awareness and analysis.

My university's ENG 2135: Technical Writing is a sophomore-level elective English course that introduces scientific and technical writing and officially belongs to the public and professional writing minor but draws students from across disciplines. It is populated mostly by humanities, communication, and STEM majors. This mixture of students (also at varying enrollment levels) makes for an interesting space in which I must toe the lines between introductory and advanced material and humanities and science-based epistemologies.

This assignment—a murder mystery game based on the Hunt a Killer board games—asks students to solve an AI-generated mystery from clues embedded in standard technical writing documents. Students investigate abbreviated versions of technical documentation and must work through/around/with the content and genre to decipher hidden elements and solve the mystery. I introduce this assignment on the first day of class, and we spend approximately two weeks analyzing the genres, documents, and hints to solve the mystery. While these

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documents originate from AI, I carefully revise, massage, and design them to fit my rhetorical needs (namely, enhanced clarity and cohesiveness). At the end of the semester, students create their own versions of these documents (entirely on their own—without the use of AI) for the next class of students to decipher. This essay will focus on the analysis that occurs during the first half of the semester.

Now, back to our specific case. Dr. Evelyn Harper is the fictional lead scientist for the Institute of Nuclear Semiotics, a group of scientists working to design and implement signage to communicate long-term nuclear waste warnings. She was found murdered in her laboratory under suspicious circumstances. The suspects include her fellow researchers, a mysterious hooded figure caught on security footage, and the security guard on duty. Students must work together to solve her murder, piecing together clues from technical documentation and then reflecting on their findings in nuanced and explicit language.

Teaching technical writing often requires a balance of creativity and clarity. This is never more evident than when discussing the nuances of genre in Technical and Professional Communication (TPC). Students need a framework for effective communication based on established conventions of the genre, but they also must see genres as dynamic and context-sensitive tools. The convergence of gamification, artificial intelligence, and rhetorical genre studies is one pathway for achieving this balance.[1]

Gamification, Rhetorical Genre Studies, and Technical Writing

Gamification usefully shifts the focus of learning by achieving traditional educational goals via a playful, competitive, and collaborative structure. Generally, games have been found to enhance students' writing skills across various (Guo et al., 2023). In the technical writing classroom, games can also encourage student engagement and position genre as a tool for problem-solving, whether that be in real or imagined rhetorical contexts. Gerdes et al. (2020) illustrated how gamified projects such as writing video games allow students to confront genre conventions while experimenting with iterative design and usability—two concepts fundamental to technical writing/writers. Gamification invites students to inhabit the role of technical writers, immersing them in the lived experience of navigating genre conventions—tools that both guide and limit rhetorical action. This pedagogical approach aligns naturally with technical and professional communication (TPC), a field situated at the crossroads of precision and interpretation, where the technical meets the symbolic and where games can reflect both dimensions (deWinter & Vie, 2016).

This tension pairs well with research on rhetorical genre studies. Carolyn Miller's 1984 argument that genres are "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (p. 159) allows us to resituate genres as dynamic and responsive rather than rigid and prescriptive (although it can sometimes read as the latter in technical writing situations), to help students negotiate the constraints and affordances of genre. Similarly, Miller argues that "if genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive" (p. 152). This perspective aligns seamlessly with game-based learning, especially the murder mystery genre requirements of motive, means, and opportunity. When students interact with genre through these kinds of creative assignments, such assignments highlight the adaptability of genres in balancing "stability and innovation, connecting theory and practice, agency and structure, form and substance" (Miller et al., 2018, p. 269). These game-based activities prompt students to identify motive and action within technical documents—elements often overlooked in genres typically perceived as rigid or formulaic.

To overcome Wardle's (2009) now-famous critique of "mutt genres"— genres that exist to serve only the writing classroom in which they are embedded—students must be given interactions with genre that push the boundaries of usage and contextual flexibility. Closing this gap between the writing classroom and the professional workplace is especially frustrating for teachers of classes like technical writing, where there is often so much push to produce perfect genres that perform their professional functions. Although writing about genres specific to non-profits, Gindlesparger (2019) rightfully argues that "disciplinary boundaries within professional education can discourage the risk-taking necessary to learn these rhetorical skills" (p. 56). It is precisely these disciplinary limitations that gamification can help to overcome, but not without explicit and specific application of transferrable skills—namely, the translation of information between diverse audiences.

Technical writing, generally seen as the go-between for specialized knowledge and readers (Killingsworth & Gilbertson, 1992), has always benefited from new technologies such as Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and AI. Johnson-Eilola (1996) argues that students need training, practice, and reinforcement in collaboration, abstraction, experimentation, and system thinking. Assignments like this achieve those goals by bringing students together to abstract important information, experiment with its logical arrangement, and place it within a system of thinking and doing. Another example of this theory at work is Balzotti and Hansen's 2019 notion of playable case studies, which immerse students in simulated environments and narratives via ARGs to teach workplace literacies in technical communication courses. These playable case studies quite literally embody their rhetorical purpose and the generic purpose of most technical writing genres: information transfer.

These activities turn AI into a heuristic rather than a replacement for human creativity for navigating the genre constellation or ecology (Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000) of TPC settings. AI's capacity to generate complex and nuanced texts under specific genre constraints allows students to engage with genre in ways that rhetorical genre studies ask us to, while also illuminating the impact that gamification can have in the classroom and overcoming some of the challenges in the field of technical and professional communication. Thus, in my murder mystery game assignment, students must decode the subtle interplay between language, structure, and rhetorical purpose.

It is crucial, though, to acknowledge that AI's place in the writing classroom is contentious both within the field and outside of it. While some instructors disagree, I believe that AI–like many writing technologies before it—is here to stay. Restrictive policies and practices that ignore the reality of AI's presence do not work, and large language models' ability to generate complex texts that challenge students to analyze genre conventions, audience assumptions and expectations, and rhetorical strategies is worth the labor investment of integrating it into the classroom. Recent studies (such as Mehlenbacher et al., 2025) are taking up this work. They remind us that the interplay of generation and revision is most important (p. 182) in the same way that the interplay between genre and algorithms presents fruitful and dynamic discussion.

In my assignment, AI is the initial generator, yes, but it is also heavily edited to reflect the course's needs, students' learning levels, and my understanding of the genres I asked it to produce. This distinction of labor is elaborated by Knowles' (2024) rhetorically precise distinction between humans-in-the-loop (HITL) and machine-in-the-loop (MITL) writing workflows. HITL writing encompasses any collaboration where humans retain some rhetorical load, but GenAI tools carry a significant portion of the invention, arrangement, or memory tasks. In contrast, MITL writing positions the machine as a subordinate assistant, with the human author retaining the majority of rhetorical labor. In my assignment, students take a MITL approach to direct and evaluate AI-generated content, using it to augment their own work rather than relying on it to generate ideas or structure. This approach ensures that AI complements, rather than replaces, teacher and student agency in the writing process. Similarly, the Modern Language Association–Conference on College Composition and Communication (MLA-CCCC) Joint Task

Force on Writing and AI (2023) asserts that "policies should support the development of critical AI literacy" (p. 8), and a project where students analyze and reflect on AI-generated content does precisely that.

Certainly, non-AI alternatives exist in the form of pre-packaged sets (such as the Hunt a Killer board games) or freeware roleplaying script games like The Business of Murder or even compilation message boards and free resources like boardgamegeek.com. However, the integration of technical writing genre conventions with the actual mystery makes using AI to design these documents unique.

When applied to an academic context, gamification situates students within interactive, high-stakes scenarios where genre knowledge is interrogated and conventions are analyzed under pressure. At the same time, AI is the laboratory for generating and manipulating the texts they interact with. Rhetorical genre studies anchors these activities by ensuring students move past rigid understandings of genre. Students, at once, inhabit the roles of technical writers, detectives, and storytellers to uncover hidden meanings; analyze (and eventually create) genre-complimenting and conflicting texts; and advance the story's narrative. Then, they reflect on the rhetorical strategies that guided their decisions.

Assignment Details

My goal for this section of the essay is to share a brief daily breakdown of this project. In the ancillary materials files and in Table 1, you can also find a complete breakdown of materials for running the mystery at the Institute of Nuclear Semiotics and templates for making your own. Throughout the project, I make clear that this content was generated using AI and edited by me so that students are always/already aware of its origins. Typically, this disclosure leads to generative discussions of the veracity and reliability of AI in producing these documents. I show them the original AI outputs and compare those to the final edited versions. I also clarify that these documents are just some of the genres common to technical and professional communication, a representative sample of the field in some ways. I also explain that these documents are abbreviated versions of the longer-form documents they would likely encounter as technical writers. This design choice is to avoid burnout and to ease students into the genres without overwhelming them with entire white papers or user manuals, to name a few examples.

Class Process

Day 1: As mentioned, the game begins on the first day of the course, where I give students a brief overview of the field of Nuclear Semiotics and a dramatic presentation on this fictional mystery. I introduce the characters (presented in personnel files) and the plot while distributing the initial documents: meeting minutes, a project plan, and a white paper (Table 1). These documents introduce the tension in the meeting (a report that something has gone wrong with the major project), details of the project's timeline and budget, and the scientific criteria for testing the project (all crucial in the data analysis later). I then spend class time guiding students through the requirements of the technical writing chart, which is attached to their assignment sheet, for each document. I explain how each document we are analyzing meets the purpose, style, and tone of technical writing. I ask them to think through how these documents might have dual technical and public audiences, and we find fuller examples of these documents together online. Lastly, I walk students through the first clue analysis (namely, that the data report does not match the testing criteria established in the white paper—suggesting foul play). Before they leave, I remind them of the three big questions they will need to answer as they investigate:

- Who killed Dr. Harper? What evidence do you have (including means, motive,

and opportunity) that leads you to believe that?
- What went wrong with the project? What evidence do you have that leads you to believe that?
- Who is the mysterious hooded figure? What evidence do you have that leads you to believe that?

Table 1. Daily overview of documents and in-class activities

Day	Materials Distributed	In-Class Activities
1	assignment overview-“Hello Investigator” introduction letter, personnel files, meeting minutes, project plan, abbreviated white paper	• Introduce plot and characters via personnel files. • Introduce the Conventions of Technical Writing chart. • Practice application of the Conventions chart to meeting minutes, project plan, and/or white paper. • Model analysis of initial clues.
2	user manual, test results, email screenshots,	• Establish groups. • Discuss data as technical communication with practice interpretation. • Discuss emails as technical communication with emphasis on content and form analysis. • Group work time with all documents.
3	security incident report, access logs, interrogation transcript	• Co-read interrogation transcript. • Highlighter annotation activity. • Group work time with all documents.
4	assignment overview-deliverables breakdown	• Student learning objective review. • Introduce reflection prompt. • Independent work time solving the case and pre-writing for reflection.

Day 2: We establish groups at the beginning of the class. Students receive the user manual, test results, and email screenshots to add to their packets, and I set them on the task of finding clues and establishing the potential motive (tension between two of the characters) together. Toward the end of class, I focus on data interpretation, which also serves as a moment for them to check their analysis skills because I point out inconsistencies in the results. Importantly, I try to avoid language that directly tells them about the issues with the data and instead ask leading questions to help them discover the issues on their own. For example, instead of outright stating that some of the results are coded as a failure when they should be a pass, I ask them to compare the criteria for a passed test to specific lines of the data and then attend to the pass/fail indicator column. I also stop to demonstrate how email can be considered technical communication when the content is appropriate. We talk about tone, style, structure, and public vs. private audiences. We work through the chart in their assignment sheet for each document and slowly broaden our understanding of genre and technical writing by complicating the application with their prior knowledge of these genres. The goal here is to use discussion of these example documents (although fictional) to help students understand the rhetorical functions and recurrent features of genres.

Day 3: The security incident report, access logs for the lab, and interrogation transcript are distributed. We spend the majority of this day understanding the documents and reading the interrogation transcript together. Students eventually break off into groups to pull out clues, and I introduce a highlighting strategy wherein they use one color (or annotation symbol) to indicate what they believe to be critical clues and what they believe to be red herring clues.

Toward the end of class, I redirect them to review their previous documents as a group and perform this annotation strategy on them. Returning to these artifacts and annotating them with all pieces of evidence in one place allows them to revisit and reevaluate their previous assumptions and begin to gather their answers to the big questions.

Day 4: We spend most of class time working through the reflection prompt and writing out the answers to the big questions. Before this, I also review what they have learned and how this project meets key student learning outcomes for the course. Specifically, I relate the work back to identifying/analyzing technical communication genres and engaging in critical/systems thinking. After this, we review the reflection questions and discuss where they might find evidence to answer them. I draw parallels between the fictional detective work they did to solve the case and the very real detective work of reflecting on their learning. Finally, students work independently on answering the big questions and writing their reflective memos. I do grade partially on the correctness of their deduction; however, after they turn in their reports, I reveal that any of the characters could be the culprit and that I will accept almost all answers so long as they are supported by relevant and sufficient evidence.

Closing the Case—A Conclusion of Sorts

As mentioned, solving the mystery is but half of the assignment as I run it in my class. At the end of the semester, I also have students create their own versions of these documents independent of AI and complete with clues (both critical and red herring) so that they usefully frame the semester with reflections on genre, flexibility, and technical writing's place in the world, a direct tie into the course's learning objective for recognizing, analyzing, and contextualizing common TPC genres.

Playing with genre as actionable (Miller, 1984), agential (Miller et al., 2018), and adaptable (Gindlesparger, 2019; Wardle, 2009) allows the technical communication educator to transgress genre boundaries but also bring new meaning to a field which students may misunderstand as static or "boring" in its adherence to these generic specifications.

Each time I run this assignment, I find new ways that students engage with the content and exercises. They're often surprised by how engaging and rigorous technical writing can be. The mix of humanities, communication, and STEM students brings diverse approaches to the game.

Reflections often include initial confusion about the content and form of the documents, which is almost always resolved by the end of the project. They're surprised by the range of genres considered to be technical writing and how their prior assumptions were challenged by analyzing documents as clues as opposed to decontextualized models of the genres. Some students are frustrated by the lack of black-and-white answers to the mystery. These students are often from science backgrounds, which stimulates another fruitful discussion about the value of nuance and rhetorical flexibility in STEM disciplines as well as technical writing.

Students also reflect critically on the role of AI in their educational experience and environment. They often comment that AI's creation of these documents can fall flat without significant editing. They also see that while AI can be creative, it simply replicates the most generalized information about the subject area (i.e., technical writing happening in the most high-stakes contexts: nuclear safety signage). Students often ask to see the original outputs of the AI before my editing and will comment on the lack of sophistication and understanding of the rhetorical situation in the initial outputs. Although, all this work can be done without integrating AI adding this element to the game fosters discussion and establishes boundaries for students' use of AI going forward in the course. For me, AI also saves significant time by allowing me to focus more closely on creative editing instead of generating a genre example from the ground up. Students and I reflect on GenAI's shortcomings and strengths, always remembering that it is an imperfect writing tool, just like every tool that has come before it.

As I continue to refine this assignment, I find myself returning to Johnson-Eilola's (1996) assertion that collaboration is not merely a pedagogical strategy but a foundational value of technical and professional communication. In this light, I remain uncertain about the necessity of the small group structure. While students submit their work individually, the shared investigative process—deciphering clues, debating interpretations, and negotiating genre conventions—mirrors the distributed authorship and collective problem-solving that define professional technical communication.

This tension between individual deliverables and collaborative process invites a broader reflection: how do we design assignments that honor the rhetorical complexity of TPC while also preparing students for its social realities? The murder mystery framework, with its layered documents and interdependent clues, offers one such model. It positions students not just as solitary analysts but as co-constructors of meaning, echoing the genre ecologies and networked authorship that Johnson-Eilola describes.

I want to end where I began and encourage you, dear reader, to take on the case of Dr. Harper (or create your own mystery) and let AI be a tool by which you do so.

ASSIGNMENT
Student Investigation Letter

Hello Investigator,

Today, we are embarking on an exciting and challenging mystery-solving activity inspired by the Hunt A Killer board games. The setting of our mystery is the Institute for Nuclear Semiotics (INS). This research facility is dedicated to creating signs and documentation to convey information about hazardous nuclear materials to future generations, ensuring safety and comprehension across language and cultural barriers.

The main character in our story, Dr. Evelyn Harper, a leading expert in nuclear semiotics, has been murdered. This incident coincides with a critical project milestone related to a new signage system and a mysterious hooded figure caught on security footage. Your task, as investigators, is to determine what happened to Dr. Harper and uncover any underlying issues within the project.

You will start by forming groups of four and analyzing the initial set of documents, which includes meeting minutes, a project plan, and a white paper. These documents will provide the background and context needed to begin your investigation.

As you progress through the sessions, you will receive additional documents such as user manuals, technological specifications, data sets, emails, security incident reports, access logs, and a security camera still image. Pay close attention to the details, as some documents contain critical clues while others may serve as red herrings designed to mislead you.

Remember, communication and collaboration within your group are key. Share your findings, discuss your theories, and piece together the puzzle. By the end of this activity, you will not only have solved the mystery but also gained valuable experience in exploring, analyzing, and synthesizing technical documents.

Happy Investigating!

Deliverables Breakdown

You will submit two deliverables for this project: a solution to the mystery that answers our major questions and an informative reflection.

The Solution

- For this portion of the project, all I need from you is a paragraph answer for each of the big questions. You will be graded only partially on how accurate your deduction is, but mostly on how well you support your answers with evidence and reasoning.
- Please answer the following questions:
  - Who killed Dr. Harper? What evidence do you have that leads you to believe that?
  - Don't forget to establish motive, means, and opportunity.
  - What went wrong with the project? What evidence do you have that leads you to believe that?
  - Who is the mysterious hooded figure? What evidence do you have that leads you to believe that?

The Reflection

- Your job here is to reflect deeply on this game's impact on your learning. This is where most of your grade for this project will come from. Please answer all of the questions listed below. Stellar reflections do so by uniting answers under a common umbrella point instead of simply answering them in a row as they are listed.
- Please answer the following questions:
  - How did this game reinforce what you already knew about technical documents/writing before entering the course?
  - How did this game challenge your previous understanding of technical documents/writing?
  - What documents did you find most enjoyable to analyze? Why?
  - What documents did you find most challenging to analyze? Why?
  - What was your process for identifying critical clues and distinguishing them from the red herrings?
  - How did this mystery game enhance your understanding of the role of technical writing in real-world contexts? You may discuss high-stakes situations like nuclear safety, but you can also think about more everyday applications of technical writing.
- Return to one of the documents in the packet and explain how it specifically meets the definition of technical writing we have been working on. Use the chart below as a point of comparison.

Editors' note: As part of this assignment, the author included a table describing the conventions of technical writing. This chart can viewed with the assignment in the Supplementary Material.

Notes

[1] A number of scholar-teachers have explored the value of games and in the writing classroom. Along with those cited in this essay, I suggest the following: Caravella and Shivener (2020); Colby (2022); Colby (2025); Hernandez (2024); Sánchez et al. (2021); and the special issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* on Games in Technical Communication edited by Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie, 2016.

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.v10i1.232.

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Building Relevancy and Engagement through Case-Based Learning in English Studies

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Abstract

This critical reflection, motivated by a comprehensive program review and the opportunity to teach a new course, explores issues of relevance and engagement in English Studies. Arguing for instructional methods that meet our current challenges, the author shares her experience with case-based learning in a graduate level English Language Study course. The course utilized real-life cases to teach advanced linguistics, encourage critical thinking, and show students the ways linguistics can be used to address everyday problems. A specific example of a case is presented. Feedback from students evidenced a high level of relevancy and engagement. The article also highlights the importance of scaffolding and collaboration in implementing case-based learning successfully.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2022, I was tasked with conducting a comprehensive program review of our undergraduate major—an assignment many of us receive in advance of an accreditation visit or the latest program prioritization trend. This is usually the kind of task I complete solely to fulfill an external requirement, not as part of my reflective teaching practice. But this time was different. While I knew national trends indicate that over the last 10 years the number of English majors has dropped by over a third, it was still striking to see the downward trend lines for my own department in the charts attached to the review template I was handed.

I pictured the students I work with currently teaching in the K-12 system, laboring as Teaching Assistants in our department, or planning to become teachers—all graduating into a world where the Humanities seem to matter less and less. Within this context I debated how to answer program review questions such as:

- How is the curriculum relevant to the needs of students?
- What are the major challenges facing the degree program?
- What are the plans to overcome the challenges faced by the program?

As I reflected on these questions, a parallel debate emerged for me about how to best address these issues within my own classroom. Everywhere I looked I saw challenges and opportunities students graduating with an English degree were uniquely situated to address, especially in the age of generative AI. Why didn't more students, and society at large, see this, too?

Nathan Heller's (2023) widely circulated *New Yorker* article, "The End of the English Major," offers some clues. Among them was the perspective from one of the students he interviewed: " 'I think the problem for the humanities is you can feel like you're not really going anywhere, and that's very scary,' he said. 'You write one essay better than the other from one semester to the next. That's not the same as, you know, being able to solve this economics problem, or code this thing, or do policy analysis.'"

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Relevancy and Engagement

The issues this student raises—that is the issues of *relevancy and engagement*—aren't new. Recent efforts to address relevancy and engagement in English Studies have focused on expanding the canon and incorporating digital studies—important steps, to be sure. Although clearly not enough as these issues have long required more of us as a discipline.

For example, in 2000 Gad Yair published "Educational Battlefields in America: The Tug-of-War over Students' Engagement with Instruction." Yair relied on data collected in 1993 from the Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development (Bidwell et al., 1992). This study utilized the Experience Sampling Method (Hektner et al., 2007) and included 865 K-12 students across the United States. These students provided data on 28,193 daily experiences Yair filtered to focus on moments of instruction, resulting in a sample of 4,058 learning experiences.

Yair (2000) found that student engagement with instruction differed significantly in relation to instructional method *and* subject. Not surprisingly, rates of engagement were highest during laboratories and group work focused on active problem solving. Rates of engagement were also highest during math and science courses and lowest in English (62.8% vs. 48%). As alluded to by the student quoted earlier, writing ever better essays is not, *or is not perceived to be*, the same as actively solving an economics problem or developing policy analysis.

In short, we need to do a much better job of providing students with relevant and engaging instruction that they perceive as meeting the demands of our current moment.

Course Context

I had an opportunity to address this challenge not only because of the comprehensive review of my program but also because I had been assigned a new graduate level class, English Language Study. The general purpose of this class is to provide students with an advanced linguistics background that will support their future endeavors as teachers and graduate students. I began by asking not only what I wanted my students to learn but also what I wanted them to be able to do after taking this class.

Of course, after this class I wanted my students to be able to apply the principles and practices of linguistics in addressing pedagogical issues in their own classrooms. But I also wanted them to be able to use the tools of linguistics to solve complex problems outside the classroom. And I wanted to offer them a pedagogical model they might employ in their own classrooms to increase relevancy and engagement with the Humanities. These goals first led me to Problem-Based Learning (PBL)—a method familiar to many K-12 teachers. While I appreciate the attention placed on solving real-world problems with a focus on the problem-solving process itself, PBL leaves too much to chance in terms of the actual subject-matter content learned, time required for learning, and small group dynamics that might impede learning. Indeed, in a comparative study of PBL at two medical schools, the relatively unstructured, open inquiry method of PBL was preferred by only 11% of the students and 16% of the faculty (Srinivasan et al., 2007). What was overwhelmingly preferred was Case-Based Learning—a guided inquiry method that is over 100 years old but largely ignored in English Studies outside of professional and technical writing courses.

Case-Based Learning and Teaching

Case study teaching is a highly participatory instructional method. It demands much of the teacher. I had to learn how to write cases, lead case-based discussions, orient students to a pedagogical approach completely new to them and, specifically, teach students how to both participate in case-based discussions and write case reports. Fortunately, there are some excellent resources available including Naumes and Naumes's (2015) *The Art and Craft of Case Writing,* Ellet's (2018) *The Case Study Handbook*, and The Christensen Center for Teaching and Learning (n.d.). However, these materials are written for business school students and faculty. As I learned by actively engaging my students in this pedagogical experiment, several adaptations were needed to be effective for English Studies. For example, beginning the course with an overview of the theory and practice of case-based learning and a simulation designed to prepare students for how we would work together, the joint development of rubrics for both the cases and discussions, guided peer review of the case reports, and basic instruction in how to read educational statistics.

Cases typically tell the story of a real-life decision-maker who is grappling with a question or problem in need of a solution. The context for the question or problem needs to be described in some detail. Supporting data, ranging from government reports, academic articles, videos, news clips, case law and more, need to be woven into the story. Because I wanted the study of our cases to provide students with the same level of subject-matter content in linguistics they would have received in a more traditional instructional format, our cases incorporated a carefully curated set of readings. Our first case centered on the decision by a high school principal in Tennessee's Memphis-Shelby School District, where a majority of students read below grade level, to require explicit phonics instruction across the curriculum (Mervosh, 2022). Students were asked to consider the complexity of this issue and then argue whether or not the principal of Oakhaven High School made the right decision. Doing so required background knowledge of phonics, phonetics, and the general science of reading as well as an understanding of the political and socioeconomic context in which the decision was made. Students were presented material that included everything from newspaper articles to formal linguistics instruction (print and video), to National Assessment of Educational Progress reports. Our other cases included consideration of whether or not the editor of *Science* made the right decision in instituting a complete ban on the use of generative AI for its research articles (semantics, pragmatics, syntax), whether or not the UAE made the right decision in instituting English as the primary mode of instruction in government schools (functional systemic linguistics and World Englishes), and whether or not a court case where the decision rested on competing interpretations of a specific emoji was correctly decided (sociolinguistics, forensic linguistics).

But before we could begin the first case, we had to orient ourselves. We did so using the Everest Simulation offered by Harvard Business Publishing (Nichols & Wright, 2015). The Everest Simulation is an award-winning tool designed to enhance student learning in group dynamics and leadership using the context of a Mount Everest expedition. Participants assume one of five roles within a team, working together through various scenarios to decide whether to advance to the next camp, aiming to reach the summit. Like case-based learning, this simulation requires a high degree of collaboration, the ability to think through complicated issues, and effective decision-making processes—especially in the face of opposing interests and asymmetrical information. Using this simulation gave us a chance to explore group dynamics, communication, cognitive biases, psychological safety, and other aspects of central importance to case-based learning.

Following the simulation, students were asked to study our first case in preparation for our discussion. The case-based discussion is graded. Jointly developing a rubric and attaching a grade to the case discussions reinforced not only the importance of being prepared for discussion but also helped provide a level of structure and guidance we often assume students have already internalized even though that may not be true. Discussions were graded using three criteria: Knowledge/Breadth of Understanding, Critical Thought and Extension, and Leadership and Teamwork. While the first two are familiar criteria, the last one is less so. Leadership and

Teamwork involves an assessment of the degree to which a student actively engages others by inviting comments and feedback, constructively challenging the accuracy and relevance of statements made by others and drawing critical conclusions while avoiding attempts to "overpower" other students.

It is important to note the role of the teacher during case-based discussions. In case-based discussions, the teacher primarily facilitates and guides the discussion, ensuring that it is productive and engaging for all students. The teacher poses thought-provoking questions, encourages diverse perspectives, steers the conversation to cover key constructs, and helps students apply theoretical concepts to the real-world scenario presented in the case. Additionally, the teacher may provide summaries or clarifications as needed. This required me not to be prepared with a set of lecture notes for each class, but rather to be prepared with a set of guiding questions that both encouraged thoughtful discussion and ensured students understood key concepts.

After each discussion session(s), students completed a case report. The report varies a bit depending on the type of case but usually requires the following:

1. Brief overall evaluation (concise description of the situation and a position statement);
2. Evaluative criteria applied in developing your position (explain the criteria you used in reaching your decision);
3. Evidence provided to support your evaluation;
4. Discussion of any major contingencies or counterarguments;
5. Action plan that considers short and long-term actions that bear on your position. (Ellet, 2018)

As mentioned earlier, jointly constructing rubrics for the cases and workshopping drafts of cases, which I found little parallel to in Business literature, helped us align this teaching method with English Studies.

Aligning case-based learning with my objectives for graduate level study of linguistics fostered these particular outcomes in more effective ways than more common teaching methods:

- Critical Thinking and Analysis: Case studies focused on complex issues like language acquisition, sociolinguistics, or computational linguistics problems. This fosters students' critical thinking by analyzing linguistic data, identifying patterns, proposing hypotheses and supporting or challenging proposed solutions.
- Practical Application of Knowledge: By working through real-life scenarios, students see how linguistic theories apply to situations such as language teaching, natural language processing, or language policy planning. This helps align learning with outcomes aimed at applying linguistic knowledge to solve practical problems.
- Communication Skills: Discussing case studies as a group improves students' academic and professional communication skills. This includes articulating arguments, engaging in scholarly debate, and presenting linguistic information clearly.
- Ethical Considerations and Cultural Sensitivity: Cases help students explore the ethical implications of linguistic research and language policy as well as develop cultural competence.

Student Perceptions and Future Practice

I was fortunate to find such a willing group of collaborators in my graduate students. Their openness to case-based learning was motivated in large part by their dedication to their own students and deep desire to meet the challenges of our current moment. Feedback solicited throughout the semester evidenced the high degree of relevancy and engagement experienced by students. Anonymous feedback in end-of-term student evaluations show that this approach to case-based learning holds promise for the Humanities:

- I thought the case report model was an interesting way to connect course material to real-world problems. I also really liked the Everest Simulation - it was a great way to build community and work as a team with my fellow grad students.
- I really enjoyed the case studies as a whole and think the topics you chose were pertinent and interesting. In general I really enjoyed the class and found it to be rigorous, interesting, and extremely applicable, as well as an interesting way to explore linguistics through application.
- Absolutely love the structure of this course! The instructor created an atmosphere that cultivated psychological safety. . . . a comfortable environment to ask questions and take risks. Additionally, I really enjoyed learning about issues that are impacting people and policies that we are confronted with today.
- The case study report format was one of the first templates/organizing methods that has truly resonated with me. . . . I appreciate you implementing this type of assignment into English studies, as it has real world application.

There are several matters to consider as I expand my teaching practice to include more case-based learning. For example, I underestimated how long it takes to write high quality cases as well as how difficult it was for some students to transfer their skills to this new learning environment. I also learned that it is very easy to build cases that are unwieldy in terms of both the amount of reading and background knowledge required, leading to frustration on the part of students when the challenge of the case is too high. As I continue to develop my ability to write high quality cases, I will focus specifically on providing sufficient scaffolding for this type of learning as well as more accurately assessing the time and effort required of students for each case.

I'm also eager to work with others to expand case-based learning within English studies in particular and Humanities in general. Professional writing courses lend themselves well to case-based learning. For example, teachers could present a scenario where a company is facing a technical crisis or risk, such as a product recall or a data breach. Students might assess decisions made concerning press releases, FAQs, and communication plans to stakeholders, aligning with outcomes related to ethical communication, crisis management, and public relations writing. In a Literature course we might present students with a case focusing on a character's decision or a pivotal plot point within a work of literature. Students can analyze the motivations, cultural contexts, and consequences of these literary elements, proposing alternative outcomes or decisions based on textual and historical evidence.

In short, there are many ways case-based learning might help change perceptions of students in the Humanities as doing little more than writing one paper better than the other from one semester to the next.

ASSIGNMENT
Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Our class met once a week on campus. The first case, which was relatively complicated, unfolded over the course of four weeks:

- Week 1: Brief Introduction to Phonics, Phonology, and the Science of Reading (both linguistics research and recent legislative actions across the country)
- Week 2: Case Discussion (again, this is graded and requires significant preparation—see rubric below)
- Week 3: Drafting/Peer Review
- Week 4: Case Report (final drafts/individual conferences)

Case #1: Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Do you remember learning to read? Do you remember any books you liked to read when you were in third grade? Perhaps a parent or guardian remembers (ask if you have a chance)? Even if you don't remember any particular books, the fact that you are in graduate school today suggests that by the time you were in third grade you were considered a proficient or excellent reader because it turns out that what you were doing in third grade matters a whole lot!

It's important for students to read at grade level by third grade because reading is a foundational skill that is necessary for academic success in all subjects. Students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are at a higher risk of falling behind and struggling in school (e.g. Duncan, et al. 2007 and Rabiner et al. 2016). Additionally, research has shown that students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are also more likely to drop out of high school (Hernandez, 2012). In general, phonological awareness is central to knowing how to make both spoken and written language work!

This is one of the reasons why people pay so much attention to NAEP scores when they are released. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card, has been administered since 1969 and "is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what students in public and private schools in the United States know and are able to do in various subjects" (NAEP Overview). Nationwide assessment of Reading and Math typically occur once every four years. The most recent scores were released in 2022. While a majority of states showed a decline in Reading test scores between 2019 and 2022 in part due to the pandemic, certain states and school districts evidenced a significantly sharper drop than others.

In Tennessee, lawmakers were alarmed by the lack of reading proficiency even before the release of the latest NAEP scores, but those scores heightened their concern. This resulted in the Legislature and Governor instituting measures designed to improve the training of teachers and accountability of Educational Program Providers (EEP's). Tennessee is one of many states instituting what are referred to as "science of reading " laws,[1] which often single out phonics instruction as a significant part of the solution and focus on students in elementary school.

There is ample evidence of the effectiveness of phonics at the lower levels—for example see this research. One of the most influential researchers in this area is Mark Seidenberg—for a sampling of his work take a look at all 3 blog posts from March 2022. And keep in mind that the question of what to do with students who are not reading at grade level by third grade is very controversial.

Tennessee's largest school district, Memphis-Shelby County Schools, experienced some of the biggest drops in test scores in the country.[2] Because a majority of the students are Black and from low-income families and only 25% are currently proficient in reading[3] this drop is especially troubling. At Oakhaven High School in particular, reading proficiency hovers around 15% and the most recent ACT average score was 14.8. But this school is generating headlines with its new approach to improving reading proficiency. Oakhaven High School as implemented a phonics/phonology across the curriculum approach to improving reading proficiency, a move expected to improve proficiency in all disciplines given that reading is a foundational skill for educational success.

Considering the complexity of this issue, has the principal of Oakhaven High School made the right decision? Is this decision likely to improve reading proficiency, and by extension proficiency in all disciplines, at Oakhaven High School? What should happen if reading proficiency doesn't improve?

Case Report Outline*

Most of the cases you will consider this semester require you to evaluate a complicated situation and/or decision. In this case you may use any of the material included in the case itself as well as foundational material as provided via lecture, and the sources shared by your classmates. Specialized language and concepts specific to this case should be appropriately employed. Case reports that are evaluative in nature typically focus on 5 matters:

1. Your overall evaluation (in other words, a position statement);
2. The evaluative criteria you are applying to this situation and/or decision;
3. The evidence provided to support your evaluation;
4. An explanation of any major contingencies or counterarguments;
5. An action plan.

Overall Evaluation

Your overall evaluation is typically brief (a paragraph or two) and stakes a position. However, because of the complexity of the cases and the messiness of real life, the position statement is seldom absolute but rather one that considers the intricacies at play. Be sure to outline important aspects of the context under study. ***You should write your position statement after completing the rest of your report.***

Evaluative Criteria

The criteria upon which you base your evaluation are the heart of your report. You'll develop the criteria based on the material presented as part of the case, relevant frameworks and concepts included in case material as well as additional instructional material provided (e.g., the introductions to phonology and phonetics in Module 2).Professional experience may be referenced when relevant and concrete—although this should be limited. In brief, you need to articulate to yourself and your readers the criteria that you are using to make your evaluation and why.

Evidence and Analysis

Establishing meaningful and defensible criteria is crucial because it requires your evaluation to be rooted in evidence. Establish your criteria before searching for evidence and then use the criteria to follow the evidence where it leads. Do not try to force the evidence to fit the criteria—it's likely it will be easily refuted.

Proving your overall evaluation is usually the longest part of your report. Use your criteria to organize this section, providing the most important evidence related to each criterion to support your evaluation, while also acknowledging counterarguments.

Counterarguments and Contingencies

In the next to last section, you'll consider credible counterarguments as well as contingencies. Your goal is not to consider all counterarguments, just those that are most credible and likely to have an impact on your overall evaluation. Contingencies are different from counterarguments. When considering contingencies, you are considering changing conditions that you can't accurately predict but that would likely impact your evaluation (e.g., a pandemic or economic recession or new Governor, etc.).

Action Plan

Finally, you'll present an action plan. Your action plan should aim to improve the situation described in the case. You should consider both short and long-term actions (and perhaps medium-term actions). Short term actions should be more urgent and long-term actions ones that are dependent on the short-term actions. You should elaborate not only the action but also who should be responsible for the action, accountable for the action, consulted before taking the action, and informed about the action. Don't forget to consider the resources needed for each action.

*If you'd like to learn more about analyzing, discussing, and writing case studies please look at The Case Study Handbook by William Ellet (2018) from which this material was drawn.

Notes

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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.v10i1.183.

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Expanding Graduate Student Rhetorical Knowledge
African American Rhetorical Analysis

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Abstract

This graduate level assignment requires students to analyze rhetorical artifacts through an African American epistemology of rhetorical knowledge. I built expectations of the assignment on the concepts of Kemetic-rooted (Ancient Egyptian) rhetorical traditions that U.S. Black communities share every day. The assignment worked towards helping learners demonstrate foundational declarative and procedural knowledge of the practices and frameworks within an African American rhetorical tradition that would help them expand their understanding of rhetorical aims throughout the course and beyond. This assignment expanded how students perceived the relationship between rhetoric, society, culture, and community both historically and contemporarily. For some students, working with a different rhetorical mindset allowed them to theorize about rhetorical communication in ways they feel they had not been able to articulate in previous courses or contexts.

Get Your Geek On: The Impetus

Can I educate rhetoric and writing graduate students in the foundations of rhetoric through a course that centers African American rhetorical traditions and histories? Can I teach in this way intentionally decentering Platonic-Aristotelian rhetorical perspectives? These questions were the kindling that ignited my passionate pursuit to create a graduate course on African American rhetorical traditions. At the center of the course's identity lies the goal of critical thinking about rhetoric, language, knowledge, and choice. These areas of interest reinforce every general course in rhetoric, but in this case, students would be doing so without the taken-for-granted rhetorical knowledge we in the West have assimilated into thanks to K-16 education. I created and taught an African American Rhetorical Analysis assignment to assess students' early comprehension and application of this unfamiliar but cultural-historically grounded rhetorical knowledge system.

Just as I would with teaching the practices of any other rhetorical tradition, I knew I needed to center a cultural perspective that informed the rhetorical tradition within the U.S. frame of reference. Coming from a cultural rhetorics framework, I sought to move students to center Afrocentric theoretical and methodological approaches to rhetorical studies, within the American context, and constellate, or bring together to create shared meaning from multiple experiences, those to other rhetorical traditions and cultures. Further, I intended to take them to the point where they felt comfortable analyzing and critiquing works through an African American rhetorical lens in all of their graduate courses in rhetoric. I think in my mind, I envisioned a student in their Rhetoric of Social Movements course, for example, contributing to the discussion by explaining that an orator failed to move their audience due to lack of *interconnectedness* and an inefficient use of *magara* both critical rhetorical knowledge in Afrocentric rhetorical traditions, both critical concepts of Afrocentric rhetorical traditions. I describe *magara* in more detail later.

These intentions meant that I needed to refresh and expand my own engagement with these traditions. I by no means consider myself an Afrocentrist or even an African American-centrist in

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scholarship. This admission might surprise my students and colleagues. I aim to center African American perspectives and knowledge systems in my research and teaching, because I am Black and American, and I'm an African American cultural rhetorics geek. In the same way that I go deep into the works of sci-fi/fantasy authors and K-pop idol groups, I go down curiosity rabbit holes in discussions of signification, indirection, nommo, narrativizing, call-response, stylin', hip-hop. To plan, develop, and teach the fully asynchronous online course, African American Rhetorical Traditions, I went beyond my nerd girl fascination with the writings of Carmen Kynard (2013), Elaine B. Richardson (2003), and so many others. Teaching African American Rhetorical Traditions required demystifying a long tradition of rhetoric that could help graduate students develop in more adaptable, community-centered rhetoricians and writers. The African American Rhetorical Analysis was an early step in their developing knowledge and application of this tradition.

If You Don't Know, Now You Know: The Context

> "I write like this. It makes more sense to me."
> –First-year Graduate Student enrolled in African American Rhetorical Traditions

The first step to teaching the course and creating the African American Rhetorical Analysis assignment was to gain permission to do so. Yes, the graduate catalog listed Rhetorical Traditions as an elective course for students of writing and rhetoric and other humanities programs. Mind you, though, I would be the first faculty to teach the course from an Afrocentric perspective of rhetorical practice. The most prominent reason to request approval for this was recent legislation that impacted graduate education, along with K-16 instruction in the unfree state of Florida. In some ways, I still believe my course met the restriction, "Core courses may not …include a curriculum that … is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States" (Higher Education. Senate bill 266, Florida Senate, 2023). I developed the following outcomes:

- Define the African American rhetorical tradition.
- Identify and explain African American rhetorical patterns in any given discourse.
- Position the Western Aristotelian rhetorical tradition in relation to the African American rhetorical tradition.
- Implement an African American-centric construct for rhetorical analysis.
- Center an African American rhetorical approach to important inquiries about language, writing, literacy, and education in the field of composition studies.
- Formulate arguments that illustrate value and appreciation of the role of African American rhetoric in the field of composition studies.

Although I did not explicitly address Florida state's criminalized pedagogies in my course, I have no doubt that many students inferred that, among many other sociopolitical conditions, systemic racism, cultural oppression, and cultural privilege were at the core of the often-asked question, "Why haven't I learned this before?" And because speaking about rhetorical traditions and practices without discussion of cultural influences and implications is talking out the side of your mouth, the lessons in African American Rhetorical Traditions had to include brief surveys of pre-Transatlantic slave trade and cultural histories of Afrocentric rhetorical perspectives.

Despite this factor, the graduate programs director encouraged my path forward, including use of the textbook, *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, edited by Ronald L. Jackson II and Elaine B. Richardson (2003). She believed, as I do, that education and composition-rhetoric has to share multiple ways of being rhetorical. My course consisted only of students concentrating in rhetoric and composition and creative writing in our university's Master of English program, some who began the degree program with this course, some who ended the degree with my course, and still others who enrolled in the course midway through the program. The diverse student body ranged from middle-aged Caucasian American women teaching K-12 or retired and returned to school to Black American and West African, Latinx, and international students at disparate points of their lives.

Coming into the degree and the course, many students had a background in English literature, so they weren't accustomed to thinking about the rhetorical application of language in the ways I required to engage with the material. Not to mention, Aristolelian-Platonic paradigms grounded their perceptions of effective rhetorical practice. Therefore, my approach needed to be careful to capture the minds of students who came with no knowledge of rhetorical traditions outside of Western rhetoric. For example, a few students had taken a course on Global Black Rhetorics previously in the department, so that course prepared them for a few of the concepts in my course. To account for the breadth of experience in this 17-student-body class, I drew on cultural rhetorical pedagogies and writing-to-learn practices, such as the African American Rhetorical Analysis assignment.

Hellutalmbout: The Scholarship

Entry paths into African American rhetoric are as diverse as any rhetorical knowledge system, so I relied on the wisdom of my scholar-ancestors and contemporaries to help me structure the course in a logical way to grasp the basic concepts for appropriate application of this tradition. The African American Rhetorical Analysis assignment acted as one crucial measure to guide students to this outcome. I drew on the scholarship of the following researchers and many others:

- Molefi Kete Asante (2003)
- Geneva Smitherman (1977)
- Esther Milu (Browdy & Milu, 2022)
- Ronisha Browdy (Browdy & Milu, 2022)
- Elaine B. Richardson (2003)
- Ronald L. Jackson II (2003)
- Maulena Karenga (2003)

These scholars helped position me with the instructional resources to help students know what the hellutalmbout[1] in African American rhetorical practice. The most influential sources in developing the rhetorical foundations of the course were *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L Jackson II (2004); *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* by Geneva Smitherman (1977), and the aforementioned textbook *Understanding African American Rhetoric* (2003). While I relied on the former two resources to support exploration of modern African American rhetorical practice through the use of discourse modes and literacies, the latter provided extensive knowledge on the origins of Afrocentric rhetorical traditions out of ancient Kemetic society and social order.

I think it bears repeating that I am not an Afrocentrist, or a scholar who specializes in Africanist culture and history. Like you, most likely, I grew up in a system of rhetorical education that omitted any recognition of Africanist language culture, despite the fact that the Ancient Egyptian, or Kemetic, system of *medet neferet* long-preceded the widely accepted rhetoric epistemologies of Aristotle and Plato. As my students learned from the *Book of Ptahhotep* via Karenga (2003), the Kemetic term *medet neferet* means "eloquence and effective speech itself" (p. 11), and its rhetorical influence undergirds the generative power of the word, or *nommo*, in African American rhetorics.

The African American Rhetorical Analysis assessed students' application of these concepts along with others that are central to African American rhetorical traditions and uses of rhetoric across rhetorical traditions. Because many scholars of African American rhetorics and other Global Black rhetorics (Browdy & Milu, 2022) recognize the lack of rhetorical analysis models utilizing an African American rhetorical knowledge epistemology, the authors we studied in the course provided examples for me to teach and for students to model.

Make It Do What It Do: The Instruction

I set the assignment deadline for Week 5 of the 15-week semester. Students built experience in working with the concepts through studying readings from the textbook and engaging with the weekly online lecture notes. As the African American Rhetorical Analysis assignment indicates, final submissions should have investigated the rhetorical efficacy of one of the listed concepts or constructs of Afrocentric rhetorical practice that influence the African American rhetorical tradition in three student-selected rhetorical artifacts. Scaffolding for this assignment began during the first week of class with establishing rhetorical knowledge, such as the aims of the rhetorical tradition.

Nommo, *Magara*, and *Medu Nefer*: Instruction in Afrocentric Rhetorical Knowledge

I aimed to begin with basic constructs in the same way that rhetorical education in the Western tradition begins with an understanding of ethos, pathos, and logos. The Kemetic rhetorical canons established a fundamental backing to this study of rhetoric, because, as I shared with students, they indicate the values inherent in the cultural rhetoric of this rhetorical community. I use the idea of the rhetorical community as Woodyard (2003) conceives it, or individuals who come together in response to oppressive social conditions and empower each other to create collective rhetoric that affirms their humanity (p. 138). Those canons include restraint, good timing, fluency, silence, and truthfulness. And they link with the ethical concerns of "the dignity and rights of the human person" (Karenga, 2003, p. 14), "the well-being and flourishing of community" (p. 16), "the integrity and value of the environment" and "the reciprocal solidarity and cooperation of humanity" (p. 18). My course mainly focused on *medu nefer* or good speech, and its relationship to the "most important … canon of truthfulness" (Fox, 1983, as cited in Karenga, 2003, p. 11). In their rhetorical analyses, two students chose to take on the tension between truth-telling and persuasion by all available means. Throughout the course we returned to the critical question of why truth-telling and the power of the truth is vital to this rhetorical practice.

Much of this context for African American rhetorical traditions came from the chapters in the textbook, "Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practice" by Maulena Karenga (2003) and "Africological Theory and Criticism: Reconceptualizing Communication Constructs" by Jeffrey Lynn Woodyard (2003). This book knowledge was complemented with my research-based living practice (Karenga, 2003, p. 5), or what some call "street knowledge," of the concepts. The principle of *magara* provided direct support to this curriculum, as the principle "invokes our ability to 'strengthen' and/or 'weaken' another toward a particular interpretation or understanding" (Woodyard, 2003, p. 136). This rhetorical concept is critical to African American rhetoric as it signals strong and/or weak impact that is activated together with rhetorical practices and rhetorical communities (Woodyard, 2003, p. 137).

Call-Response, Narrative Sequencing, and Indirection: Instruction in Black Modes of Discourse

Magara and the spirit of morally good speech (*medu nefer*) provided the framework for examining African American rhetorical modes more critically, along with the concept of *nommo*. In weekly assignments, such as reading responses, students were tasked with connecting material from the readings to ideas provided in the lecture notes. Key to making these connections was the rhetorical concept of *nommo*. *Nommo*, or the power of the word—both spoken and written—is as foundational to the African American rhetorical knowledge as the means of persuasion are to Aristotelian rhetorical knowledge systems. This concept of *nommo* undergirded all of our work on the subject, and the lessons leading to the Rhetorical Analysis privileged discussions and applications of "*nommodic* rhetorical behaviors" (Woodyard, 2003, p. 140). These behaviors, such as the *magara* principle, illustrate the effect of *nommo* in communication. In conjunction with the study of Geneva Smitherman's Black modes of discourse, students developed the capacity to start formulating informed inquiries about rhetorical practice from an Afrocentric framework. By requiring students to include a set of three texts in their corpus for the Rhetorical Analysis, I wanted them to reflect on the affordances and potential universality of the African American rhetorical tradition when it comes to particular kinds of academic, public, and civic writing.

Using these combined explanations of the concept, I gave students access to multiple ways of making meaning from these constructs and their practices. To examine concepts, the reading responses and online discussions that I required for students included clear, real-world examples for students to examine. Figure 1 shows the discussion forum activity students completed in Week 3.

POST: In honor of the recently passed observance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, this week will request that you engage with one of his lesser-known but significant works. Read, watch, or listen to Dr. King's address to the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, "Give Us the Ballot."

In your 300-400-word post, discuss the prompt: Per the analytical framework provided in "The Spiritual Essence of African-American Rhetoric" by Adisa Alkebulan and in "Afrocentricity as Metatheory: A Dialogic Exploration of Its Principles" by Ronald L. Jackson II, select two to three instances within King's speech that reflect one of the following constructs. Describe your understanding of the rhetorical construct and what passages from King's address exemplify that concept.

(Lists constructs from the course)

Be sure to cite for both chapters and the speech itself. Use appropriate MLA or APA in-text citation conventions.

REPLY: Reply to TWO classmates by Saturday Week 3. Your replies should directly respond to content from the post by either supporting or expanding on it.

(Provided example response for students.)

Figure 1. Low-stakes discussion activity to prepare students for the rhetorical analysis essay.

This low-stakes activity acted as an essential building block for the Rhetorical Analysis assignment, not only for examining my class's capacity for working with these rhetorical constructs, but also for practicing the kinds of terminology and diction they would need to get the ideas of these discussions across. After all, the African American Rhetorical Analysis called on students to identify and describe "the presence of (or not) African American or Afrocentric rhetorical themes, purposes, or behaviors." Some students began their foray into African American rhetorics by placing them in comparison or contrast to what they know about *rhetoric*. This wording was theirs, connoting that they viewed neo-Aristotelian rhetorical traditions as the center of rhetorical theory. Much of my teaching on these attitudes happened through the feedback I provided on low-stakes assignments, with comments such as, "Does this point work if we see Afrocentric rhetorical practices on their own?" and "What purpose does it serve to include this citation from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*?"

Please don't misunderstand me; we spent plenty of time during the course discussing how different cultural developments resulted in specific rhetorical purposes and cultural rhetorics. In fact, one of the student learning outcomes listed above explicitly calls for students to "position the Western Aristotelian rhetorical tradition in relation to the African American rhetorical tradition." At this point, however, their objective was to acclimate to the *foundational concepts and constructs of African American rhetorical traditions* by implementing an African American-centric construct for rhetorical analysis. The African American Rhetorical Analysis additionally acted as their first formal attempt to center an African American rhetorical approach to important inquiries about language, writing, literacy, and education in the field of composition studies. The target audience of popular rhetorical studies journals strengthened the rhetorical situation for the assignment and gave students hands-on understanding of the vast reach of African American rhetorics within broader rhetorical studies.

Students took a few approaches to the assignment, with many deciding to analyze works from famous black writers, such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or James Baldwin. One successful assignment examined the purpose of "show the truth" in Dr. King's (1957) "Give Us the Ballot," Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots," and Abraham Lincoln's "The Gettysburg Address." The student concluded that showing a version of the truth was more critical to the works of Dr. King and X, while constructing a narrative of truthfulness presented more in the "Gettysburg Address." Although this student struggled to show restraint in the scope of their submission, they succeeded in good timing, or "an understanding of when to introduce new ideas and transition across discussions" and providing insights from relevant secondary sources, or truthfulness. This outcome contrasts with another student who analyzed the creations of musical artists, including Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder, and demonstrated excellent silence and fluency practices. They provided a tight rhetorical analysis that centered "the dignity and rights of the human person" and complemented it with strong secondary source evidence. They found that even as Dylan came from a Caucasian American background, he employed clear intentions to show the dignity and rights of the human person in his song, "I Shall Be Released" with The Band. This analysis connected approaches to the same themes in Gaye's "What's Going On?" and Wonder's "Living for the City."

I gave both examples high grades due to their strong analysis based in African American rhetorics and their successful demonstration of African American canons of rhetoric.

A Rhetoric of Community: Instructional Reflection

An aspect of the assignment I wished I would have maybe spent more time teasing out is the audience and venue component. Audience was a great focus of my instruction, because harmony and interconnectedness with community as audience is foundational to African American rhetorics. Karenga (2003) affirms that "African rhetoric is first of all a *rhetoric of community*" (p. 5). He also emphasizes "the well-being and flourishing of the community" (p. 16) as an ethical practice of African American rhetoric. As one of the assignment components challenged to target a community of "the editors and readers of an academic journal in rhetorical studies (community-centered rhetorical practice)" with "the expectations, needs, and goals of the target audience in mind." Upon re-teaching this course or a similar one, I would love to focus on academics, researchers, and scholars as readers within a *rhetorical community* that students belong to and aim to build rhetorical knowledge alongside. Another assignment that became due after the African American Rhetorical Analysis gave students the opportunity to play around with some of these aspects. But I hope to strengthen the focus in the course and in future iterations of this assignment.

ASSIGNMENT
African American Rhetorical Analysis Essay

Assignment Description

This assignment requests that you perform a rhetorical analysis using the purposes, principles, and canons of Afrocentric rhetorical theory to a small corpus of texts. You should draw knowledge from the course reading assignments and the lecture notes to help frame your analysis with these elements appropriately. This analysis will require you to apply the canons of Kemetic rhetorical traditions as you may be accustomed to with Aristotelian traditions. This means that your essay will need to demonstrate …

- Silence - effective use of quiet and rhetorical listening to learn
- Restraint - demonstrate eloquence with what not to say
- Fluency - exhibit verbal dexterity and deep comprehension of topic and message
- Good timing - deliberate use of time to strengthen effect of the message
- Truthfulness - privilege the truth in rhetorical communication

More on how you might exhibit these canons in the Assignment Instructions.

This assignment will also call on your attained knowledge of African American rhetorical themes to analyze your chosen corpus.

Assignment Instructions

Compose an extended African American Rhetorical Analysis of a corpus of three texts. Your analysis will use the frameworks of Afrocentric rhetorical practice and African American rhetoric you have studied in ENC6335 to present an argument about the Afrocentric rhetorical practices within your corpus. To demonstrate the reach and versatility of Afrocentric rhetorical philosophy, your corpus of primary sources must include **2 texts from Black American** rhetors or authors and **1 text from a non-African** rhetor or author. The selected texts can come from any genre, but they must result in a *rhetorical* analysis not a literary analysis.

In 10-12 double-spaced pages, your African American rhetorical analysis will examine the *tep-heseb en medet neferet* through the presence of (or not) African American of Afrocentric rhetorical themes, purposes, or behaviors in the texts of your corpus. You will present and support an argument about the workings of **one of the following** African American themes, purposes, or behaviors:

Themes:

- The dignity and rights of the human person
- The reciprocal solidarity and cooperation of humanity
- The integrity and value of the environment
- The well-being and flourishing of community

Purposes:

- Building community
- Communal deliberation

- Reaffirming human dignity (reaffirmation)
- Enhancing the life of the people (possibility)
- Liberation
- Resistance
- Show the truth
- Bring good into the world

Nommodic rhetorical behaviors (manifestations of nommo) (Woodyard):

- Rhythm as a frame of mentality
- Lyrical approach to language
- Call and response of participation
- Reliance upon mythoforms
- Use of indirection
- Repetition for intensification

To **perform this task effectively**, you are asked to complete the steps below in your essay.

- **Respond to the guiding questions**: How does the application of particular themes, purposes, or behaviors in these texts reflect or represent African American rhetorical traditions or not? How effective are the themes, purposes, or behaviors in the corpus texts? What practices does the author use that demonstrates that theme, purpose, or behavior? What is the *magara* of the use of the rhetorical concept?
- Demonstrate **restraint**: Provide a detailed introduction that introduces and gives a good overview of the rhetorical concept you are analyzing.
  - Explain focus of the essay and specify elements under analysis.
  - Stay within assigned task length and time constraints.
- Demonstrate **silence**: Provide a discussion of secondary research sources and their perspectives on the topic.
- Demonstrate **fluency**: Provide historical and cultural context for the discussion of your corpus texts and rhetorical concept.
  - Perform a close and critical analysis of three texts (see requirements above) only.
  - Use carefully selected diction and syntax in construction of writing.
- Demonstrate **good timing**: Employ effective organization throughout the structure of your essay.
  - Show an understanding of when to introduce new ideas and transition across discussions.
- Demonstrate **truthfulness**: Frame and support your analysis with concrete, specific evidence from primary sources of your analysis and with the thoughts and theories of others through your secondary research.
  - Incorporate insights from 6-8 relevant secondary sources, at least half of which are scholarly and peer-reviewed and two of which were assigned in ENC6335.

Audience and Venue

Your target audience for this essay are the editors and readers of an academic journal in rhetorical studies (community-centered rhetorical practice). Select from one of the venues below:

- *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*
- *Philosophy and Rhetoric*
- *Peitho: The Peer-Reviewed Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*
- *Rhetoric Review*
- *African American Review*
- *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*
- *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space*

You should craft your analytical essay with the expectations, needs, and goals of the target audience in mind.

Submission Requirements

1. Select a rhetorical concept to frame a rhetorical analysis of a corpus of three texts from three separate authors per the required elements detailed above.
2. Illustrate understanding of the canons of Kemetic rhetorical traditions per the expectations described above.
3. Responds to the guiding questions.
4. Appropriate use of secondary sources, per the expectations above.
5. Audience-aware (community-conscious) choices demonstrated through fluency, timing, and restraint.
6. On-time submission in the Webcourses assignment space.

Due Date
Friday Week 5.

Notes

[1] *Hellutalmbout* is a Black American vernacular phonetic spelling of "the hell are you talking about," posed as a question in response to an unbelievable, ridiculous, or confusing assertion.

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.v10i1.238.

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