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22 Terrain.org Class Exercises (In-Class and Online)

1. Thinking about Your Readers

It's always important for writers to know WHO they are writing for. So today, let's pretend you are going to be writing for the online literary magazine **Terrain.org**. Take some time to look at the magazine. Notice the design of the website. Browse and spend a little time reading the content.

Write a reflective paragraph:

What observations can you make about the journal?

What kinds of things does it publish?

What do you think it's trying to accomplish?

What do we know about the writers? Who are they?

What can we learn about the readers? Who are they?

2. Using Writing to Brainstorm and Learn

If they haven't already, have students read [Peter Elbow's piece](#) on freewriting. Then have them read some of the [Letters to America](#) in Terrain.org.

Tell students they are going to "freewrite" with a prompt. This will help them learn how to use writing as a way of brainstorming. The prompt is, "What would you say in a letter to America?" Ask them to write for ten minutes without stopping. Their pen has to keep moving. If they can't think of anything to say, they have to write "Dear America" over and over again. After the ten minutes is over, invite students to share if they wish. Some will have a germ of an idea that could be turned into a Letter to America. It's a good way for them to see how they can use freewriting as a way of brainstorming ideas that can be later developed and revised.

3. Imitation

One time-honored way to become a better writer is to take a piece written by an established writer and imitate that piece as a writing exercise.

Read:

Erin Coughlin Hollowell's piece [Letter to America](#)

Or Robert Wrigley's [Letter to America](#)

Now your own letter, imitating the style of the writer. Be sure to use specific and original details, just like those writers did.

Then write a reflective paragraph in which you answer these questions:

- *How do you think your voice (and your choices) are different than the writer you chose to imitate?*
- *What did you learn from this exercise?*
- *Most editors see specific details as essential to a good piece of writing. Was it difficult to come up with specific details? Did you enjoy seeing specific details when you read the letters that your classmates wrote?*

4. Evaluating Sources When We Do Research on the Internet

Have students read the Gregory McNamee guest editorial [“Of Truth, Post-Truth, Alternative Facts, and Lies”](#)

Discuss:

What do people mean when they say we’re in a post-truth era?

What does he mean by calling our time the Age of Lies?

What advice does he give to help us negotiate in this time of lies?

What does he mean when he says that passive voice should be a red flag?

What is symmetrical skepticism?

He says that old journalists always said, “If your mother says she loves you, get it from two independent sources.” What point is he making?

He says that some opinions are more valuable than others: what does he mean by that?

Has further reading and research ever changed your opinion on something?

How can facts be deceiving?

What’s the difference between fact-checking and checking for bias?

Then choose a topic currently in the news (climate change, the water crisis in Flint, Standing Rock, and Greta Thunberg are ones I’ve used successfully in the past). For the next class, each student has to do some research on the topic. Then they have to come to class with what facts and information they’ve found, but more importantly, a short paper analyzing their sources of information. In class, we compare all the information and the sources, check facts and allow for bias, and see if we can figure out what is actually going on.

We then collaborate on a list of what things we look for in a source. Examples:

- 1) we want to know the author’s name
- 2) we want to know the date this was written
- 3) does this source hire journalists who were trained as journalists?
- 4) does this source hire fact-checkers?
- 5) does this source print corrections if it gets something wrong?

- 6) what kind of reputation does this source have?
- 7) how long has this source been in business?
- 8) is there bias we need to account for?
- 9) how is this source funded?

5. Passive Versus Active Voice

In [Gregory McNamee's guest editorial](#), he tells us to look for the passive voice.

When someone says "mistakes were made," set your antennae on the most sensitive tuning.

This is a good time to teach active voice vs passive voice.

After many examples, most students will see that active voice is in most cases a stronger way to write. But then you can talk about times when a writer might *choose* to use passive voice.

Lab reports will come up as one example. In that case, what you're doing is considered more important than what you're doing.

Who else uses passive voice often? People trying to shift blame. "The dog was kicked." "The lamp was broken." "Mistakes were made."

Political speeches are filled with passive voice. That takes the discussion back to the point that Gregory McNamee is making. Being a critical thinker means paying attention to language.

6. How to Write an Introduction

Put students in pairs.

First, ask them what makes them stop reading, what makes a bad introduction. Come up with a list. (It's boring, it's confusing, it doesn't make a point, it doesn't catch my interest, it uses cliches or tired sayings, it quotes the dictionary, it doesn't really say anything, it doesn't include any interesting details, etc.) Then have each pair write a deliberately terrible introduction. (You can pick the topic. I've used "violence in video games" successfully in the past.) Read them aloud, and vote on which is the worst introduction. (They are often hilariously funny.)

Tell them that most people write terrible introductions on their first draft, but now that they know what they look like, they need to edit that stuff out for the second draft.

Next: Ask them to Terrain.org, looking at just the very beginning of each essay or poem. Each student needs to choose a piece of writing that has a beginning that caught their attention and made them want to read the whole letter. Then they have to answer the harder question: Why did it work? Then everyone needs to share.

7. Establishing Credibility

Read: Ask students to read David Rothenberg's [Eleven Paths to Animal Music](#).

Discuss: How does he establish his credibility as someone who can talk about birds and music?

Or use [To Hold a Beautiful Burning Snake](#) by Caleb Roberts

Or use [The Collecting Basket](#) by Lyn Baldwin

Writing task: Ask students to think of something that they have experience or expertise in. None of them have PhDs but they probably can come up with something. Perhaps it's years of playing Ultimate Frisbee or playing piano or training dogs or eating pizza. Tell them they can exaggerate a bit to make up for their young age. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they explain their credentials to a reader who knows nothing about their topic. Their goal should also be to keep the details interesting enough to get the reader interested in the topic. Then share these paragraphs in class.

8. Development: Choosing Facts and Details

Often beginning writers don't include any facts or details to support what they are saying.

Or they do some research and include every single fact and detail they find, whether or not they are relevant to the point they are making. A more sophisticated writer does their research and then chooses the facts or details that are relevant to the point they are making.

In this essay, underline the facts or details. Then be prepared to explain WHY this writer choose those particular facts or details.

[Each One a Bright Light](#) by Lee Herrick

[Hasten to Understand](#) by Kathryn Miles

9. Analyzing Prose and Use of Social Media

The [Richard Kenney poem](#) draws attention to Donald Trump's use of twitter. Find his twitter account and choose several tweets to analyze. For each tweet

- Fact check. Are the facts accurate?
- Does he use hyperbole?
- What is the bias?
- What's the tone? What does that tone achieve?
- What is the metamessage? What is he trying to say?
- What does this tweet achieve?

10. Endings

Have students look through essays or poems from Terrain.org that they've already read, and look especially at the endings. What makes a good ending? What do you think each writer's goal was for a particular ending? Make a list.

Some in particular to look at:

[The River Between Us](#) Kurt Caswell

[Somewhere I've Never Travelled](#) Robert Wrigley

[Thoughts on the Apocalypse: Fight for What you Love](#) Derrick Jensen.

[A Life of Science: Harvesting Sunlight](#) Liliana Ruiz Diaz

11. Organization: The Big Picture

In pairs, read this essay/poem/guest editorial and then draw a picture that shows how the author organized their ideas. (It might look like a flowchart or an infographic or a diagram or something else. I give my students complete freedom on this one.) Then each pair has to go to the board, draw their picture, and explain why they think the organization was effective. This exercise leads to good discussions about how to organize a piece of writing.

Some pieces that might work particularly well:

[Fenton Johnson's *My Mother's Vote*](#)

[Kurt Caswell's *The River Between Us*](#)

[Cherene Sherrard's *Saltworks*](#)

[Mitchell Thomashow's *Environmental Learning and COVID-19*](#)

[Lynne Bama's *Bringing Back the Bighorn*](#)

[Mary Quade's *Songs of the Humpback Whale*](#)

12. Organization: The Shuffle

Take an essay that the students haven't read yet. Print it out and then cut it up paragraph by paragraph. Shuffle the pieces of the essay. Paperclip together and give one of these packets to each pair of students. Tell them they have to decide what order to put the paragraphs in, and they will have to justify the order they choose. This will lead to good discussions about how to organize an essay.

13. Learning to Discuss Difficult Topics

Have students read "[In Case of Active Shooter](#)" by Heather Ryan

Have them do some research on school shootings (and guns) ahead of time.

Set aside a class for a discussion on the topic.

This is a collaborative exercise. We are working together. Here are the rules.

- Everyone has to be polite and respectful (if not, we all lose)
- We can use laptops and phones to fact check things people say
- We need to come to a consensus (that's the ideal) or if we can't, a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote (any less than that, and we've failed the exercise.)
- Every person in the room has to speak at least once
- Teacher has to stay neutral although they can ask for fact checking

The topic is: **What can we do to prevent school shootings?**

- Teacher writes the topic on the board. Students come up with a list of ideas, which the teacher writes on the board. Other students can ask questions and can ask for facts and evidence, but all ideas are respected and are put on the board.
- Once we have a list of ideas on the board, we go through one at a time, discuss them, ask for more information if we need it, and then vote. Anything that doesn't get consensus (or a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote, depending on the particular class) gets erased.
- At the end we look at what's left

The exercise is a success:

- If everyone has spoken at least once
- Everyone has been respectful and polite
- We've done a good job factchecking
- We've come up with a list of solutions

14. The Writer's Voice

Does it matter WHO wrote each piece in this literary magazine? Often the writers introduce themselves with just a phrase or two. Many are writers well-known to the readers of Terrain.org

Ask each student to choose one writer and do some research to find out who that writer is, then write a short paper in which they include relevant information about the writer and a paragraph describing that writer's voice.

For class discussion: Does what we found out about each writer change how we read the piece or how effective it is?

15. Ethos, Pathos, Logos: Categories of Persuasion

Working as a class, define ethos, pathos, and logos.

Put the students in pairs and ask each to come up with an essay for each category.

(Most essays use all three -- but often there's one dominant appeal.)

Ask each pair to explain and defend their choice to the class.

Or, give each pair of students an essay that you've selected, and ask them to come up with a pie chart, showing how much of the essay depends on ethos, how much on pathos, how much on logos. They then have to defend their choice.

Some good essays to use for this exercise

[The Reaper of the Sea](#) by Naila Moreira

[Letter to America](#) by Pam Houston

[Tombstones by the Sea](#) by Rick Van Noy

16. Journals for Nature Writing

David Gessner's four-part series [Walks and Talks with Dave \(and Henry\)](#) includes short lectures as well as four writing prompts. This is a fantastic resource if you want to introduce your students to nature writing, particularly using journals. It's also a nice model for anyone who finds themselves suddenly moving their classes online.

[A Good Hike](#) by Camille Dungy is another important essay for students to read before you ask them to take a nature walk and then write about it.

17. Keeping Journals or Blogs

If you want to encourage your students to keep a journal or a blog, you will want to take a look at the Pam Houston's [Twenty Words During Lockdown](#).

18. Writing Prompts: Class Exercise

Have students read the [Thoughts on the Apocalypse](#) series. Then brainstorm with students to come up with a word that they will all respond to with a short writing piece.

19. Students Writing about Field Work

The [A Life of Science series](#) features grad students writing about the work they do. It's a terrific resource for students who are studying science and learning to write about it. Have students read several before writing their own.

20. Collaborative Writing

After students read and discuss the series [Environmental Learning in the Anthropocene](#), open a google doc and ask all the students (yes, the whole class) to write a collaborative essay on the topic: What should environmental learning look like moving forward? Give them a time limit of 48 hours. Tell them to change the color of the font if they want to add conflicting point of views. The result will be a multi-voiced document that reads more like a discussion than an essay.

You can also ask students to read this collaborative essay:

[Sinking into the Anthropocene: New Orleans Nature Writing](#)

You could visit a place together as a class, and then each contribute to a piece of writing.

21. The Photo Essay

Ask the students to pick a place, spend time there, make some observations in a journal, take some photos, figure out the significance of the place, come up with an overarching topic, organize the photos, and then write a photo essay, using both images and words. Before they start writing, look at these examples together:

[The World's Largest Refugee Camp](#) A Photo Essay by Saleh Ahmed

[Temptation to Trespass](#) A Photo Essay by Kathleen Galvin

If you want to give your students the option of using art instead of (or in addition to) photos, show them [The Collecting Basket](#) by Lyn Baldwin

22. Place-Based Writing

Have the students read, analyze, and discuss some of the [essays in Terrain.org](#). Ask each student to choose a place that is connected to an overarching issue. For example, a local zoo could be connected to animal issues, or a mall connected to consumerism, or a plaza with statues could be connected to oppression, or a cemetery could be connected to green burial, or a lake connected to pollution). Once they've chosen the place, they do research about the issue and place. They need to visit the place and make observations, and interview at least one person connected to the place. Then they can write a place-based essay, or do a place-based podcast, or make a place-based video. This exercise can be done in groups.

Special thanks to Terrain.org education editor Janine DeBaise for creating these class exercises. To learn more, visit www.terrain.org/teach. For questions or additional assistance, or the opportunity for 1:1 consulting with Janine or other Terrain.org editors, contact us at teach@terrain.org.