

Sequenced Microthemes: A Great Deal of Thinking for Your Students, and Relatively Little Grading for You

Ray Smith, Director, Campus Writing Program
Indiana University Bloomington

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Despite the press of large classes and numerous other responsibilities, nearly all of the 300 or so faculty respondents to a 1991 Campus Writing Program survey reported that they persisted in asking their students to write essays of some sort. Our experience and our survey tell us that it is nearly impossible to generalize about just why faculty demand writing of their students: some teachers want scrubbed sentences, others want their students to practice “real world” skills, some want to “watch their students as they think,” some want to initiate their students into a discipline, some want to improve a sort of critical agility, and still others feel that the ability to express complex ideas without adding to their complexity is essential to a liberal education. But our survey also reveals, to no one’s surprise, that the biggest impediment to assigning essays is the time it takes to mark and to grade them. I want to suggest, particularly to those of you who teach classes with more than twenty-five students and with little if any grading help from AIs, that you consider asking your students to write microthemes, mirco-themes that are assigned in a certain order to foster particular skills or abilities.

The microtheme, the Swiss Army knife of assignments, can be put to many uses, and is merely a short 100–500 word essay in which a great deal of thinking precedes a rather small amount of writing. In addition to requiring less time for you to read—and I can grade and comment upon twenty-five microthemes in about two hours—microthemes force an admirable economy on your students by forcing them to distinguish between the important and incidental, and to choose the former. If they have taken W131 on this campus, your students will have received some practice in writing microthemes.

My experience and that of many others is that microthemes (and, for that matter, writing assignments in general) are frequently employed successfully when they are attached to course goals rather than used merely to improve writing at the sentence level. They also work well in a sequence of assignments that culminates in a longer paper. In my own Intensive Writing class last year, Introduction to Shakespeare, I used sequenced writing assignments to tackle two problems that often confront teachers of conventional introductory Shakespeare courses: 1) the discomfort of students wrestling with what is in some respects a “foreign” language; 2) the paralysis that sometimes overcomes students when they are asked to write an ambitious essay near the end of the term.

As an early-semester icebreaker in this class, I typically assign a particularly difficult passage from a very early play, usually *Titus Andronicus*, that bloody skeleton occasionally heard rattling in the canonical closet. Last semester I chose a passage from Act 2, Scene 4, in which Titus’ horribly mutilated daughter is discovered by her uncle, Marcus. Upon seeing her, he utters a speech so artificial, so lacking in sentiment, that the scene is appalling (to modern audiences) in all senses of the word. My students’ first task is to “translate” Marcus’ speech into a more modern paragraph, and then, in an appended essay of about 150 words, explain to someone who knows little about *Titus Andronicus* just how far removed sound and sense are from each other in the passage.

What does this microtheme assignment do for my students? The act of translation demystifies Shakespeare's language; I usually have the class "translate" passages in the early portion of the semester until they read and understand Elizabethan dramatic verse with some facility. The second part of the assignment, the more analytic portion in which my students discuss the apparent incongruence between Marcus' sentiments and how he reveals them, reminds my class that Shakespeare was once a struggling young commercial dramatist capable of writing a bad line, a bad passage or, indeed, a bad play. The Immortal Bard becomes less remote and his language open to study.

I attack the end-of-the-semester term paper logjam by assigning, for my last two microthemes, topics that are really too large to be handled in fewer than five hundred words, e.g., "the women in the comedies we have read (do/do not) educate the men in those plays." In answer to this type of question, my students write microthemes that fairly beg to be revised to longer papers. And they do become longer papers, because the assignment for the final 7–10 page paper is to revise and expand one of the two final microthemes. Those final essays are generally more thoughtful and sophisticated than most "term papers," because my students had in writing the microtheme already made a good faith (graded) pass at a difficult question. Though I acknowledge that end-of-the-semester term papers have their uses, I have cast them out of my syllabus. They are, for reasons we all know, too often hastily written—and it shows. My students' final essays, because they are prepared for through the microthemes, are usually admirably premeditated.

Microthemes may be used, naturally, in a variety of disciplines and may be sequenced for reasons other than mine. Trevor Brown of Journalism, who sometimes teaches J110, a large (>100) introduction to the study of mass media, attempts through a battery of assignments to engender certain skills in his students, skills that he feels they will need in their work as journalists. These skills are graduated; that is, he attempts to move his students through tasks that grow progressively more challenging cognitively. Because the ability to summarize is exceedingly important to the practice of journalism, Trevor asks his students in their first two microthemes to summarize articles [one of those assignments is available [at this link](#)]. Summary is no mean or easy task, as most of us know, because in attempting it one must read intelligently and make nuanced judgments about what to keep and what to discard. Research in composition and the Campuswide Writing Program's reading of thousands of placement essays in the past two years tell us that few of our students will be able to summarize accurately or fairly when they enter the university. I say "fairly" because, as many of you will have noticed, students encountering conflicting expert opinions or those divergent from their own may distort views they hold to be irreconcilable, threatening, or unfamiliar.

In the next battery of microthemes, Trevor sets a more difficult task of his students, asking them to induce meaning from what seems at first glance inchoate information [as in the assignment available [at this link](#)]. He presents a table or a series of tables (all related to a subject like national advertising expenditures, 1984 and 1989, or the number of women in journalism, 1971 and 1981) and then asks his students to make sense of these juxtaposed facts for an educated reader. At the end of this process of making sense of the figures, Trevor's students must make assertions about their meaning and argue the validity of their assertions with reference to that data. In short, his students must argue—many of them for the first time under criticism—inductively and empirically. Those of you in the natural and social sciences should be pleased to inherit veterans of Trevor's course.

Sequenced microthemes can, of course, be used in the natural and social sciences, and are used on this campus in disciplines as disparate as geology and physics, biology and economics. For some examples of such assignments, and for citations to articles about microthemes, follow the "[microthemes](#)" link from

[this description](#) of a consultation by the Campus Writing Program. Please feel free to contact me at wrsmith@indiana.edu or 855-4928.

Addendum—Grading Microthemes

Several faculty members responded to the original publication of this article by asking how to grade microthemes. I usually give each paper a check (“^”) or a plus (“+”).

I count a “plus” as 4 points, a “check” as 2, and noncompliance as 0—in other words, an answer that shows engagement gets an A, someone with a pulse gets a C, and.... I've also tried a binary system: students get 1 point if they submit an essay, and 0 if they don't; this system doesn't, however, allow for many useful distinctions.

The Campus Writing Program will also work with you to develop grading criteria that you may wish to share with your students, who may then be better able to meet your standards.