Literature in First-Year Composition

Practice Overview

The use of Literature in composition courses is far more controversial than one would think, given that composition courses are a part of English departments. The controversy is often symbolized by the image of a swinging pendulum. On one side of the arc we have Rhetoric, and on the other, Literature. In his book *The Rise and Fall of English*, Robert Scholes gives an extremely useful historical analysis of this battle. Before the rise of English professors, writing pedagogy was under the tutelage of Rhetoricians. With the rise of the study of Literature, and particularly the New Criticism, the first pendulum swing took place and Composition was taught with Literature. In the late 1960’s, a Rhetoric revival took place and Literature began to be disregarded by a new generation of Composition teachers. New buzzwords, such as “invention,” “voice,” and “brainstorming” were the new foci, and, in some ways, the pendulum remains on the Rhetoric side.

The practice normally manifests itself in the classroom by way of anthologies which are made up of essays, short stories, plays, poetry or some other type of literature. The students are asked to read a piece and respond to it in some way. For example, in the anthology, *Literature and Ourselves*, the student/writer is assigned a poem by, say, Seamus Heaney. After reading the poem, the student is given a list of response questions which require an essay of their own. In the Heaney example, one of the response questions asks the student to “compare this poem to Ferlinghetti’s description of the poet” (Henderson 1114). This requires analysis as well as the ability to express one’s thoughts, thus addressing two goals at once.

The practice of using Literature to teach writing, as stated above, has its roots in the New Criticism and its focus on close textual readings. Proponents claim that this encourages students to not only read, but think critically. Since critical thinking is an integral part of writing, the practice is, by definition, useful.

Another benefit of using Literature has to do with its value to society. Literature, say its advocates, is the repository of our culture and carries with it the experience that one needs in order to contribute further to society. By asking young writers to read and analyze the “canon,” we are preparing them to write meaningfully.

Opponents of using Literature say that its application in the composition course requires too much focus to be on reading and too little on actual writing. Before students can write about Ibsen or Twain, a lengthy lecture is necessary. This class time, they say, would be of better use if it were spent in peer review, or free writing.

Another complaint is that the practice is too “English-centric.” A biology student has little use for the skills that they will gain by the study of Literature. The goal, they say, of a composition class should be to serve all departments of the academy, not just to prepare future English majors for their work.
Students tend to form their own opinions along these same lines. The English major will feel much differently than the Chemistry major. The teacher, on the other hand, is another matter. First-year composition courses are predominantly staffed by graduate students from English departments. Those graduate students specifically interested in writing pedagogy may come from the New Rhetoric school and feel that Literature has no place in the curriculum. The more traditional English student will value the opportunity to gain experience teaching Literature.

Very little consensus has been reached on this issue. Rhetoricians fight the intrusion of Literature, yet many textbooks, if not centered on Literature, include it. Scholes, in his book, makes a rather compelling argument for the synthesis of these two pedagogical philosophies. He agrees that the composition course should serve the whole university, yet doesn’t want to abandon the literary canon. He proposes new courses which would, if put into practice, serve both masters. For example, he proposes a course entitled, “System and Dialectic.” The texts he would bring into the course would be Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel etc. . . . These courses would satisfy the current emphasis on Rhetoric while giving the English professor something to feel good about as well.

While Scholes’ ideas may be a bit too revolutionary to be widely accepted, it isn’t that far off from Case Western Reserve University’s SAGES program. This is an interdepartmental program which replaces the old Composition class with a series of seminars based upon rather abstract topics, leaving much room for play between both “invention” and “canon.”

Annotated Bibliography


This anthology is a good example of a text which incorporates literature into the teaching of writing. Not only does it include literary texts with writing prompts, it includes a large section called “The Writing Process.” This section is divided into sub-topics like “Developing Ideas”, “Researching”, “Organizing”, “Drafting”, and “Revising and Editing.” In addition to this, the anthology’s introduction gives a solid background on text-oriented approaches to teaching writing.


This book, by one of English’s most respected and accomplished scholars, gives a detailed historical and ideological account of the use of Literature in writing classes. In addition to this valuable background information, Scholes presents a plan to synthesize Literature and Rhetoric.
Equivocation that Lies Like Truth: Finding (or Creating) Evidence in *Macbeth*

Part of any convincing argument is the evidence that you can generate from the text to support your claims. This evidence can come in references to events in the play or to characters' actions; however, the most convincing type of evidence in any argument is direct textual citation accompanied by your own explication and interpretation that connects the quotation to your own larger claim. Your understanding of a particular point of dialogue or quotation may be influenced by your sense of how the scene is staged.

1) This exercise asks you to work with the others in your group in order to come to an agreement as to the two most important "statements" that the play is making about an issue, whether it be about the nature of kingship, ambition, violence, power, gender relations, sexuality, etc.

2) Once your recorder has written down these two "statements," then your group's task is to find in the Act assigned to you two quotations or examples of dialogue that supports your assertions about the play's "statements." Where in the Act does the play address what you feel is the key issue? Creative understandings of the play's language, imagery, or staging are, of course, encouraged.

3) The group must also outline how the evidence exactly supports your assertions by explicating the language of the text and by interpreting it in the larger context of your arguments. Each group will present what they come up with the the class in 30 minutes. (Acts 1 and 2 are open for all groups to use for evidence).

---Please record your group’s findings below and on back.---

*This was found on Vanderbilt University’s writing resources website. Many thanks to them. Here is the link:*

http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/site/liumxq/findingevidence