

January 25, 2008

Dear Teachers:

It has occurred to me that, in my brief talk this morning, I did not adequately contextualize the handouts I use with my first year writing students. These are *not* meant as formulas for good writing that exclude a student's need to think and write critically, i.e. a simple fill-in-the-blank essay in which the student need not wrestle with important social issues, nor articulate his or her own genuine investment in a particular controversy. Rather, they are meant to invite students into the *conversation* of academic discourse, a conversation that most of my own students simply do not know how to enter and are afraid to attempt.

My handouts are meant to present in a direct and accessible way the rhetorical patterns that are commonly used in scholarly argumentation, and are often quite mysterious to students new to academe. Strong argumentative writing is based in these patterns of the university community, as much as good, clear text-messaging is based in patterns of discourse intimately familiar to our students (and my own children, who have taught me a great deal about how to read the messages they send my cell phone—thank heavens.)

For an excellent example of the use of rhetorical patterns in the composition classroom, take a look at *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (Norton, 2006). As Graff and Birkenstein argue, meaningful writing is a conversation which involves multiple voices, including the student's own. It is my hope that—rather than feel shut out of, alienated by, the writing process—the young people who enter our university classrooms will understand that they have a right to participate in important social conversations, that their voices matter. And the better equipped our students are to listen to (read) and understand the ideas of others and articulate their own ideas in relation to them, the more power they will have to shape their own lives and that of the communities in which they live. Ours is deeply important work!

With admiration for your work on behalf of Houston's middle school students!

Best wishes,

Robin Davidson

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