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Finding focus

A guide to working with 098 and 100/100R Students

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"Who *are* these people?": The 098/100 Student

I find it always helps to start with an understanding of my students' path through the Writing Program: where they came from and where they're going. That not only helps me understand their needs and experiences, but it also helps me see what it is I need to teach them versus what they will be learning in future classes. In fact, you might bug Bob for a copy of the course descriptions for each of these classes. Those will give you a good sense of what your tutee's particular course is trying to achieve as well as some sense of how their papers will be graded. Knowing what they need to be doing is an important step in helping them do it.

As for the students themselves, they're in these classes for very good reasons. Students are placed into 098 because they need help with basic skills. These students generally have low verbal and math SAT scores and may not be ready for college level writing. Often, they need help with the basic building blocks of writing, from sentences to paragraphs. The Spring sections of 098 may have a few students just entering Rutgers, but as a general rule, these are students who did not pass 098 in the Fall, suggesting that their writing needs are particularly severe.

Students enter 100 and 100R from a variety of paths. Freshman may be placed into these sections based on placement tests or SAT scores. Generally speaking, these days a student can only be in 100 if placed directly there. All other paths lead into 100R, which differs from 100 only by adding an extra day of class to concentrate on reading comprehension and skills. Students who pass 098 move into 100R, and starting this semester students who failed 100 in the Fall are taking 100R this Spring. Finally, students who have moved through the EAD program, designed for students with second language issues, take 100R as well.

Perhaps the first thing to realize when tutoring 098 or 100/100R students in the Spring, then, is that all of these students have some kind of experience with Rutgers' writing classes. Either they have failed 098 and are retaking it, or they moved from 098 or EADII into 100R, or they failed 100 and are taking 100R now. Because of these experiences, students may feel generally defeated, may be weary of writing, or may be frustrated because of past failures. As a tutor, these emotional concerns can get in the way, so you may want to start by asking a student how they feel about where they are and reminding them that they're in this particular class because it is going to provide them the skills they need for future success. In other words, you may have to be a cheerleader—but we all could use one of those sometimes. The good news is that if they're sitting in front of you, they know they need help and they are ready and willing

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to get it. And, these students are *used* to working **hard**. That's where you step in.

"Oh my God!": Encountering the 098/100 Paper

I've taught both 098 and 100 now, and every time I sit down to read a draft or grade a paper, my reaction is *still* the same: "Oh my God! The error!" It's hard not to feel overwhelmed reading the work of these students. If I were to correct each and every error, you would think I had committed hari kari from the amount of red on the paper. It's overwhelming: for me, for the students, and perhaps for you as well.

The first step in combating the paralyzing panic of encountering one of the student's drafts is to filter out what's simply not important, or, at least, what's not important for now. Parenthetical notation? They can learn that in 101. Conclusions? They won't pass the class with a stellar one, nor will they fail with a poor one. Reviewing the course descriptions for these classes *and* 101 can help you see that you don't have to help them fix everything.

Instead, ***you have to focus***. This is in some respects crucial, because **YOU** have to focus: the students probably don't know how to, and teachers can only do so much since they have to move the class as a whole towards the goals of the course. The most important skill students can learn at the Writing Center at this point in their writing careers is what needs to be addressed first, what one problem is most keeping them from passing. Help them with that problem first, then the next biggest problem, then the next and the next and so on down the line.

Focus is not just a mental strategy, a way of deciding how to approach these students. It's also a very material practice you need in these sessions. With a 101 student, you may be able to make some comments on a draft and watch them take flight. With these students, structure works best. Focus closely on their impeding problem, on one single instance of it, and then help them understand how they can look for and correct this problem when they leave you.

For example, if a student is having problems with connection, you might spend an entire session on one paragraph. Focus on it, focus on connection, and then help them see how they can do the same kind of focused work on each paragraph after they leave.

Focus on the problem in your mind and in your session. Ignore everything else.

"Target locked": Finding the Focus

Of course, even after you've looked at the course descriptions, even after you've looked at the draft, you may not have a sense of just *what* you need to focus on first. Here are some good general guidelines for helping you decide where to start in a session:

1. **INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS:** OK, we don't always fill out the forms letting you know how we feel about a student. To be honest, we instructors have a *lot* to do, and as much as we'd *love* to help you as a tutor, paperwork seems like a unstartable chore sometimes. So, if you don't have a sheet from the instructor, start with the instructor's comments on papers, drafts, or homework. This is a good way to locate the problem to start with when working with a student because although grading criteria is uniform across all sections, instructors still place subtly different emphases in each of their classes. For example, my classes are connection-driven: if a student can make a couple of solid connections in a paper, I'm happy. I generally start with connection/quotation, then work on argument, then work on organization. Other instructors, however, start with organizational issues, like paragraphing, and build up from there. Still others have argument-driven classes. So, get a feel for what the instructor is looking for. After all, we're the ones who are going to give the student a grade. Do the comments ask the student to work on error? quotation? reading comprehension? argument? organization? Gathering as much information and feedback from the instructor as possible is the best way to decide what needs focus first.
2. **STUDENT INPUT:** In conjunction with what the instructor has indicated, ask the student for their input as well. After they all, they hear us harping on this or that issues for 80 minutes 2-3 times per week. But don't simply ask students what they feel they need to work on. Students often don't have a good sense of what's important in the course, especially early in the semester (for example, I've had two of my students this semester tell me they know they have a problem with conclusions. I pointed out that in my class you've passed or failed the paper before I even get to the conclusion). Students also don't often digest our comments. They see "NP" on their papers and everything else becomes a blur. So, in getting student input, you might start by asking your tutee what issues they've been working on in class, what comments their instructor has made, what exercises they've done in class. You might also go through an instructor's comments on a paper and figure out what that instructor is looking for with the student's help and input.

3. **MAKE A FOCUS:** If the instructor's comments have not been illuminating, if the student is lost, then it's up to you to determine where to start. In the rest of this booklet, I'll discuss strategies for dealing with some common problems among 098 and 100 students. You might find these helpful in locating a focus in your tutoring sessions, when no other input is available.

"Baby steps": Focusing on Focus

Once you've decided what most needs work, you have to refine your focus even more. 098 and 100 students need help on two levels at once, both the microscopic and the macroscopic. The best way to cover both is to use baby steps.

For example, if a student is having trouble with paragraphing, that problem is going to occur in every paragraph (or most paragraphs) within their paper. Rather than commenting on each in the draft, pick one paragraph, discuss it, focus on it for the entire session. Then, before the student leaves, help them make a plan to replicate the work you've done in the session. Focus on the particular instance of the problem, help them work on it, but also help them see how to work on it when they leave.

You may even focus on a single quotation for the entire session. It will be excruciating, for sure, but that intensity of focus can help students build the skills they need. It may not feel like you've accomplished a lot in that one session, but if you approach things from the macro-level, you may end up accomplishing even less.

So, after you find the focus, focus on the focus. Concentrate on the problem while also providing ways for the student to move from the ridiculously explicit to the necessary abstract. It may not feel like you've given the student all the help they need, because, in some sense, you *can't* give them all the help they need in that one session. But keep the focus, and move in baby steps, one little bit at a time.

Also, at this point, it may help to keep in mind the golden rule of the Writing Centers: no matter what occurs in the session, no matter how much or how little gets done, the very fact that the student is spending 80 minutes working on their writing with no distractions is bound to help.

What follows are some of the most common problems with these students, and strategies to address them in your sessions. You probably do a lot of this already, since a lot of what I am going to say is "standard operating procedure" for tutors, but you might find a new trick or two as well

"Huh?": Reading and Comprehension

A good place to start with students is reading. Understanding the essays is a big issue for both 098 and 100 students, and in many ways it's a hidden issue as well. In fact, it's an issue you may not be able to see at first. After all, you haven't read all the essays, nor should you. So you're going to have to ask the students to explain the essays to you. And they will. *That's* the problem.

Because these students have no problem comprehending the essay—on the surface. But they often take from the readings only superficial understandings. These are students who read an essay, get the gist of it, and then stop. They don't think "into" the essay, and in doing that they often end up misreading it. For example, this semester in my 100 class I started with the Fishman essay. We spent time discussing the reading, and a couple of classes actually taking apart some of Fishman's sentences to get a feel for her argument. Basically, Fishman examines the education of a young Amish boy to raise questions about mainstream education and the ways in which students from different cultures may enter our schools with a literacy very unlike mainstream literacy, forcing them to choose between what they have learned at home and what they're learning at school. Imagine my surprise, then, when students started talking about how Fishman felt the Amish were backward or had the wrong literacy or even had no literacy at all! They read the essay, they got it, but they didn't really *read* Fishman, and so what they got was only part of the story and the rest they just filled in.

So, if a student is starting a new essay, it's probably not enough to ask them what it's about. They'll have an understanding, but it may not be *the* understanding. If you've encountered the essay before, you may see where their reading is deficient and you may be able to use that to guide them to a deeper understanding. But, if the essay is new to you as well, then it might be a good idea to ask them about the essay *and then get into* the essay.

A good place to start is the end of the essay. Students have often zoned out by the end of an essay, or worse yet, they're already decided what the essay is about by the time they reach the conclusion. Have them summarize the final paragraph and then relate it to the rest of the essay. This will let you see their understanding and this will let them see how the conclusion relates to the overall argument. This is also a good strategy to use with the opening of an essay. In fact, you may spend a session working on the start and end of an essay, helping students to understand them both and, through that, to understand what happens in between as well.

But this is a good strategy for *any* paragraph, and you could just pick one at random to have them work on, or, better, ask them to find a paragraph that gave them particular problems. This, of course, is what we often do with students, 098-101 and beyond. But there's a difference. Don't just ask them what the paragraph means. **Ask them HOW they know it means that.** This is a brilliant insight from Carol Bork, an extraordinary teacher and the co-director of the College Ave Writing Center. Asking "how?" is the key to comprehension for 098 and 100 because it forces students not only to decode the text but also to focus on the clues within the text that help them to decode.

Don't feel bound by paragraphs. Work with a sentence. Help students break it down word by word if necessary. But remember above all else, don't just ask them what it means, ask them how they know that.

"What does you means its wrong?": Error Issues

After reading and comprehension, perhaps the next most common problem for 098 and 100 students is sentence level error. Keep in mind that a large segment of the 100R population is coming from EAD. In that classroom, they had daily support for their language skills, but that disappears with 100R. The sentence-level skills of past and present 098 students tend to be weak as well, and they may need just as much support as second language students. The Writing Center is a **crucial** support system for error. As instructors, we just don't have enough time to really focus on error in the classroom, as much as we'd like to do so. At the same time, controlling error is vital to passing both 098 and 100. The support you give as a tutor, then, is an essential supplement to what we can do in class. We can't spend 80 minutes on error. Theoretically, you could.

First, it's important to understand that error-free writing, though an admirable goal, is not a necessary one. There is an "acceptable" level of error in both of these courses, so you don't have to transform them into perfect grammarians. But there are some errors that students must learn to recognize and control. Generally speaking, for example, article usage is a non-critical error. We recognize that many second language students are always going to have problems with articles, because the rules in English for article usage are, at best, confusing and because many of these students have a first language that doesn't use articles at all. On the other hand, subject-verb agreement is a critical error. In part, that's because the rules are easier to master and so should be. But more importantly, these errors can impede meaning.

And that's the rule of thumb for error in these classes. Any error that impedes meaning must be addressed. And what do we mean by "impede meaning"? Well, if you can't understand what the student is saying, if you can't clearly "get" the meaning, then there's a problem. Apostrophes? No one uses them correctly, so not a problem. Verb tense issues? Yeah, that can impede meaning.

If you feel error is severe, and if English is the student's second language, you might suggest to them that they also sign up for the EAD Academic Center (Emma should have the contact info for students). That program provides support specifically on language issues, and **ONLY** on language issues, so make it clear to students that that is a supplement to, not a replacement of, the kind of help you can provide.

If error is present, but not overwhelming, help students learn to track their errors. Chances are you know this technique already, but let me summarize it quickly. The idea is that in any given paper there aren't twenty errors, but one or two *kinds* of error that

the student does twenty times. So, the trick is to identify the *kind* of error a student makes, help them to understand what it is and why it's an error, and then help them to find that kind of error on their own and fix it on their own. For example, if a student has a lot of subject-verb agreement problems, you might pick a paragraph that has several of these errors. Correct the first one and discuss it. Then have the student go through the rest of the paragraph and find each subject and verb and check their agreement. If they learn they have a subject-verb problem, then they know what to look for, and their proofreading will be productive and *focused*.

Proofreading, of course, is an issue unto itself. Just as these students rush through essays they also rush through drafts. If you start a reading a draft and it's filled with error, many of which seem to be typo's, then stop reading it. You're not their editor or proofreader. Ask the student if they proofed the draft, discuss various proofreading strategies, and then give them the draft to proof. Make it clear to them that they should come to the session with a clean draft that's been carefully proofed. Otherwise, they're going to waste time that could be used to improve the content of the paper. Having students proofread a draft serves an extra purpose: it lets you see what are careless errors and what are errors they just can't see, which are the ones they need to track.

You'll probably want to discuss every proofreading strategy you can think of, but the best one, I feel, is having a student read a paper out loud, and you may have them wander off to the third floor or somewhere else to do just this. Reading out loud is effective for a number of reasons, but in terms of error it serves an additional purpose: often, students can't *see* that a sentence is wrong, but they can *hear* it. Our ears know English better than our eyes do, so tell a student to read out loud as much as possible. Read the essays out loud to get a feel for the rhythm of academic writing, read the assignments out loud, and most of all, read their own writing out loud. If something sounds awkward, if they suddenly stop or stumble, then tell them to say what it out loud until it *sounds* right. Chances are, it will be.

"A + B = C": Working on Connections

For me, connection is the core of the Writing Program. Because we're teaching these students how to think critically, and it takes a lot of thinking to make a solid connection. I have a few exercises I use in my classes to get students really focused on connection. You'll find those in the appendix. But let me discuss some general issues and strategies here.

Focus, again, is the key. Have the student locate two quotes they feel connect. Then have them *explain* the connection. This is what trips up most students, and not just the ones in 098 and 100. All students can see that one quote is similar to another, but they often just say that. They don't take the time to explain *why* they connect. Just as with reading, the question is not just do they connect, but *how do you know that?* Have students work on explaining the connection, and you may even force them down to the very words that make the connection. Being able to explain a connection keeps them from generalizing, as they like to do with reading, and it makes the connection clear and strong.

A related issue is *which* connections a student chooses. Every time I get a set of papers, I see the same 2 or 3 connections, the same 2 or 3 quotations. Students are comfortable with these connections because they are easy and/or because we've been through them in class. So, you may want to force students to find new connections. Even if they don't end up using them in the paper, getting them used to the process of *thinking* is important. You might skim the essay and find an unusual quotation and ask them to find a connection in the second essay. Be prepared for some forced, strained, almost non-connected connections. Fine. Work with that by helping them see where the connection goes wrong, why it's weak.

If a student has a grasp of the essay, if they have error more or less under control, and if they can make at least two solid connections, they'll pass a paper in my class. Their argument may be weak, or even non-existent, but if I can see them thinking for those 2-3 brief moments, I know it's a start. Help them get there.

"A is similar to B": Developing Arguments

Argument is THE bugaboo for my students. They can write, they can connect, but often bringing those connections together into an argument simply escapes them. I'm beta testing a packet on argument in my class right now. You'll find it in the appendix as well. I don't know if it works, but you might give it a try.

The problem is that students have trouble understanding that it's not enough for them to make connections—*those connections have to mean something*. Inevitably, I get paper after paper with an argument that basically says "Author A is similar to Author B." Just as inevitably my comment is always "AND SO?": fine, the essays connect, but what difference does that make? what do we learn *because of* these connections?

The best place to start with tutoring around argument is to have students brainstorm a list of every connection they can possibly think of. Then, help them look for connections *between* the connections. Often, students don't end up with arguments because they choose connections that are essentially random.

Sometimes I think my focus on connection skews argument, makes it backwards. So, you may want to have students think about the essays themselves and just brainstorm possible arguments *and then* find the connections to support their argument. You might also have a student who already has a draft look to their conclusion. A lot of times students start out writing with only a general sense of what they want to argue. Only when they get to the end of the draft do they understand (and articulate) their argument. In both of these cases, have students write a paragraph about what they're arguing, and then work on squeezing that down into a sentence or two that makes the argument clear.

Either way, it's important for students to understand two things: papers must have an argument and papers must prove that argument.

"A leads to B leads to C": Working on Organization

If students have a good sense of argument and connection, then you might have them work on organization. There are a few tricks I usually find effective.

The first is outlining, both before and after a draft. Again, it's a question of focus. Students need to know where they're starting, where they're going, and how to get there. That will help them draft. But once the draft is done, you can also help them make a roadmap of where they've been. That's the reverse outline.

Have students write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph in the paper. If they can't summarize a paragraph in one sentence, then let them know that maybe that means that paragraph needs to be broken into two. When they're done, they have a map of how their argument develops, or how it doesn't. Use the reverse draft to help them think about whether each paragraph leads logically to the next. Also use it to help them think about whether or not each and every paragraph relates to the argument.

It's also useful to help students think about transitions. You might hunt down a good handbook, or have them bring theirs. Look at the section on transitions and help them locate transitions for their paragraphs. Students sometimes will jump from topic to topic, but if they can find a way to relate what they just said to what they're going to say, then their paper will read as more cohesive.

"Phew!": Concluding Thoughts

To me, these are the key areas for 098/100 students, and they're areas of decreasing importance. Reading is the most crucial, then error, connection, argument, and organization. But these priorities are filtered through my own classroom, so keep in mind that an instructor may be stressing something else. In that case, go with it. In the end, there are a few general tips to keep in mind:

1. **STAY FOCUSED.** Don't try and do everything at once. Make your best informed decision about what needs the most work, and start there. And, once you start there, focus on that problem intensely, down to its most minute level, while always keeping the larger picture somewhere floating in mind.
2. **SAY IT IN WRITING.** As you probably know from your general tutoring experience, it's important to have students leave with something written. This is especially true for these students. Don't just discuss what needs to be done, have them write out a plan. Don't just discuss connections, have them jot it down. Don't just discuss a concept, have them draw a picture of it. Remember, when they leave 135 George St. everything you *said* dissolves. But if they have it in writing, they'll be able to work when they get home.
3. **THESE ARE NOT 101 STUDENTS.** Well, not yet. Don't feel like you have to help them do the work of 101 students. Review the course descriptions, chat with Bob, or come downstairs and chat with me to figure out just what these students need to do now, and just what they will do later. You don't have to turn them into brilliant thinkers, you just have to help them get to 101.
4. **WORK WITH THEM, NOT FOR THEM.** Finally, in the end, remember that it's up to the student in the final analysis. You can help them, but *they* have to work hard, too; in fact, they have to work much harder than you do. If your student is not willing to do the work, then they'll be in the same class come Fall. As I like to say to tutees, "This is a pen, not a magic wand. I can help you, but only help. The rest is up to you."

And you know what? They do the rest. They learn. Education happens. And that's part of what makes working with these students so rewarding. With a 101 student, you'll feel good if they leave with an argument, outline, and 4 connections for a draft. With these students, you may feel just as wonderful if they figure out one sentence from Bellah. Baby steps. They're small, but they still get you somewhere. And that somewhere is

where they need to be.

"Here, try this.": Appendix

Please see me if you want explanations of how any of these work, or if you want clean copies you can give to students.

Forcing a basic connection

Barclay's Super-Secret Formula for Connection

$C_l \rightarrow I \rightarrow Q_1 \rightarrow E \rightarrow T \rightarrow Q_2 \rightarrow C_e$

C_l = Start by stating your claim, what you are trying to prove.

I = Then introduce the first quotation.

Q_1 = Give the first quotation.

E = Explain it in your own words.

T = Give some sort of transition to the next quotation, providing a clue to connection.

Q_2 = Give the second quote.

C_e = Explain how the second quote connects to the first one in a sentence or two. This last part is crucial. You need to explain the connection in order to really prove it.

Nail That Connection!

This is a useful exercise to make sure that the C_E of your connection, the place at the end where you explain the connection between the two quotations, matches up with the quotations you've actually chosen. I know I've commented on some papers recently that you're making an explanation that doesn't come out of the quotations. If I've written that on your paper, this is most especially for you. But this is a great exercise for everyone, since it makes your connections sharper, stronger, and slicker.

1. Select the two quotations you think make a connection.
2. Take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle, from top to bottom.
3. Write each quotation on the paper, on either side of the line, so that you can actually see the two pieces of text next to one another.
4. Underline the phrases in each quotation that you think actually connect and then draw a line connecting them.
5. At the bottom of the sheet, write a sentence in which you explain the connection using each of those phrases.
6. Use this sentence to create your C_E in the super-secret formula.
7. Repeat for the next connection.

The idea is that you not only get to see the pieces of text next to each other, which helps you see the connection, but you also refer directly to the quotations as you explain the connection, and to the exact pieces of the quotation that actually connect. If you can't find phrases that connect in each quote, then perhaps you should choose some better quotes. If you need to explain the quote for a few sentences before you can make the connection, then there's probably a better quotation you can use. Go find it.

All About Argument

There are two essential skills to this class, and to all the composition classes: connection and argument. And it's not that those are the two random hoops we decided students needed to jump through. Instead, they are the two skills that best reflect critical thinking. And they reflect that thinking in a very particular way. The kind of work we ask you to do is the kind of work we do as academics. This is what all your professors do. We think. We think a lot. We think hard. Then we write about what we think. We write papers, articles, books that make arguments about issues we care about. We don't expect you to become professors, but we do expect you to have the same kind of thinking abilities. Because what you learn here will help you throughout college and beyond.

We've already started working with connection, mainly through the super-secret formula as well as through the work we did in the computer classroom. Both of those activities have gotten you started thinking about how two pieces of two essays relate to one another. AND, they've asked you to not just say they relate, but to explain the relationship, down to the very words of each quotation. Now it's time for us to think about argument. Because it's not enough to have a series of connections. *Those connections have to mean something.*

I. Argument is a kind of conversation

Let's start with the basics. Argument is a kind of conversation, so, as a group, create a definition of conversation. We all know it's a kind of speaking, but what makes a conversation a conversation? Jot some notes here:

OK. Now imagine that each of the essays we read is part of a larger conversation. Thinking about the essays, their themes, their issues, their points, describe the larger conversation of each essay as best you can. What do you think are some of the larger issues? Jot some notes here:

II. There are different kinds of argument

Argument is a kind of conversation, but even within that there are many different kinds of argument. As a group, jot down some of the characteristics of each of the different kinds of arguments. What are they like? How would you be able to tell one from another? Jot notes:

- a. an argument between lovers

- b. an argument between political candidates

- c. an argument in a courtroom

- d. a scientific argument

Now, as a group, explain the difference between these two sentences: "They're having an argument" and "You have a convincing argument"

Think about this class. What kind of argument do you think your paper should have? Describe what it's like compared to the examples above.

III. What an argument looks like

Consider the following statements. Which one is an argument, and why?

- a. Princeton and Rutgers are universities.
- b. Princeton's writing program is similar to Rutgers' writing program.
- c. Princeton's writing program is similar to Rutgers' writing program, which means that Rutgers is as good as an Ivy League school in terms of writing.

IV. Some models for argument in the composition classes

Now, having thought about all that, I want just to introduce you to some of the ways we as teachers have talked to each other and to students about argument. These are all "models" we have used here at Rutgers to describe the kind of work we want students to do:

- a. "Framing": The purpose of the paper is to use the ideas from one essay to "frame" the ideas from the other. That is, you examine the second essay using terms and concepts from the first, as though examining the second essay through a frame or lens provided by the first. For example, using Princeton's program to "frame" Rutgers' program.
- b. "Conversation": The purpose of the paper is to put the two essays into conversation. That is, you use the ideas and terms and concepts from one essay to discuss or evaluate the ideas from the other. For example, discussing Princeton's and Rutgers' programs together.
- c. "Case/Theory": The purpose of the paper is to use a theory about something from one essay and to test it using another essay as a

particular case. That is, you evaluate how effective the first author's ideas are when applied to a second author. For example, seeing Princeton's program as a theory of what an effective program should be like and then testing it with Rutgers'.

- d. "Application": The purpose of the paper is to apply the ideas of one essay to the ideas of the other. That is, you take a term or concept and apply it to the new essay, learning something new either about the term or about the new essay. For example, applying the ideas of Princeton's program to Rutgers'.

As a group, discuss these different models, and then jot some notes on what they have in common. Think about what model seems clearest to you, if any. And, as a group, try to come up with an explanation of what an argument should do in a composition paper.

V. My terms for discussing argument

I myself have tried to explain arguments in a few different ways. Think about the following descriptions:

- a. "And so?": An argument has to have a point. It has to first assert a connection between the two essays *but then also* answer the question "and so?" Essay A is like (or unlike) Essay B and so . . .
- b. "Point": An argument is the point you are trying to make. It is the idea or thought you are trying to get across. A point is something you prove, and a point is also something that we haven't thought of or discussed yet.
- c. "Making knowledge": An argument is a way of making new knowledge.

How do we learn something new? We think about what we know and then we come to a conclusion. That conclusion is a new piece of knowledge that we can express. If you just read Essay A you learn X, but after reading Essay B we now learn Y about Essay A. The argument tells us something new, something we haven't thought about before.

Discuss these ideas as a group and jot a few more notes on what you think an argument should do in a composition paper:

VI. OK, but I still can't think of an argument myself. So what do I do?

Well, the first thing to do is to realize a few things. One, you're not *expected* to understand argument now. You're not expected to really get it until you're done with the writing classes as a whole, though you are expected to begin understanding it by the end of this class. Two, it's not easy, and it's not supposed to be. Finding an argument takes a lot of thinking, which, after all, is the whole point. Three, you should now (I hope) have some sense of what an argument does, and that's a good start too.

Here are some tips for finding an argument for your paper:

- a. Think about the larger conversation. Both these authors are talking about similar things. That's why we can find connections between their essays. But the connections are not just in specific terms or ideas or concepts or quotations. There's also a connection in terms of the larger issues. Start by thinking about what the larger issue is between the essays, and then think about how each of these essays addresses this issue. For example, if the issue is literacy, then what does each author say about literacy, in a larger sense?
- b. Think about the connections. Make a list of every connection you see, and then start looking for connections *between* the connections. Is there a set of connections about one idea? How do those connections relate to each other, to both essays, to larger ideas?
- c. Think about what you're trying to prove. It's not enough to prove a connection. Yes, that takes *some* thinking, but not enough. You have to think about what the connections mean.
- d. Think about what we're learning from your paper. What have you discovered by bringing these essays together? Does the ideas of one author extend the ideas of the other author into a whole new area? Are the ideas of one author limited because of what the other author shows?
- e. Think about one essay and then the other. Imagine you only read the first essay. Make a list of what you would have believed, thought, or learned. Then, think about how the second essay would change, challenge, or extend that.

VIII. Argument worksheet

If you're still stuck, try this worksheet:

The larger issue behind both these essays is _____.

My first author, _____, has the following argument about this issue in his/her essay:

My second author, _____, has the following argument about this issue in her/his essay:

I have located the following connections between these essays:

These connections all have to do with _____. While _____
____ says _____ about _____,
(extends/challenges/disproves/modifies) that idea because _____.

VII. Testing your argument

Once you think you have an argument, use the following questions to test and see if it's clear and strong:

- a. Do you express it in one sentence? A clear argument should always be identifiable in your paper. Someone should be able to point to a sentence in your introduction and say "Here, that's the argument."
- b. Do you express it in terms of both essays? Though this is not *always* true, a good rule of thumb is that the argument should contain the name of each author. That makes it clear that the heart of the argument is a larger connection.
- c. Is it specific? Have you specified exactly what argument you are making? A strong argument will not only make a claim, but will also give some sense of how that claim is going to be made by mentioning specific terms or ideas that relate to the argument.
- d. Does it answer the question "and so?" ? Does the argument just point to a connection, or does it go beyond that to make a claim about one of the essays *based* on the connection?
- e. Does every paragraph relate to my argument? Each paragraph of your paper should somehow be proving your argument. Read each paragraph and ask yourself what it's doing. Ask how it helps to prove your argument.
- f. Do I end with the same argument I started with? After you have done your draft, read your conclusion. Sometimes we're not sure what we want to write, but as we actually start writing we discover it along the way. Check your conclusion and see if you proved what you set out to prove. If not, it might be a good idea to use the ideas in your conclusion to revise your introduction and argument.