The Politics of College Writing

The High School Model vs. The College Model

Stuart Greene says good writing is “understanding conflicts,” not persuasive storytelling. Though there is hardly consensus on the matter, high school writers seem to be dedicated to something like the latter while experienced college writers understand writing as a kind of conversation. To participate in the great conversation that is academic discourse, a writer must implicitly assert the authority of his or her voice in relation to others. In their essays on transitioning to meet expectations of college writing, David Bartholomae and Nancy Sommers & Laura Saltz say that this is especially difficult because students must write as if they are knowledgeable in fields that feel fairly unknown to them.

Recognizing Problems of Authority in Student Essays

1. Too Much Summary, Not Enough Opinion

Summarizing what others have said is a nice way for a writer to sidestep the difficulty of asserting his or her authority. If the writer simply relies on what other people say, the writer can’t be wrong. The problem is, this strategy makes for a spineless paper, one without any real argument.

2. Weak Structure

This almost goes hand in hand with the first one. A common trap for novice writers is to follow the source text too closely. In doing so, they may not structure their essay according to the unique argument they are making, but rather structure it using the same organizational logic of the source material. This is an especially big pitfall in English papers where there is great temptation for the writer to follow the narrative of a story, scattering his or her analyses throughout.

3. Reliance on Language of the Prompt

A writer can use specific terms from the prompt as a kind of crutch: saying something in one’s own words (instead of the professor’s) often necessitates a far deeper understanding of the material. In addition, when a writer stays close to the parameters of the professor’s prompt, he or she engages with the professor’s ideas instead of his or her own.

Possible Solutions

1. Advise Writer to Argue Something That a Peer is Likely to Disagree With

When a writer takes a real stand, he or she argues for something interesting or complex that isn’t apparent from a single glance. Ask the writer what his or her argument is. Then ask can a paper be written from the opposite point of view.

2. Ask Writer to Justify His or Her Organizational Logic

This connects to the previous number 2. How did the writer organize the paper? Is there an argumentative thread throughout that dictates the organization? Reverse outlining can help here.

3. Ask Writer What He or She Felt Passionate About
If a writer is having trouble developing an interesting response to a prompt, start by asking general question about what he or she found most interesting. Why did they find this interesting? Chances are there is something unique lurking behind this interest that sustain the interest of an analytical essay.