

TS English: Curriculum Philosophy and Practice

By Curtis Hisayasu Ph.D
TS English Instructor
Asst. Director of Programs
Robinson Center for Young Scholars, University of Washington

I. “Acceleration” in the Transition School

The Problem of “Accelerating” English

While all of the courses offered as a part of the Robinson Center’s Transition School operate according to an “accelerated” curriculum, built to prepare students for the subject matter and intellectual rigor that they will encounter at the university level, what it means to “accelerate” student-learning differs dramatically in each class. Some (particularly Math and Physics) have defined for themselves relatively linear tracks of development and skill acquisition, and “accelerate” their content and forms of inquiry accordingly. In humanities-oriented classes like English, however, a linear account of student development is harder to come by, and there is much less general consensus on what specifically constitutes the foundational content of these subject areas. Part of the difficulty with accelerating English, therefore, as a subject of inquiry and as an academic discipline, lies in the competing conceptions of what an English class “does” in general: what forms of inquiry it involves students in, what academic or interpersonal skills it cultivates, and what forms of knowledge are most essential to its practice. As we will see, there are as many different ways to conceive of “acceleration” in an English/humanities context as there are different answers to these questions.

In this section, we will survey some of the pros and cons of these approaches while keeping one eye on the university context which we outlined in the previous section. Our question: what are the outcomes of these forms of acceleration, and how do they work to prepare students for the context that we are accelerating them *towards*: humanities work in the university. While there are several different ways to accelerate student learning in an English class, thinking about the different ways that they prepare (or don’t prepare) students for college level work in the humanities allows us to prioritize some approaches over others.

Surveying Approaches

1. Content-Based Approaches

The term “content-based” is meant to broadly capture approaches to curriculum development that organize themselves around a particular canon of materials or that define student ability in terms of the mastery of ideas or problems that have been designated as foundational. For instance, one very traditional way of structuring an English curriculum is through a literature

survey. When most people think of a high-school (or even college) English class, they probably think in terms of the “literature appreciation” class, which assembles a group of texts which will test students ability to comprehend and construct intricate interpretations. One version of this, the liberal arts “Great Books” approach, teaches students cross-disciplinary reading through a canon of literary works that have been designated as foundational to the Western intellectual tradition. The idea of an uncontestable canon of “most important” works is outmoded (or at least controversial) in most contexts now, but, still, many university and high school English departments maintain some version of this curriculum in the form of required American and British Literature classes and periodization requirements, assuring that students have some exposure to a supposedly “representative” sampling of important literary and philosophical works.

But in an English literature class, content-based approaches to curriculum development are not easily amenable to “acceleration,” for a number of reasons. For one, if student competency is defined in terms of their mastery of a set canon of texts or a predetermined collection of concepts (however conceived), then one “common sense” accelerated curriculum would simply expose students to texts or concepts at an accelerated rate. But while many would argue that these materials are foundational, few would agree that simple accelerated exposure to these texts (short-changing the time-consuming work of interpretation and critical reflection) leads to student mastery in any substantive sense. Staging the work of reading in this way is also directly counter to the logic of student progress and growth that is implicit as students move from secondary education to college-level humanities work. In college, students are expected to engage texts with increasingly detailed, in-depth, and sustained analytical perspectives, so while a literary canon-based approach to acceleration may succeed in familiarizing students with the texts and ideas they will encounter at the university, it does very little to prepare students for how they will be expected to engage these texts and ideas in college-level work. Reading “quickly” for basic content and comprehension is, in this sense, does not accelerate students towards the types of reading and thinking that students will be expected to perform at higher levels of their education. In fact, it may do the opposite.

For many, content-based acceleration also prompts serious concerns regarding student maturity and life experience, where the crucial lessons of the Western canon inevitably involve discussions of foundational human experiences and histories: sexuality, violence, trauma, political conflict, genocide, mourning, and death. On this basis, some might be tempted to suggest that humanities acceleration is either inappropriate (because exposing young students to these topics is morally or politically inappropriate, or detrimental to their social development) or impossible (because to avoid these topics would be to bankrupt the material, defeating the whole purpose of the survey in general). On a related note, it is worth noting that English classes in a high school context are one of the privileged sites where students can engage questions of identity, oppression, expression, and the subjective experiences of others. To shortcut a humanities curriculum is, therefore, to deprive students of the opportunity to formulate an ethical relation to social difference. But, once again, these objections are built on a series of specific assumptions about the work and value of an English classroom. *Certainly*, all teachers hope to have an effect on how students think about themselves and their social worlds. But from our perspective, the humanities have as much to offer (if not more) in terms of teaching students *how* to think critically and academically as opposed to *what* to think about a particular set of topics or

key concepts. Rather than envisioning our goal as teaching students what to think about racial identity, for instance (a topic that students are bound to encounter as a part of their college experience), an accelerated humanities class can prepare students by introducing them to the multiple ways that “identity” and social power are conceived of at the university, preparing them to encounter these topics from an appropriately critical perspective down the line.

There are, of course, other ways of conceiving of content-based acceleration in the context of an English curriculum. One may, for instance, conceive of a core list of literary terminologies or forms of literary expression (allegory, metaphor, etc) or build a checklist of literary forms (poetry, prose, non-fiction) that students need to understand on a generic level. From our perspective, these content-based approaches are preferable to ones based on a literary canon, as they overtly prioritize preparing students to encounter new texts, rather than defining their mastery in their treatment of the texts already encountered. But, once again, there is very little consensus on what terms or concepts are most important. One thing we have tried to consider is what types of concepts are likely to be taught at the university as a part of a classroom curriculum and which ones will be assumed or expected. For instance, topical classes in English will not generally assume that students enter with previous knowledge of “modernist” literature or the terms of rhetorical analysis – these classes are built to teach these content areas, including the terminologies and concepts that are most important to the topic, and are often designed to critique or revise “common perceptions” that the student may bring with them in the name of more rigorous academic understanding. But these same classes *will* expect students to be prepared to discuss and analyze texts (from the disciplinary/methodological perspective that is implicitly or explicitly outlined as a part of the class inquiry) and write clearly and effectively (within the context of specific disciplinary conventions and assumptions). In this way of thinking, a “content-based” approach quickly slides into something that is more appropriately understood as a “skills-based” approach, which seeks to equip students to perform the tasks necessary to master a variety of different types of content.

2. Skills-Based Approaches

Another option, perhaps more common in the context of the contemporary educational system, is a skills-based approach to English and Language Arts instruction. English classes have long played a crucial role in secondary education as the place where students cultivate reading and writing skills. Though the way these skills are conceptualized varies, objective, skills-based approaches have several advantages, including standardized assessment strategies and relatively clear outcomes/goals for student learning. The Washington State OSPI, for instance, defines a standardized approach to K-12 student writing approach which gradually emphasizes the “recursive process” of writing (prewriting, drafting, editing, revision) and seeks to incorporate reflective understandings of audience and genre as the student advances to more formal, analytical writing. In terms of envisioning “acceleration” in TS English, a skills-based approach helps to center the curriculum on clearly-defined elements of student performance and ability that transcend the literature classroom, training students for college reading and writing more generally. But this larger context also presents a number of difficulties for the very idea of universally applicable student “skills.”

While there are a number of advantages to a skills-based approach, especially for teachers looking to center their curricula on a series of standardized outcomes, one of the potential dangers of this approach is that it tends to approach student skills in an overly de-contextualized manner, as though these skills occur in a vacuum. Teachers looking to implement this approach need to be careful in how they define and present these “skills” to students. Representing reading as a “skill,” for instance, works well for producing a stable, standardized definition of student mastery, but it also often involves manufacturing an overly simplistic, singular account of what reading entails. Students for whom reading is simply a “skill” geared towards comprehension or basic thematic interpretation are often confused or even irritated when instructors propose “resistant” readings, when they read for meanings other than ones that can be designated as the “main point” or “morale” of the literary text, or when the readings employed seem to focus on specific issues in the text (gender, for example) to the exclusion of others. Even skill-based imperatives to “read for different purposes” (information retention, interpretation, etc) don’t challenge the assumptions about the reading process that students bring with them into the college classroom. Students for whom the goal of reading is to *understand* what the text is communicating can be understandably perplexed when the instructor’s aim is to critique, historicize or deconstruct the text and its logics. Critical readings such as these are routinely mobilized across a number of disciplines in the university; in most cases, the instructor is mobilizing a methodology that is developed through an academic understanding of language, social power, and reading as culturally-embedded practice. In modeling the reading methodologies that pertain to their fields of research and analysis, therefore, instructors often find themselves in conflict with assumptions about the work of reading that were assimilated by students as a part of their understanding of reading as a “skill.” There is a subtle difference, therefore, between an approach to reading as a “skill” and reading as a “methodology.” Whereas the former tends to simplify the concept of reading in order to cultivate a singular definition of student mastery, the latter requires a critical engagement with the concept of reading itself and tends to complicate (rather than unify) our understanding of how meaning and representation operate as social logics and what the actual aims of reading can and should be. At the university, reading is a diverse and intellectually-dense practice, and skills-based approaches to reading in both secondary school and college can potentially leave students unprepared for this reality.

From our perspective, any articulation of widely-applicable student skills must be accompanied by the disclaimer that these skills are inextricably framed within specific contexts. We can, for instance, suggest, very rightly, that college writing is categorically argumentative and analysis-based, and we can construct a series of student goals and assignments designed to prepare students to make arguments in their writing. At the same time, however, we must somehow prepare students for the contextual reality of academic writing at the university, where “what counts” as an argument and what types of analysis are considered valid can vary radically in different disciplinary and topical contexts. Similarly, reading is clearly an essential skill for students – understanding and engaging texts is a basic requirement in classes across the humanities and social sciences. But the cultivation of reading skills needs to also be augmented with the understanding that reading is an academic methodology and, as such, there are a number of different, conflicting “ways of reading” that are built to perform certain analytic tasks and which vary greatly depending on the type of inquiry one is invested in.

Reflection: Towards a “Practice-Based” Approach

What does acceleration in the humanities, and English, in particular, entail? What needs to be “accelerated” and why? Surveying these approaches has given us a preliminary sense of the advantages and disadvantages of these acceleration strategies. In the one hand, content-based approaches can be used to give students useful tools for encountering new texts (terminologies, an understanding of devices and rhetorical forms). On the other, a skills-based approach can and should emphasize reading and writing skills that transcend the English classroom and prepare students more generally for their work across the humanities and social sciences. But both approaches risk over-simplifying (or even eliding) the way that reading and writing actually operate in scholarly situations. The problem, in this sense, is not in deciding what specific content areas are most important, or how to break down the foundational components of writing as a “skill.” Rather, the problem is how to teach both content and foundational skills in reading and writing in such a way as to foreground the actual diversity in how these skills are used and how this content is produced. What can and should be “accelerated” is an understanding of what it means to read and write in the name of scholarly knowledge production across a wide range of disciplinary sites.

The answer, at the Robinson Center, is a **“practice-based” approach** which seeks to equip students with an understanding of the types of scholarship and critical thinking that occur at the university. By making the context of the university itself a part of the *content* of the course, students will be better equipped to not only learn the necessary *skills*, but understand how to apply these skills successfully across the multiple contexts of the university. Our contention is that an English class is, in many ways, an ideal place to both cultivate college-level reading and writing skills, while *also* introducing students to the disciplinary, inquiry-based context of the university more generally. English is, after all, one of the main disciplinary sites where reading and writing are not just practiced, but studied and analyzed as objects of inquiry in and of themselves. Academic perspectives on rhetoric, genre, and writerly process can be turned inward to prompt an analytic understanding of the university classroom itself as a rhetorical situation with its own generic conventions and approved discourses. And it is the interdisciplinary reach of literary theory itself which has helped to equip diverse fields like anthropology and film studies with the specific reading practices that they often mobilize within their own fields. Constructing an accelerated English curriculum in this way requires us to stage English itself as a specific form of scholarship – one of *many* ways of drawing conclusions about the world in an academic sense. But it also turns to concepts developed within an English/humanities frame to give students much needed perspective on the university as a whole.

II. Defining “College-Ready” (From a Humanities Perspective)

The University as a Learning Context

The Robinson Center’s one-year Transition School program is intended to prepare students for early entrance into the University of Washington, and this specific context powerfully inflects both the way that “acceleration” is defined in our curricula and how we envision student outcomes. Because of this, having a clear sense of what constitutes “college-readiness” (indeed, what defines “the university” as a specific learning-situation) is an essential starting place for constructing an effective Transition School course-plan. As you will see, we have tried to take careful consideration of the kinds of challenges that face students moving into a college context. The definition of “the university” that we have outlined here challenges many of the conventional ways of envisioning “college-level” reading and writing skills, and adds considerable nuance to our definition of what constitutes a “college-ready” student.

There are, of course, as many different ways of defining “college-readiness” as there are paths through the college experience – perhaps the most important thing to remember about the university is its size and intellectual/cultural diversity. Even in the much more limited context of the humanities, defining a specific criteria for determining “college-readiness” is slippery work at best. Additionally, our goal is not only to define what makes a “college-ready” humanities student, but to consider how the humanities might be used to prepare students to be “college-ready” in a larger sense. So rather than focusing exclusively on a skills-based definition of college-readiness – centered on reading, writing, and “critical thinking” – we have tried to consider the university as a specific kind of context for student learning. If the goal is to produce a usable definition of “college-readiness” then the first question is, what does it mean to read, write, and think at the university? Contextualizing student skills in this way can help us to develop a clear set of outcomes for assessing “college-readiness” in our Transition School students.

College is...

1. Disciplinary –

The fact that universities are divided into departments, where specialists in a given field conduct research and teach in a particular domain of knowledge, is common knowledge. But the ramifications of this organizational structure, specifically in terms of student preparation and success, are not often considered or confronted directly. A longitudinal study initiated by Dr. Catherine Beyer and Dr. Joan Graham in the early 90s, and culminating in a 2003 report sponsored by the UW Office of Educational Assessment, found that first-year college students were often confused by the kinds of writing required in their classes, and that this confusion was due to a lack of understanding of the disciplinary nature of college work. They found that new students were often intimidated by the diversity of intellectual tasks and formal structures they were asked to perform. And whereas the lion-share of their secondary school writing experience was in writing about literature, many found that the “rules” which pertained to this type of academic writing (and which had reliably defined “good writing” in their educational past) were suddenly not applicable to writing in their philosophy or sociology classes. Students reported

difficulty in assuming the specifically disciplinary perspectives required in writing for different courses (“think like a historian,” “write like a sociologist”) and were often confused by the fact that standards for what constituted “successful” written work seemed to change in every class. While many attributed this diversity to instructor idiosyncrasy (“I just need to figure out what my professor *wants* me to write”), what these students were actually encountering was the diversity of knowledge production and scholarly convention that is a result of the university’s disciplinary structure.

While the OEA report assesses non-accelerated freshmen students who enter college in a conventional manner, its insights into the challenges of university level writing and thinking have ramifications for how we understand the “skills” that are necessary for our students to transition into university level work. Working (writing, reading) in a disciplinary setting requires students to be savvy in ways that are not often taught; instructors are often, themselves, insensible to the subtle ways that their priorities and criteria are inflected by their specific disciplinary training. What constitutes common-sense and accepted knowledge on a given topic? What are the approved modes of analysis? What kinds of theses or arguments are considered valid? The answers to all of these important questions are largely determined by the conventions and methodologies which pertain to specific disciplinary contexts. Thus, being a successful college writer is not simply about having an always-reliable understanding of “what makes a good academic essay”; students need to be able to assess the context of their writing and craft it to engage a number of very different disciplinary conversations. These conventions are often still unspoken factors even in courses that describe themselves as “interdisciplinary” (indeed the actual practice of interdisciplinarity requires an understanding of these differences in method and disciplinary assumptions). Reading is also a diverse practice from this context; students may (for instance) be asked to read a text by John Stuart Mill, but the *way* they will be asked to read it will differ dramatically depending on if it is assigned in a History class on liberalist thought, a Philosophy class on utilitarian ethics, or an English class on nineteenth-century literature. In this sense, part of preparing students to do exceptional work at the university involves introducing them to the disciplinary context of their work and giving them the tools to recognize and adapt to multiple academic audiences and practices.

2. Inquiry-Based

Envisioning the university as a site of academic inquiry is a useful way of defining what is similar about the types of work that is done across the sciences and humanities. Lab researchers, philosophers, social scientists, literary analysts – all of these types of scholars do their work by generating questions and lines of inquiry that are approved in their particular disciplinary contexts. The knowledge that is produced is argumentative in nature, supported by analysis of evidence (both, again, defined in disciplinary-specific ways) and in conversation with the academic work that has preceded it, often as a critique of established ideas or arguments. While there is obviously a distinction between the kinds of work that university professors are doing in their own research and the kinds of work they expect from students in a classroom setting, the inquiry-based approach to knowledge production is one of the things that subtly defines what professors “want” from their students and how they expect them to think about the material that is presented in a given course.

In a specifically humanities context, this means that argument-based reading, writing, and thinking is the order of the day. Courses are often designed to challenge conventional assumptions about history or society, and to introduce students to an academic conversation where a number of conflicting perspectives and approaches all attempt to contribute to a common understanding. Texts are presented in the context of these larger disciplinary questions or conversations, and students are often expected to assume argumentative positions about how the text adds to, refines, or complicates established positions or arguments. The OEA report suggests that this is another aspect of college-level writing which is neglected in standard accounts of college-ready writing and thinking. For instance, students familiar with research as a straightforward act of surveying knowledge in a particular topic were confused when a research assignment required them to critically assess or compare their sources in terms of methodology, to account for their different conclusions, or to engage their research in terms of unanswered questions or assumptions within the body of scholarship. Even in the specific context of the conventional literary analysis paper, college students are usually expected to construct critical readings, often as a way of challenging (explicitly or implicitly) other possible readings and ways of thinking about the text, rather than gearing their commentary towards the more obvious and incontrovertible “central meaning” of the text. While many uninitiated students experience this as another version of the “figure out what the teacher *wants* me to say” imperative, these types of assignments are intended to engage students in the process of academic inquiry, which entails both a critical relationship to past knowledge and the ability to “break new ground” with new questions and paths of inquiry. Needless to say, these conventions of college-level work require students to think differently about the *purpose* of their reading and writing, and to conceptualize knowledge itself as a field of disciplinary conversation that they can become a part of for themselves.

3. Pedagogically Varied –

Today’s college classroom is probably more variable in its structure and setting than it ever has been. College students can expect to encounter a variety of different types of class in their undergraduate years: lecture, discussion-based, project-based, work-experience, lab-based, workshop. In these contexts, students will be expected to excel at a number of different styles of learning and a number of different types or scales of assignment, everything from on-the-spot discussion questions to quarter-long independent projects, oriented around research, design, or methodologically oriented tasks. Each of these classrooms will make use of a different model of assessment, from test scores arrayed on a curve to participation/collaboration models that weight student success heavily on less tangible skills and practices. College instructors typically develop the format of their classrooms in consideration of their specific goals for academic content or skill acquisition; specific student learning styles and preferences are often not something they are trained to think about or prioritize in their curriculum development. In this sense, pedagogical expectations for student performance and “social” skills are another factor that subtly shapes how student success is defined.

For instance, many of the humanities classes that students will encounter in their first years at the university will mix instructor lecture with a heavy emphasis on class discussion and student-led inquiry. Others will be built as project-based courses, linearly structured around a series of open-ended, collaborative tasks, where a large part of the assessment (explicitly and implicitly)

will be organizational and social in nature. Assignments can range from short weekly reading responses to quarter-long essay assignments, and will often include student presentations or student-led discussions as graded components of the class. Seminar-style student discussion itself is a skill which can and should be developed. Most students know how to raise their hands in answer to a direct question from the teacher. But college-level seminar situations will often require more various and complex student engagement as a part of the day-to-day activities of the class – students may be asked to define the questions that will motivate the discussion, locate “starting places” for a particular conversation, and, in all cases, they will be expected to attentively engage their peers’ insights alongside their instructor’s contributions. Many students are socialized to the idea that only the teacher’s words are worth paying attention to in a classroom setting, and the act of engaging or even taking notes on such a multi-vocal conversation can be a difficult task for the uninitiated. A truly successful student, in this context, will know how to make the most of the discussion format as a learning environment and as a stage for the development of their own ideas. Alongside the ability to master content, in other words, students need to be able to achieve and express that mastery in a variety of different ways, depending on the specific classroom situation. Scholarly practices like note-taking, annotating texts, and various study strategies need to be cultivated and adopted to work in a variety of pedagogical contexts.

4. Institutionally Diverse

Being a successful college student requires more than simply the ability to master content and earn “A”s in various classroom contexts. College students entering the University of Washington are faced with a large, multi-faced institution which they must navigate as a part of their undergraduate journey. The Robinson Center’s in-house counseling unit is specifically designed to provide early-entrance college students with structure and support as they move into the university and begin to fit themselves into its various institutional contexts. The RCs counselors are well equipped to attend to the specific challenges that face accelerated students, including “high-school deficiencies” requirements, issues with enrollment, financial aid, and applying to majors. They also help students to locate various opportunities on campus (internships, RA fellowships, contests, student organizations) which are scattered across the university’s diverse institutional context. The institutional, bureaucratic nature of the modern university is not only a matter for counselors, however; at the classroom level, this institutional context inflects the expectations of professors and instructors for how their students will conduct themselves, expectations that need to be considered in our definition of “college-ready.” By this, I mean that students in a college classroom are implicitly regarded as “adults,” in the sense that they are expected to independently manage their own educational experience in a variety of ways. Even accelerated students who are intellectually prepared to learn difficult material can be uncertain about how to negotiate the institutional and social context of the university. If our goal is to prepare students to make the most of their university experience (and not simply to survive the difficult material of their college classes) then an emphasis on independent engagement and mature, self-motivated initiative is essential.

Preparing students for the institutional mandates of the university means equipping them with the habits of mind and the practical skills that characterize mature, self-motivated, professional learners. On the one hand, students need to be prepared to struggle; they need to be self-

assessors of their own performance, capable of reaching out appropriately to instructors and TAs alike with an understanding of their own difficulties. Instructors will keep a limited amount of office hours, but it is up to the individual student to identify their struggle and seek out these opportunities for support – formal email etiquette and personal organization regarding appointments are both necessary “skills” in this context. Moreover, the concept of “struggle” itself needs to be revised. For students who have felt unchallenged by conventional educational models – students for whom school has always come “easy” – struggle is often experienced as a kind of failure and to ask for help is to admit one’s own inadequacies. But in an inquiry-based research situation, trial-and-error, revision, rethinking, and continual critical assessment of one’s own work is a necessary part of academic knowledge production. The university is built to support exactly this kind of recursive process, but students need to learn how to understand their own intellectual struggles in this context and seek out the appropriate forms of support. Moreover, accelerated students who have never experienced academic failure, at any scale, need to be prepared to encounter these struggles as a necessary and even desirable part of their academic journey, as opposed to evidence of their own personal inadequacy or as a fatal blow to their sense of self-worth.

In a larger sense, students should be capable of advocating for themselves and seeking out their own “college experience” amid the multiple options afforded by the university. Campus life offers a truly staggering array of opportunities (student research, study abroad, organizations or interest groups, work experience) and equally diverse forms of support (tutorials, writing centers, mentor relationships). It includes not only classes, but lecture series, conferences, symposia, and other opportunities to engage the intellectual and social work of the university. But none of these will seek out the student; rather it is up to the student to seek out these opportunities according to their own ambitions and struggles.

Reflections: The Humanities as an Entry Point into Scholarly Context

What do we gain by imagining the university in this way? Part of what this characterization suggests is that the university context, in its structure and institutional conventions, requires students to think differently about the work they do and how they do it. This implies a need for a different type of meta-awareness which can be modeled and taught in a humanities context. In many ways, English is an ideal disciplinary location in which to introduce students to concepts like academic conversation and convention, argument-based inquiry, and critical methodology. Problems of communication and interpretation are at the heart of these issues, and by teaching students how to conduct scholarly inquiry in the humanities, we can simultaneously teach them how to perceive their work in a university context. This **contextual meta-reflection** can be cultivated by involving students in conversation and activities regarding the actual labor and process of scholarship. In many cases, this involves teaching a rhetorical perspective on the university as a kind of “discourse community” with its own internal “rules” regarding how communication occurs and what forms it takes. It can be staged equally through critical examinations of historiography or reflections on writing process, both of which are conversations about how academic ideas are produced. The idea is that the more a student is capable of imagining the university in this way, the more capable they will be to understand and adapt to the diverse learning contexts and expectations that they will find there.

Another thing to reflect upon here is the importance of less tangible “skills” that will prepare students to take full advantage of their college experience. Beyond the ability to read and write in a disciplinary, inquiry-based context, “college-ready” students need the confidence and wherewithal to engage the university as a particular type of institution and social environment. This is *not* to say that our goal is to socialize our young students as “adults” ahead of their years or that they need to act and think like 21 year-olds prior to being considered “college-ready”. But they do need to understand and be ready to meet the expectations that they will be beholden to in situations from classroom discussions to registration processes. One of our central arguments here is that, in a college context, educational strategies and opportunities will not be designed to meet the student; rather, the student must be equipped to meet them. In this sense, **scholarly skills** like personal organization, professional standards of correspondence and communication, individual initiative, and time-management must be explicitly taught and implicitly modeled as a part of a college-prep curriculum.

III. TS English Curriculum Development & Design

“Practice-Based” Goals

Having thought through both the various available acceleration models and the context of college-level work, we can now turn to formulating curriculum goals for our “practice-based” approach to humanities at the Robinson Center. Simply put, this approach seeks to contextualize a “skills-based” approach by giving students a sense of how scholars utilize reading and writing to produce their own disciplinary forms of knowledge. By envisioning the class as an introduction to scholarly practice, we can start to identify the key terms and concepts for our own curriculum development. What are the essential terms of a “practice-based” acceleration in a humanities context? What would we define as the clear (and practical!) goals for such a class, keeping a clear eye on the actual complexities of the college context which they must inevitably be subject to?

Reading: At the university, reading is a diverse, informed practice. Analysis of literary texts occurs at multiple disciplinary sites of the university, and for entirely different purposes and within different conventions of reading. Historians read literary texts as a window into the time period while philosophers read them as exemplifying ethical or philosophical problems. Scholars within disciplines like Anthropology, Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, and Environmental Studies, use a variety of reading strategies to address issues of social structure, power, oppression, and identity through literary and cultural production. TS English, therefore, seeks to introduce students to **reading as a methodology**, in a way that will prepare them to encounter and engage the diversity of reading practices at the university.

Writing: Research has suggested that college-level writing is increasingly beholden to the disciplinary, inquiry-based structure of the university, and that students must learn to recognize the nuances of their specific academic contexts in order to produce “successful” writing. But the obverse is also true – a course on essay writing is an excellent place to introduce students to the conventions and “rules” of academic discourse. Part of the process of teaching students how to produce academic “arguments,” for instance, involves teaching them how to argue with or against the forms of knowledge that have come before in a way that is persuasive to the intended audience. This kind of “accelerated” writing course, geared to prepare students for college-level work, emphasizes **argumentative, analysis-driven composition** while simultaneously teaching students to locate themselves, both analytically and **rhetorically**, within specific **academic conversations**. In a more general sense, our goal is to encourage students to see their writing itself as a practice of inquiry (as opposed to the simple product of thinking and reasoning that occurs elsewhere), where **substantial revision** for both content and form are an essential part of the process, and not evidence of failure.

Academic Inquiry: Like both reading and writing, the questions and problems that motivate academic work at the university are framed by prior knowledge and pursued in terms of disciplinarily specific methods and means. Students who are unaware of this element of scholarly practice are ill-equipped to understand the origins of the ideas that they encounter in their classes and engage the process of scholarship in their own work. An inquiry-based

curriculum must introduce students to the deceptively complex process of **asking questions in a disciplinary frame**, where *how* and *why* one approaches particular topics in the humanities is shaped by various specialized ways of thinking. And it should seek to familiarize students with the ways that academics construct their own **lines of inquiry**, considering issues of **archive/evidence and methodology**, and defining the parameters of their research and analysis to suit their questions and goals. The idea here is not to make students expert researchers across the disciplines – this would be impossible to achieve in a one-year class. Rather, students should be prepared to understand **how academic ideas are produced**, as opposed to simply encountering the ideas themselves in an intellectual vacuum.

Scholarly Skills: Students need to be capable of advocating for themselves and maneuvering effectively within the social, institutional conventions of the university. On the one hand, students need **flexible survival strategies** and habits of mind that will help them to be successful in a variety of different learning environments. In a humanities context, these strategies include note-taking, annotating texts, time-management for long and short-term assignments, and some rudimentary research methods. Students also need to be prepared to engage course material in a variety of different ways, from open-forum discussion to collaborative group work. In addition, they must be capable of making use of the resources available to them. In this sense, more intangible “skills” and competencies regarding interpersonal **communication and organization** are a necessary part of the Transition School preparatory year.

With these goals, we would like to think that the Robinson Center lives up to its name, training, not just technically competent students, but *young scholars* who are equipped to make the most of their college-experience. In practice, the aim is to use humanities content and skills as a means of immersing students in the habits of mind and basic practices that facilitate academic success.

IV. Academic Writing: Standards and Situation

Writing as an Introduction to Academic Discourse

My own opinions and experience teaching college writing were heavily shaped by my time with the UW's Expository Writing Program, and many of the strategies I employ are developed directly out of their first-year writing program. One of the things I learned in my time at the EWP is that a class on "college-level" writing can be (and, in fact, must be) a class on academic discourse in general. Thus, an introduction to college writing is the first step in my "practice-based" accelerated curriculum.

In a certain way of thinking, this could be considered counterintuitive. Writing is the last step – the thing that one does to *prove* one's proficiency in a subject area. It's the thing you turn in when you're done. In this way of thinking, writing is a product of work which is really taking place elsewhere – in the classroom, in the student's thoughts, in the act of reading. Why start with writing? What will they write *about*?

But, as many others have argued, we believe that writing is an essential way of thinking, organizing, and creating. Ideas don't produce writing; writing produces ideas. Writing is where a lot of the thinking actually happens. After all, the primary genre of academic writing (and even science work, if you are generous in your characterization) is **argumentative** – in their writing, academics examine evidence in through a variety of different authorized methods and come to conclusions, pose theories, and generate explanations that are always up for revision. In this sense, talking about writing is a great way of talking about how the university is organized, how academics do their work in general, and according to what rules and conventions. And by giving students a language in which to discuss academic writing, you are simultaneously giving them the tools to respectfully approach the ideas of others and to understand how they have done their own work. So when I start TS English with a quarter devoted to academic writing, I intend it as an introduction to the rhetorical, inquiry-based, disciplinarily-organized "situation" that is the university.

"College Writing" Vs. "College Writers": Setting Accelerated Goals

Looking back at our earlier attempts to define the college-situation, you might be tempted to suggest that teaching students to write at a "college-level" is impossible in a quarter-long/year-long course. Research has suggested that "successful" college writing is often defined in terms of disciplinary standards. Appropriate "common sense," evidence, analytic methods, arguments – even what counts as "critical thinking" – are all standardized in the context of disciplines and interdisciplinary configurations that students must adapt to as a part of each new learning situation. What does it mean to teach students how to write "successfully" for a college class, when these standards will compose a constantly shifting ground? And which of us has the time or experience to instruct students in all of different disciplinary conventions they may be held accountable to in their college experience?

Of course, first-year student writers *are* often successful in this context, and no student enters into college with a pre-formed understanding of how anthropology or environmental science operate through a series of distinct conventions and rules. Our goal, therefore, is to train a particular type of writer who is prepared to both recognize and adapt to a number of different writing situations. **Situational awareness**, within an academic frame, is at the top of our agenda for this writing curriculum, and our course’s emphasis on academic “**conversation**” conventions and **rhetorical sensitivity** reflect this emphasis.

This meta-cognitive approach might seem at odds with an emphasis on “standards” in academic writing, but I maintain that the basic elements of academic discourse across the disciplines can be distilled into that language of **argumentation**. At its base, all academic writing presents evidence and explains an analysis of that evidence in the name of making a persuasive claim to an academic audience. But, as I suggested elsewhere, one must be careful in presenting these “standards” in an overly stabilized way so as not to give students the wrong impression about what are actually diverse academic practices. Depending on the context, “evidence” will range from personal anecdote to statistical data, and “analysis” will vary greatly depending on the questions and foundational assumptions of the discipline in question. The solution, in our curriculum, is to present these “standards” as questions that students must train themselves to ask in any given writing situation. Rather than simply assessing students according to these standards, students must learn to assess their own work according to these questions – where every act of analysis must be assessed first according to the question “what *is* analysis in this situation?” Even this is a tall order, and the real goal of this “practice-based” curriculum is to encourage these habits of mind and to teach them as a practical part of how college writers do their work.

With these things in mind, here are the student-writing goals for my fall course:

- **CONTEXT:** To make appropriate writing choices based upon a critical understanding of audience, voice, genre, and rhetorical situation.
- **ARGUMENT:** To produce complex and persuasive claims that matter in an academic context.
- **ANALYSIS:** To build and support your argument through a purposeful analysis of evidence and assumptions.
- **CONVERSATION:** To use research and analysis to situate your argument in relation to a larger academic conversation.
- **ORGANIZATION:** To organize your analysis logically using a strategic line of inquiry and effective transitions.
- **REVISION:** To develop strategies for identifying substantial issues in your writing and revising in order to strengthen the overall argument.

As just explained, students must learn how to see their own work in these terms (not simply produce work that meets these standards). To this end, the actual curriculum which accompanies these goals must be geared to emphasize these terms as situational and mobile – students need to learn to *use* them as a way of thinking about academic writing in general, their own writing and the writing of others.

Strategies for Teaching Situated Writing

1. **Portfolio:** Portfolio-based instruction is one of the strategies that I have adopted from the EWP's first-year writing curriculum. The portfolio itself is composed of several short 2-3 page assignments which strategically build the skills needed to accomplish a much longer 5-7 page argument paper. This pattern is repeated twice, and instructor comments (without formal grading) and peer workshops are designed to give students feedback on how successfully they have performed the particular writing tasks of each assignment. At the end, students choose approximately half of this work to revise (sometimes for the 3rd or 4th time) and submit for formal evaluation, along with a cover-letter explaining how their work in the final portfolio meets the "standards" of college writing laid out in the course goals. This structure encourages the desired habits of mind regarding academic writing and thinking in a number of ways. By designing assignments to target different "skills" (staging quote analysis, constructing claims, incorporating secondary sources) in the context of a particular topic, the portfolio stages the process of academic inquiry, where all arguments must be considered from multiple angles. And by withholding formal evaluation until several layers of revision and assessment (from numerous sources) have been processed, the portfolio stages academic writing as a recursive process of rethinking and rewriting in the name of strengthening academic ideas.

Most importantly, the portfolio (and, particularly, the cover letter that frames the final work) requires students to adopt the meta-cognitive, situational perspective on writing that we believe is essential to successful college composition. In describing their final drafts for the cover-letter, students justify their revisions in terms of how it strengthens the argument or ideas contained within (emphasizing the recursive nature of academic writing). And they must learn to think about their writing in situational terms, explaining, rhetorically and structurally, how their work is built towards the specific assumptions and requirements of literary criticism, and how it engages that specific "conversation" in its argument. In this sense, the final portfolio cover-letter can be approached as a "test" of sorts, where the student's ability to assume this meta-cognitive perspective is a part of how their "college-readiness" is evaluated at the end of the course.

2. **Workshops:** Many students (especially "accelerated" students) have a tendency to become disgruntled and/or resistant in group work situations. They often come to the table suspicious of the idea that their peers can offer any meaningful criticism or advice. But this attitude is particularly a problem in a classroom where one of the main objectives is to learn how to *think differently* about writing and how it works (or doesn't). In these situations, both participants in the workshop are learning how to make use of these terms and ideas about writing (the writing of others and, importantly, their own). The hope is that these workshops also give young writers strategies that they can use on their own, with their own writing, and many "defamiliarizing" workshops are designed after strategies that writers use on themselves, like reverse outlines.

Too many writing workshops are designed too loosely, ultimately cumulating in sessions where students tell each other "what they thought" about the writing in question – whether it was "good or bad" and whether they "liked it" or not. In my experience, workshops are more productive the more the activities themselves are designed to "defamiliarize" the writing – the more they isolate certain features, organize the content

in certain ways, or break up the text in a way that allows the reviewer to see alternative paths. By designing rubrics based on the course goals, and by designing activities designed to allow students to see their writing in a different way, you avoid these less than desirable workshop situations. Student reviewers deliver “findings” based on the activity, rather than opinions about its overall quality.

3. **Using a Writing Vocabulary:** Establishing a shared vocabulary for assessing the basic components of an academic argument is one of the most important elements of fall quarter. In the first quarter, students are explicitly schooled in terms like analysis, evidence, conversation, organization, line of inquiry, and claim as the “standards” for what constitutes a persuasive, academic argument. This vocabulary is essential if students are to understand my feedback on their work, assess each other effectively in peer review situations, and, ultimately, if they are to stage their own work for evaluation in the portfolio cover-letter. These “standards” are meant to describe the basic components of academic writing – the basic elements which all academic writers use in their work, in increasingly sophisticated ways. And they should continue to apply, even in the most advanced situations. The course goals, for instance, are phrased in such a way that they remain applicable even as the student moves beyond the “novice” stage.

In this sense, this vocabulary offers teaching opportunities beyond the writing workshop. Throughout the whole year, I return to these terms in order to prompt student engagement in course readings. Especially in the final quarter, as students are working on a much longer research paper, we look at essays from literature scholars not only in terms of their analytic insights or historical arguments (content), but also in terms of the strategies that the scholar has used to organize their ideas, the ways they have staged their evidence and analysis, etc. By keeping this vocabulary in play throughout the whole quarter, I try to cultivate an ongoing conversation about the many different strategies that are available to academic writers.

V. College Reading: From Skill to Methodology

The Problematic Transition to College Reading

Reading is another area where students, making the transition from secondary school contexts to college, often experience something of a disconnect. Though their experiences vary, many have assimilated, often unconsciously, some definition of the “correct” way of reading, especially as it pertains to fictional texts. For instance, students familiar with a “literary appreciation” model of discussing texts will sometimes express disappointment or full-on resistance to a curriculum whose mission is to historicize literature, critique its investment in certain discourses of identity or social order, or deconstruct its underlying logics. For these students, engaging in the academic work of interrogating the text through intellectually valid modes of analysis is the equivalent of “ruining” the text. In other cases, students experience these forms of reading as the imposition of a subjective perspective on a more universal meaning – forms of reading that look to emphasize issues of gender or class, for instance, simply have “an axe to grind” and can be easily dismissed as the instructor (or the discipline as a whole) applying a foreign agenda to a fundamentally innocent text. Whatever their origin, assumptions about the nature of reading gear students to reject or misunderstand analytic methods and recourse to what they consider to be (overtly or implicitly) a more “authentic” way of reading.

But within this “authentic” reading practice, uncritical “common-sense” understandings of interpretation, written communication, and language are prevalent and unchallenged by conventional secondary school education. If a text, for instance, has multiple interpretations, it’s only because “people can read into anything,” a position that either proves the need for a more authoritative single meaning or invalidates reading as an intellectual practice altogether. At the same time, the “true” meaning of the text is hard to locate, and often involves erecting some version of “what the author meant to communicate” or centering the reading on “the text itself” as the origin of meaning (which does not solve the problem). Some kinds of texts are said to have large “universal” meanings while others communicate, unproblematically, the experiences of particular groups or types of people, but there is little or no critical engagement with the assumptions that undergird this distinction. While students can often be prompted to recognize these contradictions and inconsistencies, they are mostly unprepared to confront them in an academic manner and to replace their “common-sense” reading model with something more coherent. What does it mean that a given text presents the opportunity for multiple interpretations? Does “meaning” originate in the intention of the author, the nature of the text, or the shared values of readers? Is this the best way to think about what it means to interpret something? How does textual communication actually *work*?

Whole disciplines and bodies of scholarship have emerged from these kinds of questions, and without understanding this, students are unprepared to inhabit the types of reading they will be asked to perform at the college-level. Moreover, they are unprepared to understand *why* one would need to read differently in different intellectual situations in the first place. Exacerbating this problem, many college instructors in the humanities and social sciences will fail to fully explain the intellectual underpinnings of their reading practices, preferring to base their instruction on the content-based insights of these analyses and neglecting a more thorough

explanation of the methods that got them there. Now, it should be said that most students at the undergraduate level find a wide-range of success *despite* the lack of methodological instruction, often by realizing, at some level, that the teacher “wants” a particular topic to be addressed in their treatment of the text. But these students miss out on much of the intellectual content of the course, mistaking academic method for instructor bias or idiosyncrasy. The disconnect I am attempting to describe here is between students who understand reading as a “common-sense,” naturalized operation of interpretation/comprehension and scholars who critically consider and inhabit various reading methodologies as a part of their intellectual inquiry.

How to resolve this disconnect? From the perspective of my “practice-based” approach, preparing students for the context of college-level reading entails augmenting a “skills-based” approach – where the academic practices of critical reading are introduced as a series of repeatable operations – with a critical engagement with the assumptions about “authentic” reading that discourage a full understanding of how and why these critical readings are necessary. Of course, asking students to fully understand advanced reading methodologies prior to entering college is an impractical and unnecessary goal; reading methods are something that students should *learn* from their college classes, and our goal should be to prepare them to do so. But if students are going to be prepared to encounter and engage the full range of potential reading practices that circulate in the scholarly community of the university then they need to understand that these reading practices emerge from scholarly inquiries into the nature of language, meaning, interpretation, and representation. Scholars that take up identity-based reading practices, for instance, aren’t so much imposing their own subjective biases on the text as much as attempting to reckon with the role of racial or gendered logics in *producing* the shared representational vocabulary that we all utilize when we read and write. They conceptualize texts as archives of historical, social values that must be shared between the reader and writer if the text is to have a communicable meaning, and the types of reading they perform are based on this underlying understanding. Cultivating this understanding can be thought of as the transition from thinking reading as an activity or “skill” to thinking of reading methodologies as a series of scholarly practices (each of which conceptualize the text in slightly different ways and treat it accordingly) and an academic conversation in its own right. As usual, an introductory course has little hope of actually exposing students to the sheer diversity of methods which operate simultaneously across the disciplinary sites of the university. But by introducing the problem of reading, moving past the contradictions of “authentic” interpretation, and surveying some of the basic issues that demand methodological approaches we can prepare students to understand that learning *how* to read is an essential part of their education and the research process in general.

Reading as a Scholarly Practice

In this section, I will try to break down my reading instruction by quarter, with the intent of outlining my scaffolding logic.

1. FALL: Engaged Reading (Reading for Writing)

By starting with writing instruction, my goal in the first quarter is simply for students to understand their reading in the context of a much larger process of academic inquiry and research. Reading for the sake of reading and interpretation that has, as its endpoint, a stable and irrefutable statement on the “moral lesson” or main point of the text are valid and valuable for many personal and public reading situations. But this is not how academics approach texts, nor is it how texts are approached in a most of the classroom and research contexts that college students will encounter. How do scholars treat texts? Starting with this question diverts us immediately away from “appreciation” and “comprehension” models of instruction and starts us down the road to more situated approach. The answer, necessarily generalist in nature, is that scholars treat texts as *objects of inquiry* – something to interrogate, analyze from all angles, and, eventually, use as evidence in arguments of their own. The text and its meanings are only *academically meaningful* in the context of larger lines of inquiry and forms of analysis which often have their own specific topics of interest, a situation that has less to do with individual bias as it does with particular academic questions.

The text as “evidence” is where TS English reading instruction starts, and reading is staged as a fundamentally analytic procedure. This works to introduce and situate some of the basic activities of academic composition (quoting, analyzing texts, citation), but it also serves as an opportunity to stage critical questions about how the type of evidence one uses affects the types of academic claims one can make. What types of arguments do people make using, say, a novel as evidence? What about a newspaper article from the nineteenth century? As it turns out, textual evidence lends itself to a number of different types of arguments, all of which are necessarily hedged in by a critical consideration of the nature of the evidence itself.

In the context of a writing course, engaged reading begins with simple practices like annotating and quote harvesting. And it opens with treating the text as a piece of evidence in a more general line of inquiry. In fall quarter, I supply the questions and students must “mine” our shared text (Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) for material that will support any answers that they would like to give. Quotes and plot details become “support” for argumentative positions on a variety of different topics. While this approach does not provide any explicit instruction on specific academic reading practices, it does introduce important academic practices and habits of mind. For one, it **stages an academic treatment of a text**, where different types of questions lead to different types of focus in the reading. In this context, students who are used to using their reading to construct overall interpretations of the text’s central meaning will quickly discover that academic questions sometimes require them to focus on specific and sometimes seemingly irrelevant elements within it. What they “observe” and ultimately analyze in the text is framed by the questions that they are asking. If their goal is to understand how gender identity works, then their reading is necessarily going to be drawn to particular characters, relationships, and scenes. Students also learn, implicitly, **that any one text can serve as evidence in a number of different lines of inquiry**, and that competing readings are not so much evidence of “bias” as much as they are the result of the diversity of academic questions.

2. WINTER: Methodological Reading (Reading as a Topic of Inquiry)

Winter quarter, reading is the primary concern; rather than simply building a class where reading is a “skill” to be assimilated in the lessons of the course, I have made an inquiry into reading and

interpretation itself the content of the course as well. Readings (largely from the British literary canon) are chosen because of how they animate different conceptions of reading and writing or how the strategies they adapt disrupt our own understandings of language. These readings are supplemented by academics who are expressly interested in questions of representation and literary theory, and the class discussion largely serves to highlight various issues within the politics of reading and the definition of language and meaning itself. Paper prompts no longer supply the animating questions of the essay the way they did in the fall. Rather, they require students to adopt and perform different types of reading practices, allowing students to see what it means when they have to submit their own interests and ideas to scholarly methodology.

Methodological concerns are a quintessential part of scholarly practice. When scholars in the biological sciences approach a particular type of organism as an object of analysis, they have many “tools” at their disposal and must make informed choices about how to proceed based on their own goals and questions. They might choose, for instance, to dissect the creature to understand its internal workings. Or they might study the creature in its natural ecosystem to better understand its behaviors. Or they might classify the creature within various categorical systems to cultivate theories about its relation to other species and its evolutionary character. Each of these different methods contains its own concerns and “rules” about how valid analysis is achieved (the ecological analyst, for instance, must take care to make sure that her very presence does not contaminate her observations about how the ecosystem operates). This anecdote is useful for outlining the basic questions for a methodological approach. What is the nature of the inquiry and what forms of analysis will help you to answer your specific questions? If your question is about how a certain creature eats, dissection will provide a picture of the mechanics of the digestive system while environmental understandings will generate an understanding of hunting/harvesting behaviors, as well as seasonal patterns. All disciplinary fields, from economics and mathematics to psychology and film studies, contain both a variety of different methodological approaches as well as an ongoing internal conversation about the pros and cons of these models.

The central course goal in the winter is to give students a series of flexible “tools” that they can use in the academic writing situations that they encounter at the university. In the plan of the course, students will be exposed to theoretical explanations of distinct reading methodologies (formalism, for instance, or a historical materialist approach to representation). My purpose here is not primarily to introduce students to a jargon or collection of “isms” but to introduce a conversation, within the disciplinary field and beyond, about the types of assumptions that we unknowingly mobilize in our conventional ways of reading and the specialized reading strategies that have been produced to work against these uncritical assumptions. This goal is explicit in everything from the choice of course texts (many of which were picked because they dramatize acts of reading and writing) to the nature of the writing assignments. Whereas in Fall quarter, writing assignments were built around prompts that designated a particular topic for argumentation, Winter quarter paper prompts are designed to allow students to designate any topic they desire *as long as they mobilize the correct reading strategy in pursuing it*. In this sense, this quarter’s assignments operate as a kind of reading “lab” – asking students to inhabit numerous different critical approaches over the course of the class. In some particularly rewarding cases, students will take up the same *topic* (gender, for instance) in several papers over the quarter and will be given an opportunity to discover how what they can say about the

topic changes depends on the *methodology* that they apply to it. Along the way, students will also accumulate a vocabulary for assessing literary texts and representational artifacts that will be useful in a number of different disciplinary sites where culture is an object of analysis.

3. SPRING: Critical Reading in Action (Reading as a Practice)

The final quarter of TS English serves primarily to reinforce a scholarly approach to critical reading in practice. By Spring, students are hopefully geared to make use of a number of discrete reading methodologies in our course discussions and writing assignments. The class itself is structured much more openly, allowing students to both continue to practice applying these methodologies to specific texts and to stage a situation where it is up to them to decide what methodology is most pertinent for the artifacts or critical questions at hand. In terms of reading practices then, Spring quarter is intended to present students with a series of literary texts for analytic consideration, putting the onus on them to define not only *what* can be said about it, but *how* we can say it. By Spring, in other words, reading method is an everyday scholarly consideration. Not only is it evident in the way we stage our own conversations on the literature and in the nature of the questions that we are asking, but it is a part of how we discuss the multiple academic sources which are also a part of the course reading in Spring. With a quarter of reading methodology instruction behind them, students can begin to understand and assess these scholarly arguments, not just in terms of what they are arguing, but why and how they are arguing it.

The results of the whole year's worth of critical reading instruction are probably best demonstrated in the Spring quarter research project. Over the course of a quarter, students work on developing a humanities research project from the ground up, developing questions, identifying archives, and locating established academic conversations in which to situate their own individual arguments. A part of the development phase of the project requires students to declare not only what their topics are and what kinds of texts they will be looking at, but *how* they will be looking at it and why. Drawing off of writing skills introduced in Fall quarter and an understanding of critical reading methods from Winter, the project requires students to put these lessons into practice to design their own, very individual lines of inquiry. In my experience, the results of this have been very rewarding. While most TS students will be able to work through these tasks to produce very successful analysis papers, some students who have been following these methodological conversations at a high level can be encouraged to incorporate methodological framing into their introductions to these long essays, taking time to not only describe *what* their papers are about, but to explain the reading strategy that they will be employing in their own analysis and, in some even more advanced cases, how their own reading strategy is different from other scholars and why. These types of writing operations are very sophisticated for students at this level, and it is only by incorporating an explicit, year long conversation on reading as a methodology that they are able to envision the work of scholarship in this way.

VI. Staging Inquiry: Using Questions in an Academic Context

The Work of Producing Questions

In the name of staging **academic inquiry**, every TS English class is built around a series of open-ended academic questions. In my courses, I make extensive use of these questions from beginning to end, in everything from assignment designs to daily discussion topics. The goal is to introduce students to **the process of scholarship**, from learning how to ask academic questions to formulating their own lines of inquiry. Course questions are an essential part of how I emphasize this aspect of student learning, making every course into its own model of engaged critical inquiry. As you will see, these questions play several roles in my curriculum:

1. Writing Topics Vs. Sustained Inquiry

While the goals of the fall quarter course may be to introduce students to the standards and strategies of academic writing, its questions are designed to give students something to write *about*. But these questions should do more than designate a topic for the class. I have chosen to gear my fall course towards questions of representation in “monster culture” (a topic that, hopefully, students will find engaging as well as intellectually stimulating); the class begins by taking Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* as a shared object of inquiry and then allows students to choose further the investigation with their own examples from literature, film or popular culture. Since this is their first quarter, I try to make the questions as accessible and open-ended as possible, while still highlighting key issues (like “categorization” and history). One of the opening discussion activities of the class (a basic analysis of cultural images) is designed to introduce these questions by inviting students to think about modern representations of monsters as a distinct cultural phenomenon with a long and varied history.

The questions include:

- *How or why does something get imagined and categorized as a monster?*
- *What makes something “monstrous”?*
- *How does the definition of a monster change over time and why does this matter?*
- *Why do we have so many monsters?*

The same activity encourages students to cultivate multiple answers to these questions and critically evaluate them. For instance, I invite students to reflect upon a conventional answer to these questions: monsters are prevalent because they are merely a form of popular escapism and are therefore not worthy of serious consideration. In the course of the discussion, students are prompted to use various examples to problematize this potential answer (primarily by noting how various representations of monsters are intimately connected to historical and political contexts) and to propose alternative answers of their own. By giving students the means to leverage specific examples against an overly-simplistic answer, the activity stages, in the earliest moments of the class, an analysis-driven critical inquiry. Answering these questions will not be a simple yes/no operation; beyond simply designating a topic for their writing, questions pertaining to “monster culture” offer numerous opportunities to stage the processes of academic inquiry over the course of the writing curriculum. The larger lesson, one that I emphasize in all of my courses, is that this type of inquiry requires a sustained, critical evaluation of both new evidence and available solutions, a continual recursive questioning that drives scholarship forward.

2. Situating Writing and Research

In staging academic inquiry, these questions also serve as an entry point into an “**academic conversation**” which students must learn to engage in their writing. This concept is introduced in the fall, integrated into a curriculum on the conventions and practices of academic writing. Academic work is defined, in many ways, by how it places itself into conversation with the ideas that have come before it, and the conventions of “successful” college writing relate to a student’s ability to construct these “conversations” in their writing. Research, too, is a practice which is usefully staged as a process of locating and engaging “conversations” taking place in the larger body of scholarship. Even the idea of “argumentative” writing (the standard genre of academic writing across the disciplines) implies that there are other positions to “argue” against or with, and that the writing is directly addressed to others who occupy a series of already established positions. In the fall, students find that the same questions which motivate their own thinking are taken up by other scholars who are interested in our literary texts; they quickly learn that they are not the only ones who have attempted to answer these questions and that there is an already established field of debate and argument on these very topics. In this way, the course questions are designed to integrate students into a *shared* academic line of thought, and part of their goal (in writing and thinking) is to become a part of this conversation. In this sense, academic writing and the discrete skills associated with it (incorporating quotes, analysis of texts) become a way of engaging in a larger conversation and line of inquiry.

3. Unsettling Reading Practices:

In the Winter quarter, the course questions outline a what would seem to be a pretty grandiose line of inquiry.

- *How do language and literature make “meaning”?*
- *How do we as readers and scholars interpret it?*

These questions have the advantage of taking students by surprise. Not that our goal is to frustrate or frighten students; rather, these questions have never been considered outside the realm of “common sense” – texts mean what they mean, either because of what the author was trying to communicate in them or because of the way they are written. Simply by asking these questions, **students can begin to encounter contradictions and fallacies in their “common sense” way of thinking** about what it means to read (like the problem of authorial intent or the social character of language) and are invited to turn their sustained critical inquiry towards a field of inquiry which they never knew existed. In a more skill-based sense, my goal is to give students practice at adopting critical reading practices in the name of pursuing different types of analysis and argumentation. The goal of the class is not to supply stable and unquestionable answers to these course questions (this would be impossible and would only return students to the comfortable assumption that there is one right way to read). Rather, the questions allow for students to encounter a range of perspectives on these issues, giving them multiple options for engaging texts on their own.

Rather than simply making students “read for different things,” these questions make “meaning” an open aspect of our inquiry, requiring students to learn how to analyze their texts in the name of a different set of conclusions. Instead of asking students to “interpret” texts and deliver an explanation of its “meaning,” paper prompts ask them to draw conclusions about *how* and *why* the text means what it does. Not only does this **open up a whole new range of analysis for students who have been simply accustomed to basic interpretation**, it introduces yet another

academic conversation on reading itself. Some types of scholars would answer these *how* and *why* questions through a detailed formal analysis of literary devices, looking to patterns and figures of speech in the writing to explain the “meaning” that it generates. Others understand “meaning” as an intersubjective phenomena, and look to social, historical, or ideological factors to explain the texts ability to communicate and represent. In this class, I try to encourage students to look to both literary artists and social critics to generate *multiple* accounts of how texts “work,” prefacing the multiple forms of reading they will be asked to perform at the university.

4. Building Towards Scholarly Inquiry:

In the Spring, TS English is designed to set students loose within the domains of academic conversation and reading practices that we have established in the first two quarters. At this point in the year, students should be well acquainted with the idea that academic work is organized by “conversations” that are defined as much by approach and methodology as they are by topic and object of analysis. The questions that inform my spring quarter class on American Literature and Culture are designed to reflect this level of sophistication by inserting students into the foundational inquiry of this field of study.

- *What is the history of U.S. nationalism and what are the topics/issues that are crucial to that history? What are the ramifications of arguing that nationalism is historical and produced through social processes?*
- *What role has literature and the sphere of culture played in this history? In what ways have literary texts participated in the historical production of national consciousness? Conversely, in what ways have historical forms of nationalism influenced or played a role in the production of literary texts?*

Certainly, the level of discourse **and the complexity of the questions have accelerated in accordance with student’s understanding** of college reading – the idea that literature and culture “participate” in or “produce” national identity is taken from our discussions of social meaning in the winter. When introducing these questions, I emphasize how our work on writing (conversation) and reading (method) have equipped us to join in the work of this field. These questions are explicitly built to allow students to set these skills to work in a coherent field of scholarship.

5. Asking Academic Questions

The final quarter of TS English also places a significant emphasis on **building questions themselves as a stage of academic inquiry**. This may seem counterintuitive – asking questions is the first step in academic inquiry, so why is does it appear so late in an inquiry-based course plan? The answer is that students need to understand that successful academic questions are built *in the context* of disciplinary conversations, methods of analysis, and archives. It has been said that there is no such thing as a bad question, but when laying out questions in an academic inquiry, scholars need to be sure that the questions they are asking are appropriate for the types of evidence and analysis that they are trained to mobilize and the types of arguments they are capable of making. For instance, one might read a short story by Ernest Hemingway and ask, “*What is it that makes people sad?*” While this is certainly an interesting question, taking a scholarly approach requires the reader to think about how to approach it through a literary archive. Psychology, neurobiology, sociology, philosophy, and literary studies all have very different ways of approaching the foundations of human feeling and experience, depending on

the types of inquiry they privilege. A more sophisticated questioner will have the creativity and the critical wherewithal to ask a question that is more in line with the affordances of her archive or method of analysis. *What does Hemingway's writing tell us about cultural attitudes towards "sadness"? About the genre of tragedy or the history of "sadness" as narrative trope? About how we interpret sadness as a political phenomena, identity type, or form of critique?* Scholarship is guided and shaped by these conventions, but even seasoned scholars working in their discipline can forget that, in an academic context, **asking questions is a kind of intellectual labor in and of itself.**

The work of asking questions becomes a central feature of assignments in spring quarter. Presentation assignments are geared not at the delivery of information, but require students to set up a discussion for the class – the real work is in designing a series of questions that both engage the class and are *answerable* within the available forms of analysis. Weekly writing assignments place students in the position of designing lines of inquiry for other students to engage. And the formal argument paper which is the centerpiece of the course explicitly stages the research process as a continual revising of questions – one of the short “lead-up” assignments instructs students to literally write the prompt for the paper they intend to write, forcing them to articulate both the motivating questions and stakes of their independent inquiry. Whereas fall quarter prompts supplied a given topic and the winter quarter prompts defined a specific reading method, the goal of spring quarter is for students to decide for themselves which topics and forms of analysis make sense for their own thinking.

Making Questions Work

As you can see, course questions are an essential part of the designs, goals, assignment structures, and “accelerated” scaffolding of TS English. In keeping with our “practice-based” acceleration model, what is emphasized and continually modeled here is the actual process of assembling an academic line of inquiry. But what role do these questions play in the day-to-day of the class? Here, I will try to hint at some of the ways that these same questions make their way into how I conduct discussion, create group activities, and stage lectures.

- **Be transparent:** I favor telling students explicitly about the questions and goals of the course; students are privy to my thinking on how and why we are doing what we are doing, including most of the explanations that I supplied in the breakdown above. If the goal is to give students the experience of engaging in academic lines of inquiry, then the more they feel like equal partners in the class inquiry, the better. Of course, students are not really “equal partners” in the course design or assessment, but giving them an equal sense of responsibility in the objectives of the course helps to empower them to take up critical relationships to the readings and engages them in the collaborative, conversational project that is academic discourse.
- **Direct large questions at small discussion moments:** I typically use these large course questions to frame both opening and closing lectures in a class. But, if the questions are to really be an effective organizing principle for a collective inquiry, they must be explicitly a concern in how we look at individual readings. When discussing a specific literary text, for instance, I always try to remember to pose one of more of the course

questions after students have generated some basic interpretive analysis. Not only does this force the discussants to direct their various analytic insights to our collective goal, but it also allows them an opportunity to compare texts/ideas in the name of their exploration. I have found that this thinking is often inspires surprising sophistication and creativity. By asking students to consider how a poetic text “makes meaning” (taking my winter questions as an example), they can start to construct a comparative account of how different poets use different writing strategies and even have different accounts of how language and meaning “work.”

- **Scaffold questions in assignment prompts and exams:** It probably goes without saying that these questions are quite helpful when designing exams and writing assignments. But beyond giving the course a clear objective (“answer *this* question and you win”) I try to scaffold my assignments to model academic inquiry. In my fall quarter writing class, assignments start by engaging writers in the class question, first by asking them to generate analysis of the primary object – in these early assignments, students generate academic positions on the topics in question. From there, the same questions can help us to incorporate research and a more situated understanding of how academic ideas are generated. By asking students to read and explain how other scholars have answered the same questions in different ways, I try to get students to see their own thinking as a part of a larger conversation which they are engaging with their own writing.

VII. Scholarly Skills: The Context of Student “Mastery”

College as a Varied Educational Context

It would be irresponsible for a program that claims to prepare students for early college entry to define that “preparedness” solely in terms of content mastery. Equally important, as I have suggested in my definition of “college-readiness,” is an attention to the situations and circumstances in which students will be expected to demonstrate this mastery. Many classroom situations will define “mastery” in terms of information retention and application (demonstrated in the context of timed exams and other problem-solving activities). But others will require students to demonstrate their “mastery” in the context of much more open-ended seminar situations (where different forms of critical reasoning and intervention are privileged over having “the right answer”) or in project-based curricula where working in groups and managing one’s time over the whole quarter are implicitly a part of the definition of “success.”

One of the roles of the TS English classroom, therefore, is to help students to prepare for this varied context. One of the ways that I attempt to accomplish this is to model the TS classroom itself after a sampling of the types of “situations” one might encounter in humanities classes in the university. Fall quarter’s composition class is structured as a hybrid lecture/discussion/**workshop**, with the majority of time given over to inquiry-based discussions and small group work where students provide each other with feedback (and are assessed on their ability to work in these contexts). Winter quarter is modeled after what I would identify as the “conventional” literature **seminar**, with daily discussions directed at a shared text that students question and analyze together. And, in the spring, students must adjust themselves to a class that incorporates a **project-based** element alongside its “intro” to the field of American Studies and which demands more and more student leadership in daily discussion. The nature of the work and the types of assignments changes accordingly. On a quarterly basis, students must learn to adjust themselves to a different timeline, workload, and definition of “success,” and I make use of every opportunity to stage open discussions about the challenges and difficulties of these different activities.

Throughout the year, I also tend to target particular skill areas that my English class is particularly suited to address. In my experience, these are the areas where students need most support and instruction, in their transition towards more “mature” educational arenas.

1. **Seminar Discussion** – At the beginning of the year, it is always clear that students’ understanding of what a “class discussion” entails is very limited. Most seem to expect a situation where the instructor poses a question and one of the students supplies the correct answer, endlessly repeated so as to allow the student to demonstrate that, yes, they did the reading, know the equation, have learned the lesson. Many of the students that end up in TS are used to being the ones who reliably supply this answer, so while many of them are quite enthusiastic about class participation and eagerly raise their hand when prompted, *very few* of them know what it means to actually stage an inquiry-based discussion. This entails a lot of other “types” of participation, including 1) posing new lines of inquiry or questions based on the current discussion; 2) expanding on ideas that have been supplied by peers; and 3) respectfully critiquing the ideas of others or even the teacher. It means

not simply asking questions when you are confused but learning how to ask questions that move the conversation forward; listening and engaging the ideas of your classmates (and not the just what the instructor puts on the board); and knowing how to mount a critical conversation that does not hinge on disrespectfully dismissing or ignoring the ideas of others. This is the goal for discussion throughout the whole year of TS English, and is an overt part of the instruction, assessment, and final evaluation of student performance throughout.

2. **Time Management:** The pace and workload of the quartet system is sure to pose challenges for uninitiated students. In addition, one of the primary differences between high school and college workloads has to do with the expectations for how much work is being done outside of class time. At the university, students are largely expected to be working on the class (reading, doing homework, preparing for class) for twice as much time as the weekly in-class time; in a 5-credit class which meets 5 hours a week, students are expected to, on average, be spending 10 hours working on class materials on their own. In college, students spend less time in structured, mandatory class settings, and are expected to do more on their own initiative. As much as content-mastery will challenge students in the Transition School curriculum, managing “free” time is itself a challenge for their maturity and organizational skills. Procrastination and inefficiency can cause serious problems for these students, and part of the TS curriculum’s intensity is designed to challenge these students ability to manage the work in an environment where we can catch them if they fall.

College as a Social Situation

In addition to these practical concerns, a “college preparatory” curriculum must be attentive to how students negotiate the myriad types of interpersonal and group communication that will affect their college success and opportunity in a more subtle way. Students need to be able to communicate effectively and respectfully with their instructors and peers, in a variety of different situations from email to class forums. And, in a larger sense, they need to be able to present themselves as a particular type of student, with a flexible perspective on the types of relationships that they will enter into and perform in the largely “adult” world of the university.

This is not to say that our goal is to make “adults” of the gifted middle-schoolers that enter into the Transition School. General worldliness, adult cynicism, sexual maturity, or a mastery of “mature” subject matter are not part of our criteria for what makes a college-ready student, nor are they standards for admittance to the university. Rather, college students often are (and are often expected to be) young people at a point in their lives when they are experiencing new levels of social, financial, and professional independence. And as much as the university is built to facilitate *exactly* this transition with its curricula, social networks, support services, and career training opportunities, it *also* figures this aspect of student life into the expectations that are built into various situations, both in and out of the classroom. These expectations can range from an instructor’s assumptions about student’s time-management skills and degree of personal mobility when designing a prolonged group-work assignment to administrator’s expectations regarding a student’s degree of financial autonomy and personal independence. In the meantime, our students largely live at home under more explicit parental supervision and financial support, and

are coming directly out of an educational context where the expectations about their personal responsibility, mobility and capacity to make decisions are very different. To properly insert themselves into this context, students need to understand that, in college, they are expected to learn and perform increasingly professional forms of interactions and relationships on a daily basis, both in class and out of it.

The responsibility to prepare students for this social reality is shared across the Transition School academic and counseling units. The professional advisors and teachers that are in charge of facilitating TS students' transition to college freshman status lead numerous workshops and informational sessions for students to familiarize them with registration, financial aid issues, and, generally, with the institutional conventions of the university. But the TS faculty can and should contribute to this training providing instruction on how to conduct oneself as a college student in the classroom and in communications with instructors or TAs. In English, topics like writing process, rhetorical reading, and academic inquiry can be applied to much more "on the ground" instances of interpersonal communication and simple questions about how to conduct oneself as a student. TS English contributes to this in a few basic ways.

1. **Rhetorical Awareness:** The central conceit of the TS English Fall composition course is that successful college writers know how to assess their academic "situation" in order to determine what makes "good" writing in the different contexts of the university. As much as this is true of essay writing, it applies even more easily to the more mundane forms of communication and interaction that occur everyday between students, administrators, and faculty. In this sense, lessons about how to assess audience, tone, and genre are easily adopted into lessons on how to address professors, how to assume a properly respectful tone and style, and how to format an email or a request for a letter of recommendation. In this sense, lessons regarding student writing from Fall quarter TS English can be easily adapted into a survival strategy for encountering and engaging adult audiences at the university.
2. **Independence and Assertiveness** – The TS faculty attempts to model their communications with students after the types of interactions that they are likely to maintain with their instructors at the University: email, office hours, etc. One of the conventions of these interactions is that they are student-driven. College professors will rarely take the time to actively seek out students who are struggling in their classes. Rather, students are expected to seek out support or mentorship and, within those relationships, to take responsibility for defining their needs and goals. In TS English, we do our best to acquaint students with this role and help them to adjust to being their own advocates. My TA allows students to submit early drafts of their essays for comment, but requires that they submit specific questions as well, requiring students to assess their own work as a part of preparing to receive feedback. And though I constantly remind students about the value of office hours at various stages of their work, the students themselves are responsible for requesting (and keeping!) an appointment through the means defined on my syllabus.

Over the years, I have discovered that a big part of helping students to transition to this more mature, invested approach to their education is in helping them to understand

“struggle” differently. In many cases, the students that find their way to TS have been defined (by themselves and others) as academically successful and independent because they *never need to ask for help*. Revising this definition of “struggle” (as evidence of your inadequacy) is therefore a crucial step in the process of helping students to become independent, assertive managers of their own education. Myself, and all of the TS faculty, continually emphasize that seeking out support for one’s own self-identified struggles is not a sign of weakness, but the indicator of a motivated student who is capable of advocating for his or her own educational goals.