
Generating Writing Ideas Using Journalistic Approach

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Abstract:

Writing is integral to student success. Throughout their academic career, students will be asked to produce term papers and write answers to essay exam questions. Yet surprisingly little attention is paid to the craft of writing outside of required rhetoric and composition or literature classes. As a result, few students learn how to write within the conventions of a particular discipline. Writing is not merely a mode of communication. It is also a method of reflection, thinking, and analysis. It is a way for students to learn a discipline's habits of mind and to reflect on their own reasoning process. The goal of writing assignments is not only to transform your students into better writers, but into better teachers, political scientists, or sociologists. There is no greater gift you can give to your students than to strengthen their writing skills and to help them become self-critical writers. Writing is not simply a method of imparting information or demonstrating understanding, but the most nuanced and sophisticated way to order, analyze, apply, and synthesize information. In this article it discusses the journalistic approach in generating ideas for writing.

Key words: Writing, Journalistic Approach, Paragraph Writing, English Writing Skills, Guidelines in Writing, Journalistic Style of Writing, Approach

GENERATING WRITING IDEAS USING JOURNALISTIC APPROACH

Through your writing assignments, you can enhance your students' ability to evaluate data and methods, to formulate hypotheses, to predict, to generalize. In order to generate ideas for writing you can use the following strategies and guidelines.

Have students write regularly and frequently. Frequent writing helps to break down students' writing inhibitions and make them more comfortable in expressing their ideas in written words. You do not have to grade every writing assignment. You might simply scan some of these assignments.

Focus less on mechanics than on the thinking and writing skills central to your discipline. Your job is not to teach the basic mechanics of writing. By the time your students reach you, they will already have had a great deal of instruction in grammar, syntax, word choice, organization, and other aspects of writing.

Stress the "pre-writing" process. "Pre-writing" is the process through which a writer asks questions of the material and devises (or brainstorms) strategies for analyzing the material. You might ask the students to summarize a particular reader's argument or describe a debate within the scholarship or formulate a thesis or draft a compelling introduction to a topic. Pre-writing is a great way to overcome writer's anxiety and get ideas flowing.

Vary the assignment's purpose and audience. Students write best when they have a clear sense of the purpose of the writing and of their audience. You might ask your students to write for an audience other than you.

Tailor your assignments to the skills and conventions of your discipline. In the social sciences, for example, students must evaluate quantitative data and critically evaluate methodologies and distinguish between correlation and causation. Therefore, you might give your students an assignment in which they must analyze a data set, evaluate a

methodological approach, or assess whether a correlation is spurious or causal.

Build assignments around focused “prompts.” A common mistake in disciplinary-based writing is to give assignments that are too vague and unfocused. Instead, consider build your assignment around a specific disciplinary skill.

Integrate peer review into your class. That doesn’t necessarily mean asking students to grade other students’ written work. It might involve having the entire class discuss anonymous excerpts from students’ writing or having a small group of students review the literature on a topic and draft a hypothesis.

Create sequential assignments that build on one another. Each assignment should add a layer of complexity or broaden the range of students’ writing experiences.

Focus your criticism. Instead of asking a student to correct all the errors in a paper, focus on the most glaring. Identify a particular problem before moving on to other difficulties.

Using journalistic approach in writing has some things in common with regular English writing. It has a lot of rules, some of them seemingly similar. Below are a few of the basic principles as follows: the number one requirement is accuracy, second to that, strive to be concise, precise, specific and clear, no opinions, just facts, observe capitalization, abbreviation, etc., use proper grammar, punctuation and spelling and complete sentences, if you have any doubt as the spelling or meaning of a word, consult a dictionary, never rely on spellcheck, always write in the past tense (assuming the events you are describing occurred in the past), use short (mostly one- and two-syllable) and plain words instead of fancy synonyms, avoid using slang or overly casual words, don’t use contractions, avoid euphemisms, clichés and catchphrases like the plague, no semicolons, exclamation points, dashes or parentheses.

Question marks only in quotes that contain questions. No italics for emphasis. That is, no “air quotes” or “scare

quotes.” Use single quotes (‘like this’) only for quotes within a quote. Periods and commas ALWAYS go inside quotation marks. In news (as opposed to feature stories), put the most important material at the beginning of the story, at the beginning of paragraphs, and at the beginning of sentences. Write mainly short declarative sentences. For the subject of a sentence, choose the main actor, which will usually be a person, a group of people or an organization, rather than a concept or idea. Starting with “It is,” “What” or “There are/there is” rarely leads to a good sentence.

Good reporting makes for good writing; poor reporting makes for poor writing. That follows from one of most important principles in news writing, and in writing generally: “Show, don’t tell.” When possible, find a stronger verb than to be.

Generally avoid the passive voice, not only because it has the weak verb to be but because it tends to leave out significant information.

Use a mix of one-, two- and three-sentence paragraphs. One-sentence (journalism lingo for “paragraph”) are good for emphasis and for setting up quotes. Do not use more than two of them in a row.

Further, the first sentence of a news story is called the “lead”. It is also the first paragraph of the story. The most important stories and the least important stories (brief articles about relatively minor events) get news lead. Everything in between usually gets a feature lead, which follows a different form. A news lead is in the past tense (assuming the events it describes took place in the past). Headlines are in the present tense. A news leads summarizes what is most important about the story. It usually takes this form and this order: Who-What-When-(Where)-(Context/Additional Relevant Information)-(Attribution). The elements in parenthesis are sometimes used and sometimes not, depending on the nature of the lead. “Who” corresponds to the subject or main noun of the sentence, and “What” to the predicate or main verb and, sometimes, a direct

object. The Context/Additional Relevant Information usually comes after a comma, as does the Attribution. Sometimes, to avoid awkwardness or confusion, the “When” will come before the “What?”

Similarly, the “Where” can sometimes come before the “When?” Do not lead with “When” unless it is the most important element in the story. Do not include dateline in your lead it will be supplied by a copyeditor if appropriate. The “Who” in your lead is a person or organization; you will sometimes name him, her or it in the lead.

Probably the most important difference between news writing and other kinds of writing is that in news writing, editorializing isn’t allowed. “Editorializing” means expressing an opinion, which is appropriate only on the editorial page and in reviews (of restaurants and movies, for examples). To some extent, it’s acceptable in columns and articles that are clearly marked as “analysis” or something similar.

It is impossible to banish opinion from any sentence, much less an entire story. You are expressing your opinion merely by what information you decide is or isn’t important enough to include. However, you cannot be blatant about it.

Opinion comes in many forms: not only in obvious words like good or bad and similar expressions of approval or disapproval, but in characterizations (usually adjectives or adverbs) like many, few, usually, important, effective, influential, overweight, pretty, controversial, fortunately, or even very. A word should be avoided if some people might disagree with it or have a different opinion of what it means.

In general, avoid adverbs and adjectives except for “objective” ones, such as “green,” “empty” and “only.” Even verbs like “refuses,” “claims” or “admits” are editorializing and should be avoided. As noted, you are not banishing opinion from your story, but rather words that obviously express opinion. That’s a neat trick.

If you have concluded based on exhaustive reporting that the official abuses her power, you have to be that much

more careful about establishing this through facts, and not using negative or judgmental terms. You must also give the official ample opportunity to give her side, and give her statements adequate space in the story. Avoid the words seem and seems. Your job is to tell us what is. In categorizing amounts, avoid words like “many” and “few.” Instead, either give the exact amount or number or use objective words, like “all,” “none” or “most.” (Of course, you have to be able to back these up.) A trick is to use the word “some,” which is not editorializing and is hard to disprove. Similarly, with frequency, “often” and “rarely” (and synonyms) are no good, “always,” “never” and “usually” are okay if you can back them up, and “sometimes” is a sometimes useful hedge.

CONCLUSION

In general, writing using the journalistic approach has seven principles to bear in mind:

1. **CLARITY** use precise and unambiguous language to convey ideas. Use short and simple sentences. Provide examples for abstract ideas. Anecdotes and hypothetical situations can be helpful.
2. **ORGANIZATION** the ideas in the paper should be presented in a logical manner. Each sentence in a paragraph should be connected to the previous sentence. Use appropriate headings for sections in the paper. Use transitions for connecting paragraphs in a section.
3. **CONCISENESS** strives to use as few words as possible to convey ideas. Don't use more examples than is necessary to clarify ideas. Avoid redundant information.

4. **ACCURACY** checks the accuracy of citations and descriptions of research findings. Describe research findings precisely.

5. **VIVIDNESS** provides detailed explanations. Use interesting and detailed examples.

6. **COGENCY** provides a plausible rationale for ideas. Present sufficient evidence for ideas. Provide the best evidence. Experimental research findings are better than findings from correlational and case studies because experiments allow us to make conclusions about cause and effect. The conclusions in the paper are consistent with the evidence.

7. **DEPTH** the paper has an original, well-developed thesis with several elements. Describe ideas in detail. Describe how variables are causally related. Describe limitations of ideas and findings. Describe how ideas and findings can be applied to important situations.

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