



Cornell University
John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Question and Answer
Author: Nadine Attewell

Course: English 105
Course Title: Women and Writing: "This strange house": Women and the city 1918-1939

Year of Award: Spring 2003

Copyright Statement:

This material is copyrighted by the author and made available through the Cornell University eCommons Digital Repository under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial License.

This document is part of the John S. Knight Writing in the Disciplines First-year Writing Seminar Program collection in Cornell's eCommons Digital Repository.

<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/10813>.

November

→ Spring 2003 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of primary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts:

- 1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students.
- 2) An explanation of the exercise and the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the exercise.
- 3) If possible, an example of a response to the exercise. (Be sure to get the student's written permission to use it.)

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages, and are due in 159 Goldwin Smith by **Friday, May 16**. No exceptions can be made.

Winning Writing Exercises will usually be included in the course packet for Writing 700 and will be posted on the Knight Institute website.

The two winning entries will receive \$350 each; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$100.

→ Spring 2003 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please print clearly~

Instructor's name Nadine Attewell

(250 Goldwin Smith)

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my writing exercise, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I am also prepared to send an electronic version of my text to the Knight Institute (knight_institute@cornell.edu).

Instructor's signature Nadine Attewell title of essay Date May 14 2003

Question and Answer

There are lots of things you can do to get yourself started on an essay: brainstorming, freewriting, rereading, outlining. But before you begin to collect your thoughts and ideas in an outline, before even you go to the text about which you're meant to be writing, you need to set parameters for yourself, find a focus. You need to *define your question(s)*. Once you've got your questions, then you can start generating ideas (i.e. answers).

There's a couple of ways in which this needs to happen.

1. Implicit and Explicit Questions

Let's say I give you an essay question that reads, "Why does Clare Kendry die at the end of *Passing*?" Presumably, I don't want to know that Clare fell out of window, or even that her husband had just discovered she had been lying to him. This question *implies* other questions that you'll need to formulate for yourself:

How does Clare die (i.e. is she pushed, and by whom? does she commit suicide?)?

What does the way in which she dies tell us about why she dies?

Does she have to die? Why?

What are the proximate causes of her death?

What, more importantly, are the larger forces that drive her to her death?

2. Defining the Essay

In this course, you'll more usually be given a rather broad topic within which to work. I'll ask you to "discuss the trope of blindness in *Passing*" or the "significance of space." This gives you more freedom to follow your own interests and ideas, but it also requires that you develop the ability to ask meaningful and productive questions.

Let's say I ask you to track the eyeglass image through a Virginia Woolf essay. What are you going to want to know about that image so as to be able to write a cogent and interesting essay?

Micro level: Where does it appear?
What images/ideas does it seem to be connected to, contrasted with?
Why there? What is it doing, saying?

Macro level: Does the eyeglass image seem to mean/do different things at different times?
How does the author seem to value the eyeglass? Positively? Negatively? How do you know?
What's all of this got to do with the larger thrust (arguments, themes) of the text? In other words, so what?

[These are the instructions I then handed out for their first critical essay.]

Essay 2

Draft Due February 12; Final Version Due February 17

Write a 3 to 4 page essay on ONE of the following topics. Remember to double-space, paginate, and title your paper!

If you wish to write on another topic (and you are certainly free to do so), please come to speak to me before you start writing, so we can craft an appropriate question.

A Suggestion: As she was starting to write *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf said to her diary,

And I'm quivering & itching to write my - whats it to be called? - 'Men are like that?' - no thats too patently feminist: the sequel [to *A Room of One's Own*] then, for which I have collected enough powder to blow up St Pauls [Cathedral].

When writing a critical essay, make sure you too have collected enough "powder" to blow your reader out of any opposition to your argument he or she might consider. Always include evidence from the texts you're working on in order to support the claims you wish to make about that text.

A Requirement: In preparing for this essay, I would like you to practice some of the questioning skills we discussed in class. Instead of writing an introduction to this essay, please hand in a list of the questions you developed in order to write the essay. **You do not need to have a thesis for this essay; what I would like to see you do is explore a set of images or ideas in their complexity and contradiction.**

Questions

1. Trace one of the following sets of tropes in at least TWO of Brontë's *Villette*, Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, de Certeau's "Walking in the City," Woolf's "Oxford Street Tide" and "Street Haunting":

- a. reading and writing.
- b. vision and blindness.

2. What, according to the writers we've studied so far this semester (Brontë, Richardson, de Certeau, Woolf), is the place and value of shopping in city life?

You should draw on Judith Walkowitz's article for ideas about what shopping has meant for women, in particular. Be careful not to equate the historical views she presents to us

with her own personal views! You will also want to think of shopping as not simply confined to the act of purchasing. Think about the range of activities you call shopping in your daily life.

3. How do TWO of Brontë, Richardson, de Certeau, and Woolf, understand and construct the self?

Rationale

I designed this exercise for three reasons. First, I wanted to focus the students' attention on the particulars of the assignments they would be asked to fulfil. As teachers, we're often reminded – rightly – that *how* we formulate an assignment determines how students respond to that assignment. We're also often urged to make explicit as much of our rationale for assigning such work as seems reasonable. I thought that by asking students to concentrate on the wording of essay questions before embarking on the writing process proper, not only would I be able to share some of what goes into the crafting of assignments, but students would then be better equipped to respond fully and adequately to the questions being posed. Secondly, it's seemed to me that a thesis-driven approach to writing analytical essays can result in narrow thinking, a determination to exclude ideas, arguments, or evidence that appear to contradict "the thesis," an inability to cope with and/or articulate complexity. This is especially the case when students feel they cannot begin writing, or even thinking about, their essays, until they have developed a thesis. Forcing students to develop questions seemed a good way to prevent this cart-before-horse problem, since questions either a) imply both a negative and a positive answer, or b) can generate altogether unexpected answers, and sometimes even further questions. Finally, the asking of questions is in large part how I run seminar discussion, and so seemed both something I could model, and a way to link seminar practice to individual writing practices.

Because I wanted to disrupt a thesis-based approach to both writing and reading about literary texts, I introduced the "Question and Answer" handout early in the semester, before assigning the first essay. We went through the handout's principle points in class, with the students generating their own questions in response to my suggested essay topics. We did this as a class, and with generic topics, but it would be also possible to divide the class into small groups (pairs, perhaps), and have the students generate lists of questions for the topics on which they were actually going to write. Such lists were, in any case, included with the essays they finally did hand in, about a week after the initial discussion. This essay was the first analytical essay the students produced; they were asked to write about a number of different kinds of texts, including short sections from two novels, a historiographical essay, and a dense theoretical essay. Because I wanted the students to explore difficult and abstract ideas about space, place, memory, surveillance etc., I felt they needed to be freed from the necessity of producing perfectly coherent (but likely dull) arguments. The ideas they were going to work with were messy, and requiring questions that could provoke multiple answers and dispensing with introductions seemed a good way to force attention to that messiness. I wanted to disconcert them, throw them off-balance, but hopefully in a productive way.

I think, on the whole, that I succeeded. A couple of students expressed uneasiness about writing without an introduction, but all produced interesting sets of questions nonetheless. The essays themselves were thoughtful meditations on difficult concepts (vision, fantasy, anonymity). It's possible, of course, that these were simply exceptional students, but I think that not having to articulate the one-sentence thesis students seem to feel is required of them allowed these freshmen to take risks and follow ideas to complex

ends. The initial difficulty I had as a reader in deciphering where the essay was headed was more than repaid, I think, by the sophistication of the ideas. An unexpected benefit of the exercise was that in peer review sessions, or later revision efforts, students could ask (of themselves, of their peers) whether they had answered the questions they'd set out to answer, or whether there might be different ways of answering the same question.

In assigning this exercise again, I think I'd want to pair it with an exercise about crafting arguments that can't be (or don't need to be) reduced to a one-sentence thesis. After marking the essay *sans* introduction, I might have the students write introductions for their own papers, or perhaps for someone else's. In either case, the distance between writer and product would confirm that the writing process need not unfold in a linear way.