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Winner

Fall 2007 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (honorable mentions, if any, will receive \$150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 7. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2007 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

-Please Print Clearly-

Instructor's name Alan Young-Bryant

Home address _____

Home telephone 227-7757 Hometown Newspaper _____

Department English Course # and title English III-4 "Life, Death, and Desire in 19th Century European Literature"

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I am also prepared to send electronic versions of my text to the Knight Institute (knight_institute@cornell.edu). I will receive the award for my prize-winning assignment sequence upon submission of the electronic text.

"Revisiting the Sentimental in Flaubert"
Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature A. Young-Bryant Date 12/7/07

James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application
Alan Young-Bryant
Department of English
December 2007

Revisioning the Sentimental in Flaubert

I. Overview and Rationale

I am pleased to submit the enclosed four-part assignment sequence, *Revisioning the Sentimental in Flaubert*, for the J.S. Knight Institute's 2007 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. I created this assignment sequence as the concluding writing project in my first-year writing seminar, "Life, Death, and Desire in 19th Century European Literature" (English 111.4). The sequence has four formal stages, as well as several informal, preparatory exercises designed to ready students for writing about the final text in the semester, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. As the last writing assignment in the course, the assignment sequence builds on previous conversation and writing about sentiment, feeling, and style. By returning to topics we had addressed previously in the course in order to revision and complicate them, this assignment afforded opportunities for reflection and self-reflection which had the effect both of raising student awareness about what they had learned this semester and of making students more confident in their writing as they approached the final essay.

In terms of writing goals, *Revisioning the Sentimental in Flaubert*, introduces three specific aspects of writing: paragraph transitions, metacommentary, and conclusions. Pre-Writing exercises #1-#3 ask students to explore a topic of their choice in the novel, the only requirement being that students must address the writing skill highlighted in each assignment and write a brief but focused reflection commenting on what went well for them in the essay and what they would like to improve in the future. Each of the three pre-writing essays give students the opportunity to develop a topic for the final essay of the semester, a longer essay that draws on previous writing while being a new and original composition.

To help students identify and refine a topic for the final essay, I respond to each pre-writing essay with comments oriented toward the next writing exercise. Pre-Writing essays are un-graded in order emphasize the gradual and often messy process of finding a problem or question about a text that can organize a longer and more polished essay. My comments to students this semester often said things like, "I like how your ideas about the novel are taking shape. Do you think you are interested in exploring the question of women in the novel, or are you more interested in the question of Frederic's own desire? I think you could write interestingly about either one." What students thought was one topic often comprised three or more topics, each one of which could be the basis of the final essay. For this reason, in my role as a responder I focused on pushing students to be more specific while telling them that their writing was ultimately their own product, and the choice of what to focus on was up to them. Each pre-writing essay also included a reflection/rationale, and I used students' comments about their writing to frame my own response, often agreeing with their self-assessments and encouraging them to continue practicing a specific technique if they found it challenging.

II. Preparation for Writing

Pre-Writing #1

To prepare the class for *Flaubert: Pre-Writing #1*, which asks students to focus on two adjacent paragraphs in the novel, I created a handout (“Flaubert On Writing,” attached) with statements by Flaubert about his own writing process. I used these comments by Flaubert (e.g., “my work is going very slowly; sometimes I suffer real tortures to write the simplest sentences, despite myself”) to frame a class discussion about the importance of style in Flaubert and the demands of revision. I posed questions to the class such as, “does the novel itself show traces of this concern with individual sentences and words?” and “do Flaubert’s ideas about revision (e.g., “I’m going to have to unscrew them [i.e., paragraphs], loosen the joints”) speak to your own practice of revising essays in this class or in other classes?” I was delighted to find that students had a lot to say about their own experiences revising papers, and many students also cited passages in the novel where they thought Flaubert’s prose reflected the concerns he lists in the handout on style. At this point in the semester we had already had several conversations about revision, but on this day students had much more to contribute. I think this was because by this point students had revised several of their essays, and the handout was an interesting springboard for talking about our own relation to revision vis-à-vis Flaubert’s own practice. I found that the candor in Flaubert’s self-analysis helped students talk about the challenges and problems they encounter when revising. This was especially interesting because the way we often use literature to teach writing focuses exclusively on the text itself and not on problems of composition—an approach which does not always then lend itself to open and frank discussions of process and composition with regard to student writing. By allowing us to reflect on Flaubert’s text alongside his own self-analysis, this assignment, by contrast, offered a useful model for students’ own self-reflection on their writing process.

Pre-Writing #2

This essay asks students to continue to develop their ideas about a theme or question in *Sentimental Education* while practicing four kinds of metacommentary. By integrating metacommentary in their writing, students were encouraged to make their own position as readers and interpreters more explicit. This was not itself a new technique in our class because students had previously written an essay that included counter-arguments, another form of metacommentary. Reminding students that they were familiar with and practiced at something that seemed new helped them feel more confident about completing this assignment.

To prepare students for the assignment, I distributed a copy of a student essay from earlier in the semester and asked the class to suggest revisions that would add metacommentary to the existing essay. This was a successful activity because it provided a concrete example for talking about how to use metacommentary. I saw my role in this conversation as facilitating our peer-critique by drawing out connections between different students’ comments and posing new questions to the class. My students impressed me with their ability to integrate metacommentary into the essay, and this in-class exercise was a helpful “warm up” for pre-writing #2.

Pre-Writing #3

After students submitted *Flaubert: Pre-Writing #2*, we prepared for *Flaubert: Pre-Writing #3* and the final essay with in-class writing in which the class wrote informally about the theme that interested them in the novel. I encouraged students to write about whatever they were most interested in at this point, even if it was not explicit in their earlier pre-writing essays. The goal of this in-class exercise was to help students refine their ideas by asking them to write a tentative thesis for their topic. After ten minutes or so of writing, we discussed ideas that students had, and collectively critiqued two thesis statements that were read aloud by students. This was an especially helpful aspect of the class, and students had many questions about how specific or general a good thesis might be. When I teach this novel in the future, and even in other teaching situations, I will use a version of this in-class activity. Many of my students later told me that this exploratory writing about their topic/thesis helped them when they prepared to write the final version of the essay. In the future, I would add to this in-class activity by grouping together students with similar topics so that they can share their thesis ideas and talk more generally with each other about their topics.

On a separate day, I designed a class in which we listened to two songs—one by Patsy Cline and one by the Beach Boys—in order to talk about how the themes of desire and experience in *Sentimental Education* have a wide resonance in popular culture. The goal of this activity was to help students “hear” Flaubert’s novel in unexpected places, such as in popular music, and to notice how themes of desire and experience in these songs, in particular, rely on formal devices such as apostrophe, parallelism, and rhyme, all of which we had already encountered in previous writing assignments in the class. Students were quick to notice the formal structures used by Patsy Cline and the Beach Boys and to translate listening literacy into the terms of literary analysis we had previously explored in the course. This was a further step toward activating and “revisioning” topics we had previously encountered in order both to prepare students for a final writing assignment and to allow them to reflect with confidence on what they had learned this semester about writing and analysis.

To prepare for pre-writing #3, which asks students to select a song of their choice and write about how it relates to the novel, I asked the class if they could imagine either of these two songs in the soundtrack to a film adaptation of the novel. Most students felt that the lyrics of the Beach Boys coincided well with the tone of *Sentimental Education* but that the rhythm and musical composition of the Patsy Cline song was a better fit with the novel than the too up-beat sound of the Beach Boys song.

Final Essay

Pre-Writing exercises 1-3 gave students time to focus a topic for the final essay, and by this point I needed to play only a small role in helping the class prepare for the last paper. Rather, at this point students were supported to work independently in order to engage what they had learned through previous writing and reflection. In concluding our “revisions” we turned at last to a discussion of writing conclusions, which students had focused on in pre-writing #3. For further emphasis, I created a short handout with an excerpt from Aristotle on plot. Talking about ideas of sequence between beginnings, middles, and ends was an occasion for students to pose their own questions about what makes a conclusion effective. Although we did not arrive at any definitive answers to this question, it was a successful conversation to the extent that it showed us that writing conclusions is in fact always challenging, and that the best conclusions rarely make use of formulas. To further prepare students for the final essay, I conferenced with each student in the last week in order to discuss specific questions and talk about individual progress in the course.

Revising the Sentimental in Flaubert
Pre-Writing #1

due date: 11/7

Rationale for Pre-Writing Exercises 1-3: So far this semester, you have written argumentative papers that have focused on a range of different writing skills. The pre-writing exercises in the remaining weeks of the semester will build on the skills you have already developed (such as introductions, use of informal language, counter-argument, etc.). In addition, these exercises will introduce several new, more sophisticated writing skills that will help your writing. For each exercise (there are three), you should remind yourself of the different skills you have already practiced and incorporate these into your upcoming writing, when relevant. The focus, however, will be on practicing new techniques in your writing, which will be defined in the assignment description for each exercise.

In addition to giving you practice at new writing skills, these pre-writing exercises will lead up to your last essay of the semester. In each exercise, you will select your own thematic focus within *Sentimental Education*. In the final paper of the semester, you will review your pre-writing exercises and use them to develop your own topic for a 6-7 page paper on the novel. You will conference with me to refine your proposed topic for this paper, and we will share the pre-writing papers in class for peer-critique along the way.

Pre-Writing #1 Assignment Description

Writing Skill: *Transitions*

Preparation: 1) Read (or review) the chapter on transitions in *They Say/I Say* (“connecting the parts”)
2) Read pages 1-150 in *Sentimental Education*

Length: 600 words, *which you must divide between three paragraphs (each approx. 200 words)*

Instructions (1-3):

1) Select **two adjacent paragraphs** that interest you in any part of pages 1-150 of *Sentimental Education*. You can select any two adjacent paragraphs in the novel up to page 150. You should choose paragraphs that focus on or develop a theme or idea that you would like to know more about. Let your own interests or questions guide you in choosing your paragraphs, just be sure that you actually have some reason for choosing them—e.g., Does a particular theme strike you? Does a certain use of language stand out? You do not need a thesis, but you must **focus** on a theme in the paragraphs you select by **analyzing Flaubert’s language in close detail**.

2) Next, write 600 words in which you explore, by citing relevant sentences and words, the paragraphs you have chosen. Do not cite the full paragraphs in the body of your text (you won’t have any space to analyze them if you do this, so transcribe them separately and put them at the end of your paper for me to read).

You must divide your 600 words into three paragraphs (each approx. 200 words)—this limitation means that you will write two transitions (between paragraphs 1 and 2, and between paragraphs 2 and 3). Thinking about what *They Say/I Say* mentions, use these paragraph transitions to your best advantage. You want to guide your reader through your ideas about Flaubert’s text by writing elegant and informative connectors. If it helps you, focus on how the paragraphs you have chosen from the novel are juxtaposed to one another. That is, you can use Flaubert’s transitions as content for your own analysis. You do not have to write about this, but it may be a good way of exploring your ideas about a theme in the novel while also thinking further about transitions.

3) On a separate page, write a brief but detailed rationale explaining why you wrote your transitions in the way that you did. This rationale will help you focus closely on the decisions that inform your transitions in this exercise.

Revising the Sentimental in Flaubert
Pre-Writing #2

due date: 11/16

4)

Pre-Writing #2 Assignment Description

Writing Skill: Metacommentary

The following excerpt about metacommentary from chapter ten of *They Say/I Say* reminds you that you have already made use of metacommentary in your previous essays:

Many moves function as metacommentary: entertaining objections, adding transitions, framing quotations, answering “so what?” and “who care?” When you entertain objections, you stand outside of your text [“meta” means “above” in Greek] and imagine what a critic might say; when you add transitions, you essentially explain the relationship between various claims. And when you answer the “so what?” and “who cares?” questions, you look beyond your central argument and explain who cares about it and why (128).

Preparation: 1) Read chapter ten in *They Say/I Say* (“The Art of Metacommentary,” pp. 123-132)
2) Read pages 150-300 in *Sentimental Education*

Length: 600 words

Instructions (1-3):

1) Select a single sentence (or two sentences, but no more than two) from any part of pages 150-300 in *Sentimental Education* that relates to a theme you wrote about in your Pre-Writing #1 assignment. You will use this sentence (or two sentences) as evidence to further explore a theme or motif in the novel that interests you.

2) Next, write 600 words in which you explore the particular meaning and significance of the sentence you have chosen for the theme you are interested in.

The only formal/organizational requirement for the paper is that you must include the following **four kinds** of metacommentary in your writing:

- 1) **Metacommentary to move from a general claim to a specific example** (*They Say*, p.129)
- 2) **Metacommentary to ward off potential misunderstandings** (p.128-9)
- 3) **Metacommentary to alert readers to an elaboration of a previous idea** (p.129)
- 4) **Metacommentary to indicate that a claim is especially important, or less important** (p.130)

Thinking about what *They Say/I Say* mentions, use metacommentary to your best advantage. You want to guide your reader through your ideas about Flaubert’s text by writing in a voice that steps back and reflects on what is being said at key moments (*They Say/I Say* chapter ten explains how to do this).

3) On a separate page, **write a brief but detailed** reflection in which you comment on two things: 1) what you think went well in your use of metacommentary, and, 2) something that you found challenging in using metacommentary, and how you might improve on this point in the future.

Revising the Sentimental in Flaubert
Pre-Writing #3

due date: 11/28 (e-mail essay and song to: _____ by 10 a.m., 11/28)

Overview and Rationale: For this assignment, you will write a 600-word essay that explains how a song of your choosing relates to one of the themes you have explored in *Sentimental Education*. The writing aim for this assignment is to develop your skill at writing a conclusion.

Pre-Writing #3 Assignment Description

Writing Skill: Conclusions

It is hard to generalize about what a conclusion should be because the way you end a piece of writing depends so much on questions of audience. A film review, for example, will most likely conclude differently than a political manifesto or an essay about a Baudelaire poem. But to generalize anyway, how you “end” your writing will always depend on what “end,” in the sense of “goal,” you have in mind. The conclusion, then, will often benefit from metacommentary that reminds readers exactly what that end is.

But you don’t need to hit readers over the head with your purpose—it often suffices to say things like “as I have tried to show...,” or “as this essay suggests...” and let your previous analysis of the evidence stand for itself. A brilliant conclusion will never make up for shoddy evidence and far-fetched analysis. The most important thing is to be specific and to keep to the criteria you have used in the paper. If the paper is intended to explore the current problems facing the Connecticut state legislature, for example, you don’t need to refer to the greed inherent in human nature. Stick to your evidence and the boundaries that the evidence itself suggests.

If you are writing with transitions and metacommentary, writing a conclusion will probably come more easily. The only real rule is to avoid formulas—how you conclude an essay depends on what you want to accomplish in your writing, and what you want to accomplish is always singular and unique to the situation which you create *by* writing. If you truly have something to say, you already know how to say where it ends.

- Preparation:
- 1) Finish *Sentimental Education*
 - 2) Re-read your Pre-Writing #1 and #2 essays to recall which themes you have written about (and what my comments suggest...)
 - 3) Plug-in your iPod, open iTunes, or, if you still have them, look at your CDs.

Length: 600 words

Instructions (1-3):

1) **Find a song** that you think relates to some aspect of *Sentimental Education*. Any song may be appropriate, depending on how you define “relate” in “relates to *Sentimental Education*.” Your task is to write, elegantly and critically, about how the song you select relates to a theme from the novel.

*You are required to send me the song as a music attachment, preferably in mp3 format. Send the file to me at janet@yale.edu.

Hints/Pointers for selecting a song:

- Imagine you are selecting the music (or at least one song) for a soundtrack to a film adaptation of *Sentimental Education*. What kind of song seems appropriate to you? To decide, you should consider the salient themes, motifs, attitudes or sensibilities in Flaubert’s novel that you think a soundtrack should highlight. What time period and setting would be used?

- The song should be of personal interest to you, and you should have things to say about its lyrics, composition, etc. in relation to the novel.

2) Write a brief essay (600 words) exploring how the song you have chosen relates to a theme you are interested in in *Sentimental Education*. **Place your emphasis on writing about how the song plays up an aspect of the novel. With this in mind, make the theme from *Sentimental Education* the primary focus of your essay, the discussion of which will be framed by the song you have selected.**

Your essay should include the following:

- A citation of a passage in the novel taken from pages 300-464 that relates to your theme
- Direct quotation and analysis of lyrics in the song you choose (with reference to the novel)
- Comments about which part(s) of the novel the song should coincide with (i.e., imagining a film adaptation and soundtrack...)
- A concluding paragraph that uses appropriate metacommentary to present a **new yet related** aspect of the theme you have traced in the novel. Your goal in this essay is to convince your classmates (your audience) of the prominence of the theme you have chosen, as well as to show the relevance of the song you select for our understanding of a particular theme in the novel. I will copy and distribute all of your essays and, if the technology gods cooperate, make a CD for you with all of the songs from the class.

3) In a separate paragraph, explain how your conclusion draws on what you have already written while at the same time suggests something new to your audience. In addition, please comment on how the conclusion reinforces the end/goal of the essay (see last bullet point in #2, above).

*Your email submission must contain two attachments:

- 1) a music file with your song (mp3 or mp4)
- 2) a word document with your essay (with the name of the song and the artist at the top of page 1)

send email to:

Revising the Sentimental in Flaubert
Final Essay

Length: 6-8 pages

Due: December 6

Submission Details: Deliver hardcopy to my English dept. mailbox in Goldwin Smith (mailroom is on 2nd floor of GS)

The informal writing you have done over the past month has prepared you to write about a topic in *Sentimental Education*. This writing has also given you practice at the following writing skills: *paragraph transitions, metacommentary, and conclusions.*

For the final paper (6-8 pages), you are to write a more formal and polished essay about the novel by presenting an argument on a topic you have explored in the pre-writing exercises. All of the familiar guidelines for papers still apply (see the handout on Intro., Argument, and Thesis, for example), and you must have a focused thesis which is a springboard for investigating a clearly stated problem or question in *Sentimental Education*.

You most likely already have a “topic” or a “theme” selected for the paper, but you might not have a “problem” or “question” *about* that topic/theme. Framing your topic as a problem or a question is the best way to generate a thesis and write an engaging, lively essay that brings together the various writing skills we have practiced over the semester. Take this essay as an opportunity to review old assignments to remind yourself of the writing skills you have developed. There are no specific requirements for this essay—just show me (and yourself) your best writing in an essay that makes a focused argument about the novel.

You have already written three preparatory, informal essays. For the final paper, make use of what you have done by taking your ideas about the novel three steps further. You should ask yourself whether you have complicated your initial ideas. If you think the novel is about the failure of Frederic’s development or education, you’ll want to consider what “development” or “education” means, and you’ll want to say why it matters that he fails. Exploring the implications of your central idea will be especially important for this essay. Take our class as your audience for the paper, and assume an interested, slightly scholarly audience (you might review the Glossary of Terms handout from earlier in the semester).

Since the pre-writing essays are meant to be exercises to prepare you to write this paper, please do not cut and paste entire sections of them into the final essay. This is a new essay. From conferences with you last week, I’m confident that all of you have interesting and serious topics. Now go start writing!

I will respond to short sections of your paper in advance if you email me with questions. If you want to see me before the essay is due, I will be tutoring at Rockefeller on Dec. 5 (Wed.) from 3:30-5:30pm (inside, go to the end of the building closest to North Campus and look for the “Writing-Walk In Service” signs).

FLAUBERT ON WRITING

For Flaubert, the sentence is at once a unit of style, a unit of work, and a unit of life; it attracts the essential quality of his confidences as his work as a writer. If we rid the expression of any metaphorical resonance, we might say that Flaubert has spent his life "making sentences"

—Roland Barthes, "Flaubert and the Sentence" (1972)

"I'd rather die like a dog than rush my sentence through, before it's ripe" (**Flaubert, 1852**).—"I only want to write three more pages...and find four or five sentences that I've been searching for, nearly a month now" (1853).—"My work is going very slowly; sometimes I suffer real tortures to write the simplest sentences, despite myself" (1852).—"I can't stop myself, even swimming, I test my sentences, despite myself" (1876).

"One achieves style only by atrocious labor, a fanatic and dedicated stubbornness"

—**Flaubert** (1846)

"What is atrociously difficult is the linking of ideas, so that they derive naturally from each other" "...And then the transitions, the *sequence*—what an entanglement!"

—**Flaubert** (1852, 1853)

"Each paragraph is good in itself, and there are pages I am certain are perfect. But just because of this, *it doesn't work*. It's a series of well-turned paragraphs which do not lead into each other. I'm going to have to unscrew them, loosen the joints"

—**Flaubert** (1853)