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**Instructor’s Notes for Literature Review Assignment**

**August 2018**

**How it came to be:** I developed this final assignment in a Learning Community I participated in during Fall 2016, “The Research Assignment.” We read “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?” by Elizabeth Wardle. Wardle criticizes the focus in Composition on the argument-based paper. She argues that this is not a useful or relevant skill for most undergraduates. The entire article is a great read for a number of reasons, but this particular point illuminated an experience I was having in my 302 classes at the time: my students were having a hard time identifying arguments in their scholarly articles, because the very general, conditional, and evidence-based arguments didn’t *look like* the confident, bold claims they’d been taught to develop in their high school argument papers.

They were confused, and so was I: what exactly is an argument? After reading Wardle, I could no longer justify asking my students to develop arguments based simply on their reading. This is not how knowledge is generated within their fields. I designed the Literature Review paper as an alternative final assignment.

**What students struggle with:**

* The new vocabulary “synthesis” and “Literature Review” are intimidating. Students struggle to understand what synthesis is abstractly and are anxious about approaching a new genre. When asked to actually synthesize information, however, they do great. I reinforce that they are already skilled at synthesis and offer real-life examples: when you buy a new phone, or earbuds, or a car, you research online, synthesize your findings, and decide which is best for your own needs and budget.
* What does a Lit Review look like? At my students’ request, I drew up a sample Lit Review structure (included in the assignment prompt). This eases their minds and improves the quality of their papers.

**What I changed in my course schedule:**

* Any class time spent developing a strong claim has been dedicated to developing strong research questions. These are very easily interchangeable, and similar activities seem to work for both.
* I had to abandon my textbook that focused heavily on developing claims, and I reduced my unit on counterargument (which was much more important when students were writing argument papers).
* I encourage my students to begin thinking about their final topic in the first week of classes. Many students end up discovering their topic in their research for the Discipline Awareness paper, focusing on a scholarly article on the topic for their Rhetorical Analysis paper, and then sticking with it for their Lit Review. This means that both they and I are somewhat educated on the topic by the end of the semester. (Plus, they are allowed to re-use the article from their second paper in their third paper.)
* The first semester I taught this, the synthesis sections were very weak. In subsequent semesters I’ve introduced an entire unit on synthesis. This includes:
* introduce the concept of a Lit Review early in the semester, so they can get comfortable with it and ask questions. I emphasize it as the primary assignment in our class, and the first two as preparing them for the Lit Review
* a lecture and discussion on the difference between summary, analysis, and synthesis, using real-life examples.
* a group activity where they read Yelp reviews of a restaurant and write a synthesis paragraph about what they find.
* sample Lit Reviews to read/analyze in class—from past students and some I found online.
* after they’ve chosen and read their sources, we do an in-class activity where the title and main points of each article are written on an index card, and students seek out relationships between the sources to help them figure out how to organize their paper.

**Why I love it:**

* I ask them to choose a topic that is important to them within their discipline, not to pick something “easy.” Many students use this paper as an opportunity to prepare themselves for an upcoming internship or job; to begin researching a topic for grad studies; to supplement their coursework in their major.
* Students often want to make a bold claim about their chosen topic, even when it is not supported by evidence. Because they aren’t making a claim or taking a position on their topic, the Lit Review forces them to write an honest report on their findings. They are far more even-handed and rational than their argument papers were.
* The Lit Review works really well with the poster presentations I schedule during the last week of classes. It is easier for them to explain a topic and teach their classmates about it than it is to develop and defend an argument, especially when it’s a controversial topic. They really enjoy *educating* their classmates on a topic that means a lot to them.