Chapter 15. Promoting Academic Skills through Writing: "The Survey of Academic Skills Essay" Assignment

Lisa Whalen

NORTH HENNEPIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The number of students arriving at college unprepared to complete college-level work has increased significantly during the past decades. In fall 2000, the U.S. Department of Education found that 42% of first-year students at public two-year colleges and 20% of first-year students at public four-year colleges required at least one remedial course before they were ready to enroll in college-level courses. By 2009, an ACT National Curriculum Survey found that only 26% of professors thought new college students were prepared for college-level assignments (5). Although students and faculty sometimes differ in how they define college readiness, these studies indicate that in addition to entering college without necessary content-area knowledge, many students lack basic academic skills, such as knowing how to study, manage time, prioritize, and communicate appropriately. These skills also happen to be in high demand but short supply across many of the job markets for which colleges are preparing graduates, according to a national survey of business and nonprofit leaders (Hart Associates). As a result, college faculty face a dilemma: Do we help students succeed by *stealing* time from course content to teach academic skills, or do we cover content thoroughly but risk leaving behind students who haven't mastered academic skills? How can we help students understand the value of such skills, not only for college, but for employment and civic engagement as well? Fortunately, composition instructors are in a unique position to teach both content and academic skills without short-changing either. The Survey of Academic Skills Essay, which can be applied to developmental or first-year writing courses, allows instructors to reinforce academic skills while also teaching academic writing. It implements intentional learning by asking students to become more self-aware of their academic strengths and weaknesses in order to plot a course to build on strengths and improve weaknesses. Through integrative learning, students apply the skills they are learning as part of the writing preparation and composition process.

Process and Product: An Overview of the Survey of Academic Skills Essay

Instructors disagree about whether composition courses should emphasize product or process, but some assignments highlight both. Although the Survey of

Academic Skills Essay (SASE) assignment is product-driven in that it asks students to submit an essay for grading, it emphasizes process by breaking the essay into a series of steps that illustrate the writing process. Like writing assignments students complete in many college courses, the SASE teaches time management skills that instructors want students to develop and that employers seek when hiring by requiring students to meet short-term deadlines while remaining focused on the long-term goal of turning in a polished essay (Maguire).

Step One: Defining Success

Step one of SASE launches the brainstorming stage of the writing process, introduces prioritizing, and reinforces time management. Students begin the assignment by responding in writing to the prompt "Define what it means to be a successful college student." To prevent automatic responses, such as "Get As in my classes" or "Do the homework," instructors can ask students to make lists of their short- and long-term goals, challenges they face in achieving their goals, and time they spend each week on other commitments, like jobs and family care. From this exercise, students generate personalized definitions of success based on realistic expectations. For example, to some, being a successful college student means balancing work, school, and family. To others, success in college means maintaining a particular GPA, being accepted into a program/major, or participating in as many campus activities as possible while still passing their classes.

Step Two: Developing a Survey

Step two of SASE introduces audience awareness and information-gathering in addition to the academic skills of self-presentation, communicating with peers, and receiving feedback. Each student creates a survey about becoming a successful college student, which he/she distributes to 10 people who are not members of our class. I provide a list of sample survey questions, for instance, *What resources (writing center, tutoring, study groups, etc.) do you find helpful?* and *What strategies do you use to avoid procrastinating?* Up to three questions on each student's survey may come from my list. Students must generate the remaining questions, for a total of five. Deciding what they want to learn from the survey encourages students to think about their strengths and weaknesses as learners and increases their investment in the assignment. Creating and distributing the surveys also teaches students to handle the specific time management challenges that arise while working with others because the longer they wait to create and distribute their surveys, the less time respondents have to complete and return them, which decreases students' ability to meet deadlines for the next steps in the assignment.

Developing these surveys also provides a brief introduction to the in-depth primary research students will be required to perform for future assignments, like the one described by Lynee Lewis Gaillet in "Primary Research in the Un-

dergraduate Writing Classroom." Exposure to primary research on a small scale allows students to discover the types of problems that can crop up and how to contend with them before beginning a higher-stakes research project, such as in a capstone project for their major, later on.

Students submit their surveys and a plan for distribution (e.g. via email, Surveymonkey, social media, or face-to-face conversation) to me. While requiring my approval may dampen students' ownership of their research, it provides two important benefits: it helps ensure survey questions will elicit useful responses, thereby sparking discussions focused on audience awareness, and it demonstrates how ongoing feedback and revision are integral to the writing process. For example, I emphasize audience awareness by pointing out how people outside of our class might be unfamiliar with the phrase "academic skills" and therefore unsure how to answer a question like "How can someone improve their academic skills?" I ask students who plan to distribute surveys via SurveyMonkey (a free tool for designing online surveys) if their respondents are likely to have enough computer literacy to answer questions online. I suggest surveys comprised of open-ended questions may be more effective if conducted online instead of face-to-face because respondents will have more time to think about their answers. In some cases, I recommend changing open-ended questions to multiple choice in order to produce analyzable data. In addition to changing their surveys to accommodate respondents' needs, students develop audience awareness by considering which responses will be most beneficial for their audience and therefore worth including in their essays.

As students distribute their surveys, they practice self-presentation. In a culture where consumers are regularly asked to complete surveys by restaurants, department stores, and repair shops, they have to figure out how to present themselves as serious scholars conducting worthwhile research so respondents will provide thoughtful answers. If students aren't getting any responses to their surveys, we talk about why that is and how they can increase the response rate.

Step Three: Analyzing Survey Responses

Step three ushers students into the planning stage of the writing process and teaches analysis and prioritization. I provide a chart (see Figure 15.1) with sample survey questions and responses that students complete by plugging in their survey results.

Students use their completed charts to analyze responses and then write a summary of what they learn. Writing the summary encourages students to prioritize by selecting only the most important ideas from the information they gathered, and then to state those ideas clearly and concisely in their own words. In college-level or research-based composition courses, I add a requirement: Students must find one or more outside sources and compare and contrast what the source(s) says about academic skills to their survey responses. Depending on

course goals and time constraints, I may also include lessons on locating sources and evaluating their credibility or change the essay from exploratory/reflective to argumentative.

Name of person who completed survey (or, if you don't want to use names, give each person a number)	Survey Question 1: How do you avoid procrastinating?	Survey Question 2: How do you study for exams?	Survey Question 3:	Survey Question 4:	Survey Question 5:
Pat	Write assignment due dates in the calendar on my iphone.	Use a free, online program to make flashcards			
Jim	List each day's homework in the planner I was given during the first week of classes.	Take notes on all readings and lectures. Review my notes with a study group before the exam.			

Figure 15.1: Sample Survey Response Chart

In addition to helping students generate ideas for their essays, the summary serves as a first step in planning how they will present their research to readers. I read and respond—either orally or in writing—to each student's summary and provide suggestions for turning the summary into an essay, which reinforces audience awareness, self-presentation, and the *looping* nature of receiving feedback and revising. It also prepares students for a workforce in which "employers are unequivocally telling [researchers] that they want graduates who can translate technical expertise and complex data into cogent, meaningful and persuasive arguments" (Maguire). Students practice these skills by deciding how best to use their data to develop and support thesis statements both before and during the drafting process.

Step Four: Writing a Rough Draft

Step four moves students into the drafting stage of the writing process and teaches them how to apply what they've learned. Application is particularly important for both retaining knowledge and succeeding in the job market. A 2013 survey of employers by Hart found that "applied knowledge, written and oral communication," and the ability to "conduct research and use evidence-based analysis" were among five key areas employers wanted colleges to emphasize. This assignment addresses each of those, particularly by asking students to reflect on and analyze what they've learned by responding to the following questions in their essay drafts:

- How do you define what it means to be a successful college student?
- What past experiences (good and bad) have shaped who you are as a student? as a writer?
- What did you think academic skills were before you began working on this assignment?
- What have you learned about academic skills from working on this assignment?

- What is/are the most useful thing(s) you've learned from this assignment?
- How can you use what you've learned about academic skills to become a successful college student?

By reflecting on past experiences, assessing current skills, and thinking about how they can apply what they've learned to form future habits, students begin forming, as Kathryn Crowther describes in her essay for this volume, "the routines and attitudes that will shape their approach to writing and to learning throughout their college and future careers." The earlier they form these routines and attitudes, the more integral those routines become to students' identities as successful college students.

Step Five: Using Feedback to Revise

Step five reintroduces the feedback-revising loop, this time as an *official* stage of the writing process. Through peer review, students learn to give and receive feedback, something they'll need to do in almost every aspect of their personal and professional lives. Many do not feel confident enough in their own writing skill to critique someone else's, and there is always a risk that students will give misguided advice. Still, I include peer review in the SASE assignment because it exposes them to the idea that there are many different ways to craft an essay from a single assignment. According to the National Capital Research Council, instructors can reduce the likelihood that students will provide misguided advice during peer review by establishing clear guidelines. Therefore, my students and I co-create a peer review checklist. A typical checklist includes the following:

- Identify the writer's thesis.
- Does it make a claim?
- Does it forecast the essay's main ideas?
- How could the claim and/or main ideas be stated more clearly?
- Examine each paragraph and identify topic sentence(s), supporting details, and transitions. If one of these is missing, indicate which one and where it is missing.
- Give at least one suggestion as to how the introduction could better grab readers' attention.
- Give at least one suggestion as to how the writer could make the conclusion more dynamic.
- Note any sentences that are unclear. What about them could be clearer?

I also impose a fairly standard structure on how peer review is conducted. The structure asks students to read their work aloud in small groups and discuss responses to the questions for each essay. A unique benefit of peer review for this assignment is that by reading peers' drafts, students teach each other what they've learned about academic skills, such as how to study for exams or what resources the college provides. Sharing feedback and knowledge of college resources is key

to students' success. In fact, studies show that "students who talk about substantive matters with faculty and peers . . . and receive frequent feedback on their performance typically get better grades, are more satisfied with college, and are more likely to persist [in college]" (Kuh). The link between social interaction and persistence is particularly strong for underprepared students (Kuh).

Separate from peer review, I provide written comments and, depending on time constraints, schedule one-on-one conferences to discuss students' drafts. Students are required to schedule the conference in advance, show up on time, and bring questions about their drafts, thereby practicing time management and self-presentation. Lastly, I encourage students to seek additional feedback by offering a chance to increase their final essay score by half a letter grade (e.g. B to B+) if they submit a signed form showing they met with a Writing Center tutor. After peer review and conferences, students use all of the feedback they have received to revise their rough drafts.

Step Six: Presenting Survey Results

If time permits, students present their survey results to the class. Presenters must make their research clear and interesting for their audience, occasionally incorporating charts, graphs, or other audio/visual elements, which requires additional reflection on their data and audience needs. Members of peer review groups provide moral support for the nervous and lead the applause once a presentation is over, thereby strengthening social relationships. Presenters and audience members discover they can learn from one another, which is a revelation to many. As Gaillet points out in her essay in this volume, primary research allows students to "become the experts on topics in which they are vested." Seeing themselves as experts on academic skills helps them develop confidence in their ability to become successful college students and to offer support to peers.

Step Seven: Submitting a Final Draft

Preparing to submit a final draft includes editing and proofreading, though how much time we spend on them depends on time constraints. Students assess the strengths and weaknesses of their essays and consider one last time how to best present what they have learned to their audience. Then, I give students feedback in the form of a detailed grading rubric.

Feedback from Students: Reflections on the Assignment

According to students' essays and comments on course evaluations, this assignment has been successful in teaching a range of writing, academic, and life skills. Most comments fall into one of three categories: discovery of new resources, increased awareness of habits, and improved writing.

Several students indicated that as a result of this assignment they began using campus resources such as the Writing Center, the Advising Office, and the Career Services Center for the first time—an improvement over 2013 CCSSE (Community College Survey of Student Engagement) results for NHCC that indicated although 75% of students surveyed rated tutoring services as "somewhat important" or "very important," only 27% reported using those services. Responses for financial aid advising, transfer credit assistance, academic advising, and career planning ranged from 78-90% of students rating them important but only 15-55% of students using them (Olson 14). Data indicates students don't use the services unless given a good reason because so much of their time outside of class is taken up by work and family responsibilities. However, if convinced by a source they trust—a peer—that a college service is beneficial, they make time to use it (Olson 12-14).

In analyzing responses to her survey about studying for exams, one student noted, "I was surprised how many people use study groups. It seems like a smart and helpful resource." Another student summarized the links between devising a survey question, analyzing responses to it, and applying what she learned from the responses—a mirror of both learning and writing processes:

> I wanted to know specifically what strategies are used to avoid falling behind on homework or in a class. . . . [S]ixty percent [of respondents] said that they spread [the work] out or put Post-It notes all over to remind them, forty percent said that they just do it, ten percent said that if they are having problems they will go to a tutor to get help. I found this very helpful and plan to go to the writing center for some assistance in writing a stronger paper.

Students' comments about their own writing reflected increases in audience awareness and willingness to invest time in the writing process. One such comment explained, "I cannot stress the importance of brainstorming, proofreading and acknowledging your target audience. Before this assignment I lacked the understanding of these three skills in writing. I now understand that every writing needs to have effective ideas and an understanding of the target audience."

Some of the most insightful comments described students' increasing awareness of their habits and of the relationship between habits and success. A student whose survey focused on organization summarized her results this way: "[My respondents use] a planner. Many of them put their class times down, when they will study and do homework, when everything is due and when tests are. I truly believe by staying organized helps you to become a better student." Another student discovered links between motivation, habits, and success:

> . . . [O]ne of my participants said she prepares for class by mentally motivating herself to be ready for whatever she will be learning that day. . . . [Now] I mentally motivate myself by thinking of the life I'm going to have after I graduate. I know in order to graduate,

> I need to get good grades and actively participate [in class].

These comments also ranged from a narrow focus on one habit to the nature of habits in general. Regarding her time management habits, a student wrote, "One of the first problems that needed to be changed was my inability to manage time effectively . . . . It's amazing how prioritizing my life had such significance. I started getting better grades in school and my overall stress level was reduced . . . ." A second student described her learning process:

> Prior to developing the survey and learning study habits of others, I thought academic skills were how smart one was . . . . After developing the survey and reading the responses from individuals, I now understand that academic skills refer to much more . . . . Academic skills refer to habits and practices that the student has in preparation for each task handed out by the instructor.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important thing I've learned from this assignment is that when students perceive a direct link between what they are learning and how it will benefit them, they are more likely to become invested in their education and to take ownership of their learning. That, after all, is the aim of integrative learning. As an added bonus, my investment in students' learning increases along with theirs. The essays document students' growth as human beings in ways that both they and I find rewarding.

Works Cited

ACT National Curriculum Survey 2009. *ACT.* 2009, www.act.org/research/policy-makers/pdf/NationalCurriculumSurvey2009.pdf.

Hart Research Associates. "It Takes More than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success: Overview and Key Findings." *Association of American Colleges & Universities*,10 Apr. 2013, aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf.

Kuh, George, D. "What Student Engagement Data Tells Us about College Readiness: Student Preparation, Motivation, and Achievement." *Association of American Colleges & Universities,* 2007, www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/what-student-engagement-data-tell-us-about-college-readiness

Maguire Associates. "Employers Rate Internships and Work Experience as Most Important Criteria for Hiring College Graduates; Although Deeper Look Shows How Much They Still Value Liberal Arts Outcomes." *Insights for a Changing Economy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014.

Olson, Sheryl. "Overview of the 2013 CCSSE Survey Results." Office of Institutional Effectiveness, North Hennepin Community College, 2013.