Teaching the Analytical Life

Brian Jackson

Using a survey of 138 writing programs, I argue that we must be more explicit about what we think students should get out of analysis to make it more likely that students will transfer their analytical skills to different settings. To ensure our students take analytical skills with them at the end of the semester, we must simplify the task we assign and teach deliberately for transfer. If we can teach students to evaluate rather than just interpret an argument, we will teach them to be citizen-critics engaging in public debate over the merits of arguments about issues that influence us all.

“I wonder if you people aren’t a bit too—well, strong, on the virtues of analysis. I mean, once you’ve taken it all apart, fine, I’ll be first to applaud your industry. But other than a lot of bits and pieces lying about, what have you said?”

—Roger Mexico, in Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow (88)

I. The Analytical Life

It is very likely that at some point this semester, most of us who teach writing will tell our students to go find something to analyze. We might give them books filled with speeches, essays, articles, and images—anthologized, commercially-packaged, and waiting to be vivisected. Or we may send students into the world of commercial messages, political speeches, poems, artwork, Web sites, and films and tell them to choose, from that cacophony, a single artifact upon which to inflict a new and often Greek-sounding taxonomy of interpretation. Sometimes we mandate a single text. (“This semester we will analyze the film Crash.”) Sometimes we tell students to analyze their own souls.

Like the research paper, the analysis is one of the most popular school genres for the first-year writing course, and, like the research paper, it flourishes by the weight of its own tacit tradition. As an evolutionary product of literary and rhetorical criticism, analysis has become so much a part of the curriculum that we hardly know it’s there. Its purpose goes without saying; we all know why we assign analysis, so why talk about it? The tacit-ness of the genre is evident in the professional literature where the only reliable place in the last fifty years we find helpful specifics about teaching analysis is the textbooks and handbooks. It seems as a discipline that we have moved on to other concerns. However, since most of us teach analysis in some form or another, we might want to deliberate more about why we teach our most popular genre.
Arguing for analysis is picking the low fruit; its importance, it seems, is self-evident. The power to analyze is one of those “trained capacities” John Dewey speaks of that helps students understand, evaluate, or resist the never-ending stream of commercial, political, institutional, and social messages that pummel them twenty-four hours a day (Dewey *The Early Works* 5: 76). We analyze texts to understand, appreciate, or defend ourselves. In a metacognitive sense, our analytical skills (or lack thereof) often determine our quality of life in concrete ways. Analysis comes into play in both the prosaic and the profound: when we consumers get a bill we don’t understand or a contract with small print; when campaign committees and comedians look over speech transcripts of political adversaries; when lawyers pore over Supreme Court decisions and tax accountants study the tax code; when old widows and widowers receive mail from faux charities and scams; when voters read propositions and referenda; when college students get scolding e-mails from parents and ambiguous text messages from romantic interests; when we want to understand or appreciate a text or artifact or event more deeply than we already do. Sometimes we perform analysis when it seems our love lives, careers, finances, or way of life is at stake in the interpretation and/or evaluation of a document. As Gerald Graff has argued, the intellectual life is the analytical life (*Clueless* 96-7).

At least this is the sales pitch our students get when it comes time to analyze “Once More to the Lake” once more. It is a good pitch, all things considered. In essence we promise students that what they learn from us will go with them to other contexts and give them power in their personal, professional, and public lives—power, more specifically, to analyze texts (e.g., newspaper articles, presidential speeches, advertisements, popular films) to determine their merits and demerits. Are we delivering on this promise? Are we teaching the analytical life? Or is the analytical essay a “school genre,” as David Smit argues, that often does not “really convey any information to anyone who needs the information, nor really try to persuade anyone of any particular viewpoint” (165)? Since provisional survey data suggest that analysis is the central component of first-year writing, we should, as Elizabeth Wardle recommends, engage the transfer issue and come to terms with this pervasive genre (66). If we want analysis to be more than “just practice” (Smit 165), we must be more explicit about what we think students should get out of it. We should also simplify the task of analysis to make it more likely that students will transfer their analytical skills to different settings.

II. Analysis in the Undergraduate Curriculum

Dictionary definitions of analysis invoke an act of dissection—pulling something apart to see what it’s made of, to see how it is composed. To
analyze is to determine how the parts make the whole or how the whole fits into a bigger whole. In the writing program where I work, graduate students teach the general concept of analysis to FYC students by dumping out the contents of a backpack, supposedly left in the room by a student from a previous class, and asking students to infer from the contents what the owner is like. Analysis is a standard skill for any discipline, any profession, any intelligent way of life, and since it is such a broad, generalizable skill we find different interpretations of what it is, what it’s worth, and how to teach it.

In English Studies, analysis is a reading skill. Adler and van Doren call analysis a third-level reading skill, after elementary (essential literacy) and inspectional (prereading, skimming, etc.) reading. Analysis involves—or at least can involve—classifying a text, situating it in a context, discovering its structure, decoding its terms, laying bare its strategies, revealing its argument, and (in some instances) evaluating its worth (Adler and van Doren 59). To complicate matters, advances in New Media Studies and visual rhetoric make analysis less an act of literacy than of semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 19-20). At any rate, the only way to find out whether students know how to do this is to get them to write their reading, which makes analysis a composing skill as well. English students in the 1880s wrote analyses in the very first freshman composition courses taught by Adams Sherman Hill, who hoped, together with his boss, Francis James Child, Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard, that students “would acquire a taste for good reading” by doing so (Brereton 48). Harvard’s entering freshmen took written examinations that required them to “discuss the rhetorical qualities” or “give [their] opinion of the literary worth” of passages from writers like Milton, Defoe, Pope, Hawthorne, and Longfellow (Brereton 441). Mimesis was a secondary goal: by analyzing great writing, Hill’s students would adopt “better forms of expression” (Brereton 48). Likewise, in his Handbook of Rhetorical Analysis, published in 1891, John Genung introduced students to the “science” of analysis as the only true way “to make, or to discover, [their] own rhetoric” by studying good models (Genung vii). In fact, for most of the history of teaching rhetoric analysis was not necessarily an act of interpretation but a process students went through to learn to appreciate and imitate exemplary texts (see Clark; Fahnestock and Secor 178; Gross and Keith).

It is likely, and unsurprising, that compositionists teach interpretive analysis so pervasively in first-year writing because of our professional interests in literary and rhetorical criticism. We teach analysis often because we “do” analysis, in some way or another, for a living. More accurately, we do history, theory, and criticism; freshmen do analysis. (If they go on to study in English or Communication, they have a 6% or 13% chance, respectively, of taking upper-division courses in rhetorical theory or criticism. If they major in English, they’ll have at least a 70% chance to take a course in literary theory

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or criticism; around 40% are required to take such a course. See Jackson 193; Huber.) It is just as likely that analysis plays such a leading role in the curriculum out of pedagogical necessity, or inertia. Close reading practices evolved at the turn of the twentieth century in the newly-minted English departments where students came “face to face with the work itself,” in the words of Indiana’s chair of English in 1895 (Graff Professing 123). Criticism—close reading—was meant to be liberating for students. No longer did they have to muddle through histories or biographies or etymologies; neither did the teachers. “Given the vast unknowns on both sides of the lectern,” writes Gerald Graff, reflecting on his experience as an amateur teacher, “the work itself was indeed our salvation” (Graff Professing 179). In reality, the “work itself” has never been fully sufficient for student writers. Instructors teach vocabularies fixed by research interests in poetics, linguistics, rhetoric, argumentation, philosophy, semiotics, and cultural studies to load the toolbox that students are asked to lug with them to the text. A mixture of professional interests, curricular history, and program necessity has kept analysis in composition whether it continues to be useful or not.

In spite of the critique that analysis is a school practice, it is clear that we value it as a cognitive skill that potentially transfers to new situations, even if the analysis paper, like Spam, does not exist in the natural world. In 1981, analysis was “the most frequent kind of school writing” in grade school, according to Applebee’s influential study (qtd. in Hillocks 58). Tracking university-level writing, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), in cooperation with The Council of Writing Program Administrators, discovered in their 2008 survey of 23,000 students that “the most common writing tasks were to analyze something or argue a position” (“Promoting Engagement” 21). NSSE categorized analysis as a “higher-order writing” activity, along with summarization and argument, and reported that both first-year students and seniors analyzed or evaluated something in 91% of the papers they wrote (22). This evidence suggests that in spite of Smit’s argument that analysis is a school (i.e. artificial) genre written in isolation of real needs and situations, most first-year and university writing programs value and teach it anyway. The reason for this is not hard to puzzle out. As my survey discussion that follows suggests, writing teachers and administrators seem to believe that we can acclimate students to the cognitive process of analysis in all its intricacy by assigning students to do it as calisthenics for future analytical acts. Amy Devitt has argued convincingly that we salvage first-year writing from obsolescence in part by seeing the analytical essay as an “antecedent” genre that students can draw from when they need to analyze artifacts in their own fields as majors, which again, according to the NSSE, they do in 91% of their writing as seniors (202).
III. Our Favorite Assignment: A Survey

To get a better sense of how analysis pervades the curriculum, in Winter 2009 my research assistants, Ty Campbell and Jalena Reschke, and I administered an online survey to which 138 writing program administrators and first-year writing instructors responded. We targeted a sample of colleges and universities from the Carnegie Foundation’s nine categories of bachelor-granting institutions, from baccalaureate colleges to research-intensive institutions. Since we could not always find writing program administrators, particularly in the baccalaureate and liberal arts colleges, we asked first-year writing instructors from these institutions to respond. Of the 138 responses we received, 105 identified their institutional affiliation: roughly 36% (38 schools) identified as baccalaureate colleges, 36% as masters colleges and universities (38), and 27% as research universities (29), according to the Carnegie Foundation classifications. Though I cannot argue that our sample is technically representative of national practice, I believe the responses we received suggest trends across the board in first-year writing programs. In the survey, 92% of respondents said they assign students to perform analysis in FYC (see Table 1); 78% assign it more than once, and of that group we found dozens who assign three or more analyses to first-year students. These numbers seem to reinforce the NSSE findings that analysis is trendy in the university curriculum. Even the research paper is not as popular in first-year writing. According to our survey, 80% of programs and instructors assign research writing in the first year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>92%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion paper (e.g., editorial or other argumentative essay)</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal writing (e.g., narrative or personal essay)</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog, wiki, Web page, or other online writing</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative writing (e.g., fiction, drama, or poetry)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>26%</td>
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* A few answers: visual analysis, ad analysis, critical inquiry, article analysis, evaluative paper, contextual analysis, “we don’t

Table 1: What major writing assignments are your first-year students required to complete? Mark all that apply.
necessarily call it anything particular,” “no program—we all do our own thing.”

Names for analysis assignments vary, and each name suggests a possibly unique theoretical approach to the proto-genre. Table 2 indicates that the most popular title is “rhetorical analysis,” with “analysis” and “critical analysis” coming in second and third. We did not refine our research tool enough to reveal whether respondents would have considered other terms as synonymous. For example, it would be interesting to know if someone who assigns a “textual analysis” would consider a rhetorical, critical, or discourse analysis the same thing. Would analysis by any other name smell as sweet? I assume that in spite of whatever similarities they might have, rhetorical analysis is not the same as literary analysis which is not the same as textual analysis, though they might share similar cognitive processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Analysis</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Analysis</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literary Analysis</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Reading</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Analysis</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Analysis</td>
<td>8%</td>
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**Table 2: What does your program call the analysis assignment(s)?**  
Mark all that apply.

If our respondents represent the rest of us, then we teach analysis for a variety of purposes, with a few trends worth noting. We found that 84% of our respondents said that it was “very important” to teach students how to evaluate an argument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses (see Table 3). The second most popular purpose for analysis was to teach students how to evaluate the effectiveness of an argument in terms of its context, audience, and original purpose. These two data suggest the endurance of rhetoric as theoretical grounds for teaching composition, in spite of those who continue to argue that they have nothing in common, or at least shouldn’t. Table 3 also reveals that at least 32% of respondents consider it “not important” to teach students to appreciate the aesthetic value of a text. Apparently writing teachers and program administrators favor the pragmatic value of teaching students how to evaluate the strength of an argument in its rhetorical situation over teaching them how to read like
liberal humanists appraising artistic merit, which is, we suggest, another sign that rhetoric reigns in first-year comp (and probably nowhere else in most English departments).

| Purpose                                                                 | Not Important | Somewhat Important | Very Important |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|               |
| To teach students how to interpret texts correctly through close reading | 10 (8%)       | 32 (26%)          | 82 (66%)      |
| To teach students how to appreciate a text’s aesthetic value             | 40 (32%)      | 63 (50%)          | 22 (18%)      |
| To teach students how to evaluate an argument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses | 4 (3%)        | 17 (14%)          | 103 (83%)     |
| To teach students how to evaluate the effectiveness of an argument in terms of its context, audience, and original purpose | 4 (3%)        | 21 (17%)          | 100 (80%)     |
| To prepare students for critical civic engagement                         | 17 (14%)      | 58 (46%)          | 50 (40%)      |
| To help students develop their own rhetorical skill through imitation     | 16 (13%)      | 46 (37%)          | 62 (50%)      |

Table 3: Which of the following purposes of analysis are important to your program? Please mark 3—very important, 2—somewhat important, 1—not important

But the data in Table 4 suggest that this judgment might be too hasty, since 57% of first-year programs still teach students how to analyze imaginative literature (i.e., fiction, drama, or poetry). The most popular kind of text in our sample, taught by 89% of our respondents, was the ubiquitous “essay,” that tried-and-true artifact of cultural observation presented to students in gargantuan anthologies that preserve E.B. White’s writing like amber preserves ancient bugs. (As of 1999, “Once More to the Lake” showed up in at least 40 anthologies, coming in second to George Orwell’s “The Politics of the English Language,” which was in 45. See Bloom 967-8.) The next popular artifact for analysis is the “media” text such as film, advertise-
ments, and television shows: 74% of writing programs assign some kind of media artifact for students to analyze. With sources like AmericanRhetoric.com, it is not surprising that 68% of our respondents have students analyze speeches, most likely political speeches that represent the deliberative and epideictic tradition of oratory that has flourished from the founding to the inauguration of Barack Obama. Additionally, at least 54% of us assign students to analyze digital media like Web sites or blogs, suggesting trends toward new media writing (see Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe and Sirc).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifacts or Texts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essays (e.g., literary journalism, nonfiction prose, public arguments, “Once More to the Lake” by E.B. White)</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film or other forms of mass media (e.g., film, music, advertisements, TV)</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speeches (e.g., Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech)</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative literature (e.g., fiction, drama, poetry)</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital media (e.g., Web pages, digital video)</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: What artifacts or texts does your program assign first-year writing students to analyze? Mark all that apply.

When it comes to the hermeneutical toolbox we present to students, rhetorical terms are favored over literary ones, though the distinction may not be completely helpful. 85% of our respondents “always” or “frequently” teach terms from informal logic like fallacies, claims, reasons, or induction, and 71% “always” or “frequently” teach classical rhetorical terms like ethos, pathos, and logos, while only 51% “always” or “frequently” teach literary terms like metaphor or diction (see Table 5). Of course, many of us would argue that metaphor and diction are rhetorical terms, but the teachers and administrators in our sample clearly favor approaches to analysis falling in Fulkerson’s “procedural rhetoric” category, with a strong leaning toward the tools of argumentation (Fulkerson 671).

What does this survey tell us? Though I cannot generalize with complete confidence, this survey is highly suggestive of how analysis pervades our first-year curriculum. It is widely taught, even more so than research writing or opinion writing. (75% of programs teach the opinion editorial, even though some writers like Patricia Roberts-Miller oppose it.) When asked how many times they assign analysis, administrators and instructors gave us numbers ranging from 2 to 10. One respondent wrote that most writing projects assigned are “rooted” in analysis. Another respondent took issue with the suggestion that analysis is an assignment or “paper,” since it smacked of “the
old ‘modes’ approach” that ignored the fact that all writing, according to this respondent, had an analytical component. “I don’t see analysis as a genre,” wrote another. “It’s a tool, a cognitive move, a way of reading critically.” And yet it continues to be the most popular writing task in first-year writing, with classical rhetoric and argumentation the most popular theoretical approaches. That more literary approaches, with more literary texts as artifacts, are less frequent is indicative of the enduring control of writing programs by those trained in or informed by rhetoric and composition. Furthermore, we tend to see analysis as a way of helping students evaluate the strength of an argument as it is situated in a rhetorical context of time, audience, and purpose—qualities not as apparent in more literary texts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical tool</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary or stylistic terms (e.g., metaphor, voice, diction)</td>
<td>12 (10%)</td>
<td>50 (40%)</td>
<td>41 (33%)</td>
<td>22 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical rhetorical terms (e.g., ethos, pathos, logos, kairos, stasis)</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
<td>33 (26%)</td>
<td>36 (29%)</td>
<td>52 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal logic terms (e.g., claims and reasons, assumptions, logical fallacies, warrants, induction/deduction)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>16 (13%)</td>
<td>44 (35%)</td>
<td>63 (50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: What analytical terms or tools most frequently are taught to first-year students in your program? Please mark 4—always, 3—frequently, 2—occasionally, and 1—never.*

**IV. Can We Teach the Analytical Life?**

The answer, I propose, is a qualified yes. I have described what I believe is the lay of the land as far as curriculum goes. I now turn to purpose. Surely we do not teach this kind of writing for its own sake. We believe, or at least our practices lead me to believe we
believe, that analytical skill is portable, that its methods go with students to new situations that require analytical reasoning. If it doesn’t, then the widespread practice of teaching analysis in a general writing course is suspect. Any discussion of analysis must take into account the contentious issue of *transfer*—whether the skills students learn in general writing courses go with them to different settings, different contexts (see Petraglia). It is not an easy issue, and, in fact, any conclusion that can be drawn from it, including mine, likely will be provisional without further research. Yet considering the assumptions the survey revealed, we must confront the transfer issue or admit that we teach analysis as a ritual act of faith borne of the sweet whisperings of our intuition. If we want to teach for the analytical life, we must be more attentive to the general principles we want our students to abstract from their analyses. It is not sufficient to say that *any* analytical activity will prepare students for *any other*. To ensure our students take analytical skills with them at the end of the semester, we must simplify the task we assign and teach deliberately for transfer.

Put simply, all learning implies transfer—the ability to take knowledge or a skill from one setting and apply it to another setting. In fact “the ultimate goal of schooling,” according to the National Research Council, “is to help students transfer what they have learned in school to everyday settings of home, community, and workplace” (73). Seen from one perspective, transfer is not a controversial concept. For example, after we learn to read Dr. Seuss as children, with some degree of success we can read comic books, the back of cereal boxes, or the jokes on the inside of a Laffy Taffy wrapper (see Perkins and Salomon). On the other hand, as two cognitive psychologists put it, “there is little agreement in the scholarly community about the nature of transfer, the extent to which it occurs, and the nature of its underlying mechanisms” (Barnett & Ceci qtd. in Lobato 431). That it happens is uncontested; how it happens is mysterious, and one hundred years of experimental research has yielded conflicting frameworks and conclusions that suggest—to put it blandly and anticlimactically—the need for further study.

Working either with this literature or independent of it, some composition scholars have concluded that teaching students transferrable skills (like analysis) in first-year writing is a lost cause, and their perceptive and sophisticated critique still stands as an open challenge to our widespread practice of teaching analytical writing in FYC (see Beaufort; Freedman; Petraglia; Russell; Smit). Though their methodologies may differ, their assumptions and conclusions are similar. All cast doubt on the efficacy of what Petraglia calls “general writing skills instruction” (GWSI), the kind of instruction that goes on in the first year, of which analysis is a part. GWSI, according to Petraglia, “has more to do with ‘doing school’ than it does with teaching students to perform rhetorical tasks” (89). First-year students have “little or no intrinsic motivation to act as rhetors,” and their audiences—mainly
us, let’s concede the point—are more intent on “evaluating” rather than understanding or using the writing (91). This was not an original critique when it came out in 1995, but it is a powerful and enduring critique that challenges FYC teachers to account for the genres they assign, especially analysis, the Spam of academic writing. (Would the “research paper,” then, be the bologna?)

In separate chapters in the provocative book *Reconceiving Writing, Re-thinking Writing Instruction*, published in 1995, Aviva Freedman and David Russell set up the theory behind the critique, echoed recently in works by Beaufort and Smit. Citing genre theorists, language-learning research, and some cognitive psychology, Freedman argues that we learn to write like we learn to speak—in rich social contexts “in response to a rhetorical exigence” (128). From fifteen years of research on Canadian students from elementary school to college, Freedman concludes that comp classrooms lack “the richly elaborated discursive context” of classes in the disciplines, where students pick up the ambience of discourse because the “what, where, when, how, and even why of writing” is more clearly articulated (136-7). Similarly, Russell leans on the work of Vygotsky and activity theory to argue for the apprenticeship model of learning to write. Since “writing does not exist apart from its uses” in a reticulate activity system, first-year writing instruction, insofar as it commits to teaching general writing skills, teaches very little (57). The kind of writing students perform when they analyze exists “for no particular activity system” beyond the classroom (57). Beaufort points out that without a specific discourse community in which to operate, students likely will not see writing assignments like analysis as “authentic” (54). This is what Smit means when he calls analysis a “school genre” (165) that depends on explicit instruction in an artificial environment for an artificial purpose for an artificial audience that, ostensibly, would be interested in reading an analysis of “Once More to the Lake.” It is difficult, indeed, to imagine anyone interested in that kind of analysis. (White himself, were he not dead, might gag at the prospect.) My guess is that many teachers, even at their most charitable, find this kind of writing less interesting than other kinds, or maybe any other kind.

Genre theorists have sought to overcome the transfer problem by making analysis a *metacritical* activity that has less to do with what texts say and more with what they do. Bawarshi (see also Devitt, Reiff, and Bawarshi) makes *genre analyses*—collecting texts in recurring rhetorical situations (like obituaries), examining the situations in which these texts are embedded, noticing textual regularities and irregularities, and analyzing in writing how text and context interact to create meaning—central to first-year writing (see Bawarshi 158). In *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*, Bawarshi argues that the actual genres first-year writers write are, to a degree, immaterial (168). The goal is to develop a transferrable skill, a content-less rhetorical
literacy, that will go with the student to future situations that require genre writing in professional and public life. This argument concedes a point to the critics of FYC mentioned earlier: It seems we cannot truly teach genres outside the contexts in which students will write them.

Then again, Beaufort’s study of “Tim,” the would-be engineer-writer, strongly suggests that students don’t really gain specialized rhetorical prowess in a field until they are writing on the job. In the end, it seems the genres do not transfer as well as we hope; we aim, rather, to teach students transferrable rhetorical principles that can be applied “to new situations” beyond FYC (Beaufort 151). “Rather than being artificial genres serving only composition courses,” argues Devitt,

the genres students acquire in our writing classes serve as antecedent genres when students move into other contexts—into discipline-specific courses, into workplaces, and into civic lives. If we ask students to write analytic essays in first-year composition, that genre will be available for them to draw from when they need to write a causal analysis in their history class, a report at work, or a letter to the editor. (204)

Of course the challenge for us is to articulate what analysis looks like as an antecedent genre, since the kind of analysis one does as a historian and the kind one does working for Hewlett-Packard will be very different. Yet as Lee Ann Carroll’s research has confirmed, analysis is an appropriate “literacy task” to teach students in the first year of college to prepare them for future tasks in their disciplines and beyond (Carroll 129-30).

One way to make analysis a more useful and transferrable antecedent genre is to make it more an exercise of situated evaluation than interpretation. By situated evaluation I mean asking students to evaluate the relative merits of a text for a specific purpose in a specific situation directly related to the students’ lives. To carry this point further, it will be useful to contrast what I am proposing with a common first-year genre: rhetorical analysis.

Analysis, indeed, has many instantiations, but one of the prevailing forms champions the how of texts over the what or the so what. As Bazerman and Prior explain, analysis tends to “focus on what texts do and how texts mean rather than what they mean” (3). They argue that students cannot interpret texts in this way unless they overcome their “natural” inclination to ask “what things mean” and start asking “what they do and how they mean” (8). Rhetorical analysis, assigned by 51% of our survey group, is one such assignment that asks students to analyze how a texts works in a particular situation for a particular audience that the student may or may not belong to. The standard model was pioneered by Herbert Wichelns, a speech critic at Cornell University in the early twentieth century. Before Wichelns, speech teachers taught speeches in the same way that writing teachers taught essays—as exemplary models to be imitated rather than interpreted (Medhurst
In an article published in 1925, Wichelns argued that rhetorical analysis “is concerned with effect” and “regards a speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation for the orator’s method of imparting his ideas to his hearers,” i.e., the hearers at the particular historical moment (26).

Rhetorical analysis requires the student to know something of the speaker and the situation, the intended audience and purpose, the main argument and the supporting evidence, the arrangement and style, and, most importantly, the “effect of the discourse on its immediate hearers,” which, in some instances, could be determined by studying news accounts of the speech event (29). Though speech communication scholars have moved far beyond this model in their discussion of criticism, English rhetoricians—especially those responsible for writing programs—have continued to define rhetorical analysis in pretty much the same way Wichelns did. For example, Jack Selzer defines rhetorical analysis as “an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language” (281). Similarly, for Fahnestock and Secor, rhetorical analysis (1) “pays attention to the who, when, where, and probably why of a text;” (2) “uses an identifiable vocabulary drawn from the rhetorical tradition,” which includes Aristotelian terms like *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*; (3) “identifies language choices that serve the rhetor’s ostensible purpose;” and (4) “seeks to uncover the argument of a text” (182-4).

On its face this kind of assignment seems incredibly valuable. It teaches students to look for the strategies writers, speakers, and performers use to persuade, convince, and move us. Yet a fundamental ambiguity exists that keeps us from making this kind of analysis as useful as it could be. A traditional rhetorical analysis in the mode of Wichelns would focus on audience—i.e., the intended audience of the artifact being analyzed. Selzer calls this “contextual [rhetorical] analysis” because it takes into account the specific context a text is embedded in. Normally when we read a text, we assume that we are the intended audience. But when we “read rhetorically” we essentially eavesdrop “on what someone is saying or writing to someone else,” and we “may or may not care much about the issue” (Selzer 282). “As a rhetorical analyst,” Selzer continues, “your job is not so much to react to these rhetorical acts as understand them better, to appreciate the rhetorical situation” (282). Leff and Mohrmann’s reading of Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech is a model of this kind of analysis, the kind that takes into account “the immediate rhetorical motives” behind the speech and its immediate audience of Northern Republicans on the eve of the Civil War (358).

This kind of assignment asks students to disengage themselves from the text, assume a position of critical distance, and then make analytical assumptions about how a text might be received based on what is understood of the original purpose and intended audience. To perform this analysis,
students make assumptions about why a text would be persuasive for an intended audience, and by so doing they commit what Steve Fuller calls an act of “humanist hubris” (292) by assuming that unknown, and reductively understood, audiences receive texts in the same way rhetorical critics do, and that audiences are consciously persuaded by the same “specter of hidden tropes” that rhetorical critics conjure up in their analyses (294). This critique of rhetorical analysis might be too dismissive; there is evident value in getting students to think creatively about how texts work in rich contexts for various audiences. But there may be a better way to engage students in the practice of rhetorical criticism, without leading them to make guesses about how Martin Luther King’s rhetoric would be received by his immediate historical audience in 1963 America. And there is a better way to ensure that students transfer their analytical abilities to other settings where the texts they encounter will not be as aesthetically rich.

I have been teaching rhetorical analysis for almost a decade and have been unhappy with the writing my students do. This, to me, is a sure sign that there is something wrong with my assignment and not my students. “My” assignment, however, is not really mine—rhetorical analysis is part of the bread and butter of a dozen textbooks and (I imagine) hundreds of programs in the comp world. To teach it, we give students articles frozen in time (like FDR’s speech after the Pearl Harbor attack) and introduce them to a forest of rhetorical terms they must first internalize and then use to analyze the texts they read. Sometimes (at least 68% of the time, according to our survey) these historical speeches make it impossible for students to do anything but appreciate the greatness of the good man speaking well. It shocks no one when a new semester of students finds the “I Have a Dream” speech eloquent and persuasive. When they write this kind of analysis, they plow over a plowed field as analytical observers whose critical faculties have been circumscribed. Students interpret not as contemporaries of King in a critical moment of public debate, but as necessarily awed appreciators of someone’s already established rhetorical skill. And even if they are assigned the task of evaluating the merits of a less-regarded argument, they do so outside the transaction, making somewhat reductive, and often painfully obvious, observations about how this ad or this speech or this essay persuades a target audience to which they do not necessarily belong.

Such approaches could, in fact, be useful to teach the “rhetoricality” of text in general, which Petraglia argues is all we can expect to transfer out of first-year writing (95). But I believe we must do more, or maybe less. If we can teach students to evaluate rather than just interpret an argument, we will teach them to be citizen-critics engaging in public debate over the merits of arguments about issues that influence us all. I argue that one problem with rhetorical analysis, as often taught, is that it focuses on “the efficacy of devices” rather than “the validity of arguments” (Fuller 294).
other words, it teaches students to appreciate or analyze how an apt metaphor works without asking them whether it should work, a question that brings both student and text into a live milieu of public debate—the kind of debate that matters right now. The word “critic,” as Noel Carroll points out in *On Criticism*, implies someone who makes judgments about the value of something and whose appraisal is itself argumentative. The critic occupies a “social role” in that he or she helps an audience understand the value of a text and form judgments of their own (Carroll 45). In this role, students seek to convince other members of protopublics and publics to be or not to be convinced by arguments meant to change the course of public attitude and behavior.

Situated evaluation treats texts as live missives in public conversations in the reticulate publics students inhabit. Gerard Hauser defines a public—small “p”—as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (61). These spaces emerge from the back and forthness of a rhetoric whose *telos* is practical judgment—the kind that helps us know how to feel, think, and act in the context of public controversy. From this perspective, an invitation to analyze is an invitation to act as judge, as a citizen among citizens; an invitation to write analysis, even in a situation as cloistered and seemingly removed as a first-year comp class, is an invitation to argue about the value of “actually occurring discourse” to help shape common judgment (Hauser 273).

This kind of orientation to a text is normative in the sense that students use the tools of critical thinking to exercise judgment about the relative merits of an argument. Scholars of critical thinking divide the cognitive task of analysis into two main parts: identifying an argument (i.e., deciding the argument’s claims, reasons, assumptions, and conclusions) and evaluating an argument (i.e., testing assumptions, ambiguities, or omissions) to determine whether it is convincing (see Dick; Ennis; Fisher). Unlike the standard rhetorical analysis of “Once More to the Lake” that determines its already over-determined strategies, this kind of evaluative critical thinking has a direct influence on the lives of our students since it helps them conclude “what to believe or what to do in a given context” (Giancarlo and Facione 30). Students use what Hauser calls “local norms of reasonableness” to help others evaluate arguments in the deliberative sphere they belong to (61). And of course a student’s analysis is itself argumentative, as are the norms they use to evaluate a text.

Unlike other forms of analysis, this approach has been shown to transfer to other domains in research studies. In an article in *American Psychologist* that summarizes the research, Diane Halpern describes critical thinking as “the purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed” process “involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making

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decisions” (450-1). It is a “higher-order cognitive skill,” as the NSSE report argues, but it should also be taught as a metacognitive activity that is “reflective, sensitive to the context, and self-monitored” (Halpern 451). If students are taught analysis explicitly and deliberately as a transferrable skill, they will be more prepared in future experiences to activate the steps of critical analysis. Such “focusing phenomena,” as Lobato calls them, “regularly direct students’ attention toward certain properties or patterns” they will encounter later (442). If we can make the properties and patterns of analysis far more simple than we have in the past, students will leave our classrooms prepared to analyze arguments in other settings.

This last semester my students and I met one morning to talk about Facebook—more specifically, to talk about an article in the student newspaper about Facebook. A student-journalist had written a trenchant critique of the online social networking site, and I wanted to know whether my students accepted the critique. We looked at the reasons, lined up like soldiers with weapons drawn. The writer argued that Facebook led students to withdraw from “authentic” relationships, that it could be addictive, that it celebrated superficial friendships, and invited dissemblance—all commonplaces about social networking sites. Some of the students were convinced; some weren’t. The conversation, though, turned into a debate about the unwritten assumptions (called warrants by Toulmin) that tied the assertions together. One student concluded that if Facebook was inauthentic, then phone conversations were as well. Another pointed out that the critique against adding acquaintances to your profile assumed no possible benefits for doing so. Ultimately my students were trying to convince each other to accept or reject an argument meant for them, in their rhetorical situation, with kairotic importance for their lives now lived.

The analytical life I imagine for my students begins with the deliberative discourse students inhabit as citizens and group members. Instead of analyzing John Muir’s “Save the Hetch-Hetchy Valley,” a fine essay that could be usefully assigned for other tasks, students should analyze the latest political discourse on health care or their college’s policies. As citizen critics, they need to know how to identify and evaluate salient vernacular arguments whose authors want students to think or act in certain ways, to vote and consume in certain ways, to be subjected to power dynamics in certain ways (see Hauser). By reframing analysis as an act of critical evaluation, we not only loose ourselves from the power of the commercially-packaged readers, we teach, in the words of John Dewey, “critical sense and methods of discriminating judgment” that makes coordinated political action possible (Later Works 337). In addition, if we reframe the assignment as a public act of evaluation, we give our students a rich rhetorical situation to inhabit analogous to the deliberation about the Constitution and other
public disagreements that require rhetorical analysis, the antecedent genre of critical democracy.

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**Works Cited**


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