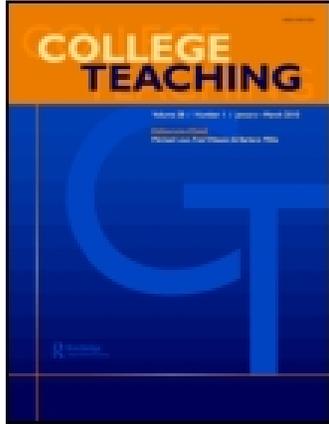


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Improving Students' Formal Writing: The IDOL Writing Device

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QUICK FIXES

Improving Students' Formal Writing: The IDOL Writing Device

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Consistent with the student-centered learning movement in higher education, college teachers have increasingly utilized student-active teaching formats and methods as primary modes of undergraduate instruction. Student-active teaching can take a variety of forms: role playing, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and the case method (Nilson 2010). A primary objective of student-active teaching is for students to connect disciplinary concepts and theories to “real-world” activities by drawing on personal experiences, documenting field observations, and collecting primary data (e.g., interviews, surveys). Such assignments introduce basic research skills while sensitizing students to academic reasoning and writing.

One useful and widely used form of academic reasoning and writing is Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik's (1984) claim-data-warrant model. Toulmin and colleagues noted that all scholarship offers some sort of claim. Next, data is offered as evidence to support the claim. Finally, it argues that the evidence sufficiently justifies the claim. Although this model is relatively simple and can sensitize students to “the need to include all three elements in every piece of formal writing they do” (Nilson 2010, 224), we found that our students often struggled to incorporate all three elements in their writing. In particular, we noticed that students frequently did not provide sufficient explanation to connect the examples they provided to relevant course concepts/theories.

In order to improve students' formal writing, we created an acrostic-based mnemonic device to aid students in constructing and supporting arguments in a manner consistent

with the claim-data-warrant model. We call it the *IDOL writing device*:

- I Identify a specific claim
- D Develop an argument to support your claim
- O Offer an example(s) that supports your argument
- L Link the example(s) to the claim

This device highlights the need for students to make a specific claim and further describe the claim by providing additional details. It also reminds students to incorporate examples from their experiences, observations, survey responses, or other forms of data. Finally, it asks students to explain how the examples connect to the claim being made.

We use the device in a variety of ways during in-class exercises or homework assignments. We often ask students, for example, to identify the different elements of their arguments in initial drafts of their own papers or published articles by marking the sentences with one of the letters of the acrostic. The device can also be used in peer review exercises by asking students to identify the elements in other students' writing.

Using the IDOL writing device allows students to remember the crucial elements of making and supporting arguments in formal writing by introducing academic reasoning. Once students have learned to incorporate each of these elements into their writing, they can then focus on improving the content and quality of their arguments.

REFERENCES

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