

Declaring Your Independence (From the Five-Paragraph Essay)

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Set the stage for students to name writing functions—i.e., develop a lexicon—on their own with an active reading exercise.

Writing Focus: *key words*
Project Stage: *brainstorming*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Student Preparation: *none*
Estimated Time: *55-60 minutes*

EXERCISE

Prep Work: The instructor should prepare three handouts: 1) the *Declaration of Independence* (or an alternative document); 2) Active Reading Questions (see sample below); and 3) “A Writing Lexicon.”

Step One: (20 minutes) Distribute the *Declaration* and the Active Reading Questions handout. Divide students into groups of three, and ask them to take 20 minutes to read the document and begin answering questions with their group members. It’s worth explicitly saying that you’re not collecting their responses so they don’t think you’re quizzing them (especially if this is used on the first day).

Helpful Hint: Since it will be quiet while students are reading, it’s possible that they will be anxious about breaking that silence to start discussion. After they’ve been reading for five minutes, I usually prompt them to start talking to each other. I’ll wander between the groups to listen, and lightly intervene if necessary.

Step Two: (20 minutes) Lead a discussion based on their observations of the text. There’s no need to proceed in the exact order of the questions, though starting with #1 gets them to *thesis* right away. As you hit on lexicon terms, collect them on the board (using either the “proper” lexicon terms or the terms the students develop, it doesn’t matter). You’ll probably get *thesis*, *structure*, *evidence*, and *key words*, or their close equivalents. If you’re lucky you’ll get *analysis*, *sources*, and *orienting*. It’s not likely that you’ll get *motive* per se, but they *are* likely to mention audience or purpose and you can spin that toward motive.

Helpful Hint: It’s crucial that you spend time on motive (or its component parts), because it’s the high-order concept likely to be most mysterious. If they don’t get there on their own, you can prompt them by saying something like “We all care about the *Declaration* because of its historical legacy, but it wasn’t obvious at the time it would earn that legacy. In the text itself, how does Jefferson try to convince us that his argument matters?”

Step Three: (10 minutes) As the discussion develops, encourage students to draw links between the various sections of the *Declaration*, and then generalize to similar relationships between lexicon elements. Track these relationships on the board. For example, students will likely connect Jefferson’s long list of grievances against George III as supporting the basic claim that the colonists should secede. This is an opportunity for you to link evidence to thesis via analysis.

Step Four: (optional, 5-10 minutes) Now that your students have named half or more of its terms, pass out “A Writing Lexicon” (and perhaps assign it for the next class). If you have time, ask them to scan it quickly now, and see if they can find any of the elements absent in your discussion from Steps Two and Three in the text of the *Declaration*.

Step Five: (~3 seconds) Quietly congratulate yourself. Your class now has a working vocabulary to describe academic writing.

REFLECTIONS

I use this exercise the first day of my Writing Seminar. Much of my teaching centers on creating conditions for students to develop important principles for themselves, in the hopes that inductive discovery proves stickier than listening to deductive lecturing. The Active Reading Questions lead them to identify and assess the key writing functions they’ll work with all semester. They might not volunteer the exact terms in the lexicon, but that’s less important than their ability to identify the functions those terms represent. You could easily hand out the lexicon first and ask students to find the different terms operating in the *Declaration*. It would certainly save time. But the discussions that result from *not* having the terms are the whole point of the exercise.

This plan is easily adapted to any type of course. It hinges on finding a short text, or self-contained excerpt of a longer one, that is substantively useful for your class and reasonably understandable to your students before you’ve taught them anything. For bonus points, choose a text that is both familiar and “authoritative,” so that it will not have occurred to your students to subject it to critical scrutiny. The *Declaration* is a fun selection in part because of what happens when students discover they are allowed to criticize Thomas Jefferson. The license to do so introduces students to their role as active scholars and critics rather than passive recipients of others’ ideas. Examples of alternative texts include Descartes’s “First Meditation,” sections 25-27 of Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, and excerpts from Chapter 14 of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* or Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet.”

The *Declaration* is a fairly easy read, but a modified version of the Active Reading Questions (using the “real” lexicon terms) can be used to help students break down and make sense of more difficult texts. Once I made the dubious decision to assign William James’s “What Pragmatism Means” in my Writing Seminar. When my students failed to make much headway and politely suggested that I might be insane, an impromptu version of this exercise came to the rescue. It helped them better imagine what James was trying to convey and, more importantly, ask stronger analytical questions of the text.

Active Reading Questions (sample)

Instructions: Read the *Declaration of Independence*. In your small group, work with the text to answer the following questions in as much detail as possible:

1. Distill Jefferson's words into three sentences or less. At its core, what does the *Declaration* say?
2. Mark the major transitions in the *Declaration* by dividing it into sections. How many major sections do you think there are?
3. What led you to divide the sections in the way you did? What distinguishes each one from the next?
4. Look again at each section you've marked off. What is the relationship between that section and your answer to Q1? What does each section *do*?
5. Circle up to five words or phrases that seem particularly significant to Jefferson's argument. Why do they matter?
6. Underline your favorite sentence, and explain why it's your favorite.
7. Where do you find yourself especially persuaded or impressed by Jefferson's writing? What makes you feel that way?
8. Where do you find yourself resistant to or skeptical of Jefferson's writing? What makes you feel that way?