

1. A General Review of the Writing Situation

Christopher Perkins

In Composition II, there is a general understanding that students have all written essays and have a sense of what composition is and what will be required of them. This chapter will give a brief review of some basic concepts that are important to composition, offer a general definition and outline of an essay, introduce some concepts specific to Composition II, and explain how the study of humor relates to composition, research, and critical thinking.

Because we all come to this class from different experiences and perspectives, it is necessary to make sure we all understand basic concepts and have a shared vocabulary. This chapter will provide those things. If it has been a while since you took Composition I or wrote an essay, you may want a more thorough review of the writing process. I highly recommend reading through the Wikihow article “How to Write an Essay (With Pictures)” any time you are struggling with the writing process or need a good refresher on the things you should already know.

What is an Essay? How to Think About and Organize Your Essays

You’ve all written an essay at some point, but it always helps to stop and define our terms at the beginning of any process. So what is an essay?

No doubt, lots of things are going through your mind as you think about that question. Maybe you’re thinking about those 5-paragraph essays that many of you learned to write in high school (those are great for timed writing and exams!). Maybe you’re thinking about something you read or wrote in Comp I. Maybe you’re thinking about sadness and suffering—the response that many people have to being told they have to write an essay. All of these are valid responses to the question “what is an essay?”

I always like to start our course by thinking about how the essay is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. If you look up the word “essay” there, you’ll find that there are two forms of the word available: a noun and a verb. Obviously, when we say “essay” normally we are using the noun form: a thing, defined by the *OED* as “a composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject.”

But what about the word “essay” as a verb? That’s an odd idea to a modern reader, and the dictionary does point out that this usage is mostly *obsolete*. However, it provides an interesting way of thinking about what we do in Composition classes to consider the verb definition of “essay” as “to try,” “to test,” and “to attempt.” Thinking about this, the practice of essaying—trying out and testing ideas, attempting to see things clearly and/or in new ways—becomes more active and interesting.

In this class, we will be actively trying out new ways of thinking and writing about a subject that is probably somewhat familiar to us already, but that many of us have not examined too carefully: humor. In doing so,

you will try new things, test new theories, and attempt to develop a clear and thorough understanding of this subject through writing. This mindset will encourage you to be active and experimental in your thinking about our subject. From that perspective, you will compose your essays.

Three-part Organization

While I encourage you to think about things in new ways in this class, when it comes to organizing your thoughts, there are some standard practices to keep in mind. All good essays—even experimental ones—contain three basic parts that you should be familiar with and work to include in your written compositions:

1. Introduction—where topics are introduced, context is given, and the thesis (main point) is clearly stated.
2. Body—where the thesis is supported with examples, evidence, logical argument, research, and more. This is the primary focus of Composition II. In this class, we build good body paragraphs with strong evidence and analysis.
3. Conclusion—where your main ideas are reiterated and built upon. A good conclusion leaves a reader with a clear understanding of what they've just read and why it matters.

What is Comp II? A Course Map

At TCC, Composition II is a continuation of Composition I that furthers analytical reading skills, academic writing, and techniques of research and documentation. In order to accomplish that goal and the various Course Learning Outcomes that are outlined in our course syllabus, this class focuses on the specific theme of humor. By focusing on one idea for the whole semester and approaching it from multiple perspectives through reading, writing, and research, we will further our skills and develop a degree of expertise in both composition, and the subject of humor.

As you work through this book and this semester, you will be working through the process of how we develop expertise in any subject or field. The steps we take throughout this semester to develop an expertise on the subject of humor can then be applied to any subject that you may wish to understand more deeply.

Here's what that process looks like:

Step 1: Identify Prior Knowledge

What do you know already about the subject?

What opinions do you have about the subject and why?

Step 2: Inquiry and Analysis

What do you want or need to know next?

What key terms or essential ideas need to be defined to understand the subject?

What works exist about the subject already?

What does that work add to my knowledge?

Step 3: Practical/Real-World Application

What examples of the subject do you encounter in everyday life?

How does the subject relate to you, your life, your job, your major, etc.?

Now that you know a little more (from step 2), what new questions do you have?

Step 4: Research and Information Synthesis

Gather all relevant information.

What scholarship exists on the subject?

What conversations exist and what are they saying?

How do the various texts you find come together to enhance and complicate your understanding of the subject?

Step 5: Develop Your Idea and Argument

Having identified the subject and defined it, what do you want to say about it?

Having identified the conversation surrounding the subject, what can you add to it?

How does the subject relate to and enhance you and your interests?

Why Humor? How This Book and This Course Work

Now that we've got a basic understanding of what this course is and what we'll be working toward, one question remains: why humor?

The answer is simple: because humor is something that most of us have some experience with, but that we very rarely think too critically about. This makes it a perfect subject for Composition II because you will have some prior knowledge (what makes you laugh, for example), but there's a lot out there to learn and use to further your understanding.

Think about it, when was the last time you laughed? Was it today? Yesterday? Some time this week?

Most people will have laughed about something in the last week, but how many of you, after laughing, stopped and asked questions about what you were laughing at, why, and what that says about you and the world you live in? Most of us don't do that. In general, we laugh, we enjoy it, and we move on with our lives.

This book will ask you to do a little more than that. It will ask you to really think about the things that make you laugh and in doing so to take a critical perspective toward a part of life that you may have previously taken for granted. Doing this will force you to ask questions and examine experiences in new ways that will then impact your reading, writing, and research skills. Beyond that, this work will also require you to think deeply about yourself and your world. As we will see, studying the things that makes us laugh requires that we look carefully at what we know, what we believe and value, how we interact with others, how we understand the world, and so much more. Sometimes, we may not like what we see when we look at these things in this way. I can tell you from experience that studying humor has forced me to change some of my attitudes and habits when it comes to the things I laugh and joke about, and that's a good thing. As we pursue education, we should challenge ourselves and our habit. Indeed, it's looking at things critically that helps us really learn who we are and, more importantly, who we want to be, and this class will offer you plenty of opportunity to do that.

Oh, and we might have a laugh or two along the way...

Works Cited

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