Transitioning to UW
A Writing Guide Presentation
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Goal of this workshop:

What you already know how to do → What you’re now being asked to do
What’s on the menu?

1. Understanding UW & its goals
2. How to Speak UW: a glossary of terms and how to use them
3. How to apply these to your writing
Think about the last educational context you were in before UW. In that context, what are some of the "rules" of essay writing you were expected to follow?
Discussion
Understanding UW & Its Goals

How you’re being asked to shift your approach to writing
Philosophy of University Writing

WRITING = THINKING
Three shifts you’re being asked to make:

1. From thesis-driven essays to **inquiry-driven** essays
2. From predetermined structure to **logic-driven** structure
3. From language-focused evaluation to **idea-focused** evaluation
Shift #1: From *thesis-driven* essays to *inquiry-driven* essays

- from prompts to interpretive problems
  - You’re essentially generating your own prompt questions
- from knowledge demonstration to knowledge creation
  - It’s not about showing you know something, but about bringing readers to a new understanding
- from critique to curiosity
  - Rather than trying to prove someone right or wrong, we’re seeking to advance the conversation as a whole
Shift #2: From *predetermined* structure to *logic-driven* structure

- **BEFORE**: 5-paragraph essay and other formulas
  - Useful for simple arguments
  - “How can I fit my argument into a given structure?”
- **NOW**: freedom to use the structure that makes the most logical sense
  - Useful for complex arguments (the kind you’re making in UW!)
  - “In what order do my readers need the information in order to follow the logic of my argument?”
Shift #3: from **language-focused** evaluation to **idea-focused** evaluation

- Clear idea transmission is more important than “flawless” grammar & mechanics
- Goal is complex ideas communicated through simple (clear) language
How to Speak UW

A glossary of key terms & writing moves - and how to use them
AUTHOR’S PROJECT

Definition: what is the author trying to accomplish, and how are they doing it?

Components of a project:

- aims (what the author tries to do)
- methods (how they do it)
- materials (what they use)
- motive (why they do it)

Why this matters:

- Starting point for analysis/argument (need to know what you’re analyzing first!)
- Allows you to distinguish between what the author is doing & your analysis/argument
- It’s how we enter any academic conversation

AUTHOR’S PROJECT

Definition: what is the author trying to accomplish, and how are they doing it?

Sample description for author’s project:
“In ___TITLE___, ___AUTHOR___ [does/strives to/claims/etc.] ___AUTHOR’S AIM___ by ___AUTHOR’S METHODS/MATERIALS___ so that ___AUTHOR’S MOTIVE___.”
Definition: reading a text not just to understand WHAT an author said, but reading a text to make observations about HOW an author has expressed their ideas.

Things you might observe through close reading:
- word choice
- structural choices
- patterns (& pattern breaks)
- tonal shifts
- formatting choices
- unexpected moves

Why this matters:
- Observations from close reading feed directly into formulating Interpretive Problems
- Analyzing text using close reading can serve as evidence for your Claims
- The ability to observe closely and notice details is useful across academic disciplines
**INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM**

aka Problem, aka IP, aka Tension, aka Scholarly Problem, aka Driving Question, aka “that’s weird”

Definition: a tension or dissonance that, when resolved, advances our understanding of something (in P1, a text)

To find an IP, locate in your observations at least two things in tension with one another:
- element & whole
- element & element
- pattern & pattern break
- function & form
- presence & absence
- expectation & observation
- audience & text
- convention & observation
- context & text

Why this matters:
- IPs form the basis for our claims
- The ability to generate good questions is a crucial skill in any academic field! (think scientific method)

Adapted from “9 ways to an interpretive problem” handout by Dr. Sue Mendelsohn
Sample questions that articulate IPs:

- “If __OBSERVATION #1__, then why does the author __OBSERVATION #2__?”
- “How can we reconcile __OBSERVATION #1__ with __OBSERVATION #2__?”
- “Given that the text __OBSERVATION #1__, how can we make sense of the fact that it also __OBSERVATION #2__?”

Adapted from Ritzenberg & Mendelsohn, *How Scholars Write*. Oxford University Press, 2020
In UW (and other fields) claims arise from the questions we ask (aka our IPs)

To brainstorm claims, ask: How can I explain or resolve the IP? What are the consequences of the IP? For example:

- Does the IP force us to rethink the author’s underlying beliefs?
- Does the IP make us realize something new about the author’s text or argument?
- Does the IP change my understanding of the author’s actual project or intended audience?

Why this matters:
- Claims allow us to bring something new into the conversation
- Every academic field requires us to make arguments
Is your claim interesting?

High Provability

Low Provability

Low Surprise

- Uninteresting
  - Has compelling supporting evidence but is very likely to occur to readers

High Surprise

- Uninteresting
  - Unlikely to occur to readers and has compelling supporting evidence

Interesting

Unlikely to occur to readers and has compelling supporting evidence

Uninteresting

- Unlikely to occur to readers but has little supporting evidence

Uninteresting

- Very likely to occur to readers and also has little supporting evidence

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[from “The Interesting,” by Mikhail Epstein, as cited/illustrated in How Scholars Write, by Aaron Ritzenberg & Sue Mendelsohn, Oxford University Press, 2020]
Task: Choose a quadrant in Figure 1 in which to place each of the following claims about Albert M. Bender’s poster “Jobs for Girls & Women.” Answers appear on page 60.

a. The woman exudes happiness.

b. With his poster, Bender intended to create an image that would launch a new vision of domesticity for working class white women.

c. The woman on the poster is showing that her favorite part of domestic service is dishwashing.

d. The poster’s Depression-era depiction of a beaming housekeeper offers women who were struggling to find employment a vision of domestic service as honorable—and even joyful—work that would not diminish their social status.

Taken from Ritzenberg & Mendelsohn, How Scholars Write. Oxford University Press, 2020
In P1, claims articulate your new understanding of the text:

- “At first it seems _OLD UNDERSTANDING_ but actually __NEW UNDERSTANDING__.”

- “Although it appears that __OBSERVATION #1__ conflicts with OBSERVATION #2, in fact NEW UNDERSTANDING.”

- “While the text seems to assert that __AUTHOR’S CLAIM___, the choice to __AUTHOR’S FORMAL MOVES__ leads us to see that __NEW UNDERSTANDING__.”

- “Given the presence of __OBSERVATION #1__, the surprising absence of __OBSERVATION #2__ suggests that we must rethink the text in this way: __NEW UNDERSTANDING__.”

This **NEW UNDERSTANDING** is your claim!

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**CLAIM**

aka argument, aka thesis, aka hypothesis

Definition: an idea that someone else could reasonably disagree with.

Adapted from Ritzenberg & Mendelsohn, *How Scholars Write*. Oxford University Press, 2020
Sample description for your project:

“I am writing about ___TEXT___ to come to a better understanding about ___PROBLEM___ so that my audience will understand ___CLAIM___.”

Your Writing Process

How to apply this to your own writing at UW and beyond!
Writing Process for Analyzing a Text

6. Your CLAIM allows you to articulate YOUR PROJECT

5. Resolving the INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM will bring the reader to a new understanding (which is your CLAIM)

4. Using CLOSE READING to return to the text in search of a resolution to the INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

3. Finding two or more observations that stand in tension to articulate an INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

2. CLOSE READING the text to make observations about the author’s writing choices

1. Reading a text to understand the AUTHOR’S PROJECT

Start Here

Adapted from presentation by Valerie Seiling Jacobs
One more shift: from writing in isolation to writing in community

- Talk to your professors
- Visit the writing center
- Use each other as readers
What’s one thing you’re taking away from this workshop to apply to your next UW essay?
Questions?
With material adapted from...

- Mendelsohn, Sue. “9 ways to an interpretive problem” handout. Columbia University Undergraduate Writing Program.