Information Sheet #13

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MICROTHEME STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING COGNITIVE SKILLS

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Since this is the first Writing Center Information Sheet for the '88-'89 school year, let me take this opportunity to introduce our publication to those of you not on campus last year. The purpose of the Information Sheets (appearing 2-3 times each month) is to acquaint the Coe faculty and staff with various strategies for improving our writing program throughout all academic disciplines. While some Information Sheets may present ideas relevant to only a few departments, the goal is to find materials appealing and useful to a wide spectrum of the Coe Community.

As was true last year we will continue to be a Digest on Teaching Academic Writing, mixing Shoe cartoons, articles reprinted from professional journals or books, and items composed by our own faculty. If you would like to contribute a piece, perhaps responding to something you have recently read or sharing a successful writing assignment, please feel free to contact me.

Information Sheet #13 describes a type of writing assignment that has enormous potential for improving the integration of writing experiences into a college curriculum. I have been using microthemes or over two years and have found that these short assignments provide a quick, useful snapshot of how well my classes have understood an issue raised by out readings or class discussions.

—Bob Marns

One of the best blockbusters we have discovered is the microtheme—an essay so short that it can be typed on a single five-by-eight-inch note card. Capable of being graded rapidly and thus adaptable to large classes, microthemes can be designed to promote growth in specified thinking skills... without adding a heavy paper-grading burden to the instructors' work load.

The microtheme method can be employed successfully in both large and small classes. Instructors who use the method generally give all students the same assignment, along with a description of the criteria by which the theme will be evaluated. The assignments are designed according to a principle that we call leverage in which a small amount of writing is preceded by a great deal of thinking. Not all microthemes need be graded; some instructors, considering them practice for later graded exercises, simply record that they have been completed. When microthemes are graded, they can be scored rapidly according to a variety of strategies. Using simple rating scales, instructors can grade between thirty and fifty microthemes per hour. Rather than writing comments on individual microthemes, the instructor can provide feedback to students by duplicating and distributing several of the best microthemes, as well as a few of the less successful ones that exhibit representative writing or thinking problems. Class discussion of these microthemes
provides adequate feedback; indeed, some students report that it provides better feedback than traditional comments on papers.

The Summary-Writing Microtheme

Writing a good one or two hundred-word summary of an article is a cognitively difficult task. The writer must first determine the structure of the original article by locating the transitions and other cues that signal hierarchical relationships among specific details and various levels of abstraction. Then, the writer must condense the whole, retaining main and subordinate ideas while eliminating supporting details. Such a task builds students' reading comprehension skills and also gives students practice in writing concise, flexible prose. [Figure 1 shows a sample rating scale for summaries.]

The summary-writing microtheme can have another benefit for students—as a way of helping them combat what cognitive psychologists call egocentrism. According to Piaget, an egocentric thinker "sees the world from a single point of view only—his own—but without knowledge of the existence of [other] viewpoints or perspectives and . . . without awareness that he is the prisoner of his own." As maturing thinkers develop toward the ability to think in abstractions without dependence upon concrete or specific example, they acquire the ability to imagine the points of view of other thinkers and thus to initiate the kind of dialectic interplay between opposing views that leads to intellectual growth.

The summary-writing microtheme is beneficial in courses where conflicting world views clash—sociology, ethics, political science, and so forth. Having students summarize articles that express opposing points of view urges them away from superficial one-right-answer thinking. One especially valuable procedure in such classes is to have students summarize opposing articles while keeping a journal that allows them to explore their own subjective reactions to the material.

The Thesis-Support Microtheme

Many student writers have difficulty discovering issues within a topic or formulating thesis statements that take focused positions on issues. Either they write a diffuse thesis statement ("The student movement in the late sixties had good points and bad points"), or they write a paper that has no thesis statement at all ("data dumping"). Illogical or poorly focused papers frequently stem from inadequate thesis statements, which stem in turn from an inadequate sense of the issue at hand.

Thesis-support microthemes enable students to discover issues and create propositions within a content discipline. The following assignment sequence for an upper division finance course in investments illustrates this strategy. The instructor, Dean Drek, assigns students ten issues from a list of more than sixty. Each issue is stated in terms of contradictory propositions. Students must choose one alternative for each issue and write a microtheme that defends the position. (Drenk allows students to write two typed pages—slightly more than the other microthemes described in this paper.) Here are two representative issues:

1. The price-earnings ratio of a stock (does/does not) reflect the rate or return that an investor will achieve.

2. Professional management (is/is not) an effective means of achieving higher than average stock returns.

Drek posits two immediate advantages to thesis-support assignments: Students become more skilled at focused argumentation, and students learn to see their discipline as a field of controversies, not as a body of facts to be memorized.
(Proposed criteria for grading such microthemes are shown in Fig. 2.)

The Data-Provided Microtheme

The task of the data-provided microtheme is the obverse of the thesis-support microtheme. Here, students are provided with data and asked to discover a thesis or a general statement that gives meaning to the data. The data can be provided as a list of sentences (Figure 3) or as a graph or statistical table (Figure 4). Students must arrange the data in a logical order (in more complex assignments, students select only the significant data and omit irrelevant data), connect the parts with appropriate transitions, and write statements showing the meaning that they have induced.

Data-provided microthemes can serve a variety of purposes. At a most basic level, they can teach students to arrange paragraphs hierarchically and to signal the relationships with transitions. At a more advanced level, instructors can use data-provided assignments to teach students how to write the discussion section of a scientific paper.

The Quandary-Posing Microtheme

There is some evidence that the process of transforming vaguely formed private thoughts into public words enhances comprehension. One does not really understand a concept until one can articulate it clearly to someone else. A physics instructor has designed a sequence of quandary-posing microthemes for a 400-student lecture course to duplicate the benefits from face-to-face conferences with students. These microtheme assignments, often presented as humorous case situations, ask students to solve puzzles involving velocity, acceleration, and other physics concepts and to teach their solutions in writing to an imagined audience.

[A complete version of this essay may be found in Teaching Writing in All Disciplines, edited by C. Williams Griffin and available in the Writing Center.]