Strategies for Helping Students Write More Effective Arguments

Design writing assignments so that they call on the ways of thinking you want students to engage in and the purpose(s) and audience(s) you want them to address. Strategies:
- Consider ways of critical thinking that the course focuses on; also consider key aspects of argument: issue, claim, warrants, backing.
- Consider the relevant rhetorical situation and genre for the argument, especially purpose and audience.
- To identify valued aspects of typical kinds of argument within a given discipline, analyze arguments as made in professional texts.

Identify some of the important demands the project will place on students. Strategies:
- Do it yourself, or at least begin it, and note the questions you had to answer and strategies you used in formulating and expressing your ideas.
- Analyze student papers from previous semesters, noting differences in the interpretive/problem-solving/argument strategies reflected in the better papers and the less successful papers.

Present the actual assignment so that it gives students some guidance in exploring and shaping their ideas and presenting them to a reader. Strategies:
- Identify genre, including audience, purpose, expected ways of problem-solving/making an argument, format and style for the writing.
- Pose questions that will guide inquiry, focusing on a limited number of key questions so as not to overwhelm students with too many questions.
- Identify evaluation criteria, ones linked to the important intellectual demands of the writing.

Teach students what is entailed by x sort of writing. Strategies:
- Plan in-class activities to introduce students to the analytic and “claim-making” skills they will have to use for an assignment: e.g., given a set of data, what claim could you make from it; given a claim, what would count as “evidence” to support that claim.
- Clarify what you want in “arguments” and show that to students. You might use examples from professional writing or, with permission, student writing. You might also show how writing within the field varies by genre and/or audience (e.g. specialized versus general audience) and assign different genres.
- Provide models and work with students to generate traits from the models. And/or give out two or three argument excerpts of varying quality for students to evaluate, selecting the weaker ones to illustrate typical difficulties students have. (With student permission, use student writing.)
- Discuss audience expectations and enact the audience.
- Sequence writing projects so one will build upon a previous one.
If sequencing or structuring arguments is a major challenge for students, you might consider some of the following strategies:

- Use the metaphor of line of development to discuss structuring, considering how an argument unfolds linearly in a print text (although not a hypertext argument).
- Stress the importance of formulating a guiding claim for the entire argument with supporting claims (or main points). Show students how these claims bridge from analysis/interpretation to writing.
- Present structural guides for organizing and examine the line of development of a clearly developed model or two. For the latter, ask students, perhaps working in pairs, to analyze and identify the structure themselves.
- Assign a main point outline to be created after an initial draft and used as an aid to revision.

Provide opportunities for students to confer with you and their peers as they work through an assignment. Strategies:

- Break larger writing projects into a series of smaller ones, for example, have students write planning proposals and periodic progress notes as they work on a project.
- Schedule peer review sessions for feedback on drafts and, as relevant, have students consult as well on planning proposals and progress notes.
- Ask students to write informal cover notes when soliciting feedback on a draft, responding to these prompts: 1. The primary claim I’m trying to get across is. . . . 2. I’m having difficulty with. . . . 3. I’d particularly like feedback on. . .
- Schedule a writing workshop session.

If your course is not a writing course, or writing-intensive course, set priorities: focus on aspects of writing that link most evidently to learning ways of reasoning and writing in your discipline. Attend to other aspects of writing as time and interests allow.

Be flexible and willing to revise an assignment. Also, be willing to reflect critically on your own understanding of the conventions of argument expected within your professional community.

Consider assignments in genres other than academic argument that might also serve learning goals for a given course.

January 12, 2011

Anne Herrington
Distinguished Professor of English
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Amherst, MA 01003
annenh@english.umass.edu