Module 6: The Definition Essay
By Camille Willingham, Communications and Humanities Faculty, Kennedy-King College

Course
English 101 – Composition I

English 101 – Composition 1, 3 semester hours
The goal of English 101 Composition I is the development of critical and analytical skills in reading and writing expository prose. The general objective is for students to learn strategic steps and the rhetorical devices and modes used in collegiate writing. The specific objective is for students to write a minimum of eight essays according to the basic rhetorical forms: narration, description, definition, example, process analysis, comparison/contrast, classification/division, cause/effect, and argumentation. For each writing assignment, students are expected to (1) select a manageable topic, (2) have a thesis statement that implies or states the essay’s plan of development, and (3) construct at least three paragraphs that develop the thesis with concrete, relevant, and cohesive support, using transitional words, phrases, and sentences. They are also expected (4) to use good diction and correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation in 80% of the sentences. Prerequisite: Placement test or grade of C or better in English 100 or consent of department chairperson.

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Description
This module is designed to facilitate student fulfillment of specific objectives 2 and 3 of our 101 course syllabus. Unity, support, and coherence are the requisites for the effective collegiate essay in all rhetorical modes. The student examination of sample essays is an excellent way to master these concepts. Consequently, our modules propose to examine appropriate sample essays that demonstrate these requisites in each of the eight rhetorical forms. Our modules will enhance student understanding of the function of thesis, logical organization, topic sentences, supporting paragraph details, and transitional words in each of the sample essays. This exercise will reinforce the concepts of unity, support, and coherence required to effectively set forth and develop a point. Each sample professional essay taken from Langan (2001) is presented in four on-screen computerized exercises.

Transferability
The enhancement of critical and analytical skills in writing and reading expository prose is essential in all other English composition, developmental reading, and literature courses. It is, in fact, essential in all of the liberal arts that students have the skills to identify the main idea, major supporting points, and the effectiveness of those points when reading. It is equally important that students, when writing papers and exams, are capable of formulating an essay that has a clear thesis and coherent and adequately supported points. An on-screen computerized analysis of a sample professional essay in their discipline would be a reinforcement or refresher to what they have been taught in English 101.

Faculty Technology Skills
• The ability to manage the Windows or Macintosh computer operating systems
• The ability to use a wordprocessor (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect)
• The ability to open, print, and close a file.
• The ability to use a projector and computer for presentations

Student Technology Skills
• Need to know how to use a word processor
• Need to be able to open, print, save, and close a file
• Need to have the skill to use a mouse to do basic formatting—to make bold, to underline, to make italics

Faculty Equipment
• Individual computer with wordprocessor (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect)
• LCD Projector (PC and/or Macintosh compatible)
• Color Printer

Student Equipment
• Individual PC with wordprocessor (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect)
• Printer, b/w or color (optional)

Improvement on Teaching and Learning
The concept of a well-developed essay, centered around one controlling idea, and connected by logical transitions between sentences and paragraphs, is a difficult one for many community college students to master. This technological approach to sample essay analysis gives the student the opportunity to observe the essay on the screen and have the benefit of a classroom
team approach to analysis. It encourages greater student involvement, and as an educational approach, it is far more engaging.

**Nontechnology Comparison**
Traditionally, study of the eight rhetorical modes has included student analysis of the appropriate sample essays as part of a homework assignment and then class textbook analysis of the essay to strengthen student understanding of the rhetorical modes. Students still need to study their sample essay and the theory of the rhetorical mode that it embodies before the class meeting. This teaching approach is much more engaging and interesting than the individual textbook approach because the student is no longer working as an individual in his or her own textbook, but as a part of a collaborative interactive classroom team in the essay analysis.

**Pertinent Issues**
Teachers need to be aware of . . .
- Possible limitations on copyrighted commercial work.
- The range of text-available Internet sites, fee and free sources (when model essays are used from sources other than the class textbook).
- Built-in limitations of older word processing programs and printers.
- Obstacles to learning presented by student lack of required computer skills.
- The fact that the module exercises can be adapted to the Blackboard course management system.

**How to Use This Module in the Classroom**
It is imperative that a preliminary general discussion of rhetoric—the elements of the essay—precede any specific consideration of rhetorical mode. Therefore, prior to teaching each lesson on a specific rhetorical mode and the specific module given here to enhance that mode, the instructor must begin the 101 course and each unit of rhetorical mode—illustration, narration/description, process analysis, definition, division and classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, argumentation—with a review of the general elements of the essay.

The initial units of the English 101 composition course should thoroughly cover general rhetorical theory. The chapters and exercises therein may be assigned for homework. The instructor may lecture on this rhetorical theory and as a classroom activity allow the students to orally review the chapter exercises. At the completion of this unit, the student should understand the following general rhetorical theory:

- **Elements and Language of the Essay**
  An essay is a relatively short piece of nonfiction in which a writer attempts to develop one or more closely related points or ideas.

  The thesis of an essay is its main idea. Sometimes, it is implied rather than directly stated. The thesis determines the content of the essay: everything the writer says must be logically related to the thesis statement. A good thesis statement identifies the topic and makes an assertion about it. A well-written essay should be unified; that is, everything in it should be related to its thesis, or main idea. There should be no digressions. A unified essay stays within the limits of its thesis. Your essay is unified if you advance a single point and stick to that point. If all the details in your essay relate to your thesis and supporting topic sentences, your essay is unified.
An effective essay requires a good *introduction* or beginning and a good *conclusion* or ending. A good beginning should catch a reader's interest and then hold it. In addition to capturing your reader's attention, a good beginning frequently introduces your thesis and either suggests or reveals the structure of the essay. The best beginning is the one most appropriate for the job you are trying to do.

A conclusion may summarize; may inspire the reader to further thought or action; may return to the beginning by repeating key words, phrases, or ideas; or may surprise the reader by providing a particularly convincing example to support a thesis.

The paragraph, like the essay, has its own main or controlling idea, often stated directly in a *topic sentence*. It should be unified, with every sentence relating to the main idea. Like the essay as a whole, the paragraph should be coherent with sentences and ideas arranged logically using appropriate transitional words. Moreover, like the essay, the paragraph requires adequate development—enough examples to convince the reader of the topic sentence.

*Transitions* are words and phrases used to signal relationships between ideas in an essay and to join the various parts of an essay together. Writers use transitions to relate ideas within sentences, between sentences, and between paragraphs. The most common type of transition is the *transitional expression*, such as *furthermore*, *consequently*, *similarly*, *granted*, *nevertheless*, *for instance*, *elsewhere*, *simply stated*, *finally*, *to conclude*, and *subsequently*. Pronoun reference and repeated *key words* and *phrases* are the other important ways to make transitions. Good transitions enhance *coherence*: the quality of good writing when all sentences, paragraphs, and longer divisions of an essay are effectively and naturally connected.

- **The Definition Essay**
  Assign the chapter to your students for homework. They should read the theory and complete the exercises in their textbook. Upon completion of your lecture, the classroom discussion of theory, and the review of textbook exercises, your students should have gained the following understanding: The definition essay makes clear in a more complete and formal way our own personal understanding of a term. A term may be defined by synonym, formal definition, or extended definition. The essay may proceed by starting with one meaning of a term and then illustrating this meaning with a series of details.

  Now you may announce to your students, “To further enhance our understanding of this rhetorical mode, let us leave our textbook this class session and examine a model student essay that is not taken from our textbook” (Langan, 2001, p. 177).

**Exercise 1**
First, let us look at scrambled sentences from a paragraph of this essay and unscramble them to test our understanding of logical organization.
"In the case of football fans, the term is appropriate. They behave insanely, they are insane about the past, and they are insanely loyal. What is a football fan? The word "fan" is an abbreviation of "fanatic," meaning "an insane or crazy person."

**Exercise 2**

Now, let us look at these scrambled paragraphs, which appear out of their correct order in the essay, and match them to their appropriate topic sentences. In addition, in orange, let us underline any sentences that do not advance the topic and thereby violate paragraph unity. This exercise enhances our understanding of paragraph unity and support.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraphs</th>
<th>Topic Sentences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should their beloved team lose three in a row, fans may begin to react negatively as a way to hide their broken hearts. They still obsessively watch each game and spend the entire day afterward reading and listening to the postgame commentary in newspapers, on TV sports segments, and on sports radio. Furthermore, this intense loyalty makes fans dangerous. To anyone who dares to say to a loyal fan that another team has better players or coaches, or, God forbid, to anyone wandering near the home cheering section wearing the jacket of the opposing team, physical damage is a real possibility. Bloody noses, black eyes, and broken bones are just some of the injuries inflicted on people cheering the wrong team when fans are around. In 1997, one man suffered a concussion at a game in Philadelphia when Eagles fans beat him up for wearing a jacket with another team's insignia.</td>
<td>Football fans are insanely fascinated by the past.</td>
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<td>Football fans are insanely fascinated by the past. They talk about William &quot;Refrigerator&quot; Perry's 1985 Super Bowl touchdown as though it happened last week. The passion they show recounting Franco Harris's &quot;Immaculate Reception&quot; makes you wonder if they realize his playoff-winning catch occurred in 1972. They excitedly discuss the 63-yard field goal kicked by Tom Dempsey—a man with no toes on his foot—as though it's news, instead of having happened in 1970. And if you can't manage to get all that excited about such ancient history,</td>
<td>Last of all, football fans are insanely loyal to the team of their choice, often dangerously so.</td>
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they look at you as though you were the insane one.

**Exercise 3**
For another exercise in logical organization, let us look at the scrambled five paragraphs of this essay and put them into logical order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scrambled Paragraphs</th>
<th>Logical Order</th>
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<tr>
<td>From February through August, football fans act like any other human beings. They pay their taxes, take out the garbage, and complain about the high cost of living. But when September rolls around, the colors and radios go on, the record books come off the shelves, and the devotion returns. For the true football fan, another season of insanity has begun.</td>
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<td>Football fans wear their official team T-shirts and warm-up jackets to the mall, the supermarket, the classroom, and even—if they can get away with it—to work. If the team offers a giveaway item, the fans rush to the stadium to claim the hat or sports bag</td>
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or water bottle that is being handed out that day. Baseball fans go similarly nuts when their favorite teams give away some attractive freebie. Football fans just plain behave insanely. Even the fact that fans spend the coldest months of the year huddling on icy metal benches in places like Chicago proves it. In addition, football fans decorate their houses with football-related items of every kind. To them, team bumper stickers belong not only on car bumpers, but also on fireplace mantels and front doors. When they go to a game, which they do as often as possible, they also decorate their bodies. True football fans not only put on their team jackets and grab their pennants but also paint their heads to look like helmets or wear glow-in-the-dark cheeseheads. At the game, these fans devote enormous energy to trying to get a "wave" going.

Last of all, football fans are insanely loyal to the team of their choice, often dangerously so. Should their beloved team lose three in a row, fans may begin to react negatively as a way to hide their broken hearts. They still obsessively watch each game and spend the entire day afterward reading and listening to the postgame commentary in newspapers, on TV sports segments, and on sports radio. Furthermore, this intense loyalty makes fans dangerous. To anyone who dares to say to a loyal fan that another team has better players or coaches, or, God forbid, to anyone wandering near the home cheering section wearing the jacket of the opposing team, physical damage is a real possibility. Bloody noses, black eyes, and broken bones are just some of the injuries inflicted on people cheering the wrong team when fans are around. In 1997, one man suffered a concussion at a game in Philadelphia when Eagles fans beat him up for wearing a jacket with another team's insignia.

Exercise 4
Now, let us look at this sample for the last time and better perceive the logic and coherence of essay organization by drawing a red line under the thesis or main idea; a blue line under the topic sentences in the body, which support that thesis or main idea; and a green line under the transition words that enhance coherence between these paragraphs.

**Definition of a Football Fan**
What is a football fan? The word "fan" is an abbreviation of "fanatic," meaning "an insane or crazy person." In the case of football fans, the term is appropriate. They behave insanely, they are insane about the past, and they are insanely loyal.

Football fans wear their official team T-shirts and warm-up jackets to the mall, the supermarket, the classroom, and even—if they can get away with it—to work. If the team offers a giveaway item, the fans rush to the stadium to claim the hat or sports bag or water bottle that is being handed out that day. Baseball fans go similarly nuts when their favorite teams give away some attractive freebie. Football fans just plain behave insanely. Even the fact that fans spend the coldest months of the year huddling on icy metal benches in places like Chicago proves it. In addition, football fans decorate their houses with football-related items of every kind. To them, team bumper stickers belong not only on car bumpers, but also on fireplace mantels and front doors. When they go to a game, which they do as often as possible, they also decorate their bodies. True football fans not only put on their team jackets and grab their pennants but also paint their heads to look like helmets or wear glow-in-the-dark cheeseheads. At the game, these fans devote enormous energy to trying to get a "wave" going.

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**Recommendation for Assessment**
It is highly recommended that instructors using this module assess learning by selecting a model essay from a source other than the student textbook.

**Reference**