

Fall 2012 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

Instructor: Christine Yao

Course: ENGL1105.102 “Sluts, Spinsters, and Drag Queens”

Title of Writing Exercises:

Collaborative Analysis and Punctuation Usage with Google Documents

Overview: A week-long series of collaborative group writing exercises using Google Documents to write paragraphs incorporating theoretical terms and varied punctuation.

When we are teaching our students how to write, I’ve found that an ongoing concern is how to give our students time to practice these writing techniques outside of essay drafts and editing. This is particularly an issue for first year writing seminars that have been allocated the “50 minutes 3 times a week” scheduling which limits the amount of time for in-class writing exercises. Moreover, despite covering writing as a class and doing peer editing, writing often feels like an individual activity rather than a collaborative one; in my seminar I like emphasizing the importance of building dialogue and community for collaborative intellectual discussion and I wanted to bring this same group dynamic to writing. How can they learn to use their critical and argumentative skills as a group through writing? How can we address the importance, as well as the possible intimidation factor, of using varied punctuation to enhance clarity and style in writing?

In order to address these concerns, I designed this writing exercise by turning to Google Documents, which is housed under Google Drive. Google Documents is a free service offered by Google that allows people to share files as well as create and edit documents in real time with other users. While I do not believe in technological gimmicks, Google Documents is a useful tool for aiding pedagogy and introducing our students to the latest technologies for editing that augment classic writing techniques. The use of Google Documents helps students to expand their discussions and writing practices with each other beyond the time in the classroom.

This writing exercise takes place over 3 classes and involves 3 handouts, combining the teaching of analysis alongside punctuation. This is the week that we began reading Toni Morrison’s *Sula*; I imagine that other instructors using this exercise as a model can substitute any primary reading of their choice.

First Class: Theoretical Terms

We began our preliminary discussion of *Sula* and I had the students do a free write applying theoretical terms about sexuality and race that we had been discussing for the past several weeks. The free writes helped bring greater complexity to our discussion about the beginning of Morrison’s novel; more importantly, it allowed us to begin the new text and the upcoming collaborative exercise through the lens of familiar intellectual work since the previous essay required them to incorporate theoretical terms into their argument.

I then divided my class of 17 students into four groups and gave them the **first collaborative paragraphs assignment sheet** about extending their individual skills at writing paragraphs and applying theoretical terms to a collaborative paragraph. I decided against giving a different theoretical term per group, and instead I assigned the same term “heteronormativity” to the first two groups and the “double consciousness” to the second two groups. Part of the challenge, along with writing and organizing the paragraph, was for the groups discuss amongst themselves how to effectively use their theoretical term in a complex argument that would be different from the other

group with the same term. Prior to class, I had previously encouraged the students to bring their laptops and the remainder of class time was dedicated to the students working as a group on Google Documents. I went from group to group to make sure that each one had a cohesive idea about their approach.

The homework for next class was to finish the paragraph and also to post a humorous example of misused punctuation in a Blackboard thread I had created.

### Second Class: Punctuation Lesson

How can we make undergraduates more confident about using varied punctuation in their writing? Misused punctuation has become a popular topic of Internet humour and memes (such as “Let’s eat, Grandma” versus “Let’s eat Grandma”). This homework was an easy way for the students to incorporate something within the realm of their own knowledge in order to segue into the lesson about punctuation. I gave them the **punctuation handout** and we went through the funny examples as a class, with the students identifying the confusion of meaning due to the use or misuse of specific rules for each type of punctuation.

We then went through the collaborative paragraphs on *Sula* as a class: I projected the paragraphs and had a member of each group read theirs aloud. This allowed the students to see the variation in how they approached the application of theoretical terms as well as for the other groups to give praise and feedback about what they thought the others could improve.

I then gave out the **second collaborative paragraphs assignment sheet** subtitled “Punctuation Challenge!” Using the punctuation handout they had to rewrite their collaborative paragraphs in order to incorporate a variety of punctuation marks that undergraduates often avoid using for fear of misuse: semi-colons, colons, and dashes. In my handout I had two versions of the instructions: one with the varied punctuation, and the other with the same wording but with no punctuation other than periods. This helped to demonstrate the importance of punctuation in terms of clarity and style. I gave them the remainder of the class to work in their groups on their collaborative paragraphs in Google Documents.

### Third Class: The Importance of Style

After our discussion of the reading on *Sula*, we turned to the latest incarnation of the collaborative paragraphs. As a class, we again read through the collaborative paragraphs, with group members pointing out the new punctuation in their writing. This exercise organically led to a discussion where students compared the previous versions of their paragraphs to the latest ones and what punctuation they found interesting or difficult to use.

### Final Thoughts

This writing exercise gave the students an opportunity to use digital technologies as part of a collaborative effort to improve their analytical and writing skills. The students were enthusiastic about the project and many had never used Google Documents before. The assignment balanced in-person discussion with written communication: it allowed quieter students who were good writers to demonstrate their abilities to their peers. As an instructor, I enjoyed watching the real-time collaborative editing my students did both in and out of class through Google Documents as well as the complex and informal discussions that arose about writing and reading texts. It helped the students see the thought and writing processes of others and how to work with one another on writing, which is often seen as a solitary pursuit.