

The Diagnostic Essay: A Model for Inquiry and Interrogation

Definition: In general terms, a diagnostic essay is intended to identify strengths and weaknesses in student writing early in the course of a semester so that instructors insight into the type of curriculum, feedback, exercises, etc., they will need to provide to students holistically and individually. A diagnostic essay usually consists of a prompt (or prompts) aimed to elicit meaningful writing from the student in a limited amount of time. Students are given anywhere from 20 minutes to 50 minutes to respond to the prompt.

Purpose: By employing a diagnostic essay, the instructor and mentor will have the opportunity to examine student writing together and consider what constitutes quality constitutes quality student writing as well as to identify students who may be experiencing challenges with their writing. Ideally, the diagnostic essay will serve as a catalyst for a dialogue between the instructor and the mentor and will enable each to speak to one another about student writing, address assessment of writing strengths and weaknesses, and express the pedagogical practices he or she believes will nurture and enhance student writing.

Caveats: While timed-writing exams are commonplace across the university, often in the form of essay exams, etc., they often undermine the ways that writing is generally taught in first-year writing courses where the focus is generally on the *processes* involved in writing as opposed to the “finished” *product*. Obviously, diagnostic essays do not allow time for brainstorming, revision, feedback, reflection, editing, etc., in the ways that students are often afforded in the first-year writing course. Because students are not afforded the processes they normally encounter in writing an essay, diagnostic essays are, naturally, not as “genuinely” representative of student ability as, say, a comprehensive writing portfolio, comprised of several “finished” pieces representing a variety of genres, might be. It should also be noted that inexperienced writers often express frustration when asked to write about personal experiences.

Considerations for Employing a Diagnostic Essay:

- 1) Provide a prompt that will elicit meaningful responses from students.
- 2) Provide students (2-3) prompts from which to choose.
- 3) Provide students with prompts that might segue into the first paper or papers assigned later on in the semester.
- 4) Accompany prompts with brief, succinct guidelines/expectations so that students may obtain a clearer understanding of what is expected of them.
- 5) Provide time at the end of the timed-writing (5-10 minutes) for students to reflect in writing on their diagnostic essays, the choices they made, what they might do differently, what they would do to improve their essays if given more time, etc.