

Kathryne Bevilacqua
Statement of Teaching Philosophy
First-Year Writing and Composition

Most of my teaching experience has come in writing classrooms, and yet, I fundamentally think of myself as reading teacher. In my composition courses, I ask students to take reflect on, practice, and revise their varied strategies for reading and responding to literary and non-literary texts. Helping students gain fluency in describing and practicing different forms of reading inevitably reinforces their skills and confidence as writers, and I design my classrooms to make space for students to practice and reflect on this reciprocal relationship. This reflection equips them for the varied texts and interpretive contexts they will encounter beyond my classroom.

A central goal of my composition teaching is to help students recognize the specificity of the literacy practices required in college classrooms. In past courses, I have used a “Reading Journal” assignment to help students approach “academic writing” from its supposed opposite: the reading they do for fun. Using an online course site like Canvas, I set up an open forum in which I ask students to share interesting items from their everyday reading. As students post everything from BuzzFeed quizzes about the TV show *Scandal* to *New Yorker* articles on police violence, they model different types of reading for each other while also challenging themselves to read and respond to new or different types of writing. In a colloquium at the end of the semester, students present a summary of the discussion that arises from one of their posts, which allows them to consider how their initial reactions to a piece of writing may have changed in conversation with others. While very few of the articles that students choose to write on are strictly “academic,” this semester-long exercise in cultivated attention to reading and writing helps students draw connections between their work in our classroom and the wider world of writing beyond.

Acknowledging the diversity of reading practices that my students bring to class has enabled me to better teach one very specific type of reading, close reading. Especially in classes that focus on literature, I have designed assignments that help students reimagine close reading not as a “treasure hunt” or search for “hidden meaning,” but rather as a method for generating questions and claims about texts. In a classroom activity I use at the beginning of the term, I project a short poem on a screen in the front of the classroom, then have each student share one thing he or she notices about the poem. As their observations grow from a laundry list of literary devices to a richer description of the text’s effects, our collective reading coalesces around particular concerns or questions that were not apparent when we first read the poem. This exercise uses class time to model the part of close reading that we too often assume students can do on their own—the actual reading—and I have found that students really appreciate this acknowledgement of how different close reading is from other types of reading they do. In subsequent essays, I can see that my students feel authorized to move away from simplistic lists of devices and toward more nuanced, compelling descriptions of their encounters with texts, descriptions that foreground the student’s own interests and questions that do not shy away from confusion or complexity.

The work that I do to help students reconceive of their reading as active and engaged is all in the service of the work I do around writing. To this end, one of the most important types of reading I teach is “reading for revision,” no matter the status of the essay at hand. For example, when I assign a complex piece of argumentation—such as a feminist psychoanalytical reading of

“The Yellow Wallpaper” published in a scholarly journal—I encourage students to read not as students, but as “peer reviewers.” Whereas the former mode of reading may focus on extracting content, the latter mode demands that students engage with the rhetorical substructure of the article, just as they do with their classmates’ essays. This adjustment in subject position may seem slight, but to students it often represents a new type of permission to speak back to texts that seem difficult, authoritative, or otherwise above reproach. Authorized as “peers,” students more freely and concretely articulate their admirations, misgivings, and confusions about essays that, like their own essays, may have catchy introductions and unpack important quotes, but also leave important transitions unflagged and venture unwarranted claims in their concluding paragraphs. Through this adjusted reading process, students learn that critiquing a piece of writing does not necessarily rely on subject matter expertise, but instead can come from their instincts as readers and their reactions to rhetorical choices around structure, organization, authority, and motive. I have found that asking students to “peer review” professional essays translates when they turn their attentions to their classmates’ work: peer review comments become less timid, but also more constructive. This reading practice also helps students recognize how many of the more obvious rhetorical moves of academic writing—for example, epigraphs, section headings, and explanatory footnotes—can do useful work in their own essays. Above all, reading for revision helps students see beyond the “final draft,” an oxymoron that shuts down discussion of what still remains to be improved about a piece of writing. No writing is final, I help students see, whether a respected scholar’s, a classmate’s, or their own.

All of this small-scale work on reading culminates in workshops for formal essay assignments, in which we turn our collective readerly attention to student writing. To signal how central student writing is in my classroom, I have recently started scheduling two full class periods of workshopping per essay: one day to focus on higher-order issues of argument, and an additional day to focus on sentence-level grammatical and mechanical issues. While most workshop instructions steer students away from “copy-editing,” I use this second workshop day to dive into the nitty-gritty of prose, showing students that even without a sophisticated understanding of the “rules” of grammar, they are nonetheless well-equipped as readers to help clarify and strengthen each other’s prose. Using Google Docs to share selections of their essays, students read paragraphs aloud to identify wordiness, generate new versions of the same cumbersome sentences, or experiment with different opening gambits for their introductions. I dedicate these class periods to word *play* instead of to word work: as we share in the inadvertent humor that comes from misplaced modifiers, clumsy transitions, and essay titles like “[Don’t Forget to Add a Title],” we vivify the most important social aspects of writing, in which readers—not rulebooks—shape our arguments and motives. This playful ethos resonates with students, not only those who pride themselves on their copy-editing skills, but especially those for whom a more traditional grammar lesson might seem prescriptive or alienating. Focusing on reader response, rather than writerly mastery, enables every student to speak from a place of authority.

My ultimate goal in composition courses is to cultivate in students a habit of mind that finds value and purpose in diverse forms of reading and writing. I work toward this goal by making my classroom a laboratory in which students can take stock of all of the different ways in which they are readers and writers, while embracing experimentation and risk-taking in their reading, writing, and thinking.