Academic Argument: Model Papers

Although good writing skills are a necessity for all students, many professors are unable to establish exactly what qualifies as “good college-level writing.” Therefore, many first-year college students often find themselves confused at how to begin a writing assignment because they do not understand their specific teacher’s expectations. For many first year students, academic writing is like a foreign language. By beginning an assignment without any direction of what the teacher expects, the student is set up to be hesitant and misguided. An academic model is a representation of what the teacher expects; therefore, it allows the students to cater their ideas based on the organization and structure of the assignment. Although many first year English professors claim that model papers take away the students’ creativity, academic models give students direction and confidence for the assignment and also demonstrate the rhetorical genre in which the student will be writing.

Professors often argue that academic models lead to plagiarism and uniform copying. They believe that these model papers, which show students the structure of the assignment, strip the creativity from the student and prevent them from expressing their original ideas (Macbeth 35). Authors like Donald M. Murray argue that academic writing should be taught as a process rather than a product. Murray believes that students should not be given any supplemental instruction to benefit from. Therefore, he appeals to college English professors and urges them to believe that “repetitive autopsying” or the act of breaking down sample papers piece by piece in
the classroom, does not teach students how to improve their writing skills. In order to change this fault, he thinks that teachers should center their curriculum around teaching the process of writing rather than focusing on the final product. (3) Although this seems like a valued technique at a glance, one must ask how is it possible to teach students a process of edifying their work without giving them thorough instructions on how to complete this task.

As opposed to what many tend to believe, academic models – if used correctly – are useful because they outline the professor’s expectations for his students, which give the students a sense of direction and confidence when they begin their work. In Karen Macbeth’s article, “Deliberate False Provisions: The Use and Usefulness of Models in Learning Academic Writing,” she suggests that if students have a complete understanding of the purpose of academic models, those models can serve as the foundation. Macbeth writes, “[a model paper’s] parts are visible in ways they would not be in an actual engine, and because of this, it is able to instruct in the skeletal structure of an engine” (37). Model papers aim to show students a skeletal outline of what the assignment should look like. By giving them this source of definition, students are able to have more confidence in developing their ideas, which in turn, leads to better academic writing throughout both the process and the final product. Knowing how the paper should be organized provides students with an easy transition into the assignment. With this added sense of confidence and direction, students are able to develop their own ideas more thoroughly thus increasing the clarity of their papers. Beginning an unfamiliar assignment is difficult for anyone. In order to ease the foreignness, models allow the students to feel like they know where they are headed and what is expected of them. Expecting academic writing without giving students a sample of their requirements does not provide students with the correct foundation to build their
papers on and leaves them confused and frustrated when they begin writing because they do not know where to start.

In addition, model papers establish the rhetorical genre in which the assignment is set and allows students to have a better understanding of the topic by facilitating the learning of the genre, it’s expectations, and it’s form. A rhetorical genre refers to the format of the specific style of writing and gives students a tone for their assignment (Flowerdew 369). Brian Huot suggests in his article, “Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom” that students tend to cater their writing based on the expectations for the specific genre of the assignment. Without having an understanding of form of the assignment, the students cannot make progress. Depending on the strength of the model, academic models can double-function as rubrics. These sample papers can outline what the genre expects and ways to support the student’s arguments in a discreet way that still forces the student to be creative. In Macbeth’s article, she proposes the idea of academic models serving as the foundation for organizing academic writing. Macbeth writes, “no one is born a native speaker of academic English” (34). Like many involved in this argument, Macbeth believes that each type of writing has different expectations for what defines worthy academic writing in that specific genre and that no one is born fluent in the language. Because the type of assignment determines the rhetorical genre, teachers are looking for specific guidelines in that line of assessment. Therefore, models are necessary to provide structure and show the students what their professors are looking for in order to get the highest grade possible. Teachers have expectations for certain rhetorical genres that need to be demonstrated in the assignment and that can be shown clearly through model papers.
In a practical world, academic models are necessary for student success. Without confidence and proper analysis of rhetorical genre, students are forced to forfeit their best possible writing before they even write their first sentence. They are predetermined to lack clarity in their work because they are not confident in their destined final product. In order to prevent mindless plagiarism, teachers can give their students sample papers over different topics, which mirror the same genre and form. By providing students with the same style argument over different topics other than the ones they are to explore in the assignment, teachers still are able to train their students to be innovative with their ideas while also supplying them with the correct support to fulfill their own expectations. Ultimately, the inadequacies of model papers do not compare to the benefits and there are ways in which teachers can maneuver their way around sample papers that prevent their students from plagiarizing.
Works Cited


