From Simple to Complex:  
Ideas of Order in Assignment Sequences

ELIZABETH RANKIN

The professional literature on composition course design often stresses the importance of sequencing assignments. Some discussions directly address the subject, usually in the context of a general assemblage of advice for writing teachers. In others, it occurs as part of a rationale for a particular approach to teaching writing.

An example of the former is Richard Larson's advice in "Teaching Before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition":

Think of a sequential program not merely as a chronological arrangement of assignments but as a structure in which assignments are closely related to each other in service of the goals of the program. . . . The goal of each assignment in a true sequence should be to enlarge the student's powers of thinking, organizing, and expressing ideas so that he can cope with a more complex, more challenging problem in the next assignment. (212)

Although written nearly twenty years ago, Larson's advice is not dated. In fact, it is fairly consonant with the advice offered in these two recent texts for writing teachers:

Effective writing assignments encourage students to define progressively more complex rhetorical problems. Since students learn to write by writing, our responsibility is to control and vary the rhetorical demands of writing tasks to give students practice in adjusting relationships among writer, reader, and subject, manipulating more and more complex variables. (Lindemann 205)

The backbone of an effective writing course . . . must be a carefully planned sequence of tasks set in gradually broader and more complex contexts. (Foster 124)

In all three passages, the explicit expectation is that sequenced assignments will be arranged in order of increasing complexity.

Numerous assignment sequences described by teachers and course designers reiterate this notion. Roger Garrison includes in the final chapter of
How a Writer Works a list of “writing tasks,” and although he insists that these tasks do not constitute a particular sequence, Garrison nevertheless entitles his chapter, “Writing Tasks: From Simple to Complex.” In a recent article in *College Composition and Communication*, Malcolm Kiniry and Elaine Strenski describe the academic writing course initiated by Mike Rose at UCLA. The course attempts to structure writing tasks recursively, so that even as students move on to more complex tasks, they find themselves increasingly capable of turning back profitably to those expository strategies they already have begun to master. (192; emphasis added)

And in his introduction to a collection of courses designed at the 1979-80 NEH/Iowa Institute, Carl Klaus explains,

These courses typically move through progressively more complex perceptual, conceptual, or rhetorical re-engagements with a topic, problem, or activity implicit in the initial assignment. (xviii; emphasis added)

I could offer many more examples: David Bartholomae’s reading and writing course, which moves toward “that complex negotiation where a writer or reader uses the work of others . . . to enable work that he can present as his own” (37); Marilyn Katz’s expository writing sequence, which works toward “the complex academic paper, our final goal” (291; emphasis added); James Kinneavy’s text on *Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition*, in which “all the major sections of the book . . . develop from the simplest to the most complex and difficult” (xv; emphasis added). These are only a few.

What is interesting about these examples is their great variety. All of these compositionists agree that a structured sequence of writing assignments is preferable to a random arrangement. All agree that the sequence should move in the direction of greater complexity. The problem, however, is in defining *complexity*. In the examples just cited, the implicit definitions of *complexity*, while perhaps not wholly contradictory, are different enough to raise questions about what we really mean when we order writing tasks “from simple to complex.”

Although much has been written on the subject of assignment design, few attempts have been made to compare or classify kinds of assignment sequences. Lynn Diane Beene surveys a few sequence designs in her bibliographical essay on assignment making, and Kenneth Dowst attempts a rough classification in his discussion of the epistemic approach to teaching writing, but only David Foster addresses the issue directly. In his review of the ways teachers might organize an effective writing course, Foster argues that the basis of such a course “is a series of purposeful writing tasks. This series can be organized in several ways: for example by means of the writer’s logical processes, or in terms of a sequence of topics, or as a sequence of
different rhetorical situations” (124). Foster’s classification, informal and incomplete as it is, helps us see some broad distinctions between kinds of sequences and notions of complexity. But these distinctions are too broad, creating odd, eclectic groupings that confuse as much as they clarify. For instance, Foster places in the “logical processes” category sequences as diverse as Kinneavy’s traditional modal arrangement; Ann Berthoff’s “assisted invitations” in forming, thinking, and writing; and Katz’s personal-academic analysis sequence. In the “topics” category, he includes not only variations on the typical writing-about-literature course but also William Coles’ inventive “epistemic” theme courses. If we are to truly understand the various meanings of complexity, we must make some finer distinctions than these casual categories allow.

In the pages that follow, I will outline a set of terms we might use to make such distinctions. As I do so, I will show how those terms allow us to understand the logic of various sequences, to compare and contrast related sequences, and ultimately to evaluate the concept of assignment sequence itself.

Types of Assignment Sequences

The first major distinction is between hierarchical and non-hierarchical assignment sequences. A non-hierarchical sequence is one in which the first assignments are not regarded as prior to but simply other than those that follow. Although most assignment sequences (including those that presume to move “from simple to complex”) are hierarchical, a significant proportion qualify as non-hierarchical, and examples of these can be found in all three of Foster’s categories. For instance, certain writing-across-the-curriculum sequences in which the order of writing assignments follows the thematic content of the course may be said to be non-hierarchical. Likewise, case approaches whose aim is to provide the writer with a variety of rhetorical situations may be non-hierarchical. Even logical process sequences may fall into this category on occasion: “patterns of exposition” sequences, for example, in which the range and variety of patterns tend to be more important than their order.

Most assignment sequences, however, are explicitly hierarchical, based on various principles of subordination. We might call one such principle formal primacy, in which certain forms of writing are regarded as basic or fundamental to others. An example of such a sequence would be the traditional sentence-paragraph-theme approach that formed the basis of so many “current traditional” texts in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although largely discredited by process practices in composition instruction, this atomistic sequence, as it is called by its detractors, has a powerful small-to-large, part-to-whole logic that reflects two of Aristotle’s topoi. Perhaps for that reason, it is still in evidence today, most notably in some basic writing courses and in research paper sequences that progress from one-paragraph
summaries to short "synthesis" assignments and then to a long "research paper."

Other hierarchical sequences are based not on notions of formal primacy but on theories of mind or cognitive development. The traditional modal sequence is a case in point. As Robert Connors and others have shown, the original modes—narration, description, exposition, and argument—were connected to outdated theories of faculty psychology adhered to by their inventor, Alexander Bain, and his contemporaries. Modern rhetorical theorists, notably Frank D'Angelo and Kinneavy, have offered more sophisticated rationales for similar sequences. This theoretical backing, combined with the considerable weight of tradition, helps account for the great popularity of the modes and other patterns of exposition sequences, even today.

Closely related to the various modal sequences, and almost as widely employed, are the developmental sequences. Based on the theories of Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and other cognitive psychologists, developmental sequences purport to follow a natural learning order, usually beginning in egocentric, subjective experience and moving outward toward integration with the "other," the world outside the self. Although existent in some forms long before they acquired any sophisticated psychological rationale (Connors, "Personal"), developmental writing sequences came into their own in the 1960s, in direct response to the theories of James Britton and James Moffett. Though Britton and Moffett themselves were careful not to suggest that assignment sequences be based on their theories (Britton 198; Moffett 54), curriculum planners and textbook writers have in fact cited their work as the rationale for sequences moving from "expressive" to "transactional" writing, from familiar to more abstract writer/audience/subject relationships.

Consider, for example, Stephen Judy's "experiential approach," described in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Judy says his course follows "the inner worlds to outer worlds pattern that one finds described in the works of Piaget, Creber, Moffett, and others." He describes this pattern and argues, "The inner worlds/outer worlds pattern, valid as it is for human growth in a broad sense, works nicely for individual writing courses as well" (49-50). Ken Macrorie's research sequence in Searching Writing, is another that is clearly based on developmental assumptions. And well-known "theory based" texts like Axelrod and Cooper's St. Martin's Guide to Writing frankly acknowledge a developmental bias in their organization of writing tasks (Instructor's Resource Manual 3).

Principles of Order

Just as hierarchical assignment sequences have different principles of subordination, they can also have different principles of order. The major difference here is between assignments that follow in serial order and those that are cumulative. The serial arrangement, probably the more common, involves a number of separate, discrete assignments, each of which is
regarded as an independent writing occasion. The typical modal or pattern sequence falls into this category, as do thematic sequences in which writers respond to a succession of different readings or groups of readings. Casebook approaches in which each new assignment is a response to a new, "more complex" rhetorical situation are also ordered serially.

In contrast, a cumulative sequence is one in which the later assignments "grow out of" or subsume earlier ones. One example is the research sequence in which students begin by writing summaries and syntheses of source materials which are eventually incorporated into a larger research paper at the end of the course. Unlike a serial research sequence, in which early assignments are viewed as practice for later ones, this cumulative sequence has a kind of organic structure. In a formalist course, it grows into a traditional research paper; in a developmental sequence, it might produce Macrorie's "I-Search" report.

Another example of a cumulative sequence may be seen in the expository writing program designed by Rose and his colleagues at UCLA. This program, "drawing on research in educational and cognitive psychology," involves a "master sequence" of eight kinds of writing activities frequently found in academic writing assignments. Each kind of writing (listing, definition, seriation, and so on) involves a sub-sequence of "discrete problem-solving exercises of gradually increasing difficulty" which "recapitulate and anticipate" the order of the whole. The sequence is designed to be "recursive" in the sense that it moves "not only forwards but circularly backwards, reinforcing and recouping . . . previous gains as [students] call upon the earlier writing strategies in service of the later ones" (Kiniry and Strenski 195). Perhaps the most well-known cumulative courses are those organized around particular topics or themes. Coles' courses, as described in *The Plural I, What Makes Writing Good*, and elsewhere, are cumulative, as are Dowst's "epistemic" approach, Klaus's "courses for change in writing," and Bartholomae's college reading and writing courses, outlined in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. Like the UCLA course described by Kiniry and Strenski, these thematic sequences have a recursive, organic structure:

In an initial assignment, the students address a certain issue related to the general theme of the sequence. . . . A subsequent assignment provides enough data and questions to complicate the issue in various ways, so that the students must reformulate their positions. Later assignments introduce new data, new questions, new perspectives. (Dowst 78)

While the UCLA sequence is based on "generalized cognitive models," the courses of Coles, Dowst, Klaus, and Bartholomae share a different set of theoretical assumptions—assumptions having to do with the nature of language and reality. Dowst explains some of these assumptions in "The Epistemic Approach: Writing, Knowing, and Learning." Citing the philosophy of John Dewey and Bruner as fundamental to this approach, Dowst says,
Education . . . involves more than increasing the number of data that direct or vicarious experience leads one to know. No less importantly, education involves composing language to connect one datum with another, one experience with another. This establishes patterns by which one can make sense of known data and in terms of which one can discover new data as well. A typical epistemic writing assignment assumes with Dewey that all “teaching and learning [is] a continuous process of reconstruction of experience” . . . It directs students to follow the experience of composing with some “reflective review and summarizing” of what they have been doing. (75)

Because the relationship between assignments in an epistemic sequence is so crucial and sometimes hard to articulate, course designers often rely on metaphor to explain the connection. Here is Dowst describing his own assignment sequence in terms of a spiral: “In an epistemic course, an assignment is part of a sequence of assignments that spiral around a central idea, progressing from relative simplicity to relative complexity of thought and expression” (78). Claus offers a musical analogy: “Thus each of these courses proceeds according to an organizational strategy somewhat like the musical form of theme and variation” (xviii). Coles speaks of his sequence as creating “dialogues” or “conversations” between students and teacher (Coles and Vopat 2; Plural I 4, 13). And Bartholomae, quoting Steiner and Said, says his allows students to “translate” themselves in the act of “inventing a discipline” (7-9).

The difference between a simple cumulative sequence and an epistemic one, then, is this: in the former, the writer uses language to synthesize knowledge—often the knowledge of others, which he comes to “make his own”; in the latter, the writer uses language to construct knowledge and, in the process, a way of knowing. Although usually associated with thematic sequences such as those mentioned here, the term epistemic can also be applied to logical process sequences, such as Berthoff’s “assisted invitations” in Forming/Thinking/Writing.

Thus, there are several ways to categorize and differentiate writing assignment sequences. They may be non-hierarchical or hierarchical; based on formal, cognitive/developmental, or epistemic principles. They may center on themes, logical processes, or rhetorical situations, and they may be ordered serially or cumulatively. No doubt there are other useful distinctions we could make as well, but my aim is not to exhaust the possibilities. Rather, I’m interested in exploring what is meant when different sequences are described as moving “from simple to complex,” and for that purpose, these terms will suffice.

Detecting Conflicting Assumptions

Not only do these terms clarify what different people mean when they use the ambiguous phrase “from simple to complex,” but they enable us to see the conflicting theoretical assumptions between (and sometimes within) related
sequence designs. For instance, consider the sequences Foster lists in his "thematic" category. At one end of the thematic spectrum are those traditional sequences based on readings in literature or essay anthologies. In purest form, these sequences are non-hierarchical, following no particular logic of their own but simply reflecting the arrangement of the readings themselves. In the middle of the spectrum are conventional "topic" courses which might be overlaid with formalist or logical process sequences—or possibly with both. (Philip Snyder's "Working 1-002: A Theme Course for Freshman Composition" is a good example of the latter.) At the far end of the spectrum are the epistemic sequences of Coles, Dowst, Klaus, and Bartholomae. Based on developmental principles and rooted in dialectic, these courses could not be less like the conventional thematic sequence.

To see how the terms I've proposed help detect conflicting assumptions within sequences, examine a course described by Katz in "From Self-Analysis to Academic Analysis: An Approach to Expository Writing." As the title suggests, the primary order of Katz's sequence seems to be developmental. "Since college students, in particular," she says, "are interested in understanding their own experience, self-analysis seems a logical place to begin to teach them about the process of abstract thinking and its relationship to writing" (289). Katz then "overlays" the primary sequence with a secondary hierarchy of formal skills that includes constructing a thesis and writing topic sentences. So far, no inconsistency. The conflict comes when Katz introduces a third organizing principle, the epistemic concept of "discovery":

In this course, students move from close analysis of aspects of their personal experience to analysis of academic material. They discover for themselves those thought processes which underlie the rules of paper organization we teach in expository writing courses. (288)

Now it's true that Katz herself never uses the term "epistemic," nor explicitly attempts to align herself with that theoretical approach. Nevertheless, it is the claim to "discovery" that sets her approach apart from numerous other sequences that integrate developmental and formalist principles. Implicitly, she is promoting a dialectic in which students "discover for themselves" the knowledge they need as writers. But something rings false in this declaration. To see what it is, we need only read what Coles says on the subject of discovery. The object of a true epistemic sequence, says Coles, is to keep things open, to pursue an idea in such a way as to allow a student to have ideas of his own, to find himself in the act of expression, to become conscious of himself as becoming through the use of language or languages. No set of assignments which fails to pursue an idea can allow for these possibilities. No set of assignments which closes an idea, which has a "point"
to get, or moves to a pre-determined conclusion, can allow for them either. ("Teaching of Writing" 32)

When Katz asks students to "discover for themselves" a set of "rules" that the teacher knows in advance, she is violating the principles of the epistemic approach.

It is important to note that there is no necessary contradiction between the formalist sequence and the epistemic approach. Conceived broadly, as in Bartholomae’s or Berthoff’s courses, formal skills are perfectly compatible with an epistemic sequence. Students discover not formal "rules," like use of "the topic sentence," but the concept of form itself. The problem in Katz’s scheme is that she defines formal skills too narrowly. The whole course is based on a hidden agenda incompatible with the notion of true "discovery" and thus undercuts its own credibility.

Some Cautions

The terms I’ve proposed here also enable us to evaluate certain trends or developments in assignment sequence design. The post-Dartmouth Conference interest in personal, expressive writing resulted in more developmental approaches. The "back-to-basics" movements of the early 1970s spawned a new generation of formalist sequences. And now, the epistemic rhetoric of the 1980s, along with the writing-across-the-curriculum movement and a heightened awareness of the social contexts of discourse, has sparked interest in new and (dare I say?) more complex kinds of assignment sequences.

As usual, these sequences have been slow to make their way into textbooks—except in such idiosyncratic texts as Coles’, Berthoff’s, and Bartholomae’s. But rationales for such sequences are becoming more and more prominent in the professional literature. Rich in intellectual content and based on post-structuralist theory that has elucidated our understanding of how language works, such rationales are emerging in journal articles, in professional publications, and on conference programs. Before long, I suspect, they will be evident in "mainstream" texts as well. But before they do, I would like to offer a caution.

In our eagerness to implement the principles of this newest "new rhetoric," let us remember what those principles are. An assignment sequence that "works" (whatever that means) works not because of some inherent logic. To believe in a "true" and "natural" sequence is to contradict the very principles of dialectic and social construction on which these new courses are built. It is also to ignore a long history of successes in the writing classroom—a history too often obscured by our young profession’s need to repudiate its beknighted elders.

At the same time, to imagine that we can be free of sequence is equally illusory. Those who lay claim to such freedom, by making no assignments at all, are only buying into the notion that student-generated writing occasions
are somehow more "natural" than teacher-initiated ones—as if one could
ignore all the social constraints imposed by the classroom environment.

Ultimately, we cannot allow our rage for order—in our classrooms, in our
profession, in our lives—to seduce us into thinking that any order is sacro-
sanct. The notion of sequence, like our various notions of simple and
complex, is itself a social construct. It is a way of asserting order in the midst
of chaos, a means by which we assure ourselves and our students that we are
making "progress." To put it simply, an assignment sequence is a necessary
fiction.

University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, North Dakota

Works Cited

Axelrod, Rise B., and Charles R. Cooper. Instructor's Resource Manual for The

Bartholomae, David, and Anthony R. Petrosky. Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts:
Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course. Upper Montclair,

Beene, Lynn Diane. "Assignment Making." Research in Composition and Rhetoric:

Berthoff, Ann E. Forming/Thinking/Writing: The Composing Imagination. Portsmouth,
NH: Boynton, 1982.

Britton, James, et al. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). London: Macmillan


Coles, William E., Jr., and James Vopat. What Makes Writing Good: A Perspective.

Connors, Robert J. "Personal Writing Assignments." College Composition and
—. "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse." College Composition and

D'Angelo, Frank J. A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop,
1975.

Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Ed. Timothy R. Donovan, and Ben


---

**Call for Textbook Reviewers**

*Focuses* is preparing a special issue that will feature reviews of current writing and rhetoric textbooks. If you are interested in writing a review and have never written or edited a writing textbook, contact William C. Wolff; Department of English; Appalachian State University; Boone, NC 26808 (704-262-2321).