



2023

Moving from Zero Draft to Essay Writing: A Scaffolded Exercise

Lindsay Knisely

University of California, Santa Cruz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knisely, Lindsay (2023) "Moving from Zero Draft to Essay Writing: A Scaffolded Exercise," *Journal of Response to Writing*. Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol9/iss2/5>

This Teaching Tips is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Response to Writing* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Moving From Zero Draft to Essay Writing: A Scaffolded Response Exercise

Lindsay Knisely

University of California, Santa Cruz

This exercise guides students in first- and second-year college writing classes through the process of developing their *zero draft* into a completed essay. The zero draft is a brief, low-stakes brainstorm in response to an essay prompt and is designed to be accessible and non-intimidating for the student writer. In this activity, students use writing to respond to a prompt and explore their burgeoning ideas in order to develop their initial thoughts into a completed paper. The students learn the value of responding to their own writing as a generative tool to locate the central elements of an essay. Through the zero draft, students learn the process of harvesting promising insights from their initial ideas and evolving those ideas into the thesis, analysis, interpretation of texts, and conclusion that comprise their essay. By engaging in this metacognitive activity, students learn how to mine their freeform brainstorms for their strongest ideas and use their responses to expand their thinking into a finished paper.

Various scholars have implemented exercises similar to the zero draft activity as a form of instructional scaffolding to guide students from ideas to essays. Huff (1983) wrote about teaching what he calls “Problem-Solving Drafting” to students and described the benefits of assigning a zero-draft kind of exercise thusly: “It is at this point in the drafting process that the

writer can begin to take charge of the text—adding, deleting, substituting, and reordering major components in accordance with an increasingly realized and interconnected set of rhetorical goals” (p. 811).

Instructional scaffolding is a well-established method for helping students become better writers. Susanna Benko (2012/2013) wrote about scaffolding as an ongoing process to support adolescent writing development, asserting that “with scaffolding, students’ potential is far beyond what it would be without” (p. 292). She quoted Applebee and Langer’s 1987 article, which stated that “effective writing instruction provides carefully structured support or *scaffolding* as students undertake new and more difficult tasks” (p. 139, italics in original). Benko referenced Applebee and Langer again in describing the “transfer of responsibility in the scaffolding process . . . Instructional scaffolding includes internalization by the students, wherein students take control of their learning and no longer need the supports they previously received” (Benko, 2012/2013, p. 293). The zero draft exercise functions as a form of instructional scaffolding that clarifies the steps of the writing process and provides support to student writers as they move from the conceptual stage to the composing stage.

Writing Activity Context

The zero-draft exercise can be used in a first- or second-year undergraduate class whenever students are given an essay assignment. Students can be prompted with directed self-reflection to consider how they can transfer the skills they have learned in this activity to future coursework as part of a practical, portable writing process. To help students use zero drafting as a model for generating writing in other contexts and for other courses, instructors can remind students of the value of setting interim deadlines for drafting to implement a metacognitive self-reflection and focused expansion of ideas.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

After completing this activity, students will have experience participating in essay writing as a process and in developing their original ideas from brainstorming to drafting. This exercise is designed to demystify the writing process and provide helpful guidelines for moving from concept to explication.

Course Format

This activity can be used in class or as a homework assignment. It is also effective as an asynchronous or online assignment.

Teacher Preparation

This exercise works within the context of a college composition course where students are reading and discussing texts in preparation for writing an essay. Before participating in this exercise, the instructor needs to have assigned the essay and explained the essay prompts to the students. The instructor must also have already assigned the zero draft before this exercise. The zero draft, also known as a free write, can be completed as a timed writing exercise in class or as homework. Students need to have access to the course texts, the essay prompt, and their completed zero draft before beginning this activity. After the exercise, students can discuss their plans for expanding their ideas into their papers either in small groups or in individual conferences with their instructor. The instructor can also respond to students' essay expansion ideas with written commentary to facilitate the students' transition into composing their final drafts.

Zero Draft Activity

Estimated Time

At least 20 minutes.

Procedure

Ask each student to respond to these five questions in writing, either on the zero draft itself or in a separate document.

1. First, reread your zero draft, and come up with a thesis in response to the prompt in the original writing assignment. Do this by returning to the central questions in the prompt you are responding to and reading over your zero draft, answering these questions in **one or two sentences that can serve as your working thesis**.
2. Next, think about what evidence you have to support this working thesis. Using the texts we have read and discussed that correspond to this writing assignment, come up with several useful quotations that relate to your zero draft and would help develop your ideas about this topic. **Please find some relevant quotations in these texts that you could use in response to this prompt.**
3. Now, think about how you can deepen the analysis in this paper. To do this, return to your zero draft and brainstorm several different expansions on the ideas you already wrote down. Think about extending your ideas into 3–4 sentences at the end of each paragraph. **Please write down a few ways you can deepen your paper’s analysis.**
4. Now, build an outline of your essay’s paragraphs based on the work you have been doing in this exercise. Make a plan for the paper based on your working thesis, the quotations you chose, and the central ideas you just expanded upon. Think about how you will move from one idea to the next—how you will transition smoothly and effectively for the audience. This may mean rearranging your paragraphs to create a sequence of thoughts that flow. **Write down several of your essay’s main ideas in an order that progresses logically from one idea to the next.**
5. Finally, write about the implications of your ideas. This is a useful way to prepare to write a conclusion for your essay as well as a helpful way to deepen your analysis at the end

of each paragraph. What are some big-picture implications of your points that you can anticipate discussing in answer to questions like the following: “So what?” “Why does this matter for you, your generation, or your community?” “Why should the reader care?” **Write down a few responses to these questions to develop your treatment of your main ideas.**

You now have a blueprint for your analytical essay. Follow this plan as you are expanding your zero draft into your paper. Pay special attention to ideas that seem powerful or intellectually invigorating—make sure to develop these original moments of insight in greater detail as you compose your essay.

Caveats and Alternatives

As an alternative, students can respond to these five questions verbally in small groups (or breakout rooms, if the course is online) and take notes instead of writing out their responses individually. This option is also useful for accommodating a diverse range of learning styles and can be adapted for use with secondary school students.

References

- Benko, S. L. (2012/2013). Scaffolding: An on-going process to support student writers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56(4), 291–300.
- Huff, R. K. (1983). Teaching revision: A model of the drafting process. *College English*, 45(8), 800–816.
- Langer, J., & Applebee, A. N. (1986). Reading and writing instruction: Toward a theory of teaching and learning. *Review of Research in Education*, 13, 171–194.