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Essay Examination Prompts and the Teaching of Academic Writing

Daniel Horowitz

Abstract—Two hundred eighty-four essay examination prompts from 15 academic departments at Western Illinois University were classified into four main categories and a number of subcategories on the basis of the type of response they required. Specific content was then removed from each prompt, leaving organizational "frames" that correspond to each prompt type. These "frames" are listed and suggestions for using the typology in the classroom are given.

The purpose of this paper is to present a typology of essay examination prompts and to show how it can be used to help foreign students sharpen their essay exam-taking skills. The typology is based on 284 prompts sent to me by members of the faculty of Western Illinois University in response to my written request for: (a) recent tests containing questions requiring students to write anything from a few sentences to a fully developed essay; and (b) handouts on which instructors assigned "papers" of any kind, book or article reviews, "take home" exams, and so on.

Of approximately 750 faculty members contacted, 38 sent responses, 36 of which contained usable data. The responses that fell into the second category (out-of-class writing assignments) were discussed in an earlier paper (Horowitz, 1986); here I will focus on the essay prompts, which came from 29 courses in 15 departments (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Departments Contributing Essay Prompts

Department	No. of Questions	No. of Courses
Agricultural economics	6	1
Anthropology	10	1
Art	17	2
Business	5	1
Communication arts and sciences	10	2
Computer science	1	1
Economics	7	1
Geology	15	1
History	44	4
Law enforcement administration	5	1
Marketing	11	2
Political science	4	2
Psychology	39	5
Sociology	97	3
Zoology	13	2
Totals: 15 departments	284	29

Because the responses were unevenly distributed, I have not tried to draw any conclusions about the distribution of prompt types among the various departments. I did find, however, that within the 284 prompts there were both sufficient variety and uniformity to create a useful, if preliminary, typology of essay examination prompts.

Methods of Classification

The most direct way to classify essay examination prompts is by the actual instructional verbs they contain, as was done by Mallows (1980). This approach would be of value if a uniform code of instructional verb usage were followed, but this is not the case at either British (Swales, 1982) or American universities. For example, even though all three of the following examples use the same instructional verb, *describe,* it seems highly counterintuitive to put them into the same category:

Example 1: Describe the causes of the War of 1812.
Example 2: Describe the technologies associated with horticulture and also those associated with agriculture.
Example 3: Describe the relationship between population growth, urbanization, and the demographic transition.

Example 1 requires a discussion of historical causes; Example 2, a listing and perhaps a physical description; and Example 3, a discussion of the interrelationships among three abstract concepts. The meaning of *describe* varies so greatly among these prompts that there is little pedagogical value in placing them under one heading.

Various other schemes used to classify academic writing tasks were designed to handle a much broader range than the present study comprehends. For example, Kiniry and Strenski (1985) proposed a scheme to classify "quizzes, examinations, reports, and papers" (p. 192). Purves, Söter, Takala, and Vähäpassi (1984) developed a "system intended to both describe and classify current writing assignments . . . for an international study of written composition" (p. 385). Bridgeman and Carlson (1984), Johns (1981, 1985), Kroll (1979), and Ostler (1980) each conducted writing task surveys for which they constructed lists of task types. These lists included examination essays as one type of writing task, among others, but did not distinguish among different types of prompts. Although each of these classification schemes has merit within its own context, none has the "delicacy of focus" (Halliday, 1976, p. 24) required for classifying a relatively large body of essay prompts in a pedagogically useful way.

I chose instead to follow an approach similar to Swales' (1982). His method was "to form the instructional verbs . . . into a limited set of super-ordinate groups" (p. 16). In the present study, the concept of *instructional verb* was expanded to include all organizational markers. Prompts were placed in the same group if their organizational markers were judged to have performed equivalent or nearly equivalent functions within the context of the complete prompt. The

specific content material was then removed, leaving "prompt frames" such as the following, all from the category "dictionary definition":

Example 4: Define . . .
Example 5: Give a definition of . . .
Example 6: What is . . . ?

In this approach, then, a typology of essay prompts consists of a relatively small number of organization categories and a relatively large number of frames that are the linguistic realizations of those categories. These frames vary along a continuum, from those that make use of members of a relatively closed system of instructional verbs (as in Example 4) to those that exploit more general lexical resources (as in Example 6).

These "lexical" frames, such as "What is . . . ?" and "Why is . . . ?," are obviously capable of pointing to more than one pattern of organization and therefore appear in more than one category. Although a preponderance of this type of frame would lead to an indistinctiveness in the categories—and would call into question the separability of form and content demands within the prompts—repetition is the exception rather than the rule, as a conscious effort was made to include within each frame the most likely organizational information evoked by a prompt.

Despite this effort to make the frames as inclusive as possible, the analysis given here does not exhaust the organizational potential of prompts. In other words, although there is a great deal of organizational information commonly given to a writer in an essay prompt, this analysis concentrates on only one, the primary organizational instruction. Others (C. M. Johns, 1976; Swales, 1982) have noted the importance of secondary instructions that tell the writer what persona or point of view to assume, which sources to draw from, what to be sure to include or exclude, and so on. Understanding these clues is vital to being able to mold one's answer to the prompt; however, this discussion will not include further mention of them.

Finally, it is reasonable to ask about the fundamental nature of the categories I will propose. To begin with, it will be seen that the categories do not have hard and fast boundaries; rather, they blend into one another at the "edges." They can best be thought of as those areas on the continuum of human cognition that have special significance in modern academia. They are the forms into which the English-speaking world pours its academic knowledge, the places where that knowledge is found; and, not unlike Aristotle's *topoi*, the places where arguments are found.

It is also certain that these areas are culturally determined, a fact that adds to their pedagogic value in an ESL/EFL program. Indeed, it is just as interesting to note what is not there as what is. For example, no question asked a student to draw a moral lesson, though this may be common in other cultures; and only one asked for a prediction about the future. Of course, the absence of these types may only be a reflection of gaps in the data. Nevertheless, the general idea—that these categories represent culturally determined areas on the continuum of human cognition—would, I believe, remain valid no matter how much the data were expanded.

The Typology

At the broadest level of analysis, there are four tasks that an essay prompt can require a student to perform:

I. Display familiarity with a concept.
II. Display familiarity with the relation between/among concepts.
III. Display familiarity with a process.
IV. Display familiarity with argumentation.

Table 2 outlines these categories and their subcategories, with an example of each type of question.

TABLE 2
Categories and Subcategories of the Tasks an Essay Prompt Can Require a Student to Perform

I. Display familiarity with a concept.
   A. Dictionary-style definition ("Define the term contropposto.")
   B. Example ("Give examples of positive and negative sanctions.")
   C. Significance ("Identify and explain the significance of five of the following: Paul of Tarsus; Livy; Charles Martel; Benedict; Charlemagne; Justinian; Muhammad.")
   D. Physical description ("Describe the glycocalyx, including its chemical composition, in various groups of platyhelminthes.")
   E. Function/purpose ("List and explain . . . the five major functions that governments attempt to perform in modern capitalistically oriented society.")
   F. Unspecified ("Describe Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning.")

II. Display familiarity with the relation between/among concepts.
   A. Similarities and differences
      1. Description of differences ("How do naturalistic studies contrast with laboratory experiments on external and internal validity?")
      2. Accounting for differences ("Give three reasons why basalt flows . . . might vary in thickness.")
      3. Classification ("Discuss in detail and name the different types of silicate structure and why they are different. Give examples of minerals in each structural group.")
   B. Cause and result
      1. Historical cause ("What caused and encouraged the growth of warlordism in China?")
      2. Goal ("Indicate [Alexander Hamilton's] complex motivation in pursuing [his economic program].)"
      3. Contributing factors ("What factors other than innate intelligence contribute positively to cognitive development and success in school?")
      4. Result ("What are two effects of social typing?")
      5. Process of causation (". . . explain how changes in the rate of interest will cause changes in the equilibrium level of Gross National Product.")
   C. Unspecified ("Define and describe the relationship between anomie, deviance, and urbanization.")

III. Display familiarity with a process.
   A. Process ("Describe the process of "intermediation" . . . [in] agricultural finance.")
   B. Narration ("Write an essay about the history of sculpture in the round during the Middle Ages.")

IV. Display familiarity with argumentation.
   A. General argument ("Summarize the arguments for and against slavery")
   B. Ascribed argument ("Describe the justifications used by the Child Savers for removing dependent [as well as delinquent] children from their homes and placing them in detention facilities.")
   C. Critical thinking ("Is it probable that one day machines will be smarter than men?")

I. Display Familiarity with a Concept

There is a multidimensional continuum within this category running from prompts that require one short, rhetorically specified answer to those that simply name a concept and ask the writer to give an extended description of its salient characteristics. The following is a list of frames corresponding to each subcategory.

A. Dictionary-Style Definition.

Define (the term(s)) ****.
Give a definition of ****.
What is meant by ****?
What does **** mean?
What is/are ****?

B. Example. Although many prompts required the student to give examples, only two of them asked only for an example.

Give an example/examples of ****.

C. Significance. This group included prompts asking about the significance of a person, group, or concept.

What is/was the significance of ****?
Explain the significance of ****.
Tell why **** is important to ****.
What is ****'s importance to ****?
Tell what role **** played in ****.
Who were ****?

D. Physical Description. Eight of the 12 questions in this category came from art courses, where questions such as "What is a mosaic?" would of necessity require a physical description.

Describe a ****.
Give a description of ****.
What are ****?

E. Function/Purpose.

Describe the function(s) of ****.
Tell about ****'s function(s).
What purpose did **** serve?
Explain the purpose of ****.
What are ****'s used for?

F. Unspecified. There were a relatively large number of frames that prompted students to display familiarity with a given concept, theory, or problem or to give details about something. Although previous analyses of instructional verbs (C. M.

Johns, 1976; Swales, 1982), as well as textbooks (Williams, 1982) have made careful distinctions among markers such as *describe, explain,* and *discuss,* my research indicates that all of these serve this same signaling function; therefore, there is no pedagogic value in teaching students to distinguish among them. Indeed, this category is the most content-centered, giving students a relatively wide choice in organizing their answers; it is, in a sense, the limiting case in which the content dimension is central. The following are common:

Discuss	the principle of ****.
Explain	the theory of ****.
Describe	the characteristics of ****.
Summarize	the fundamental nature of ****.
Outline	
Write an essay on	

Identify the significant elements of ****.
Characterize ****.
Define ****.
Explain what **** is.
What is/are ****?

II. Display Familiarity with the Relationship Between/Among Concepts

A. Similarities and Differences.

1. Description of differences
   What is the difference between **** and ****?
   Describe/discuss differences between **** and ****.
   What was the nature of **** as differentiated from ****?
   Explain the difference between **** and ****.
   Differentiate between **** and ****.
   Distinguish among these concepts:
   Compare **** to ****.
   Write an essay comparing **** and ****.
   Contrast **** with ****.
   How does **** contrast with ****?
   Contrast the differences *(sic)* between **** and ****.
   What were the differences in **** among ****?
   How do **** differ in ****?
   How does **** do **** in ways that are different from ****?
   What is peculiar about ****?
2. Account for differences
   Account for the differences between **** and ****.
   What determines which . . . ?
   Why is **** the only ****?
   Give the reasons why **** vary.
   Why is **** more **** than ****?

3. Classification. There were only four questions in this category. This leads one to question the emphasis placed on it in most writing textbooks.

   Name the different types of **** and discuss why they are different.
   Mention criteria you would use in categorizing ****.
   . . . Give the various taxes involved, set up experiments to demonstrate each one individually.

B. Cause/Result.

1. Historical cause
   Describe the causes of ****.
   What were the causes which . . . ?
   What caused and encouraged the growth and continuance of ****?
   Explain why **** happened.

   $\left\{\begin{matrix}\text{Identify}\\\text{Delineate}\end{matrix}\right\}$ the $\left\{\begin{matrix}\text{forces}\\\text{developments}\\\text{pressures}\end{matrix}\right\}$ that

   Why did . . . ?
   . . . Why?
3. Contributing factors
   What factors contribute to ****?
   List and explain the aspects of **** that contribute to ****.
4. Result
   What is the effect of ****?
   What would the effect of **** be on ****?
   What consequence does **** have for ****?
   In what way does **** have an influence on ****?
   What impact did **** have on ****?
   Describe the changes that have occurred under the influence of ****.
5. Process of causation
   Explain how **** affects **** to achieve ****.
   How did **** encourage ****?
   List two ways in which **** fosters ****.
   Explain how changes in **** will cause changes in ****.
   What is it about **** which prompts ****?

C. Unspecified. This was a small category, with only six prompts. Most instructors seem to have preferred prompts in which the relation to be described was specified.

Define and describe the relationship between **** and ****.
How is/are **** related to ****?
What is the relationship between **** and ****?
Describe how **** is related to ****.
Explain how ****, ****, and **** each relate to ****.

III. Display Familiarity with a Process

A. Process. This category provided especially clear evidence that there is no consistent difference between *explain* and *describe,* which were used interchangeably.

Explain	the evolution of ****
	the use of ****
	how you would go about . . .
	the technique . . .
Describe	how . . .
	the procedures . . .
	the process . . .
	the practices . . .
	the ways . . .

How do . . . ?
In what way(s) do(es) . . . ?

B. Narration.

Trace . . .
Summarize the course of . . .
Describe the history of ****.
Write an essay about the history of ****.
How has **** changed over time?
Tell what happened to ****.
. . . How was this implemented?
Describe some of the actions . . .

IV. Display Familiarity with Argumentation

Argumentation may be defined as "the discursive techniques which make it possible to evoke or further people's assent to the theses presented for their acceptance" (Perelman, 1963, p. 155). In this sense, argumentation is more ambitious than exposition, in which supporting detail is chosen and arranged to promote an audience's understanding of a topic, not its assent to a thesis.[1]

Working from this definition, we can easily test whether a given prompt is meant to elicit an argumentative or expository response by adding "Convince the reader that . . . " to the beginning of the prompt and asking whether the

[1] This dichotomy is somewhat muddied by the fact that all essay examination writing contains an argumentative element, namely the writer's attempt to persuade the reader/instructor to proffer an acceptable grade in a course. This intention must be hidden, however, because of the social convention that states that an expository exam essay is to be written as if the reader did not already understand the ideas being presented — as if a prompt were really a question — and that an argumentative essay is to be written as if the reader did not already agree with the thesis — as if a prompt were really part of a Socratic dialogue. Thus, essay examination writing is doubly false, in that writers must hide their true intention (to pass the course) behind a wall of prose designed to do what has already been done. The only exceptions to this are prompts in the "critical thinking" subcategory, where the writer has a real communicative intention — to defend an original thesis.

resulting prompt is essentially the same as the original one. If it is, the prompt falls into this fourth category.

Consider these superficially similar prompts:

Example 7: Why do people study history?
Example 8: Discuss why there are negative attitudes about [multi-national corporations] from a U.S. perspective. . . .
Example 9: Why did [the Puritan's] religious and state system break down at the end of the 17th century?
Example 10: Why should the tag on the leg of a stuffed bird give the leg and bill colors but not the feather colors?
Example 11: Give one argument in favor of, and one in opposition to, having scientists steal eggs from California condor nests for the purpose of raising them in captivity.

The absurdity of "Convince the reader that people study history" is immediately apparent; this prompt relates to goals, not argumentation. Examples 8 and 9 also fail the test; they are concerned with causes. Example 10, however, passes the test: "Convince the reader that the tag on the leg of a stuffed bird should give the leg and bill colors but not the feather colors" would elicit essentially the same response as the original prompt, as would Example 11, which must be slightly reworded: "Convince the reader that stealing eggs . . . is good, and convince the reader that stealing eggs . . . is bad."

This category has three subcategories. "General argument" contains prompts in which the argumentation to be presented is "public domain," in counterdistinction to the prompts in "ascribed argument," where the argumentation "belongs" to some individual or group. Examples of "general argument" prompts are:

Example 11: List two common criticisms of differential association theory.
Example 12: How well did archaeopteryx fly, and what is the evidence? Some examples of "ascribed argument" are:
Example 13: Are court records an accurate reflection of early delinquency, according to the article by Erikson and Empey? Why?
Example 14: What experimental evidence did Lashley provide against the argument that his studies that showed cortical lesion disruption of learning were simply the result of specific sensory deficits?

In the final subcategory, "critical thinking," writers are called upon to present and defend their own theses—ideas, judgments, hypotheses, or analyses of previously unseen data. In general, these prompts require the application of learning to a new situation. Examples of this category are:

Example 15: This slide shows a carved tombstone. The work does not appear in the textbook and probably is unfamiliar to you. Nevertheless, on the basis of your experience with the arts, suggest a date and a probable origin for the object. Next, write a brief essay in which you defend your attribution. . . .

Example 16: Dr. Lou Treen trained a group of snails to avoid footshock by not crawling down from a platform (passive, one-trial avoidance). He then removed the brains from these trained snails and baked them into a quiche. Treen found that other snails fed this brain quiche learned the avoidance task faster than snails not fed this quiche. He concluded that a memory of the avoidance learning had been transferred from trained donors' brains in the quiche to the recipient snails — thereby improving their performance. What are two alternative explanations for these results, and two control conditions or groups necessary to control for these two possibilities?

A. General Argument.

Summarize the arguments for and against ****.
Give one argument in favor of and one in opposition to ****.
What is the argument which supports ****?
Why is **** condemned?
List two common criticisms of ****.
Why is **** considered ****?
In what ways does **** indicate ****?
. . . and what is the evidence?
It is generally accepted as fact that . . . What evidence do we have that leads us to this conclusion?
What are the main justifications for ****?
What is the rationale for ****?
What are the two most common reasons why . . . ?
Make a general statement about **** and tell why . . .
Indicate why **** are (not) ****.
Explain why . . .
Why is/are . . . ?

B. Ascribed Argument.

Describe the justifications used by ****.
Are . . . , according to ****? Why?
What evidence does **** provide against the argument that . . . ?
Express the opinions of the following men regarding . . . : ****, ****, etc.

C. General Thinking.

Is it probable that . . . ?
What do we mean when we say . . . ?
In your opinion . . .
Would you suggest ****? Why or why not?
On the basis of your experience . . .
What is wrong with the following . . . ?
Give two alternative explanations . . .
Support one of the above opinions.

Here are some data designed to test the hypothesis ****. Analyze the data as best you can and write some of the important conclusions.

Suggestions for Using the Typology in the Classroom

Two assumptions underlie my suggestions for using the typology: first, that foreign students lack skills in writing examination essays and so need instruction; and second, that this instruction should aim to familiarize students with this typology (or a similar one produced for a specific purpose) and with some of the sentence- and discourse-level structures that might be especially useful for answering each type of prompt.

The first assumption is supported not only by my personal experience, but also by a number of other researchers. Swales (1982) quotes from an interview with a British professor: "The overseas students' major problem is this question of how they answer an examination question; what we would frequently get from students is an answer to a question which didn't exist" (p. 13). Houghton (1984) also notes that "Overseas Students . . . are likely to be handicapped to a certain extent in attempting to master the rules of [writing academic essays in English]" (p. 47) and goes on to discuss those rules and why they present difficulties.

As for the second assumption, it seems likely that students who become familiar with the standard "display cases" in which they will be asked to show off their knowledge will have better study skills because they will more accurately be able to predict what questions will appear on a test. In addition, faced with examination questions they have not seen before, these students would be better able to hazard reasonable guesses about what their instructor was asking for and, under the pressure of time, use the structures they learned to shape their answers accordingly. As Purves (1986) writes,

> I think it is important for the United States teacher of the non-native student to make clear to the students that what they are going to learn in a composition course is not *the* way to think and write . . . but the particular form of these aspects of writing that is valued in the academies of the United States. (p. 150)

A course that aims to familiarize students with various methods of paragraph and short essay development may sound reminiscent of the approach common to many writing textbooks, which concentrate on one type of organization after another, assigning students to write "process" paragraphs or to find a topic suitable for a "cause/effect" essay. This textbook presentation, however, differs in two significant ways from the approach advocated here. First, most textbook categories are not based on a study of foreign students' academic writing needs and therefore tend to be "all purpose" rather than specifically designed for one type of language use. Second, textbooks place too much emphasis on organization, relegating content to the position of a necessary evil.

In contrast, the approach advocated here tries to strike a balance between specific content and organization because, as the evidence presented earlier for the interchangeability of instructional verbs such as *explain, describe,* and *discuss* indicates, the successful interpretation of any prompt requires an apprecia-

tion of the interplay between organizational markers and specific content. There is, in other words, no point in studying organizational markers (or the corresponding methods of paragraph development) in isolation from specific content, because each provides the context for the other's interpretation.

To illustrate how these principles can be put into practice, let us imagine that an EAP teacher has designed a unit on plate tectonics (continental drift) that includes a number of readings and a guest lecture given by a member of the geology department. The following are some ideas for using such material:

1. Using the frames presented here as a guide, teachers can devise questions about the readings and the lecture that students must answer in complete, paraphrased sentences. Teachers might even include redundant questions ("What causes earthquakes?," "Why do earthquakes occur?") and make it part of the task for students to discover this redundancy.
2. Teachers can distribute copies of the typology and have students compose prompts based on the readings and the lecture. Students can then evaluate each others' prompts, deciding if they are in the correct form, if they are relevant to the subject, if they can be answered from the reading, and so on. Students can also be assigned to answer each others' prompts.
3. Teachers can have students paraphrase teacher- or student-generated prompts in as many ways as possible. This would demonstrate the many ways that the same information can be asked for.
4. After the unit is completed, teachers should give a timed essay test. I have found that for advanced students, three questions in a 50-minute period is both challenging and possible. If the topic is fairly detailed, students should be allowed to use their notes, or better yet, a prepared, one-page note sheet. Preparing such note sheets forces students to go over their longer notes to decide what is and is not essential. If the topic has been studied extensively or is in the students' common major field, teachers might want to give a closed-book exam.
5. Before the test is given, students should be assigned the task of "psyching it out," writing those questions they feel most likely to be on a comprehensive exam covering the given topic. This assignment provides a great deal of useful material for classroom discussion.
6. The students' answers to the essay prompts should be examined, compared, discussed, and so on, not so much for their grammatical accuracy as for their appropriateness to the prompt. "Answering the question" should be the overriding criterion in evaluating such essays.
7. Teachers can present students with lists of useful paragraph strategies on which essay structures can be modeled. For example, a unit on dictionary-style definitions might include work on the "concept-class-characteristics" structure of definitions (e.g., a telescope is an instrument that magnifies distant objects), the grammatical resources available for realizing those structures, and ways that definitions can be extended through description, analogies, examples, and so on.
8. After an essay exam, teachers can point out (or students can find) those sentence- and discourse-level structures that seemed most useful for answering the question. Teachers may also want to make up exercises that would reinforce these structures even further. Cloze and sentence-combining exercises are especially useful for this.

9. When choosing topics and composing questions over the course of a semester, teachers should seek a balance among topics that lend themselves to the different types of essay prompts discussed in this paper. By the end of the course, students should have written time-pressured essays corresponding to a variety of prompt types.

Conclusion

The greatest strength of this approach is its diversity. Essay prompts from a number of different university departments were put together into a common typology; thus, it is most useful for teachers working with undergraduates, who normally take a fairly wide range of courses.

This is also its greatest weakness. Those who teach more narrowly focused ESP classes may find this typology too general. My suggestion to these teachers is to replicate and extend this study by asking faculty members of the appropriate department to send them representative essay questions, analyzing and classifying those questions, and then following the suggestions for teaching given here. An excellent example of a more specific typology is Armbruster, Anderson, Bruning, and Meyer (1984), who classified over 300 questions from middle school history textbooks. Although their prompts came from this source, their method was much the same as that of this study and provides a useful model for those who are motivated to carry on this type of analysis in more specific fields of study.

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