

Developing students' essay-writing

Nicola describes a way of supporting students with their essay-writing through talking essays, using the example of comparing two hurricanes.



Accompanying online materials

Most teachers would agree that many students find it difficult to produce good-quality writing for extended essays. It takes a high level of skill to guide a reader through a geographical issue, drawing together key points and explanations, comparing and critiquing different arguments, and making conclusions appropriate to the evidence. Taylor (2004) argues that this can mean teachers are sometimes reluctant to set analytical or discursive extended writing tasks below A level, and this may mean that A-level students can suddenly, and overwhelmingly, have a lot of catching up to do to meet the demands of their course.

One way that I have found to support students of all ages with their essay-writing is the 'talking essay'. Talking essays give students an easy way into essay-writing, helping them develop their ideas without requiring large amounts of independent writing. The way it works is that the teacher gives each student a small section of an essay (a 'small point'); the students work together to identify which paragraphs their small points belong to; then they work together in 'paragraph groups' to collaboratively 'write' the essay. Depending on how you structure the activity talking essays can develop students' ability to select the geography for their writing, prioritise their key points or effectively communicate the geography. In this process they are learning together through dialogue and discussion, using peer talk to develop not only their extended writing skills, but also their thinking about a particular geographical issue.

An example of how I have used this is with a year 10 class exploring the different effects of hurricanes (Figure 1 and 2). The title of the essay the students were set was 'Do all hurricanes have the same effects?' In previous lessons, students had considered the physical causes of hurricanes, including their place within global climate systems, and had started to explore some of their social, economic and environmental impacts.

They had then begun to consider the different approaches to hurricane damage mitigation in countries with contrasting levels of economic development. The essay title had been introduced at the end of the previous lesson, and for their homework students considered what types of information their essay might include. At this point my students had not studied specific examples of contrasting hurricanes, so this was a useful way to introduce them to two case studies as well as develop their literacy skills. Figure 3 summarises the talking essay process, the cards referred to are available to download.

Although the example in this article explores the differing effects of hurricanes with year 10, the talking essay technique could easily be adapted for other topics and year groups. I have found it particularly effective with year 13, to give them greater confidence in selecting relevant case study information for extended examination questions. These students are already familiar with the case studies; I provide them with a larger number of descriptive smaller points relating to a range of case studies, and the activity becomes the more challenging task of selecting and tailoring the information to the overall question.



Figure 1: Cyclone Nargis was a low-latitude, Category 4 tropical cyclone that made landfall in Myanmar (Burma) in Asia on 2 May 2008. It sent a 4m-high storm surge 40km up the densely populated Irrawaddy delta, causing at least 138,000 fatalities and catastrophic destruction. Despite the fact that India had been tracking the cyclone, the Burmese population, with both low literacy rates and low levels of technology, received very little warning of the disaster. Cyclone Nargis rendered 3.2 million people homeless and cost approximately US\$10 billion. **Photo:** Burma Campaign UK.



Figure 2: Category 5 Hurricane Katrina was the costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States. At least 1833 people died in the hurricane, and the total cost of damage to property was estimated at US\$108 billion. Much of the damage was the result of the 8.5m storm surge which caused the levee system to fail catastrophically, flooding large areas of New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana. Ten years after the Hurricane Katrina hit there are still many abandoned houses in New Orleans (pictured). **Photo:** Ruth Totterdell.

Essay title: Do all hurricanes have the same effects?

1. Write the title on the board and explain the task – the students will be exploring the impact of two contrasting hurricanes.
2. Discuss as a class the potential structure of this essay – what are the important ‘big points’? (Refer to their homework if you have asked them to write a structure for the essay.) For example, my students produced a structure which included the following key paragraphs:

Introduction – including a definition of a hurricane, how hurricanes are formed, and parts of the world where they are named tropical cyclones.

What factors affect the impact of a hurricane? – the physical and human factors which determine how hazardous a hurricane will be.

What were the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the USA? – what factors affected their human impacts?

What were the effects of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar? – what factors affected their human impacts?
3. Give out a set of cards with a number of ‘small points’ relating to the title (one card per student). For this question I had decided to use the two contrasting case studies of Hurricane Katrina in the USA in 2005 (Figure 1) and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 (Figure 2). This supported a discussion about the factors influencing the damage a hurricane might inflict: from simple points, such as the strength of the hurricane (i.e. what category is it?) through to the physical relief of the area, its population density, and the country’s level of development and preparedness. The inclusion of Cyclone Nargis allowed me to illustrate the potential of a political regime to influence the impact of a natural disaster: Myanmar’s military rulers initially resisted international aid.
4. Have a set of big points on larger cards matching up with those decided in class (you could change these from your original plan if the students come up with a different yet equally valid approach to answering the question).
5. Students move around the classroom and fit their facts into one of the ‘big point’ categories.
6. Each group of students now adopts a ‘big point’ and its associated cards. Each group decides what is the most important point on their cards and why (this pushes them

into a discussion of the significance of one fact *vis-à-vis* another). Extra information can be added in from their prior knowledge, or supplementary information sheets. Often, some groups have more information to deal with than others, so allocate students appropriately.

7. Select a representative from each group to write the introduction and conclusion. Discuss what should go in an introduction – you need to give the reader signposts. Ask a person from each group to say what their ‘big point’ is and why it is important, and record this. Do the same for the conclusion. This is a good opportunity for building in differentiation, as writing the introduction or conclusion can be challenging.
8. Each group is given a period of time to ‘write’ their paragraph. It is important that every group member should write and read out at least a couple of sentences – everybody in the class should have a part to play. Depending on the class, you may need to support students with their writing; at a sentence level, they will need to consider how each sentence builds on the one before, whilst at paragraph level they should think about how it links with the previous (or next) paragraph. This may require communication between groups at some point during the task. You may need to support some students by giving them a word bank of connectives or sentence-starters.
9. ‘Perform’ the essay as a class. It is particularly effective if you can record the spoken essay so that it can be replayed to students later.
10. Hold a class discussion to explore the key points arising from the activity, relating both to the geographical understanding (in this case the issues of how and why hurricanes of the same size might affect different areas differently) and to the process of putting together the essay. This is particularly effective if you can replay the recorded essay with them and of course provides the opportunity for more extended engagement with the essay (such as students assessing the essay with pre-determined success criteria, providing formative feedback etc.)
11. For groups of students who might find it useful to have copies of the essay, such as examination classes, I transcribe the essay. This also gives students an opportunity to assess their work, which can be particularly effective for examination-style questions where students can use the official mark scheme to summatively assess their class essay.

Figure 3: The talking essay process.

Conclusion

Talking essays have many benefits. They support students’ literacy, particularly their extended writing. They provide a safe context for younger students to develop their ability to structure an argument, thinking it through carefully, and supporting it with a range of evidence. They give older students an opportunity not only to practise their discursive and analytic writing, but

also to tailor case study information to specific examination questions. Although initially students may be reluctant to stand up in front of a camera and speak, in my experience their nerves are soon forgotten and they engage actively in the process of collaboratively producing an essay, and the subsequent opportunities for formatively assessing their essays. | TG

References and useful reading

- Casey, M. (2010) ‘Why the Cyclone in Myanmar was so deadly’. Available online at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/05/080508-AP-the-perfect.html> (last accessed 3 February 2015)
- Taylor, L. (2004) *Re-presenting Geography*. Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing.
- Zimmerman, K.A. (2012) ‘Hurricane Katrina: Facts, Damage and Aftermath’. Available online at www.livescience.com/22522-hurricane-katrina-facts.html (last accessed 3 February 2015).

Online resources

The cards with big points and small points referred to are available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/tg and click Spring 2016

Dr Nicola Walshe

co-ordinates the geography PGCE course at the University of Cambridge.

Email: nicola.walshe@gmail.com