

Teaching Note

Exploring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Social Justice Writing Prompts for Students of Advanced English

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Introduction

Balancing linguistic learning objectives and social justice goals can be challenging for instructors who already feel stretched for time and resources. Communication skills are essential, but issues like dignity, liberty, and equality are prominent in the lives of immigrant, refugee, and international learners. One solution for upper-level student writing is to contextualize the course within the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This nearly 75-year-old document still resonates with students, and a recently published collection of social justice writing prompts offers students a path from informal and subjective personal reflections to objective and academic analysis supported by credible sources.

Using the UDHR as a writing course theme offers additional advantages:

1. Its contents are relevant to both individual experiences and current global events.
2. It can be instructive to study the same message expressed in parallel forms.
3. It provides a unique structure in which to compare cultural norms and personal philosophies.
4. Because it was written in 1948, students have room to consider shifts in world culture over time and imagine what could be changed or added.
5. Its scope is large enough to accommodate individuality within a common theme while providing multiple ways to engage through different rhetorical styles.

Process

This coursework was piloted in an upper-level writing class at Portland Community College during summer 2020. There were 19 students from nearly as many countries, and the course was delivered remotely using Zoom. In lieu of textbooks, a combination of free original and open educational resources (OER) were provided via D2L/Brightspace.

Two-week units focused on different rhetorical styles. Writing prompts inspired by the UDHR were paired with related grammar, vocabulary, composition, and critical thinking lessons. Students first brainstormed with informal discussions on Padlet before moving to Google Docs to write paragraphs which they later used as outlines for essays. Each step included personalized instructor feedback, and students received extra credit for visiting tutors.

The rhetorical styles included:

- **Definition:** Students chose abstract words or concepts, such as *liberty* or *security*, to explore using various definition strategies while incorporating adjective and adverb clauses
- **Cause-and-effect:** Students chose issues, such as *slavery* or *freedom of thought*, to explore through research into their causes and effects while practicing noun clauses and passive voice
- **Discussion/argument:** Students identified a human right missing from the UDHR or one that should be changed, such as *digital privacy*; they discussed its pros and cons while learning more about modal verbs and hedging.

Results

Students successfully demonstrated skills to brainstorm appropriate topics, prepare a basic thesis, and support their thesis with a logical set of main points. Students organized this information into a standard academic essay structure while utilizing clear grammar, appropriate vocabulary, and standard mechanics. Students also began to incorporate outside information with simple acknowledgment of sources.

Areas requiring further development were typical of ESOL writers at this level: occasional lack of focus or direct flow; lack of succinct and specific supporting details; unfamiliarity with research methods; and difficulty shifting to a formal tone. These were not surprising and are part of the normal learning process at this level. Interestingly, however, some students created higher-level work, such as using cause-and-effect strategies to argue a particular viewpoint.

Feedback from students was positive. Although some topics were challenging to address with limited language, students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to write about real-world issues relevant to their lives instead of artificial prompts that serve only to demonstrate grammar and composition abilities. In the process, students gained transferable skills to use in future classes and their day-to-day lives.

Resources

The complete set of prompts, as well as a Padlet with additional materials and sample student work, are available from <https://tinyurl.com/UDHRwriting>

References

United Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *United Nations*, 1948, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights. Accessed 4 Feb. 2022.

Author

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