How I Teach *The New Yorker*

From the first, teaching *The New Yorker* was total improvisation—the memory of ads in *The New Yorker* asking, “Do you teach? Consider teaching *The New Yorker,*” four weeks to prepare, a begged and borrowed syllabus from Carol Freeman. Carol’s syllabus was, fortunately, a very good one and generously shared and, that first quarter, almost slavishly followed. Elements I still follow (though less slavishly and more thoughtfully): beginning to read the magazine with the Talk of the Town, five papers, (a personal essay, a “Talk of the Campus” for the fictional magazine *The Santa Cruzier*, two critical papers, and a research paper), and peer-editing. (The weekly assignments from Donna Gorrell’s *Style and Difference* I used from the beginning but were my own.)

In classroom discussion, I’m relentlessly, Socratically, posing questions about the rhetorical structures of the argument, eliciting from their observations and inquiries (both scanning and focused lines of inquiry) the principles of argumentation, explanation, reflection, evaluation, situation, audience, the conversation between writer and reader, the triangulation among writer, subject, and reader, and derivation of an understanding from the evidence so that they may see and know what and how. Paper assignments consciously (and, again, relentlessly) insist on two elements: the students find the articles
they wish to write on, and they write on the argument of the article. One student, Max, asked, “So I’m kinda scared about paper writing. Do I have to just jump in and do it?”

“You do have to jump in, but I’ll be right here, and you won’t drown,” I said.

Later, I added some repeating elements: weekly assignments of the Cartoon Caption Contest or an electronic version of refrigerator magnets to make poems—these assignments should exercise their creative faculties, or spark an experience with experimental word combinations—and daily assignments of eight questions to ensure preparation for discussion, and to make them write so many questions over the quarter that they are nearly bound to make them—with my comments and direction—into more sophisticated inquiries.

With the advent of the new evaluation form, I spend more time explicitly on research strategies. In addition to the library visit, I devote a couple of class meetings to thinking about Wikipedia as an entity—we read Stacy Schiff’s “Know It All” (*The New Yorker: July 3, 2006*) and Nicholson Baker’s “The Charms of Wikipedia” (*The New York Review of Books*: March 20, 2008; 55:4) and, additionally, I demonstrate on my laptop in class the usage of the *New Yorker* web archives (it is an occult set of search algorithms).

Then there are the set pieces not mentioned in the syllabus: the “pop quiz” diagnosing the times and categories when they know they need help, reading aloud their captions and poems, the plagiarism “pop quiz” (which I got from Amherst College, who
got it from Tufts’ Writing Center), some exercises from Bruce Ballenger about moving dialectically from the creative flow (and which writing exercises generate creativity) to the critical thinning (and which exercises and mental processes generate judicious editing), and the Freemanian “comparing apples and oranges discussion.” Mathematicians say it cannot be done, but writers can do anything. The students free-write for a few minutes, collecting all their associations with apples and oranges—to develop creativity and model the mental processes for moving from the creative gathering to the critical winnowing—and then we list, observe, conclude and I narrate the meta-cognitive processes. Usually, we discover that the apple is more culturally significant than the orange, though one spring I had a group of pop-culture nuts who thought of every single piece of cheap orange-flavored candy in the world.

I also use E. B. White’s marvelous “Moon Walk” from the Riverside Writing Guide, six-drafts (in twelve-hours) of a New Yorker Comment to show how he used drafting to clarify his thoughts, how he keeps and re-arranges elements, drops them, joins new ones, and finishes with something entirely more polished, deeper, elegant, and thoughtful.

At last, it remains improvisational quarterly, weekly, daily. I have students nominate the articles they’d like to read (figuring they’ll be most engaged if they do), and then vote on those, and I arrange the reading list and order. Frequent favorites are the longer non-fiction articles where I have my particular pedagogical aims for the discussion
of the article (and I have to be adaptable about this: some articles are about making covert arguments about the writer's attitude toward its subject, some are most useful as demonstrations of the use of several sources of evidence for an argument, some as demonstrations of a single-source of evidence, some use the writer as a strong presence, such as Bill Buford's extraordinary tour de force on chocolate ("Extreme Chocolate" October 29, 2007 issue) where several themes emerge (portrait of an eccentric, the journey, the writer in the writing, drug culture) and many are just subtle arguments about the topic at hand, torture, football, reading, cinema, the presidential candidates, medical testing, global warming, bees, the justice system.

In its improvisatory way, disordered, dependant on the editorial decisions of David Remnick, my course remains a process-oriented class, where each of the main mental activities (speaking, reading, and writing) recursively contributes and refines and redefines students' critical skills. Those skills which are paramount to their development as thinkers and writers, where they actively, as we all know and argue, become, at their individual rates, richer and more subtle thinkers, readers able to understand a complex argument and writers beginning to learn to draft their way to a complex, nuanced, and reasoned response to the world of ideas.