

Flash Presentation: Using Screen Capture Software to Communicate Ideas in the Drafting Process

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By Shakil Rabbi

This semester I have used an assignment in my first-year composition (FYC) classes that asks undergraduate students to digitally record a brief presentation of their essay outlines. I call this assignment a “Flash Presentation.” The activity provides students a way to use digital tools to improve their writing and thinking, two competencies listed in our university’s [Student Learning Outcomes](#). It also allows me a way to give feedback to students early in the writing process (when they are formulating their ideas). Taken together, Flash Presentations help my students create deadlines for themselves early in the writing process and write more substantive, organized first drafts. Flash Presentations also help me offer just-in-time feedback on macro-level writing features, even before students begin drafting their essays. The better first drafts I receive also help me save some time typically dedicated to extensive feedback on full-text drafts.

To explain this activity and how it fits into the writing process approach I take to FYC, in this post, I will first lay out the specifics of the assignment. I will talk about how I pivoted to a digital recorded format for the assignment because of the exigencies of online learning. I will then explain how the Flash Presentation activity helps students create deadlines for themselves early in the writing process. The fact that they have to present on the outline invites them to create better outlines and, in my opinion, better first drafts. I will end by discussing how moving this activity into a digital modality assessed asynchronously helps me provide better writing feedback.

The Assignment: Flash Presentations During the Writing Process

As any instructor who teaches multiple sections of FYC can attest, reading student essays can become overwhelming simply because of the volume of texts we have to process throughout the academic term. So, I use the Flash Presentation assignment as part of the writing process to support both my students and myself (as a feedback provider).

For this term, I decided to ask students to record five-minute presentations of their essay’s outline using screen capture software. This choice reflected our all-virtual class environment that is in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Some of my students already have the latest version of Microsoft Powerpoint on their computers, which allows them to record their presentations; for others, I asked others to make use of free recording software such as [Screencast-o-matic](#) or [Screencastify](#). To support students’ understanding of what was expected in a Flash Presentation, I modeled the assignment for them through a [mini-lecture](#) that I recorded and uploaded to YouTube for them in preparation for class activities.

My use of the Flash Presentation assignment encourages students to take their oral communicative competence and make it a part of the writing process itself. In other words, it “flips the script” on the common experience of presenting on finalized texts. To do this, I explain the following steps of the Flash assignment to my students:

Step #1 Create an outline for your essay, with evidence and expositions

Step #2 Develop slides for each of your main points using a list format and images, and

Step #3 Record yourself engaging in a think aloud about each component of their essay, explaining how ideas connect and the overall structure of the text you intend to write

I have found that the Flash Presentation

- helps both my students and myself avoid feeling rushed, a common emotion during face-to-face presentations;
- reduces the feeling of pressure that accompanies speaking in front of others;
- is assessed asynchronously and provided me an opportunity to craft substantive, actionable feedback on my own timeline.

These 5-minute presentations provide me with an opportunity to give feedback to my students early-on in the drafting process, a critical time when my students need the most writing support.

The Flash Presentation is a time-saving strategy that allows me to focus my feedback on macro-level writing features (i.e., content, evidence, organization) without needing to wade through pages and pages of written text.

Supporting Students' Self-Regulation and Adaptation of Process-Based Writing

I have found that the use of a Flash Presentation, submitted early in the drafting process, pushes students to create a deadline for themselves. They see that there is a (graded) activity that will be assessed by their instructor even before they draft their essays for peer review, they take the time to develop ideas that are more substantial. As prominent research on writing such as [Steve Graham](#) (in K-12 contexts) and [Adler-Kessler and Wardle](#) (in post-secondary contexts) have argued, this process fosters important self-regulation skills used by experienced writers. Consequently, they have more content to work with when they do set their minds to composing a full-text draft.

Some first year undergraduate writers are still learning how much time the writing process takes (balancing their writing assignments with all other academic and non-academic pursuits in today's challenging landscape). I know I was guilty of this as an undergraduate student, waiting until the last minute to write my essays and would justify it by telling myself that "I work best under pressure."

Like many of my students, I held the false belief that writing is an act of genius. What is needed for good writing is good thinking, and this requires time.

To dispel the myths that good writing is a natural talent owned by good writers, I use [a outline-draft-feedback-rewrite-submit-reflect framework to developing compositions](#). These steps stretch out the space of thinking across different activities and across the moments of time these situations represent.

However, it is not news to most teachers that most students in writing classrooms, like me, might avoid a process approach to writing because the purpose of such an approach is unclear (especially in light of writing myths). Teaching students to take the process seriously means thinking about ways we can signal to them the value of the writing process for their development as writers and the improvement of their writing. Providing iterative cycles of feedback that begin even before students draft a full-text composition reinforces a process-based approach to writing.

Providing Instructors the Time to Give Thoughtful Feedback

Another benefit of the Flash presentations is that it provides me more time to assess and provide feedback. Presentations during class-time tend to create a rush because of all the



students trying to get in their presentations during class time. There were often too many students to make the presentations work in practice, and sometimes too many students' presentations either run too long or too short. I was also faced with my own mental limitations of coherently providing effective feedback continuously and rapidly, causing a deep dissatisfaction with the quality of my feedback.

Thus, Flash Presentations have helped me to provide better feedback. I can look at the presentations at my leisure and provide specific and actionable feedback. I usually do this through written feedback in our LMS, [Blackboard](#) (though I have tried recording feedback, I usually try to communicate in writing with students directly through the LMS). In other words, I can provide feedback in ways effective in helping students develop their drafts when it can be used. My students are still developing [expository skills](#). So a pretty common piece of feedback I have provided in most of my students' essays is that they need to include adequate evidence for their claims, or explain evidence in the context of their thesis. I am able to stress this need in my feedback to each student's Flash Presentation and this reduces the number of full-text drafts that do not include evidence.

This time also gives me the chance to look up resources that the students might benefit from and include them as links in the feedback. I can do this without having to trudge through rough drafts of written words, which takes up too much time and my mental capacities when one is teaching multiple sections of FYC.

Conclusion

The Flash Presentation assignment I employed this semester started out as a way to support students' writing process and self-regulation skills using digital tools, an important shift during our all-virtual class environment. At the same time, this assignment has worked out well for me as a feedback provider. It has made for better first drafts because it has allowed me to provide feedback to students early in the process. It let me do so in a time-saving, efficient manner, and it has also leveraged students' abilities to communicate orally in ways that help them generate ideas and make for better thinking.

I know I will employ this assignment in the future when we are all back to face-to-face learning. It has worked out well because it has promoted students' investment in the process and in responding to feedback. Some of them, it seems to me anyway, enjoy playing around with the genre and feel more individually addressed. Possibly in the future, I would also think about asking students to peer review each other's presentations, promoting the sense that all communication (not just writing) is made better by help from others.

Bio

[Shakil Rabbi](#) (Ph.D.) is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Composition, Department of Language, Literature & Cultural Studies, Bowie State University, in Maryland. His work has been published in *Composition Studies*, *humanities*, and he was a 2015 International Writing Center Association President's Future Leaders Award recipient. He has also worked as a lecturer in English Literature and composition in Bangladesh, and as a primary school teacher in Thailand. Some of his writing can be found on his personal site: atthecentersattheedges.net



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