



teaching learning committee  
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**Using Writing as a Teaching Strategy**

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Although college composition has traditionally been an emphasis in departments of English and Rhetoric, strategies for using writing in a wide range of other disciplines have been developed through such programs as Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing in the Disciplines. The basic principle underlying these initiatives is that writing is more than a technical skill to be acquired in a first-year comp course but is, in fact, a mode of learning that can enhance students' understanding of the content of the disciplines. From this perspective, writing becomes a means by which students not only present but explore the knowledge they develop in their disciplinary coursework. When students write in, say, a science or art or business class, they are called upon to conceptualize and organize what they are learning in unique ways. Rather than simply mirroring back on a test the details of what they have taken in, they are challenged to think about and integrate facts, ideas, and perspectives in ways that extend their learning in new directions.

While the use of writing in disciplinary contexts is a sound and useful pedagogical strategy, many instructors see assigning and responding to writing as a challenging task. Some frequently-asked questions are: What does a good writing assignment look like? How do I find the time to read and respond to papers? What do I do about all the errors I see in my students' writing? How do I grade the papers my students turn in? While the decision to use writing in your course does mean giving attention to perhaps unfamiliar teaching methods-and does involve some extra time-there are ways of using writing that not only are manageable but also generously repay your efforts by enhancing your students' experience of learning in your discipline.

**Developing Writing Assignments**

There are a number of ways that writing is used in disciplinary contexts. Whether and how you implement them depends largely on the course. Here are a few ideas that should help you to start thinking about using writing in your classes:

\* In-class writing

Having students write a brief impromptu piece in class is a great way to get them interacting with material and to provide student discourse for discussion in class. An in-class writing take about 10 minutes or so and should be in response to a prompt (i.e. question or other discussion point) that is given on the spur of the moment. This type of activity requires students to organize elements from a domain of knowledge into some level of coherent perspective-often a great advantage over class discussion, in

which many students don't feel confident in contributing. After the writing, you can have a few students read their pieces and use those readings for discussion.

#### \* Responding to authors

When students are assigned to respond in writing to authors, they are called upon to make sense of their reading in ways that don't happen by simply reading and then discussing in class. But you do need to explain carefully to your students what responding to an author means. You don't want to get writing that simply repeats what an author says or that takes a simplistic position in agreement or opposition to the text. Instead, you want to get your students to really think on paper about what the author is saying. This can be done fairly generally, e.g. by having students take a claim or perspective that is found in a text and discuss its implications for a claim or perspective in another text. This would generate a variety of responses. You could also be quite specific and have everyone focus on the same thing, e.g. (in HIST 311 Early America) "Does Howard Zinn's revisionist approach to Columbus's arrival in America represent a balanced perspective on the event?"

#### \* Short writings for discussion

Using responses to authors or other types of short writing assignments is an excellent way to generate discussion among students. For example, a short writing could be done as a homework assignment, students could be asked to bring three additional copies to class, and then groups of four could be set up in which each paper is read by everyone and discussion takes place. The multiple learning opportunities of this kind of process are obvious, and the instructor's role is that of roving facilitator of discussion. The papers should be handed in for credit and given a place in the grade for the course.

#### \* Longer papers

When students write longer papers (i.e. 5+ pages) for class, they should be graded (for the purposes of "effort insurance"). Also, conventional wisdom on writing in the disciplines says that longer papers should go through a feedback+revision process in order to be really useful. Of course, the kind of assignment you give for a longer paper will be driven by the content and curricular priorities. For help in designing paper assignments for your classes, contact one of the coordinators of the program in Writing Across the Curriculum: Edis Kittrell ([kittrell@montana.edu](mailto:kittrell@montana.edu)) or Kiki Rydell ([rydell@english.montana.edu](mailto:rydell@english.montana.edu)).

### **Responding to Student Writing**

Using writing in your class does not mean that you have to become a writing teacher. Composition instructors have specialized training and experience in many of the details of writing instruction that you probably don't have the time or inclination to develop. What you offer to your students as an instructor is knowledge of the content of your field and an awareness of what good writing in that field should look like. This is what you should focus on in response to the papers that your students write. As you read a paper, you should ask questions such as: How well does this writing respond to the assignment I gave? Does the paper indicate that the writer understands the material? Is the discussion clear in terms of the use of words, phrases, and ideas? Are the explanations, analyses, and arguments adequate? Naturally, student writing in your discipline will not meet the standards of the

professional work that you read and produce. Instead, think of your students' papers as initial attempts to construct knowledge in your discipline, and think of your role as an expert reader who can help them construct that knowledge in a clearer, more cohesive, and more informed way. What this translates into is reading almost exclusively for the content of what is in the paper. Student writers will benefit most from your feedback when it focuses on what they are saying and how they can say it better. When I read a student paper, the two questions that always guide my reading are: 1) what does the writer seem to be saying (or trying to do) in this piece and 2) how might the writer say (or do) it in ways that are more effective?

The ideal context for giving student writers feedback on their writing is the one-on-one conference. In small classes (or in larger classes with the support of experienced TAs), such a process is feasible, but in the case of larger classes, it's not. Whether the feedback context is the individual conference or comments in writing, the same principles apply: 1. Brief cryptic comments such as "awkward", "unclear", "confusing", "wrong word", etc., are useless. Instead, the writer should be engaged with questions and observations, such as: "What do you mean by X?" "Here, you make the claim Y; what kind of support would help your reader to accept it?" "How does X relate to Z in this section?" "Why do you bring up Y here? Is it really important to your discussion?" Since addressing issues in this way is a more involved engagement with the text, many instructors have abandoned the age-old process of writing in the margins and instead write a separate, brief response in the form of a paragraph or two that is attached to the paper. In this format, you can "talk" your feedback to the writer-explaining, giving examples, asking questions, etc. Of course, if you were to address everything that would improve the paper, you would never have time to write it all. This is why it's important to focus on the big picture items: clarity, thoroughness of explanation and support, or whatever the prime directives are in the assignment you have given.

### **Dealing With Errors in Student Writing**

One of the frustrations faced by instructors when reading student writing is the presence of errors in punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, etc. College teachers have long bemoaned what they see as a woefully inadequate grasp of proper English usage in writing. The simple fact is that many of our students do come to us with limited fluency in the mechanical conventions of standard written English. Another fact is that there is no "crash course" in grammar that will fix these problems. Learning to write in mechanically conventional ways is something that happens through reading good writing and doing a lot of writing. Does this mean that you should ignore error in student papers? The answer is both yes and no. On the "no" side, when a student hands in a paper for a grade, it should be evaluated not only for its ideational content but also for its presentation. Good writing in any discipline is clean and conventionally sound. Students should be required to proofread carefully and, if necessary, to get help from a more experienced reader/writer who can point out their errors. However, they will do neither of these things if there are no consequences for the presence of error in their papers. For this reason, the instructor should make it clear that mechanical accuracy will make up a significant portion of the grade for the writing and-crucially-that the paper itself will figure prominently in the grade for the course. Experience indicates that when students understand this scenario, they are somehow able to marshal the necessary resources to help them produce a largely error-free final paper. The other side of this coin is that a preoccupation with error in writing that is in first draft form can be counterproductive. While students should be urged to at least proofread everything they hand in, the instructor should be willing to read past the errors in much student writing in order to engage with the

content of the material. Except in the case of non-native English users, it is rare that errors of grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure actually present significant obstacles to understanding what the writer is saying. More at issue is the annoyance that the instructor feels at having to "put up with" mistakes in student papers. Instructors should understand that student writing is an exploratory process and one that already causes a lot of insecurity for many, due to their lack of fluency in written expression- as well as the experience of having only heard and read criticisms of their writing because of the mistakes they make. Instructors can encourage students in the writing process by focusing on and engaging with the content of student writing, leaving an insistence on correctness for when it counts.

### **Grading Papers**

Grading student writing is a notoriously difficult process. How does one decide what aspects of the writing to assign significance to, and then how does one quantify those aspects? Some instructors use a six- or seven-trait scoring rubric, assigning points for elements such as organization, support, mechanics, etc. Others grade based on a very general wholistic impression. The former, although giving the appearance of more precision, stills requires the instructor to make subjective judgments. The latter runs the risk of grading on a curve, as student papers are compared with one another, or of being subject to the peevish or partisanship of the instructor. Your grading policy for student papers will have to develop over time as you get a sense of the place of writing in your class and how you want it to contribute to your students' sense of success and responsibility. A reasonable expectation might be that students who get high grades on tests will (and perhaps should) most likely get high grades on papers-and vice versa. In any case, keep in mind one of the key factors in grading: If you give writing a significant place in the overall course grade, your students will write better.