

INTEGRATING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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Writing & Thinking are Interdependent Processes

- Logical leaps and gaps are often evidence not only of failures in communication, but also of failures in thinking.
 - “I write when I make progress; I make progress by writing.” -- Augustine
- Both writing and thinking are tools for discovery. Writing, or even thinking in different ways, will lead to clearer thoughts and thus, to more clearly written essays.
- Introduce the importance of considering *audience* and *purpose*.

Setting Goals & Evaluating Performance

- First Week of Class – Assign a one-page introduction letter in which you ask students to **articulate some concrete goals for the semester**. For plebe English classes, I assign the following:

“Welcome to HE 111! It is my personal goal as your instructor to help each one of you improve your writing this semester. That being said, it is particularly important that I know exactly where you need improvement and what your goals are for this course. I will be tailoring lessons according to what you write, so please take this writing seriously and set goals you actually want to reach.

Construct a short essay that explains the value or usefulness of this class for you. Are there any specific types of writing with which you struggle? Are there any areas of concern that your teachers frequently point out to you? Explain what you want to accomplish this semester. This “Writing Improvement Manifesto” should establish at least three specific goals for your semester.

This letter also serves as an opportunity for me to get to know you a little better. Please feel free to include some details on who you are, where you’re from, and what your interests are, aside from schoolwork. While these essays are of great importance to the overall shape of the course, this piece of writing is ungraded.”
- Follow-Up – Generate an **anonymous list of all goals/concerns** listed by your students; share this list in class and emphasize trends and common ideas. Keep these essays and refer to them throughout the semester during EI or even in essay comments.
- Last Week of Class – Set aside some time for an in-class writing reflection. Return introduction letters to students and ask them to **respond to their original letters**. For example:

“In your ‘Writing Improvement Manifesto,’ I asked you to explain the usefulness of this class for you and to establish three specific goals for your semester. Now that you’ve read dozens of short stories, essays, and plays; written four formal essays and over half a dozen response essays; made some oral presentations—individual and group; and participated in daily class discussions and debates; I want you to conduct an honest self-reflection on those goals.

 - ❖ Did you (or will you) accomplish your personal goals? Why or why not?
 - ❖ Give your “future self” some advice and/or important reminders for future writing/speaking endeavors, whether at USNA or beyond.

In-Class Writing Activities

In-class writing activities can take a number of different forms, but they all have one thing in common: they involve students in practicing the skills of planning, writing, revising, and editing. What use you make of writing-based activities will depend on the skills you are trying to teach.

1. **Opening of Class:** Pose a question that allows students to synthesize or explore the topic at hand. Give them five to fifteen minutes to write. Ask them to read aloud their responses and encourage them to respond to one another. This is a great technique for fostering more robust class participation from the class, even from those more reticent students.
2. **Middle of Class:** If students seem uninterested or perplexed (or bored), stop talking for a minute and ask them to focus their thoughts. If you can pose a question that forces them to assimilate the reading assignment or problem at hand, you're on your way to getting the class back on track. For instance, "What was the hardest thing to understand about today's reading?" "What's your biggest doubt about today's lesson, and what information could assuage that doubt?" "What does this reading make you think about?"
3. **End of Class:** Near the end of class, ask students to write (1) what they learned in class today that they didn't know before they walked in, and (2) how today's learning connects with yesterday's—or will connect with tomorrow's.¹

Whole-Class Workshops

The whole class can act as an effective workshop group. Before setting up small groups, you may prefer to run several whole-class workshops in order to train students in the process and to get to know them as readers. In whole-class sessions, you will provide guidance on tasks through your questions and comments. The following techniques can help make whole-class workshops positive learning experiences:

- Present strong student-generated work so that the class can easily recognize its strengths. Readers will learn the techniques that work for their peers; writers will gain confidence from well-deserved praise and from recognizing what in their drafts is working. (Be sure to ask for permission ahead of time before using a student's text as your example.) It can also be useful to save weak student-generated work from previous sections. After removing the name, you can pair the weaker work with a strong essay and discuss the differences.
- A day or two ahead of time, hand out copies of the essay(s) to be discussed to give students a chance to read it at their own pace. Ask them to write comments in the margins as they read, indicating points of strength and confusion. Finally, have them write a note to the writer, giving their reaction to the overall content, describing the work's strengths, and offering one or two specific suggestions for improvement. Since this can be time consuming and logistically difficult, I often make copies of the essay(s) and read the essay aloud during class, requesting that students make their marginal comments and suggestions as we move along.
- Begin the workshop by asking students to take turns reading the essay aloud; this practice helps students to focus on the essay and remember it. (Alternatively, you can ask the writer to read it aloud, if you are not doing this anonymously, or *you* can choose to read it aloud, emphasizing certain points along the way.) Ask students to comment on the positive features of the draft: what was effective and what they admired. After establishing the strengths, readers can then move on to discussing what needs to be strengthened in the draft—and specific ways to build those strengths.

¹ Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite, *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* (New York: Bedford, 2008), 62-63.

- At the end of the workshop, you should recap some of the strengths that were mentioned and point to two or three elements that the writer can work on in revision, summarizing those comments that seem most salient. You can also use this opportunity to draw parallels to what you are hoping to see in their current/future essay assignment.

Peer-Response Workshops

If you use whole-class workshops as a training ground for talking constructively about writing, then your students may be able to move directly into peer-response groups without much further preparation. The expertise of group members usually evolves over the course of the term as students become better readers, questioners, and revisers—especially if you initially help them understand what exactly they are expected to do for one another. Some tips to remember:

1. Size of Groups – Consider the amount of time you have and the complexity of the tasks to be accomplished. For example, asking a group of three people to share thesis statements in twenty minutes is realistic; asking a group of six is not. Keep in mind that groups often work best when there are no more than four students in each (I usually stick to three).
2. Keep Groups Focused - Be very specific about what you want each group to achieve. I always create a workshop sheet tailored to each assignment; this sheet can also serve to reinforce what you will be looking for when grading the essays. (I have many samples available upon request!)
3. Establish Higher Stakes – I instruct my students to turn-in all workshop sheets along with the final draft of their essays. Not only does this practice raise the stakes because they know their responses will affect their participation grade, but it also provides insight into the depth of revision (or lack thereof) a paper undergoes. Your paper grades will seem much less arbitrary if the writer’s peers discovered the same flaws you did.

Short Reflection Before Turning-In Projects

Before students turn in an essay, lab report, or even a quiz/exam, ask them to write a brief reflection (essay format or even bullet points) to consider 1) strengths of the project, 2) perceived weaknesses, and 3) greatest challenges. This kind of reflection can serve as a gut-check for students (“Could I put more effort into this class?”) and for teachers (“Are many students experiencing the same difficulties/challenges?”). Also, it will help to manage expectations when students receive their grades.

Activities for a Class Period on Citations

- Give your students an example of a citation in Chicago style, one in APA, and one in MLA. Individually or in groups (and referring to the *Longman Handbook*), have your students determine what the significant differences are among these styles. What are the similarities between these styles? The differences? What sorts of information does each style seem to privilege? From your answers to these questions, what can you conclude about citation styles in general (other than that they are annoying and/or can be done much more easily by a computer program)?
- In preparation for a research assignment, ask students to write citations for the sources they have already found. Have them trade papers and check each other’s work using the *Longman Handbook*. Ask them to consider: Is there a benefit to knowing how to write a proper citation? Assuming there *is* a benefit to knowing how to write a proper citation, what is it? Highlight the fact that this is one way to enter meaningful academic discourse in your field.

Works Cited & Additional Resources

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