

## **IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS OF STUDENT WRITING: MAXIMIZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR WRITING LESSONS AND MINIMIZING THE CLASS TIME YOU USE FOR THEM**

Using student writing samples as the basis of your in-class discussions about writing is an effective method to teach writing and it saves you time. Why?

- You can talk concretely about specific writing problems in class.
- You can deal precisely with course content.
- You don't have to write the same thing over and over again when you're responding to papers.
- Full-class discussions of writing allow students to cultivate the analytical skills they need to write successful papers.

### **Part I: Preparation**

Facilitating a short, effective writing lesson requires planning and forethought. To prepare for an in-class writing lesson based on student writing samples, you should:

- Make it known to your students on the first day and in your syllabus that their writing will be considered public domain for the course. In other words, warn them that you will be using selections of their writing in class.
- Assign a short, well-defined writing assignment early in the semester that students will have the opportunity to revise. (See this sourcebook for more ideas about designing and sequencing writing assignments.)
- Schedule the assignment so that you will meet with all of your sections between the initial submission and the first revision of the assignment, making sure that students will have ample time for additional revision after the in-class lesson.

### **Part II: Choosing samples of student writing**

Once you receive the first submissions of your students' papers, sort through them and select samples before you mark the pages, then photocopy and/or transfer the selections onto transparencies. When you select your samples, you should:

- Try to select student writing samples that target a specific writing issue that will be applicable throughout the semester. Some examples of writing issues you might address are thesis statements; paragraph construction; incorporating quotations into writing vs. paraphrasing; the difference between summarizing and analyzing; etc.
- Select samples of varying quality.
- As you select samples, think about how much time you have in class to discuss them. I usually have time for only one paragraph from each of about three samples. If you want the class to critique a lengthier section of a paper, you might ask students to read the sections for homework.
- Compile your thoughts, comments, and suggestions for each of the samples.
- Read through your compiled thoughts for all of the selections and identify three main points you'd like to emphasize that are common to all of the samples. As you generate discussion about the samples, make sure you return to these three main points.
- An additional option to consider: You might prepare a writing sample of your own and have students evaluate it in class as well. Not only does sharing your own writing show empathy for students, but it also demonstrates the important lesson that writing can always be improved, because your students will have suggestions for you! When I lead this activity, I initially withhold the fact that the writing is mine, so that students won't feel too intimidated to respond to it.

### **Part III: Leading a discussion about the writing**

- Remind your students that the authors of these samples could be in the room and encourage them to give candid yet sensitive feedback. Talking about specific writing samples in class allows you to model how to give good feedback and gives students the opportunity to practice these skills, which will make future full-class discussions run more smoothly and will prepare the students for peer review in small groups.

- Explain to students that the first thing you will do together is rank the samples. Read through each of the samples together, asking a different student to read each sample aloud.
- Rank the samples from best to worst by a show of hands. Usually, there's a consensus. If there's not, however, that's instructive too! A consensus helps to communicate to students that your evaluation of their writing is not totally subjective, while disagreement can open up productive discussions about how certain aspects of academic writing affect different audiences.
- Go back and spend time on each individual sample. Draw out your prepared points about each and validate your students' comments. It's tricky to keep discussion on task, but keep in mind that this is a directed, not exploratory, discussion. Feel free to entertain (briefly!) valuable comments from students that are not on your list, but don't let them derail you! You can re-direct the discussion by saying things like, "That's an insightful comment, but I'm not going to delve into that further because I'm trying to focus on much more basic aspects of writing," or "That point is highly debatable/abstract/contentious. Let's stick to the more established/concrete/accepted conventions of academic writing right now."
- Once you've discussed all of the samples, be sure to emphasize the strengths of each sample, as well as reinforce your main points.
- A postscript about public criticism: To have your piece of writing ranked the lowest is instructive, but is never fun. So make sure that the lowest ranked sample has some genuine strengths that you can point out in class. I have found, however, that students are rarely insulted by a low ranking in the context of this exercise. The combined effort of comparing samples and focusing on a small amount of text gives more specificity to the general comments students have been getting for years. In this discussion, they get helpful feedback and suggestions for revision, rather than just criticism.

#### **Part IV: Building on this exercise**

By doing such an exercise, you establish a format for discussing writing that you can use over and over again for different targeted topics. Moreover, you've established a shared vocabulary with your class about writing concerns that can help them (and you!) talk productively about writing in conferences, peer review, and large group discussions.