

HELPING YOUR STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR WRITING AND THEIR LEARNING

GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND OPTIONS

- 1. *Frontload your efforts.*** To help students succeed and to help them learn, invest more of your time in designing assignments, in helping students understand how to write the kind of paper you're asking for, and in responding to early drafts of their work rather than in writing extensive comments on finished papers. Research shows (as do the stacks of unclaimed papers outside professors' offices at the end of each semester) that our comments on final versions of papers too often go unread or are poorly understood.
- 2. *Integrate writing assignments into your course.*** Remember that writing assignments can do much more than test what students know; they can help students learn the subject matter and the ways of thinking central to a course. Thus, writing assignments work best when they match the overall goals of a course. Make sure that what you're asking students to do in a paper is something the other activities in your course prepare them to do. For example, course papers typically ask students to analyze something, to come up with an original argument and to support it with evidence from a text, to explain contradictory findings, to identify a researchable question, or to develop a theory. Students are much more likely to succeed with papers if they have heard you explicitly modeling these kinds of thinking in class, seen and discussed how they work in course readings, and, even better yet, practiced doing these kinds of thinking in class.
- 3. *Set high standards and communicate them in advance.*** Talk with your students about how important writing is in your course—and why it's important. Share and discuss a written version of your evaluation criteria; make them as specific and clear as possible.
- 4. *Use informal writing assignments to help students generate and experiment with ideas for more formal papers.*** The shallow thinking we find in some of our students' papers often occurs because students spend too little time exploring and questioning ideas before they commit themselves to arguing a particular point. Journals, brief in-class writing, freewrites, responses to lectures and readings—these types of informal, ungraded writing can give students the opportunity and the freedom to explore and to identify promising topics worth writing about and ideas worth developing in a paper.
- 5. *Especially in more advanced courses, design assignments that lead students to higher-order thinking within your discipline.*** Ideally, writing assignments encourage students to develop their ability to think like a member of your specific discipline. Define what you believe are the primary skills of a physicist or sociologist, for example. Then discuss these ideas with students and design assignments that offer opportunities to develop these skills. You might, for example, want to have students in advanced classes do some theoretical and speculative writing.
- 6. *Assign several shorter papers, rather than a single longer one.*** Students often learn more from writing regularly throughout a course, and their writing improves with each successive assignment.
- 7. *With longer, more important papers, set draft dates, give feedback on drafts, and have students revise.*** The best student writing, just like the best faculty writing, results from the hard work of revision. Because research shows that many of the papers undergraduates submit to us are first drafts, you may want to build revision into your assignments by setting a draft due date a couple of weeks before a final due date. To ease the paper load, you might reduce the number of pages or papers due in the semester, thus focusing on a series of revisions. You can also emphasize the process of good writing by breaking longer, more complex assignments into their component parts (for a research paper, for example, set a deadline for tentative research questions, for an annotated bibliography, for a draft, for a final, revised version). You can, thus, provide feedback along the way and guide students' learning. To save time, you can look at and respond to only the first page or two of each student's draft, suggesting one or two main ways in which it can be improved; through this process, you can also identify those students who need more help.

8. ***Make your expectations clear in a written version of the assignment.*** It's important to remember that in their different courses your students face very different types of assignments and widely varying expectations. Moreover, students typically approach your writing assignments in ways that have helped them succeed in the past. The clearer you can be about what you want from students, the better they'll be able to adapt to your writing assignments and meet your expectations. You'll want to specify the manuscript and documentation formats that you want students to follow. In addition, let students know what you expect them to do in the paper. If, for example, you want papers organized around a central arguable thesis—a conclusion students have drawn about a question—say so in the assignment and try to pose a question that leads students to take a stand.
9. ***Specify an audience for the paper.*** So many of the choices we make as writers depend on our sense of our audience and its needs (just think of how difficult it is to plan a talk or paper for an audience you don't know). Even if the audience is the class, specify that in the assignment and briefly discuss the implications of writing for that audience.
10. ***Assign a group paper.*** This kind of assignment reduces the number of papers you have to read and grade. In addition, having students work together generally provides for a blending of strengths that results in more thorough research, more effective arguments, more creative thinking, and improved writing.

GETTING STUDENTS STARTED ON ASSIGNMENTS

11. ***Discuss your assignment during class.*** In-class discussion allows you to elaborate on your expectations, gets students thinking about the paper, emphasizes its importance, and gives students a chance to ask questions. You can start such a discussion by asking several students to explain how they might go about interpreting the task you've assigned and to discuss options they see for approaching the paper. The class as a whole can then consider both the strengths and weaknesses of given approaches to an assignment. Another way to encourage students to start thinking about a paper is to require them to come to the next class meeting with questions about the assignment.
12. ***Introduce students to the type of writing (a literature review, a lab report, a book review, a research proposal) that the assignment requires.*** Discuss, in class, professional publications or successful sample papers written by students in the same course in previous semesters. Students learn much more about writing successful papers and meeting your expectations from examples than they do from abstract injunctions to "have a focused argument," "use sources responsibly," "link studies in a literature review," or "synthesize multiple points of view." To save time, discuss brief excerpts, but be sure to look at at least a couple of different samples, ones that take different approaches or argue different points. Otherwise, it's easy for students to conclude that there is one right way to do the paper and to please you. Be sure also to talk through the samples and to explain what works well and why; you might even want to annotate the sample to illustrate and explain what's working well.
13. ***Teach students how to use sources responsibly and how to avoid plagiarism in their writing.*** It is far better to address this subject while students are writing their papers rather than to have to deal with problems once they have occurred. The Writing Center's handout on quoting, paraphrasing, and acknowledging sources can help.
14. ***Give students an opportunity during class, to talk about their plans for a paper.*** Ask them to share the question they're trying to answer in their paper or a rough version of their main point, and encourage them to ask questions of each other. Sharing ideas in progress and hearing what others are planning to do in a paper not only motivates students but also helps students generate new ideas at the crucial formative stage of writing a paper.

HELPING STUDENTS IN THE PROCESS OF WRITING

- 15. Have students participate in peer reviews.** In pairs or small groups, in or out of class, students can respond to each other's drafts. The suggestions they make to their peers can improve the revised versions you eventually receive, and the experience of reviewing someone else's draft can improve students' abilities to criticize and revise their own work. You'll want to provide some guidelines for peer review, ones that match your evaluation criteria. To model the process of peer review, you may also want to lead a full-class review of a sample paper in progress.
- 16. Hold individual conferences with students to talk about drafts of their papers.** Many teachers find that holding conferences is no more time-consuming than reading drafts and commenting in writing. And having conferences may be the single best way to improve the quality of the final papers you receive. How long a conference needs to be depends on the length of the paper, the complexity of the issues you're discussing, and the particular student, but a conference typically lasts twenty minutes or so. You can make conferences more efficient by having students, in advance, evaluate their drafts in order to identify issues to discuss with you; by reading only the first couple of pages of the draft and skimming the rest; and, above all, by remembering that your goal is not to identify and solve every problem in a draft but to suggest one or two main ways in which the draft can be improved through revision.
- 17. Encourage all students to take advantage of Writing Center instruction.** The Writing Center has 45 experienced writing instructors available to meet with your students individually as they are working on course papers. Writing Center instructors can help students generate and organize ideas, and they can provide a critical response to a draft, pointing out possible problems and offering advice for revision. Try mentioning the Center on your assignment sheet. Better yet, you can have a Writing Center instructor make a brief (5-minute) presentation about our services in your class. To arrange such a presentation, call the Writing Center at 263-1992, or email a request to writing@wisc.edu.
- 18. Help students see that problems (in reaching a conclusion, organizing part of a paper, defining a research question, etc.) are an essential part of thinking and writing.** Less-experienced writers often try to avoid problems instead of wrestling with them and recognizing them as an inherent part of the writing process and as opportunities for arriving at new, more complex insights. In conferences and in written comments, point students to the potential of their work in progress. In class, you can model this process by discussing the problems and potential in a sample draft.
- 19. With their final versions of assignments, have students submit drafts, peer review comments, and their previous papers for the course.** This allows you to expect and evaluate progress, emphasizes the stages in the process, and encourages students to see themselves as developing writers.

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' PAPERS

- 20. When you respond to students' papers, resist the urge to comment on everything.** More is not necessarily better in this case. Research shows that students are often overwhelmed by voluminous comments and, thus, miss our main suggestions. First, emphasize the strengths of a piece of writing (praise is a great motivator), and then identify one or two main ways in which a piece of writing could be improved. It's important to tie your comments to your evaluation criteria and to the specific demands of the assignment. And it's crucial to be specific about how and where the paper succeeds or fails. Consider holding conferences to discuss your responses because, without discussion, written comments on paper are often ignored or misunderstood.
- 21. Don't waste time responding extensively to minimal efforts.** If you suspect that a paper is the result of hasty or careless work, or if it's way off the mark in responding to the assignment, your time is probably better spent meeting with the student to discuss the situation. Ask for a revision rather than trying to "fix" the misconceived first effort.

22. When you return papers, take some class time to share and to discuss examples of successful work.

Discussing even excerpts from successful papers honors some of the best writers and encourages a natural modeling that helps students set and achieve higher goals for their future work. (Of course, you'll want to ask the student-authors' permission before doing this.)

23. "Publish" some student writing.

You can create a copy-shop packet of students' papers, which both current and future students in your course can buy and read. By broadening the audience for students' writing, this kind of publication casts student-writers as experts on their subject matter and encourages them to do their best possible work.