Integrating Writing into Your Teaching

Academic success requires writing—irrespective of your field. Writing is the way that academics communicate, inform, and argue.

But writing is hard work. It's much easier to talk than write. Crafting a compelling argument or turning a clever phrase or crafting a compelling argument isn't easy. Even the most gifted writers receive criticism—and criticism hurts us in our most vulnerable appendage: our ego.

Writing should not be confined to composition courses. Writing helps students learn the content of their field. Each discipline has its own distinctive forms and conventions. If students are to learn to write effectively, they must write frequently—in their areas of specialization.

Myths about Writing

Certain myths and misconceptions make writing problems worse and discourage you from incorporating writing into your teaching.

Myth 1: Skilled writers write effortlessly.
Every writer procrastinates, gets anxious, and loses focus. The Pulitzer Prize winning historian Richard Rhodes offers a simple, if crude, piece of advance: Keep your ass to the chair.

Don't wait until the last minute to complete assignments. Model writing on weight loss: Strive for small, daily advances rather than attempting to do everything all at once.

The way to learn to write is, simply, to write a lot.

Myth 2: Skilled writers write from carefully plotted outlines.
There is nothing wrong with brainstorming and carefully organizing your ideas. But in fact writing is messy. It is not a linear process.

Writing is thinking. It is during the writing process itself that you will come up with your best ideas.

Myth 3: There are two stages to the writing process: writing a draft and then editing it to correct grammar and delete typos and extraneous words.
There is no writing, only re-writing. And re-writing generally requires significant re-organization and rethinking.
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Myth 4. Writing instruction requires you to sacrifice time better devoted to other things.
Writing does not have to take up too much class time. Nor must it require extensive time for grading and commenting.
- Much of the writing is impromptu or brief or takes place outside of class.

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Myth 5. Instructors must have extensive training and expertise in writing instruction.

You don't need to be an expert in grammar. You aren't the department of corrections.
- Make it clear that the burden of proofreading belongs on the student.
- The main goal of the assignments is to enhance students' analytical skills and promote student learning.
- Consider peer editing
- Use short hand for various kinds of comments.

Why Include Writing in Your Classes?

Because writing is valuable
1. In communicating information
2. In clarifying thinking
3. In helping students to learn:
    - The value of abstracting
    - The value of synthesizing
    - The value of role-playing
    - The value of hypothesis formation and testing

How To Avoid Lousy Papers

1. Provide models of strong and weak papers

2. Spell out your objectives grading criteria

3. Consider requiring peer review

Make sure that the goals of peer review are clear.
Model effective commenting
- make comments in a spirit of helpfulness.
- point out strengths as well as weaknesses
- pay attention to the larger issues first--argument, evidence, organization—before focusing on word choice, grammar, and punctuation
- respond as a reader: what is confusing, are the examples and argument convincing

Build in incentives for helpful comments

What Makes a Good Writing Assignment
- The task has a specific purpose
  To help students learn foundational concepts
  To check students' understanding of material
  To develop their critical thinking and reading skills
  To practice the conventions of writing within the discipline

- The elements of the task are clear, including format and documentation.

- The grading criteria are spelled out in advance.

- You provide samples of strong and weak papers.

Kinds of Assignments

1. A reading journal:

Makes students more conscious about what they are reading
Summarize arguments; identify main ideas; not key details

2. Reading abstracts;

An article summary

3. Annotation:

A brief evaluation of an article's strengths and weaknesses

4. Response paper:

A reaction to specific elements of a reading: the quality of the data, the validity of the research design, the effectiveness of the argument

5. ***A position paper:***
   A student must express a point of view on an issue

6. ***A literature review:***
   A students is asked to write about several readings and identify the issues and ideas that these present

7. ***A discussion starter:***
   Students identify key issues or questions raised by a reading.

8. ***A learning log or a laboratory notebook:***
   Students spend five minutes summarizing lecture material, noting key points in a discussion, restate concepts in their own words, and respond to questions raised in class.

9. ***A process analysis:***
   In writing, students trace the steps required to solve a problem.

10. ***A problem statement:***
    After introducing a concept in class, ask students to identify a theoretical or practical problem that the concept might help solve.

11. ***A Solution to a Real Problem***
    Students write about a problem—derived, for example, from a newspaper article, and propose a solution.

12. ***Pre-test warm-ups:***
    Student might generate problems for an upcoming test or draft answers to sample essay questions.

13. ***Write a sample proposal or recommendation:***
    In a letter of application or a policy brief, students learn how to explain concepts, positions, policies, and recommendations.

14. ***An evaluation a newspaper or journal article***
    Select on or two articles on an issue, problem, or research question and have th stuents evaluate the article's accuracy, use of evidence, and conclusions.

15. ***Evaluate a thesis, concept, or methodology:***
    Have students summarize the arguments in support AND in opposition to the thesis, concept or methodology.

16. ***An analysis of events:***
    Post-hoc analysis: Ask students to reflect on what happened, why it happened, and the event's implications.
    What if: Ask students to speculate about how an outcome might have differed if one or more conditions had changed.

17. ***A project notebook:***
    ▪ Research Question – Have students draft a research question.
    ▪ Process Analysis – Have students describe the process that they go through as they work on a project—research design, data collection, model building, and hypothesis testing.
    ▪ Problem-solving – Have students describe the problems they encountered in the course of the project and their solutions, successful and unsuccessful.
    ▪ Literature review – Have students succinctly summarize the material that they consulted.

18. ***An interview transcript or oral history:***
    - Have students list questions that they propose to ask.
    - Have students complete an interview transcript.

19. ***Formats that mimic professional writing:***

A lab report, a position paper, an interpretive essay, a literature review, a grant or project proposal, a formal lecture.

Collaborative Writing Assignments
Collaborative writing assignments can draw on the students' diverse strengths and prepare students for future activities involving project teams. Peer instruction and review is built into the process.

Responding to Student Writing
1. Effective responses require much more than identifying errors in mechanics.
Comment on the central issues: Focus, development and arrangement of ideas, the quality of argument and evidence, and whether the student takes account of counter-arguments.

2. Focus your comments.
Don't comment exhaustively. Comment on the most important points raised by the paper.

Dealing with Common Challenges
1. "I've got nothing to say"
Academic writing—whether this is an essay, a lab report, or a problem solving exercise-- involves taking part in an argument, conversation, and debate. The student's job is to persuade a reader that the student's position is appropriate and sensible take on the issue.

▪ The first step is to identify the larger conversation surrounding an issue. Try to figure out how whatever you're writing about—an event, text, experiment, finding or whatever—fits into your larger subject or field.

▪ Then problematize the conversation: Look for questions, tensions, and unresolved issues. These provide openings for something new to say.

▪ Develop a thesis—a distinctive stance within the conversation.
Have an angle--a slant that gives your paper focus. Advance a provocative thesis that speaks to larger controversies.

How do you do this? Use the magic formula: Become part of a broader conversation or controversy.

- Refute an argument
- Refine an argument
- Reveal a gap
- Fill a gap
- Ask a new question or refine an older question

Unlike a legal brief, an academic argument must be fair-minded and balanced, based on evidence and taking account of alternate interpretations and counter-arguments.

2. Awkwardness
We'd like student writing to be original and elegant and their arguments nuanced and sophisticated, but often we'd be happy if their writing was clear. Instead of writing with concision, short active verbs, and a smooth flow of sentences, their writing is wordy, filled with the passive voice and with arguments that are jumpy and undeveloped.

Students can gain clarity by:
▪ Breaking sentences into easier-to-understand pieces.
Simplify. Cut out excess nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.
▪ Using active verbs and attaching verbs to clearly identified actors.
Minimize the use of the words "was," "were," and "is."
▪ Avoiding nominalizations—actions expressed as nouns.
Examples include argument instead of argue; analysis instead of analyze; performance instead of perform.
▪ Using transition phrases and words
Transitional phrases:
I will begin by...
Before I say what is wrong with..., I will first...

At this point, we need to consider the following objection...
Although I have shown..., I still need to...
Next, I will offer support for what is perhaps my most controversial claim, that...
Further support for this claim comes from...
Having argued that..., I need to consider rival views...

Transitional words.

To give multiple reasons: In addition, Also, In the first case
To explain: Because, Given, Since
To conclude an argument: Therefore, Hence, Consequently
To illustrate your argument: A case in point, To illustrate
To provide a specific example: Specifically, Namely
To intensify: Above all, Moreover, Furthermore, More importantly
To emphasize: Of course, Indeed, Certainly
To compare: Similarly, Likewise
To contrast: However, On the other hand, Even so
To speculate: Let's assume, Let's suppose
To concede an argument: Of course, Doubtless, While recognizing that...

- Using tenses consistently.
- Establishing an academic tone.
  The student must establish a reasonable, open-minded tone that promises honest consideration of a question.
- Be careful about the beginnings and ends of paragraphs.
  These are natural emphasis points.

3. So What?

A paper can be clearly written yet trivial. The question it grapples with may be insignificant or its argument simplistic. Here are some suggestions for making arguments more powerful and persuasive.

- Engage the reader.
  The opening paragraph must grab the reader's attention.
- Crystallize the argument in a single sentence.
  A paper must present a strong argument. But too often the thesis is weak, absent, or confusing.
- Remember the power of 3.
  In classical rhetoric, this is the tricolon. Lists are more powerful when they contain at least three items.
- Don't sweep contrary evidence or alternate interpretations under the rug.
  Engage the counter-arguments. Use words like admittedly, clearly, at first it may seem, in fairness.

4. Misusing quotations

Misuse of quotations in rampant in undergraduate papers. Sometimes, students quote too much—or too little. Sometimes, they blur their voice and those of the sources they quote. Often, they assume that quotations speak for themselves.

- Explain the quotation's point.
- Integrate the quotation into the text.

5. Weak conclusions

In oratory, the peroration is the conclusion of a speech or discourse. It is the place where the speaker recapitulates the argument and presses it a final time with renewed vigor. It provides an opportunity to remind, to reflect, to inspire, to leave the listener with a bit of wisdom—to sum up with panache. Mediocre student essays simply recapitulate the paper's argument. Strong endings provide a larger vision or context, and broaden the implications of the paper's argument. They provide a fresh twist or a broaden the perspective. Often, they "close the circle"—connecting to the paper's introduction.