

## WRITING

- Creating Meaningful Writing Assignments
- Crowd Sourcing an Essay
- Helping Your Students Write Compelling Thesis Statements
- How You Can Improve Your Students' Writing
- Peer Editing

### Creating Meaningful Writing Assignments

Too often, writing assignments provide insufficient direction. Such assignments encourage papers that are vague, highly general, over overly descriptive, and insufficiently analytic.

#### *1. If you want students to learn how to argue effectively, give them a writing prompt*

Prompts offer a particularly effective way to generate thoughtful, provocative thinking. By presenting students with a carefully defined problem, they challenge students and make the criteria for evaluation clear.

#### *2. Build your prompt around an active verb.*

Analyze, compare and contrast, evaluate, assess—these words provide students with a clear focus.

#### *3. Identify an audience.*

Who should a particular paper be “pitched” to: for example, an academic audience, policy makers, or journalists.

#### *4. Incorporate the grading criteria within the prompt.*

Spell out your expectations. For example, an effective paper will present a compelling argument and carefully consider counter-arguments.

### Crowd Sourcing an Essay

One way to integrate writing into your classes—and to enhance your students' writing skills—is crowd-sourcing: Having your students collectively draft an essay in class. The key is to split the assignment into distinct tasks and divide these tasks among student teams.

#### *Step 1: Break down the project into clearly defined tasks:*

For an assignment in the humanities, this might involve writing the introduction; the thesis or hypothesis; the argument; responses to counter-arguments; the conclusion.

For an assignment in the natural or social sciences, this might involve a literature review, hypothesis, methods, data results, discussion, and conclusions

***Step 2: Assign portions of the project to student teams.***

Teams should consist of no more than 3-4 students. The teams should be able to complete their initial portion of the assignment in 15-20 minutes.

***Step 3: Assemble the group projects***

Collect the drafts, assemble the pieces, then distribute copies during the next class session.

***Step 4: Collectively evaluate the completed essay using a grading rubric.***

Sample grading rubrics are available on the Teaching Center website. See pages 14 and 15 of the Center's Teaching Fellow Handbook:

[http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/TA\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/TA_handbook.pdf)

## **Helping Your Students Write Compelling Thesis Statements**

Perhaps the single most glaring flaw in many undergraduate essays is the inability to formulate a succinct, provocative, and sophisticated thesis statement.

How can you help your students create effective thesis statements? Here is a five step action plan.

***Step 1. Identify a problem worth addressing.***

Typically, a good question:

- complicates a seemingly clear-cut issue;
- challenges the conventional wisdom or an earlier argument;
- addresses a contradiction or paradox or ambiguity; or
- emerges out of your source material.

E.g. Why, in the mid-term elections of 2010, did 14 of 16 Democrats in the Congressional districts worst hit by the recession win reelection?

***Step 2. Develop a distinctive slant or a unique perspective on the problem.***

E.g. Economic conditions do not adequately explain why voters vote as they did.

***Step 3. Construct a thesis statement***

Usually, a thesis statement consists of three parts:

- a concession, which acknowledges an opposing point of view: Although...

-- the main argument

-- a because clause

E.g. Although many pundits contend that short term economic factors like changes in the unemployment rate drive elections, class and geographical divisions better predict voting behavior.

#### ***Step 4: Refine the thesis statement***

Eliminate vagueness and ambiguities and make the argument more sophisticated and nuanced.

E.g. Although many pundits contend that short term economic factors like changes in the unemployment rate, the poverty rate, and home values drive elections, in fact structural factors such as religious orientation, class status, attitudes toward gay rights and immigration, and whether one lives in a high income or low income state more accurately predict voting behavior.

#### ***Step 5: Craft a thesis paragraph***

A thesis paragraph identifies the problem the paper addresses, explains the problem's significance, defines key terms, concepts, and presents your argument in brief.

## **How You Can Improve Your Students' Writing**

### ***1. Let students know what you want.***

Don't just tell your students, for example, to write a "response paper," explain the assignment in detail and your grading criteria.

### ***2. Have your students write frequently.***

Incorporate "everyday writing" into your classes. You might ask students to

--summarize three points they learned in class that day

--one point that they found confusing

--respond to a lecture or reading

--summarize an article

--pose questions raised by a reader

--support or criticize a generalization

### ***3. Provide writing prompts***

You will get better writing from your students if they understand what you want.

### ***4. Incorporate "real world writing" into your class***

These might include a letter to the editor, an op-ed essay, a policy briefing, an article abstract, an annotated bibliography.

*5. Have students anonymously distribute copies of their thesis statement for comments from their classmates.*

## **Peer Editing**

One way to help your students become better writers is to integrate "peer editing" into your courses. Students respond--individually or in small groups--to a piece of writing.

Peer editing is an effective way to underscore the importance of revision and re-writing and to teach students how to edit their own work.

To be successful, a peer editing session must focus on the key components of effective writing:

- 1. Engagement:* Does the opening paragraph effectively grab the reader's attention?
- 2. Argument:* Does the essay have a clear thesis? Is the thesis significant?
- 3. Organization:* Is the paper's structure logical and coherent?
- 4. Evidence:* Does the evidence effectively support the argument? Are quotations effectively woven into the paper and adequately analyzed? Does the writer paraphrase effectively? Are counter-arguments taken into account?
- 5. Style:* Does the paper make use of strong verbs, specific details, memorable phrases, and striking images? Can sentences be combined? Are transitions smooth?
- 6. Conclusion:* Is the conclusion simply a summary? Does it tie back to the introduction?

If you want students to take peer editing seriously, then it is essential that students write down their comments, and receive a grade based on their editing.