



## COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES

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### Nine Principles of Effective Writing Instruction

Writing is integral to student success. Throughout their academic career, students will be asked to produce term papers and write answers to essay exam questions. Yet surprisingly little attention is paid to the craft of writing outside of required rhetoric and composition or literature classes. As a result, few students learn how to write within the conventions of a particular discipline.

Writing is not merely a mode of communication. It is also a method of reflection, thinking, and analysis. It is a way for students to learn a discipline's habits of mind and to reflect on their own reasoning process. The goal of writing assignments is not only to transform your students into better writers, but into better biologists, political scientists, or sociologists.

There is no greater gift you can give to your students than to strengthen their writing skills and to help them become self-critical writers. Writing is not simply a method of imparting information or demonstrating understanding, but the most nuanced and sophisticated way to order, analyze, apply, and synthesize information. Through your writing assignments, you can enhance your students' ability to evaluate data and methods, to formulate hypotheses, to predict, to generalize.

Given that you have no formal training in composition, how can you strengthen student writing? Given your need to communicate content, how can you devote additional attention to writing instruction without sacrificing course material? And given other demands on your time, how can you possibly grade students' writing efficiently and effectively? Here's how.

**1. Have students write regularly and frequently.**

Frequent writing helps to break down students' writing inhibitions and make them more comfortable in expressing their ideas in written words. Don't worry: You don't have to grade every writing assignment. You might simply scan some of these assignments.

**2. Focus less on mechanics than on the thinking and writing skills central to your discipline.**

Your job is not to teach the basic mechanics of writing. By the time your students reach you, they will already have had a great deal of instruction in grammar, syntax, word choice, organization, and other aspects of writing. If they continue to have problems with mechanics, let specialists, in the Writing Center, help them.

**3. Stress the "pre-writing" process.**

"Pre-writing" is the process through which a writer asks questions of the material and devises (or brainstorms) strategies for analyzing the material. You might ask the students to summarize a particular reader's argument or describe a debate within the scholarship or formulate a thesis or draft a compelling introduction to a topic. Pre-writing is a great way to overcome writer's anxiety and get ideas flowing.

**4. Vary the assignment's purpose and audience.**

Students write best when they have a clear sense of the purpose of the writing and of their audience. You might ask your students to write for an audience other than you. For example, in a Political Science

course, you might ask them to write a memorandum to a political campaign or a brief to the Supreme Court.

**5. Tailor your assignments to the skills and conventions of your discipline.**

In the social sciences, for example, students must evaluate quantitative data and critically evaluate methodologies and distinguish between correlation and causation. Therefore, you might give your students an assignment in which they must analyze a data set, evaluate a methodological approach, or assess whether a correlation is spurious or causal.

**6. Build assignments around focused “prompts.”**

A common mistake in disciplinary-based writing is to give assignments that are too vague and unfocused. Instead, consider build your assignment around a specific disciplinary skill. For instance, in a History course this might involve weighing evidence or evaluating conflicting interpretations of a particular historical event.

**7. Integrate peer review into your class.**

That doesn’t necessarily mean asking students to grade other students’ written work. It might involve having the entire class discuss anonymous excerpts from students’ writing or having a small group of students review the literature on a topic and draft a hypothesis.

**8. Create sequential assignments that build on one another.**

Each assignment should add a layer of complexity or broaden the range of students’ writing experiences. For instance, you might ask students to begin by writing a literature review. Then you might ask them to critique the literature, and then craft a thesis of their own.

**9. Focus your criticism.**

Instead of asking a student to correct all the errors in a paper, focus on the most glaring. Identify a particular problem before moving on to other difficulties.