

Teaching Writing at Hamilton

Teaching Writing Intensive courses requires you to balance course material with writing instruction, which can be challenging. Many faculty find it helpful to hear about how others incorporate the WI guidelines into their courses. The following pages provide an array of approaches and ideas, including suggestions from faculty regarding:

- Writing Assignments in Introductory WI Courses
- Writing Assignments in Upper Level WI Courses
- Ideas for Other/Informal Writing Activities
- In-class Discussion of Writing
- Individual/Small Group Conferences & Peer Review
- Feedback/Grading
- Revision Policies
- Writing in Non-WI Classes

We hope this is helpful as you design your syllabi and assignments. You're welcome to meet with the Writing Center Director to discuss any of these issues (or others) in more depth.

The Writing Advisory Committee plans to expand this document, so please send your ideas to share.

INTRODUCTORY-LEVEL WI ASSIGNMENTS

- Assignments expand from shorter to longer papers. All are argument papers based on one or two texts.
- I assign three papers, five pages each. Having a page limit reduces summary and increases focus on argument and counterargument.
- I assign four papers. Students write the first on their own so I can see their raw work; the fourth assignment includes a Writing Center conference. The second and third assignments include small group peer review of drafts.
- I assign multiple small papers that are components of a longer research paper due at the end of the semester. Students revise each section after receiving feedback from me. Before they submit the final, they are expected to revise it as a whole, attending to how those individual components work together.
- I assign five 2-3 page papers. Students select a topic that must address a specific, significant question.

UPPER-LEVEL WI ASSIGNMENTS

- The goal of this interdisciplinary course is to teach students how to write in the discipline as preparation for the senior thesis. Assignments range widely: autobiographical piece, interview, survey, review of literature, data analysis, and reflective writing. Some shorter assignments lead to longer assignments. Lengths range from two to twenty pages.
- I assign four papers, each a bit longer and more complex. The first, three to four pages, is a comparison of two contrasting ideas. The fourth, six to ten pages, includes literature research and analysis.
- Students keep a writing portfolio of four papers and write an end-of-term cover essay that pulls them together. The papers are organized around different critical approaches to a single work. Assignments grow in complexity: later papers include the use of critical articles. Students like and benefit from having a central organizing topic connecting all the papers.
- The first three are short argument papers; the fourth is a 10-20 page research paper on a self-selected topic. Students must keep a research folder over the semester, with notes on readings, a timeline, etc.
- I used to assign four analytical papers, but I now assign one ten-page research paper and eight two-page essays. Half of the research paper is analysis of one piece. In the other half, the student assumes the identity of a real or imagined historical person and explores that person's connection to the topic. In addition, at the end of each of the eight units, students write a two-page essay that reviews the material.
- One is a library research paper in preparation for a poster. The other three are review articles written for readers of journals.

IDEAS FOR OTHER/INFORMAL WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Short responses at the beginning of class to help students pose questions and organize thoughts.
- A brief statement of paper topic submitted ten days before the paper is due.

- Short e-mail/Blackboard responses to me prior to class.
- One-page discussion papers that relate the readings to another course/text, raise a question suggested by the readings, Students must hand in six out of ten.
- Close analysis of short passages.
- Practice with the kind of questions on exams.
- A short outline or paragraph response to a question about the readings.
- Students write questions/comments at the end of class. I respond in writing and return at the next class.
- Five-minute freewrites at the end of class every Friday.

IN-CLASS DISCUSSION OF WRITING

- For introductory courses, I spend a lot of time on thesis sentences. Students email me their proposed thesis sentences, and we discuss them in class.
- In intro. courses, I devote one day to Paper One. I distribute a stronger and a weaker paper, and we discuss them in depth. Students' responses are pretty smart; they see the key differences between them.
- I devote two or three classes a semester to writing, specifically on how to develop a topic.
- Early in the semester, we discuss two professional journal articles. One is my favorite example of a bad paper, and the other is very good. We discuss the differences and their effects on the reader.
- We spend time discussing the topic—how to narrow it down to a workable question.
- Most of our class discussion on writing involves organization. Early in the semester, we discuss likely organizational patterns for an assignment. I have students write down everything important they can think of about a topic. Then I put ideas on the board, and we discuss ways to organize those ideas.
- We discuss how to think about the topic and likely approaches to organization. Usually the discussion about writing is not at the sentence-level but about organization and argument. Sometimes we brainstorm and create charts on the board. This is especially useful when students must handle multiple texts.
- I discuss sentences, especially how to subordinate lesser ideas to more important ideas. I want students to think about the relationship between sentences and the logic of their argument.
- In intro. classes, we discuss the objectives, audience, and possible structure for an assignment. We discuss how to develop an argument and possible evidence to use.

INDIVIDUAL/SMALL GROUP CONFERENCES & PEER REVIEW

Faculty Suggestions

- Two of the four assignments in my intro. classes include mandatory tutorials on first drafts--small group peer review either in or outside of class.
- In intro courses, I often require a “pre-writing” conference at the Writing Center for either the first or second paper. This helps acquaint students with the expectations of college-level writing and means I see stronger drafts, so I have more time to respond to more complex issues. My students have responded really positively to these early required conferences.
- For introductory courses, I require one early draft meeting with me and am available for other meetings.
- With upper level students, I spend considerable time in individual conferences discussing ideas.
- I hold group pre-writing conferences; I have found that meeting with two or three students to discuss topics is quite effective.

Writing Tutor Suggestions

- For a draft, discussion of *ideas* is paramount. The ideas drive the structure. Put the draft aside and ask the writer, “Tell me your ideas. What is your vision for the completed paper? At what point is it now?” This leads to developing a revision plan for the next draft to achieve that vision.
- Ask, “What is your main idea? Why is it important? How does your evidence support it? Why did you choose this thesis? Why did you organize your thinking in this way? What are likely counterarguments?”
- Ask, “What are the stakes of your argument?” (“So what?”) Thinking this through helps students move toward a more in-depth thesis.
- Note specific sentences/ideas needing development. Ask, “How?” “Why is this point significant?” Push the writer to identify causes and conclusions.
- Ask, “Why did you organize it this way?” “Would another organization deepen the analysis? How?” Ask the writer to explain the main idea of each paragraph and its relationship to the thesis. This reveals a lot about the substance and organization of the overall argument: too many ideas in one paragraph; irrelevant ideas; ideas in the wrong place; and the need for topic sentences/transitions that make the argument clearer.

FEEDBACK/GRADING

Faculty Suggestions

- My comments focus on four areas: the quality of ideas, overall argument structure, internal paragraph structure, and mechanics.
- I write a summary response, mostly on the nature of the argument. I try to resist line editing.
- I like to pose questions, and I will put question marks in the margins where I am confused. End comments focus on major concerns, usually about organization and evidence.

- Form and content are inseparable; the quality of the organization reflects the quality of the student’s understanding. I provide extensive end comments.
- I comment on organization, especially topic and concluding sentences; evidence; and sentence clarity.
- Most of my comments are in the margins. For final comments, I focus on the value of the argument—particularly organization and evidence.
- I hand out a detailed rubric specific to each assignment so students know what to focus on when writing, and I know what to focus on when grading.
- I emphasize one or two significant issues: what the student most needs to work on in a next draft or paper. I have students attach a cover sheet with answers to the following questions: What were you asked to work on in your previous paper, and how did you address these problems in the current paper?

Writing Tutor Suggestions

- Ideas should take precedence over style when responding to an early draft.
- It’s important as the reader to separate yourself from the text; do not focus on editing the draft. Instead, raise questions/comments that force the student to rethink.
- Ask critical questions about the text, the evidence. *Why* do certain conditions exist? Get the student to think critically about *causes* and *implications*.
- Push students to ask more of their sources. Do the sources actively support the thinking or just fill space? Is anything gained by using a whole quotation rather than a select phrase?
- Ask critical questions of specific paragraphs:
Does the introductory sentence state a fact or does it advance the argument?
Does the paragraph clearly connect to the thesis?
Has the writer sufficiently analyzed the evidence?
Is more evidence needed to make the logic clearer/more convincing?
Is the progression of ideas logical and complete?
- Writers often arrive at an important insight at the end of an early draft. In revising, they should bring those insights into the intro/thesis to help start a fuller, more insightful argument.

REVISION POLICIES

- I read two drafts of Paper One. The first is worth 5%; students revise based on my comments, and the final draft is worth 10%. For Paper Two, I require Writing Center conferences. For Paper Three, I require peer review of drafts outside of class; the peer review is worth 5%. I find that peer review is more helpful to the readers, not the writers; it helps students see their own writing in new ways.
- Students rewrite two of their three papers after meeting with me. The focus of revision is re-thinking the argument, not “correcting errors.” Often the ideas are muddled, and the student needs to reorganize.

- Because students have a new assignment almost every week, I emphasize applying what is learned from one assignment to the next, rather than emphasizing rewriting of a graded assignment. Students have the option to revise if they wish.
- If students choose to revise, certain limitations apply: they must meet with me; they must incorporate feedback, and they must revise within one week of our meeting. It is important that students understand that the revision must be substantially better to qualify for a change of grade.
- I require revision and expansion of an in-class essay. Students receive the topic ahead; they may bring a page of quotations/ideas to use. I comment on the essay, and students then revise it into a formal paper, expanding the initial argument. Advantages to this design are that I can direct the argument at an early stage; and the time pressure of in-class writing forces students to use their natural voice.

WRITING IN NON-WI CLASSES

- I have found that one-page responses to specific questions about the readings are effective; they are a way to ensure that students do the readings.
- I give the same sort of assignments as I give in WI classes, but not as many, and I don't respond in as much detail.
- I require two lab reports, each of which must be revised and resubmitted. The initial version requires only parts of a full lab report (data reduction, analysis, and presentation). The revision adds another section or two (introduction and discussion).
- In my 30-40 student classes, each week half of the class e-mails me one-page responses to the reading, due the morning before class. I read and comment on them briefly, and print out copies to bring to class.
- I always teach "writing-intensively." In a class of forty, students write four two-page papers and two five-page papers. I have found that if students write fewer than four papers, they don't learn what they need to learn.
- In a forty-student class, I assign at least one and sometimes two papers. I use a rubric to summarize comments. I also use short in-class writings, announced ahead.

This document was composed with help from the following:

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