INTEGRATING THE WRITING COMPONENT: Some Principles and Best Practices

Fundamentals

- Writing should be "normalized"; we are all writers and readers, all the time and in all academic disciplines.
- As much as possible, writing and "subject matter" should be integrated, serving each other rather than being distinct enterprises.
- There are many genres of good writing. The goal is for students to become adept in several kinds, working toward flexibility and adaptability.
- "Each one teach one": use students to improve each other's writing, rather than assuming the entire burden yourself.
- Writing is like any other complex skill: it is improved over the long haul, not in ten or fourteen weeks. Your aim is to give students good principles, good practice, and good feedback, NOT to make them good writers by yourself, once and for all.

Assignments

- Write out ALL assignments clearly, with full specifications.
- Small frequent assignments work better than long infrequent ones.
- Use an incremental/developmental approach: from shorter to longer, simpler to more complex, parts to whole.
- Build in opportunities for revision:
  "Spot" revision: select a paragraph or section to be revised and brought to conference
  Offer grade enhancements for truly revised papers
  Portfolio grading rather than huge final paper or exam
- Use ungraded writing as "safe space" for experimentation and development:
  Pass/Fail grading (or check, check-minus, check-plus)
  Writing brought to class and used in discussion, workshop, etc.
- In-class writing
- Use writing to kill three or more birds with one stone: ensuring accountability on reading; promoting discussion, AND offering ongoing writing practice.
- Explain and illustrate disciplinary particularities.
Responding to Student Writing

- Use reader-based commentary ("I'm lost here") rather than code statements ("organization"), specialized terms ("dangling modifier") or weird symbols and abbreviations ("coh")
- FOCUS commentary: identify positives and 2-3 central, pervasive or persistent problems rather than trying to "cover" the paper --which is ineffective: exhausting for you and unhelpful to the student.
- Typed commentary is usually faster for you and easier for students to read--and then you also have a copy of your comments on disk
- For clarity, try evaluation sheets with 4-5 main categories, grade/score, and comments
- Use peer review in or outside of class (including TA's), with structured, specific review sheets to be submitted w/paper
- Use individual conferences in place of exhaustive commentary. In conference, explain and illustrate particular problems, examine spot revisions, provoke thinking about further revision, and discuss areas of confusion and progress

Writing Pedagogy and Use of Class Time

- MINIMAL: Doing writing is more important than talking about it.
- Don't do much grammar/style/mechanics instruction in class unless you see a prevalent problem; use handouts and individual conferences instead.
- Explain how to construct the essay you're looking for: basic organization, approach, use of sources, introduction, etc. Show an example if you have one.
- In subsequent classes, regularly take five minutes for questions about the upcoming essay.
- Fruitful in-class writing activities:
  - Brief peer review (20 minutes)
  - Brainstorming session to prepare the way for the essay, planning a hypothetical essay collectively.
  - Student work on an overhead projector transparency: Point out successes and spot-revise problem areas together. (Don't use the worst or best paper in the class, and block the name. If possible, secure the permission of the author beforehand.) Students find this very helpful.
  - Short segment of class time devoted to common writing problem in students' last papers.

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