

Freshman English at the Tri-Campus Some Frequently Asked Questions

If the emphasis in these courses is on writing and revision, what kinds of things can one do in class to support those activities?

While we often think of writing and revision as private activities that occur in relative isolation, they can offer terrific teaching opportunities in the rich audience of the classroom. Group conferences may address brief or lengthy writing assignments; students may work on a series of brief, related writings that lead up to a larger essay assignment; workshops may focus the entire class on a representative writing sample; students may work in pairs on isolated sections of their writing, say introductions, and apply guidelines and questions supplied by the instructor; the class may brainstorm or do presentations either as a whole or in groups in preparation for a writing assignment. In short, instructors develop activities to highlight all stages of the writing process and many types of strategies and styles of writing, so there are many productive ways to use class time to teach writing.

What kinds of readings are appropriate for the Freshman English courses?

Presumably instructors choose texts that they feel will offer students complex reading experiences and will in turn inspire complex ideas for writing. While some texts might be brief (a poem or an excerpt of a few pages), the key texts will usually need to be of substantial length (15 pages and more) for the students to have the opportunity for deep engagement with a range of issues and problems. In some situations, particularly with 110, instructors may offer some class readings as stylistic models for students. Whatever the text, the students should understand that their development as writers directly relates to their development as readers.

How do I balance the teaching of writing with the discussion and exploration of the readings?

Instruction relating to the literature should always be with the ultimate goal of developing student writing. For example, discussions and writings might tend to emphasize the author's style or critical vocabulary, the way the different parts of the text work together to create an effect for the audience, the ways the text corresponds to other texts, social phenomena, philosophies, etc. rather than emphasizing the memorization of key dates, names, and plot points of the text or simply interpreting the text. These courses differ from other English courses in that mastery of the assigned reading is never a primary goal. Rather, the reading serves as a prompt to inquiry, investigation, and, of course, writing.

How do I find time in my syllabus for these group and individual conferences that are required by the University?

Many instructors cancel "regular" classes periodically and in their place conduct conferences. Students are assigned times and groups, and almost without exception the students themselves agree that they learn more in one hour of conference time than they do in four hours of regular class time. Therefore, there is no need to feel that conferences should happen in addition to regular class time, especially when one considers that these

are writing seminars, not literature courses. Also, because the purpose of conferences is to create fresh opportunities for the discussion of writing, *any* variation on the standard classroom dynamic that increases a student's contact with other readers of her work is in some sense a gesture toward conferencing. There are many creative ways to accomplish this goal.

What length should the average Freshman English essay be?

Of course instructors often give small assignments for in-class writings or responses, and these can be anywhere from 1-3 pages, but a fully developed essay is generally somewhere between 4-8 double-spaced pages in length, depending on the instructor. Because we want students to develop their ideas thoroughly and incorporate sources that support those ideas, a substantial length is necessary.

What does 30 pages really mean anyway?

The UConn writing program requires 30 pages of revised writing in the Freshman English seminars, and that's a lot. Our students will be working on drafts or short assignments each week of the semester, however, and this work tends to add up. If, for example, you have four major assignments of 6-8 pages and one or two short assignments, you will achieve this "magic number." Still, it is important to note that the courses are about much more than a simple quantity of pages. The page requirement helps us articulate a writing practice that is consistent across sections and campuses, but individual instructors will decide just how this requirement is best met.

How can classwork connect to the essays?

Often instructors give sequences of assignments, both in and out of class, which culminate in the final essay assignments. These sequences help students approach the readings and the final assignments from a variety of angles, and to see writing as a vehicle for learning rather than a one-time performance separate from the work of the classroom.

Should assignments always have a written prompt?

When an instructor writes an assignment down, the instructor begins to model for the students the kind of writing the assignment is asking for. The written assignment is an opportunity to demonstrate the kind of control of academic thought and style that we wish our students to acquire. A written assignment prompt is also an aid in preventing plagiarism because it narrows the field of inquiry and clearly delineates the writing goals of the assignment. Finally, a written assignment is helpful when students go to the Writing Center so that tutors have a reference for understanding the instructor's goals and approach. In some instances, a verbal or even implied cue can serve as a prompt for writing, but major assignments should come in written form.

How can I craft plagiarism-resistant assignments?

As described above, written assignment sheets are one way to discourage plagiarism because then students have less wiggle-room to find papers that vaguely address the instructor's assignment. Choosing highly specific combinations of texts and ideas for students to address in assignments is another way – an essay addressing Joyce's "Araby"

is a lot easier to plagiarize than an essay addressing “Araby” and another text. Finally, the drafting process aids in discouraging plagiarism because the instructor is in contact with the student’s work throughout the writing process and can monitor its development.

How can I use the required library orientation to complement what I’m doing in class?

Instructors take a number of approaches to the orientation. Most find that the library orientation is most successful when tied to work the students are doing for an assignment. Instructors may contact the librarian in advance with a request that the students do a “scavenger hunt” or begin compiling sources for a presentation or an annotated bibliography. What is most important, though, is that we see the library contact as an extension of the kind of discovery, examination, and synthesis that is present in *all* of the work in the Freshman English courses.

How do I grade this many papers with the kind of detailed attention required by composition pedagogy and not become overwhelmed?

There are many different approaches to grading papers, but the main principle that distinguishes the grading of Freshman English essays from the kind of grading that often happens in an upper level course is that grading in Freshman English must be a key part of writing instruction. Grading is an opportunity for instructors to clarify expectations and standards for students, to challenge them to develop their thoughts more thoroughly, to refine their styles, to more accurately understand their audience. For this reason, grading essays in Freshman English requires more than a letter and a few brief sentences.

The group conferences and individual conferences that are staples of Freshman English help alleviate some of the grading burden, because students get frequent verbal and written feedback from peers as well as feedback of some kind from instructors at those times. Some instructors offer only verbal feedback on rough drafts, then more detailed written feedback on final drafts. Some use Microsoft Word’s commenting tool to respond rather than hand-writing on papers, and some even have a standard set of comments saved in Word to apply and personalize as appropriate. Some offer students extensions if they visit the Writing Center for help. *A crucial point to remember is that one cannot possibly correct every error and address every issue in an essay – it’s enough to focus on helping the student identify the most important places of strength and weakness, so that he or she can apply that understanding to the next essay.*

I have so many different levels of student ability in my class – how do I help them all learn without boring one end of the spectrum or confusing the other end?

To begin with, each student should write a short sample essay (in response to a brief text) on the first day of class. Instructors should read these sample essays *as soon as possible* and contact a writing coordinator if one or more students seem improperly placed.

Once the class is set, then, having many student-centered activities in the seminar helps keep all the students on more or less the same page. The more that the instructor speaks, the harder it is to have a good handle on how well everyone is following the discussion. When students interact with one another and with the instructor in a variety of differently

structured activities, everyone benefits by the combination of independence and interaction.

However, one can only do so much. Instructors are encouraged to suggest that students visit the Writing Center for additional support – no matter which end of the spectrum they represent.

How do the activities and standards of my class relate to the students' later university careers?

As students progress into the writing intensive (W) courses, they'll be expected to be familiar with a variety of approaches to writing, to be able to express themselves clearly and appropriately, and to use peer review conferences effectively. They must understand what is valued in academic writing and why. This knowledge will be the basis for more specialized writing instruction in their chosen fields.

What role does grammar have in Freshman English assignments?

Freshman English classes are not meant to be remedial grammar courses supported by workbooks. That said, Freshman English instructors teach grammar in a variety of ways that emphasize to students the true purpose of grammar – to clarify communication. Grammar is often taught in rough draft conferences, for example, when the instructor may draw the group's attention to places where poor grammar confuses an author's meaning or undercuts the essay's authority. The key feature of grammar instruction in Freshman English is that it is always contextualized within the students' own writing.

Why do we work on the more sophisticated aspects of argument and idea development when the students are still struggling to create coherent sentences?

Often students are quite able to correct grammar and style issues in their peers' writing, but find such issues harder to see in their own writing because they're struggling to adopt the academy's language to express their own ideas. The more confident they become as thinkers and manipulators of academic writing, the easier they'll find it to identify simpler errors of mechanics and style in their writing – the kind of mistakes that they don't make when writing letters or other familiar writing tasks. Group conferencing is tremendously helpful to students in learning to identify their own mechanical and stylistic errors, because they learn to recognize these errors in their peers' writing and hear them identified in their own writing.

Which aspects of Freshman English tend to be constant from class to class due to program guidelines, and which aspects tend to vary according to instructor preference?

The constants are challenging readings, ambitious writing assignments, conferences, the library orientation, the emphasis on drafting, and a student-centered pedagogy focused on writing as a tool for investigation and communication of ideas. Text selection, length of essay assignments, structuring of conferences, and incorporation of the library literacy requirement all vary from class to class.

What role can the Writing Center have in my class?

The Writing Center on each campus offers experienced tutoring for students of all levels. The Writing Center can serve a vital role in Freshman English by providing an extension of the seminar atmosphere and an additional site for discussion, revision, and the testing of ideas. While many of our tutors are experienced teachers of these Freshman English courses, the Writing Center is *not* imagined as a place where novices confer with experts. Rather, our tutors follow a practice of drawing out the student's goals and ideas with questions, comments, and some writing suggestions. Our tutors, however, do not edit, evaluate (grade), or "correct" papers, and, indeed, it is the students who do the writing in the center. The Writing Center is always happy to send a representative to your class to explain our services to the students, and occasionally it may be possible on request to send a tutor to collaborate in classroom activities with an instructor.

Why do we have an exam if this is not a content-based course? How can an in-class exam possibly reflect what the students have learned in a course that emphasizes reflection, feedback, and revision?

The exam is a requirement of the University, not Freshman English. Instructors must conduct exams at the time and place scheduled by the University. However, that doesn't mean that exams need be heavily weighted or that they should be massive, multiple-choice fact-regurgitation exercises. The most useful exams often ask the students to engage with a new piece of writing not heavily discussed in class beforehand and use it as a framework to connect and synthesize previous readings and developed course themes. Many Freshman English instructors develop exams that either are not significant class grades—in-class essays that ask students to reflect in some way on the readings, their essays, or engage in some revision—or are significant grades because the final exam is actually a portfolio of the student's accumulated work.