

Time-Saving Techniques for Effective Writing Instruction

The following are all taken from real instructors' experiences teaching Freshman English and W Courses in the Tri-Campus. They are adaptable across the disciplines and address the students' need for writing instruction as well as the instructors' need for a realistic workload.

Techniques:

- **Write Detailed Prompts.** A detailed writing prompt offers students support in identifying your priorities for their emphasis, format, and style. You might even teach them how to read your prompts at the beginning of the semester and discuss the ways these prompts reflect your discipline-specific expectations. Students tend to assume that what works for one writing assignment will work equally well for another – no matter if one is political science and the other is biology. Detailed prompts help head off common writing problems by clarifying your expectations. Then, too, if students go to the Writing Center for help, tutors have an idea of what you intended.
- **Peer Review.** In Freshman English students learn how to do peer review. Assign students to groups, have them exchange rough drafts, and when they come in next class, ask them to review each other's papers. Give your students a handout detailing the discipline-specific writing issues you would like them to emphasize in their reviews, and then circulate among the groups. This way you don't have to read their rough drafts, but they're still getting informed feedback that is guided by your instruction.
- **Class Workshop.** Distribute ahead of time an anonymous paper or two to the class, asking them to mark it as if for a grade. Then discuss the papers collectively as a class. This gives you an opportunity to discuss as a class how the original writing prompt guides the writing, what features of the essay are successful in addressing the prompt, and what features might be improved. This helps the class get a better idea of your criteria and encourages them to adopt them. It also heads off common questions so that, for example, you don't have to explain topic sentences over and over again. *Related to this: some instructors hand out model papers from previous semesters (on different assignments, of course!) or offer outlines that are standard in their fields.*
- **Standardize and Save Common Comments.** If you find that the same problems crop up over and over again in student writing, for example diction inappropriate to your discipline or poor paragraph structure or frequent run-ons or citation problems, you might consider sitting down one day and typing up explanations for all these things. You might even skip some explanations in favor of referring students to a page number in a standard writing handbook such as Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual*. Then when you type student comments, you can begin with individualized questions and observations and plug in your standard comments as appropriate.
- **Sequence Assignments.** Rather than having one big rough draft and one big final draft, have students build up to their big paper gradually by writing a series of smaller, related assignments. You can give these more focused and yet less detailed attention as you grade them, because they highlight the aspects of the assignment that you are most interested in. That should also make your final draft commenting less involved because you've headed off many of the common problems. A sample sequence:
 - Write a two-page response to the reading/lecture, particularly considering the following points:
x, y, z.
 - Drawing on your response, choose one of the points and consider it together with this quote from another author: "abc." Be sure to use topic sentences for your paragraphs and support them with evidence from the text as well as your own critical reasoning. Share this writing with a classmate and discuss.

-Following the structure suggested by the following prompt, create an outline that builds upon your arguments/insights in the previous writing. [Prompt goes here]

-Write the 7-10 page paper.

The only one of these writings that receives more than a few questions and a check mark is the final one.

- **Invite the Writing Center to your class.** While we have limited staff availability, we are happy to visit classes when we can to assist you. Talk to us about ways you think we can support you and your students!

Some key points:

- You do not need to be a grammarian for your students or edit every single mechanical error in their papers. All you need to do is note *representative problems* and refer them to a writing handbook. They should be competent enough to handle reading most grammar explanations and when in doubt, they can visit the Writing Center for clarification. Besides, fixing their grammar problems is usually the smallest piece of the puzzle. The larger parts are content and style. *Whenever they start to grapple with complicated or unfamiliar content, their style and grammar fall apart, so if you develop competence with content, the rest will begin to fall in line naturally.* Besides, why fix a run-on if the whole paragraph needs to be re-written?
- Rather than writing extensively throughout a student's essay, commenting on ideas, you might select a few main difficulties and focus on asking guiding questions for those problems. Composition research has shown that students seem to learn better by watching instructors model reading and writing skills and applying those skills to their compositions *as a whole*. They learn less when they are surgically operating to "repair" seemingly unrelated but pervasive trouble spots.

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