

Writing beyond Writing Classes: Useful Strategies for Busy Professors Making Writing Assignments, Using Writing to Teach Content

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“Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.”

Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. 110-11.

How might the quotation above describe the situation of a writer in a particular discipline? Take five minutes to jot some ideas.

Some Guiding Assumptions

1. The ability to write is the ability to generate and present ideas in language that is effective for a given audience and purpose. Good writing in novels to be read at leisure and in reports to be read to inform investment decisions share unhelpfully little in common.
2. Writing is a mode of learning. Assigning writing is a powerful mode of teaching.
3. Informal writing exercises both complement formal writing assignments and are valuable in their own right. For many classes, frequent short writing assignments are preferable to infrequent long ones.
4. Learning to write is not like getting vaccinated against measles. People learn to write by writing, not by being told about writing.
5. Writing strategies that seem obvious and natural to professors have been internalized through repeated writing experiences. Students have not yet had the same experiences.
6. Writing is a complex of many intertwined activities. New or more challenging writing situations may cause interference among these activities, and some writing skills may actually appear to degrade.
7. Learning a discipline also means the particular ways of learning to write in that discipline. This is a natural developmental process. Just as one doesn’t expect freshman chemists or historians to know all of chemistry or history at age 19, neither should one expect them to know how to write chemistry or history.
8. *Effectively* responding to student writing does not mean *exhaustively* responding to student writing.

Some Context

The Golden Days . . . that Never Were

- Everyone who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges has known men who could not write a letter describing their own commencements without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old.¹
- It is obviously absurd that the college--the institution of higher education--should be called upon to turn aside from its proper functions and devote its means and the time of its instructors to the task of importing elementary instruction.²
- One way to handle them is to force them to take "remedial" courses (often they cannot read intelligently and dislike any reading), a slow process of remedying the ills of a slothful public school life. Another is to them, fail them, and send them home--rather heartless, but perhaps less so than to encourage the morons to go on. A third, too often done, is to accept them and work with their mediocrities; the inevitable result is the lowering of standards.³
- Students at Yale. . . are less competent to write an effective composition than were the students of ten years ago. There is a grave weakness in their powers of analysis and organization; even the brightest students sometimes show that they lack basic training in the ways of beginning, developing, and concluding an argument of exposition. This is a much more troubling weakness than any small errors in usage, for it shows a lack of mental discipline in the basic principles of human thought.⁴

Expert writers and novice writers differ not only in terms of their experiences but in terms of the range and depth of writing strategies and repertoires they have internalized. Consider some factors how (and how easily) writers produce a specific text.

- Writer's knowledge of the subject.
- Writer's ability to acquire new or additional knowledge on the subject (library research, direct observation, empirical study, experimentation, interview, etc.)
- Writer's familiarity with the genre, including the degree to which genre conventions are deeply internalized or known tacitly.
- Writer's ability to learn new genres.
- Writer's experience working within the physical/social constraints of the task (amount of time available, working alone or with others, setting for the writing (for example, in class or office vs. at home) and so on)
- Writer's past experiences and general fluency with writing.
- Writer's general knowledge of a range of topics and subject matters (among other things, influences her or his ability to draw connections, develop examples, devise metaphors, etc.)
- Writer's repertoire of rhetorical strategies (invention, arrangement, style, etc.).
- Writer's facility with the technologies of writing, from handwriting ability to wordprocessing, to html formatting
- Writer's editing and proofreading skills, ability to produce conventional standard edited American English.

And, just to underscore an additional complexity, think of the following situations in which writers might find themselves:

- The audience knows less than the writer on this particular subject.
- The audience knows as much as the writer on this particular subject.
- The audience knows more than the writer on this particular subject.

¹ Adams S. Hill, Harvard 1878.

² Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, to the Harvard College Board of Overseers, 1892.

³ Phillip March, *How to Teach English*, 1956.

⁴ Joseph Mersand, *Attitudes Toward English Teaching*, 1961.

Courses that Use Writing vs. Courses that Teach Writing

You don't have to be a writing teacher to make effective uses of writing in any course that you teach. That is, you can make writing assignments that are extremely valuable in terms of your students' learning without any of the specialized knowledge that faculty with professional expertise in writing theory, research, and pedagogy might have.⁵ Perhaps even more importantly, you can make these helpful writing assignments without adding tremendous amounts of time to your teaching.

It's useful to think of three sites or levels of writing in the university. Level One: courses that include writing, primarily as a teaching/learning strategy. Level Two: courses that have, as one of their pedagogical goals, enculturating students in ways of writing that are important in a particular discipline. Level Three: courses that are directly and specifically designed to develop student writing abilities. The following table provides a few differences between courses that use writing to foster learning and courses in which learning to write is a main focus. (I've forced some distinctions for the purpose of clarity; a blurry continuum would be more accurate.)

	Writing to Learn	Learning to Write
1	Emphasis on teaching course content through having students actively engage information and ideas.	Emphasis on students developing writing skills and strategies.
2	"Getting better" as a writer is an indirect side benefit.	"Getting better" as a writer is a direct and primary goal.
3	Class time features relatively little direct instruction on writing.	Class time features direct instruction on writing (teaching strategies, workshopping, etc.)
4	Frequent shorter writings are prominent.	Frequent shorter writings are prominent.
5	Students generally don't revise much writing after professor feedback.	Students are often required to revise writings after professor and/or peer feedback.
6	The focus of the course is on assigned readings, practices, or topics.	The focus of the course is on the students' texts.
7	Response tends to focus on quality and accuracy of student thought and engagement.	Response tends to focus on both on quality and accuracy of student thought and engagement and on matters of presentation (rhetorical effectiveness, adherence to conventions, etc.)
8	Types of writing assigned may be characteristic primarily of academic settings and assigned in order to facilitate learning. (microthemes, journals, reading responses, etc.)	Types of writing assigned may, additionally, emulate professional discourses.
9	Can be used in any class, large or small.	At some point requires relatively fewer students because of time involved.
10	Presumes no special knowledge about writing on the part of the instructor.	Asks instructors to gain some modest knowledge about the development of writing abilities and conventions of the "target genres."

⁵ Faculty with graduate training in the teaching of writing have generally studied and produced research in the areas of rhetorical theory and history; linguistic and discourse analysis; the development of student writing abilities; assessment; the analysis of individual student writing needs; composition pedagogy; and so on. They have also developed extensive "clinical experience" working with writers. But you don't need that expertise to be helpful!

Occasions for Making Writing-to-Learn Assignments

1. Before class, to ensure that students actively engage the reading or material.
2. At the start of class, to attune students to the day's activities.
3. During class, to stimulate discussion or thinking or to provide more introspective students with an opportunity to engage the ideas.
4. At the end of class, to summarize main ideas or to answer a specific question or to pose a question.
5. After class, to extend and engage more thoroughly the day's discussion.

Writings may

1. Be collected in traditional paper format.
2. Be posted on course discussion boards.
3. Receive a quick comment.
4. Be rated with a rubric.
5. Be randomly selected for comment.
6. Be published by the instructor.
7. Receive a comment from a peer.

What did you find most effective/insightful/helpful?

What one idea/element might the writer extend further to deepen the writing?

If someone were to disagree with or be skeptical of this writing, what might they say?

Some Variables in Making Writing Assignments

Topic

General subject field (topic area)
Specific topic/specific position on topic
Specific source materials to be used

Role

student
collaborator/colleague
professional,
knowledge
peer
expert
employee
citizen
interest group member
official, etc.

Purpose

demonstrate knowledge
organize materials
analyze, draw inferences and conclusions
synthesize
critique
argue a position or policy, etc.
explore or reflect
connect new knowledge to old or to experience
interpret

Readership

teacher
peers
hypothetical or real individual
general public audience
specific audience (interest group, etc.)
specific academic or professional audience, etc.

Genre

memo; letter
journal entry; log; lab notebook, ethnographic notes
report of information; of observations; of event
response, blog entry—about readings? Events?
article, essay
case study; treatment plan
research paper: primary sources? Secondary?
short answer/microtheme
class notes, summary
poster, brochure
class posting on a discussion board
podcast; film
PowerPoint; Web page

Conventions

format, length, style, etc.

Which is the Best Writing? (Trick Question)

A Further Demonstration that “Good Writing” is always “Good in Context”

1

Prices are rising for the black sludge that helps make the world’s gears turn. If you think we’re talking about oil, think again. Petroleum prices have tumbled from their record highs. No sooner was there relief at the pump, however, than came a squeeze at the pot. That jolt of coffee that a majority of American adults enjoy on a daily basis has gotten more expensive and could go even higher this year. . . .⁶

2

A person who is required to file an information return with the IRS, must obtain your correct taxpayer identification number (TIN) to report, for example, income paid to you, real estate transactions, mortgage interest you paid, acquisition or abandonment of secured property, cancellation of debt, or contributions you made to an IRA.

U.S. person. Use Form W-9 only if you are a U.S. person (including a resident alien), to provide your correct TIN to the person requesting it (the requester) and, when applicable, to:

1. Certify that the TIN you are giving is correct (or you are waiting for a number to be issued),
2. Certify that you are not subject to backup withholding, or
3. Claim exemption from backup withholding if you are a U.S. exempt payee.⁷

3

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.⁸

4

Abstract: We extend earlier ideas about the appearance of noncommutative geometry in string theory with a nonzero B-field. We identify a limit in which the entire string dynamics is described by a minimally coupled (supersymmetric) gauge theory on a noncommutative space, and discuss the corrections away from this limit. Our analysis leads us to an equivalence between ordinary gauge fields and noncommutative gauge fields, which is realized by a change of variables that can be described explicitly. This change of variables is checked by comparing the ordinary Dirac-Born-Infeld theory with its noncommutative counterpart. We obtain a new perspective on noncommutative gauge theory on a torus, its T-duality, and Morita equivalence. We also discuss the D0=D4 system, the relation to M-theory in DLCQ, and a possible noncommutative version of the six-dimensional (2; 0) theory.⁹

5

I remember vividly the moment that I entered the world of literacy, education, institutional “correctness,” and, consequently, identity. I was demonstrating to my older sister how I wrote my name. The memory comes after I had been literally taught how to do it—which strokes of the pencil to use to create the symbols that equate to my name.¹⁰

⁶“Joe Economics.” Editorial *New York Times*, January 8, 2007.

⁷ Internal Revenue Service, directions for W-9.

⁸ Lewis Carroll, “The Jabberwock.”

⁹ Seiberg, Nathan, and Edward Witten. “String theory and noncommutative geometry.” *Journal of High Energy Physics*, 1999. <<http://ej.iop.org/links/r0OcrjXAO/fHGb9M6e2xGu2OqEav5vpA/jhep091999032.pdf>>

¹⁰ Geraghty, Elise. “In the name of the Father: Self Naming in the Face of Institutional Patriarchy.” *Writing on the Edge* 17 (fall 2006): 29-37.

To Help Students Learn Writing in a Discipline

Consider Types of “Target” Writing

Brainstorm: Following are some general broad categories of types of writing, distinguished by their intended audiences and forums. What are the features of different kinds in your discipline?

- Academic Discourse
- Civic or Popular Discourse (Inform, Persuade, Entertain)
- Professional or Vocational Discourse
- Personal and Interpersonal Discourse

Understand Conventions of Writing in Your Discipline

- Source materials (primary or secondary readings; written artifacts; measurements; observations, etc.)
- Treatment of sources (lengthy summary and discussion, quick citation, etc.)
- Citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.)
- Voice; representation of narrator (“present” in the text, effaced from the text)
- Conventional structures (set elements and order; implied elements)
- What counts as evidence or proof (facts, examples, testimonials, quotations, interpretations, etc.)
- Purpose (document procedures; record; explain; argue; etc.)

Consider the Sequence of Writing Assignments in a Course, Trying to Scaffold Tasks

- Divide long assignments into pieces. Or use several short assignments.
- Increase number of difficulty of sources.
- Vary audiences.
- Vary genres.
- Use “translation” assignments. Or back translation assignments. (Scholarly to popular or vice versa; expert to novice; novice to expert.)
- Move from cognitively simpler tasks to harder. Also see page 7.
 - Report
 - Summarize
 - Respond
 - Analyze
 - Synthesize
 - Define
 - Critique

Consider the differences among these tasks and what good writing looks like in each:

1. From the observational notes you compiled over the past two weeks, write an analysis of the habits of fourth graders at recess.
2. How does the theory of the carnivalesque explain the island world in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*?
3. After you’ve completed the experiment, please prepare a lab report, in standard format.
4. Compose the CEO’s letter for the Twain Corporation’s Annual Report to Shareholders.

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Spectra of Difficulty in Writing Situations

“Relatively Easier”

Known readers
Friendly readers
Familiar information
Given information
Familiar genre
Short
Single purpose
Well-defined task



“Relatively Harder”

unknown
skeptical/hostile
new
compiled or generated
new
long
complex
ill-defined task

Consider difference among the following types of assignments.

- 1A. Write a ten page paper on a topic related to this course.
- 1B. Write a ten page paper in which you argue for or against teaching Intelligent Design in high school science courses.
- 1C. Read the articles on the science of intelligent design by Smith and Jones, summarize their positions, and explain whose position you find more convincing and why.
- 1D. You are invited to speak to a group of people who believe Jones is right. You, however, disagree. Write the speech that you might give; your purpose is not to persuade them to agree with you, which would be asking an awful lot. Instead, your purpose is to have them understand why you're a reasonable person who has thoughtful reasons for believing as you do.
- 1E. Using your writings from the previous assignments, prepare a web page that contains resources that will be useful for someone trying to understand the issues involved in this topic. Write a two-page commentary that explains the choices you made and shows that you made them with care and diligence.
- 2A. Write a research paper on the topic of the current situation in Iraq.
- 2B. Discuss the articles by Smith and Jones on the situation in Iraq.
- 2C. The articles by Smith and Jones take different positions on the ultimate success of America's involvement in Iraq. Write a paper that explains which position is more accurate, based on a careful analysis and evaluation of each. Successful writers will need to research some of the claims that Smith and Jones cite, including the evidence they marshal—or ignore. Your readers are thought