

Mount Holyoke College, Spring 2017
TSRW WORKSHOP

**DESIGNING AND TEACHING WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES: EFFECTIVE
ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION**

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PART 1. THE ENVIRONMENT OF A WRITING INTENSIVE COURSE

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

What do you think a writing intensive course means? How would you define a writing intensive course?

What are the challenges you've faced in your writing intensive courses? If this is the first time designing a writing-intensive course, what challenges do you anticipate?

DEFINING THE WRITING INTENSIVE COURSE

Our neighbor, Amherst College, distinguishes between the writing “attentive” and the writing “intensive” course. Writing-intensive courses appear to be a subset of writing-attentive courses; writing-intensive courses focus on the *rudimentaries* of academic composition.

From the Amherst College Dean of Faculty website

Writing Attentive

Any course in any discipline can define itself as Writing Attentive (W) if it has as one of its conscious and stated objectives the improvement of students’ critical writing, whether that writing is highly discipline-specific (e.g., a lab report) or broader in its application. Whether a course counts as a W course is determined not so much by the number of pages of writing students produce as by the uses to which that writing is put. In particular, writing assignments should be used at least in part for the purpose of improving students’ writing skills rather than solely as evidence of their mastery of course content. Accordingly, in W courses, students can reasonably expect to receive extensive feedback not only on the content but also on the form of their writing. This feedback might be given in a variety of ways, e.g., written comments, one-on-one paper conferences, and/or classroom discussion of samples of student writing.

Writing Intensive

Designed specifically to meet the needs of students whose secondary education did not adequately prepare them for writing at Amherst College. Students who take these courses will be taught the fundamentals of academic writing: thesis development, the use and citation of secondary sources, cogent argumentation, effective organization, the construction of coherent and unified paragraphs, and the crafting of complex yet clear sentences whose grammatical structure accurately mirrors the logical relations between the ideas they express. Though a significant amount of class time will be devoted to writing instruction, these courses are based squarely within a particular discipline and may count toward the major in the department in which they are taught.

Writing centers such as those at the University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, and Dartmouth College publicly define the expectations of the writing-intensive course. Several common features are useful to note: (1) writing is **explained** to students; (2) courses are designed to make writing assignments an **ongoing** exercise; (3) courses involve opportunities for **revision**; and (4) students are given feedback on the **quality of their writing** (structure, form, and style) in addition to the content of their work.

From Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin

1. Writing assignments must be an integral, ongoing part of the course, and the writing assignments must constitute a substantial and clearly understood component of the final course grade. Assignments must be structured and sequenced in such a way as to help students improve their writing. Instructors in writing-intensive courses should not just assign writing; they should help students succeed with and learn from that writing.
2. There must be at least **four discrete writing assignments** spread throughout the semester, not including in-class essay exams.

3. At least one assignment must involve **revision**; the draft and revision may count as two discrete writing assignments. Exceptions will be allowed for instructors who instead choose to use a sequence of repeated assignments.
4. Students must produce a total of at least 14 double-spaced pages (c. 4000 words) of finished prose; this total does not include pages in drafts. When the writing is in a foreign language, a lower number of total pages may be appropriate.
5. Instructors must provide feedback on students' writing assignments.
6. Some **class time** must be devoted to preparing students to complete writing assignments. Some options include:
 - discussion of assignments and of evaluation criteria
 - analysis and discussion of sample student papers
 - discussion of writing in progress, using examples of successful work from students
 - peer group activities that prepare students to write a particular paper, such as sharing and discussion of plans, outlines, strategies, theses, drafts
 - discussion or presentations of students' research in progress
 - instruction about how to write a particular type of paper or about solving a common writing problem

Excerpts from Campus Writing Board at the University of Minnesota, 2010

1. Writing is comprehensively integrated into the course. The writing in the course must be tied to the course objectives and course outcomes....
2. Writing is a significant part of the course work. Students must write at least 2500 words or the equivalent of finished writing, in genres and modes of production appropriate for the course and discipline. The written products may be distributed over a variety of assignments or through a single major assignment; both are encouraged. Group-authored documents may be part of a WI course, but each student must meet the minimum word count.
3. Writing is a significant part of the course grade. Writing must be a major component of the final course grade, with this relationship detailed explained in the syllabus. [Examples: Student's performance on writing assignments constitutes at least 33% of the grade. Or students who perform poorly on writing assignments cannot pass the course.]
4. Writing is learned through revision. Instructors should provide substantial feedback on writing assignments, and allow revision in response to that feedback. Continuous, focused feedback building systematically over the course of the class is encouraged, as is a variety of modes and purposes of feedback. [Example: students submit drafts of an assignment or part of an assignment. In a laboratory course with multiple lab assignments, feedback might come on one lab report with the expectation that students will use the feedback to improve their writing in a subsequent report.]
5. Writing is explained and practiced in the course. Explicit writing instruction must be integral to the course, as part of the course content and as a significant, recurring activity. Through instruction, students should learn about writing, including its disciplinary structures and

functions, and should practice writing in a variety of modes and settings appropriate to the discipline. The forms and types of writing instruction that will be used in the course should be explained in the syllabus or supporting teaching materials. Course specific writing instruction appropriate to a WI course may take many forms, including engaging students in discussions of the relevance of writing to the discipline and course; asking students to analyze course readings looking specifically at the rhetorical strategies or writerly qualities; assigning frequent informal, ungraded or low-stakes writing activities (for example, "five-minute papers," concept maps, posts to online discussion boards or annotated design notebooks); facilitating frequent "five-minute writing workshops" to engage students in interactive and context-specific analysis of writing style, usage, or mechanical issues appropriate to current assignments; and providing students with style guides or books on writing appropriate to the discipline. Comment: Support for instructors interested in developing and implementing course-relevant writing instruction activities is available at the Center for Writing.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: WRITING INTENSIVE IN AN MHC COURSE

Example of a first-year course in the English department (ENGL 199)

Several one-page responses (570 words), graded out of 6 points. (Number of assigned responses depends on level of students and their weekly preparedness. For first-year students, I assign at least one response paper per primary text.)

One Presentation. Students pair up to present a 15-minute presentation. Instructions are in the syllabus, along with main categories for presentation.

Three 3-4 page papers, plus one revision. This translates to four grading periods. Papers 2 and 3 are weighted differently than Paper 1. Students are asked to formulate a revision plan after the first essay.

THE STUDENT AUDIENCE

High School Writing

Many students come to MHC having learned to write the compact five-paragraph essay: introduction, three observations represented in three body paragraphs, and a summary conclusion. The five-paragraph essay is useful, but college students quickly realize that this is only the beginning. Chances are students learned to write effective book reports or summaries using this model. Investigation and inquiry require different objectives and formats. We can remind students that they are not necessarily throwing out the old, since in some cases reporting or summarizing are necessary for further work; but now, they've earned the right to begin thinking in more flexible and higher-stakes terms.

From Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric

What Students Expect

Over the years, we've heard from students the various expectations they have of their seminars. Here are some of the most commonly heard expectations:

- Students expect the classroom format to be discussion-based, not lecture-based. They want a class that is intimate not only in size but in character.
- Students want feedback from you on their writing. You should respond not only to the content of the writing, but also to its structure, form, and style.
- Students expect that you will return their papers to them in a timely manner, so that they have sufficient time to absorb and incorporate your comments before the next paper is due.
- Students expect that you will meet with them in conference at least once or twice during the term to discuss their progress as writers. They also hope that you will be available to them in office hours and via email.

They may not realize it, but your students also need you to show them that some of their existing research and writing practices, which they have brought with them from high school, won't work in the college classroom. Once you've shown them that their existing models won't work, students will want you to inspire them to explore new models and to support them while they do. They'll want you to remain engaged with them as writers and as thinkers, so that they in turn can do their best work in your course.

Explaining Expectations for the College Writer

I lay out logistics in the syllabus to answer any basic questions about assignments and how they should be formatted. The following language appears in my syllabus:

Three Essays. You will write three 3-4 pp. papers for this course. College-level papers should be well-written, thoughtful **interpretive analyses** of passages in a work—not summaries or book reports. You will not pass this class without submitting all major written assignments within a reasonable time from the scheduled deadlines. For assistance with essays, you're always welcome to see me in office hours. Please come to me well in advance of the final few days before a paper is due.

Smaller Writing Assignments. Writing exercises can include quizzes, short in-class exercises, and response papers. Each exercise will be graded out of **6 points**. You may be asked to research and define a term, concept, or program of thought to advance our discussions. Aside from being a basis from which to conduct discussion, your response papers are also opportunities to practice close reading, so make sure they are thoughtful analyses of a manageable excerpt from the text in question.

SUBMITTING YOUR WORK

All written work (papers, response papers, & small writing assignments) must be submitted in hardcopy. Formal papers should be submitted to my mailbox in the English Department Office (111 Shattuck). Response papers and small writing assignments are to be handed in during class.

For all writing assignment, please include:

Your name
ENG 199, Professor X
Assignment
Date

When submitting your papers, make sure you've accounted for the following things:

- **Surname** and **page numbers** at the top right corner of your paper
- Staple or clip your papers
- Proper citations (parenthetical in text, MLA style)
- Proper use of block quotes and punctuation
- Titles of literature in question italicized or placed in quotation marks, depending on the work.
- For formal essays only: include a works cited list (MLA, even if only the primary text used for the course).

Late Policy. I will allow one late response paper, but thereafter will accept no late response papers from you. As for formal papers (short and long essays), you may choose to submit a formal paper late at the cost of a full letter grade (e.g., from **A** to **B**). The grade will continue to drop one-third of a letter grade (e.g., from **B** to **B-**, and so on) for every day that the paper is not submitted. After one week, the paper will be given a grade of **F**. Again, please note that you will not pass this class without submitting all major written assignments (formal essays) within reasonable time from the scheduled deadlines.

Grammar resources can be put on reserve at the library; students can also be directed to useful internet resources via links on Moodle and on the syllabus. Again, I include an explanation in the syllabus:

You'll find a useful guide to MLA style at the **Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab**, under **MLA Formatting and Style Guide**: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/1/>. Please also refer to the **style sheet** on the English Department website. Follow the "Writing Tools" link.

More information at: www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/english/stylsheet.html. For any basic problems with paper formatting and logistics, I will directly dock your essay one-third of a letter grade.

Explaining the expectations can also mean providing a model of one or two good response papers in the syllabus. Finally, by including some language about campus writing resources, you can give students a chance to take personal responsibility for their writing. If student writers are particularly challenged, I'll ask them to meet with me before I suggest that they go to the SAW Center. Good writers can also be directed to the SAW center to talk out ideas or test their drafts with a SAW mentor.

A BRIEF LIST OF OBJECTIVES AND REMINDERS

Some Objectives for Planning

Address some basic categories for good writing:

- a. Developing a thesis or argument
- b. Locating and using textual evidence
- c. Citing sources well
- d. Making revision a part of the writing process

Help students advance from reporting to inquiring.

Emphasize slow reading, slow thinking.

Reminders When Planning

Relay a consistent message. Focus on one or two crucial facets of writing success that students can practice and develop over the semester.

Remind students that writing is difficult; that it is intertwined with their process of thinking; and that it improves over time with practice.

Remind students that they are responsible for their own paper mechanics (grammar, punctuation, etc.).

Writing can be an uneven process for different students.

Some students are perfectly happy to do C-level work! Others earnestly know they're not good writers and will try to improve. Others will be happy to improve slightly. It is good for me to keep in mind that the A is not everyone's objective, which can allow me to concentrate on each student's aptitudes and focus on their improvement.

PART 2. FINDING A FOCUS FOR THE WRITING INTENSIVE COURSE

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

What are some of the major issues or problems you've seen in student writing over time?

What aspect of writing seems most critical for students to achieve success in your discipline? What do you think the most important skill is for your students to learn as writers communicating in your field?

What distinguishes critical thinking from summarizing or reporting in your discipline?

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Focusing: Textual Evidence in the Literature Classroom

Focusing on the development of one primary skill in written communication can make it easier to structure a semester of assignments and exercises.

What are some aspects of writing that students have a hard time with? In my classrooms, I find that students have trouble with the use of **textual evidence**. Through the term, they learn to ask questions such as: what is good textual evidence? How much time to spend with it? How to set it up? Secondly, students have difficulty building a **thesis statement**, which consists of not only the main claim, but also an explanation for how an issue derived from textual evidence links up to the bigger themes or questions of the work as a whole.

To help familiarize students with the discipline of literary studies, I focus on teaching students how to engage with **textual evidence**. While students determine the content (of their essays) and the level of creativity necessary for good work, the course provides a structure that requires them to practice finding and grappling with textual evidence repeatedly throughout the semester.

Students learn how to **identify** good passages or valuable areas of textual evidence.

Students learn how to **format** textual evidence (setting up quotes, using block quotes, citation)

Students learn the **pace** of analysis or critical thinking—it is slow.

Perhaps you might think of something that is more discipline-specific. It might matter more that a student is able to set up a good CLAIM or THESIS, that the student knows how to SIMPLIFY their prose, or that they know how to organize a SEQUENTIAL line of argumentative development. Any focus you establish will give students something to work on and accomplish. This doesn't mean that the other parts of writing necessarily fall out. But you can focus on the base tools for your discipline that students will need for writing success in other classrooms.

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

Through formal and informal assignments, one can build a series of written and oral work that helps students practice and develop that crucial aspect of writing success in your discipline. In this way, it's possible also to minimize your labor both in and out of the classroom context.

One-page reading responses and various types of response papers

In about 570 words, students focus on a passage from the text in question. The assignment gets them to think about a thematic issue that is advanced, challenged, or altered by the passage. It's a basis for all the work that they do, and it gives them a way to prepare to come to office hours. Sometimes, I ask a general question for them to answer. Again, this is based on textual evidence, so I may sometimes ask for a definition, a summary, or an analysis.

Re-description vs. Brainstorming vs. Analysis

Students may be asked to write in different modes to understand the difference between a report (summary), a rough synthesis of elements in a passage without an overarching claim, and an interpretive analysis.

Defining your terms

Students research and define a concept in their own words. They are required to cite their source in a works cited section. For example, they define terms such as “epic,” “stream of consciousness,” “postmodernism,” or “allegory.”

Cross-referencing course materials

Students focus on a passage in order to compare and contrast source/analogue materials against another work.

Collaborative assignmentsPeer Editing

Students bring a draft of an essay to be workshopped in class with one other student. Can be done in or out of class, with or without technology.

Preparing Textual Evidence Using Class Time

Students are asked to bring a passage with them. They are paired up in class and given 20 minutes to discuss and analyze. When the group assembles together again, student contribution to discussion must draw from textual evidence and analysis that was conducted in pairs.

Presentations

Provides a different type of peer-component to writing pedagogy. I explain that the presentation is an oral version of an analytical response and a formal essay. In my syllabus, I briefly explain the presentation in the following way:

Presentations. With one classmate, each student will present a close reading. The presentation should be 15 minutes, beginning with an *interpretive* question that leads to an analysis of a passage from one work of literature. You’ll be expected to account for at least three textually based observations whose uses you will explicate, and for which you will be asked to give an overarching argumentative claim. We will spend our class time discussing your reading. See **Presentation Rubric** for more detailed information about the assignment.

This exercise is designed to distill the parts of a written assignment that I want students to pay attention to. By working in groups, students are held accountable to the guidelines. 15-minute time limit forces students to consolidate their thinking. The presentation purposefully asks them to consolidate and narrow down to the core parts of a growing argument. It helps them think about building an argument that revolves around the careful analysis of textual evidence. I try to get them to think in passages rather than in single quotations.

PRESENTATION RUBRIC

A typical presentation will be scored according to the following rubric out of a total of **32 points**. Please familiarize yourself with these categories. Once you have scheduled your presentation, come see me a week before you're scheduled to present. You can prepare for that meeting by deciding on a passage for close reading and explicating it beforehand.

TOPICAL QUESTION (6 pts)

Rated from 1 to 6. 6 reflects an insightful, relevant, and discussion-spurring question.

What themes, issues, or images interested you? How did those things lead you to your passage?

THESIS (10 pts)

Rated from 1-10. 10 reflects an effective thesis—one that states both an argument and its implications, and makes clear the outline of the presentation.

What is the specific claim of the presentation based on your analysis of the selected passage? Why is it important?

CLOSE READING (10 pts)

Rated from 1-10. 10 represents a clearly demonstrated explication of a passage.

FOCUS. Did the presentation focus on a manageable cluster of lines or a manageable passage?

PROBLEM. Did the passage contain an interesting problem?

FEATURES. Did the presentation address a substantive number of features in the passage or lines that led to a clear understanding of a problem/thesis? Do the features together help to build a case for a claim? Does the claim do more than decode the work's metaphors? How does this reading extend, transform, or counter some of the main preoccupations of the work in question?

INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS (6 pts)

Rated from 1-6. 6 reflects an insightful, relevant, and discussion-spurring question.

What new considerations arise from the presentation's argument and analysis? Does this presentation shed a new light on other passages in the text?

For presentations, students schedule themselves through the “Choice” function on Moodle.

Quick Instructions to set up Presentation Selection Module on Moodle using CHOICE:

1. Add an activity or resource
2. Select CHOICE
3. Allow choice to be updated? **YES**
4. Allow more than one choice to be selected? **NO**
5. Limit the number of responses allowed? **YES**
6. Option 1 (2, 3, ...) (Date of presentation, name of text, pages or chapters)
7. Limit 1 (2, 3, ...) (Type in the number of students per group.)
8. Publish results? ALWAYS show results to students.
9. Privacy of results? Publish full results, showing names and their choices.

First Essays and Revision Plans

Students receive their first essays back with full comments and no visible grade. They must use a Grading Rubric alongside paper comments to estimate their grade. In a post-essay conference, they receive their official grade and discuss a prepared revision plan.

Portfolios of writing

Students assemble their written work over the course of a semester. Toward the end of the term, they write reflections on their improvement, reflections on course content (depending on topic), and perhaps a précis for the final essay.

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

How do students in your discipline engage with textual evidence?

In the given examples, what are the four main things you would ask students to expand upon? How? What does a C-range or “average” writer do with this passage?

PART 3. STREAMLINING EVALUATION

Formatting Comments

Reduce your thinking time when grading. Students will become accustomed to the form as well.

1. **Reiterate** your understanding of their main claim.
2. Offer a word or two about **strengths**, however small they may be.
3. **Outline** things to improve: three of the top problems in the essay that affected the essay's persuasiveness. Bullet-point major tasks to be accomplished in revision or next essay.
4. **Acknowledge** their effort.

Some Categories at a Glance

It can be frustrating to deal with an essay that is either chaotic or whose author simply doesn't care. These essays take longer to work through because you have to figure out what your student is trying to do in order to understand why the essay isn't working. Some useful categories may help to streamline the grading process.

Topic vs. Claim

A general topic is different from a claim. Topics are broad while claims are specific. Does the essay begin with a topic that narrows down to a specific issue, ambiguity, debate, conflict? Why does claim matter? How does it impact our understanding of the work as a whole?

So What?

"So what?" is always a good question to ask in order to get students to think about the stakes of their work. Usually, such a statement comes at the end of the introduction paragraph, and if not there, students may eventually arrive at a "so what?" statement toward the end of the essay. But many don't arrive at that point of discovery, and it can sometimes be frustrating to read a paper that exists in a vacuum. Getting them to articulate "so what?" about their argument forces them to think sequentially and across the sweep of their observations.

Framework, Structure – thesis, outline, paragraph structure, main idea, topic sentence.

An effective way to get students to improve the structure of their essays is to insist on good topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph. Pointing out where topic sentences might be needed automatically gets them to consider argumentative order, since they're not always thinking about how the essay unfolds as a focused line of thought from start to finish.

Quality of Textual Analysis – summarizing or analyzing? Demonstrating/proving or assuming? Located *in* textual evidence or going by impressions?

The Essayist's Voice

Encouraging the essayist's voice means asking them to take ownership of their argument. They are responsible for explaining the claim, narrating the turns of their argument, using strong topical sentences for each paragraph, structuring the essay in an orderly sequence.

Advising Challenged Writers

Draw students back to key tasks of an essay. Discuss structure—draw on the scaffolding of the five-paragraph essay. Encourage students to go to the SAW Center for extra help and practice.

SOME KEYWORDS FOR QUICK COMMENTING

This is not an exhaustive or authoritative list, and some of the language in one column might apply to others as well.

C range

adequate
good
re-describes
summarizes
reports
brainstorms
capable

B range

solid / good
promising
potential
thoughtful
discovers
organizes
tidy / capable

A range

excellent
elegant
insightful
rich
investigates
synthesizes
thorough

WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

What are some successful assignments you've given students?

What would you do differently?

PART 4. RESOURCES AT MHC AND ONLINE

Some MHC Resources

The SAW Center

Amy Martin (amartin@), Director

Mark Shea (mshea@)

Using a SAW Mentor: SAW mentors are trained to assist students with essays, lab reports, presentations and speeches, senior theses, reflection responses, personal statements, analytical papers.

Research and Instructional Support (RIS) at LITS

Megan Brooks (mbrooks@), Director

Writing Resources at Other Colleges

Amherst College: Online Resources for Writers

www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters

Hamilton College: Best Practices in Writing Intensive Courses

www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/writing/faculty/best-practices-in-writing-intensive-courses

Middlebury College: Faculty Resources

www.middlebury.edu/academics/writing/teaching

Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric Resources

writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/teaching/guidelines

UMass Writing Center Resources

www.umass.edu/writingcenter/resources-writing-and-research

Resources for the Syllabus

OWL PURDUE ONLINE WRITING LAB

General Writing Resources

owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/

Research and Citation

owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/

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