Writing in the Core:
Graduate Students Discuss Best Practices with Undergrad Writing Assignments

E608 Integrating Writing into the Core, is a one-credit, five-week course that explores relevant theory, traditions, research, and practical applications of “best practices” for grading and responding to student writing.

The course includes discussion of first-year students’ writing and learning challenges as well as practical guidance on having an instructional impact as a GTA, especially through well selected and delivered comments in the margins and at the ends of student papers.

While there are many ways to integrate writing into the academic core, this issue will focus on staged assignments and the role of GTA feedback in staging. The graduate students enrolled in E608 believe staged assignments are useful and necessary, especially when applied to the education of undergrads.

When considering the usefulness of staged writing assignments, GTAs point out that it is vital to first understand staging choices in terms of components, including the many ways an assignment can be broken down and how each part is made necessary for assignment completion. Most importantly, it is important to consider how feedback can be provided at each stage and the different ways feedback can be integrated.

MOU: WRITING IN AUCC COURSES IN LIBERAL ARTS Adopted 2007

All AUCC courses in Categories 3B, C, D and E of the core must satisfy the following requirements regarding writing. These must be clearly stated on the syllabus for the course.

1. Goals for writing in AUCC courses:
There are two goals for writing assignments in AUCC courses:
1. To improve students' comprehension of course content and, (2) to improve students' proficiency in writing.

2. Writing requirements:
(1) At least 25 percent of the course grade must be based on written work that satisfies the following:
   a. At least one writing assignment must be an out-of-class piece of written work.
   b. In-class written work, such as on exams, must be in the form of essays.

   * Note: While this represents a minimum standard, to maximize the benefits to students of more writing opportunities to write and respond to feedback are recommended, such as:
   1. Several out-of-class writing assignments.
   2. One or more rewrites of an out-of-class writing assignment.

(2) Expectations of written work must be clearly stated on the syllabus. Among other things the instructor considers appropriate, those expectations should include students demonstrating:
   1. The ability to convey a theme or message in a written work.
   2. The ability to analyze critically and to synthesize the work of others.
   3. The ability to acquire and apply information from appropriate sources.
   4. Competence in standard written English

3. Plagiarism Statement*
   More writing in AUCC courses also brings the risk of increased incidents of plagiarism. It is strongly recommended that instructors have a statement in their syllabus that clearly states that plagiarism is not acceptable and is a form of academic dishonesty. An example is: Plagiarism is a form of academic dishonesty. As per university policy “Any student found responsible for having engaged in academic dishonesty will be subject to an academic penalty and/or the University disciplinary action.” See Section 1.6 of the General Catalog, where plagiarism is defined as follows:

   "Plagiarism includes the copying of language, structure, ideas, or thoughts of another, and representing them as one’s own without proper acknowledgement. Examples include a submission of purchased research papers as one’s own work; paraphrasing and/or quoting material with properly documenting the source.”

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2. Application
   • Apply knowledge of syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling in writing assignments.
   • Use appropriate vocabulary, formats, and documentation for different writing Tasks.

3. Analysis
   • Critique own and others’ work.

4. Synthesis
   • Integrate own ideas with those of others.

5. Communication
   • Convey a primary theme or message in a written text.
   • Use a variety of research tools, including current technological resources.

6. Evaluation
   • Clarify ideas and improve the quality of a written paper by using feedback.

*The above bullets represent the full spectrum of criteria that may define this competency. For the purposes of qualifying a state guaranteed general education course that requires this competency, the institution must demonstrate that the core substantively addresses most, not necessarily all, of the stated criteria.

Guiding Principle
Learning to write is a complex process that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance. While qualified writing professionals help students learn writing skills and knowledge of writing conventions, written communication competency is developed as students apply this knowledge across the curriculum.

Definition
Student demonstrates the ability to write clearly and concisely.

Criteria*

1. Information Acquisition
   • Find, select, and synthesize information from appropriate primary and secondary sources.

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Given all of this, when planning a timeline for staging an assignment, it is important to take into account the time students need to accomplish each task, the time needed to provide feedback, and the time needed for student integration of that feedback in the next stage. Clarity about formatting information, including length requirements, is also helpful at each stage.

GTAs have offered their ideas on staging David Scott, (Ecology) makes a claim about the benefits: “Without the opportunity to correct mistakes, re-examine weaknesses, and build on strengths, I argue that there is no past, no future, and no academic bridge—only a stagnant and unsatisfactory present. I think that any undergraduate writing assignment which does not allow for a draft and final stage misses the point of what young people are here to do—improve themselves.”

Jenny Deichman (History) adds, “Writing is a process and when a paper can be worked on over a period of time, with feedback that is effective, it is a powerful way in which to encourage understanding and progress for the student.”

Erik Scott (Political Science) elaborates by saying staged assignments “force students to come to terms with the process of writing. Too often, undergraduate students approach writing with minimal thought and preparation, opting for a stream of consciousness approach in which they compose their entire essay in one sitting.”

It was the general consensus that staged assignments may be especially beneficial to first year college students who are transitioning from high school academics or work situations to college.

According to Joe Rankin (History) students need a transition that allows them to grow. He says “To create a well written paper there are many steps that a student must take, and they are not always self-evident. By ‘staging’ the assignment, the work is broken down into much more manageable segments. Not only is this approach less intimidating, but it also provides several opportunities for constructive feedback. By structuring the assignment in such a way, the students and the teacher have several opportunities to discuss the writer’s strengths and shortcomings, which provides the writer with needed direction and confidence.”

Along with enabling students to understand the components of a staged assignment it is also important to construct an environment where meaningful feedback extends well past grammar correction.

Alexandra Duncan (English) points out that as faculty and GTAs work with their students through the revision process, they become coaches. Duncan describes staged assignments as a direct approach allowing “for more reflection, identification of places needing improvement, and revision. It gives the teacher more time to successfully "coach" the student through their comments and ultimately sets the student up for success.”

John Kochanczyk (History) adds, “It is much more beneficial for the students’ learning process if they receive feedback at varying stages in the development of their writing, rather than taking a shot in the dark for a single draft only assignment. If our goal is to help students become better writers and thinkers, then staged assignments serve as an extremely useful tool in this process. Staged assignments provide a very important bridge between the past and future for students’ learning. A student should become a better writer as they progress toward their academic future, and by requiring drafts and other assignments along the way, the learning process is facilitated.”

Janell Nelson (History) believes “the value of commenting and responding to student writing cannot be emphasized enough. Staged assignments provide multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback. I really appreciate the idea of asking students to show how they have incorporated the comments from previous stages into their final work. This creates an opportunity for students to bridge the gap between conceptual ideas about writing and owning those ideas in their own writing.”
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In terms of grading, Morgann Means (Political Science) says comments “should move students into an intellectual space that is not confined to the limited nature of a single grade, but rather illustrates the complexity of the paper as a whole.”

Elizabeth Plombon (Sociology) adds, “Throughout the different stages, students should be able to see how their writing has evolved to become more cohesive and all-encompassing on the subject matter. Students are not able to see this, much less produce any significant changes, if the only comments they are provided are grammatical errors and/or negative final assessments.”

Andrea Akers (Anthropology) points out that “the need to challenge students can be accomplished through commenting, especially in terms of challenging ideas and assumptions that students may make.”

Along with avoiding only grammatical corrections, Jaclyn Menendez (Psychology) says, “The progression of comments is crucial; we must know what to tackle first and how to approach it in an encouraging, applicable manner. In staged assignments, the entire purpose is to progressively refine your writing. This simply isn’t possible without guided and time-lined comments; the success or failure of a student’s performance is a direct reflection of the level of comments that are given along the way.

Chelsea Welker (Political Science) adds, “Students measure their own progress by those comments; they desperately desire to know where they stand in the classroom. Commenting should always be constructive, whether negative or positive.”

GTAs throughout the CLA and Psychology look forward to increased opportunities to have an instructional role through staged assignments. Staging helps undergraduates improve their writing and underscores the important role of GTA feedback!

Advice on Writing Assignment Design and Response from Anne Herrington, UMass-Amherst
A summary by Amber Reese
GTA Sociology

In the article, “Developing and Responding to Major Writing Projects,” Anne Herrington argues that teachers can encourage inquiry-based learning through conscientious development and in-process responses to student writing assignments. While Herrington recognizes the importance of short assignments, this article focuses on lengthier writing projects. As a teacher herself, Herrington directs this article towards other teachers and encourages them to develop writing activities that “foster engaged, inquiry-based learning” (Herrington, 1997). She recommends that feedback be offered at each of several steps or stages along the way of a writing project.

Herrington suggests the application of “three central principles” to develop writing projects that encourage engaged learning (1997). The first principle involves making writing projects that are “inquiry or issue-based” (Herrington, 1997). Thus, by inviting inquiry into writing, students experience more of a challenge by having to fully understand the material as well as their own inquiries into the subject. Rather than regurgitating information onto the paper, students are more aware of the purpose of the writing assignment which makes the process “more interesting and challenging for the student” (Herrington, 1997). She also proposes the strategy of having students write for a specific audience and purpose to further encourage them to build upon their understanding of the topic. The second principle Herrington offers is to “keep writing projects focused, but open enough for students to develop their own angle or interest” (1997). As a result, the purpose is to induce creative thinking by the student, either by choosing the subject itself or by having the choice of how to present the information to a specific audience. The third principle recommended by Herrington in developing writing assignments is to “offer guidance for going about the inquiry and writing” (1997). By giving students criteria in the assignment about the “intellectual demands of a project”, the teacher can offer guidance about the approach the student is using.

Herrington also argues the importance of “coaching and consultation throughout the project” and reports that, “the time between my initiating a writing project and students’ completing it is when I feel I can do my most fruitful teaching” (1997). She provides several suggestions to illustrate a more productive writing process that entails more opportunities for feedback and yet is less time consuming than traditional responding to a finished product. For example, creating a preliminary plan to help students decipher their goals and then responding with additional options for the student; progress memos that accompany drafts where students indicate the problems they faced so that peer reviews that are then critiqued the teacher, which helps to cut down on lengthy responses by the teacher. Students often appreciate such in-process commenting because the comments are still relevant and thus help to create a better final project. Regarding the final responses, Herrington suggests beginning with the students name to help focus on the person not the paper and to be responsive to the writer’s concerns that were expressed in the cover note or memo associated with final paper.

Herrington suggests that when we challenge and respect students in the writing process, they can learn to create more engaged, inquiry-based writing. Through carefully developed, staged writing assignments and conscientious responses throughout the writing process, students are able to develop their analytical writing skills rather fully.