Teaching Writing Better eBook

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Chapter 1

An Introduction: About This Work

Teaching Writing Will Increase Your Efficiency And Effectiveness

All disciplines include written work of some kind, but many classes in the disciplines do not include writing instruction. Techniques from Composition Studies can help teachers in all fields increase their efficiency and effectiveness and improve students' learning.

So I pulled together a collection of techniques and resources, intended for teachers in non-writing subjects across age levels, to teach writing in their classrooms. These are the tools I have found to be most effective in my high school and college classrooms, and you'll notice that I offer suggestions for you to choose the best activities for your classroom, student level, and curriculum.

Most importantly, I designed these activities to be practical and hands-on so you can integrate writing instruction into your classroom while minimizing your workload.

Teaching Writing Aids Students' Cyclical Growth

The quality of students' ideas often deepens before their writing skills do.

Imagine a student with third-grade-level thinking and third-grade-level writing; all is well. But when that student reaches fifth grade, reads and learns more, and gains sophistication, he still writes as a third grader. As the student's writing catches up, his thinking advances again, a process that continues during his education. Because schooling tends to focus on improving students' thinking, expressive desire often outpaces expressive ability.

Resolving one problem uncovers other, often more complex, problems.

In addition, solving one problem can uncover other problems. For instance, a student's grammatical issues might distract from content issues. When the student resolves her run-on sentences or poor punctuation, her weak thesis statements become clearer.

And, of course, grading is a blunt instrument: the student may have earned consistent C+ grades because of grammatical errors. Once those are resolved, you notice the essay's logical flaws, and the student earns B-'s or more C+'s. She might feel that resolving the grammatical errors

was a waste of time, and you might feel that you helped her reach one success only to face a more complex challenge.

It's our responsibility to teach our students that which seems obvious to us.

Finally, writing is sometimes considered a single skill, but it is actually a diverse set of skills joined for one purpose. As we know, a text message requires different skills from a research essay, and a research essay in psychology requires different skills from a history or biology research essay. These diverse skills aren't easily adapted across genres and disciplines.

So while it may seem clear to teachers that the apostrophe rules are static across disciplines but citation rules change, such nuances are far less clear to students, which means we need to tell them!

Writing requires reiteration and reframing at each stage of development.

Young writers constantly flex new muscles, grow beyond their previous capabilities, and must return to the basics as they grow. We easily understand that athletes and musicians, whether professional or amateur, have to cultivate foundational skills at each stage of growth. We should think about writers the same way. Even the most concrete writing skills do not naturally evolve with intellectual maturity and require not just reiteration but reframing at each stage of development.

Acknowledge your own writing struggles to help students achieve success.

Most instructors, even at high levels of professional achievement, feel some insecurity about their writing skills. Chances are, writing is hard for you because writing is hard. The more you acknowledge your writing struggles – the feelings of inferiority, the boredom, the sense of vulnerability, the distraction, the anxiety – the more effectively you can work with students. And the more you focus on your successes as a writer – the satisfaction, the excitement, the sense of accomplishment and of communicating something that matters – the better you will be at helping your students to achieve their own successes.

I'm usually writing something, and I share my struggles with students. I mention that I'm fighting my way through an article, that I'm unhappy because I just deleted four terrible pages, or that I'm laboring to organize my ideas. Sometimes I show them a draft so they can see my many marginal notes, cross-outs, arrows and asterisks.

You are in a position to offer your students helpful tools …and hope!

Show your students that writing is always hard, even for you, and that having a writing toolkit makes it more doable. It helps them see a path to success. And that, ultimately, is what we can offer our students: tools and hope.

We cannot offer ease, and we cannot make writing a one-step process. But we can use our own experiences -- as students, teachers, and writers -- to show students how to help themselves make writing more efficient, more communicative, and more satisfying.

Chapter 2

Three Minute Writing Exercises

Short, informal exercises to encourage creativity, increase student attentiveness, and assess understanding.

How It Works

A writing assignment needn't be long and unwieldy. Short, informal writing is a great teaching tool even without extensive (or any!) written feedback from you.

Three-minute writing can take the form of "bellringers" or "writing to learn" activities, and you can find lots of these online, create your own, or adapt the examples in this section to your needs.

Students can share Google Docs that include a full semester of three-minute writings with a date at the top of each addition. If your students don't have technology in the classroom, three-minute writings can be done by hand.

Why It Works

Increase Student Attentiveness

Students who know they'll need to write something about today's lesson pay attention more than those who figure they'll just study before the next assessment.

Plan Future Lessons

With information from your students' three-minute writings, you'll better gauge what interests or challenges students for further exploration.

Recognize Areas Of Confusion

Low-stakes writing, like quizzes but without the pressure, can help you and students recognize their areas of confusion prior to a unit-ending assessment.

Avoid Selective Participation

Some students don't feel comfortable participating in discussions while other students feel too comfortable doing so. Three-minute writing offers another modality for student participation so you can get to know all your students better.

Lessen Teacher Obligation

Our goal is to teach, not to grade. Having students write about their learning increases their learning, and consistent written responses from you aren't necessary.

Increase Writing Practice (Relatively) Painlessly

A couple of weekly three-minute writing pieces become pages of writing over the course of weeks, giving students practice with articulation, self-expression, and content understanding.

Encourage Experimentation And Creativity

Low-stakes writing allows students to take intellectual risks without worrying about grades.

Distribute Teaching And Learning Responsibility

By giving students agency in composition, we encourage them to be more active participants in their own learning.

Avoid A Big Classroom Commitment

Three-minute writing is such a small commitment. What's the worst that can happen? You get no useful information, or participation is lackluster. But you've only lost a few minutes, and you can try again next time with a different technique. Unlike a two-week project that goes wrong, you've lost almost nothing in experimenting with three-minute writing while you potentially have a lot to gain.

Even small experiments can offer myriad benefits, so start small and reevaluate as you become more comfortable with new approaches.

Three Minute Writing Exercise 1: Recap Writing

At The Beginning Of Class

Recap writing asks students at the beginning of a class period to write for three minutes on last night's reading or yesterday's discussion topic.

Your feedback can be limited to a quick "good, you've got it" or "not quite," or you can elect not to respond at all. A quick glance through students' three-minute recap writings can clarify whether

students are keeping up with the work or confused about particular ideas, and it keeps students attentive.

At The End Of Class

Ask students to summarize or analyze the day's lessons for three minutes at the end of a class period.

Questions for the end-of-class writing can include:
- *What was the most important thing you learned during today's session?*
- *What confused you about today's discussion?*
- *What point from today's discussion would you like to consider further?*
- *Which ideas did you find most and least interesting today? Why?*

These prompts also require no feedback unless you wish to respond to a particular comment, but they help you hear from everyone, determine which ideas need more explanation, and gauge students' interest. End-of-class recap writing also encourages students to reflect and pay attention, knowing they'll have to say something about the material.

Three Minute Writing Exercise 2: Regular Check-Ins

When students seem to drift off, pause and ask them to write for three minutes about what's been happening in the discussion. While some students will inevitably write, "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention," using this technique regularly can remind students to stay engaged.

Assess Issues With Focusing

If much of the class drifts off frequently, consider altering the method of content delivery to be more engaging or interactive, but if students seem only occasionally distracted, a pause and brief written check-in can refocus their attention. For those with daily excuses or apologies, a private conversation can help you offer those students advice for focusing.

Canvass The Class

Check-ins often highlight teachers' mistaken assumptions: I have learned that students who seemed attentive were lost and that those who seemed disengaged were following closely. Of course, I can always call on a student who's chatting or on his phone, but that can embarrass one individual without demonstrating whether everyone is fully present or almost no one is. Written check-ins enable you to canvass the class more comprehensively without public embarrassment.

Three Minute Writing Exercise 3: Questions and Comments

Save Class Time

When students ask a lot of questions about a particular topic, a quick three-minute writing can save class time. Ask students to write down their questions and, after class, you can easily glance through to get the gist – many of which are likely repeats – and address them in class the next day.

Consider A Shared Document

If you prefer, students can answer each other's questions or create a shared document as a class activity, which empowers them, aids knowledge retention, and is more efficient than answering each question yourself.

Why It Works

This activity allows each student to be heard and helps you identify students' confusion. By writing their questions, students may also better understand their own struggles and begin to see answers more clearly. You can conclude a conversation with three-minute writing to capture students' thoughts. A shared document enables students to see each other's comments, or they can simply share their comments with you.

The room will become quieter, but more students will be actively participating. You'll also have a written record of the conversation from which you can select relevant points for future discussions.

Three Minute Writing Exercise 4: Scavenger Hunt

Use Fun To Your Advantage

This three-minute writing begins with your listing several terms or concepts on the board at the beginning of each period. Ask students to listen for the terms and write a sentence about each as it arises during the period. Calling this activity a scavenger hunt makes it more fun, even for college-aged students!

Students who write a sentence about each item can earn a star or prize (depending on the age of your students) or can simply keep their "scavenger hunt" pages as study guides.

Reinforce Students' Learning

To reinforce students' learning, save two or three minutes at the end of class for students to review and revise their sentences, which they can share with you or not, depending on whether you want to use this activity to gauge their understanding.

Quick Caveat

This activity requires your knowing in advance what material you'll cover during the period, at least in broad terms, and flagging a few of those items in advance, but it engages students throughout the period.

Chapter 3:

Crafting Thoughtful Prompts

Tips and techniques for elevating your essay prompts

Sample Essay Assignments

[Sample 1](#)
[Sample 2](#)
[Sample 3](#)

Teacher Worksheet

[Prepare Your Prompt](#)

There Is No "One Size Fits All" Essay Prompt

You can adapt this advice to your needs and only include the sections that feel relevant. As you'll see from the samples below, I don't use every section for every prompt.

Consider Your Goals

Consider why you've chosen this assignment: is it specific to your discipline? Do you expect students to use a particular voice and, if so, what? Envision your ideal product and how students might misunderstand the assignment. Then, use the worksheet below to prioritize your goals, leading to a more effective prompt and greater success for your students.

Put Yourself In A Student's Shoes

Envision yourself as a student reading the prompt for the first time. What questions would you have? Would you know how to begin? What information would you help you achieve the desired outcome, especially if you have seldom written an essay in this field before?

Use Multiple Subheadings

- They address students' questions
- They provide information to consult later in the process
- They provide an opportunity for you to share your writing values.

Giving students time to read, understand, and even notate the prompt ensures clear expectations and the tools students need to meet them.

Benefits Of A Detailed Prompt

1. You waste less time answering students' clarifying questions. The time spent writing the prompt pays off in time saved on the back end.
2. Students submit essays more closely aligned with your expectations.
3. Students feel more committed to completing the work well when you put effort into the prompt. They see that the work you assign is crafted with them in mind.
4. Students are less likely to plagiarize. Research has shown that students plagiarize more on generic assignments than specific ones, so greater specificity leads to more student investment. If you anticipate their questions and offer effective advice, they are more likely to give it a try.

Sections of the Prompt

Adapt your prompts to include all sections, or pick and choose what's best for your students

Purpose: Articulate your intentions
Goals: Illuminate the assignment's goals
Process: Improve writing by separating its steps
Product: Articulate smaller details that students need
Expectations: Explain what you expect from students and what they can expect from you
Grading: Help students prioritize what really matters
FAQs: Clarify the assignment, and give students greater autonomy

Prompt Section 1: Purpose

Although the purpose may seem perfectly clear to you, students may not understand itt or interpret it as "busywork." By outlining the motivation for the assignment, students can orient their thinking towards its purpose.

Our Constitution Essay Example

For example, a common prompt for history classes is an argument about the ongoing relevance of the Constitution, and it usually looks like this:

> *"Compose an argumentative, thesis-driven essay about whether you believe the Constitution is still relevant today."*

Add A Purpose

> **Purpose:** to demonstrate your textual comprehension of the Constitution, your understanding of the Constitution as an historical document, your familiarity with 18th century politics and cultural mores, and your ability to apply that knowledge to your contemporary surroundings.

Or:

> **Purpose:** to highlight your understanding of the contemporary world and how an historical document fits into a modern context.

Why It Works

You help students divide the assignment into its component parts while identifying what matters most.

Prompt Section 2: Goals

A goals section may overlap with a purpose section, and you may choose to include only one or the other.

Goals And Purpose May Overlap

For instance, if your goals section reads almost identically to the purpose section, omit either the goals or purpose section:

- *to demonstrate your textual comprehension of the Constitution*
- *to show your understanding of the Constitution as an historical document*
- *to highlight your familiarity with 18th century politics and cultural mores*
- *to illustrate your ability to apply that knowledge to your contemporary surroundings*

Goals And Purpose May Differ

For instance:

- *to demonstrate your ability to write a cogent, well-developed and supported argument*
- *to illustrate your ability to balance historical knowledge with contemporary insights*
- *to integrate historical facts with your own opinions*

Prompt Section 3: Process

Giving students process advice can be incredibly helpful in avoiding writer's block, frustration, and lots of extra questions addressed to you.

Our Constitution Essay Process

1. *Begin by rereading the Constitution and notating it: mark each section that feels particularly relevant or irrelevant today, and include notes about your thinking.*
2. *Next, collate those sections of the document into a list so you can look at them together. Do the points you've identified seem, on the whole, more relevant or irrelevant to today's world?*
3. *List some specific situations in the current world in which the Constitutional points are either relevant or irrelevant.*
4. *Once you have this list and your notes, begin formulating a thesis statement that can encompass many (but not necessarily all) of your points. Check your argument: is it arguable? (Can someone potentially disagree?) Is it truthful? (Does it accurately articulate your feelings about the topic?) Is it supportable? (Can you identify examples, text, or logical points to bolster it?)*
5. *If the answer to all of these questions is "yes," begin writing the essay to prove the argument. If the answer to one or more question is "no," hone the argument until the answer to all three questions is "yes."*
6. *Next, begin to construct the body paragraphs.*
7. *After you've written the body of the essay, try writing the introduction and conclusion rather than beginning with them.*
8. *We'll talk together in class about how to revise the draft, but work on getting this structured first draft before worrying about revisions!*

This is merely one example of a process section. You might instead recommend free writing or referring to secondary sources or some other process. See the Process tab for even more ideas.

Combat Student Worries

Remember that students have far less experience constructing essays than you do and will likely feel overwhelmed. The more advice you offer, the better equipped they'll be to write. In addition, a process section expands their writing toolbox without using additional class time.

Offer Alternative Process Suggestions

If this is a class' first assignment, on the next assignment you can offer a different process suggestion and say, "If the first assignment's process worked well for you, use that process again! If it didn't, try this one instead." As the semester or year progresses, students will have more and more process tools from which to choose.

Prompt Section 4: Product

Product descriptions are easier to write than process steps, and I use them to cover smaller details. I like to separate product from process because each needs to be approached at different points: process at the outset and product mostly towards the end.

Two Sample "Product" Sections

Product Sample 1:
- *A three-to-four page double-spaced essay in Times New Roman 12-point font.*
- *The final draft should include page numbers, your name, and a substantive title relevant to the essay's content (so not "Essay #2" please!).*
- *A "List of Works" cited should be included at the end of the essay on a separate sheet of paper. It is not included in the page count.*

Product Sample 2:
- *An essay of approximately 2500 words, submitted through our course page before class on Monday, November 5.*
- *It should include our standard class heading and the self-reflective cover sheet, which is available on our course page.*
- *Font, margins, and spacing are up to you.*
- *Remember to include paragraph breaks: your essay should have an introduction and conclusion as well as separate body paragraphs for each supporting idea.*

Why It Works

Student writers tend to focus on product more than process, so articulating each separately, and emphasizing that process matters more, shows students that issues like font and length deserve only minimal attention. Page numbers and double spacing may matter to you, but not as much as argument and ideas!

Prompt Section 5: Expectations

Get Clear

Students often complain that they don't know what their teachers want, so I use this space to clarify my expectations.

Sample Expectation Sections

"I expect you to reread this assignment sheet before emailing me with questions.
Or

"I expect you to turn this assignment in on time. To ensure that you do so, please submit it at least one hour before class begins."

How To Craft Your Expectations Section

How have past students have not met your expectations? In particular, consider patterns of student behavior (rather than unusual circumstances or outliers), and try to anticipate those behaviors with this section.

I often like to include a "what you can expect from me" section here too, in which I delineate my expectations for myself and which can help to control student questions and uncertainty. That section might look like this:

Sample "What You Can Expect From Me" Section

- Responses to emailed questions within 24 hours
- Comments on drafts within two days
- Final drafts, with comments and grades, handed back within a week of the due date

Why It Works

Clarifying that the students and I both have responsibilities can make the process feel reciprocal, and it can help to avoid frustrating student questions. ("I sent you an email two hours ago but have not heard back yet. Please respond!")

Prompt Section 6: Grading

Help Students Prioritize

The grading section of an assignment prompt can be brief or detailed, but either approach helps students prioritize. A brief version lists the qualities you care most about.

Sample Grading Section (Brief)

"Grading for this assignment will be based primarily on the strength of your central argument, support for that argument, and clarity of expression."

Sample Grading Section With Tiers Of Importance (Detailed)

"The most important aspects of this essay are its thesis, integration of quotations, and organization. Secondarily, I will consider your introduction and conclusion, which should appropriately prepare readers for your argument and synthesize your ideas. Finally, poor

grammar and proofreading can lower your final grade, but strong grammar and proofreading cannot compensate for weak ideas."

Prompt Section 7: FAQs

Alleviate Student Anxiety

Addressing potential questions in a lighthearted and anticipatory manner can alleviate students' anxiety. As you write your FAQs, envision the kinds of questions they might ask.

Clarify The Assignment

Some FAQs are clarifying questions that may not have been addressed earlier in the assignment prompt, like "how many sources do I have to use?" or "can I use ideas we've already discussed in class?"

For certain questions, like "Should I cite my sources?" the answer in my class is "always," so I write that on every FAQ. For others, though, like "can I alter the parameters of the assignment in some way?" or "can I use first-person voice?" the answer differs depending on the assignment goals.

Give Students More Autonomy

Others may push the boundaries of the assignment, like "Is it okay if the essay is shorter than the minimum you listed here?" with a common follow up of:
- *"What if I can't think of anything else to say?"*
- *"Can I use text(s) other than the ones you've indicated here?"*
- *"Can I answer a different question than the one you've posed?"*

You may be fine with these alterations and or not; letting students know in writing without having to address each question individually gives the students greater autonomy over their choices and frees you from constant questioning.

Teach Writing Skills Without Devoting Class Time

Clarifying in the prompt itself that different kinds of writing call for different parameters implicitly teaches students writing skills without devoting much or any class time to them. My students have learned, over time, that some genres allow for first-person voice while others don't. They do not leave my class with the impression that literary writing must always be in the third person, but we only talk about this detail very briefly when we discuss formality and genre.

Inspire More Self-Awareness

Interestingly, after reading FAQs on several consecutive assignments, students become more self-aware about their questions. Occasionally, a student asks a question like one of these, and the others promptly say, "Go to the FAQs!" without my having to say anything.

Chapter 4:

Researched Writing

Teaching techniques to make researched writing less frustrating for you and your students.

Research Papers require teaching rather than mere assigning

Recognize Researched Writing As Enormously Complex

Research papers, despite being so common, are among the most difficult assignments.

We assign researched essays because we want students to realize that they are part of an ongoing intellectual conversation. However, in courses where no (or little) other writing takes place, a single large research paper can feel like an insurmountable task to students and, consequently, a very frustrating experience for teachers.

The skills required to successfully locate appropriate and relevant material, understand others' perspectives, join a conversation in progress, contribute meaningfully to that conversation, and attend to all of the other writing concerns necessary to essay writing (organization, argument, sentence-level construction, etc.) are enormously complex and require teaching rather than mere assigning.

Encourage Students To Practice With Smaller Researched Writing Assignments

We likely wouldn't ask students to start playing baseball by getting out in the field for the championship game or start playing piano on stage with the sheet music for a Beethoven sonata. Similarly, we need to teach students the rules of the essay game and give them the opportunity to practice discrete skills in isolation before combining them, especially when the stakes for the final product are high (such as counting for a significant portion of a course's final grade).

Instead of tackling all of these skills in a single assignment, break the conventional research paper down into smaller researched assignments that can help students scaffold and build their skills.

Avoid Dread And Anxiety - For Everyone Involved!

This division will almost certainly provide you with stronger essays. Consequently, it will help you to avoid the dread that comes with grading a massive and possibly poorly done assignment as well as addressing the many anxious questions that students will ask you as they work on it. Doing so will, of course, also lessen your students' anxiety as they focus on one or two new skills rather than multiple skills simultaneously.

Whether you choose to assign one large essay or smaller essays that focus on fewer skills, the ideas in this section can make researched writing a less frustrating experience for both you and your students.

Researched Writing Part 1: Understanding Interdisciplinary Conventions

Transferring "English Course" Skills To Other Subjects

Not all skills learned in an English course are transferable to other disciplines without additional instruction. In fact, you can probably readily identify writing skills unique to your discipline that cannot reasonably be taught in a class that focuses on literary interpretation.

This expectation of transference is especially prevalent in high schools, where literature and composition teaching are combined into a single course while other classes – biology or history – are expected to focus primarily on "content" and simply assign writing. Many universities have rethought that model, and most offer stand-alone composition courses, but these are still often -- but not always -- housed in English departments and taught by English faculty.

Step 1: Identify Common Errors In Your Discipline

Different disciplines have different expectations for writing, including elements like voice, citation style, organization, perspective, integration of research and more, which require your attention as an expert uniquely qualified to introduce students to those field-specific aspects of writing.

You can introduce ideas of disciplinary convention by recalling how students' researched essays have not met your expectations in the past:
- *Are they researching in the wrong places?*
- *Are they citing using a format other than the one your discipline prefers?*
- *Do they use active voice when passive is more appropriate, or vice versa?*
- *Are they writing in the first person when your discipline avoids that perspective?*

If you can identify a list of common discipline-specific errors, you can explain your expectations and the reasons underlying them.

Step 2: Help Students Avoid Common Errors

Once you've identified common errors, integrate brief lessons around them into your classes. Rather than waiting for a single large assignment, take three minutes at the beginning of a class period to have students rewrite a sentence you provide from first-person active voice to third-person passive, and repeat that activity, or a similar one, several times over the course of months.

Why It Works

Hearing about this expectation on multiple occasions, learning why it matters to the discipline, practicing it in small ways, and then being reminded of it on a writing prompt can lead students to meaningful stylistic change. You'll also save yourself and the student the frustration of an essay written in a way that's not appropriate to your discipline or expectations.

Grammatical correctness is generally the same across disciplines, but other writing problems like confusing phrasing or disorganization can grow from disciplinary misunderstandings. Clarity around your expectations, and especially how those expectations are connected to the conventions of your field, can help to avoid that pitfall.

Researched Writing Part 2: Locate Reliable Sources and Encourage Good Digital Citizenship

Teach Students To Find The Right Sources

Students are adept at finding information, but teachers frequently complain that they find the wrong information or are looking in the wrong places. Discussing your expectations not only for students' researched product but also their research process can help avoid their choosing inapt sources.

Sometimes instructors aim for this goal by listing source requirements, like, "You must include at least four sources, two of which come from peer-reviewed journals." Or "You may not use Wikipedia." Adding an explanation of "why" allows the research skills you're teaching to become transferable. If students are simply instructed to use a certain number or type of sources, they often assume that this is a teacher's individual quirk, not a thoughtful understanding of how research works.

Explain Why You've Established Specific Guidelines

Try to explain why you are establishing these guidelines:
- Why are peer-reviewed studies particularly important to your field?
- Why are they more reputable than other kinds of sources?
- What are their problems as well, and why do researchers in your field feel that the benefits outweigh the problems?

- Why do you feel that Wikipedia is not a sufficiently reputable source?
- If you discourage students from using online sources, why?
- Can you teach them to use internet sources more discriminatingly so that they can harness the power of this tremendous resource without misusing it?

Any time spent on these skills is actually time spent building students' subject-specific skills for the future. Demonstrating how researchers in your field do their work is a skill you are uniquely positioned to share. Any assumption that students should have learned these skills in a general composition or English course overlooks the reality that an instructor outside of your specialty is likely not qualified to offer the insights that you are.

Teach Your Students To Be Good Digital Citizens

Beyond guiding students towards or away from particular types of sources, researched writing is an excellent place to include information about digital citizenship, a term that is often understood as "protecting your privacy online" or "not posting inappropriate things online" but actually has a far broader meaning. Being a good digital citizen means understanding where sources originate and how to determine information's reliability. This is one reason I discourage a flat rejection of Wikipedia, which can be useful if students know how to read its bibliography and gauge its accuracy. Alan November has done excellent work teaching digital citizenship and has many online resources.

Students may not know about library network databases; my students are generally shocked to learn that they have free access to JSTOR or ProQuest and what those databases can do. If your institution does not subscribe, you can at least show students Google Scholar and its capabilities.

Equip Students To Research More Efficiently

A quick search game can make this learning fun and relevant.
1. Choose a topic relevant to your current work or assignment, and give students five minutes to find a reputable, trustworthy source.
2. After seeing what they've found, demonstrate a range of ways to refine their search by:
   - Using stronger search terms or boolean operators
   - Testing tools other than Google
   - Narrowing their searches to academic sites
   - Locating the original source instead of a re-reported site

Whys rather than rules will lead to transferrable skills and a greater sense of investment for students, who realize that they are learning how professionals in your field work rather than believing themselves to be held, arbitrarily, to a set of whims.

Researched Writing Part 3: Guide Students To Integrate Others' Ideas More Naturally

Start With A Strong Research Question

Once students have located their research, they may struggle to integrate it into their own writing. Should they locate their research and then write around it or formulate ideas and then use research to support them? A better option in most disciplines is to begin with a research question. Using research questions has been written about extensively, and you can use a text like David Jolliffe's excellent [Inquiry and Genre](#) or briefer resources like this [one-page guide](#) from George Mason University's writing center to learn more about how to employ research questions at the outset of the research process.

The research question offers a direction but not a conclusion, which allows research to be integrated most seamlessly and authentically. We all know of writers – perhaps even ourselves – who have used research selectively or with some bias. We wish for a particular outcome, so we choose quotations or data to support that outcome. But when we wish to teach students to engage meaningfully with the entirety of the research, having them choose evidence selectively to support a predetermined outcome can feel disingenuous. Similarly, developing an argument fully around their research without asking a question can prompt a simple compilation of others' ideas without the student's voice appearing at all.

Show Students That Their Ideas Are Vital To The Larger Conversation

It may be that students lack an argument of their own, so encouraging them with other techniques from the Process Steps can help them to situate themselves within a discourse. Reading others' ideas can also help students formulate opinions, but if they lack confidence in their ideas, research can become a crutch rather than a tool. Students may find themselves parroting others' opinions rather than taking a stand, so pushing students to think more deeply about the purpose of research can help them to see themselves as a necessary component of the conversation, not merely as a reporter of others' ideas.

"Why Include Another's Voice At All?"

One way to help students think about the integration of research is to ask them why they are including another's voice at all. I encourage you to push students towards a more specific definition of "support;" they should feel that they are building meaningfully on what others have said rather than simply including five sources because they are required to do so.

Point Your Students Toward The Argument-Based Reasons For Including Research

Chances are, across levels, that many students will believe they are only included sources to adhere to your rules, which is part of what makes the integration of sources so difficult; if they

do not understand the argument-based (rather than requirement-based) reasons for including others' ideas, that integration will likely feel random, disconnected from the rest of the text, or entirely tangential.

If students are aware of the rationale for including research and can reflect on how each source contributes to their purpose, as well as how they can build on the sources by using their own voices and ideas, you will find significant improvement in their integration of source material.

Taking a moment to return to purpose – even if it feels frustratingly time-consuming – will lead to far stronger work in the long run and a better experience reading and evaluating student essays.

Researched Writing Part 4: Citing Sources Correctly And Efficiently

Why Does Citation Matter?

For students unfamiliar with citation, begin with an explanation of why citing sources is necessary (and not merely by explaining that plagiarism is punishable: why does it matter beyond the punishment?).

Well-Cited Sources Strengthen Your Argument

Explain that citation shows one's engagement with others' ideas and places oneself within an ongoing conversation. Knowing the publication information of cited works can help readers understand an author's place in the conversation more completely. For example, I can explain to my students that, if I know they are responding to something recent from a prominent national newspaper, I may understand their argument differently than if they are responding to an obscure, decades-old belief. Students can learn that citing sources well will strengthen and justify their arguments.

How To Increase Students' Citation Accuracy

As with so many aspects of teaching, presenting this information as helpful to the student's efficacy rather than as an arbitrary rule or one that avoids "getting in trouble" makes students more aware of citation's communicative purpose. Five or ten minutes discussing the rules' rationale can benefit the accuracy of citation and students' belief in its import.

Specialized Citation Styles Necessitate Explanation

Of all the areas where specialized disciplinary knowledge matters, citation is probably the most central. Citation styles are so specialized that, if you feel strongly about students' citation format, you simply must spend time talking with them about it. Citation is hardly intuitive, and even very experienced scholarly writers still have to look up formats at times. With the explosion

of new source types, knowing the resources for learning about citation is far more important than knowing how to cite sources by heart.

Encourage Students To Outsource To Citation Software

Encouraging students to use citation software is a very good idea. Citation formatting is tedious but doesn't require much thought; it has myriad rules but generally lacks logic. (There is some logic, but it's limited to things like where the date of publication goes; whether items in a citation are separated by a semi-colon or a comma is fairly arbitrary.) Encouraging students to outsource this necessary but time-consuming work to online programs allows more time for them to locate, analyze, and integrate sources effectively.

Chapter 5:

Avoiding Plagiarism

Effective pedagogical techniques to motivate your students

Reframing The Challenge of Plagiarism

Avoiding plagiarism should be one aspect of your teaching but not your primary focus. While honor codes or pledges may be helpful, pedagogical techniques are even more effective!

Many wonderful articles exist on the topic of plagiarism avoidance, and I highly recommend [Rebecca Moore Howard's pieces](), especially as they reshape teachers' relationships with students. Keep in mind that "plagiarism" differs from patch writing (compiling multiple sources by misunderstanding research and citation) or shoddy citation, both of which are problematic but are not "cheating." Students who simply don't know how to integrate or cite sources correctly – even if you believe they should know – can be taught to improve in these areas rather than treated as though they are trying to game the system.

Why Teachers Should Avoid Plagiarism Software

Plagiarism software, in addition to its many pragmatic shortcomings (see [Susan "George" Schorn's experiments with Turnitin]() and other detection software for more on its false positives and inaccurate reports) and ethical violations ([see Morris and Stommel, among others, for more on this]()), establishes an antagonistic relationship between students and teachers that interferes with both learning and teaching. Motivating students as they write is far superior to catching them after the fact. Plagiarism software implies that you do not trust them and are working in opposition to them rather than joining them on the same team with shared goals.

Avoiding Plagiarism Tactic 1: Original Assignments To Avoid Plagiarism

One of the best ways to avoid student plagiarism is to assign unique topics that rely on the student's own voice and opinions and feel deeply integrated with the work of the class. As an added bonus, such assignments can lead to essays you're more excited to read and students are more excited to write.

Original Assignments At Their Best

"Refer to Points from Our Class Discussion…"

Consider the difference between "What were Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation?" which is easily found online and will result in similar essays from every student, and "How do Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation connect to one topic of last week's class discussion? Refer to specific points from our conversation in class to prove your argument." The latter topic requires some individual connection to the material and has the added benefit, if you share the prompt with students in advance, of making them more attentive to the class conversation and better note-takers. The latter topic similarly requires knowledge of the material you wish students to know, but, by adding the extra step, you will receive a broader range of responses and lessen students' opportunities to simply copy the answers from a website or book.

…Or "Choose one sentence…"

Alternatively, you could say, "Choose one sentence that you think best exemplifies Thomas Aquinas' opinions on revelation." Again, students must demonstrate their knowledge of the topic, but they do so within a choice-based system that gives them more agency over their work. That their choice matters makes them more likely to engage in the work. If you add, "Let's work in pairs for ten minutes to start choosing quotes," students leave class with something written already, easing the process without relying on outside material. That jumpstart helps all but the most hardened cheaters avoid plagiarism.

Learning From My Own Mistakes

Identifying Plagiarism In My Class

Despite my emphasis on original assignment writing, I sometimes get lazy and mess up. Recently, I caught three students plagiarizing towards the end of the year after having experienced zero instances of plagiarism during the rest of the year. Of course, I immediately realized that this happened because my assignment – "write a book review with one paragraph of summary and one paragraph of analysis" – was terrible.

Recognizing Why It Happened

For me, the importance of this minor unit was that students read the book. The writing was an afterthought simply to ensure that students completed the reading. Naturally, students rightly sensed my attitude towards the writing, and three of them simply copied the summary paragraphs from online sources. They may very well have read the book – their analysis paragraphs suggest that they did – but they intuited the "busywork" nature of the assignment and reacted accordingly.

Pivoting My Prompt

Of course, the majority of the class didn't plagiarize, and the students who did faced the school's plagiarism penalty. But I do believe that part of the onus lies on me: I used the writing assignment as a placeholder for more meaningful learning and unintentionally opened a door for students to plagiarize. Granted, three students chose to walk through that door, but I needn't have opened it in the first place. Since then, I have offered a better prompt, asking students to create — in writing or video form — an interview with a character from the book. What questions would they ask, and how do they imagine the character would answer? Students have not plagiarized that more imaginative assignment both because they feel motivated to write a piece that asks for more of themselves and because finding relevant online information for that unique prompt is much more difficult.

Avoiding Plagiarism Tactic 2: Non-Thesis-Driven Assignments

Assignments That Are Nearly Impossible To Plagiarize

Inspire Their Imagination

While most scholastic essays focus on argumentation, you might have students write a piece that does not require a traditional thesis and argumentation, which almost necessarily prevents plagiarism.

Example 1: For Literature Class

For example, in my literature classes, I love to have students write:
- *a "lost" scene of a play we're reading*
- *a "what happens next" piece hypothesizing about what happens to the characters after a novel or story ends*
- *a scene from a novel written from the perspective of a different character*

To add an analytical writing opportunity to such assignments, I ask students to write a paragraph or two about the creative work they've done:
- *What textual details prompted their piece?*
- *How do they justify their choices?*
- *How did they use diction and style to mimic the author's writing or diverge from it?*

This analytical work provides insight into students' thinking while assessing their understanding of the text.

Example 2: Interdisciplinary Applications

While these examples could feel specific to literature courses, they actually work well in most disciplines:

- ***What might a particular mathematician or scientist have been thinking or feeling as she made her discoveries?*** *Get inside her head, based on your learning in this class, and write her diary entries as she worked through her discovery. Alternatively, compose a letter to a fellow scientist describing her work and thought process.*
- ***Write a scene from history or politics or the arts from the perspective of one of its major players.*** *What might General Grant have been thinking during the Battle of Shiloh? How did he make his strategic decisions? Students can write a first-person narration from the perspective of any historical figure, drawing on their knowledge and/or research to interpret the character's motivations and actions.*
- *Every subject has the opportunity to envision a "what if?" scenario or embody a major character in writing. Students can write:*
    - ***An interview from the perspective of Freud or one of his patients***
    - ***A letter from Nelson Mandela to a member of his party, or an opponent***
    - ***A diary entry from Beethoven, a medieval peasant, or a student of Socrates***

How To Use Non-Thesis-Driven Assignments In Class

As with every assignment, think about your pedagogical goals and the skills, concepts, or knowledge you want students to demonstrate. Then use non-thesis-driven genres to have students show their work towards or mastery of those skills. Because these pieces are written in less formal voices and can be shorter, you need not devote as much time to them as you might to more formal, thesis-driven assignments, and therefore these can be used as fun (but still educational!) interludes that are nearly impossible to plagiarize.

Avoiding Plagiarism Tactic 3: Scaffolding Assignments With Outlines, Drafts, and/or Presentations

Require Evidence That Students Have Begun Working

Scaffolding assignments with any interim steps -- outlines, rough drafts, brief in-class presentations -- essentially ensures that students do not plagiarize. Requiring some evidence that students have begun working helps to prevent plagiarism on two levels:

1. It shows you the direction in which students are moving, so if their final products differ markedly from their earlier steps, you can ask what happened to effect that change.
2. A tremendous amount of student plagiarism grows from time pressure and anxiety around writing, so pushing students to begin drafting earlier in the process eliminates much of that last-minute panic that can lead to the "easy out" of plagiarism.

Jumpstart The Writing Process

Even some three-minute writing can jumpstart the process for students. Simply ask them to show you their steps as they go – a bullet-pointed list of ideas one day, a couple of paragraphs later in the week – to encourage them to keep up with the work, which makes integrity more

effective; buying or copying an essay and then having to write an outline and a free write to match is more work than just doing the work in the first place!

If you prepare students with some prewriting and thesis-development techniques, they will feel better prepared to complete work on their own, and if they've walked out of class with notes or ideas rather than facing the despair of the blank page, they are less likely to turn to desperate measures to fulfill their obligation.

Particularly if the topic grows organically from class discussions, finding an appropriate essay online or hiring someone to write one will be more difficult than writing it oneself.

Avoiding Plagiarism Tactic 4: Reflection Assignments

How Reflection Combats Plagiarism

Asking students to reflect on the stages of their process as they work can similarly combat plagiarism from two angles:
1. It encourages students to articulate what makes writing difficult for them and lets you know when they're struggling so you can help.
2. It requires a different kind of exposure than plagiarism does. Students who may not feel guilty about copying a generic essay will likely feel worse about completely fabricating a process or their own feelings and therefore hesitate to do so.

Why Reflection Works

Students Will Learn What Works For Them

Something as simple as asking, "What was especially difficult about writing this outline?" or "Which part of this draft are you most proud of?" can help students to notice what works well for them or what causes them to struggle. If you follow one of those questions by asking students how they can either replicate their positive feelings in future work or how they can avoid the struggle, they can try to use that reflection to transfer skills to future assignments.

Students Will See That You Care About Their Writing

Asking students to reflect also demonstrates that you really care about their writing. This might seem like a silly point, but, as Rebecca Moore Howard notes, assignments that feel like busywork or that strike students as generic increase the likelihood of plagiarism. If students feel that you care about what they have to say, they have a greater stake in their writing and are more likely to work at it.

Avoiding Plagiarism Tactic 5: Model And Articulate Expectations Around Plagiarism

Before we list rules, we should explain why we disapprove of plagiarism and also recognize the places in which it does happen, not just extreme cases like politicians or academics who face censure but in form letters, legalistic writing, and even in our teaching.

Modeling: Cite Your Sources Every Single Time

We can model our expectations by citing sources every single time we use them, including materials we quote or borrow for handouts, slide presentations, and assignment sheets. If we take ideas from colleagues or from textbooks, including syllabus language or writing prompts, we should cite them just as we expect students to do when they use others' ideas. That modeling demonstrates that we are serious about the value of citation and are not imposing a rule on students that we ourselves do not observe.

Expectations: Explain Your Specific Expectations For Source Use

Beyond modeling, we need to be clear about our expectations. A blanket honor code, or a line in a writing prompt like "Make sure to cite all your sources" or "Plagiarism will be taken seriously and lead to punishment" does not teach students what to do; it simply repeats something they already know but may not fully understand.

In the same way that students can often state "Apostrophes demonstrate possession" but have no idea how to apply that knowledge or even what it really means, students of any age and level can say "plagiarism is really bad" but cannot articulate or define plagiarism, at least in its nuances.

Students have almost certainly learned different things from different teachers about what constitutes plagiarism, and they know from practical experience that every instance of copying isn't treated identically. They see, for instance, that every prescription medicine insert includes almost identical language without citation and that certain information ("The United States has 50 states" or "Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president") came from a source but is generally not cited.

Clarifying Expectations Helps Students Meet Them

Take a few minutes, either in class or on your writing prompt, to explain your expectations for source use. This information can be part of your syllabus and then repeated or reviewed periodically, or it can be assignment-specific. The more clearly you articulate your expectations, the more helpful you are to your students. Undoubtedly, some students will try to break the rules, but your articulation can help to avoid claims of misunderstanding later in the process and,

importantly, help the majority of students who genuinely want to do the right thing but may feel unsure about what that is.

Specific Things To Consider When Discussing Plagiarism In Class

Some of the areas you can address when you discuss plagiarism or compose assignment prompts are:

- *What citation style is used in your field?*
- *What constitutes common knowledge in your field and therefore does not require citation?*
- *How much diction change allows an idea to be considered paraphrased and not require quotation marks?*
- *Does only specific language require citation or should ideas be cited as well?*
- *How much and specifically what kinds of outside help from friends, relatives, or tutors is permitted?*
- *What kinds of sources need to be cited: your class textbook? Lecture notes? Class discussions? Websites? Dictionaries?*
- *Can students use their own writing from previous pieces, including pieces they have already written for your course?*

Clarifying these expectations will help students to meet them. Even if academic integrity seems obvious to you, it's practically a guarantee that you and your colleagues do not perfectly align on every one of these points, so letting students know what's appropriate in your field and your class is information that only you can provide.

Chapter 6:

Giving Feedback

Right-sizing feedback saves you time and increases students' understanding

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Tools And Techniques For Streamlining Feedback

- Student-Created Rubrics
- Top 3 / Bottom 3
- Process Over Product
- "Content" and "Form"
- Self-Evaluations
- Locate The Errors, Hide The Corrections
- Year-Long Goals

Understanding Your Role In Responding To Student Writing

Responding to every aspect of a student's writing can be counterproductive, but teachers across fields still often feel compelled to respond comprehensively.

So what is the teacher's job in responding to student writing? Most often, teachers simply mark everything they see: in-text comments on grammar and diction, marginal compliments or critique, and a paragraph summarizing overall impressions.

The Most Popular Commenting Style Is Not The Most Effective

I recommend against this style of commenting, even though it is by far the most popular. First, it takes too much time, which makes you less likely to assign writing regularly. More importantly, much of your work is wasted because students cannot absorb so many comments and markings.

Certain students will read everything you've written, take it to heart, and attempt to apply it to the next assignment, but those students are not the majority, and even they may struggle with overwhelming feedback.

Be A Teacher, Not A Copy Editor

The first step in right-sizing your feedback is recognizing that you are a teacher, not a copy editor. When students see a fully edited essay, they also aren't left with anything to do: you've done it all for them. Your primary goal is to help your students grow, not to improve the essays themselves. The essay is merely a tool employed for student learning.

Save yourself time and trouble, and save your students from being overwhelmed, by using some of the techniques below to provide feedback students can actually use.

Prioritize and Minimize

Differentiate Writing Concerns

Higher order writing concerns should take priority: argument, ideas, meaning. Lower order concerns aid communication but do not form the basis of writing: grammar, spelling, diction. In the middle are issues like organization and sentence structure. Focus first on the highest order concerns and then move down the list.

Set Realistic Expectations

Editing while writing interrupts the writing process and may be a waste of time if students edit work they will eventually delete. Students should work on content and ideas before worrying about word choice or grammar. We may prioritize the right things, but our written comments may send a different message.

Ideally, students would write essays that are logical, content-filled, well-supported, clear, communicative, and error-free. But this expectation is unrealistic, especially if they challenge themselves on content.

Maximize Student Improvement

We can help students improve their overall writing by teaching transferable skills. Ironically, the final essay they turn in may be weaker since it does not benefit from detailed feedback. But if students learn to genuinely improve even one aspect of their writing, they have accomplished more than they achieve with one gorgeous essay that you helped them copy edit.

Prioritize Feedback

You can choose a single element on which to focus your comments. For example, I might announce to students that I will grade the entire essay but only comment on the quality of their argumentation. I focus on higher order concerns, but I might add one lower order concern into my comments or have the students complete a "locate the errors" activity. Doing so allows students to grow more in a single area by making your feedback more comprehensible.

Give Students Room To Grow

If commenting is easier for you, you're likely to assign more student writing, which is the single best thing you can do to improve students' writing. By teaching yourself to write less, students can write more.

Create Feedback Loops

Students Should Interact With Your Comments

While perhaps students should take the initiative to work through your comments independently, they may not know how or may feel overwhelmed by other obligations. Creating a feedback loop is essential for learning and to ensure that your time spent commenting is not wasted.

The Simplest Feedback Loop: Ask Students To Reply

The simplest feedback loop is one in which students simply reply to your comments. I tell students to respond to all of the suggestions and none of the praise. For example, if I wrote "Great point!" in the margins, I don't need the student to write "Thanks!" in response. But if I wrote, "How could you expand this point with a specific example?" I ask students to give me an example and explain why it reinforces his idea.

Ten Minute, In-Class Reflections

Even ten minutes spent reading and responding to comments ensures that students have reflected on your feedback, so I phrase many of my comments as questions.

You can also have them summarize your comments. Ask them, "What's the big takeaway?" A sentence or two of reflection can help students articulate goals:
- *"The big takeaway is that I have a lot of ideas but don't develop any of them quite enough."*
- *"The big takeaway is that I didn't really figure out my argument until the end. Next time, I'll write a draft sooner so I can figure out the argument sooner."*

Bonus! Enhance The Feedback Loop

To enhance the feedback loop, have students revisit these reflections before the next assignment so they are giving good advice to themselves, not just hearing good advice from you.

Each of the techniques below includes a feedback loop, so feel free to use those ideas or create your own.

Giving Feedback Activity 1: Employ Student-Created Rubrics

Have Students Create Their Own Rubrics

Many wonderful books and articles explain how to use rubrics, so I won't focus on those here. Rubrics can be time-savers, and schools like them because they create programmatic uniformity and efficiency. However, they also can feel impersonal and may not give students the information they need to improve.

I prefer to have students create their own rubrics. I do this in two ways, depending upon the class, the assignment, and the class time I am willing to use.

Option 1: Class-Created Rubric

We begin as a class by listing essay elements students feel are most important. Then we combine some elements into categories (argument and thesis, for example, are one category), eliminate repetitive or unnecessary elements, and assign percentages to the items. This work requires some cooperation and compromise, and we put items to a binding class vote. In about fifteen minutes, we create a rubric over which the students feel agency.

I tell them that I have veto power (so, for example, if they all decide that the essay should be graded entirely on spelling, I will veto that) but that they can determine what elements of the essay should be privileged. In general, their rubrics do not differ tremendously from ones that I would create, but their creation of the rubric has two distinct advantages:
1. **They are more familiar with it.**
2. **They feel connected to the grading of their essays.**

Option 2: Each Student Creates Their Own Rubric

A second option is to have each student create her own rubric, a blank version of which is submitted as the essay's cover page. I provide parameters: the rubric must include at least five elements; higher-order concerns like content must be weighed more than lower-order concerns like sentence structure; and argument must be among the elements. I sometimes ask that students include a few sentences explaining their rubric to show that they have thought about their choices.

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
● We don't use class time ● Students needn't agree with one another ● Students are invested in a rubric they created themselves	● You may have to help struggling students create the rubric ● You have to readjust yourself to each rubric ● You may worry that students privilege their strengths and devalue

	weaknesses, which can lead to higher grades, but I haven't found this to manifest in reality.

Mostly, the differences among student rubrics are minimal, but the payoff is well worth the small adjustments you must make as you comment on their work.

Why It Works

Students generally take the opportunity to create rubrics seriously because they are so seldom given agency in grading, and they genuinely appreciate the opportunity. Being part of rubric creation, whether individually or as a group, lessens their sense that grading is arbitrary.

Keep It Simple

A student-created rubric in my class might look more like this:
- Argument/thesis (25%)_____
- Support for argument (25%)_____
- Organization (20%)_____
- Introduction and conclusion (10%)_____
- Diction (10%)_____
- Grammar, spelling (10%)_____

If a class needs more direction, I might add adjectives:
- *"Clear, arguable, and supportable argument"*
- *"Specific and reputable support for argument"*
- *"Purposeful organization that uses topic sentences and transitions effectively"*

Don't Forget The Feedback Loop

Finally, add a feedback loop to rubric creation by having each student fill out the rubric as well. Comparing their rubrics with yours can help students pinpoint where their self-assessment differs from that of an outside reader.

Giving Feedback Activity 2: Top Three, Bottom Three

A Teacher's Compact List With Applicable Advice

A compact list can provide more applicable advice than a comprehensive one. My favorite lists include positive feedback and areas for improvement, and they are easily read and digested by students.

A teacher's Top Three, Bottom Three list at the end of an essay might look like this:

Top Three:	Bottom Three:
1. Strong central idea	1. Some organizational issues, especially in the third paragraph
2. Conclusion raises compelling new idea	2. Second paragraph needs more support
3. Correctly formatted citations	3. Many comma errors

Add A Feedback Loop For Further Impact

Students can respond to one, two or all three of the "Bottom Three" items by reworking a section of the essay or identifying ways to work on particular skills. You can respond with your own suggestions, and even that exchange will be less time consuming than comprehensive commenting.

Students are often pleased to have their strengths recognized and may wish to articulate pride in their own work:
- *"I really messed up my citations earlier this year, so I paid careful attention to them this time"*
- *"I was so excited to think of that connection in my conclusion. Glad you noticed!"*

For the next assignment, ask students to return to the Top Three, Bottom Three list from the previous essay and articulate how they worked to improve their Bottom Three list while maintaining the successes of their Top Three list.

Why It Works

Because Top Three, Bottom Three is not especially time consuming for teachers, students get their work back sooner, which can lead to better learning outcomes since they're more likely to remember what they were thinking and feeling as they wrote.

Ask Student To Create Their Own Top Three, Bottom Three

It is also possible, after they've seen this response technique, to ask students to create their own Top Three, Bottom Three. They might end up commenting not only on the product but also on their process. Such a student list might look like this:

Top Three:	Bottom Three:
1. I really like the topic I chose	1. I procrastinated getting started, which was stressful
2. The grammar is solid	2. The conclusion is very repetitive
3. I found a lot of supporting details	3. Some of the vocabulary feels basic

Why It Works

Similar to filling out a rubric, writing this list creates a space for meaningful conversation and increased student self-awareness.

Similarly, students might focus on details like vocabulary or grammar (as in the example above) when you want them more focused on big ideas; identifying that distinction can help students refocus on higher order concerns.

Giving Feedback Activity 3: The Content/Form Split

Well-Organized Comments Lead To Learning and Growth

Just as we can minimize comments, we can also organize them. An essay covered with comments can feel overwhelming, and students may not know where to begin. The overall impression of such an essay is "I'm terrible at so many things."

How It Works

Left Margin For Content, Right Margin For Form

One way to streamline your feedback is to employ the two margins of the essays for different purposes. This idea, shared with me by Dr. Jill Gladstein, who oversees the National Census of Writing, separates comments into content and form. The left margin can be used for substantive comments and the right margin for grammatical or diction comments. From there, you have several choices. For online grading, you can use the comments feature for substance and the "suggestions" feature for sentence-level work, or choose some other distinction depending on the program you use.

Add A Feedback Loop

Ask students to address the substantive comments and write questions about the grammatical or diction comments they don't understand. Then ask them to write about how they would change one or two of those substantive areas.

Why It Works

Even if you don't comment on or grade their responses, they'll have learned from doing the exercise.

Similar to the Top Three, Bottom Three list, this approach highlights digestible, usable collections of information to help students see patterns in their writing. Once they recognize those patterns, they're more likely to be able to change them.

Empower Students To Identify Their Own Writing Patterns

If you do all of the commenting, students may benefit very little despite your extensive work. If you do none of the commenting, students struggle to identify their strengths and weaknesses. But if you do some portion of the commenting, like an in-text content/form split, and then encourage them to summarize and analyze your feedback, your time actively informs their knowledge.

Giving Feedback Activity 4: Self-Evaluate

Bridge The Gap Between Your Understanding And Theirs

How **You** See Their Writing Versus How **They** See Their Writing

Asking students to fill out a self-evaluation form can clarify where their understanding of their writing differs from yours.

Sample Self-Evaluation Questions

You could ask students all of them, just one or two, or something in between:

1. *What is your thesis?*
2. *What do you like about this thesis?*
3. *Do you believe the thesis could be improved and, if so, how?*
4. *What are your main supporting points?*
5. *Do you believe that these points support the thesis sufficiently?*
6. *Do you have an interesting conclusion that does not merely restate the introduction or the body paragraphs? If so, what is it? If not, can you think of an idea now?*
7. *Have you read through your essay, preferably aloud, to identify sentence-level problems with phrasing, diction, or grammar? If so, what kinds of errors did you locate? What changes did you make?*
8. *Please copy one sentence from your essay that feels poorly phrased to you or that might benefit from rewriting. Can you rewrite it? If so, do. If not, can you explain what aspect(s) of the sentence you don't like?*
9. *Please write one sentence here that you think is especially strong or clear. What do you like about it?*
10. *Imagine you have a couple of extra days to work on your essay. What would you do with that time?*

You could ask hundreds of other questions on a self-evaluation, and I change mine regularly. I might ask them:
- *What prewriting process did you choose? Would you choose it again?*
- *Did you have anyone peer edit with you? Was it helpful? Why?*

- *More generally, are you pleased with the work? What pleases you about it?*
- *If you are dissatisfied with the work, what about it feels insufficient?*

The more specific their answers, the more helpful the self-evaluation.

The Key Question: "If You Had More Time…"

In each case, though, I include question #10 ("If you had more time to work on this essay, what would you do?") because it pushes students to think about their own space for improvement and prompts them, on future assignments, to realize that I will ask it again.

- *"I wish I had just one more day to work on my introduction"*
- *"I would have proofread more carefully"*
- *"I would play around more with the organization, which I know isn't right, but I ran out of time to fix it"*

Recalling their frustrations, they are more likely to address those issues next time.

Inviting Self-Reflection Means Inviting Altered Behavior

I often remind them that they can "create" extra days by starting to brainstorm or free-write shortly after receiving the assignment rather than postponing the early process stages. By the end of the year, multiple students answered that question by saying, "I don't need a couple of extra days," illustrating that the question served a dual purpose: allowing them to self-reflect on their process and using that self-reflection to alter behavior.

Surprise! Grant The Extra Time And Watch The Revelations Unfold

On occasion, I have said, "Now that you've answered this question, I'm actually giving you two more days to turn in the essay." Having students say what they'd do with more time and then giving them more time – followed, of course, by another reflection question to see how that extra time served them – teaches students about their writing process, time management, and pacing. You can only use this trick once or twice before they expect more time for every assignment, but, even used just once, that extra time can be revelatory: students recognize that they can shift their process to create extra time and consequently feel much better about the final product.

Giving Feedback Activity 5: Add A Feedback Loop

Once students have answered reflection questions, create a feedback loop. Students can compile answers over weeks or months and then review them to see how their answers have changed. If their answers haven't developed, they can adjust their practices or you can suggest new practices:

> *"I notice that you remarked on the weakness of your argument on three of the last four self-evaluations. Have you considered playing the So What? Game with me or one of your*

classmates? Have you tried adding a subordinate clause to your thesis idea? Please write back to let me know what techniques you're applying to improve in this area."

How It Works

Two Spaces Beneath Your Self-Evaluation Questions

Even a single self-evaluation can be very useful. I tell students that I will not read their self-evaluations until I have read and graded their essays because they worry that naming their weaknesses will draw my attention to them. After reading their work, I read their self-evaluations to see where we agree and disagree. The entirety of my comments might be written on the self-evaluation form. To do this, you can leave two spaces beneath each self-evaluation question, like this:

Do you believe your points sufficiently support your thesis?	
Student answer:	**Teacher answer:**

Or, as with a rubric, you can use an identical template to the student's that contains your answers.

Why It Works

Self-evaluation gives students a greater sense of agency; their writing is not just a mysterious thing they submit to receive feedback they couldn't possibly have anticipated. And that independent understanding – a recognition of their own ability to anticipate areas for improvement – helps them to feel their own power as writers.

Giving Feedback Activity 6: Locate The Errors

If you feel insufficiently prepared to help students with grammar, give yourself permission to focus on other areas. However, many teachers wish to focus on grammar, so here is a way to do so without editing.

The best practice involves pointing students in the right direction but not providing information for them. Ideally, you can give them less information as the year progresses, reflecting their growth.

3 Key Pieces Of Information We Provide When Correcting Errors

When we correct errors on student essays, we provide three pieces of information:
1. The location of the error
2. The type of error

3. How to fix the error

So, for example, if you place a comma where one is missing, you've let the student know where the comma was missing, the problem was a missing comma, and the solution is adding a comma. Occasionally, you may provide only two of those pieces of information. For example, if you write "run-on" in the margin of a sentence, you've identified the location and the problem but not shown students how to fix it. If you write "run-on" and also add a semicolon, you've provided all three pieces of information.

How It Works

Option 1: Omit Only The Correction (Easy)

The easiest and most straightforward aspect to omit is, of course, the correction itself, but keep in mind that if you identify both the location of the error and its type, you are making the job of correction potentially too easy. If your students are generally weak writers, you can begin by only omitting the correction itself. Aim to lessen the information you provide for students over time so they can become better equipped to locate, identify, and also correct their own errors.

Option 2: Use X's To Mark Error Locations, Not Error Types or Solutions (Moderate)

To eliminate the copy editing of students' work, try providing only one of the pieces of information above. If you want to comment on location but make students determine the type of error and its solution, put an X in the margin each time you see a surface-level error. Students' follow-up work requires identifying the errors and correcting them.

Add A Feedback Loop

Ideally, they will also explain the rationale for the change:
- *"I needed a comma there because I was separating two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction"*
- *"Two independent clauses can't be connected by the word 'however' without a semi-colon."*

If students struggle to find the error themselves, a partner can help. If lots of students struggle with the same error, I may pause and offer a brief explanation to the whole class.

Working To Improve Over Time

Students can count their X's and then aim for a lower number on the next essay. Something about reducing a quantifiable number feels both more achievable and more fun.

Option 3: Identify The Error Type, Not Location (Hard)

Identifying the type of error but not the location is harder, so I save this approach for later in the semester. At the bottom of the last page of the essay (or at the bottom of each page), create a tally list like this:

- **Commas:** IIIIII
- **Apostrophes:** II
- **Run-on sentences:** I
- **Typos:** III

Why It Works

It's not hard to keep this running tally as you read, and the student's job is then to review the essay (or page) and find as many of those errors as possible. The student may not find all of them, which is fine. If they find most – or any! – they are doing the hard work of asking questions – "Wait a minute; does a comma belong here or not?" – determining the answer, which can help them far more than your marking a comma ever could.

Experimentation Welcome!

If you need an interim step because a list of errors at the bottom of the page is too difficult, you can place a list at the end of each paragraph or focus on counting only a single type of error per essay. Be creative, keeping in mind that you should leave at least one, and preferably two, of the three aspects of error correction undone so that students can complete it themselves.

Option 4: Include Only The Number Of Errors (Very Hard)

The most difficult of these options, and the one that provides the least information short of providing none at all, is to simply include a number at the end of the essay. I only do this for my most advanced students who are up for a challenge, but it can be quite interesting for them to see simply a "12" at the end of an essay. Again, that notation concretizes the goal of "lower that number!"

Invite Students To Recognize Patterns

If you offer just a number, ask students to categorize their errors and begin to notice patterns. While occasional students will have errors in many aspects of their surface-level writing, most students follow specific patterns of error. Even within a larger rule like commas, an individual student's comma errors usually present a clear pattern, so encourage students to notice not merely that most of their errors are comma errors but, first, whether they overuse or underuse commas and, second, in which particular situations: compound sentences? appositives? introductory clauses?

Why It Works

The more they identify error patterns, the more likely they are to change them. If a student generally feels "I'm terrible at punctuation" but cannot articulate how, she is unlikely to break that pattern.

Work Toward Teaching Students Rather Than Correcting Them

Each of these techniques, tiered for different levels of students, works towards teaching students rather than correcting them, and while you may initially have to fight yourself to avoid copy editing, doing so will help students gain control of their writing. In this way, you become their guide and mentor but not their evaluator.

Giving Feedback Activity 7: Year Long Goals

Yet another way to encourage students to reflect on their own writing for improvement is to ask them to set their own short-term and long-term goals.

Where To Start

When I begin this activity, often on the first day of school, I ask students to list both process and product goals for themselves. I tell them to list tangible ways they want their written products to be better (stronger topic sentences or transitions, deeper development of ideas, clearer or more persuasive arguments) and ways they want to improve their writing processes (be more organized, procrastinate less, feel less stress, enjoy writing more, revise more substantially).

When they begin, most students write "grammar" as their product improvement even if they don't believe that their grammar is especially weak. It can be hard for students, regardless of age or level, to think about product concerns beyond surface correctness, so "grammar" is the go-to answer. Even when I encourage students to write anything but "grammar," they still focus on sentence-level concerns.

Moving Beyond Sentence-Level Concerns

Cultivate More Sophisticated Goals

But as the semester progresses, students' goal-writing shifts. For instance, one student wrote in September that her product goal was "making my sentences more clear and concise." In February, she wrote this in her goals journal:

> *"I want to try adding more complexity to my drafts. Sometimes, I end up with a draft that has the most analysis in the conclusion, so it would be helpful to integrate deeper analysis throughout instead of having to go back and add it."*

Reflecting regularly on her writing goals, together with refocused attention on substance, led to a much more sophisticated goal.

Get Clear On High-Level Goals To Work Toward

Another student began the year with these three goals:
1. Knowing what to write for conclusion paragraphs

2. Using better/different words in my writing. I often repeat the same words throughout an essay, so I think I need to build my vocabulary
3. Editing. I rarely edit after finishing my papers.

In April, he wrote this:

> "I'm so-so in terms of how I feel about my writing development this semester. On the one hand, I think I pick interesting theses for my assignments and support them well. Still, I feel like my writing is very unsophisticated in terms of structure. My essays always look relatively similar. (Intro with background and thesis, a few paragraphs with support, and a conclusion which brings the thesis a step further). I want to have the ability to restructure the essay in a less common (and frankly boring) way if it works better."

Although this student didn't feel great about his growth, his altered goals demonstrate a notable change. Two of his initial three goals were superficial (diction and editing), but these shifted during the year to structure and organization. Even if he didn't achieve them during his junior year of high school, he articulated them and can work on them in the future.

How It Works

This activity helps students to grow and to track their own growth in writing. You can enact it in several ways:

Option 1: In-Class Goals Journal

For five minutes during class, once every few weeks, ask students to add to their goals journals based on their most recent writing experience(s). The goals journal can be a physical notebook or an online form like a Google Doc that can be accessed from anywhere and therefore cannot be lost. You can look at and comment on their goals or not, or you can do so sometimes but not always.

Option 2: Homework Assignment

As a homework assignment or in class, students can write their current goals as well as the ways they've noticed their writing improve.

Option 3: Two Lists

You can begin the year by asking students to list aspects of their writing that they feel proud of as well as aspects they'd like to improve. Then periodically they can, on their own or with prompting from you, add to both of those lists. They should date their additions so they can see their own growth.

Why It Works

Even a few minutes of attention to year-long goals gives students greater agency over their own writing. While you might respond to their comments, a goals journal transfers classroom power by moving authority to the students themselves. Coupled with other activities in this section, students begin to recognize the choices they are capable of making as writers.

A final examination of their goals journals at the end of the year, as part of course evaluations or in preparation for the next year's learning, meaningfully concludes the process and provides students with a document that details their improvement and offers them a roadmap for future growth.

Chapter 7:

Understanding The Process

The 5-step process to crafting thoughtful, well-written essays.

Why The Process Helps

Your students may not know how to complete each step of the writing process, and they will almost always need practical techniques to guide them through.

After learning about these writing processes, your students will:
- Feel more accomplished and adept at communicating valuable ideas
- Pace themselves more effectively
- Become accustomed to writing in stages
- Approach writing with more knowledge and direction

By teaching the writing process, you will end up with essays you're happier to read!

How To Use It In Class

Feel free to include only brief pieces of the information below or engage with it more comprehensively. Every tool you provide is an investment in students' learning.

If you have limited time, focusing on the first three steps will yield the greatest benefits in the quality of essays' content.

Writing Process Step 1: Prewriting

Getting Ideas On The Page

Prewriting Activities:

- [Conversation](#)
- [Write and delete](#)
- [Choose the best](#)
- [Annotation activities](#)
- [Voice recognition software](#)

- [Handwriting experiments](#)

Why Prewriting Works

Minimize Student Struggles

Helping students begin to write can be so difficult. Almost nothing feels worse than staring at the blank page, except perhaps staring at the blank page with a looming deadline. Students' struggles to start writing usually take one of two forms: no ideas or too many ideas.

Students with no ideas tend to procrastinate, hoping that an idea will strike like magic. Many of these students talk about "being in a zone" or "feeling inspired." While those things are terrific if they happen, waiting for lightning bolts is not an effective writing technique. Getting words on a page with concrete prewriting tools -- even if those words are kind of a mess -- preempts the need for a lightning bolt moment.

Students with too many ideas, on the other hand, need tools for choosing among their ideas, gauging which ideas can lead to the most complete, thoughtful, insightful writing.

Revising And Editing Are Easier Than Creating

The premise of prewriting is that revising and editing are much easier than creating. Therefore, these prewriting techniques jumpstart creation with less pain and greater fluidity, leaving space for revision and editing later. These prewriting techniques isolate the first step and result in lots of writing that can be revised as well as sufficient time to engage in that process.

In order to choose the right technique for your students, experiment. Assign one technique for one prompt and a different technique later in the semester, and then have students reflect on what they prefer. Or, if your students are up for it, have them choose from the list themselves! The more tools they have, the more effective their writing process will be.

Prewriting Shortens The Writing Process

Prewriting, although it seems to lengthen the writing process by adding a step, counterintuitively shortens the writing process by making each step more effective. Any technique that allows students to skip the "staring at a blank page" step is a move in the right direction. Once students have words on a page, there is so much they can do, as you will see in the sections below. But getting ideas on the page first, and quickly, is the necessary groundwork for every meaningful step that follows.

Writing Process Step 2: Expanding

Develop Your Ideas And Add Deeper Meaning

Expanding Activities:

- [The Three-Point Test: Crafting The Thesis](#)
- [Expanding The Thesis With Subordinate Clauses](#)
- [Templates](#)
- [Asking Questions: Developing The Argument](#)
- [The "So What?" Game](#)
- [Opposition and Counterargument Activities](#)

Why Expanding Works

Focus Students On Content

We are all familiar with the writing that either repeats itself or has a few solid paragraphs followed by paragraphs full of fluff and nonsense. We have also seen students play with fonts and margins or write as verbosely as possible to meet a word limit. This section offers techniques for expanding ideas more meaningfully, but keep in mind that you will receive better writing from your students if you are not rigid about page length or word count. You can still help students reach your desired page length, but lessening the pressure on length will refocus students on content.

Equip Students With An Idea-Expanding Toolkit

The techniques in this section complement one another. A student might find using all of them too time consuming, but her goal isn't necessarily to choose a single one. Instead, she should possess a toolkit of idea-expanding techniques that she might apply to any piece of writing. There may be a learning curve in effectively applying these techniques, but the end results will be stronger, deeper, more efficient writing. Students will have a clearer sense of what they want to say and a better idea of how to express themselves while replacing unnecessary repetition with depth and development.

Save Yourself Time And Frustration

From the teacher's perspective, any time you devote to helping students develop their content is time you'll save later in trying to explain where the ideas fell short and frustration you'll avoid when you read their final drafts and find them shallow, underdeveloped, or insufficiently insightful. And, of course, you'll be giving them tools they can use in future thinking and writing as well.

Writing Process Step 3: Revising

The Bulk Of The Writing Work

Revising Activities:

Require little class time:
- Change media
- Be a reader, not a writer
- Move conclusion to introduction
- Rearrange within paragraphs

Require some class time:
- Reverse outline

Require more class time:
- Color-code
- Cut and restructure

Why Revising Works

Helps Students Clarify Illogical, Disorganized, or Underdeveloped Ideas

Encouraging students to "write ugly" in their early drafts requires that you then provide later-stage revision techniques, but while teachers may have a clear sense of what final-product writing should look like, explaining how to get there can be difficult. As you've likely experienced, telling students that something seems illogical, disorganized, or underdeveloped may correctly diagnose the problem, but students may not know how to act on those diagnoses, leading to frustration for both teacher and students.

Keeps Students Focused On Content and Substance

This section focuses on revision while the next sections emphasize proofreading and polishing. It's useful to clarify for students that these are fully separate writing steps and that revision is where most of their attention should lie. Focusing first on content and only later on style can improve writing efficiency since fixing phrasing that may be deleted because it doesn't fit into the argument is a waste of time.

When students are accustomed to focusing on minimum page length, the new mindset of aiming for the best rather than the longest essay requires rethinking how they spend their time. It's important to convince students, through encouragement and evidence, that their writing will be better and the writing process more effective if they lessen the time they put into first drafts and increase the time they put into revision.

How To Use These Revising Activities

The first four techniques below work very well in writing across disciplines and do not require much (or potentially any) class time. Those are therefore useful options if you want to help students with their revision but don't have a lot of time to spare.

The fifth technique, the after-the-fact or reverse outline, is also extremely effective across disciplines and skill levels but can require some foregrounding and instruction. Once you have shown students how to do it, however, they can use this technique independently without additional class time.

The same goes for the last two options, color coding and cutting, but they require even more initial class time.

How To Choose The Best Revision Activities For Your Class

Ask yourself how much time you are willing to devote to revision. If your class will include writing over the course of a semester or year, introducing these techniques early in the year can reap rewards later as students have tools on which they can draw for future assignments. If you're working on fewer writing assignments or have so much material to cover that you cannot devote much space to writing instruction, stick with the first four techniques or introduce the reverse outline and reiterate its benefits as the year progresses without providing in-class time for that work.

Writing Process Step 4: Proofreading

Identifying And Minimizing Surface Errors

Proofreading Activities:

- [Wait!](#)
- [Read through a card](#)
- [Read backwards](#)
- [Use varied media](#)
- [Mandates](#)
- [Targeted tasks](#)

Why Proofreading Works

Eliminates Surface Errors By Focusing On Content

Finding surface errors, as opposed to errors in logic or concept, can be among the more frustrating tasks for writers and their readers. And while avoiding surface errors is far less

important than having great ideas, such errors can have an outsize influence on readers' reactions.

You might be tempted to jump straight to this section before addressing other issues, but consider this: the clearer students' ideas are, the better their grammar is. So work on prewriting, argument development, and other substantive issues before focusing on surface errors. Not only will you offer students more important writing tools, but many of their surface errors will disappear as their content improves.

Allows Students To Establish Themselves As Serious Writers

When students ask why grammar matters, we might argue that errors lessen clarity, but that is seldom the case: comma errors only occasionally lead to confusion, apostrophe errors very seldom do, and most spelling mistakes are easily resolved in the reader's mind. So I avoid telling students that fixing grammar improves clarity because they can see quite easily that it's generally not true.

Instead, I use the analogy of an interview. Would a job candidate dressed in sweatpants and a ripped t-shirt be worse for the job than one in a suit? Occasionally students say, yes: "he's showing that he doesn't care." But others say no: "he'd have the same job skills and degrees and knowledge." I generally side with the latter students, but we all agree that sloppy dressing lessens his likelihood of being hired. An individual's qualifications are not shaped by dress, but the impression he makes can be.

Surface errors are the equivalent of wearing sweats to a job interview: they don't change the quality of your thinking, but they alter how you appear to others; your ideas are taken less seriously. So if our goal as writers is to communicate effectively, we have to acknowledge that readers can't access our ideas when they see us as unserious or unqualified, even if that impression is wrong.

Bolsters Confidence: Poor Proofreading Isn't Poor Writing

For students who struggle with grammar or spelling, this approach is somewhat freeing. They aren't surprised to hear that correctness matters, but they are encouraged to hear that I still think they're smart, qualified, and capable. They have likely been told in the past that they are "bad writers," so recognizing that surface errors are mostly dressing can bolster the confidence of students who have great things to say but haven't yet learned how to clean up their own work.

Creates Disruption

Once we've established that poor proofreading isn't the same as poor writing, we can work on techniques for catching as many errors as possible. Doing so requires disruption: students need new ways to see their own work because it has become so familiar that the errors blend right in. Sometimes getting feedback from a teacher creates that disruption. But, to save yourself the

work of identifying each error and, more importantly, to empower students to create that disruption themselves, try the following techniques.

Writing Process Step 5: Polishing

Elevating Your Writing

Polishing Activities:

- "To be" verb activities
- Two words for one
- Possessives
- Appositives
- Sentence combining

Why Polishing Works:

Gives Students More Agency As Writers

Polishing one's prose is, in some ways, the least important step of the writing process even though it significantly shapes readers' perceptions and students' senses of their own style. Students who learn polishing techniques generally become more attuned to their writing and feel more agency as writers: they begin to see how language works and that they can control it. I don't recommend giving polishing activities to weaker students or those who struggle with higher-order concerns like argument, support, and insight; students should work on those areas before worrying too much about polish and style.

Helps Stronger Students Really Hone Their Work

But stronger students frequently remark that they are given insufficient feedback; if their writing is already "A" writing, they tend to be told that it's great the way it is while knowing that they have room to improve. Those students, as well as students who have grown into more developed and thoughtful writers over the course of a semester or year, can be introduced to polishing techniques that will help them hone their work even when it is already "good enough" to earn an A.

Minimize Wordy Writing

Sometimes these activities can also be fun in class if you have the time. If you notice lots of wordy writing – some of which will be solved by deemphasizing the length of essays as a primary requirement, but some of which has become habitual to student writers – you can ask students to apply these techniques to increase the sophistication of their style without changing the meaning of their sentences.

Chapter 8:

Overcoming Barriers

Tools and techniques to overcome writer's block, diagnose common writing problems, and provide personalized solutions

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What Causes These Barriers?

So many factors can interfere with writing. Many are emotional and manifest as writer's block. Others grow from language-based learning disabilities. Still others are rooted in a misunderstanding of the writing process. To some degree, this entire website addresses writing challenges, but the issues detailed below can help you work with students, giving them tools and techniques to conquer the barriers that stand in the way of their successful writing.

Part 1: Overcoming Writer's Block

Common Causes of Writer's Block

"Writer's block" includes entangled practical factors (lack of clarity about what to say, insufficient skills) and emotional ones (grade anxiety, worry about seeming stupid or inarticulate).

"Writer's block" is also site specific. For instance, a student who believes that she is "bad at science" and "good at English" may struggle to write about chemistry but not about literature. Helping her work through her science insecurities can ease the writing process.

Lessen Writing-Related Fears

When students' anxieties prevent them from writing, lessening writing anxiety aids your subject-specific teaching. Students who are not paralyzed by writing-related fear produce better writing!

Writing is an emotional experience. It lays bare our abilities, our knowledge, and our voices. The easiest way to avoid the discomfort that accompanies such stark exposure is to avoid writing altogether. But you can help students face these emotions rather than avoid them.

Quickly Conquer The Blank Page

Prewriting and three-minute writings can help students because the initial steps of writing are the hardest, so conquering the blank page also reduces writer's block. Practical skills from the Expanding Ideas process step can help as well. The section below, however, addresses specific writer's block issues beyond the "getting started" and "expanding" phases of the process.

Solutions To Writer's Block:

- Turn Negative Self Talk Into Clarity
- Formulate Manageable Questions
- Embrace Ugly Writing
- Talk It Out
- Make It Fun

Writer's Block Solution 1: Turn Negative Self Talk Into Clarity

Students often say "I'm a terrible writer" or "Writing is my worst subject." Even if they don't believe in their own potential, avoiding self-directed insults is the first step in the process of improvement.

Help Students Locate Their Challenges

Simply banning negative self-talk is not helpful, though, as it merely buries those thoughts rather than eliminating them. Instead of blanket prohibitions, I ask students to begin by focusing their self-deprecating comments. What do they mean when they say they're bad at writing? They might mean that they find it difficult, and so I encourage them to say instead, "I find writing difficult." Over time, I ask them to hone that statement: "I find getting started difficult." "I find editing difficult."

Or they might say, "My writing isn't good," so I ask them to hone that statement: "My thesis statements lack arguments" or "My ideas are disorganized."

Employ Techniques To Overcome Challenges

Once students locate their challenges, they can explore solutions. If students note that getting started is difficult, then we can discuss techniques to overcome that particular difficulty: pre-writing conversation, avoiding deletion, handwriting, or timed free writing. If they struggle with organization, we can work on techniques to take a jumbled piece and rearrange its parts. They begin to see solvable problems and not a generically "bad writer."

Improve Students' Confidence

If students articulate several challenges, they can tackle one at a time, and you can note improvement to continue a cycle of positivity. Improving students' confidence, even for small changes, can refocus negative self-talk on growth rather than weakness.

Writer's Block Solution 2: Formulate Manageable Questions

Writing is about answering questions, but sometimes the single question posed feels too big, which can lead to writer's block. Ask students to formulate more localized questions to begin writing. Students feel more comfortable answering short-answer questions, so breaking down a longer prompt into shorter questions can help them begin writing with less pressure.

For instance, if your history essay prompt is "Compare the approaches of Marx and the Utopian Socialists to the problems presented by the Industrial Revolution," students can begin simply: What was the Industrial Revolution? What was Marx's approach? What was the Utopian Socialists' approach? Those three short answers, which don't require tremendous effort, eliminate the blank page and can prompt more interesting questions, leading to a more compelling argument: What shaped each side's thinking? Which argument is best? Why? Beginning with even basic knowledge in small, achievable chunks prepares students to expand and develop their ideas.

Writer's Block Solution 3: Embrace Ugly Writing

Practice Separating Composition and Editing

First draft writing often sounds terrible: basic, awkward, unclear, wordy. To avoid that ugly writing, students often edit and write simultaneously, working through each sentence as it is created. Students may also believe this process is efficient, combining steps now to avoid multiple steps later.

And yet composing and editing simultaneously is nearly impossible; these steps simply must be separated in order to be done well.

Writing As A Learning Process

The composition process is a learning process. Ideas develop as they are written; writing is not simply recording ideas that we already know. And if we interrupt our writing to "fix" it, we hijack the thinking process that allows composition to occur.

Avoiding deletion or rewriting during the composition stage leads to stronger, more complete expression. We can help students recognize the need for "ugly" writing – those early stages that feel like verbal garbage or, as [Anne Lamott](#) calls them, "shitty first drafts."

Remind students that everything can be fixed later – and more easily so – to encourage their experimentation.

Ugly First Drafts Are Necessary!

No single technique works for every writer, but this one is closer to universal than any other. Allowing oneself to compose without "fixing" the work really does help to overcome writer's

block, much of which emerges from feelings of insufficiency. When the writer realizes that her first draft isn't public and is merely a necessary, ugly step on the way to polished writing, the process can proceed without the paralysis that accompanies self-recrimination.

Writer's Block Solution 4: Talk It Out

Encourage students to communicate their ideas without worrying about writing. Conversations demystify the process by reminding students that communication, not writing, is the primary goal. Ask students how they would discuss the topic with a friend to lessen the pressure; writing feels more permanent, and scarier, than speech.

Invite A Conversation, Then Write Down Their Ideas

Ask the student to envision a friendly audience: a close friend or non-judgmental family member. Imagine that person saying, "Oh, you're writing an essay? Cool, what's it about?" How would the student respond? Even if she's not sure, ask her to explain the assignment or its underlying concepts. Draw her out with friendly, opinion-based questions: "Did anyone say anything interesting about that in class? What do you think about it? Did you like that text? Why?" When she starts to talk substantively, write it down.

Work Together To Identify A Clear Direction

After ten minutes, give or email her your notes. Remind her that the ideas were hers and you simply transcribed them. If necessary, having a conversation about the notes can identify the beginnings of an argument. If she still can't proceed, help her add "why" and "so what" questions to the transcription, asking where she can expand and what evidence she needs. For some students, transcription alone will jumpstart the process; others need more direction.

Make The Most Of Office Hours

Although transcribing can be time consuming, if you are already holding office hours, notating a conversation can be far more effective than a conversation without notes. Students may gain clarity during a conversation, but if they leave your office with nothing in writing, they may find themselves stuck again. Written documentation likely means fewer meetings and less intervention later.

Writer's Block Solution 5: Make It Fun

Invite Students To Envision A Scenario

A question like "What plants are most important to the New York State ecosystem and why?" is fine but unlikely to spark students' excitement. Rephrasing the question to ask, "If you were stuck on an unplanted island with New York State's climate, what four species would you bring with you to create the best ecosystem, and why?" provides a more exciting project. Although they ask for the same knowledge, envisioning a scenario lessens the barriers to writing. With a little practice, making assignments more fun can be done in any subject area.

Invite Students To See Themselves In The Prompt

Instead of "Compare and contrast the approaches of Marx and the Utopian Socialists..." ask, "If you were living in the time of the Industrial Revolution, would you follow Marx or the Utopian Socialists?" These are hardly different, but the latter allows students to see themselves as part of the question rather than as mere reporters. Personalizing prompts makes writing more fun.

Spice Up The Prompt

Writing doesn't have to be a drag, for students to write or for you to read. List the knowledge and skills you want students to demonstrate, and then spice up prompts aiming for the same goals. The more fun students are having, the more likely they are to want to write; the more they want to write, the less writer's block they will face.

Part 2: Diagnosing The Problems Within The Writing

Become A Writing Diagnostician

We may see that something is awkward or unclear, but we can't quite articulate the problem, so we might write "awkward" or tell students to work on clarity. We know, though, that such advice is unlikely to effect much change.

Becoming a writing diagnostician means recognizing and articulating patterns. It means stepping back from the sense that "this writing is so bad" and discerning why it feels wrong. Remember that one aspect of writing can improve as another backslides; one area's improvement can highlight problems you hadn't even noticed before.

Step 1: "Is this problem product- or process-based?"

On the surface, every writing issue seems to be an issue of product. But, in fact, most writing issues are solved with process solutions. Ask students to describe their process: when did they begin writing? What steps did they take?

Step 2: Figure out what **not** to comment on

You don't need to note that a five-page essay is riddled with surface errors or disorganized if you learn that the student wrote the entire thing in one six-hour stretch on a Sunday afternoon. So first figure out what not to comment on. I have often said to students, "We can discuss the writing in this essay, but first we should improve your process."

Step 3: Encourage a more effective process

Instead of "Next time, work on organization," I'll say, "The next writing assignment is due on March 12. I'm giving you the prompt on March 5. On what date will you free write or outline?" Wecan't diagnose product until we see what a student can write using a more effective process.

I'll still grade the essay, but the comments will focus on process because that's where the issues lie.

Focus Feedback On The Most Foundational Aspects of Students' Writing

You are not abdicating your responsibility if you neglect to comment on one aspect of a student's writing while focusing on a more foundational aspect. Once you have determined whether process or product is the issue, you can identify patterns and offer solutions..

Providing Concrete Solutions

The writing diagnostician, much like the physician who can see that a baby's crying is reflux rather than fussiness, is able to provide more meaningful, concrete solutions. You can provide that insight for your students by noticing patterns and asking probing questions to uncover what underlies those patterns.

Writing Problems, Symptoms, and Solutions

Common Process Problems

+ *Trying to write too much too close to the deadline*

   The Symptoms:
   - Expressions of nervousness or uncertainty about what to write
   - Underdeveloped ideas
   - Surface-level sloppiness
   - Repetition
   - A sense, as a reader, of being rushed through the ideas
   - Wordiness/ filling space meaninglessly

   The Solutions:
   - More low-pressure free writing
   - Writing by hand
   - Discussion or So What game
   - Interim deadlines
   - Greater familiarity with a range of pre-writing techniques
   - Dictation in early stages of brainstorming

+ *Fear of the blank page*

   The Symptoms:
   - Not opening the computer or notebook to begin writing
   - Saying things like, "I just need to think a little more" or "I'm going to find some more sources first"
   - Crying
   - Expressing a helpless feeling

   The Solutions:

- Conversation before writing
- Having someone else take notes on the conversation so the page isn't blank
- Writing by hand and transcribing to screen

+ *Trying to compose and edit simultaneously*

The Symptoms:
- Inability to finish work on time
- A feeling of being "stuck" or "blocked"
- Disliking the "sound" of one's writing
- Precisely written but very short drafts
- Deleting sentences early in the writing process

The Solutions:
- Writing in multiple stages
- "Writing ugly" at first
- Writing without deleting and without looking back at the draft
- Using "placeholder" words rather than trying to find the perfect word in early drafts

+ *Not engaging in substantive revision*

The Symptoms:
- Handing in a first draft as a final draft
- Long-winded or diffuse drafts
- Tangents
- A final argument that differs from the argument stated at the outset

The Solutions:
- Time management techniques to finish draft earlier
- Fast, messy early draft writing
- Printing out draft
- Practicing revision arts and crafts

+ *Feeling insufficient/ having imposter syndrome*

The Symptoms:
- Inability to get started
- Expressing self-hatred or disgust with one's writing
- Repeatedly deleting everything and starting again
- Changing topics frequently with the hope that a new topic will be better

The Solutions:
- Recognizing that most or all writers feel insufficient much of the time
- Explaining that the reader is genuinely interested in the student's ideas and that they don't need to pretend to be anyone they are not
- Being locked into a topic at a certain point and not permitted to switch

Common Product Problems

+ *Poor general grammar*

The Symptoms:
- Errors across a range of issues (punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, etc.)

The Solutions:
- Lack of clarity on the ideas level. Go back to brainstorming before worrying about proofreading! If the ideas are clear, though, try to:
- Check on process: is the student leaving time for proofreading steps?
- If yes, try new or varied proofreading techniques

+ *Poor grammar following a limited pattern*

The Symptoms:
- Errors that fall into a particular category or more than one category (consistent run-on sentences or missing apostrophes with general grammatical correctness otherwise)

The Solutions:
- Grammar mandates
- Specific rule review
- Follow usage rather than grammar guidelines in those limited areas

+ *Disorganization*

The Symptoms:
- Repetition
- Multiple ideas in a single paragraph
- Tangents or meandering
- Disconnection among or within paragraphs

The Solutions:
- Check on process: is the student trying to write straight through a single draft? Is so, recommend multiple, discrete steps
- Revision arts and crafts
- Pre-written outline that stays beside student during writing process
- Reverse outline
- Expand transitions from one-word to phrase-long

+ *Poor support for argument*

The Symptoms:
- Assertions without proof
- Repetition of central idea that doesn't go further

The Solutions:
- Read like a reader
- Engage in imaginary or real debate on issue
- Envision a critic's response and address it in writing

- Feel genuine interest in and passion for topic (or choose a new topic)
+ *Weak or unsupportable argument*
  The Symptoms:
  - Argument is insufficiently bold and therefore does not require support
  - Argument is too bold and therefore lacks support
  The Solutions:
  - "Three points" thesis-writing technique
  - Read like a reader
  - Hone thesis using subordinate clauses or through discussion and debate

Part 3: Helping Students with Learning Disabilities

Approach Each Writer As Having Some "Learning Difference"

In keeping with national trends, you may find more and more students with diagnosed learning disabilities. But writers have such a huge range of learning differences, even those without diagnosed disabilities, that we should approach each writer as having some "learning difference."

Ask Students What They Need…

Students are generally aware of their own needs as writers. Asking all students some diagnostic questions on the first day of class allows them to share their learning profiles with you. My first day questionnaire includes questions like these, but you can adapt them to your discipline, level, and course:

- *Describe yourself as a student generally.*
- *Describe yourself as a student of English.*
- *What books have you enjoyed reading (either for a class or on your own)?*
- *What do you like to do with your free time?*
- *What is your relationship to technology in the classroom? Does having a computer help you stay focused? Does it distract you? Do you prefer to take notes by hand?*
- *Do you prefer to participate in class discussions or listen? How do you feel generally about being in class?*
- *What are your writing goals for yourself this year?*
- *What are your goals in the classroom?*
- *Do you face any difficulties with reading or writing? What are they?*
- *Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your or your learning style?*

…Then Listen To Their Needs

That survey takes students ten or fifteen minutes after the first day of class, when they have minimal homework, and becomes increasingly helpful as the year progresses. When I have questions about a student's writing or wonder about his classroom manner, I can return to the

surveys to learn more about how he sees himself. So the primary practical tip for working with students who have any sort of special needs is: ask them what they need. Then listen.

Determine Practical Needs That You Can Meet

Step 1: Remember Your Course Goals

If students struggle to articulate what they need, you can help them determine what practical needs you can meet.

Step 2: Assess If Your Goals Can Be Met With A Reasonable Accommodation

For instance, I expect my students to read *The Great Gatsby*, but I may have a student for whom an audiobook is the best way to comprehend the text. Rather than demand that she force her way through the written text, I recall my goals. Is "reading words on a page" among my goals? In my case, no. My goals include nuanced literary interpretation, appreciating the aesthetics of Fitzgerald's language, character analysis, and placing the text in historical context. Each of those goals can be met by listening to an audiobook.

If one of my goals were, for some reason, "reading words on a page," I would still likely allow a student who cannot comprehend words on a page to listen to the audiobook because, without that tool, she cannot accomplish other, more important goals.

Similarly, if a student needs dictation software or additional scaffolding – interim steps built into the process – I would not hesitate to provide those opportunities. Many different processes lead students to the same content and skills goals, so I would permit processes that ease students' access to course goals.

Step 3: Recognize Opportunities To Nurture Students' Independent Skills

In fact, if students can use my classroom as an opportunity to grow their independent skills, that is an excellent outcome. Thus, I might provide scaffolded steps for a student early in the year, with interim deadlines. Then I might ask her to create similar steps for herself on the second essay, which I would check for completion. On the third essay, I might ask her to create the steps and meet them, but I would only check in with her once. Ideally, by the end of the year, she will create and check interim steps for herself. She may never become a writer who can work without interim steps, but, if she can scaffold her own work, she never needs to write without those steps.

Personalizing And Collaborating

Teaching students well means, to some degree, personalizing their education and partnering with them to achieve learning goals.

Focus On Uniformity Of Product, Not Uniformity Of Process

Students need not have a uniform process. Not every student will thrive writing an outline. But outlining and producing good writing need not coexist. If a student can achieve the type of final essay for which you aim without outlining, or if outlining proves ineffective for a certain student, help that student to figure out a writing process that's better for him.

Some of the skills discussed on this website – reading using a card with a slit cut in it, color coding, having a discussion about a topic before beginning to write – are especially useful for students with particular learning needs. But those techniques also work well for students without diagnosed learning needs, so use them for whichever students need them.

If students with diagnosed disabilities need more time, I recommend giving it to them – within parameters that you can set together – unless there's a specific reason that extra time will hurt their learning. While extra time on out-of-class assignments isn't generally required by law, you can nonetheless provide the circumstances that allow optimal learning to take place.

Needs And Accommodations

Accommodations can take many forms. Here are the accommodations I find most helpful, which are not restricted to students with diagnosed disabilities.

+ Trouble reading on the page

   Accommodations:
   - Audiobooks
   - Ruler for reading
   - Index card with slit

+ Trouble with surface errors

   Accommodations:
   - Creative proofreading techniques
   - Allowing for certain kinds of outside help with issues like spelling

+ Trouble with note-taking by hand or handwriting

   Accommodations:
   - Allow technology for certain students even if technology is not generally permitted
   - Permit technology for all and find ways to avoid distraction (internet blockers, screens flat on desks, screen checks)

+ Trouble focusing in class

   Accommodations:
   - Fidget toys, silly putty, magnets, or paper clips
   - Chewing gum or snacks
   - Coloring books
   - Online coloring or doodling apps
   - Standing or pacing in the back of the room

+ Trouble getting started

Accommodations:
- Dictation and transcription
- Conversations or So What? game
- Sitting in your office to free write
- Sharing an assignment individually in advance of sharing it with the class

+ Slow processing or slow writing

Accommodations:
- Extra time to read with established interim deadlines
- Extra time to write with established interim deadlines
- Avoid in-class timed writing assignments

+ Trouble organizing thoughts

Accommodations:
- Work on an outline together
- Work on color coding together
- Cut up student writing and ask student to reassemble in new order
- Review and comment on bullet point list

+ Paralyzing writing anxiety

Accommodations:
- Omit grades on individual essays and only assign semester or portfolio grades
- Allow for additional drafts or revisions
- Sit with students as they write to offer words of encouragement
- Provide frequent check-ins without judgment or criticism

Chapter 9

Additional Readings

There are many wonderful studies that underlie this website and are well worth reading if you want to learn more.

My ideas have been shaped by the work of Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, whose Naming What We Know demonstrates that students need to feel that their writing has a purpose; by the work of Doug Downs, who argues for the centrality of students' self-reflective writing; as well as by Peter Elbow, a foundational figure in the field. If you wish to pursue ideas in Composition Studies in more detail, a great place to start is CompPile, an open-source online resource.

To learn more about why students should write and how they can learn, retain, and apply more information through writing, I'd recommend reading the following:

- John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*
- Robert Parker and Vera Goodkin's *The Consequences of Writing*
- Toby Fulweiler and Art Young's *Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice*
- John Mayer, Nancy Lester, and Gordon Pradl's classic *Learning to Write/ Writing to Learn*