



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.