



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.