(Some) Best Practices for Improving Student Writing

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What do you struggle with in teaching writing?

- Think of an assignment that you teach and describe your teaching challenges and/or student challenges with it.
Why don’t students reach our ideals?

John Warner says,

• Writing is hard.

• Writing is a skill developed through deliberate practice that takes time and in reality never reaches an end point.

• We often overestimate our own proficiency at writing, particularly in hindsight.
Common student challenges

• Not enough time to practice
• Unclear role
• Unclear audience
• Unclear purpose
• Lack of insider status
• “Universal standards” are not universal
• Cognitive growth or confusion can manifest in lack of clarity and technical mistakes
Ways to Mitigate Challenges

• Assignment Design
• Active Learning Strategies
• Commenting Strategies
Assignment Design

• Genre-based or rhetorically-based
  o Policy brief, a memo, a lab report, a research paper
  o Audience, purpose, and role
• Writing to learn or demonstrating mastery
  o Is the point for students to explore a topic in writing, to write their way through a problem?
  o Or to show that they know how to write like a ____ talking to other ____.s?
Assignment design

• Frame assignment as a Task as an Interesting Problem (TIP)

• Give each assignment a RAFT:
  o Role for the writer
  o Audience
  o Format/genre
  o Task

(John Bean)
Assignment 1

• Write an eight- to ten-page research paper on therapeutic touch. Follow APA conventions for documentation.

• Who is the audience for this paper?
• What is the problem?
• What is the conversation the author is entering?
Assignment 2

• You are a staff nurse at a large urban hospital. Recently the hospital became embroiled in controversy when several nurses were discovered to be practicing therapeutic touch on patients without permission. The hospital governing board reprimanded the nurses and issued a general statement forbidding the practice of TT. Research the professional literature on TT, looking especially for evidence-based studies. Then write a four- to five-page argument, addressed to the hospital governing board, supporting or attacking the board’s decision.
Make features explicit

- Recognize that elements that seem obvious to you are actually specified by discipline.
  - Of course you put your thesis at the end of the first paragraph!
  - How could you give your argument away before the second page?
  - Of course you use short sentences!
  - Naturally you will want to vary your sentence structure!
  - Of course you use acronyms after the first mention!
  - Acronyms will make your writing seem to technocratic!
Would you apply these strategies to your assignment?
Active Learning Strategies

- Use models, both student and professional
- Teach content rhetorically
- Text prediction
- Explain “assignment words” and have students practice on the day’s material
- “Goal-oriented small group” and consensus-driven writing prompts (John Bean)
Using Models

- John Warner: “Courses use readings not only as context and source materials ... but also as models — and not only static models of form but also as maps to be decoded as to how their writers might have proceeded, why, and to what effect.”
Lit Review Model

Pregnant African American women are more likely to suffer from adverse birth outcomes. Data reported by the CDC show that racial disparities in low birth weight and very low birth weight are largest between African American women and women of other ethnicities. There is a higher incidence of low birth weight, very low birth weight and infant mortality rates in African American infants than Caucasian infants and infants of other ethnicities. This finding is consistent with numerous studies showing that at birth, infants of African American women are more likely to be small for gestational age in comparison to infants of Caucasian women (citations).
Using Templates

• Global: paper organization, chapters

• Local: They Say, I Say
  o They say: entering the conversation, summarizing, quoting
  o I say: Yes, No, OK but…
    • X’s claim that ___ rests on the questionable assumption that…
    • If Group X is right that ___, as I believe they are, then we must reassess the popular assumption that…
  o And yet: distinguishing what you say from what they say
    • X overlooks what I consider an important point about ___.
    • While it may be true that ___, ultimately ___.
  o Skeptics may object: planting a naysayer
    • Of course, some may object on the grounds that ___.
  o As a result: connecting the parts
  o The data suggest: writing in the sciences
Teaching Content Rhetorically

• Example from Karen Greenfield, “The Standard English Fairy Tale”

I argue that the “new racism” described in this chapter by Victor Villanueva (26)--a racism that still exists, even if its form has changed--is deeply entrenched in our discourses about language. As I will show in this chapter, the unresolved racism in the U.S. educational system has given way to a particular rhetoric about language diversity and education that has drastically skewed our understandings of linguistic phenomena. While linguists agree upon a basic set of premises about the nature of language, the general public and even the most well-meaning educators hold beliefs in stark contrast to this knowledge. (34)
There are many reasons why Congress would want to explore the complementary topics of growth management and open space preservation.
There are many reasons why Congress would want to explore the complementary topics of growth management and open space preservation. Interest may be spurred from the bottom up—the result of grassroots concern with a community’s development. The issue may also be of interest to a member of Congress concerned with homeland security and national disaster mitigation, both of which involve the spatial orientation of population centers, a topic fundamental to land use policy. Finally, because many federal actions often impact state and local land use policies, Congress may wish to know more about growth management and open space preservation as it deliberates upon issues such as transportation, taxation, housing, and numerous other topics that bear upon the issues.

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Sherri R. Greenberg, Congress + Social Media, LBJ School/UT Austin, October 2012.
Explaining Assignment Words

What do these words mean in your discipline? Explain your assignment terms and have students practice in small groups on the day’s material.

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Goal-oriented Small Groups

From John Bean:
1. Teacher presents a disciplinary problem requiring critical thinking (resulting in a claim rather than a “right answer”).
2. Students work together in small groups to reach consensus on a “best solution.”
3. To the full class, group recorders present their group’s arguments.
4. The teacher coaches students’ performance by pointing out strengths and weaknesses, showing how the alternative claims that emerge parallel ongoing disciplinary debates, etc.
5. At the end, the teacher may also explain how this problem has been approached by experts. (pp. 184-85)
Goal-oriented Group Writing Tasks

Teaching disciplinary habits of questioning and discussing

- **Thesis-proposing**: disciplinary problem phrased as an open-ended question
- **Thesis defense**: Give students a thesis to defend or attack
- **Question-proposing**: After looking at research questions from published research, contextualize a topic (or use the day’s material) and have groups generate 2-3 questions and explain why they are appropriate
- **Evidence-finding**: give students a premise and have them search for supporting evidence—and explain why it’s appropriate for the discipline
- **Case studies**
- **Norming session**: pass out 3-4 essays from previous classes and have students rank elements of the essays using your grading rubric
Thesis-proposing

• “According to Fullinwinder, three theories are frequently used to defend preferential hiring for both African Americans and women: compensatory justice, social utility, and distributive justice. Using one or more of these theories, address this question: To what extent is the legislature’s proposed veterans preference law just?” (Bean, p. 190)
Question-generating

• “Carefully observe this graph [poem, painting, etc.]. What aspects of it puzzle or intrigue you? As a group, pose three good questions that emerge from your observation and explain why they are appropriate questions for this discipline.”

• “Scientists often pose research questions that have the following structure: What is the effect of X on Y? Using this model, develop three good research questions that you could ask about student test performance.”

• (Bean, p. 192)
Would you use any of these strategies with your students?
Peer review

• Works best before the final draft stage and when the students are incentivized to revise
• A chance for you to structure an activity that reinforces your priorities for the assignment
• Should be contextualized as part of disciplinary, academic, and professional processes
• Students practice
  o How to give global, comprehensive feedback
  o How to respond as an informed audience member
  o How to phrase feedback in a productive way for the writer
  o How to take feedback from others
• An outside facilitator and devoted class time can give the activity weight
Time-wise commenting strategies

- Is this a learning assignment or a mastery assignment? Does your commenting match?
- Invest your time at the draft stage.
- Then incentivize holistic revision that responds to that feedback.
- Final draft feedback should focus on skills students can transfer to future assignments.
- Ruthlessly prioritize: Teach one clear lesson (Nancy Sommers).
- Or, focus on no more than three patterns.
- Have realistic expectations.
- Start with a positive comment that starts the conversation (Sommers) or continues an existing conversation.
References