Teaching Writing, a Campus Task

In order to cultivate a strong writing culture across campus, every department should embrace the responsibility of teaching writing. We, as a campus, owe it to our students and to our own pedagogical methods to take on the challenge of bringing writing and the instruction of writing into our courses.

This document serves as a brief guide in assisting with how one might envision incorporating more writing assignments, both informal and formal ones, in current and future courses. While it will not answer every question and is not meant to lump all non-English departments together, its aim is essentially to initiate instructors’ consideration of how to revision their assignments and methods in teaching writing in order to foster stronger writing and critical thinking skills.

Informal Writing and Formal Writing

Both informal and formal writing are needed in courses, and it is vital to think how the two may work together and how they will assist you in achieving your course goals. Ultimately, writing assignments of every nature should complement the course objectives, have distinct (and explainable!) purpose(s), work to help students learn the course content, and assist in enhancing thinking and writing skills.

What is the difference between informal and formal writing? The former is a low-stakes, often smaller assignment; this may be completed as a brief in-class prompt, as a homework assignment, or as a small group task. Informal assignments might work to strengthen students understanding of content, to assist in their application or brainstorming, or to work through their ideas for their formal writing. Informal assignments also offer opportunities for instructors to provide feedback early on in writing and thinking stages to help better guide students. (Think about it: a not-great two-page outline versus a not-great ten-page essay, or the wrong application of that theory in a short homework assignment versus the wrong application of the theory in an entire lab report.) Formal writing is a larger (often in length and weight) assignment that one would consider to be a major component of the class. The length and weight of the assignment should be appropriate to the course, discipline, and assignment’s purpose.

What are the benefits of scaffolding objective-based informal and formal writing assignments? The short answer to this question is this: LOTS. A more extended answer would highlight an ongoing conversation with students, a focus in catching mistakes early, a chance for more risk-taking and creative thinking, and a stronger investment in assignments and the course while building community.

How and where does one even begin with possibilities for assignments? Scaffolding assignments is easier when considering skills and an effective way to order those skills. After deciding on what skills will help in achieving a larger purpose, construct smaller objectives to teach skills, which will enable students to apply them later. For example, if you want students to be able to submit a report analyzing similarities among criminal investigations as their final project, then you may want to consider where and how throughout the class you can develop smaller, informal assignments on the course material to teach them how to tackle that larger assignment more effectively.
Some Possible Ways to Incorporate Writing

Below are some possible ways to bring more writing into your course:

- Have students journal about ten readings of their choice throughout the course,
- Have students submit proposals of their research topics,
- Have students respond to your written feedback after returning essays,
- Have students recall two things from previous class, writing that and any questions down, or
- Have students freewrite at the start of class on topic related to that day’s discussion.

This list is not exhaustive; however, it may help to ignite your creative juices when thinking about kinds of writing in your courses and how to strengthen students’ abilities to craft stronger products.

Also, you might want to consider when and how to incorporate drafts, peer review sessions, and revision opportunities in efforts to stay an active part of instruction with students’ writing while enhancing their experience and strengthening students’ products of their formal assignments.

Rubrics and Evaluation of Writing

Informal and formal writing assignments are evaluated differently. Grading informal ones is typically quicker. You may consider using a check plus, check, check minus system; you may read with certain objectives in mind. For example, in one informal assignment on research, one may decide to focus primarily on students’ abilities to quote and cite correctly. Then, students can review the returned small assignment and apply corrections and what they learned into their larger research essays.

Some instructors prefer grading formal assignments with rubrics. A rubric is meant to serve as a guide not only for grading but also for students’ understanding of exact deductions; in fact, some instructors insist that rubrics reduce the number of contested grades due to an impression of added explanation. When creating rubrics, you should consider your goals and purposes of the assignment as well as the features of that writing assignment; break down the scoring and write-ups appropriately. It is advised that rubrics be distributed with the assignment. (Also, having the rubric and knowing what you will evaluate when grading will assist in constructing those informal writing assignments prior, instilling skills and helping students to have the needed tools to be successful in the formal writing.)

Regardless of whether or not you decide on using a rubric, you should include a short response explaining what worked and what might be strengthened. In addition, some individuals stress that these final comments may be brief when offering feedback throughout students’ submitted drafts.

Other Comments

Each discipline relies on writing differently, and teaching writing in your course should consider how writing is used in the field and how might your course work to expose students to writing in that field. Students should realize that what you say is just as important as how you say (or write) it and that their writing works to establish a stronger ethos when written products warrant sophistication in thought, style, and structure. Through acting with instructors across departments and talking and sharing your writing assignments, we can work together to improve the campus writing culture while setting students up better to understand and participate in writing endeavors in and beyond your course.