

Strategies for Embedding Writing Support Across the Disciplines

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Strategy #1: Consider Assignment Design

- Build support into your assignment design. Students benefit from printed copies of assignments; posting assignments on Blackboard also helps. Consider the following suggestions when you draft writing assignments:
 1. Help students see the connection between the assignment and your course goals by making explicit what the assignment will help students learn or how completing the assignment will help them meet the course objectives.
 2. Help students see how the assignment connects to work which experts within your discipline typically do. What patterns of thinking, writing strategies, formats, or genres in the discipline does the assignment help them practice? How does the assignment connect to “real world” problems, skills, and strategies?
 3. Describe the process students might follow to complete the assignment. For example, if you are asking students to write a research review, you might offer them a strategy for organizing their research reviews thematically or topically or historically. How would an “ideal” student go about completing the assignment? What steps would he or she take? What discipline-specific resources would he or she consult?
 4. Provide information about the assigned paper’s purpose, intended audience, approximate length, format, and style conventions. Use strong verbs to convey the single task you want students to accomplish; present one question you want them to address. If you want students to do more than one task or to address more than one question, bullet each task or question and then remind students to check their completed assignment against the bulleted list.
 5. Help students understand the criteria you will use to evaluate their papers. Encourage students to use the evaluation criteria to assess their essays before they submit them.

6. Encourage your students to visit the Writing Center well before their assignments are due. Professional tutors can help students clarify their focus, organize their ideas more logically, develop and support claims more effectively, and edit their work more carefully.

Strategy #2: Sequence Assignments

- Sequence assignments to help students develop the knowledge and skills you want them to develop by the semester's end. Sequencing strategies include:
 1. dividing a lengthy assignment into smaller parts (e.g. research proposal; annotated bibliography; draft; consultation; final paper);
 2. moving students from personal opinion to informed argument (e.g. express their personal opinions on a topic; locate and summarize an article which supports their opinion; locate and summarize an article which takes a position different from their own; draft an informed argument on the issue);
 3. increasing the cognitive demands of tasks (e.g. summarize X; apply X to explain Y; evaluate X);
 4. repeating the same task using different topics (e.g. article critique #1; article critique #2; etc.).
- Assign frequent, short essays, if possible, rather than a single, lengthy term paper. Frequent writing opportunities, coupled with helpful feedback from professors, support writing development. For lengthier assignments, help students by segmenting the whole into smaller, manageable parts. Establish due dates for completing parts of the assignment and make the final deadline clear.

Strategy #3: Provide Rubrics to Students in Advance

Provide rubrics or scoring guides to students in advance so they have a better understanding of what standards will apply when you evaluate their papers. (e.g. Will you consider usage and mechanics when grading their essays? If so, how much weight will you give these elements?) Rubrics support students' self-assessment; encourage students to check their drafts against the assignment criteria you provide before they submit papers to you.

Strategy #4: Provide Model Essays

Provide examples of weak and strong essays; annotate them to point out features that make the papers more or less successful. If you can spend some time discussing the model essays in class, students will have the opportunity to ask questions about annotations or features they may not understand.

When you discuss model papers in class, you help students learn more about writing conventions within your discipline.

Strategy #5: Recommend and Demonstrate Writing Strategies

When you discuss writing assignments in class, consider recommending strategies for organizing, developing, and editing. For example, if you require students to compose a research review, demonstrate strategies for organizing literature reviews chronologically or topically. Provide examples of wordy sentences and demonstrate ways to tighten them without sacrificing meaning.

Strategy #6: Consider Commenting Options

How well do students understand the comments professors write on their essays? How much use do students make of those comments when they write subsequent papers? On average, professors invest twenty-thirty minutes per essay commenting on students' work. Investing that time and effort at the draft stage—when students may be more motivated to understand and apply instructors' comments—may be a better option. Offer warranted praise and specific strategies for improvement. Using rubrics and offering brief, summative comments on final drafts make commenting upon earlier drafts more feasible, given time constraints and paper loads.

If commenting upon drafts is not a good option, consider devoting some class time to explaining your commenting strategies and symbols to students. You might want to ask students to write you a brief note explaining what was most helpful about your comments and which comments, if any, they did not understand.

Some faculty provide time in class for directed peer response activities. Providing the class with specific response guidelines can often make such activities more effective. If nothing else, response groups encourage students to read their papers aloud before they submit them for a grade; in the process, students often find and correct proofreading errors.

Many faculty ask students to annotate their own papers according to specific guidelines (e.g. underline the essay's thesis). Guided "self-talk" often leads students to revise ineffective papers and thus reinforces learning and saves professors time at the grading/commenting stage.

Strategy #7: Help Students Develop Information Literacy Skills to Enhance the Content of their Essays

Often, students' default research strategy is to surf the Web. Moreover, many students do not know how--or do not take the time--to evaluate information they find on the Web. They sometimes "cut and paste" information of questionable quality and submit the resulting unfocused "information dumps" as research papers. To guide students toward more effective research processes, tell them about library databases relevant to your discipline and explain how they can search them. Consider requiring students to work with sources to demonstrate how well they have read them and considered the sources' relevance to their research question. For example, you might ask students to outline key points in their sources, or to summarize and respond briefly to the author's thesis. Asking students to take this step often has the further advantage of moving students away from the often unintentional plagiarism that results when they lean too heavily on the original wording of their sources.

Strategy #8: Point Out Error Patterns

If you mark students on their control over usage and mechanics, point out any error patterns you note in their writing. For example, students might consistently use commas where semi-colons or periods are needed. Naming and briefly explaining errors to students may help them proofread in more directed, intentional ways on future essays.

Strategy #9: Discuss Disciplinary Genre Conventions and Their Importance in Your Discipline

When you help students understand the kinds of writing which experts in your field produce, what counts as evidence, how writing serves important disciplinary functions, and why writing well is critical to academic and professional success, you help students value the skill. When students understand that more than a grade is at stake, they may feel more motivated to polish their writing skills.

Strategy #10: Hold Students to Your High Standards

When you set high standards, you express confidence in your students' ability to achieve; you provide incentive for students to work harder to improve their skills; you support colleagues who also labor to help students write more effectively. High expectations, coupled with frequent guided practice and helpful response, create a context in which students improve their skills.