

FSEM: Stetson's First-Year Writing Intensive Course April 13, 2012 ** LBC 213

- Use writing to help students learn the material
- Use writing to introduce and reinforce basic concepts and skills for first year college
- Ultimately challenge students to think and write with more care and forethought

Where the FSEM Fits

- The FSEM is taught only in the fall semester. ENGL 101 can be taken either fall or spring. Students taking ENGL 100 must take it during the fall semester. Thus, students in FSEM may also be taking ENGL 100 or ENGL 101.
- The FSEM is the first in a series of three required writing experiences in Stetson's General Education core. The other two are ENGL 101 and Junior Seminar. FSEM complements and reinforces the work in ENGL 101, and it often presents a real challenge for students who are also taking ENGL 100.
- THE POINT: Students in an FSEM are very often getting an immersion experience in writing.

Where to Start: Syllabus

- Think about what you want your students to be able to do for your class: identifying terminology, applying ideas from reading, reflecting on observations, comparing experiences, and so forth.
- Think about how to get students to write. If you want them to use the proper terminology, ask them to work in groups to develop a written definition. If you want them to apply ideas from reading, assign them one idea from the reading (to start with), discuss the idea in class to give them some ideas about what they can say, and then send them off with the assignment.
- Build in class time to discuss the writing assignments. Then, build in some more to talk about the writing you're getting from them: show students what you like and what you don't.
- Look at the examples on the Writing Program website: <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/facresources.php#samplesyllabi>. You can also Google "writing intensive syllabus" and see what you get.

Notes from an Experienced Teacher

First, I tell students that they don't start with a 100 and then lose points for everything they do wrong. Rather, they start with a 0. Positive stuff they do raises the score; negative stuff lowers it.

Second, I tell them that I approach grading as if it were a diving competition. The score is a function of the index of difficulty multiplied by the degree of success. Let's say Suzie attempts a difficult dive (index of difficulty of 3) and messes up a bit (performance 7). Suzie's score is $3 \times 7 = 21$, an A-minus. In contrast, Bambi attempts an easy dive (index of 1), but pulls it off perfectly (performance of 10). Bambi's score is $1 \times 10 = 10$, a C. Suzie wins.

The story has two lessons. (1) As a teacher, I want to reward students for taking risks and trying to stretch their capabilities. (2) As a writer, if you know you're gonna mess up on the execution, then you'd sure as heck better try to do something worthwhile!

I keep the criteria simple:

First, have you followed the instructions in the assignment (topic, length, number of sources, etc.)?

Second, do you have a clearly conceived and articulated thesis that's supportable and worth arguing?

Third, is the development of your argument both logical and clearly articulated?

Fourth, have you provided sufficient concrete, specific evidence – of the appropriate kind, at the appropriate place, and with the appropriate documentation?

Fifth, is your writing literate at the appropriate level of decorum for the class and assignment?

Sixth, holistically, is your paper rhetorically effective?

In terms of the diving analogy, ambition tends to show on criteria 2, 3, 4, and 6 (where I consider style).

Writing Effectively in College

The ability to write effectively is one of the fundamental goals of a liberal arts education. In writing-intensive courses, we strive to help students develop fundamental writing skills so that they can use their writing to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for a variety of purposes. Goals for college-level writing include attention to:

- Audience and purpose;
- Clarity of prose;
- Clear organization;
- Effective use of evidence;
- Appropriate diction;
- Effective use of Standard English.

LEARNING GOALS FOR WI COURSES:

In writing-intensive courses we help students to:

- understand writing as a process and begin to develop an effective process of their own;
- learn how to seek and use feedback;
- gain an awareness of audience and of voice and begin to see themselves as part of a community of scholars/writers;
- learn how to apply forms of attribution and citation as appropriate;
- understand accepted guidelines for academic honesty;
- develop confidence in their writing, both through experience and also by producing at least one polished piece of their own writing;

MAIN COMPONENTS OF A WI COURSE:

Number and Variety of Assignments

Opportunities for Feedback

Opportunities for Revision

Examine Your Assumptions about How to Teach Writing

Since many faculty seem to have a “mental model” of how writing must be taught that is extremely labor-intensive, here are a few examples of how professors can offer opportunities for revision **with no extra demands on their time**—and perhaps with the added bonus of having better papers to read:

- Students use in-class exploratory writing as a basis for a more polished essay.
- A professor assigns one-page response papers every week. Skimming them, the professor marks each with a plus, check, or minus. Students then choose one of these to revise and expand.
- A professor gives two due dates for an essay, one for the first draft and one for the second. Along with the final draft, students hand in a cover sheet from an outside reader (writing tutor, classmate, other) and a paragraph describing improvements made in the second draft. The professor does not read or comment on the first draft.
- A professor returns papers marred by mechanical errors ungraded (and unedited), asking the student to fix them and resubmit.
- A larger paper is divided into smaller steps. After each step, the professor discusses common problems, which students then incorporate into the final version of the paper.
- After students have submitted their first papers, the professor shows examples of strong and weak introductory paragraphs. Students revise and resubmit their introductions based on what they have learned.
- A professor invites students to revise and resubmit a paper, but does not give detailed feedback on the revised version.

What Do You Assume the Students Know?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ○ What you mean when you say “take notes” | ○ Incorporating quotations smoothly |
| ○ What you mean when you say “read” | ○ Doing research |
| ○ What you mean when you say “draft” | ○ Revising for content |
| ○ What you mean when you say “revise” | ○ Revising for structure |
| ○ Proper sentence structure | ○ Revising for sentence-level mistakes |
| ○ Paragraph construction | ○ Visiting office hours for help |
| ○ Building a thesis statement | ○ Essential essay structure |
| ○ Answering all parts of the question | ○ What “response” means |
| ○ Citing sources | ○ What “journal entry” means |

Recommended FSEM Assignments

1. **The summary.** Teaching students how to summarize a reading or a passage or an argument is essential: if they can't summarize what someone else has said, they can't build from it very well to build their own ideas. Assign summaries of readings and then, before you start grading those summaries, talk about their strengths and weaknesses with the class. Once you've spent time discussing what you want to see more of, and what you want to see less of, you can start grading them. Take some time to read the *Guide to Writing at Stetson*; there's some very basic discussion of summary.

2. **The reading response.** Asking students to reflect on what they're reading is one of the best ways to ensure that they're getting it. Students retain concepts they've written about much more than concepts they've only scratched the surface of. Ask the students to identify one idea that resonates with them and to explain why. Assign a brief writing in which students compare the ideas in one reading to a set of contrasting ideas in another reading. No need to grade these assignments, but you probably want to read them, to see which students are making reasonable progress and which students need a little more help from you. Assign at least three reading responses over the semester.

3. **The "five minute" essay.** Asking students to write briefly about a specific question teaches them to focus and process in a short period of time. These minute essays shouldn't be graded, but they're invaluable to get a sense of the class and also give the students practice at quick response. Assign them at the end of each section of your course, or after a particularly lecture- or experience -heavy day. Try these: What are you hoping to learn from this class? What was the most important concept you got out of today's class? What elements of today's discussion do you want to spend more time discussing next time? What do you already know about this topic?

4. **The second draft.** Sure, the need for a first draft is obvious. But many of our incoming students will rely on only the first draft's work to put together their final draft, and as a result, some of their graded writing will be weaker than it has to be. Two revisions forces extended time with an essay's idea. If you comment mostly on the big issues of content, clarity, adequacy of the research, or comprehension on the first draft, you can save comments about editing, word choice, and other important surface conventions for a second revision. Don't grade drafts--that isn't fair to the student who is still learning what you want. But do offer some sort of measurement of the quality as you see it.

5. **The portfolio.** An end of term portfolio collects all (or a specific sampling) of a student's writing over the course of the term. Students should be asked to introduce the portfolio with some reflective writing on what they've written, how they've grown, what they've learned, and so forth. The advantage for the professor is that it demonstrates the students' growth, all at once. Even better, because portfolios should be given one holistic grade--one grade that captures the student's performance in that portfolio--grading is easy. Be sure that you provide very clear instructions and a set of criteria on which the portfolio will be graded.

Visit <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/usingportfolios.php> for additional portfolio resources.

Is Every Writing Assignment Equally Important? No.

For the sake of simplicity, we break the kinds of assignments into three kinds: **low-stakes, medium-stakes, and high-stakes**. Work on building up to the high stakes assignments by assigning plenty of low- and medium-stakes writing. In general, a strong writing curriculum relies more on the low- to medium-stakes assignments than on the high-stakes. The process is comparable to quizzes and exams: students use the quizzes to strengthen themselves for higher-stakes examinations, and students will not master the materials all at once. By emphasizing low- and medium-stakes writing, and a variety of grade weights and revision opportunities, faculty help students get control of the content before putting them on the spot with higher-stakes assignments.

Some examples of the kinds of writing WI faculty assign:

Informal, Low-Stakes Assignments (ongoing through the semester, generally unrevised, often not graded):

- Journal entries, logs, or "idea" notebooks
- In-class writing exercises, free writes, or "one minute" essays
- Blackboard "Discussion Board" posts

Shorter, Medium-Stakes Assignments (3 to 5 page assignments; generally some revision, generally graded):

- Correspondence (reflections emailed to you; reading responses emailed to the group)
- Short Reports
- Abstracts of readings
- Microthemes (short essays)
- Proposals
- Critical Analyses of readings or disciplinary conventions

Extended, High-Stakes Assignments (10 to 15 page assignments; revised, graded)

- Long paper or report
- Technical writing assignment
- Extended proposal, including research projects
- Case studies

Give Purpose-Driven Assignments

General	Specific and Purposeful	Explicit Goals/Criteria
Discuss the causes of the Civil War.	Write a detailed letter of about three pages to the author of our primary text about the Civil War OR Write a review of our text's chapter on the causes of the Civil War. Explain the ways in which you agree or disagree with the text, and offer suggestions for the next edition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --demonstrate nuanced understanding of material --identify separate elements involved in notion of "cause" --use quotation where appropriate --show awareness of audience --demonstrate critical thinking and reading comprehension
Discuss the significance of Stanley Milgram's experiments with obedience and authority.	Based on your understanding of Milgram's experiments, summarize for a high school Psych course the ethical issues raised by his work and their consequences for the field of psychology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --understand summary --demonstrate awareness of cause and effect --use diction appropriate to intended audience --observe conventions of documentation
Describe the key differences between Hinduism and Buddhism.	Drawing from the assigned reading, prepare a study sheet: compile a one-page table that organizes the author's explanation of Hinduism and Buddhism. Be ready to discuss your reasons for the order in which you've listed the differences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --summarize reading --identify key differences --a skill for handling ambiguity --quotation and documentation technique --awareness of organizational options
Describe the relationship between competition and cooperation.	Write to a local business owner to recommend that they replace their current "teamwork" training with a model that you know about. Be ready to describe the possible benefits based on your understanding of the relationship between competition and cooperation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --use diction appropriate to intended audience --demonstrate ability to compare --demonstrate ability to use claim and support --ability to research: what business would be appropriate audience?

Assignments with Major Mechanical Problems

- Recognize patterns of error (not just the number of errors)
- Mark only a few examples of the error
- Distinguish between “error” and “mistake” (errors are misunderstandings; mistakes are accidents)
- Create a checklist of common problems to use to guide student work
- Reduce the grade ONLY if the mechanical issues are so serious that they impede your understanding

Students Who Speak Other Languages

- Offer to help in your office hours
- When you’re reading an assignment, make the effort to distinguish between “error” and “mistake” (errors are misunderstandings; mistakes are accidents)
- Don’t penalize students for writing with an accent. They are learning.
- Very often, students writing in English as a second language will not acquire the ability to handle articles (a, an, the) and plurals until much later; some will never acquire it.
- Mark patterns of error, NOT every single example. Students learn the details of second and third languages by recognizing patterns (plurals, tense shifts, irregular verbs).
- Very often, students writing in English as their second language will have far greater insight into the materials than the native speakers.
- Very often, international students will not be able to do well in timed or inclass work but will show remarkable improvement if given additional time to work through the language and grammar issues. It’s up to you whether to allow this additional time.

About Commenting

- On the first draft, comment on “big ticket” items: content, research, focus, etc. Ignore everything else. On the second draft, comment on questions of form: sentence structure, grammar, paragraphing, word choice, punctuation.
- Save yourself time by reading all the assignments at once and only then separating them into three stacks ("good," "not so good," and "excellent"). Don't start commenting until this stage, when you've got a sense of the range of the class performance.
- Comment on what is most important to you. Commenting on every single thing you see is not only frustrating for you but confounding for the students, who can't tell what is most important to take care of. Aim at a maximum of four comments per page of student writing.

What Kind of Reader are You?

- The Cheerleader (encourages and rewards students for effort; tends to focus on developing a student's abilities by asking questions; tends to make positive comments)
- The Editor (tends to focus on details; prioritizes accuracy; tends to treat each draft as if it is a final draft; generally comments on mistakes)
- The Helper (tends to comment on the stages of development in a writer; tends to ask questions leading to growth; sees role as fostering and coaching)

What Kinds of Comments Do You Make?

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is about the documentation of information, and that is increasingly challenging to understand because information is everywhere and our students are encouraged to soak it in uncritically. It's relatively rare to see a student actually lift an essay off the web or put together a bunch of paragraphs that someone else wrote--and sure, they all know that's wrong.

But it's pretty common to see awkward attribution of ideas or misunderstandings about where the documentation goes or what "paraphrasing" really means--and those things are not universally agreed upon. A teacher needs to talk about these things, and then talk about them more. Time spent in class talking about who owns information and how to acknowledge the intellectual footsteps is time spent teaching our students to think about what they're doing.

Students who are inclined to cheat are more inclined to do so when they think you don't care and when they think you're not paying attention. They're also more likely to cheat if you provide them with opportunities to do so. Poorly written assignments, generally broad topics, and no written guidelines about the kinds and types of sources to use all contribute to plagiarism.

Preventing plagiarism is not all that difficult. Prevent it by educating the student about it. And then, take it seriously when it happens.

Visit <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/writingprogram/preventingplagiarism.php> for additional resources on plagiarism prevention.

Resources for Teaching WI courses

Plagiarism:

“Anti-Plagiarism Strategies for Research Papers”: <http://www.virtualsalt.com/antiplag.htm>

Portfolios:

Bogart, “Writing Portfolios: What Teachers Learn From Student Self-Assessment”
<http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/e2.html>

Writing to Learn:

“What is Writing to Learn?” Colorado State University: <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop2d.cfm>

“Write to Learn: Strategies and Assignments” University of Richmond:
<http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/wtl.html>