

Best Practices for Remote Teaching of Writing Courses for First-Year Students at Residential Liberal Arts Colleges

A Working Document by Writing Administrators at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

As we face the possibility of hybrid or remote teaching in Fall 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions have an opportunity to consider the values, best practices, and contributions of writing courses for first-year students (which may include First-Year Writing Seminars, First-Year Seminars, First-Year Writing). These courses are uniquely positioned to ground students in the liberal arts and to support and retain them through and beyond the first year. These courses are important transitional experiences for our students as they find their way (socially and academically) in a new residential college, and AAC&U identifies First-Year Seminars as a “high impact practice.” Our institutions value the cohort-building that is central to writing courses for first-year students, relying on faculty to connect with their first-year students while also creating community among students. Additionally, these courses serve an important role in the curriculum. They introduce students to college-level writing, research, and resources across campus, and, as such, they need special attention as institutions plan for Fall semester.

Grounded in our collective expertise in writing pedagogy, scholarship, and best practices in the field, we have drafted the following recommendations to enable productive adaptation and remote delivery of writing courses during the pandemic. However modified, these courses must remain committed to the values of the liberal arts. Administrators should focus both on structures of support (smaller class sizes, faculty development, heightened student resources) and ethics of support (flexibility, accessibility, collaboration). What follows is a brief overview of the values and practices of writing courses for first-year students and recommendations for institutions to adopt if classes are taught remotely this Fall.

Values and Practices that Distinguish Writing Courses for First Year Students

A number of research-based, nationally-accepted position statements outline the best practices and principles for teaching writing effectively (see, for instance, CCCC’s [“Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing”](#)) and affirm the value of first year writing courses (see for instance, AAC&U’s [“High Impact Practices”](#)). See also [appendix i](#).

Defined by **guiding principles**, “sound writing instruction

- recognizes writing as a social act;
- recognizes writing processes as iterative and complex;
- depends upon frequent, timely, and context-specific feedback from an experienced postsecondary instructor.”

Further defined by **enabling conditions**, “sound writing instruction

- extends from a knowledge of theories of writing (including, but not limited to, those theories developed in the field of composition and rhetoric);
- is provided by instructors with reasonable and equitable working conditions; and
- is assessed through a collaborative effort that focuses on student learning within and beyond writing courses.”¹

In keeping with these best practices and principles for teaching writing effectively, we provide the following recommendations to guide administrators and program directors.

¹ Excerpted from CCCC’s [“Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing”](#) Executive Summary

Recommendations for Remote or Hybrid Writing Courses for First-Year Students

1. Set Class Size Appropriate for Remote Writing Courses

Rationale: Writing pedagogy in first-year writing courses depends on intensive, frequent feedback and collaboration. This feedback requires more time when delivered remotely. A 2019 review of 58 studies of class size and online teaching found that while class size should be considered in the context of the institution, classes with extensive discussion, writing, and instructor feedback are most successful when they have 15 or fewer students. To achieve [the institutional goals and purposes of writing courses in the first year \(appendix i\)](#), it is essential to keep enrollment in these courses low.

Resources:

Taft, Susan & Kesten, Karen & El-Banna, Majeda.. [“One Size Does Not Fit All: Toward an Evidence-Based Framework for Determining Online Course Enrollment Sizes in Higher Education.”](#) *Online Learning*. 23. 2019. 10.24059/olj.v23i3.1534.

National Council of Teachers of English: [“Why Class Size Matters”](#)

Horning, Alice. [“The Definitive Article on Class Size”](#)

2. Provide Pedagogical Support and Development for Faculty

Rationale: Liberal arts education is distinguished by excellent pedagogy, but too few faculty have taught writing and writing-intensive courses remotely. Meaningful faculty development opportunities build on existing excellence while responding to and looking beyond the immediate crisis.

- 4.1 Include local experts (writing administrators, writing center directors, and experienced writing faculty) in planning and delivering self-paced and synchronous faculty development opportunities
- 4.2 Extend local expertise by supporting multi-institutional partnerships and participation in webinars offered by national organizations
- 4.3 Recognize COVID-19’s ongoing disruption and modify faculty review processes accordingly (e.g., reading a current statement of practice into the record).

Resources:

[“AAUP Principles and Standards for the COVID-19 Crisis”](#)

[“Statement on Teaching Evaluation”](#)

3. Provide Peer Support and Resources for Students

Rationale: First-year writing students benefit from established peer-support programs to enhance faculty feedback and support. Peers model writing and study practices, support students in the writing process, and help first-year students make the transition to college-level writing.

- 3.1 Encourage integration of peer writing tutors, mentors, assistants, and course-embedded writing fellows in first-year writing courses.
- 3.2 Connect first-year students to co-curricular support resources such as multilingual writing specialists, professional staff, and Writing Center staff.

Resources:

Bruffee, Kenneth, “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind” *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, ed. Gary A. Olson, NCTE 1984.

Regaignon, Dara Rossman and Pamela Bromley “What Difference Do Writing Fellows Programs Make?” *The WAC Journal*, 22. 2011. 41-63.

Trimbur, John. "Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers." *Writing Center Journal* 20.2 2000. 29-31.

4. Provide Technological Support for Faculty and Students

Rationale: Remote courses require that faculty and students have access to and training in the use of necessary technology that supports rather than drives the teaching and learning. It is the creative use of available technologies that will make liberal arts pedagogy distinct from asynchronous (and less expensive) online courses elsewhere.

2.1 Provide laptops/devices and hardware for online instruction (camera, headphones, microphone, document camera, etc.) that are updated enough to accomplish key teaching and learning goals

2.2 Provide current software

2.3 Provide technical support significantly beyond support available during a regular semester

Resources:

Lederman, Doug. ["Why remote instruction may be better than online for high-touch residential colleges."](#) *Inside Higher Ed*. April 29, 2020.

Global Society of Online Literacy Educators. [Online Literacy Instruction Principles and Tenets.](#)

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Appendix: Institutional Goals and Purposes of Writing Courses for First-Year Students

- Introduction to liberal arts learning
 - Writing is taught as a process: guiding students from brainstorming and drafting to revision and editing with one-on-one meetings and peer response
 - Students learn to collaborate in writing and oral presentations
 - Oral presentations and discussion are a central part of the course
 - Critical thinking is modeled and taught through readings and practices
 - Close reading emphasizes attention to detail and understanding the voices within the conversation
- Cohort building
 - Courses are limited to first-semester, first-year students (AAC&U “High Impact Practice”)
 - Courses incorporate attendance at on-campus events, talks, performances, gatherings,
 - Pedagogy helps students learn to function as community (identify and debate shared values that shape community; have difficult conversations)
 - Courses teach students to work collaboratively, in peer response groups, collaborative writing, and other projects
 - Students are encouraged to seek help by using academic tutoring, visiting the writing center, and reaching out to faculty and (as relevant) disability services
- Individual and individualized attention with low student to faculty ratio
 - Faculty guide students through transition to college challenges
 - Students meet frequently with faculty for 1:1 conferences on writing process
 - Faculty can focus assignments and feedback for individuals
- Mentoring
 - Faculty and student contact is direct and sustained, which may enable relationships over time
 - Advising, whether formal or informal, is frequently established in first-year writing courses