

Freshman Writing Woes

Common weaknesses in rat/fourth classmen writers:

- Inability to craft a clear or appropriate thesis
- Use of overly general and/or imprecise language
- Lack of writing experience (especially “analysis”)
- Inadequate time given to the assignment (procrastination/poor planning)

What can instructors do to help students become better writers?

Incorporate writing practice into the course, to build *experience*.

- Include informal writing.
- Assign a few short papers instead of one long one.
- Allow opportunities for collaboration.

Provide incentives to promote better planning.

- Use the carrot of constructive feedback for those who plan ahead: for instance, offer comments on drafts turned in by a certain deadline (option: require revision based on Writing Center conference before you see draft).
- Require structured peer review process for major writing assignments.
- Build in draft due dates, even if you don’t comment on them (be strategic).

Define the writing task carefully and clearly.

Students do best if they have a clear idea of why, what, and to whom they are writing.

- **Clarify the purpose of the paper.** Why are the students writing? If it is just “because you said so” or “for a grade,” it will be harder for them to engage in the writing process.
- **Explain the writing task.** What kind of paper is it and what type of research, if any, is involved? Provide a sample paper when possible.
- **Define the audience for which the paper should be appropriate.** An actual audience of readers that the students can identify or imagine will help them deal with issues of tone and specificity. How much do their readers know about the subject? To what kind of publication would they submit the essay?
- **Remind them that every essay must have a thesis.** If possible, provide samples of workable thesis statements.
- **Avoid lists of questions on the writing assignment sheet.** Too often students decide to answer the questions, much as they would answer separate questions on an essay exam, and fail to create a logical structure that unifies these into an essay. This happens even when instructors preface the questions with something like “questions for you to think about before writing.”

Provide proofreading practice. It’s not easy to tell the difference between careless errors and real grammatical troubles. One option is to raise the bar for “acceptable” assignments through a “revise with penalty” policy in your grading scheme. Or, the first time students hand in a paper, allow them to proofread their papers with the stipulation that errors they find and correct won’t be counted against them—*this time*.