Fast Facts for Faculty

Writing in the University

Developed by Brenda Brueggemann
The Ohio State University Partnership Grant
Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities

Introduction

The General Education Curriculum (GEC) Course Guidelines for the second and third (required) courses in writing at The Ohio State University state that:

> The abilities to read and listen with comprehension and critical acuity are requisite to the gaining of knowledge in a university setting. The ability to express oneself with clarity, both orally and in writing, provides the deepest proof of understanding. Only through such expression can one demonstrate the powers of careful thinking and critical analysis.
> *Further, we recognize that writing especially is a primary tool in learning itself, not just a means of expressing learning that has taken place. Writing is a powerful mode of thinking; writing involves making choices and then ordering those choices effectively.*
> (from, "GEC Guidelines, Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing": http://cstw.osu.edu/)

Many students, however, may often experience difficulties with writing that are not caused by a lack of understanding or critical ability. Writing is a complex activity; yet it is also a rich mode of learning. College writing requires time: time to generate ideas, determine purposes, develop an argument, organize and arrange text effectively, and revise. It also requires time of the instructor: time in successfully creating writing assignments; time in integrating writing well into the overall instructional goals; and time in responding thoughtfully to student writing. In addition, college-level writing often involves the complex tasks of reading, comprehending, interpreting and processing difficult text— including the ongoing text that one is producing, in writing, while negotiating such reading. Even reading and understanding an instructor's prompt for writing may present significant difficulties and affect the student's success with writing. This is true of *all* student writers.

For students with disabilities there may be even greater obstacles to college writing. For example, for some students who are deaf, American Sign Language is their primary language. This may affect aspects of writing like word order, spelling, and word choice. Another example is students with learning disabilities in writing expression. Some of the writing problems may be rooted in processing deficits. These students may have significant difficulty in organizing and arranging text effectively. They may know the rules of grammar, but cannot regularly apply them. They may be intimidated by writing and therefore try to avoid doing it.

In-Class Writing Activities

Examples:

- Opening the class period with instructor-prompted writing— usually calling for a paragraph-length response— that addresses either past or future points, general or specific in nature, from previous classes, lectures, readings, or discussions.
- Closing the class with writing, often a summary reflection of paragraph-length.
- Interrupting/pausing the class activities, discussion, or lecture with brief writing that calls for either opening up some new but related area of inquiry or closing down and summarizing what has just taken place.
- Anticipatory or predictive writing for readings, issues, problems still to come.

- Taking careful class notes for self and/or others.
- Summarizing one's notes (or something like a group conversation) from a previous class or discussion;
- Creating metaphors and analogies for activities or issues currently under discussion.
- Jotting down study or further discussion questions in an ongoing discussion or lecture.
- Responding to short answer quizzes.
- Problem-posing, individually or collaboratively with other class members.
- Solution-generating, individually or collaboratively with other class members.
- Engaging in web-based discussions or electronic chat rooms.
- In-class essay exams.

Challenges:

In-class writing may be challenging for many students. Significant challenges arise from factors of:

Lack of Technology: Students with learning disabilities in written expression often come to depend on grammar and spell check. In fact, they are encouraged to use technology as a way to compensate for their disability. The spelling of simple words and the organization of paragraphs can be severely problematic without the use of technology. For some students the inability to use this form of accommodation impedes the flow of writing.

Time: Students sometimes require more time to analyze and internalize the requirements of a writing assignment—to read and interpret what is being asked of them before they even begin to write—than in-class assignments often allow. In addition, individual students require widely varying amounts of time for pre-writing and pre-planning. Finally, some students just write more slowly than others for a number of different possible reasons which may include the speed and dexterity of one's cognitive capabilities under specific time constraints as well as one's manual dexterity and fine motor skills.

Environmental Distractions: The distractions of the classroom itself may also make in-class writing difficult for students. Some students may be sensitive to issues of personal space in a public setting like the classroom that makes in-class writing significantly harder for them; others may be more or less sensitive to classroom lighting, or seemingly small background noises.

Disclosure and (Dis)comfort: Writing activities like taking class minutes, sharing brief paragraphs written in response to instructor prompts, and electronic or web-based chat/discussion interactions— activities where students often report to the rest of the class what they have written or publicly display their writing—may uncomfortably and inadvertently expose a student's disability or other identities.

Best Practices:

In-class writing activities help maximize the critical, analytical, and self-discovery capacities that writing often brings to learning. They also offer flexible, frequent, and typically less threatening ways for students to respond to and engage various elements of a class, aiding students' abilities to learn-as-they-go. Bearing these possibilities, uses, and challenges in mind, the best in-class writing assignments:

- Are those that students have learned how to best respond to via instruction in the classroom where they are being used (thus, the instructor first teaches students how best to read, interpret, respond to the kind of in-class writing being used);
- Are also then first practiced and modeled before they are counted for grades in any way;
- Require a minimum of preparatory analysis on the part of the student either before class or during the writing activity itself;
- Are devised with alternative approaches in mind—offering other ways that this activity might be completed—in the event that a student encounters significant challenge(s) in completing them as originally planned for the purposes of the class;

- Are designed more for student-centered knowledge and self-discovery purposes rather than for instructor-oriented evaluation purposes;
- Do not carry a great deal of the course grade weight, especially in a single instance;
- Engage students in collaborative and peer interactions over the course material.

Notebook or Journal Writing Activities

Examples:

- Reading logs: Students keep journal-like accounts of reading done for the course, perhaps responding to specific kinds of prompts given by the instructor or generating their own kind of response "system."
- Double-column journals: In the left-hand column, students typically write immediate notes/responses to class discussions, readings, etc. and then later (at a time on in intervals determined perhaps by the instructor) they record more summative reflections on those initial notes in the right-hand column, often building notes and reflections upon each other.
- Writing process logs: Students keep accounts of their writing process(es) through various assignments in the course.
- Focused responses to readings or class discussions: Students respond to specific instructor-given prompts in relation to class materials and activities.

Challenges:

- Notebook and journal writing assignments that are not very specific, or that call on expressive/personal reactions to reading and other class discussions, may be daunting at times since some students write, think, respond, and learn better with more structure and boundaries and others are not comfortable with responses that they feel are "personal"; conversely, some students will fare better with more open-ended options to these kinds of assignments and others, too, learn best when materials are applied "personally" to their own identities and experiences. These problems can make a relatively simple and often gratifying assignment a monumental task particularly for students whose disability is in written expression. In sum, students perform with notebook/journal writing and react to it in a wide range of ways.
- These kinds of writing function best in the overall learning function of a class when they are routinized in some way. Such a routine might require that students adopt a regular schedule for responding in them and that instructors also then routinely engage in some way of meaningfully responding to these notebooks/journals. Furthermore, it is best to fully incorporate this kind of writing into "conversations" with other aspects of the course. It is often easy for both students and instructors to fall off schedule or to neglect this kind of writing and responding and thereby, to undermine the rich potential for this kind of writing in relation to other classroom activities.

Best Practices:

These kinds of writing activities give students the time to compose their texts and the opportunity to engage more in a process of writing. Reading logs that are combined with focused response questions help students learn how to read, analyze and respond to class readings at their own pace and can equip students with valuable contributions to in-class discussions. Double-column journals and writing process logs are particularly useful to all students because they give them an opportunity to articulate and criticize their own decision-making process in writing and to thereby develop their repertoire of writing skills. In order to maximize the potential of notebook/journal writing for all student's instructors should:

- Consider, as the course is being constructed, how to routinize the student writing and instructor/peer responding;

- Give prior thought to the kinds of journal writing to be engaged in relation to: the frequency of this writing; the frequency and depth of instructor or peer response to it; the level of formality/informality for this kind of writing; the length and depth of responses; the degree of structured or open-ended prompts for such writing;
- Imagine ways that the journal writing can be used in conjunction and conversation with other kinds of classrooms activities; for example, could the student be asked to compose an in-class essay based on a particular journal entry or might students begin a class period by sharing in small groups a journal response—verbatim or summarized—to a specific issue or reading;
- Be prepared to offer some flexibility and options for students who have difficulty with the parameters of this kind of writing in any one designated dimension (such as the frequency of the responses, the public use of journal responses in the classroom, the instructor's method of responding to them, the level of structure in the prompts for such writing; the level of complexity of the prompt);
- Engage students in collaborative and peer interactions over the course material at the same time they allow students options to respond individually and privately to such materials.

Shorter Writing Assignments

Examples:

Some shorter writing assignments that engage writing as a learning-enhancing activity might include:

- Writing a brief word-limited abstract of reading material.
- Composing brief response or "position" papers, either open-ended or carefully constructed by the instructor.
- Writing letters to others about the course or to an "expert" on a topic as part of a classroom assignment.
- Completing observation reports of individuals, events, groups, or institutions.
- Constructing "outlines" of various course materials—from readings, from instructor lectures, from peers' presentations or projects shared in class, for example.

Challenges:

Because the kinds of shorter writing assignments that might be used are quite varied, the challenges are both specific and general here:

- In general, all shorter writing assignments require a careful attention to and matching of the activity with the overall course goals so that these kinds of writing facilitate and further enhance the student's broader learning; it may often be difficult for students to grasp the larger impact and purpose of these kinds of writing activities in relation to the whole course.
- In general, students need to be able to complete these activities with some challenge yet not with undue time, effort, and anxiety; finding the right balance for "time on task" that matches the student's present abilities, current understanding, and available resources with the instructional goals of the course is not always easy.
- More specifically, abstracts require a sophisticated ability to discern what is important from other information and the task may take some students a particularly long time to complete—time that does not necessarily match the overall instructional goals. Observation reports, like field notes, are activities where students will benefit most with carefully crafted teacher-generated guidelines since they often involve a fair amount of "data saturation" and students need firmer guidelines in what to look for, how to see it, how to best record and then evaluate what they observe. "Position" papers can be intimidating particularly if they call on students to "come out" through opinions that are rooted in their identities—religious, familial, culturally marginalized or otherwise; at the same time, and perhaps for the same reasons, these kinds of papers can be illuminating. Outlines can often codify thinking, boxing in creative or alternative ways that students might have of otherwise learning from and responding to the materials of the course.

Best Practices:

- In general, students must first be taught how to best complete these assignments; successful models should already exist and some time should be spent in class on how to understand and best carry out the assignment.
- Shorter writing assignments especially need to grow out of, be grounded in, connect back to, and help support the overall instructional goals of the course—their power should be connected to their purpose in facilitating the student's learning.
- These activities should provide thoughtful engagement from the student but not necessarily entail undue time or anxiety in completing them.
- The instructor should try out his/her own assignments given to the students; often a student's potential interest in completing such writing, his/her process of completing it successfully, and his/her ability to do the assignment satisfactorily (as assessed by both self and another "evaluator") can be imagined best with such instructor modeling.
- Engaging students in collaborative and peer interactions over the process and product of these assignments helps students learn further from each other and encourages student responsibility to the assignment and its overall purpose in the course goals.

Sustained Writing: Research Papers, Critical Writing, Creative Writing

Examples:

This kind of writing may include: term papers, interview-based research, annotated bibliographies, critiques, reviews, analyses; and complete creative works such as poems, plays, short stories, personal essays, memoirs, etc.

Challenges:

In general, these are all sustained kinds of writing that require multiple skills in order to be completed well; this kind of writing calls on a complex repertoire of abilities. Some challenges along the way to completing larger writing assignments may be in:

- Careful planning on the part of both student and instructor about how and when the components of the larger piece of writing will be completed.
- Devoting classroom time and instruction in completing components of the overall assignment.
- Working through additional reading or research which may be difficult for the student to complete due to at least some of these issues: lack of easy access to these materials, lack of knowledge about how to use online or library resources and databases, an inability to comprehend all the kinds of material he/she might find (lack of more complex discipline-specific knowledge and reading skills), an inability in determining what is most relevant from additional materials for one's own purposes. For example, the challenge for some students with disabilities may be physical (i.e., reaching materials when using a wheelchair) or it may be accessing the material in the correct format (i.e., Braille) or it may be reading the volume of materials to prepare for the paper. Keep in mind, assistance is available for all of these challenges; however, every one of these issues takes additional consideration and time.
- Writing a research paper often entails using the Internet. Some students face challenges of access to the Internet (World Wide Web, email) because of their disability. For example, some highly graphic web sites may be inaccessible to students who are blind. Other students do not have access to adaptive technology which would enable them to read the website. For further information on web accessibility, visit www.wac.ohio-state.edu
- Writing a research paper is a challenge for the best writers; however, for the person whose disability is related to writing, the problem becomes compounded by a lack of basic writing skills, the image of oneself as a writer, and limited writing experience.
- Organizing all the materials and information made available; knowing what to keep, what to set aside, how best to arrange it all.

- Managing time and maximizing one's best learning strategies and available skills while overcoming or successfully circumventing one's weaknesses in writing, research, reading, time management, etc.

Best Practices:

These assignments give students an opportunity to call on respective university support networks and various bodies of texts and knowledge; such uses for writing may also provide a good method of learning and evaluating course materials. Strategies that will benefit all students with regard to successful research and critical writing include:

- Providing opportunities to review their research and writing progress in peer group workshops or individual conferences with their instructor;
- Offering small group and individual guidance in the selection of appropriate research information and direction in the development of their thesis/argument/purpose for these kinds of writing;
- Encouraging multi-modal approaches to the research process—in topic development, organization, source collection, etc.—approaches that involve alternatives to reading and writing-intensive activities, for example (spatial, kinesthetic, tactile approaches to the subject);
- Giving students chances to examine good models of sub-components of the writing task as well as of the whole;
- Engaging students in class discussions about time-on-task and knowing the extent of the subject to be covered;
- Helping students construct audiences and purposes for these larger kinds of writing activities;
- Offering in-class opportunities for, and discussions about, pre-writing, arrangement, and organization techniques in writing;
- Devoting class time to revising and editing strategies for completing a final written product.

Related Resources

Dunn, Patricia A. Learning Re-Abled: The Learning Disability Controversy and Composition Studies. Boynton/Cook, 1995.

Dunn, Patricia A. Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing. Heinemann/Boynton/Cook, 2001.

Landmark College: www.landmarkcollege.org/

The Ohio State University Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing (CSTW) for online handouts and linked resources about college writing: http://cstw.osu.edu/

The Ohio State University Office for Disability Services: http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/

The Ohio State University Partnership Grant, Improving the Quality of Higher Education For Students with Disabilities. The Fast Facts for Faculty series available at: http://ada.osu.edu/resources/fastfacts/

SALT (Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques) Center, University of Arizona, Writing Support Services: http://www.salt.arizona.edu/writing.htm

WriteEnvironment website "On Teaching Writing": http://www.writeenvironment.com/OnTeachingWriting.html

About the Author

Brenda Jo Brueggemann is an Associate Professor of English and The Director of Ohio State University's First-Year Writing Program. She is the author of Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness (Gallaudet UP, 1999) and co-editor of Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities (Modern Language Association, 2002). She has received eleven academic and national grants related to her work in Deaf Studies and Disability Studies and has also published around fifteen articles and essays to date in these areas. Some of the more recent articles are collaboratively written with her students.

Important Note

This information is available in alternate format upon request. Please call the Office for Disability Services at (724) 738-4877.

It is also available at http://www.sru.edu/ods and Accommodate faculty resources tab at https://sru-accommodate.symplicity.com/.

Public requests for accommodations through the Office of Disability Services can be made by visiting the following link: https://sru-accommodate.symplicity.com/public_accommodation.

This publication is funded by the US Department of Education under project #738322. For additional copies or more information, please contact:

Margo Izzo, Ph. D., Phone: 614-292-9218, Email: izzo.1@osu.edu
Ann Yurcisin, ED.S., Phone: 614-292-3307, Email: yurcisin.1@osu.edu