

Writing Matters

Notes for teachers of writing-intensive courses

No. 1: effective writing assignments
University of Hawai'i, Manoa Writing Program

Since 1988, more than 900 different UH instructors have designed courses that give special emphasis to student writing. Students who enrolled in one or another of the 5,283 UHM "writing-intensive" (WI) classes have in general found that what you write is what you learn best.

Faculty members report that they also learn from teaching with writing. As a way to help faculty colleagues exchange what they are learning, and as a way to pass on hints from experienced students in WI classes, the Faculty Board and staff of the Mānoa Writing Program are launching Writing Matters. We hope it will give you a few new ideas and help you to make your students' WI experiences even more rewarding.

WE'RE LEARNING FROM STUDENTS IN WI CLASSES

Over the last three years, the staff at the Mānoa Writing Program has interviewed nearly 200 students about their experiences in WI classes. In this issue, we focus on what most students tell us is a key to making writing matter: a well-constructed writing assignment.

HOW STUDENTS "READ" WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

We found in talking with students about their writing assignments that sometimes the mesh between their assumptions and instructors' intentions is less than ideal. Consider these comments from instructors and their students:

What WI Instructors Expect

What Students Understand

100-level WI course

For the short paper on a video, I wanted students to make connections among the archeologist's questions, the methods used to get answers, and principles from their reading.

This assignment was like writing a high-school movie review. I wanted to give my own personal understanding about the video, so I was going to write a narrative.

200-level WI course

In the journals I wanted students to really wield their own opinions and grapple with issues, to really think about course material.

When I first heard the assignment, I thought I was supposed to write anything, like a reaction, just to show if I learned something.

200-level WI course

I wanted students to really wrestle with the questions on the assignment sheet, to give in-depth answers. I wanted students to distinguish between the author's words and their own interpretation.

I was supposed to write a 6-page analysis on a reading and juice up the answers. I tried to make it sound good by adding lots of details and sounding excited in my writing.

When we asked experienced WI instructors to analyze instructor expectations and student understandings, here is some of what we found:

- ! Students translate an instructor's goals into processes they think they can handle. An instructor's desire to have students "grapple with issues" becomes for the student "to write anything, like a reaction, just to show if I learned something." Translations such as this point to significant gaps in students' understanding of the instructors' purposes and expectations.
- ! Students enter WI classes with strategies they devised to deal with earlier writing assignments, and they may try to use these strategies again rather than risk something new. For example, the student who tried to make "a 6-page analysis . . . sound good by adding lots of details and sounding excited" had learned to try to please the teacher and thus to win the "A." Sometimes prior experiences promote new learning; at other times they impede learning.



WHAT STUDENTS WANT IN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

How can professors bridge the gap between what they expect and what students understand about a writing assignment? For possible answers, we turn to students. Here are some questions students told our interviewers that they want to ask their professors:

“How will the writing assignment help me to learn the course material?”

Students are often accustomed to writing only so that they can be evaluated; they haven't experienced “writing to learn.” You can help students learn the course material by explaining how some writing can help them explore their own thinking (e.g., journals), while other assignments help them improve their reading skills (summaries), learn data-collection techniques (“process logs”), or improve their analytic skills (synthesis of journal articles). You will also help them by explaining how individual writing assignments relate to your goals for the course.

“If you had to do this assignment yourself, how would you do it?”

Students may not have done the kinds of writing that you assign. For example, you may ask your students to write an analysis of the methodology used in a research report, but the students' only experience with writing analyses may have been in courses about short stories and novels. You can help your students by making clear what points an analysis of methodology should cover, and by demonstrating the ways you go about evaluating methodology. When you ask students to revise an assignment, you can help them by providing some samples of effective revision, making clear what they should attend to.

“How does this writing assignment or topic relate to the work that specialists do in this field?”

Students particularly value writing of the sort they may do if they choose to work in your profession. But they often do not recognize that summary writing is an important tool of the philosopher or that observation logs are used by professional engineers. You might help them by showing them samples of your own observation logs or mathematical proofs, even if they are written in only a shorthand version of what you want your students to write.

“If you evaluate my work on this assignment, what exactly will you be looking for?”

Consider these suggestions from experienced WI instructors:

- Give students in writing the criteria for evaluation along with assignment guidelines. Discuss these before students begin writing and as students work on completing the assignment.
- Provide students with examples, perhaps some well written and some not so well written, of student work from previous semesters. Using the criteria provided, have students assess the writing.

“How will you be helping me through this writing assignment?”

Students particularly like assignment sheets that guide them through thinking processes and writing processes. If given only a list of “provocative questions,” students often write little more than unlinked paragraphs that answer the questions. In contrast, if you give your students information on their audience (e.g., peers, field professionals), purpose (to demonstrate, illustrate, or persuade), and genre (research proposal, critique), they are more likely to learn and to write more effectively. Students also really appreciate advice on getting information, organizing their first draft, editing, and even using a word processor. Finally, students also want to know how much written feedback you will give them, when you are available for conferences, and whether or not they can revise what they hand in.

In trying to answer these (and similar) questions when you give your students writing assignments, you may be taking important steps in helping your students to write and learn more effectively.