

# Best Practices in Writing Intensive Courses

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Instructors of WI courses have the challenge of teaching both writing and course material, and many instructors find it helpful to see how colleagues design their WI courses. With the new 2012 WI Guidelines, it is even more important to reflect on WI course design.

Below are some ways that faculty incorporate WI Guidelines in their courses. Many of the comments describe practices under the 1987 Guidelines; during 2012-13 we expect to see significant changes due to the new Guidelines. The Writing Advisory Committee plans to expand this document, so please send your ideas to share. **We especially seek descriptions of practices for individual conferencing, revision policies, and syllabi statements.**

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## **Contents: suggestions for**

- Writing Assignments
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For a thoughtful, full discussion of the revision process, see "Revision Strategies" by Michael Harwick '11, found at the Writing Center site.

## **Guidelines for WI Courses (May, 2012)**

1. Instructors will provide clear, extensive, and timely feedback on student writing. Feedback should include comments on structure, argument, grammar, and style as well as on content.
2. Students will have the opportunity to respond to feedback in a subsequent draft, paper, or other assignment.
3. Writing projects will be substantial and will be distributed across the semester.
4. Grades on written work will comprise a substantial part of the course grade.
5. Students will have the opportunity for individual or small-group writing conferences with the instructor.
6. Instructors will devote class time to discussing writing techniques and strategies specific to the level and content of the course.
7. Instructors will include on the syllabus a short statement describing how the course meets the above guidelines.

The full document "Writing Intensive Guidelines, 2012," is posted under "Course Guidelines" at the Committee on Academic Policy's website: [www.hamilton.edu/cap](http://www.hamilton.edu/cap). The guidelines are also found at the Writing Center site: [www.hamilton.edu/writing/faculty/writing-materials-for-faculty](http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/faculty/writing-materials-for-faculty).

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

### Assignments in introductory level WI courses

- I assign four papers. All are designed to teach students to work with primary historical sources. For the first two, the student analyzes a single source; paper three requires working with multiple sources. Paper four varies.
- I assign four papers. The sequence of topics ranges from single- to multi-text analysis. One paper is an expansion and revision of an in-class midterm essay.
- I assign seven to eight papers: four are two pages (check/plus/minus); several are five pages; the final is an eight-to-ten page research paper or an artistic project with a written discussion. One of the five-page papers is a group paper; two or three students argue one side of an issue, and another group takes the opposing side. Groups present to the class; the goal is to educate the class about an issue, not to 'win.'
- Assignments expand from shorter papers to longer papers of four to five pages. All papers are argument papers, based on one or two texts.
- I assign four papers. Students write the first paper on their own so I can see their raw work; the fourth assignment includes a Writing Center conference. The second and third assignments include writing tutorials--mandatory small group peer review of drafts.
- I assign four papers. The first is three pages; the rest are five pages. The goal of each is to get the student to observe and analyze. The topics grow in complexity. The fourth paper includes a small research component.
- Students have ten analytical writing assignments. Four papers are three-to-ten page papers; the rest are one-to-two pages.
- I assign four papers. For all, students must go to the core problem raised in the readings and frame their own question. Sometimes I distribute the questions to other students, and students must respond to other students' questions.
- I assign four papers, five pages each. Having a page limit reduces summary and increases focus on argument and counterargument.
- I assign four papers ranging from one to four pages. Students select a topic that must address a specific, significant question. Students struggle with identifying topics, which leads to individual conferences.

### Writing Assignments in upper level WI courses

- I assign four papers, each one being a little longer and more complex. The first paper, three to four pages, requires a comparison of two contrasting ideas. The fourth paper, six to ten pages, includes literature research and analysis.
- Students keep a writing portfolio of four papers and write an end-of-term cover essay that pulls together all of the papers. The papers are organized around different critical approaches to a single work. Assignments grow in complexity; later papers include the use of critical articles.

The portfolio is successful; students like and benefit from having a central organizing topic connecting all the papers.

- The first three papers are short argument papers; the fourth is a ten to twenty page research paper on a self-selected topic. Students must keep a research folder over the semester, with notes on readings, a timeline, etc. The folder helps students organize a complicated project, but it is not a perfect system.
- I used to assign four analytical papers, but I now assign one ten page research paper and eight two page essays. Half of the research paper is analysis of one piece, involving some research. In the other half of the paper, the student assumes the identity of a real or imagined historical person and explores that person's connection to the topic. The design is flexible: students may write in first person, use letter format, etc. In addition, at the end of each of the eight units, students write a two-page essay that reviews the material, for a total of eight short essays. I take exam questions from the short essays.
- I follow the typical pattern of four papers. One paper is a library research paper in preparation for a poster on the topic. The other three are review articles written for readers of journals.
- The goal of this interdisciplinary course is to teach the students how to write in the discipline as preparation for the senior thesis. Assignments range widely: autobiographical piece, interview, survey, review of literature, data analysis, and reflective writing. Some shorter assignments lead to longer assignments. Lengths range from two to twenty pages. Students are challenged by the many kinds of assignments.

### **Other writing activities**

- Short responses at the beginning of class to help students pose questions and organize thoughts
- A brief statement of paper topic submitted ten days before the paper is due
- Short e-mail responses to me prior to class
- One-page discussion papers that relate the readings to another course, raise a question suggested by the readings, .... Students must hand in six out of ten.
- Close analysis of short passages
- Practice with the kind of questions on exams
- A short outline or paragraph response to a question about the readings
- Sometimes students write questions and comments at the end of class. I respond in writing and hand them back at the next class.
- Five minute free writes at the end of class every Friday

### **WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON DRAFTS**

- I divide comments into 1) recurring grammar and mechanical errors, 2) organization (whole paper and paragraph), and 3) content and research. I type a paragraph on each. I use symbols from *Essentials of Writing*, the college style sheet, to mark errors ([www.hamilton.edu/style/home](http://www.hamilton.edu/style/home)).
- My comments focus on four areas: mechanics, internal paragraph structure, overall argument structure, and the quality of the ideas.

- I usually write all over the papers. I also write a summary response, mostly on the nature of the argument, up to a page long. I use colored pencils to mark recurring problems, which makes error patterns really stand out.
- The key goal is to get the student to re-think the question. I try to resist line editing and point out only major, persistent errors.
- I like to pose questions, and I will put question marks in the margins where I am confused. End comments focus on major concerns, usually about organization and evidence.
- I comment a lot, even to the point of rewriting sentences. I always feel I have more to say, and I like to meet with students to discuss their ideas.
- I first mark the surface errors, then read a second time for structure and argument. Form and content are inseparable; the quality of the organization reflects the quality of the student's understanding. I provide extensive end comments. I keep these comments on computer as a record of the student work; they are very helpful for letters of recommendation, etc.
- In upper level courses, I circle surface errors rather than label them. I type the more substantive comments rather than write them on the paper.
- I write all over papers. Most of my comments are on structure, and I spend a lot of time on introductions. I circle surface errors.
- For grammar, I circle the errors and use symbols from the Writing Center's "Habits of Effective Writers" ([www.hamilton.edu/writing/writing-resources](http://www.hamilton.edu/writing/writing-resources)) plus some of my own, including *PNA*: "presuming not arguing" (students often take positions as a given rather than argue them). My end comments focus more on structure and argument. I write comments on the paper's biggest problems, usually half a page.
- I comment on organization, especially topic sentences and concluding sentences; evidence; and sentence clarity. I use the correction symbols that I think the student will understand. For the introductory level, I use the symbols from the Writing Center's "Habits of Effective Writers."
- Most of my comments are in the margins. I do a lot of re-wording. I have no standard organization for final comments; I focus on the value of the argument—particularly organization and evidence.
- I do not let students ignore errors. Introductory-level students must correct errors and resubmit papers; upper level students correct errors and file papers in a portfolio.

#### **Writing tutor suggestions for written feedback**

- Ideas should take precedence over style when responding to an early draft.
- It's important as the reader to separate yourself from the text; do not focus on editing the draft. Instead, raise questions/comments that force the student to rethink. Get as far away from the text as you can so that you can then go back to it. Revision is reworking, restructuring, rethinking.

- Ask questions about the ideas. Students can get stuck on the ‘what’; they focus too much on summary and not enough on analysis. Students need to examine the implications of the “what.” Ask critical questions about the text, the evidence. *Why* do certain conditions exist? Get the student to think critically about *causes* and *implications*.
- Does the student even have an argument? “Indian and Irish behavior under British colonial rule differed” is not an argument. The thesis has to be contentious—an observation that needs defending.
- While the thesis is a key element in the introduction, the rest of the paragraph should not be simply a container for the thesis. Does all of the introductory material point toward the thesis, either by introducing relevant information to the reader and/or by qualifying the specificity of the thesis?
- Push students to ask more of their sources. Do the sources actively support the thinking or just fill space? Is anything gained by using a whole quotation rather than a select phrase?
- Ask critical questions of specific paragraphs:
  - Does the introductory sentence state a fact or does it advance the argument?
  - Does the full paragraph just state facts or does it advance the argument?
  - Does the paragraph clearly connect to the thesis?
  - Has the writer sufficiently analyzed the evidence?
  - Is more evidence needed to make the logic clearer/more convincing?
  - Is the progression of ideas in the paragraph logical and complete? Should alternative progressions be considered?
- Look at the sequence of paragraphs and the transitions. Non-existent or weak transitions may indicate weak organization.
- What in the conclusion was already said in the introduction? If the conclusion says nothing new, then the student has not developed a complete, full argument.  
Related to this point: Writers often arrive at an important insight at the end of an early draft. They should bring the insight back to the introduction and write a new final paragraph that concludes the fuller, more insightful argument.

### INDIVIDUAL/SMALL GROUP CONFERENCING ON DRAFTS

#### Faculty suggestions:

- Two of the four assignments in intro. classes include mandatory tutorials on first drafts--small group peer review outside of class. Students like the tutorial process very much; they get responses from me and from group members. The highest paper grades are on these papers. Tutorials are not perfect: they take a lot of instructor time, and it is questionable if students learn much about writing from one other because they are not trained to think about argument/organization. Students tend to be more helpful on content—how to develop ideas.
- For introductory courses, I require one early draft meeting with me and am available for other meetings.
- I hold individual conferences and provide models of successful and unsuccessful papers.
- With upper level students, I spend considerable time in individual conferences discussing ideas.

- I often hold pre-writing conferences; I have found that meeting with two or three students at a time to discuss topics is quite effective.

**Writing tutor suggestions:**

- It's important that the reader not be tied to the existing draft. For a draft, discussion of *ideas* is paramount. The ideas drive the structure. Put the draft aside and ask the writer, "Tell me your ideas. What is your vision for the completed paper? "At what point is it now?" This sort of discussion leads to seeing what needs to happen in the next draft to achieve the vision. Gaining an understanding of the paper's potential and the writer's capabilities leads to developing a revision plan.
- Refine the thinking. Ask, "What is your main idea? Why is it important? How does your evidence support it? Why did you pick this thesis? Why did you organize your thinking in this way? On what grounds would someone oppose your position? What are likely counterarguments?"
- Ask, "What are the stakes of your argument?" ("So what?") Thinking this through helps to get a more in-depth thesis. It makes papers be more thoughtful and interesting, for the writer and for readers.
- For the conclusion, "If you had to write another ten pages, what would you say next?"
- Focus on developing the thinking. Helpful comments include "Develop this point; I'm not following you." "Your logic is unclear." "Why?" Find the spots in the text where the ideas don't connect.
- Be straightforward and clear. Suggest revision options: "There are several ways to address this concern: You could..."
- It helps to ask the student to explain their argument. If it is incomplete/illogical, have the student walk you through the argument to identify what needs to be added. Ask questions in the *context* of what is in the draft: "What do you mean in relation to this specific point?"
- Ask, "What ideas do you find interesting?" Lead them to say something more directed and more personal. Get to the core of their argument.
- Ask, "How do you know this?" Ask them to logically defend the claim.
- Note specific sentences/specific ideas needing development. Ask, "How?" "Why is this point significant?" Push the writer to identify causes and conclusions.
- Ask the student to explain the topic for each paragraph; then look at the opening and closing sentences and the evidence in the paragraph. Do they work together as a whole?
- Encourage re-thinking of the organization. Would another organization deepen the analysis? Ask, "Why did you organize it this way?"
- A very helpful strategy is to ask the writer to go through the whole paper, explaining the main idea of each paragraph and its relationship to the thesis. This exercise reveals a lot about the substance and the organization of the overall argument: too many ideas in one paragraph;

irrelevant ideas; ideas in the wrong place; and the need for topic sentences/transitions that make the argument clearer. It also allows you to step outside of the existing argument and identify what needs to be added/changed to make the argument complete

### **REVISION POLICIES**

- I give a range of revision opportunities: one in-class review with a classmate, one out-of-class review with a classmate, and one Writing Center conference. The student chooses how to handle revision for the fourth paper. All revisions occur before the final draft is submitted; no revisions take place after grading.

I read two drafts of Paper One. The first draft is worth 5%; students revise based on my comments, and the final draft is worth 10%. For Paper Two, I require Writing Center conferences. For Paper Three, I require peer review of drafts outside of class; the peer review is worth 5%. I find that peer review is more helpful to the readers, not the writers; it helps students see their own writing in new ways.

- Students rewrite two of the first three papers after meeting with me. The focus of revision is re-thinking the argument, not on correcting. Often the content is muddled, and the student needs to reorganize.
- Because students have a new assignment almost every week, I emphasize applying what is learned from one assignment to the following assignment rather than emphasize rewriting of a graded assignment. Students have the option to revise if they wish. I do not mark specific mistakes; I read the draft and describe the significant problems to the student.
- If students choose to revise, certain limitations apply: they must meet with me; they must incorporate all of my feedback, and they must revise right away. It is important that students understand that the revision must be substantially better to qualify for a change of grade.
- The key goal in revision is to get the student to re-think the central question of the assignment.
- I require revision and expansion of an in-class essay. Students are given the topic ahead; they may bring a page of quotations to use, and they write an essay in class. I comment on the essay, and the student then revises it into a formal paper, expanding the initial argument. Advantages to this design are that students pay close attention to my comments; I can direct the argument at an early stage; and the time pressure of in-class writing forces students to use their natural voice.

### **GRADING**

(Also see comments in “Written Feedback on Drafts” section)

- I hand out a detailed grading rubric specific to each assignment. Rubrics make for better papers. Students know what to focus on when writing, and I know what to focus on when grading.
- When I evaluate a paper, I emphasize one or two significant problems: what the student most needs to work on to write a better next draft or paper. I have students attach a cover sheet with answers to the following questions: What were you asked to work on in your previous paper, and how did you address these problems in the current paper?

### **IN-CLASS DISCUSSION OF WRITING**

- I provide handouts on assignments, including explicit guidelines and an explanation of the assignment objectives. For introductory courses, I spend a lot of time on thesis sentences. Students e-mail me their proposed thesis sentences, and we discuss them in class.
- In intro. courses, I devote one day to Paper One. I distribute a stronger and a weaker paper from the class set, and we discuss them in depth. Students' responses to the papers are pretty smart; they see the key differences between the two papers.
- I devote two or three classes a semester to writing, specifically on how to develop a topic.
- Early in the semester, we discuss two professional journal articles. One is my favorite example of a bad paper, and the other is a very good paper. We discuss the differences, and the class sees what makes a good piece of writing.
- We spend time discussing the topic--how to narrow it down to a workable question.
- Most of our class discussion on writing involves organization. Early in the semester, we discuss likely organizational patterns for an assignment. I have students write down everything important they can think of about a topic; sometime I have them go to their notes and add other ideas. Then I put ideas on the board, and we discuss where are the best places to put ideas.
- I distribute a well-written introduction that includes a preview of the organization of the argument and an effective thesis sentence. We also look at a poorly written body paragraph (lacking focus and support).
- In my upper level course, we discuss an excellent paragraph written by a professional scholar and a chapter that I have written.
- We discuss how to think about the topic and likely approaches to the organization. Usually the discussion about writing is not at the sentence-level but about organization and argument. Sometimes we brainstorm and create charts on the board. This is especially useful when students must handle multiple texts.
- I discuss sentences, especially how to subordinate lesser ideas to more important ideas. I want students to think about the relationship between sentences and the logic of their argument.
- We discuss expectations for assignments and likely strategies for approaching the argument. We also look at successful models.
- In intro. classes, we discuss the objectives, audience, and possible structure for an assignment. We discuss how to develop an argument and possible evidence to use.
- Before the first assignment, I devote one class to writing. I distribute a handout with criteria for writing, ask students to describe their writing problems, and distribute a sample of a good paper, one containing a clear thesis and an argument.
- I provide specific examples from the students' papers: opening sentences, paragraphs, topic sentences, and common errors.

### **Writing tutor suggestions for in-class discussion**

- An in-class exercise, in pairs: to see the large picture, outline the draft-- the thesis and topic sentences. If these make sense, then move on to developing logical transitions.
- Peer review can really help with assessment of drafts, provided you've prepared the class to do this sort of scrutiny/assessment.

#### **STATEMENT ON SYLLABUS**

- Be very clear in your syllabus about which assignments will receive extensive commentary, which will have opportunity for revision, etc.

#### **COMMON PROBLEMS IN STUDENT WRITING**

- Hamilton students are fairly good writers and will do a good job if held to a high standard and if writing under optimal conditions. Their biggest problem is not thinking enough about the question before beginning to write. They also need to get feedback on their first full draft and then revise, especially the organization. Students need to start early to include these steps.
- Students have trouble carrying an argument from the beginning to the end.
- Intro. level students need help articulating a thesis and maintaining paragraph unity. Upper level students struggle with managing big questions and locating and using sources effectively.
- Students need to stay focused on the question. They do not carry their thesis through the entire argument. Each paragraph must relate back to the thesis in some way. Students also need to learn how to develop an argument and use sources more fully.
- Students need to work on how to examine counterarguments, how to logically structure the argument, and how to preview in the introduction the organization of the argument.
- Students need to develop confidence in their arguments and how to develop an argument. In addition, they usually do not spend enough time on their writing, which contributes to underdeveloped arguments.

#### **WRITING IN NON-WI CLASSES**

- I include almost as much writing as I assign in a WI class. I assign two eight-page papers, a midterm, and a final. There also are additional short assignments to maintain some dialogue on the readings.
- I usually assign at least two papers, plus one or two hour exams, and a final. When I teach two forty-student sections of an intro. course, I allow students to revise paper one as long as it is a substantive revision; I average the two grades.
- I am tiring of journals; students are not coming up with interesting ideas. I have found that one-page responses to specific questions about the readings are more effective; they are a way to ensure that students do the readings.
- I give the same sort of assignments as I give in WI classes, but not as many, and I may not respond in as much detail.

- Students write six one-to-two page papers and one eight-to-ten page research paper.
- I require two lab reports, each of which must be revised and resubmitted. The initial version requires only parts of a full lab report (data reduction, analysis, and presentation). The revision adds another section or two (introduction and discussion).
- In my thirty to forty student classes, each week half of the class e-mails me one page responses to the reading, due the morning before class. I read and comment on them, and print out copies to bring to class.
- I always teach “writing-intensively.” In a class of forty, students write four two-page papers and two five-page papers. I have found that if students write fewer than four papers in my class, they don’t learn what they need to learn.
- In a forty student class, I assign at least one and sometimes two papers. I use a grading rubric to summarize comments on papers. I also ask for several short discussions of how the student’s life experiences relate to the material.
- In a forty student class, I assign only one paper, but I am uneasy about it. There is no opportunity for the students to learn from only one paper. I also have in-class essays, a mid-term, and a final.
- In a forty student class, I assign two four-to-six page papers, a final take-home exam, and several fifteen minute in-class writings, announced ahead.
- In my thirty-to-forty student intro. class, we do almost the same amount of writing as in a WI course, but I do not provide the same feedback. Students write three short papers, a midterm, and a final.

#### **OTHER COMMENTS**

- Never say you will collect the “first draft,” which students assume means a very rough initial effort with no rethinking. I prefer the term “full draft.”