

**Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center  
Hamilton College  
Clinton, NY 13323**

**Writing in Larger Classes**

Teaching a larger class has many demands, and you cannot give the careful attention to writing that you could in a smaller class. Be confident that any writing that advances the learning objectives of the class is a valuable addition for students. Here are suggestions for handling writing assignments in large classes.

**1. Course planning**

**Structuring/designing the course assignments**

Consider the range of assignments that incorporate writing:

- One page responses to specific questions about the reading
- Short student email responses to reading before class:  
    half of the class (or other fraction) does this each week/each class  
    responses due the morning before the afternoon class; professor reviews and brings them to class
- Fifteen minute in-class writing, announced ahead, or not
- Short (100 word) responses or encyclopedia entries (helps students practice concise thinking and writing)
- Written exams:  
    Give questions in advance and emphasize the importance of students' planning a coherent response.  
    Tell students that they will be graded on writing as well as content on take-home exams.
- Short papers/lab reports
- Longer research papers/lab reports (sometimes with sections due across the semester)

**Managing work flow**

Be realistic about how much you can handle.

- Stagger the due dates so that only a subset of all papers is due at one time (possible ways: by alphabet, by class year, by student preference, randomly).
- Give fewer assignments.
- Keep assignments short. Less can be more if a focused, short assignment clearly advances a learning objective of the course.
- Allow (or require) students to work in groups.
- If you allow revision, make it voluntary rather than required, or allow revision on only some assignments.
- Use check/plus grading for some assignments.

**2. Communicating with students**

Communicate your expectations to students before they write.

- Help students to focus on specific writing goals and to be more self-aware writers.
- Make students aware of the criteria by which they will be evaluated.
- Set reasonable student expectations about how much assessment you can provide.

Share your grading rubric or assignment objectives with students in advance, and share models of good and bad responses.

Spend time at the beginning of the semester talking about writing; do some practice exercises; look at sample sentences/paragraphs together.

### **3. Improving efficiency in reading/commenting on/grading student writing**

Based on your goals for the assignment, construct a template for typed, general comments before grading the submissions or after quickly reading through some papers before grading; common issues can be addressed in common language.

Remember that students can process only a certain amount of feedback on each paper, so don't overload the feedback. Possible suggestions:

- Mark everything on the first page or two and then summarize the problems in the paper as a whole at the end.

- Use editing symbols.

- Put only brief marginal notes throughout; use the marginal notes as reminders for issues to address in a typed, summary response to the entire paper.

This makes it possible to lump comments by category in descending order of seriousness: content first, organization/evidence/execution next, grammatical issues/local comments last.

This can be combined with the general template described above--cutting and pasting for common types of errors.

- Focus on targeted concerns, e.g., strong thesis, effective use of evidence.

- To help maintain consistent grading, keep a rubric or list of questions in front of you as you grade (can circle or check-mark specific items for each student if that seems helpful).

- Go paperless on early and/or on final drafts.

Use "track changes" function in Word (allows instructor to write quickly, to target issues in student writing more exactly, and to give legible feedback

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