



SUPPORTING LEARNING THROUGH WRITING

A FIELD GUIDE

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In the Purdue Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program, we believe that the best way to help students to see the continued value of liberal arts is through active engagement with great works of literature through writing.

Although this short field guide is not comprehensive, it provides SCLA 101 instructors with some strategies that will empower students to learn through writing. These strategies are meant to be deployed throughout the semester alongside course content, and estimated times are listed for class implementation. The activities here can both allow instructors to solidify course content for students and help them to become better writers.



[Writing to Learn]

This pedagogical approach values writing as a method of learning. Writing can help students work through confusing new ideas: when students write reactions to information received in class or in reading, they often comprehend and retain the information better. Also, because students write more frequently, they become more comfortable with writing and are able to maintain or even improve upon their writing skills. WTL assignments are typically short and informal and can be performed either in or out of class.

Blog posts (out of class): Have students write 1-2 paragraphs in response to a prompt, reading, or class discussion on a Brightspace forum. These short discussions can be used to build deeper understanding or engagement with course content or provide students an opportunity to start to develop ideas moving towards larger essays.

Counter arguments (5-10 minutes): Have students write for five minutes to identify counter arguments or counter evidence to a point, explanation, or argument that has been raised in class.

One Minute Papers (1-2 minutes): At the end of class, have students write for a few minutes to summarize the lecture or discussion, note key points, or ask a final question.

Microtheme (5-10 minutes): Have students write a short in-class essay on a 3x5 index card in response to a prompt by the instructor. The length constraints help students to summarize what they have been learning and start to build connections. In addition to providing instant feedback to instructors, the themes and questions can appear on exams or be built on to feed into formal essay assignments.

Assignment summaries (2-3 minutes): After an essay has been assigned, have students summarize what they understand the assignment is asking them to do. These summaries can either be written in class on index cards, or out of class as a blog post. These summaries allow the instructor to assess student understanding of the assignment and allows students to begin to think through their approach to the assignment.

Helping Students Start Writing

For many students in SCLA 101, one of the biggest challenges is figuring out how to start writing. As a result, many students procrastinate on getting started, and turn in projects that are below their potential. The strategies listed here can offer instructors ways to help students think through what they want to say, consider what the sources say, and begin to structure their writing. These activities can be implemented alongside other course content before an essay draft is due.

1 Freewriting + Looping (out of class):

Have students freewrite—sit down and write for 10-15 minutes without stopping. Students can “loop” by reading back through their freewrite for themes or promising ideas, and then freewriting again, focusing on those themes. Freewrites can be turned in and graded as a complete/incomplete portion of project grade.

2 Listing (5-7 minutes):

Have students start by writing down all possible terms that come to mind for the topic they are working with. After this initial list, students can group items by emerging themes and label the themes. For each theme, students can write a sentence summarizing their ideas about that group of terms. This activity can work towards creating an outline or a working thesis statement.

3 Mindmapping (5-7 minutes):

Write the main idea or concept in the center of the page and underline. Begin to write down related ideas, and connect them to the main idea (and each other) using lines. Mindmapping can help show how ideas are related and can be used to move towards an outline for a project.

4 Outlining (out of class):

Outlining is best implemented after students have already done freewrites, created lists, or mindmapped. Using the ideas and themes they have already generated, students can write a tentative thesis, and start organizing ideas into headings and subheadings. If students already have their sources and quotes, they might want to include quotations bulleted under the headings. After creating the major headings and subheadings, students might also be encouraged to write topic sentences for each paragraph.

5 Reflection Questions (5-10 minutes):

Have students create lists, freewrite, or mindmap in response to the following questions: 1) What do I already know? 2) What do I need to know? 3) What are the next steps I need to take? This activity can be used to help students see gaps in their research, organize their thoughts around a topic, and form a plan for writing or revision. These questions can also be used in small group discussions.

6 Annotated Bibliography (out of class):

Students create a bibliography with citations, 2 to 4 significant quotes per source, a sentence summarizing the main point, and a sentence addressing relevance. This activity allows students to begin to focus on key themes in the sources and can be paired with a freewrite to let students begin to summarize their knowledge.

As you design an essay assignment, please consider the following

1

3. Evidence: What form will evidence take in this paper (e.g. block quotations? paraphrase? graphs or charts?). What documentation style should they use and should their bibliography be annotated?

4. Key words: What do the key words in my instructions mean to students (e.g. analyze, argue, critique, explore, evidence, support)?

5. Audience: To what audience should they imagine themselves writing?

1. Think creatively: Develop a question that proposes writing that you would want to read and that students would want to produce on topics relevant and interesting.

2. Lesson learned: Keep the Learning Outcomes in mind by asking yourself what Learning Outcomes will your students demonstrate by writing this paper?

1. Discuss the assignment in class so students can see that you take it seriously, so they can ask questions about it, and so they can have it in mind as they read and discuss the transformative texts.

2. Explain what you mean by the discipline-specific vocabulary used in your assignment.

3. Talk about how they can get started on this assignment. Should they do research and where should they look for sources?

4. Present writing samples that successfully demonstrate the criteria of the assignment.

5. Talk about issue of plagiarism (what the temptations might be, how to avoid risks)

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Take time in class to prepare students to succeed at writing

[Designing Essay Assignments]

1. Smaller assignments should prepare for larger ones later.

2. For larger papers, students should submit drafts and receive feedback.

3. If possible, meet with students individually about their writing. Nothing inspires them more than feeling that you care about their work and development.

4. Students should do some thinking and writing before they write a draft and receive feedback (even if only a response to a proposal or thesis statement).

5. Students should reflect on their own writing in brief cover letters attached to drafts and revisions (these may also ask students to perform certain checks on what they have written before submitting).



**General
Tips**

3

The word “revision” for most students conjures up the image of sitting down with a pen and correcting the grammatical and syntactical errors of a paper. True revision, however, is the process of systematically working through how to strengthen the central argument or idea of a project. This might involve conducting more research, reorganizing paragraphs, rewriting a thesis, or reworking an introduction and conclusion.

While the work of revision is essential for students to critically engage with course content—in that it helps them to reflexively consider their own thinking—most students will not revise without encouragement. As a result, SCLA 101 instructors must build in revision into the sequence of a semester. These activities are meant to be done either in class or out of class in the weeks before a final draft is due.

Revision

Reverse outlining (10 minutes):

After students have written a full first draft, have them write down the topic sentence of each paragraph in an outline format. This activity should serve two purposes: students can quickly see the flow of ideas in their ideas and also evaluate if their topic sentences are clearly stating the main idea of each paragraph.

1

Revision memo (out of class):

After students have received feedback on their writing, either from their instructor or from other students in a peer review group, have them write a memo that summarizes the feedback on their writing, critically reflects on what they personally see as strengths and weaknesses, and outlines a plan for incorporating feedback into a revised draft.

2

Revision Heuristic (out of class):

While this activity could be conducted in class, it is probably easier for students to work through it on their own. For this activity, you can give students a handout with the following prompts to allow them to think through how to further develop their project. This assignment pairs well with the revision memo.

1. Find your main point.
2. Identify your readers and your purpose.
3. Evaluate your evidence.
4. Save only the good pieces.
5. Tighten and clean up your language.
6. Eliminate mistakes in grammar and usage.
7. Switch from writer-centered to reader-centered.

These questions are adapted from the Purdue OWL. For the full questions, visit: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/proofreading/steps_for_revising.html

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Responding to Student Writing

General Principles: Be sure your comments on student writing reflect the hierarchy of your concerns about the paper. Treat major issues first and at greater length; minor issues should be treated briefly or not at all. Grammatical or mechanical issues are probably less important than their handling of an argument, evidence, structure, and sources. Focusing your energies on just a few important points will yield a cleaner and more easily intelligible message to your students.

Reading the Paper: You may want to skim through four or five papers to get a sense of the pile before reading and grading any single paper. Whether skimming on a first time through or reading carefully, you might keep the following categories in mind, which will help you assess the paper's strengths and weaknesses:

Thesis: Is there one main argument in the paper? Does it fulfill the assignment? Is the thesis clearly stated near the beginning of the paper? Is it interesting, complex? Is it argued throughout?

Structure: Is the paper clearly organized? Is it easy to understand the main point of each paragraph? Does the order of the overall argument make sense, and is it easy to follow?

Evidence and Analysis: Does the paper offer supporting evidence for each of its points? Is there enough analysis of evidence?

Sources: Are the sources, including the transformative texts, paraphrased or quoted correctly and in context? Are they properly documented and is the bibliographical information correct?

Style: Is the style appropriate for its audience? Is the paper concise and to the point? Are sentences clear and grammatically correct? Are there spelling or proofreading errors?

Marginal Comments



Only edit or annotate texts if your comments are legible and clearly explain their concern or praise.

Check marks, abbreviations or cryptic comments (awk, s/s, ?, or yes!) often mystify students.

Unfortunately, students often ignore the final comment and obsess about margin notes, so make sure explicitly use marginal feedback to reinforce themes in final comment.

The Final Comment

Address the paper's main point. Beginning by articulating your understanding of the argument signals to the student that you take their writing seriously. A restatement in your own words will also help you ground your comment.

Discuss the essay's strengths. Even good writers need to know what they are doing well so that they can do it again in the future.

Discuss the paper's weaknesses, focusing on large problems first.

Choose two or three of the most important areas in which the student needs to improve and present these in order of descending importance. If possible, suggest practical solutions so that the student can correct the problems in the next paper.

Type your final comments if possible. If you handwrite them, write in a straight line and avoid writing on the reverse side of the paper. The more readable your comments, the more seriously your students are likely to take them.

[Peer Review]



In peer review sessions, peer readers offer suggestions on other students' drafts to help them critically work through the process of revision.

One common misconception is that peer readers cannot provide strong feedback because they do not have the necessary expertise—however, with a little guidance, peer review sessions can offer students valuable opportunities for developing writing skills.

Peer review sessions typically involve breaking students up into groups of 3-4 (so each student has at least two reviewers) and having them circulate drafts to provide feedback to one another. This activity can either be done in the classroom, begun in the classroom and continued online, or done completely online. Some of the benefits of peer review include

- 1) Instructors reduce the workload of offering feedback on drafts.
- 2) Students develop critical thinking skills through analyzing others' writing.
- 3) Students are encouraged to write multiple drafts, leading to critical engagement with the material

Peer Review Forms

Without adequate structure, students will often struggle to provide strong feedback to their peers. One way to give guidelines to help students offer good feedback is through developing a peer review form. On these forms, you can highlight for students the aspects of papers that are most important as well as mirroring the assignment's grading criteria. Depending on the assignment, your peer review form might ask student reviewers questions like

1. What is the main idea of the paper?
2. Does the introduction introduce the topic, provide context, and show significance? Does it answer the "so what" question? What suggestions do you have to improve it?
3. Underline the thesis: Is it clear and arguable? Does it provide a roadmap for the rest of the paper? How could the writer improve their thesis so it meets both those criteria?
4. Does the paper have strong topic sentences and transition sentences? If not, how might they be improved?
5. Does each paragraph have a single idea? Do the paragraphs provide supporting evidence for the thesis? Note strong paragraphs as well as paragraphs that might be improved.
6. Is there any other supporting evidence that you think the writer should use?
7. Does the conclusion effectively bring together the main points of the paper?
8. Are there errors in grammar or spelling? If so, can you point to a specific pattern of error?

[Running a Peer Review Workshop]

Running a peer review workshop can take up to a full class period for longer projects. Below is a timeline of how a peer review session might go.

1 5-7 minutes

Begin by explaining peer review and talking students through the peer review form. For peer review to function properly, it is important to lay out some guidelines: read the draft through before making comments, point out strengths as well as areas for improvement, and link comments to particular sentences or aspects of a paper.

It's also good to remind students that comments should be constructive and address issues with structure or ideas before jumping to grammar or spelling.

2 15-20 minutes

Distribute peer review forms and divide students up into groups of 3-4 depending on class size. Each student should have brought in several copies of their draft, and should have two reviewers. If students have specific concerns about their draft, they should ask their reviewers to provide feedback on those areas.

Have students read through the drafts, leave marginal comments, fill out the forms, and highlight or underline key areas (main idea, topic sentences, important points, etc.). You can bounce between groups to listen in and answer specific questions students have.

3 7-10 minutes

The final step is to give students a chance to talk through the comments they gave and received. It's easiest if each student receives comments from both of peer reviewers while taking notes. This time can allow for clarification of any ambiguous comments as well as a succinct summary of the main points for revision.

Students should take home the peer review forms as well as their annotated drafts. Make sure to have reviewers write their names on both the forms and drafts so they can be collected later.



Virtual Workshop

Although in-person peer review workshops have benefits in terms of providing students with on-the-spot feedback and building class cohesion, some instructors may not be able to give up a full class period. In that case, online peer review is a good option. Instructors can post peer review forms on Brightspace, show students how to use track changes in Word or Google Docs, and then have students circulate drafts virtually. Another benefit of online peer review is that instructors can immediately see the feedback students are giving each other and make adjustments if necessary.

A good way to approach virtual workshops is to break up parts of the peer review process into in-person and online components. The peer review process can be explained in class, students can exchange drafts virtually, and part of the next class period can be used for students to exchange filled-out peer review forms and discuss revision plans.

Week 7

Readings:

M: *Gilgamesh*, Prologue + Books I

W: *Gilgamesh*, Books II-IV, Hinton, "You've Got a Writing Assignment. Now What?"

F: *Gilgamesh*, Books V-VI, Craig & Lessner, "Finding your Way In."

Assignments:

M: Essay 2 assigned

W: Assignment summary in class

F: Freewrite on potential ideas due

Week 8

Readings:

M: *Gilgamesh*, VII + finish discussion

W: *Aeneid*, Book I, Stedman, "Annoying Ways People Use Sources."

F: *Aeneid*, Book II

Assignments:

M: Blog post on Brightspace

W: Essay 2 outline due in class

F: Find two secondary sources and bring citations & quotes to class

Week 9

Readings:

M: *Aeneid*, Book III

W: *Aeneid*, Book IV, Hart-Davidson, "Describe-Evaluate-Suggest: Giving Helpful Feedback"

F: No Reading - Peer review workshop

Assignments:

M: Post essay intros on Brightspace + respond to 2 classmates' intros.

W: Work on essay draft

F: Bring two copies of rough draft for workshop

Week 10

Readings:

M: *Aeneid*, Book V

W: *Aeneid*, Book VI

F: *Aeneid*, Book VII

Assignments:

M: Post essay revision memo on Brightspace

W: Work on essay revision

F: Essay 2 final draft due

Teaching with Writing in a Four Week Sequence

One significant challenge for instructors is figuring out how to include writing instruction and writing activities within the flow of the semester while also delivering course content.

However, through including readings on the writing process and activities like the ones mentioned in this guide, instructors can effectively enhance student learning by sequencing assignments. Students can develop their writing skills, ideas, and confidence through low-stakes writing assignments. These assignments often generate ideas that students can further develop into longer projects.

The timeline on the left shows a possible syllabus schedule in the weeks leading up to an essay assignment. The writing instruction texts address the parts of the writing process that students are working through, and the assignments build on each other so that students are not scrambling at the last minute to finish an essay draft.



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CORNERSTONE
INTEGRATED **LIBERAL ARTS**

Prepared by



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