

Learning about Learning to Write: Introducing Students to Course Themes

Schedule	5 minutes: Getting started 20 minutes: How we learn to write. 25 minutes: Things we know about writing. 10 minutes: Debrief
Materials	pens/pencils and paper (students usually bring these with them) handheld whiteboards & markers (1 per group) classroom whiteboard (or chalkboard) computers (ideally one-per-student) with access to internet
Set-up	begin with students seated to work individually. They will later move into small groups, then a whole group conversation, and work at computers. “What We Know” reading should be uploaded to a Google Doc per instructions below

Background:

We have used this lesson with faculty attending our workshops and with students in our courses. In both cases, most of our participants expect “writing” in science to be a few lengthy term papers, styled after journal articles, with considerable attention paid to the use of commas and appropriate citations. Students and workshop participants may be skeptical of peer review, having found it to be less-than-useful in the past. They may not expect informal writing to “count” as academic writing. Students often have misconceptions about how academic writing happens, not fully understanding the critical role played by early drafts and peer review. In this lesson, we help them identify some themes about writing that they already know, and then introduce them to findings from the field of Literacy Studies. This helps orient participants to the course and to the ways in which students will be using writing to construct, critique, refine and disseminate scientific ideas.

In addition, the way we use technology in this lesson — where students use Google Docs to read, annotate and discuss the text is useful for later readings in the course. By taking a few extra minutes to familiarize students with Google Docs, with reading and commenting on text with their peers, and how to add and respond to comments in this setting, students are prepared to use this technology throughout the semester.

To prepare, you should set up a Google Doc (or other format that you plan to use throughout the semester) where students can read, comment, and view others’ comments. If you expect to use this technology frequently, you may want to spend some time walking students through accessing the site. If this is a one-day workshop, or you don’t anticipate using the technology again in your class, you may wish to set up some computers so that they are ready to use. Make sure students can comment but cannot edit the document they are viewing. The document they will be viewing is below, and can also be copied from this site: <http://>

tinyurl.com/learningtowrite. We usually add a few “mock” comments to model how this feature can be used. We may have a comment that agrees (“this idea makes sense to me. When I think about my poetry class, ...”), one that disagrees (“Surely there are skills that transfer across contexts...”), and one that opens up a conversation (“I’m not sure what this really means. I think it might mean ... but that doesn’t seem right. Any ideas?”).

Getting started:

You’ll want to have the prompt below visible — written on the chalkboard or projected on a screen.

1. How do you learn to write something new?
2. How do you learn to write well?

Call their attention to the prompt and say something like:

Before we get started, I want to take a few minutes for everyone to think through the following questions: think of something you had to write that you had not written before - maybe it was a craigslist ad for a new roommate, a performance review for an employee, or a college application essay. What do you do when you need to write something new - the kind of thing you’ve never written before? How did you learn to write that thing?

And then the second question is to think about something you can write well. How do you learn to write well?

I’m going to give you about 10 minutes to write down your thoughts and then you’ll discuss your answers in small groups.

Leave the prompt on the board so that participants can refer to it as they write. As they work, you may find that some people have questions, particularly if you have students early in their academic careers. Encourage them to think through something they are familiar with writing, including more informal, out-of-school contexts — emails, perhaps, advice they give and receive on a website, or writing related to employment.

Watch for students to finish their writing; if most seem to finish well before the time allotted, feel free to move into small groups early.

How we learn to write:

As students finish, ask them to discuss their answers in groups of 3 to 4. Circulate around to groups as they work to get a sense of the kinds of things they find. You can keep this small group work brief if needed. We recommend 5 - 10 minutes; this offers students an opportunity to begin to meet one another and hear more about the backgrounds and writing practices of their peers.

Then collect ideas on the board at the front of the room. As students share, feel free to expand or comment on their ideas, or ask them to share a little more. The goal of this conversation is for students to ground their conversation and their interpretations of the upcoming reading in terms of experiences that they have had when learning to write — in particular, they should be thinking through “real world” kinds of writing that they produce, and the range of ways in which they learn to do that.

We find that students draw from a range of genres and identify things that the later reading will confirm: the role of exemplars, of peers, of drafts and revisions. You may have a few students who reflect on particular practices they were taught and find useful: perhaps a teacher who helped them learn how to diagram sentences and they found this practice helpful; or a course in which a teacher emphasized using synonyms and they have used this with success. If so, you might press them on what kinds of writing this has helped them to construct — do they use this for emails and texts? Is it something useful for science class, math class? The later reading will call into question the idea that skills transfer across contexts; this is not to say that diagramming or synonyms are not useful, but help students to identify that these are useful in a particular writing context.

Things we know about writing:

After hearing from all groups and collecting these ideas, we then share with them findings from researchers who study how people learn to write. We share this reading as a Google Doc so that students can read, annotate, and discuss ideas with one another online. Not only is the reading useful, it models later work that students will do in our course as they make sense of texts with their peers.

This document follows; we also have a version online that you may copy to facilitate creating your own Google Doc: <http://tinyurl.com/learningtowrite>. If you use Google Docs, be sure that you have set the following permissions set so that your students can view and comment, but cannot change the original text.

We choose to use Google Docs because it is free, ubiquitous, updates in real time, and - we expect - is not likely to become outdated any time soon. The “comments” feature is particularly useful for creating a discussion around a piece of text. On our campus, students often have familiarity with Google Docs (our campus uses Google Apps for Education and that is helping to standardize this technology on campus). If you choose another platform, you will want one that allows for this kind of sharing and feedback.

There are several ways to facilitate getting everyone online. During a workshop or other short course, where we cannot meet with students in advance, we generally bring a classroom set of laptops with the website already loaded. For those who want to use their own laptops, we create a short url, similar to the one above, that sends them to the Google Doc.

For courses where we meet with students in advance, we offer detailed instructions that they use in advance to ensure they can access these documents. While not critical, this facilitates an ongoing use of this technology in our course, and it also allows them to comment under their own name. Students are asked to then bring their own laptops to class; in most classes well over half of our students have access to laptops and have no trouble bringing one along. Others are invited to share or use a classroom computer.

In the screen shot below, participants in a workshop have highlighted and added questions and comments as they read. Both instructors and other workshop participants respond to those comments in ongoing threads. This has several benefits: (1) it familiarizes students with a technology they will use throughout the semester; (2) it models for students how to read, question and discuss and article with their peers; (3) faculty can see where students have questions and concerns, and focus the conversation on those topics.

The image shows a document on the left with 20 numbered items, each containing a statement about writing and learning. Several words and phrases are highlighted in yellow. On the right, there is a comment thread with five entries, each showing a user profile picture, name, and timestamp. The comments are responses to the document's content.

10. Marking errors on one paper does not lead to improvement on the next. Rather, students learn by revising one paper before going on to the **next**.

11. **Correcting errors prompts no improvement.** Editing & proofreading for a student teaches nothing. It merely makes a better **paper**.

12. Students improve as writers only when they revise repeatedly over time. **Students must write frequently** in order to develop.

13. Students improve proofreading & editing by having a small number of repeated errors pointed out at one time, then self-correcting and collaborating with peers.

14. Peer responses may help students improve writing, provided students are trained to respond effectively through repeated **modeling**.

15. Writing in any situation is concerned, first and foremost, not with sentence-level correction, but with **communicating meaning to a real audience**. Over-concern with error too early in the writing process actually **hinders meaning-making** and the development of **ideas**.

16. **Form follows function**. Writing is effectively assessed when higher order concerns such as content and organization are considered first and most important, and when lower order concerns, such as grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, are considered **later and less important**.

17. All errors are not created equal. Those that interfere with clear meaning are more important than, say, a misspelled word, or affect when the writer means effect. Effective feedback **prioritizes revision suggestions from most important to least**.

18. Marking every error discourages learning. **Minimal marking (merely pointing out) is effective, while excessive marking is overwhelming, confusing**.

19. Grammar, punctuation, and mechanics are not learned in isolation; rather, they are learned in the context of a student's **writing**.

20. Effective writing assessment distinguishes among "mistakes" (the result of carelessness), "error" (the result of misunderstanding), and "stylistic" preferences (viscous instead of thick, for **example**).

Andrew 9:00 AM Jan 3
But what about the notion of the "expert novice"? Someone who is good at learning exhibits certain productive behaviors in novel contexts. Is there a similar idea for writers and writing?

Kim Jason 9:02 AM Jan 3
Yes, Andrew, I think I agree with this...it speaks to my example of trying to write in your field. I do have some ways of figuring out what I'm supposed to be doing. Although, I am going to sound like a newbie for quite a while

Eric 8:57 AM Jan 3
Though I would say all practice is good practice and should help across areas of study!

bor 8:58 AM Jan 3
This seems true to me. Students learn quickly how to turn skills on an off as they switch classes and instructors.

Anonymous 9:01 AM Jan 3
I have noticed this is especially true in the lab setting. Students can get very flustered when techniques that worked for a chemistry lab report no longer work for their physics lab.

Kim Jason 9:03 AM Jan 3
this is so interesting to me. We talk in composition about a "ball handling" metaphor: which ball handling skills should be taught? Can you teach ball

Debrief:

Review students' comments and questions as they work. After everyone has had a chance to comment on the piece, select a few of the items that seem particularly rich for conversation.

As you lead this final conversation, you might ask people to think through their own experiences learning to write something that they feel they write well. You can discuss how this will play out in the course you will be teaching - the assignments students can expect, the feedback you will offer, the role of peer review, an emphasis on content, the role that prior courses and "rules" about writing might play, etc.

Resources:

This material draws from our work published in Atkins Elliott, Leslie, Jaxon, Kim & Salter, Irene. *Composing Science: A Faciliator's Guide to Writing in the Science Classroom*. Teachers College Press & the National Writing Project, 2016.

Some “Givens”: Things We Know for Sure About the Teaching & Learning of Writing from 40 Years of Research [or What We *Think* We Know About Writing is Often Mistaken]

1. There is no single “good” writing because writing practices, including rules and conventions, vary from one context to another. (Thus, “good” writing in English class is not “good” writing in business, biology, nursing, computer science, or construction management.)
2. Literacy practices are situated. Students learn to write by practicing writing in a particular context, or situation, repeatedly over time. (First-year Composition teaches students to write in First-year Composition; writing in biology teaches students to write in biology. There is no universally good writing, and “transfer” is considerably less common than you think.)
3. Process comes before product. Writing practices are more important than individual papers. In a pedagogical setting, attention to and guidance in writing processes leads to improved products.
4. Students learn to write by writing, not by sitting on the sidelines and hearing a lecture on how to write.
5. Students do not learn the “basics” of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics before they can write in a particular context. Rather, they learn sentence-level rules and conventions by practicing meaningful writing—for a real purpose to a real audience in a real form—repeatedly over time.
6. Learning to write requires room to make mistakes. Novice writers in any field cannot be expected to produce writing “like a professional” or expert. Novices need to be taught and need to practice the rules and conventions of a particular field, but they are learners, not professionals.
7. Students learn to write by writing like professionals in their fields, by using writing in the ways in which writing functions in the discipline.
8. Informal writing is an effective way to learn course content. Teachers need not choose writing over content, or vice versa.
9. In a pedagogical setting, writing is meaningful when it is like the writing that people do outside of school: professional, personal, or public writing. Meaningful writing accomplishes some goal or objective important to the writer. When writing is meaningful, students find it engaging. When writing is engaging, students learn.
10. Marking errors on one paper does not lead to improvement on the next. Rather, students learn by revising one paper before going on to the next.
11. Correcting errors prompts no improvement. Editing & proofreading for a student teaches nothing. It merely makes a better paper.
12. Students improve as writers only when they revise repeatedly over time. Students must write frequently in order to develop.
13. Students improve proofreading & editing by having a small number of repeated errors pointed out at one time, then self-correcting and collaborating with peers.
14. Peer responses may help students improve writing, provided students are trained to respond effectively through repeated modeling.

15. Writing in any situation is concerned, first and foremost, not with sentence-level correction, but with communicating meaning to a real audience. Over-concern with error too early in the writing process actually hinders meaning-making and the development of ideas.
16. Form follows function. Writing is effectively assessed when higher order concerns such as content and organization are considered first and most important, and when lower order concerns, such as grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, are considered later and less important.
17. All errors are not created equal. Those that interfere with clear meaning are more important than, say, a misspelled word, or affect when the writer means effect. Effective feedback prioritizes revision suggestions from most important to least.
18. Marking every error discourages learning. Minimal marking (merely pointing out) is effective, while excessive marking is overwhelming, confusing.
19. Grammar, punctuation, and mechanics are not learned in isolation; rather, they are learned in the context of a student's writing.
20. Effective writing assessment distinguishes among "mistakes" (the result of carelessness), "error" (the result of misunderstanding), and "stylistic" preferences (viscous instead of thick, for example).
21. Errors are social and local, not universal. Errors are what experts in a field agree are errors. Error in one situation may be a preferred convention in another. We mark what we expect to find.
22. If students don't know, we must teach them. Telling students that they should have learned "X" in 4th grade or high school or First-year College Composition does not help them develop.
23. Assigning writing, marking and grading it, then returning it is not teaching writing. Teaching requires explicit instruction, repeated modeling, frequent feedback during the writing process, multiple opportunities for writing in a variety of genres, both formal and informal, and practice over an extended period of time.
24. Not all evidence of learning shows up in a single semester; rather writing development occurs slowly over extended time.
25. Non-native speakers of English will always write "with an accent." Penalizing them for their status as language learners is unjust.

—Mark Hall, Spr 2006
(edited, Spr. 2015)