

The Little Book
on
Teaching Writing to First-Year Students

Tips for Courses, Conferences, and the Classroom
from
The Writing Center at Saint Michael's College

Beta Edition

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Introduction
by
Liz Inness-Brown

About this book

In the fall of 2004, the Writing Center coaches in EN414, the Writing Center Internship, undertook the drafting of this book. Working in three groups of four, they wrote chapters 1, 3, and 4. Each group took a given topic, generated ideas for approaching the topic, divided the tasks up, and collaborated on a draft. These drafts were then “workshopped” by the class and the revised chapters were turned over to me to be edited for concision and consistency. It was also my job to write chapter 2, on designing courses.

The concept behind the book was to share with you some of the Writing Center’s strategies for working with writers, especially those useful with first-year writers. These strategies have evolved over the years and have come from many different sources—some were garnered from our texts, others from experience, both ours and our clients. We did not want to duplicate other, more expansive books; instead, we wanted to share only the most essential information, keeping it practical, focused, easy to access, and most of all *brief*, since we know that you are already devoting a good deal of time to teaching your course.

You’ll note that the title page calls this the “beta edition.” This truly is a test version. If you find errors, please let me know. I am using you as trusted proofreaders, to help me improve what is really only a first draft. Also, since this book is far from comprehensive, you may find missing from it some things that you think *really* ought to be included. If so, please let me know that, too. (For instance, I have considered adding special sections on working with writers who have learning disabilities and writers for whom English is a second language. If these seem important to you, let me know, and I’ll see if I can add them by next year.)

Now, you’re welcome to stop reading this introduction right here, but below I have included a little bit more about the Writing Center’s working philosophy, and thus the philosophy undergirding this book. I think it might be useful to you (otherwise I would not include it), but it’s not essential for you to read. In fact, a key idea behind this book is that you should be able to read any given section without reading those that precede or follow it (toward that end, the subsections are listed in the table of contents, with their page numbers). Of course, I hope you will gobble up every word. But if we have done our job, you can skip around, taste and absorb what you need, as you need it—much as students who use the Writing Center can come and get what they need *right now*, a snack of information rather than an eight-course meal.

Our Philosophy: Teach the Writer, Not the Writing

In one of our texts, Lucy McCormick Calkins's book *Lessons from a Child*, Calkins describes two years of research into how a third/fourth-grade class (and their teachers) progress as they learn to write and to teach each other to write. At one point, Susie, the "child" of Calkins's title, finally completes her story "Snuggling with My Father" and pastes it into the little booklet she has made to contain her finished writing. Calkins describes the exchanges that followed:

"All that work," Susie said happily, "for seven tiny pages."

"Same with my writing," Diane said. "Like at home—we have to get about a million buckets of sap before we get the tiniest bit of maple syrup."

But to Pat Howard, the classroom teacher, the final pieces sometimes didn't seem like Grade A syrup. Without jesting, she would groan, "All that work—for this." Then I would remind Pat that she wasn't teaching pieces of writing, but young writers. No matter what the final pieces were like, none of the drafts, none of the experiments, were a waste, for each left a mark on the writer, if not always on the writing. I didn't necessarily believe what I was saying; I was mostly trying to cheer her up. Only now, as I pore over the data, does it occur to me that I was right. (73-75)

The first semester that we used Lucy Calkins's book in the Teaching Writing class, a student asked, "What does this have to do with college students?" After all, Calkins's book focuses on children eight and nine years old, and the writers we see in the Writing Center are usually eighteen and up; certainly, this student implied, the problems of coaching and teaching writing would be very different at this level. In fact, though, I chose Calkins's book exactly because I was impressed with the parallels between how these children learned to write and how adults continue to learn; between how these elementary school teachers came to teach, and how contemporary college writing instructors do; between how these children collaborate with one another on their writing, and how, in my vision, we ought to collaborate with one another in the Writing Center.

But more than anything I was impressed with this single idea: that when we help someone learn to write, whether in the classroom, the Writing Center, or elsewhere, we should be teaching the writer, not the writing. We should be more concerned with empowering writers to write well, on their own, than with producing superficially correct pieces of prose style. We should be more concerned with learning than with grades. We should, in other words, delay the immediate gratification of "fixing it up"—so easy for those of us already confident about writing—for the long-term benefits that accrue from teaching our writers how, and why, to revise their work themselves.

"Teach the writer, not the writing" has become the guiding principle of our Writing Center, undergirded by two other of Calkins's main ideas: that writing is *a conversation*, *a collaboration* between writer and reader, and thus can benefit greatly from "conferencing," and that above all, a writing teacher must respect a writer's *ownership* of the writing. Thus, in our writing center, it's very rare for a coach to sit and read a writer's draft to herself (or himself); instead, after some conversation about writing and the assignment, the draft might be read aloud (if at all) with frequent pauses for discussion about content, organization, or style. In our writing center, if there are changes to be made, the writer—not the coach—decides when, where, and how to make them; the writer—not the coach—holds the pencil or uses the keyboard. Our job is not to correct, write, revise, or edit *for* writers, but to teach them the skills to do that themselves. Yes, we do help writers identify problems—but mostly by giving genuine "readerly" responses and asking lots of questions. And yes, when writers truly can't see the problems in their writing, we do "teach directly," but even as we do that, we strive to

protect their ownership and make sure that, each step of the way, they are collaborating with us.

Like most philosophies, ours is not always easy to live by. Learning to write is a slow process, and sometimes, both our writers and the faculty who refer them to us expect instant cures. Some of our writers drop in to solve an immediate problem and rarely return for a second or third conference on the same paper (although they often bring in other papers). When they do return, often it's not at the same time of day or week, and so they work with a different coach, and we don't get to see the progress that would be our primary reward for delaying gratification. Sometimes, in fact, despite our efforts to make our purpose and goals clear, we are sometimes faced with a writer who, when he does not get the instant gratification he came for, becomes disgruntled and does not return at all. Discouraged by such conditions, coaches are often tempted to go for the "quick fix"—to give the writer what he wants, rather than what we sense he needs.

Partly these problems result from the system in which we find ourselves. Once students fulfill SMC's writing proficiency requirement, some of them are satisfied with "adequate" grades and don't see the value of writing well. Some faculty give up hope of seeing truly good writing, and so reduce their standards, which in turn makes the time and energy required to learn to write well seem wasted. Thus, many writers come to see us only when writing presents a problem they can't surmount with their usual tactics: when the teacher's requirements seem incomprehensible; when the threat of a failing grade looms overhead; when required to by some outside agency; when English is their second language or feels like it; or when they are writing something that *does* matter, like a letter of application for a job, a scholarship, or graduate school. In short, many of our writers come to us in desperation, and often at the last minute; to them, we represent a last hope, a final resort.

How difficult it can be, then, for us in the Writing Center to create what is called the "teachable moment," to slow down the writer's steamroller of need, to involve the writer in the kind of dialogue necessary for her to *learn the skills* that will prevent this desperation from arising again. The writers who come to the Writing Center are like people who don't go to the doctor until the pain is so bad they can't stand it, and so we are faced with emergency surgery instead of preventive medicine, which is our ideal.

You, though, as first-year seminar instructors, have a built-in semester-long "teachable moment." Writing is central to your course, and you can make certain that most, if not all, of your students take it seriously—if only by taking it seriously yourself. By keeping these principles in mind—and by remembering what Lucy Calkins told Pat Howard—you *can* have a lasting effect on your writers; you *can* teach them, even if you on occasion have to do so almost against their will; you *can* help them experience the value and pleasure of writing for themselves and not for a grade. If you do that, you will have taught them to care about writing in a way that will last long after your course has ended. Not only that: You will have taught them to *write*.

CHAPTER 1

Who They Are and What They Come With

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to overcome in teaching first-year students is the fact that they come from infinite backgrounds and experiences. No two are exactly alike in their academic histories or personal strengths and weaknesses. This chapter provides a sneak peek into the journals of four first-year students of varying writing backgrounds. One is a strong writer and an excellent student, one a student with a learning difference, one an average student, and one a student who struggles a great deal although she has no disability. We don't mean to suggest in this chapter that all of your students will fit neatly into these categories; rather, we want to give just a few examples of the broad range of experiences and personalities that will make up a freshman class. We also hope to give you a look into some of the anxieties and triumphs that students might not always feel comfortable sharing with their professors.

Incorporated into the journal entries are also discussion ideas and activities that might be useful in working with your own students. At the end of this chapter we include a sample survey to help you get to know the range of writing skills and backgrounds in each individual class. Beginning with this knowledge may help you plan the best ways to help all of your students to improve.

PRE-COLLEGE JITTERS

Evan

I can't believe I'm finally packing for college. I talked to my roommate on the phone and he seems okay. Everybody keeps asking me if I'm nervous about the classes and stuff, but "nervous" isn't really the right word. It will be hard to leave my friends and family, but I am ready for a change. It will be good to start meeting new people. And classes—I'm not too worried about them. I'm sure they won't be *that* hard. I'm a pretty good student, and I do my work on time. That got me through high school; that should be good enough for college, too.

Ashley

The last thing I needed with only two weeks til I leave for college was a letter in the mail that said, "You are not yet considered proficient in writing. We have notified your first-year seminar professor and he will be working with you closely your first semester. Enjoy the rest of your summer!" [Note: With our new approach to assessment, at least you won't have to deal with this!] They might as well have written, "You are incredibly far behind the rest of your classmates and probably won't be able to catch up. You will be forced to sit under a neon blinking sign that says 'bad writer'

so that your professor will know exactly how bad off you are. Enjoy the rest of the summer while you can!" That's exactly how I feel. I always scraped by in high school with just passing grades on writing assignments—the type of grades high school teachers give you just for passing the paper in even if it's horrible. I don't know if I'll be able to make it in college. I don't think professors give you points for remembering to put your name and the date in the corner of the page. I hope my first-year seminar professor doesn't think I'm dumb just because I'm not good at writing.

Lily

In a week I'll be leaving for college. I can't believe it; that year that I took off really flew by. My parents are so excited for me but my mom is really sad to see me go. She's already cried once while we were talking about it. I'm nervous that I won't do as well as I did in high school, but my mom says not to worry. I guess she's right, I'm really good at psyching out my teachers. That's really all it takes. Once I figure out what a teacher wants to hear, I'm all set. I'm nervous for essay exams, though, because I write kind of slowly. In high school, teachers were pretty nice about giving extra time, but I don't think they will be as lenient in college. My friend told me that I have to understand that in college, professors give you more work than anyone could possibly complete. She said to survive you have to learn how to prioritize. My dad says that he always did all of his work, and he went to Harvard, so I'm not so sure. I'm such a perfectionist; I don't know how I'll ever figure out what to let slide. I hope that my friend is wrong.

My friends in high school made fun of me for being disappointed with anything less than an "A." I cried once because I got a "B+", and my friends couldn't even comfort me because they thought that I was crazy. I guess I'm just spoiled. I got a 780 on my writing SAT II and a 4 on my AP English exam even though I dropped the class. That must mean I'll do well in college, right? My dad will be so disappointed if I'm not a straight A student anymore. On the other hand, I also don't want people to think I'm a total nerd. When I switched to public high school I definitely earned that reputation. It was weird, though: I didn't hang out with the other nerds. My friends weren't really into academics at all; that always made me feel a little out of place. In college I really want to find a balance between friends and schoolwork—that is, without hurting my G.P.A. Wow, there's just so much I'm unsure of, I guess I'll just have to wait 'till I get to school to know what it will really be like. Not knowing is so scary.

Jessie

I am so sick of whistles! Every time we have to go anywhere the orientation leaders are blowing whistles to round us up and the rest of the time they are just blowing them for the sake of it! It is my second day of college, but it is still freshman orientation. I am here with all the other first-years and the orientation leaders, who are SMC upperclassmen. Despite the annoying whistles, I am having a good time. My roommate is nice and we are both on the cross-country team. The orientation activities are corny (so many name games) but I am meeting a lot of people.

Tomorrow is the first day of classes—I am so nervous! I got ok grades in high school but I don't know if I can handle college work. I bet everyone here is much more intelligent than I am. I am nervous for all the homework, especially all

the reading and writing. It takes me forever to read and write anything so I am afraid I won't be able to get all my work done. I love learning about different subjects, but I hate having to read or write about it—I wish someone could just tell me information and then we could discuss it instead of writing about it. Oh, well. I guess I will just have to see how things go in my first day.

THE FIRST DAY

Evan

First day of classes...arrgh! Okay, now I'm starting to feel nervous. I'm pretty much just taking a bunch of different subjects, since I haven't declared a major yet. I think I'm going to like my first-year seminar because it's a lot different than any class I took in high school. Today we took a survey about our writing backgrounds and stuff. It was just a lot of personal questions, like favorite type of writing and the favorite thing we've ever written. I was definitely caught off guard. No one has ever asked me that stuff before. The best thing I have ever written was definitely that weird story about Elvis and the cow that I wrote in fifth grade. Everyone LOVED that. It's too bad that I never did any creative writing since then. I guess I'm just not the type of person who writes for the sake of writing. I write in a journal once in a while, but that's a lot different than a short story or a poem or something. I pretty much stick to whatever my teachers assign me and that has worked out so far. Anyway, after the survey, we just sat in a circle and talked about writing, rather than just doing it. My professor seems cool; she said she really wants to push us to the limit, whatever that means. I'm pretty happy with where my writing is right now. No need for the pushing. It should be fun, though. She said that we can write about anything we want. In theory, this sounds cool, but I'm going to freak out without any guidance and boundaries! We talked about thesis statements for a long time. She's a little obsessed; let's be honest. I had no idea how many different definitions of a thesis statement everyone has. One kid said that it should be an important point in your paper, and that sounded pretty good to me, but then we got into talking about whether it should be just the most important point or if it should be the only point. Should it re-state the assignment? Should it be an opinion or a fact? It was frustrating to me because I thought I knew exactly what it was but now with people throwing out all these ideas at me, I don't really know what to believe. I know what works; that's easy. All this pushing to the limits.... I don't know. And WHY is she asking us about our high school backgrounds? I mean sure,

what kind of stuff did we write... That's relevant. But did you go to a private or public school? Come on. I went to a public school and that's just as good as a private school, I'm sure of it.

Ashley

I got to my seminar really early. I left my room twenty minutes early to make sure that I could find the classroom all right. I did not want my professor to think that I was the bad writer and the kid that can't find the classroom. Lots of other kids got there early too and I got a chance to check everyone out. You could tell the smart kids by the way they take the seats at the front of the classroom; I sat at the back next to this girl, Courtney, who turned out to be really nice. She was really nervous too and she told me she was bad at writing. I wanted to ask her if she got one of the letters too, but I was afraid she would say 'no' and then I'd feel weird.

My professor seems really nice, but when we went over the syllabus I got a little nervous. We're going to be doing tons of writing. For homework he gave us a survey about our writing experiences in the past: what kinds of writing we've done in high school, if we write in our free time, if we enjoy writing. He made me feel a little better when he told us not to worry too much about what level we start at because he is looking for us to improve, not to start at any certain place. I think I'm going to use the survey to let him know how nervous I am so that he at least knows that I'm willing to get help.

Lily

Today was my first day of college. I think that it went really well, although I was very nervous. I had my first-year seminar and the professor seems really great. I feel like she is interested in helping us adjust to college academics and especially writing. During high school I always did well on writing assignments even though I tended to leave them until the last minute and sometimes had trouble with writer's block. I went to private school for the first half of high school and public school for the second. One thing that really frustrated me about the public high school was that my English teachers were really obsessive about form. It got tiresome having to write five-paragraph essays all the time even if I happened to have more to say.

I was psyched to hear my professor suggest that we shouldn't feel tied to any specific form when we write for her. What a relief! When we first got to class she had us fill out a survey about our experience with writing in high school, and then we discussed as a class what we thought made a good essay. We listed all the basics: thesis, evidence, using and citing sources for critical essays, conclusions, organization, etc. I was surprised that some of the kids in the class didn't really understand what a thesis is and what it should sound like. We all took turns coming up with theses and then trying to make them sound stronger. We also talked about how the most important thing in writing is being able to get your point across to your reader; all of the details merely help to attain this goal.

It was clear from the discussion that there were students at many different writing levels in the class. I was a little intimidated by one student who sounded really smart, but I think I'll probably do okay and I definitely have a starting advantage over some kids who really just haven't gotten a chance to write much at all before now. The professor said that it didn't matter at what level we began the class, because any level of writing skills can be built upon. We all can improve in different ways and that is her goal for the semester. She said that for our first writing assignment she would require several drafts to be brought in and shared with her and with classmates. She said that this way everyone could expect help and feedback and could expect to do well based on the effort that each put in. I really think I'm going to like this class, I'm excited to try and improve my writing because in high school I think I sort of just got into a habit of writing to get an "A" rather than writing for its own sake. I'm feeling really motivated, this year is going to be great!

Jessie

I just got out of my first class, my first-year seminar. I think it was a good class to have first because everyone in it is in my grade and we were all nervous together. My professor is really nice and was sympathetic to our first-day jitters.

We began class by taking a survey about our writing background. I wasn't sure if I should be honest, because I hate writing, but I didn't want my professor to dislike me if I wrote that! However, I wrote the truth. I wrote about how long it takes me to write something and how frustrating it is. The most aggravating thing is that I always have so many spelling errors! In high school my Mom just checked over my papers for me and corrected my spelling mistakes; she thinks I am just a bad typist, but I think I am the worst speller in the world! I never know how to put my thoughts into words, either. I usually have good ideas, but it takes a long time to get them down on paper.

After we filled out the surveys, our professor asked us what components make up a good essay. Mostly we all came up with the basics of a thesis statement and the introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs. People also mentioned style, grammar, word choice, organization, and strong evidence, among other things. Next she asked us "what is a good process to use when writing a good essay?" I never really thought about writing being a process, but it definitely is. I also never imagined how many ways there are for someone to write a paper. Everyone in my class seems to have a different process. It was helpful to hear people's ideas about writing processes because it made me aware of some new approaches that I might try. Our professor encouraged us to try a new writing process if ours does not seem to be working well or simply to try doing one part of our process differently to see if it improves our writing. One thing I might try is free writing on a topic before I start writing in order to see my prior knowledge and where my interests are.

FIRST PAPERS

Evan

We just got our first paper back...C??? Come ON. I'm an A student! Okay, at least a B (no need to lie in a diary, I guess...). In high school, I had it all figured out. What's the difference? Everything was so straightforward and simple then, since I knew exactly what my teachers were looking for. We wrote about all sorts of stuff, but no matter what, the format was always the same. My style is so easy to explain and it WORKS! At least, it did until now. First, I write an introductory paragraph, explaining to the reader exactly what I will be discussing in the paper. A lot of times, an easy way to get started is by making a dictionary definition the first sentence. Teachers love that. "In the dictionary, success means:

- "1. The achievement of something desired, planned, or attempted:
attributed their success in business to hard work.
2. a. The gaining of fame or prosperity: *an artist spoiled by success.*
b. The extent of such gain," but as you will see in my essay, there are many more elements that contribute to success....(blah blah blah). After discussing what the paper will talk about for a few sentences, I will boldly state my opinion in the thesis statement. This is a strong statement that expresses my ideas on whatever topic I am discussing. Then I write three different paragraphs, each supporting my thesis in some way. After I have developed my argument in those three paragraphs, I will write my conclusion paragraph. This is essentially the same thing as the introduction, and it reinforces my points in a concise paragraph. Seriously. It worked so well before...why not now? What's going on? I can't believe this woman. She seemed so cool at first, but now I am dreading going to her class on Thursday because I don't want her to think I'm a fool. Ehhhhhh. We are supposed to sign up for individual meetings with her. I wonder if she'd notice if I didn't sign up for one? She seemed SO nice and approachable at first....too bad she hates me. Her comments weren't even that helpful. What did she mean with that business about "the paper seems truncated"? Maybe she should go right ahead and develop *that* thought. I thought I was a good writer! Not amazing, but definitely decent! Whatever. I'm not going to meet with her.

Ashley

Our first paper is due next week. We have to write a thesis paper about the book we just finished reading. We talked in class about some possible topics we might write about but I couldn't focus. My mind went blank. It seems like the words "thesis paper" just take the breath right out of me. But then my professor had us do a brainstorming session about the qualities of a good thesis paper. He wrote down our ideas on the board and then we discussed them for a while. We went through a hypothetical outline for a thesis topic that we could write about for the book we just read. It was easy to follow the thought process that went into the outline in class, which made me feel like I could do it on my own. I wrote down all of our brainstorming ideas so that I could remember them when I got back to my room. I'm going to try to start tonight so that I have tons of time to work on it. My professor told me that I should try taking my paper to the writing center if I get stuck.

Ashley

I took my paper to the writing center today. I've been working on it all week and I finally had a draft together so I brought it in. The coach suggested that we read the paper aloud but I was a little nervous so I asked her to read it. As she read it I heard lots of things that did not sound how I wanted them to sound so we stopped and fixed them along the way. Then at the end of the paper the coach told me that my paper had a lot of good things in it! She told me that she thought I had a very good writing style but that the paper was a little disorganized, which made my ideas hard to understand. We went through the paper and talked about what each part was trying to do and moved things around so that my ideas flowed into one another rather than jumping from place to place. We also talked about the introduction and conclusion. The coach told me that she thought my introduction was really good but that my conclusion was only repeating the introduction. In high school my teachers always told me that that's what a conclusion is supposed to do, but the coach told me that a conclusion is supposed to draw the paper together and make a further statement. We talked for a while about how I could do that with my conclusion and made an outline for it. I brought the outline home and worked on it tonight. I think that my paper is done!

Ashley

I got my paper back and I got a C+! I got lots of C's in high school, but I've never been so proud of one as this one. I was really afraid that I would get an F, but I worked really hard on it and my professor told me that my thesis is very good and that if I could work out a few issues with the writing he would be willing to bring my grade up to a B- or a B! He is letting the class do rewrites if we want to and I definitely want to. He gave me tons of feedback on what I can improve and I see now

where I was unclear in my writing. I can't believe that I might get a B in college on a thesis paper! I never got B's on papers in high school!

Lily

I got my first paper back today in First-Year Seminar. I got a B+, which isn't bad, but I would have liked to get an A or at least an A-. The professor said that she didn't give any A's because she's requiring everyone in the class to do a rewrite. She said she knows it will feel tedious to some of us but that writing is a process and there is always room for improvement. I had teachers allow rewrites in high school, but never require them—what a pain. My mom says I should be proud to have done so well on my first college paper.

Our professor had us get into small groups of people and share our papers in order to give each other feedback. This was a little awkward for me because I'm shy about letting people read my writing, but my classmates had some really good ideas. After that we each made appointments to meet with the professor to talk about her comments and what they mean, and to set individual goals for our writing. I'm not sure how I feel about this whole revising thing, but I think it's probably good for me to try it.

Jessie

Today we got our first papers back. I got a D! I am so upset—how am I going to pass college? I hope I can do a rewrite or extra credit or something! My professor wants us all to go meet with her, which I think will help. I am nervous to talk to her, though. It helped to get feedback from my peers in class today. I was scared since I got a D, but my professor made sure that we did not see each other's grades. My professor gave us an outline to go by for student conferencing, which was really helpful since in high school, our teachers just had us pair up and people just pointed out useless things or said "good job." People had some good suggestions about how to improve my paper, but they seemed shocked by all my spelling errors. They probably think I am dumb.

IMPROVEMENTS

Evan

Okay, I broke down. Curiosity got the best of me. Although, I must admit, I really would have gotten a lot more out of it if I had gone in with a better attitude. I was pretty intent on hating her, but she seemed okay during our meeting. I'm still annoyed that she gave me a C, but she seemed to have some reasoning at least. She gave me a lot of places she thinks I need to work on and she showed me where things don't fit in with the thesis. And she said never to start with a dictionary definition again. Dude, that's my style! She can't just knock my style! Anyway, she convinced (AKA hinted that she might raise my grade) me to go to the writing center and ask them

for help in rewriting it. That's still pretty lame, but I guess it would be okay since they're all students. I guess I'll just suck it up and do it.

Evan

I put it off for EVER, but I finally went. The guy who helped me was pretty nice. He basically said that my extra words were distracting from the actual content. Which, okay, I can buy that. In theory. But here's the problem. If she wants 5-6 pages on just two articles, how on earth are we supposed to fill up that much space without babbling just a little? I'm the king of distracting people from the content with big words...why doesn't that work now? Whatever. And I also found out what *truncated* means. Which confused me at first, because how can a paper be truncated AND babbling? I guess I just need to focus it more and develop the thoughts that I DID mention rather than re-stating the same things over and over. So after I left the Writing Center, I only have three pages, but I have to admit, they are a lot stronger than my original 5 pages. Now I just have to find something substantial to fill up the last couple of pages.....

Evan

B+ for my re-write! She said I improved the paper a lot and this is more what she's looking for the first time around. At least now I have some idea. I wish it didn't come as such a surprise though. I always thought I was already a good writer, but I guess I have a ways to go. Who knew? I think before I hand in my next paper I want to meet with the professor and maybe even go to the writing center again. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, I guess. It is just frustrating because I never ever had to put this much work into something just to get a B+. I feel like she's telling me I'm not all that smart and I didn't deserve the grades I got in high school. At least she is willing to help me, though. She has been pretty helpful throughout this process and I think she cares about my progress.

Lily

Wow, I feel much better about my paper now that I met with my professor. She had written an awful lot of comments on my paper and I didn't really know how to deal with them. It turns out that for a lot of them she was just showing me different style choices I might try out. The main thing that she pointed out was that my writing tends to be a little bit unbalanced. I mention different points but then I only give strong detail on some of them (usually the ones I'm most interested in). The goal we set was to make sure that everything that makes it into my paper is well explained, and if I simply brush

over things to consider leaving them out. I have a pretty good idea now of what changes I want to make.

Jessie

I met with my professor. She thinks that I have a learning disability (LD) because my spelling is really poor and I mix up letters a lot. One of my high school teachers thought that I might have had a learning disability, but we never followed through on looking at the problem. I don't know if I have a learning disability, but I really hope I don't because that would mean I am really stupid and will never be a good writer!

My professor and I set up a time for me to meet with Toni Messuri, a professor here who works with students who have learning disabilities. I am so nervous to meet with her! I wonder what I will have to do.

Jessie

Today I met with Toni Messuri and I definitely was more nervous than I should have been! She is extremely nice and was so willing to help me. She told me that I could go to a LD specialist and be tested, but it costs between \$1500 and \$2000 dollars! I definitely am counting that option out. She also explained that I could use the resources on campus to see if that helped my writing improve. For example, Toni has lots of information on how to cope with LDs, including dyslexia, which I most likely have. Another person I can go see is Christine Clary in the Resource Center for help with study skills. Toni also told me about the writing center. She recommended that I take my papers there to receive help before they are due since I really won't ever be able to pick up on all of my errors on my own. She is going to call Liz Inness-Brown, the professor who runs the writing center, and see if I can be partnered with a coach who understands my disability.

Jessie

I went to the writing center today and met my coach, James. He is very friendly and helpful. My session with James began with filling out some paperwork about myself and the rules of the writing center. This sheet asked if I had a learning disability and if I was willing to talk about it. I checked yes to both and told James that I have dyslexia and I find it hard to read and write because I confuse letters. Next, James asked me about my paper: what class it was for, what professor, what the assignment was, and what I wanted to work on in the session. I explained everything and then he asked me if I wanted him to read my paper aloud since I found it difficult to read. I said that I would prefer he read it. Simply by having him read my paper aloud, I could pick up on a lot of errors. James told me that lots of people don't think to read their paper aloud to themselves, but it is a great way to catch your own errors. Next time I want to try reading it aloud to myself to see if I can recognize my mistakes.

We worked a little on organizing my paper since some of my sentences seemed to be supporting a different point. James brought out some highlighters so that I could highlight sentences that were not relevant to the paragraph they

were in and then mark where I wanted to move them in the same color. This way of organizing was extremely helpful because of the color-coding.

Next we worked on spelling, grammar, mechanics, and word choice. Mostly, I needed help with spelling because I have trouble recognizing misspelled words. James said that it is helpful for him and other coaches to know about my LD because normally coaches try to help students recognize their own mistakes by asking questions or referring to the same mistake made earlier. However, people with dyslexia can only improve to a certain extent in areas such as spelling. No matter how much I work at it, my brain will always mix up letters and make it difficult for me to spell and read. However, James explained my grammar errors to me and I was able to find similar problems (such as my incorrect use of semi-colons) later in my paper without his assistance. This helped me realize that although I won't be able to fix all my writing on my own, there are still areas I can improve in. This session with James was invaluable and I feel confident that my next draft of this paper will receive a much higher grade! Also, I am glad to know I have someone to go to with my papers in the future, not just for my first-year seminar, but my other classes as well.

CLASS EVALUATIONS

Evan

It was difficult being thrown into such a demanding course during my first semester freshman year, but somehow I made it and I think that's because my professor was so helpful and she really pushed me to try my hardest. I had thought I was pushing myself to the limits before I even got to the class, but the professor was able to show me that I was very, very wrong. I was so angry when I got a C on my first paper, but looking back, I definitely deserved it. She never gave up hope in me, and was able to show me what my potential really is. The individual meetings with her about each paper were so helpful and I'm glad that I was able to benefit from them, even though I was so reluctant to go at first. I also liked the work in small groups and the fact that the class was set up as a conversation rather than a lecture. It was incredibly helpful for me to share my ideas with a few people before actually sitting down and writing a paper.

Ashley

I can't believe the semester is just about over. Today we filled out the teacher evaluations in my first-year seminar. I wanted to write pages about my professor. I was so nervous about that class and my writing and he helped me so much. I know now how to come up with ideas and outlines for papers, but most importantly I know that I can write, and that I am not a bad writer. I feel like all this time I thought that I

was just naturally bad at writing when all along I just needed to learn the mechanics of writing, the process. I really feel like I am ready to write for my other classes and that I've improved tremendously since the beginning of the semester.

Ashley

Class Evaluation: I really enjoyed taking this class and I learned so much from my professor. I came into this class scared of writing and feeling that I was a very bad writer and I am leaving it now with much more confidence and knowledge of how to approach future assignments. I am so glad that I took this class right at the start of my college career because I feel so much better prepared for writing in all my other classes!

Lily

This semester was awesome! The professor taught us many things about our writing. I got A's on most of my final drafts and an A for the semester and for once I feel like I really earned it. I think that the best thing about the class was the fact that it was small and the professor took time to get to know each of us and work with us individually as well as in a group. This helped me a lot. The only thing I would recommend be changed is that we get a little more time on our assignments. Maybe with writing assignments, we could have more time but also have to bring in proof that we've been working on it in between due dates. That would probably be helpful to procrastinators like myself. Besides that, this class certainly gets my seal of approval!

Jessie

I believe my writing has improved more in this one semester than in all my other years of writing put together. I am now aware of what process I need to use when writing, which includes utilizing the writing center. Also, writing several drafts has helped me to realize the process of writing takes time and writing can always be improved. My grades at the beginning of this class were not very good, but my professor took the time to help me, and every other student in the class, develop stronger writing skills. My final grade in the class was a B-, which reflects my growth as a writer over the semester.

CONCLUSION

The journal entries above are meant to portray the diversity of first-year student writers. Writing is a skill that students will need in every area of their studies; some students come to college already equipped with this skill, and some do not. All have room for improvement. Educational background, learning style, past experience, and confidence level make a significant impact on students' writing, and your understanding of these differences can be greatly beneficial to student progress as you foster their growth as individuals and writers and help them adjust to the demands of college writing.

In these entries, we have also tried to offer some useful strategies, such as discussing components of a well-written paper, sharing writing processes, surveying

students about their backgrounds, and suggesting the writing center. Writing is a process that students must learn to internalize; they need multiple models of this process and practice to learn their own needs and preferences. (More on this in Chapter 2.) Most important is to understand that by boosting confidence levels while teaching necessary skills, you can help students feel good about writing and lead them toward success.

We encourage you to remember that, like writing itself, teaching writing is a process. This process demands flexibility and patience, but the improvement you will undoubtedly witness is well worth the effort. Not every student will finish your class an “A” writer, but as long as each has made progress, the goal of the semester has been reached.

SAMPLE FIRST-DAY SURVEY

Name _____

First-Year Seminar Survey on Writing Background

1. Tell me a little about your high school. Where is it located? Is it public or private? How many students attend the school?

2. What is the best thing you've ever written, in your opinion?

3. Do you ever write for pleasure? How often? How much do you write? What kind of writing do you do?

4. Do you ever read for pleasure? How often? How much? What?

5. What types of writing do you enjoy? What types of writing do you dislike?

6. Do you think that you are a strong writer? Why or why not?

7. What do you find difficult when you write? What do you find easy when you write?

8. Describe your writing process.

CHAPTER 2

**Course Design:
Building Your First-Year Seminar Around Writing**

If you are reading this text, to one degree or another you probably already know how to design a course around writing assignments. But the main thrust of this chapter is to suggest that many of the problems that you see in first-year writing can be addressed by the *kinds* of assignments you make and the *sequence* in which you assign them. That is, rather than simply assign “papers” which you then “correct,” you can improve students’ writing by creating assignments that address the sources of the most common problems and allow students to work through those problems themselves. The nice thing about this approach is that it can also *decrease* the amount of time you have to play “English teacher,” improve discussion, and increase content learning by ensuring stronger student engagement.

The Writing-Intensive Course Requirements

The first-year seminar was designed as a required “writing-intensive” course to ensure that incoming students have a chance to develop college-level writing skills early in their careers at St. Mike’s. Whether you view your course as a “writing course with a lot of content” or a “content course with a lot of writing,” you need to follow the Curriculum Committee guidelines for all required writing-intensive courses. I’ve included them on the next page, in photocopy-able format, so that you can share them with your students if you like.

Note: The requirements are listed first, followed by *suggestions* in **bold**.

<p>WRITING-INTENSIVE GUIDELINES What is required in the course</p>	<p>DESIRED OUTCOMES What students should have gained by the end of the course</p>
<p>General: Lots of writing, both informal and formal, with genuine response to both ideas and form</p>	<p>General: Development of critical thinking and writing skills that can be applied elsewhere</p>
<p>1. Weekly reading and writing; may and probably should include informal writing to which the instructor responds "informally" (i.e., with focus on ideas and on giving a genuine reader's response)</p>	<p>1. Fluency--the ability to generate words on paper easily Improvement from practice Critical thinking skills; the ability to think (reconstruct, examine, analyze) on paper</p>
<p>2. At least one formal assignment, 6+ pages, or two or more shorter formal assignments, with an opportunity for revision</p>	<p>2. The ability to formulate a viable thesis or focus and to support it with sufficient evidence, cited correctly Knowledge of the structure and content required by a formal essay The ability to write formally--i.e., in an academically acceptable style Assessment of mechanical and grammatical weaknesses and the knowledge of sources to aid in correction</p>
<p>3. Clear, written criteria for writing, and assessment addressing those criteria (i.e., comments on papers or in conferences should allude to explicit, defined criteria)</p>	<p>3. Vocabulary for discussing and analyzing writing A sense of what good writing is Gain in control; reduction of the "mystery" of writing A sense of progress toward specific, concrete goals</p>
<p>4. Feedback/constructive criticism given to and received from peers and the instructor as part of the revision process; feedback and revision should usually focus on global concerns first (thesis formation, organization, development of ideas), local concerns later (grammar, punctuation, mechanics)</p>	<p>4. An "internalized" reader--the ability to imagine a reader's needs A critical perspective on writing--the ability to look <u>at</u> writing rather than merely through it The ability to give as well as receive critical suggestions Motivation to write well</p>

In the first-year seminar, these guidelines address the most common weaknesses we see in the writing of entering students: limited *fluency*, or the ability to write quickly and easily to generate thoughts and ideas; a limited ability to write and think *critically*; and limited understanding of the writing *process* and what makes good writing. Thus, the guidelines make good sense and should be used in planning your course.

The Writing Process

A good place to start is with the writing process. Most students come to college having been taught a linear approach to writing:

Draft > Revise > Proofread

And, most often, they define “revise” as “go through and fix things up”—that is, they rarely make any substantial changes once they’ve drafted. Therefore, it’s often useful, if not downright necessary, to give students a more realistic model of the writing process, to demonstrate it to them by sharing your writing process, and to make them experience it through your assignments.

In his book *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1985), the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist Donald Murray proposes this model of the writing process:

Collect
Plan
Develop

...in which “collecting” includes all activities through which we find material to put into the writing (reading, research, note-taking, *thinking*, making mental connections, mapping or webbing, list-making, freewriting, and so on); “planning” includes all planning activities (mapping, listing, mental rehearsal, outlining, and the like); and “developing” includes drafting, revision, editing, and proofreading—in short, the actual act of writing. Note the emphasis here on activities that might not ordinarily be called “writing” but that Murray finds integral to every writer’s process.

Important to Murray is that we *not* view the process as linear, but as recursive—not as moving forward in a straight line from one “step” to the next, but as moving back and forth through all the steps, infinitely repeatable. As he points out, writers can engage in any of these activities at any stage of the process, and sometimes engage in all of them simultaneously. In fact, many writers *begin* with development, collect as they go, and plan only after they have a draft. (That’s pretty much how I initially wrote this chapter, although one might say I’ve been “collecting” the material for the past 25 years!) Murray, who’s written a number of books on writing, also says, “Writing *is* revision.” This is an idea many of our students need to learn. (As I write this sentence, in fact, I’m making a wholesale revision of an earlier draft, using a new structure, writing new material, and raiding the old draft for useful material as I go.)

Whether you use this model of the writing process or some other model you're more familiar with, the important thing is to get students to understand that writing *is* a process, and make them experiment with different strategies for it. Especially effective is having students share their approaches with each other, and sharing your own strategies, either by telling stories or by writing and revising in front of students or bringing in several drafts of something you've written. This debunks one of the misconceptions students have about writing: that good writers write well the first time around, that good writers don't "need" to revise. Plus if you ask students to critique what you've written, you can demonstrate how to ask a reader useful questions and how to respond to feedback.

The next thing is to incorporate revision into your assignments—more on that below.

Structuring your course and your assignments

So—what does it mean to “structure” your course “around” the writing assignments? And how does this “teach” writing?

Teaching writing is like teaching any other skill—skiing, swimming, whatever. You start with some fundamentals and practice those till the student is able to put it all together in one fluid performance. For some students, this takes a while—for others, it seems to come naturally. Learning to write isn't that different from learning to talk, in that everyone learns at his or her own pace and in his or her own way. Patience is key. Knowing when to step in and when to stay out of the way is key. But trust the process and trust your students, and they can and will learn.

So, as you design your course, first think about what your ultimate goal is—that is, *what* and *how* (both in terms of form and process) do you want students to write at the *end* of the semester? Think of an assignment that embodies this, and make it the major project toward which everything else in the course moves.

Next, break that project down into its component steps and skills. For instance, if you want students to write an independent research paper in the last month of class, what skills do they need to do that? Here's a sample list; yours might include more specifics related to your content:

1. generate and choose a topic
2. develop their own ideas about that topic
3. develop a list of research questions on that topic
4. narrow their focus to something they can finish in the time allotted
5. find, read, and synthesize sources
6. generate a thesis
7. develop the essay supporting their ideas with evidence from sources
8. revise and edit

Next, ask yourself: How can I introduce students to those processes *before* they get to the big assignment? With a little creativity, you'll find that you can "knock off" several items at a time. For instance, for your summer assignment on *Life of Pi*, you can have students generate their own list of questions about the book and then freewrite their own speculations about the answers to some of those questions. ("Freewriting," by the way, is simply writing freely—without concern for audience, without concern about correctness, for a limited time [5-15 minutes] without stopping.) Then you can ask them to find a thesis in their freewriting to write a short essay about, using quotes from the text as support. If you then, in the first week of class, have them "workshop" this essay with their peers and then revise it, you've created a single assignment that is a mini-version of the larger paper you want them to do at the semester's end—you've addressed at least parts of items 1-8 at least once. [Note: Personally, I wouldn't collect this essay till the students have revised it at least once; then I'd collect all parts, including the freewriting and questions, review and comment on them, and give credit but not a grade. That's because I want to teach students that the process is as valuable as the product.]

Note, also, that as they write and workshop the essay, they'll be *discussing* the book—in a focused, detailed way, with the emphasis on *their* ideas, *their* interpretations. This discussion is an extremely important step on the way to *re-vision*—because discussing their own and others' ideas on the same topic forces them literally to "re-see" their draft, which leads the way to substantial revision (although many students will resist this until you insist on it).

Repetition is learning, of course, so you should have multiple assignments that address your goals. But not every assignment must or should tackle all of them. You can have some assignments that simply focus on one step, or two, and assignments that do the same things in different ways. Students tend to like a certain amount of variety, and learning multiple strategies for the writing process will help them tackle the wide variety of writing assignments they encounter in college. Also, if all your writing assignments follow the same pattern, you run the risk of reinforcing the (false) idea that writing is formulaic—a piece of baggage they tend to bring with them from high school. The point is, if you think about what you want students to be able to do at semester's *end* and work methodically toward that goal, by the time your students get there, they should have the skills they need.

It works particularly well to structure both your course and the individual assignments so that:

Students start with...	And move toward....
collecting and planning	getting feedback, revising, editing, proofreading
informal writing	formal writing
short assignments	longer assignments

An example from my own course: The “point paragraph” (PP) assignment. This is an assignment I designed both to get students writing about their reading and to hone their academic writing skills.

THE POINT PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENT

- Students first freewrite about what they read.
- In their freewriting, they find and underline “points” or “thesis statements” that could be extended and argued.
- Choosing one point, then they write a “point paragraph,” a one-paragraph mini-essay focused on one point and using evidence from the reading to support it.
- I give them feedback, focusing on ONE main thing they need to work on (I start with global problems, like critical thinking, clarity of expression, or organization).
- They revise and resubmit a new version for more feedback (I work toward local problems, like grammar and punctuation).
- If the point paragraph still has not met my standard, they revise again, and again, until it does. **I do not grade till a PP meets my standard**, which forces them to revise to get a grade.
- They repeat this process approximately eight times, with different reading assignments, writing and revising eight point paragraphs in about four weeks.

Here, students move from *informal* (freewriting) to *formal* (point paragraphs). They move from *collecting and planning* (freewriting) to *drafting, getting feedback, revising, and editing*. Later, they will move from these “short” assignments to “long” ones, as they write an essay-length memoir and then an essay of self-analysis using the lenses we’ve studied during the semester.

Some notes about this assignment:

- A key element is **repetition**: they freewrite throughout the course; write multiple point paragraphs; revise multiple times.
- Another key element is working toward a “**zero-defect**” piece of writing. Thus, students learn that writing can always be improved. And it’s surprising how willing [most] students are to work for perfection, if you give them the chance.
- I **model** and **demonstrate** what I’m looking for by giving students examples, both mine and past students’, and by writing and revising in front of them and letting them critique me.
- I use the point paragraphs to generate and support **discussion** of the texts in class, in small groups and in the whole group. That is, the assignments have both an immediate use (to focus their reading skills and facilitate discussion) and a long-term use (to teach them the skills of analytical writing and substantial revising).
- By forcing students to revise the PPs until they meet my standard, I ensure that they do **substantial revision**, and I can focus on different levels of problems until all problems have been addressed.
- Because the assignments are short, it doesn’t take me much **time** to read and give feedback. On a first submission, for instance, I might only write one or two key questions for them to address. Five drafts later, when all else has been addressed,

I might circle a pattern of misused commas and ask them to look up the error in their handbook and correct it, and write the rule down for me so that I know they know what the error is.

Again, the basic principles:

Students start with...	And move toward....
collecting and planning	getting feedback, revising, editing, proofreading
informal writing	formal writing
short assignments	longer assignments

Use these, and you will not only cover all the requirements for a writing-intensive course, but will see substantial results by semester's end.

Assessing Writing Proficiency

As you know, between 1997 and 2004, all incoming SMC students were tested for basic writing proficiency. They were given a short reading and a question to respond to, and then a limited time (usually under an hour) to write several paragraphs of response. By that method, 90-92% of incoming students annually were found "proficient." This means that—under the time and pressure constraints of a testing situation—they could write sentences with decent grammar and punctuation, develop coherent and cohesive paragraphs, and respond adequately to a prompt that asked them to do some basic critical thinking about a short reading. That's pretty basic proficiency, and the least we would expect of high school graduates coming into college.

The writing of the students who didn't pass the proficiency test generally fell into one or more of these categories:

- It seemed to demonstrate a lack of basic English skills—that is, the sentences were ungrammatical or very poorly punctuated.
- The paragraphs weren't coherent or cohesive.
- The writing didn't respond appropriately to the prompt—either was off topic or did not show the necessary critical thinking skills.

The reasons for failure were as many and various as the students. In my experience, most of the students who failed the test failed it because *it was a test*. That is, it was a snapshot in time, a picture of their ability in that one hour—an hour when they happened to be tired, stressed, and/or unprepared. Such a test only tests one's ability to write quickly on an unfamiliar topic and in a stressful situation. This is one reason that, beginning in 2005, we have adopted a new approach to proficiency assessment—instead of a snapshot in time, a semester-long "movie" of a student's ability, taken in the first-year seminar.

When you subtract the students who scored "nonproficient" because they didn't test well, probably only 3-5 % of incoming students are genuinely nonproficient by our standard,

and of these, you might have one or two in your class. The genuinely “nonproficient” student is usually nonproficient, in my experience, for one of three reasons: (1) lack of experience with and/or appropriate education about writing, (2) a learning disability and lack of *appropriate* education to address it, or (3) difficulties with English as a second language. If you follow the writing-intensive guidelines closely, if you design your course well, and if they are motivated, students in all three categories can often demonstrate basic proficiency by semester’s end, although some of them may need one-on-one instruction to help—a “designated coach” from the Writing Center, perhaps.

ESL students, depending on their background, may have the hardest time. While many of them are more knowledgeable about English grammar than our own students, using “American” thought patterns and essay structures may present special difficulty. Writing Center coaches can help with this a good deal, too, but it may be necessary to adjust your standards to acknowledge that ESL students are often not struggling only with language and writing, but also with another culture (see “The Reading/Writing Connection” below). Since many ESL students are very proficient writers in their own language, and since in second-language learning the skill of writing takes the longest to develop, it makes sense that we use some flexibility in assessing the proficiency of our ESL students.

As suggested above, beyond basic proficiency there are three areas in which nearly all students can afford to improve, areas that will make a major difference to them throughout their college careers (and beyond):

- Fluency—that is, the ability to write easily and quickly, to use writing to get one’s ideas down on paper, to use writing to *think*.
- Critical thinking—that is, the ability to generate a *point*, or thesis, and support that point with clear, valid evidence, and the ability to assess what makes a valid point and valid evidence; the ability to go beyond the obvious and to generate their own interpretations, theories, and analyses.
- The writing process—that is, the ability to use strategic writing processes, from *generating ideas* in various ways through *substantive revision*, *close editing*, and *careful proofreading*.

As you can see, these can address the needs of nonproficient students as well, and all can be addressed in a well-designed writing-intensive course.

In the appendix to this chapter, I’ve included the scoring standards for the new SAT essay component. An SAT score of “4” is equivalent to “entry-level proficiency” as we have been measuring it, and you can use this to help you determine if a borderline student is proficient or not. While I don’t recommend using a rubric like this to grade your students, it does give you some guidelines for measuring the proficiency of their writing and some language for explaining where they need to improve to demonstrate proficiency.

The Reading/Writing Connection

One thing we have learned through our clients in the Writing Center is how closely reading and writing are connected—to wit, if a student can't comprehend the text that he or she is supposed to write about, the writing will suffer. Very often, in fact, what we assume to be a writing problem is actually a problem with reading, and given a different kind of reading or a different kind of writing assignment, the student can write quite well.

However, since much of the writing we ask students to do—throughout college, as well as in first-year seminar—asks them to discuss, analyze, or otherwise use reading, it's good to think about the process of reading and where it breaks down, and how writing itself can help address the problem.

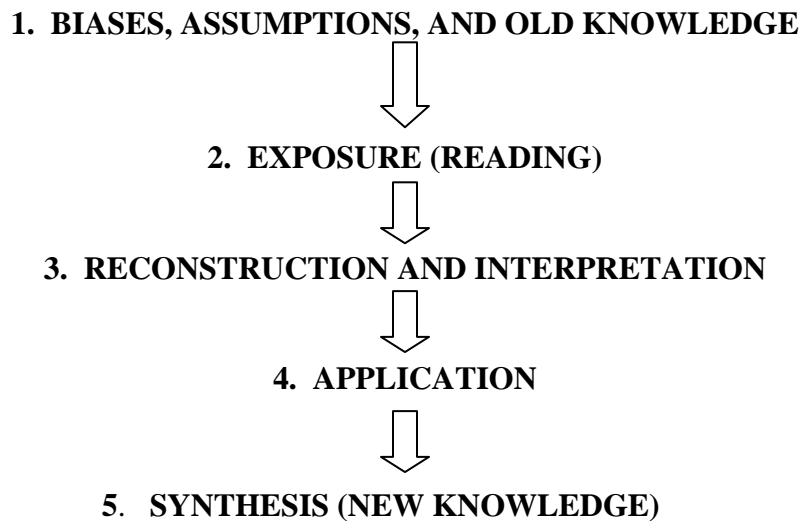
ESL students provide a clear example of one kind of “reading breakdown”: basic incomprehension of language. As we all know from our own second language studies, learning vocabulary takes a long time, and not understanding vocabulary, including our many English idioms, is of course a major impediment to reading, slowing it down if not stopping it altogether. But we shouldn't assume that our native-speaking students don't have this problem. The “dialect” of academic prose is a new language to many of them, and most students don't have the “language experience” we faculty can count on as we read. This doesn't mean we should “dumb down” by choosing easy texts—of course we want to challenge students and extend their horizons. But we can and should address the problem. Here are a few suggestions:

- When choosing texts, choose those that require students to **reach just above their expected reading ability**—in other words, for instance, probably not the most scholarly text, but perhaps a text written by a scholar for a general audience. And remember that reading builds on past experience with the topic. If the topic (and therefore vocabulary) is unfamiliar, the reading will be more difficult, even if the writing seems very simple to you.
- **Allow sufficient time** for the reading. While you might be able to read your text at a rate of 50-60 pages an hour, a student's rate might be as slow as 20 pages an hour, or even slower if there is a learning disability involved or if the text is exceedingly difficult. Take this into consideration as you plan your assignments. (One guideline suggests allowing ten hours a week of homework for your course, including both reading and writing.)
- **Tackle the problem directly.** Ask students to keep a list of unfamiliar terms and/or a list of questions they have about the reading. Collect these and review them in class or out so that you can see what hazards lie in the text you've chosen. Talk to students about strategies for reading, like reading the chapter summary at the end *first*, so that they will know what to look for in the chapter as they read it. If there's no chapter summary at the end, consider proposing “thinking questions” in advance.

Often, however, students *seem* to understand the text on this basic level, but then still can't write about it. This second level of breakdown can have various causes: the student may be trying to read too fast, or may be reading late at night, for instance. With an ESL

student, there may be a lack of cultural understanding—a lack of context. For instance, an Asian student reading *Huckleberry Finn* will miss many of the nuances that seem so obvious to those of us who have grown up in America and are familiar with our nation’s racial history. Similarly, a native-speaking student who is unfamiliar with your discipline will lack the context that allows him or her to truly understand the reading.

This diagram shows the basic “stages” of reading for comprehension:



In other words, we enter a text with an *old knowledge* foundation upon which the text will build. The reading *exposes* us to new knowledge. We must then *reconstruct and interpret* the text before we can *apply* it and finally *synthesize* it by making connections with our previous knowledge base.

Writing can help at every stage of this process:

1. **Pre-reading:** Ask students to write about their biases and assumptions or prior experiences with the topic. Freewriting for 5-10 minutes may be enough.
2. **During reading:** Teach students to write in their books. They’ve rarely been allowed to do this before, but it encourages them to process as they go. They can “gloss” paragraphs by writing a word or phrase or sentence in the margin saying what each paragraph is about; they can turn down corners on important pages; they can underline; they can record their reactions and questions. Also, ask them to stop at the end of each chapter or section and freewrite in a notebook about what that part was about, and what it made them think. Get them reading *actively*.
3. **After reading:**
 - a. *Reconstruction and interpretation:* Freewriting is a good way to do this—at the end of each day’s assignment, have them freewrite X pages, beginning with a reconstruction of what they read (“In this

chapter the author....”) and then moving to their questions, thoughts, ideas. The notes they made during reading can help with this. If you don’t like freewriting, have them write “annotations” or “reaction papers.”

- b. *Application*: Ask students to *use* the information or ideas from the text in a more formal piece of writing (or in class discussion). For instance, I sometimes ask students to apply an idea from the reading to a situation in their own lives in a “point paragraph.”
- c. *Synthesis*: When the whole text has been read, it’s good for students to reflect informally on it as a whole. Then you can ask them to look back at all their reflection and write a more formal paper that requires them to deepen their understanding of the ideas or information and integrate it into their knowledge base. Here, a simple assignment is to have them go back to their “pre-reading” writing and ask themselves how their views have been altered. Or, if part of their “pre-reading” knowledge was an earlier text read in class, you can create an assignment that brings the two texts together.

An example from my course: On the first day of class I give each student a cheap 70-sheet notebook to fill with freewriting. I tell them I will not read what they write in the notebook—it’s for their eyes only—but I will assign them things to write in it, both in class and out; at a preset date I will collect the notebooks and count the pages to give them credit for all the writing they’ve done. (Some instructors might be able to use e-College to this end.) One of the things they must do in this notebook is freewrite about each reading assignment. I emphasize that it’s important to write down what they *think* about what they read, and that it’s okay if their thoughts take them “off topic.” Making connections is good.

As a way to jumpstart discussion, I will sometimes ask students to freewrite in class and read aloud from what they’ve written. Other times I have them reread what they’ve written outside of class and choose parts to share in small group discussions. The bottom line, though, is that this informal writing forces them to *process* what they read, and because they know they are going to write after reading, it asks them to engage actively in the reading itself by taking notes, underlining, and so on. From this freewriting also come the ideas for their point paragraphs, as well as much of the material they will use in both their memoir and their self-analysis essay.

If the notion of a freewriting notebook does not appeal to you, devise your own less-than-formal writing assignment to help students process their reading. You can have them write an “annotation,” a “reflection,” or a “letter” about the reading. Or you can ask them to write down two questions and one thesis, and a short paragraph of commentary. The important thing is that you make clear that this is an informal assignment that asks them to write directly to you (or to another student) about what they *thought* as they read. It’s not a paper. And grade accordingly—making the stakes low makes it easier for students to be honest and free in recording their reactions. I give a point a page. (Note: It’s also

important that they *write* rather than just take notes. The process of composing sentences forces reflection in a way that taking notes does not.)

For some students, freewriting doesn't come easily, at least at first, but for most it's a very liberating and effective tool. The "cheap" notebook encourages them to not worry about the form of their writing, to write quickly and honestly. (Some students insist on typing, saying they can do it faster; I allow this, but only after they've tried the notebook and have been frustrated by it.) By the way, if you're thinking that "really good" students will find this process boring or simplistic, my experience has shown the opposite: such students take to this like fish to water. The benefits for them can be the same and yet different, of course: for many of them, informal writing is an avenue to finding and developing a genuine voice on the page, opening up to themselves as true thinkers, as creators of knowledge. When asked at semester's end what part of the course was most valuable to them, most of these students cite the freewriting. (And, surprisingly, most of them fill their notebooks, and some start a second.)

If you truly want your students to learn from the reading you assign, follow the reading process with writing at each stage. Along the way, you will be giving them strategies for understanding that will help them throughout college.

Creating Motivation

Above, talking about nonproficient students, I said, "If they are motivated." It's a big "if," as we all know, and not just with nonproficient students. But a well-designed course that follows the writing-intensive guidelines can integrate motivation without sacrificing intensity. (In fact, intensity itself *can* be motivating.) Among the things that can help motivate students are:

- **Assignments that ask them to make connections to their lives.** In their first year of college, most—if not all—students have one central question on their minds: What am I doing here? Which means: *Who am I? What's my purpose in life? What's life all about? Why should I take education seriously? How am I supposed to relate to this experience? How am I supposed to relate to the world?* Using informal, autobiographical writing and integrating personal connections even in the formal writing helps students learn to use critical thinking to *navigate their lives*. This not only helps them begin to answer their burning questions; it also teaches them a habit of self-reflection and provides more real motivation for learning.
- **Understanding purpose.** Students need to know *why* they are learning X or doing Y. Once they understand the value and importance of what you're requiring, they become more motivated. Tell them how it fits into the course, how it fits into college, how it fits into their lives. Make sure that you don't assign anything that is purposeless; students have had it up to *here* with "jumping through hoops."
- **A genuine audience.** Writing for and with peers is tremendously motivating. Most students are social animals, and respond well if they see that their primary,

real audience is their peers. And peer feedback can be real feedback, and can take some of the load off you (see chapter 3 for more details). In addition, if you can take off your teacher's hat and become a real audience—someone who is really interesting in *what* the student is saying, not just how he or she is saying it or whether what he or she is saying fits the assignment or gives you what you hoped to hear—students will be motivated to write for you, too.

- **Freedom within structure.** The “structure” of your course is designed to introduce students to certain ideas and certain processes that you want them to learn. But within this structure, if you give students freedom to choose their topics and explore their own ideas, they will feel motivated. They have rarely had that freedom, and most of them respond to it very well.
- **A motivating grading system.** We've all had the experience of the student who gets an A on the first paper—and stops trying. And the student who gets a C on the first paper and becomes discouraged and writes worse and worse, despite all the feedback we give. For this reason, give some thought to creating a special grading system for your first-year seminar. In my course, I've divided grading into two parts: “participation,” which includes ALL assignments given throughout the course up till the final ones, and “final product,” which comprises the two major assignments completed at semester's end. Participation is graded on effort, honesty, and so on; each assignment is worth X points, and the points “build” toward the grade, which in itself motivates students to stay on top of the work. Final products are graded on quality. In order to achieve quality at the semester's end, of course, strong participation is necessary all along the way. My point isn't that you should grade as I do—my point is that it's important not to assume that grades are good motivators, and to find a way to “work the system” to motivate your students to do their best work.

I once heard a playwright say that writing is “99 % personality management.” As you saw in Chapter 1, first-year students come into your class with many years of “writing baggage.” Do what you can to help them unload it and discover the value of writing to them, as human beings as well as students.

First Day of Class

I'm ending this chapter by talking about the beginning—the very first day of class. And I'm giving this topic its own section, despite its brevity, because I think it is key to the success of any course. **Whatever you do on the first day of class sets student expectations for every day for the rest of the term.** If, then, you want students to read, write, and discuss with each other, **this is what you should do on the first day of class.** (If, on the other hand, you want students to listen to you passively and look to you for instruction, spend the class lecturing or going over the syllabus.)

Suggestion: Hand out the syllabus at the *end* of the first class, and make the next assignment to read the syllabus and write a response to it. I have students write me a letter because I think it establishes that I want them to use their writing to *communicate* with me—not to please me. I encourage them to be honest, to ask questions, and

sometimes I give them other questions to answer, like *why did you choose this course, if you did?* or *tell me about your learning style*, so that I can get to know them a little, too. Then, freed from having to talk about my syllabus, I can design an opening in-class exercise that asks students to read, write, and talk to each other, which are the skills I will be expecting them to develop in the first few weeks of class.

Don't expect great things on the first day—your students will be shy, they will be nervous, they may not respond as you hope. But if you think of the first day as the *foundation* for your structure, and lay it carefully, you will have a sound beginning and increase your chances for the kind of success you dream of.

APPENDIX: SAT Essay Scoring Guide (*from www.collegeboard.com*)**Scoring Guide**

The Scoring Guide expresses the criteria readers use to evaluate and score the student essays. The Guide is structured on a six-point scale. Since the new SAT essay will be scored holistically, readers will be trained to use the Scoring Guide in conjunction with anchor papers, which have been scored by consensus as representative examples. The language of the Scoring Guide provides a consistent and coherent framework for differentiating between score points, without defining specific traits or types of essays that define each score point.

Score of 6

An essay in this category is **outstanding**, demonstrating **clear and consistent mastery**, although it may have a few minor errors. A typical essay

- effectively and insightfully develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates outstanding critical thinking, using clearly appropriate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position
- is well organized and clearly focused, demonstrating clear coherence and smooth progression of ideas
- exhibits skillful use of language, using a varied, accurate, and apt vocabulary
- demonstrates meaningful variety in sentence structure
- is free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

Score of 5

An essay in this category is **effective**, demonstrating **reasonably consistent mastery**, although it will have occasional errors or lapses in quality. A typical essay

- effectively develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates strong critical thinking, generally using appropriate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position
- is well organized and focused, demonstrating coherence and progression of ideas
- exhibits facility in the use of language, using appropriate vocabulary
- demonstrates variety in sentence structure
- is generally free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

Score of 4

An essay in this category is **competent**, demonstrating **adequate mastery**, although it will have lapses in quality. A typical essay

- develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates competent critical thinking, using adequate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position
- is generally organized and focused, demonstrating some coherence and progression of ideas
- exhibits adequate but inconsistent facility in the use of language, using generally appropriate vocabulary
- demonstrates some variety in sentence structure
- has some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

Score of 3

An essay in this category is **inadequate**, but demonstrates **developing mastery**, and is marked by **one or more** of the following weaknesses:

- develops a point of view on the issue, demonstrating some critical thinking, but may do so inconsistently or use inadequate examples, reasons, or other evidence to support its position
- is limited in its organization or focus, but may demonstrate some lapses in coherence or progression of ideas
- displays developing facility in the use of language, but sometimes uses weak vocabulary or inappropriate word choice
- lacks variety or demonstrates problems in sentence structure
- contains an accumulation of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

Score of 2

An essay in this category is **seriously limited**, demonstrating **little mastery**, and is flawed by **one or more** of the following weaknesses:

- develops a point of view on the issue that is vague or seriously limited, demonstrating weak critical thinking, providing inappropriate or insufficient examples, reasons, or other evidence to support its position
- is poorly organized and/or focused, or demonstrates serious problems with coherence or progression of ideas
- displays very little facility in the use of language, using very limited vocabulary or incorrect word choice
- demonstrates frequent problems in sentence structure
- contains errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics so serious that meaning is somewhat obscured

Score of 1

An essay in this category is **fundamentally lacking**, demonstrating **very little or no mastery**, and is severely flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:

- develops no viable point of view on the issue, or provides little or no evidence to support its position
- is disorganized or unfocused, resulting in a disjointed or incoherent essay
- displays fundamental errors in vocabulary
- demonstrates severe flaws in sentence structure
- contains pervasive errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics that persistently interfere with meaning

Score of 0

Essays not written on the essay assignment will receive a score of zero.

CHAPTER 3

Feedback--Professor:Student, Student:Student

Feedback. You probably noticed, in the last two chapters, a singular repetition of this word. Of course! Feedback is at the center of teaching writing. Feedback is the only way for a writer to learn whether what he or she has written communicates clearly, is interesting, does the job. Thus, this chapter is devoted to *feedback*.

Think for a moment about the word itself. What “feedback” does is to “feed” the reader’s responses “back” to the writer. “Feed” implies nutrition, nurture, sustenance. Thus, “feedback” is essential to every writer—it’s what every writer craves. We all want to know we’ve been heard and understood. And when we learn that we haven’t, and why we haven’t, that’s when we learn how to improve.

A number of problems that first-year students face in their writing are the result of a gap in communication between the professors and students. For this chapter, we surveyed over a hundred first-year students about their experiences in first-year seminar. In this chapter, we use their “feedback” to examine some of these problems, and explain how improved communication and feedback (in the form of comments, conferences, and small-group work) can help students to fulfill their potential as writers.

A Note on Assignments

For many students, writing problems start even before they begin writing. In fact, for some, discovering a way to approach the assignment is the most difficult part of writing a paper. Sometimes students complain that the boundaries of the assignment are unclear, and that they feel challenged to write all they have to say in a concise manner. Other times the assignment seems too detailed and complex for them to write enough about it. And then there are times when students don’t understand the assignment to begin with.

If a student is to succeed with an assignment, the professor must be clear in his or her expectations. Thus, feedback process may begin even before the paper is written. Question sessions, conferences, in-class exercises, and/or workshops are some ways to prepare students to write well, since they facilitate two-way discussion of an assignment when it’s most useful: *before* its due date.

Written Comments

While there are many ways that teachers can help their students with their writing, written comments on a draft are often the most direct and practical, as well as the most effective. Of the first-year students we polled, the overwhelming majority claimed that receiving comments on their papers was their preferred way for teachers to convey the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Since students put such stock in teacher comments, it is important for you to consider the impact those comments have and capitalize on the opportunity to help students better their writing.

Crucial to consider is turn-around time. Many first-year students are unsure of teacher expectations. Even if guidelines have been given, the adjustment from high school to college writing, as well as differences between professors and disciplines, often leaves students unsure of their writing. Students unsure about fulfilling their teachers’

expectations depend on comments to tell them what they are doing correctly and what they need to improve in the future. It is *essential* that one assignment be returned to students before a new writing assignment is given. All too often, students come to the Writing Center with a new assignment feeling frustrated and helpless because they don't even know if they did what they were supposed to in their previous paper.

The content of written comments is, of course, very important. The key to giving useful comments is to strike a balance between feedback that is too sparse and vague and that which is too detailed and cluttered. A comment like "weak conclusion" leaves a student unsure of what to do; she knows the conclusion needs work, but not why. Instead, try this: "This conclusion strays from the main idea of your paper. Maybe use this part of the paper to explain the significance of your main argument?" These two sentences let the student know what the problem is while offering a constructive suggestion for fixing it. Note: Even a comment like "good" can be frustrating, if the student doesn't know just what you thought was so "good."

Even more frustrating than vague comments is getting a paper back covered with so many comments that the student feels overwhelmed and defeated before he even reads them. One of the most common reasons professors "overmark" papers is to correct grammatical or sentence structure problems. While you might intend these corrections to be helpful, a clutter of marked-up, crossed-out, rearranged, or otherwise changed sentences is intimidating and can make a student feel as if you're taking ownership of her writing. More useful may be to identify a common recurring error, write a short note addressing the issue, and point out one or two instances. For example, if a student is having trouble keeping verb tenses consistent, a brief comment on the problem and a reference to a place where the tense shifts will get the message across without overwhelming the student, and will also save you time.

While content and style are both important elements of a well-written paper, if a student has problems in both areas, you might consider addressing only content problems first. A paper that lacks a thesis, wanders from its central focus, or has other major content issues needs major revision. Pointing out sentence-level errors will only distract a student from this work. Furthermore, there is little point, either for you or for the student, in taking the time to rework and polish incorrect sentences when those sentences may disappear as the student revises for content. (Note: In any case it's often true that errors decrease as a student becomes more confident about *what* he's saying and is freed up to focus more on *how* he's saying it.)

It's also very important to give *positive* feedback. For one thing, no matter how poorly written a paper may seem to you, chances are the student has invested time and energy into it; acknowledging that work is important to student motivation. Additionally, if you can find at least *one* aspect of the paper that "works" or is worth pursuing, the student will be more likely to want to revise. Knowing what works gives the student something to build on, and knowing that her writing has potential motivates her to keep trying.

In general, pay close attention to *how* your comments are written. Make sure they are respectful. Address the student by name. If your comments seem careful and thoughtful, and if they show that you really read and tried to understand the paper as written, your students will respond in kind. Don't just give *teacherly* comments that

imply correction and judgment; instead, try to give *readerly* comments that let the student know how a reader perceives what he wrote.

Teacher comments on corrected papers can be one of the most useful vehicles for helping students better their writing. If students receive feedback in a reasonable time, they can learn from the strengths and weaknesses of their work. By making sure to give specific advice as to *how* to improve a paper, avoiding excessive markings and corrections, addressing content issues before grammatical ones, and giving positive and readerly feedback, teachers can ensure that their comments are both helpful and practical.

Conferences between Professors and Students

According to our student survey, this form of feedback ranks second, right behind written comments. For students, a professor:student conference is helpful because it provides immediate feedback. When they are unclear about your expectations or unsure of their ideas for an assignment, one of the quickest and surest ways to get help is to meet with you; such meetings can improve a student's confidence and the final product as well. Also, conferences after a paper has been returned can clarify written comments and even the grade.

On the other hand, our survey suggested that students also have problems with professor:student conferences. The number one difficulty is making time for an appointment with a teacher. Finding time in a busy schedule can be overwhelming for anyone, let alone first-year students getting used to college life. Also, students sometimes feel that teachers do not have the time or care about meeting with them. The idea of office hours and having to find professors' offices in the different buildings is a new one to incoming students, and can be a bit intimidating.

To address these issues, try bringing a sign-up sheet to class. If the conference is required, make that clear in the syllabus, including what the cost will be for missed conferences. Tell students what the purpose of each conference is and what you will expect from them. For instance, do they need to review the assignment and make a list of questions? Do they need to come in with part of a draft? Do they need to read over your comments and come in with their reactions? If you prefer not to require conferences but simply want to encourage them, put a sign-up sheet on your door and remind students frequently of its existence, or allow them to email you for appointments. First-year students need to feel that you are making time to meet with them and are interested in helping them; otherwise, they may not ask for an appointment, no matter how much they might need it.

Conferences about writing are a bit different than other kinds of conferences you might have with students. The key thing is to make sure that the student does most of the talking. For instance, if the student has come in for feedback on a draft, you can begin the conference by asking, "What do *you* think about the paper?" If the student seems flummoxed by this question, ask some follow-up questions: "Well, what do you like most about it?" or "What do you think needs work?" Another approach, if you haven't read the draft, is to begin by having the student "gloss" the paper for you—going through paragraph by paragraph and explaining what each part "does" in the paper. This often leads the student to discovering the strengths and weaknesses of the paper on her own.

Naturally, the student has come to you for your input. But try to avoid taking over the paper and/or making too many or too strong suggestions. *You* are the authority, and if

you say, “What I’d do is...,” that is what most students will do. Maintaining ownership of writing is important to student motivation. So if you find yourself taking over, change tactics. Say “what I really like is X, Y, and Z; what needs work is Q. Do you have any ideas for how to improve that?” And see Chapter 4 for more ideas about how to diagnose writing problems and help students solve them.

By keeping ownership of the conversation *and* the writing in the student’s hands, you will be “feeding” your students just the kind of help they need to improve on their own.

Student:Student Conferencing and Small Group Work

According to our survey, student:student conferencing is the least favorite form of feedback. Of the twenty students who said that they liked or didn’t mind student:student conferences, most of them specified that these conferences are helpful for editing purposes only. This comment expresses well how students feel about these conferences: “I hate student:student/peer editing. It can be embarrassing, and I don’t feel like I always get the best (if any) comments back to help me improve.”

One effect of student:student conferences is that students are exposed to each other’s writing. This can have positive impacts, but also negative ones. Imagine that you are a first-year student with an LD, and your paper is rife with spelling and grammar errors. You might worry that your classmates think that you aren’t a smart person. Even if you get someone to help you edit your paper before the class sees it, you might still imagine a “smart hierarchy” in the class. Even very good writers can be uncertain about the quality of their writing. It’s important that professors realize how self-conscious students can be about their writing, and how personally they can take criticism, especially from a classmate.

The fact that the majority of the survey responses favored written comments and professor:student conferences, and that very few students liked student:student conferences, indicates that students are most concerned with what their professor thinks of their writing. After all, the professor will be grading it. Thus, a first-year student who is having a hard time reaching her professor’s expectations might not value comments from her colleagues, who are also first-year students just out of high school. Even a student who gets helpful feedback during student:student conferences can be concerned about how the *teacher* will receive the paper, and this might make student conferencing seem like a waste of time.

There are, of course, many benefits to student:student conferencing. One is that it resolves the time issue of busy student schedules. Since student conferencing takes place during class time, it’s very efficient, and can often get feedback to students earlier and more frequently in the writing process. As one student commented: “It is very helpful to conference with other students who are writing on the same topic because you can give each other feedback as to how you could elaborate on a certain point.” An environment of collaboration and evolving ideas is a nice ideal to strive for in college, and this comment offers some hope that this environment can be achieved.

To make that happen, you should plan your student:student conferences well, and *teach* students how to give each other the kinds of feedback that you want them to get. Here are some tips for doing just that:

- Do it early and often. The more students practice the art of giving each other feedback, the better they will get at it, and the more they will value it. Additionally, as students get to know each other, they will relax and feel more open to feedback. Start with having them share informal writing that won't be graded, so that they can't worry about the impact of the feedback.
- To alleviate the anxiety that will come with sharing their work, tell students about times when you have had similar experiences—talk about the importance of having many readers, of gathering feedback from many points of view.
- Make student feedback central, not ancillary. Trust students to give each other good feedback and make that feedback essential to each student's success, and students will pull through for each other. When a group has given a student feedback that you don't agree with, give it due respect anyway.
- The best size for a small writing group is three students. This forces all students to participate and allows more time for each student. (For short exercises or discussions where the focus is not on writing, groups of five work well.) You can let the groups be random at first; then, as you get to know the students, you can shape the groups, mixing personalities, gender, and writing ability to achieve your goals. Some groups will work well; others will not. Feel free to rearrange.
- “Feedback” is not “critiquing” or “criticizing.” It is *feeding back* to the writer what the reader “got” from the writing, or didn't get. It's not about saying what's “wrong” but about saying what “is.” Thus, focus on using student feedback mainly for content questions, especially at first. Avoid letting students get bogged down in error hunts. Forbid it.
- Focus each feedback session on a particular task. For instance, you might ask students to find and summarize the argument in each paper. Or you might write on the board some questions to address. For a first draft, good questions are “What's it about? What works well? What do you want to know more about?” To ensure everyone stays on task, especially at the outset, have one student serve as “reporter” and report the discussion to the whole group at the end of class, or write it up to hand in to you.
- Early in the writing process, it works to have students read their drafts aloud to one another; later, it will work better to have them bring in copies. Reading aloud forces them to focus on the big picture; having a copy to read allows them to give more detailed response.
- Have the *writer* lead his or her own discussion. To aid in this, ask the writers to jot down their questions and concerns in advance of the workshop.
- If the small groups aren't working well, stop and ask them to freewrite about why not, anonymously. Then have a class discussion about what's going wrong and how to fix it, or read what they wrote and address the issues yourself.

- Allow some “socializing.” This lets students relax and helps them to get to know one another, which makes for more comfort in sharing their work. But do wander through periodically and eavesdrop to make sure that the groups are accomplishing what they need to accomplish, and when you’re not sure, “drop in” and ask a few questions.
- Remember that the benefits of peer conferencing don’t just accrue to the writing itself. Working together this way teaches students how to listen, discuss, and learn from one another, and helps students form a community of learners—and writers. Additionally, having a “real” audience for their writing gives them a stronger sense of the value and importance of writing—for themselves, not just for school.
- If you want to move from “small-group” workshops to “whole-group” workshops, follow the principles above. The main issue here is what *your* role should be. Again, let each writer lead his or her own discussion. Perhaps step in only when the discussion is floundering; be ready to step back out again when all seems to be going well. If students (and you) also put your feedback in writing, a whole-group workshop will be even more useful to the writer, and can provide you with many a teachable moment.

A balance of all kinds of feedback, offered consistently and constantly throughout the semester, is one key to improving your students’ writing. We hope these insights help you toward that all-important end.

CHAPTER 4

Solving Writing Problems: A Diagnostic Approach

Diagnosing Writing Problems: READ THIS FIRST!

In Lucy Calkins's book *Lessons from a Child*, she tells the story of a third-grade boy who writes

I got a model from:Eric.

His teacher's response is positive and insightful: first she says, "Oh! You've used a colon the first time!" Then she asks, "How'd you go about deciding to use it in this particular place?"

To which the boy replies: "You know, like on a birthday card. 'To: Brad. From: Eric.'" The teacher applauds his way of thinking, and then goes on to give him a quick lesson in the colon.

This approach to teaching writing—identifying the reason for an error and only offering instruction if needed—is what we call the "diagnostic approach," and it is a method we rely on in the Writing Center. All St. Mike's students come to college knowing a great deal about writing, including some things we rather wish they didn't "know." If we merely "correct" the problems or tell students how to correct them, we're not addressing the cause, and so not really teaching. We're like doctors who, seeing a rash, rush to prescribe an ointment while neglecting to ask whether the patient has been exposed to measles recently. A little investigation into a student's most common, repetitive errors can go a long way toward finding a genuine remedy.

The key phrase in the above sentence is *repetitive errors*. *Everybody* makes mistakes sometimes. But if you notice a *pattern* of errors—either a pattern of local errors over the course of a single paper, or a pattern of global errors in two or more assignments—then some diagnosis is in order.

How do you diagnose the cause of frequent errors? There's only one way: Ask the student (preferably in a one-on-one conference). Ask what she learned in high school; ask what her writing process is; ask if she understands the assignment; ask what her *reasoning* was. Only the student knows what goes on in her writing, but once *you* know, you can correct the misconceptions or educational gaps you discover.

Below we have listed some of the more common writing problems we see with first-year students, beginning with global (which we define as having to do with content or organization) and working toward local (which we define as things that affect sentence-level understanding). We've also proposed possible "causes" and "solutions" for these problems. Of course, as always, feel free to refer your students to the Writing Center if you would like them to work on these problems with us.

GLOBAL ISSUES: CONTENT, ARGUMENTATION, ORGANIZATION

Note: In each chart, a number next to a cause parallels the number of the solution. That is, cause #1 responds well to solution #1.

Chart I: Apparent Lack of Thesis

HOW IT LOOKS	POSSIBLE CAUSES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p>A paper without a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thesis has been placed in an untraditional location, where the student feels it is most effective or natural. 2. Student began writing without knowing what point s/he was going to make and discovered the point in the process of writing and then did not revise. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unless you have made it clear that you expect and require a thesis in the introduction, don't assume that because a thesis is not there, there is no thesis. Many professional writers put their real "point" at the end or even in the middle. If you discover a thesis later in the paper, and the paper is otherwise coherent, cohesive, and effective, assume the placement of the thesis was deliberate and grade accordingly. 2. This is a perfectly acceptable first step for writing a paper, but the student needs to learn that it should be followed with revision. In this case, underline the thesis and suggest the student write a new introduction using that point. Also see "lack of structure/organization" below.

Chart II: Actual lack of a thesis

HOW IT LOOKS	POSSIBLE CAUSES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p>A paper that lacks focus; rambles and never comes to a point; names several points but never focuses on or develops one; or has a single topic but never makes a point that can be argued.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The student may have been rushed or writing at the last minute. 2. The student is confused about the paper topic and/or the reading assignment. 3. The student may have strong language skills and was able to “get away with” unfocused writing in high school and never realized it was a problem. 4. Certain learning disabilities—in particular, ADD—can also lead to this kind of writing. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To avoid this issue, make your expectations very clear; talk in class about the writing process, what a good thesis looks like, and so on. 2. Do some preparatory assignments, discussion, or exercises in class to make sure that students understand your expectations both for the <i>form</i> and the <i>content</i> of the paper. 3. #1 above, and #4 below. 4. As you read an unfocused paper or one with several undeveloped theses, underline possible focuses; then require “radical” revision, in which the student chooses <i>one</i> focus and writes a whole new draft developing just that.

Chart III: Lack of Development, support, or evidence

HOW IT LOOKS	POSSIBLE CAUSES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p>A paper that has a thesis/focus but lacks evidence and argumentation; often restates the same point several different ways without ever demonstrating it or includes a lot of seemingly unnecessary material.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of or little sense for what a reader needs in order to accept or understand the point being made. 2. Not understanding the material and therefore being unable manipulate it to make a point. 3. The point chosen is something not arguable—either too broad or self-evident, or an “opinion” or feeling rather than a thesis. 	<p>In general, consider an incremental approach, where the students write one or two rough drafts for feedback before handing in the final paper. This will allow you to notice problems and address them in advance, saving you both a great deal of frustration. In specific response to the causes at left:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask—either in comments or in conference—the kinds of questions a reader would be asking. “Why?” “For example?” “In what way?” “So what?” “How?” Teach the student to ask him or herself these kinds of questions after each sentence as he or she writes. 2. In an individual conference, check for understanding and answer questions. Avoid the problem by having class discussions of the topic or reading before the paper is due. 3. If the thesis is inappropriate (and this isn’t always obvious, not even to the instructor), meet with the student to discuss ways to narrow it down or revise it to make it work. Try to help the student keep the original focus so as to protect his or her ownership of the writing.

Chart IV: Poor or confusing structure/organization

HOW IT LOOKS	POSSIBLE CAUSES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p>A lack of “flow”; writing feels choppy; reader’s expectations are constantly thwarted.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The student’s writing process: a paper written too quickly or late at night or with many interruptions; a paper written in pieces and then “assembled”; a paper written using an outline or formula that was not suitable to the topic. 2. Confusion about the material; see above. 3. A detailed assignment with a list of “questions to consider”: the student may have tried to answer all the questions, rather than using them as you intended. 4. The assignment may be more complex or longer than the student is used to; the “five-paragraph theme” approach no longer works but s/he is unsure how else to structure a piece of writing. 5. Lack of “connecting” material—the transitional phrases, cues, sentences that allow the reader to see how things are connected. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Suggest that the student “salvage” the draft using one of these strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Glossing: “Gloss” each section or paragraph by writing its main topic, point, or purpose in the margin. Then make an outline of these glosses, putting them in a more sensible order. Cut and paste the draft to follow this outline. ➤ Color-coding: Instead of glossing, choose a color for each subtopic, and highlight the paper to see what goes together. Things that don’t get highlighted don’t belong at all. Everything else can be cut and pasted into the right order. 2. See “Actual lack of thesis.” 3. In your written assignments, be specific without being overly directive; try, instead, <i>talking</i> through the relevant questions and issues in class. 4. Use #1, above. 5. Conference with the student and show him or her how to improve the writing by adding the material that’s missing. Ask questions; suggest phrases. Doing this on the computer, with the student at the keyboard, is particularly effective.

LOCAL ISSUES: CITATION, STYLE, GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

Chart V: Citation Issues

How it looks	Possible causes	Possible solutions
<p>Direct quotes and/or paraphrased ideas without citation; improper or inconsistent citation; sudden shift in language (e.g., a more sophisticated or complex style, a different level of vocabulary).</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inexperience with citation styles. 2. Confusion about which style to use or what needs to be cited. 3. Lack of reference guide and/or internet access to specific citation styling. 4. Rushed job in compiling “works cited” or “bibliography” section of paper. 5. Plagiarism. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1-2. Introduce class to appropriate citation styles and make your expectations clear in advance; practice citing in less formal assignments first. 3. Require students to buy a good handbook with multiple citation styles in it. 4. Suggest ways to keep sources organized while doing research; require a proposal with a list of sources in advance. 5. Before taking action, meet with student to find out whether plagiarism was deliberate or accidental; to prevent, have your discussion of academic integrity prior to the first paper in which citation will be required.

Chart VI: Stylistic Issues

How it looks	Possible causes	Possible solutions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Words frequently used incorrectly—i.e., the wrong vocabulary choices. 2. Dialectical writing, writing that sounds too much like someone talking 3. Inappropriate “register”—i.e., language too formal or informal for the assignment 4. Words used that seem beyond the student’s vocabulary and/or inconsistent with the voice of the paper. 5. “Mumbo-jumbo”—i.e., overly complex word choices, sentence structures; convoluted writing. 6. Words that are correctly used but send the audience to the dictionary. 7. Overly simplistic writing; short sentences, simple vocabulary. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Writer hasn’t learned the nuances of meaning of certain words or phrases; may be an ESL student or a native speaker from a region with a strong dialect. 2-3. Student may lack experience with formal, academic writing and/or be unsure of academic expectations. 4-5. Student may be developing his/her “academic voice” and/or may be worried about impressing the audience; may have quoted without indication or citation. 6. Student may be gifted in the English language but lacks audience awareness. 7. Student may be “dumbing down” his/her language for fear of making mistakes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conference with student about the words in question; ask “what are you trying to say here?” When the student restates it clearly, suggest using those words. Suggest checking unfamiliar or new words in the dictionary. 2-3. Talk, in class or in a conference, about formal versus informal registers and show different ways of saying the same thing. 4-5. Compliment the student’s efforts and show him/her where the language <i>is</i> working well. Suggest <i>not</i> using a thesaurus to “fancy up” the writing. Ask if the language came from another source and needs to be cited. Reassure the student that “fancy” or more formal is not necessarily “better”—that clarity is the important thing. Encourage the student to find his/her own voice to express his/her own ideas. 6. Compliment the student’s strength in language. Talk about audience and suggest ways to keep the style sophisticated and interesting without putting the audience off. Talk about the purpose of writing: to communicate. If necessary in class workshops, support the student’s choice to write in his/her own style so that others recognize its value. 7. Encourage the student to write more freely and openly; suggest freewriting; suggest that mistakes are a sign of learning; build the student’s confidence by pointing out when the language becomes more complex and interesting.

Chart VII: Grammar and Punctuation Issues: Ten Common Errors

Keep in mind that there are two kinds of local errors: *performance* errors, when the writer knows the correct forms but slips up occasionally (as in typos, etc.), and *competence* errors, when the writer is uncertain of the correct form or has never learned it. *Interlanguage* errors are very common in college writing. We see this most clearly in the ESL student, for whom forms from the first language sometimes intrude in second-language writing. But remember: For many students, formal “academic” prose is also a second language. Both kinds of students are still learning the correct forms and may use them inconsistently or inappropriately, like the boy who used the colon incorrectly

The key thing is to look for *error patterns*. If the student makes the error only occasionally, chances are she does not need instruction or correction; if you circle the error, the student can fix it herself. On the other hand, if the student makes the same error over and over or can’t correct it himself, instruction is in order. One-on-one instruction works best, but instruction through comments can sometimes be effective too.

To help students catch their own errors, try the following:

- Suggest that they proofread their work by reading aloud, preferably *to* someone. It works!
- Find one example of the error and write an end note explaining that this is a frequent error and why.
- If the student is still unable to catch the error, put checkmarks in the margins next to lines with errors (e.g., two checkmarks next to one line means two errors in that line), and ask students to correct the errors on the page and then return the same copy to you.
- If that doesn’t work, circle the errors themselves and do the same thing.
- If that doesn’t work, it’s time for a conference and/or a visit to the Writing Center.

If you have a student whose language skills are consistently seriously below par for a first-year student, suggest a *designated writing coach*. If the student seems amenable, you or he can contact the director of the Writing Center to start the process. The director will meet with the student to assess what kind of coach will be best and to find a time when both coach and student are free, and will arrange a first meeting between the coach and student. Thereafter, the coach and student will establish a schedule of meetings as necessary and appropriate. If you like, you can ask the student to document visits by showing you the session form. Extra credit can be a nice motivator, but usually the carrot of better grades works fine.

One additional caveat: Make sure that the form you are identifying as an error really *is* an error. Grammar and punctuation rules do evolve over time; for instance, it’s now perfectly acceptable to begin sentences with “but” and even, on occasion, with “and.” Check a contemporary handbook if you have any doubt. Nothing is more embarrassing to correct something that isn’t actually incorrect to begin with.

Chart VII: Grammar and Punctuation Issues: Ten Common Errors

Type of error	Usual cause/example	How to address
Subject/verb agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A phrase intercedes between the subject and the verb that throws the writer off; e.g., “The bowl of potatoes are on the counter.” (subject and verb in bold) 2. Another occasional cause is not knowing whether a subject is plural or not—words like “group” can be confusing. 3. Both ESL students and students who speak in dialect may have difficulty with subject/verb agreement because it’s not handled in the same way in their language. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask the student “what’s on the counter?” to identify the true subject and the appropriate verb. Point out that this is a frequent error, even among professional writers, and suggest watching for “interrupting” phrases that can throw the writer off. 2. If the problem is a subject like “group,” talk about when such a subject is singular (when the group “acts as one”) and plural (when the <i>members</i> of the group “act as individuals,” as in “the group argue amongst themselves”). 3. For ESL and SESL (Standard English as a Second Language) students, the key is practice; point out the error as suggested above, but try to get the student to correct him or herself it as often as possible.
Comma splice; misuse of semicolon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A comma splice is the use of a comma alone to combine two sentences: “The idea of democracy is not new to them, it’s just never lasted before.” Most often, students who use comma splices are reaching for more complex sentence structures that require sentence combining, usually with a semicolon. 2. Students who’ve had problems with comma splices in the past often use semicolons where they aren’t appropriate: “When we had everything; we got back into the car.” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask if the student knows what a comma splice is, and if not, explain and show an example. Talk about the various correct ways to combine sentences (semicolon; comma + coordinating conjunction [and, but, or/nor, yet, so, or for]; or subordinating conjunction [e.g., <i>because</i>, <i>since</i>, etc.]. Talk about the semicolon in particular: It is actually a combination of a <i>period</i> and a <i>comma</i>, and can be used as a “hard comma” or a “soft period”; think of it as a “semi-period” when you use it to combine sentences. Encourage the student to pursue the complex sentence structure, which is usually a sign of more complex thinking. 2. Explain about the semicolon (see above). Ask if the first part of this sentence really can stand alone.

Type of error	Usual cause/example	How to address
Comma splice with “however”	For example: “She came to the party, however, she was not appropriately dressed.” The word “however” is <i>not</i> a subordinating conjunction, but students frequently think it can work as one. Also, students may be confused by the fact that “however” <i>can</i> be used between two commas (as in “She was, however, wearing a ball gown”).	Explain that “however,” “therefore,” and the like are actually <i>adverbs</i> , not conjunctions, but the error can be fixed by changing one of the commas (whichever makes the correct meaning) to a semicolon (see above): “She came to the party; however, she was not appropriately dressed.” Ask them to take “however” out; is the sentence appropriately punctuated without it? Applaud the student’s effort to use more sophisticated structures.
Sentence fragments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The most frequent cause is the fear of <i>run-on</i> sentences—if a sentence seems to be getting long, or too complex in terms of punctuation, students will often lop off the thing that seems most able to “stand on its own.” Example: “Whatever the root cause of starvation, the physical symptoms are the same. Skin problems, eye problems, bone problems, and of course loss of muscle mass.” 2. If this is not the problem, the student may have difficulty recognizing what a fragment is. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Let students know that a “run-on” sentence is not just a long sentence—it’s a combination of two or more sentences incorrectly punctuated. For instance, a sentence with a comma splice is a “run-on.” Look at various samples of fragments in the student’s writing to see if there is a common situation in which s/he uses a fragment; if so, discuss the possible corrections. For instance, in the example on the left, the simple correction would be to use a colon after “same.” Also let students know that <i>deliberate</i> sentence fragments are acceptable, <i>even</i> in academic or formal writing. Help them to see when they’ve made a sentence fragment for <i>effect</i> so that they can tell the difference. Also let them know that if a sentence <i>needs</i> to be long, that’s okay! 2. Separate a fragment from its surrounding sentences and have the student look at it. Can it truly stand alone? Does it express a “complete idea”? Do this with several examples.

Type of error	Usual cause/example	How to address
Run-ons	A run-on sentence is any sentence that combines two or more sentences incorrectly—see “comma splices” for one example. Another kind of run-on is the “fused” sentence, where two or more sentences are combined with <i>no</i> punctuation or conjunction at all. Most often this is just a result of writing quickly and not proofreading.	In conference or in comments, ask “How many ideas in this sentence? Please separate them.” If the student is unable to do this, show him/her where the ideas begin and end, and suggest appropriate punctuation. If the problem persists, suggest a designated writing coach. Again, remember that the combining of sentences indicates a movement toward more complex thoughts—which is something we want to encourage. Tell the student this!
Misplaced and dangling modifiers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A “misplaced” modifier is usually a phrase that appears at too far a distance from the thing it describes, as in “I shot an elephant in my pajamas.” 2. A “dangling” modifier is a phrase that appears in a sentence that does not contain the thing being described, as in “The elephant was shot in my pajamas” or the common mistake “While reading the book, Pi stood out for his faith and patience.” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When students realize how their sentences might be misread, they can usually correct them, so tell them what the sentence means <i>as is</i>: “So, the elephant was wearing your pajamas?” and ask where else the phrase <i>in my pajamas</i> might go. Use humor. 2. Same as above: “So—Pi was reading the book?” “No—I was.” “Where can you add <i>I was</i>?” The problem here is really one of realizing that what we can get away with in speech we can’t get away with in writing. Where written words are placed <i>does</i> matter.

Type of error	Usual cause/example	How to address
Pronoun/ antecedent agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This problem often occurs when students are trying to avoid sexist language: “The student needs to bring their book to class.” 2. Another common instance is when a phrase that intervenes between the antecedent and the pronoun confuses the issue: “My sister, like many women, pay a lot of attention to their looks.” (See subject/verb agreement, above.) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ironically, the use of “their” as a nonspecific singular alternative to “his or her” was quite acceptable a hundred or so years ago. But nowadays, educated readers like things to agree in number. Use a sample sentence to show students all the parts that must agree: “The students need to bring their books to class.” 2. Remove the offending phrase and see if the student can make the correction: “My sister...<i>pays</i> a lot of attention to <i>her</i> looks.” The student can keep the intervening phrase—either where it was or at the beginning of the sentence (although you might well question the use of such a generalization!).
<i>Its vs it’s</i>	“It’s” <i>looks</i> like a possessive, because many possessives are formed with <i>’s</i> . Add to this that the two words sound identical (<i>homonyms</i>), and you can see why we all make this mistake on occasion. But many students really are unclear about which is used when.	Teach the student that there are NO possessive <i>pronouns</i> with apostrophes. Suggest substituting “it is” whenever s/he sees an “it’s” in his/her writing. If the “it is” doesn’t work, then replace it with <i>its</i> .
<i>There, they’re, their</i>	Homonyms, again. Most students know what these mean, but they often confuse them as they write.	Suggest proofreading looking <i>only</i> for these words and testing each instance for correctness.
<i>Then vs than</i>	Near homonyms, same as above.	Suggest that students associate <i>then</i> with <i>when</i> , since both have to do with time, and <i>than</i> with <i>and</i> , since both have to do with connecting two things. Proofread for this alone if it’s a real problem.

SOME SOURCES

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