

Myths about Grammar and Teaching Writing

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Two Myths about Teaching Writing:

- I don't have the knowledge to teach writing.

I'm not an expert writer . . . I don't like to write I struggle with my writing. . . . I've never been trained to teach writing.

- I don't have the time to teach writing.

It will take up valuable class time needed to teach the subject . . . I'm too overworked already. . . . If composition teachers would do their job, I wouldn't have to think about writing.

I'm not an expert writer . . . I don't like to write I struggle with my writing. . . . I've never been trained to teach writing.

Reality: Writing is difficult for everyone. If only people who considered themselves expert writers ever taught writing, very little writing would be taught. What's needed is not expert writing skills but a belief that writing is important. You are best able to teach students how writing fits into your discipline. You can learn how to teach writing for your discipline effectively.

Remember:

- Writing follows a process.
- Writing behaviors affect the result.

Strategies:

- Provide a realistic time schedule.
- Identify all due dates:
 - Preliminary theses, outlines, bibliographies
 - First or early drafts
 - Intermediate draft(s). Will you allow for revisions?
 - Final version
- Build in—or have students build in—small rewards.
- Design assignments to emphasize the behaviors you want your students to practice.
 - close reading—require summary & examples
 - personal connection—assign letters, creative responses

**Writing will take valuable time needed to teach the subject . . .
I'm overworked already . . . I shouldn't have to teach writing.**

Reality: If you incorporate disciplinary writing, you'll be teaching the subject of your course better. You can assign writing in ways that don't require an unmanageable time investment. Writing is more than a skill—it always takes place in context, and the context affects the writing. A first-year composition class can never teach your students everything they need to know for your discipline.

Remember:

- Time spent on planning/explaining = time saved in grading.
- You don't need to grade everything your students write.
- Commenting less can accomplish more.

Strategies:

- Know your purpose for the assignment.
 - Learn to write? Write to learn? Write to demonstrate understanding (of what)?
- Plan to explain basic concepts, conventions of the discipline.
 - What are the different types of writing and how does this fit in?
 - How is evidence, data, etc. selected and used?
 - Who is the audience and what style of writing will they expect?
- Set aside a few minutes of each class for questions.

Strategies:

- Go beyond the academic essay.
 - Microthemes
 - Personal responses
 - Definitions/examples
 - Discuss controversy
 - Explain a process/method
 - Apply to real life
 - Thesis sentence
 - Annotated bibliography

Strategies:

- Not all writing needs to be graded in the same way.
 - Peer responding, peer editing, UWC
 - Check sheet, rubric, primary trait, one comment to everyone, good/bad examples
 - Response keyed to writing process (e.g., early—focus on key concepts, process, limitations of topic; middle—organization, development, conventions; late—editing)
 - Only grade some assignments
 - Portfolio grading

Strategies:

- Don't comment too much! Too many comments are difficult to prioritize and can be self-defeating.
 - Quality matters more than quantity.
 - Mention strengths as well as weaknesses.
 - Put most comments at end of paper.
 - Spend more time on draft comments than on final comments.
 - Suggest how to do better next time, not just what is wrong this time.

Adequate

Better

You raise important issues but your organization is weak. I never knew what to expect next. The paper was lacking enough support. Where is the development of the ideas?

You raise 3 important points on your second page, but they get lost in the remainder of the paper. On your next draft, focus on just those 3 and support them with evidence and/or logical argument from the course material or outside sources.

I had trouble following your argument. It is not coherent. There are not any transitions between your ideas. I didn't know what your point was until I read the last paragraph.

I was a little lost until I read your last paragraph. It is a good summary of your argument and it needs to be moved to the beginning of your paper. Use it as a neat outline of what will happen next, and then make sure the rest of the paper supports your thesis.

There is no thesis statement here. You are merely summarizing the ideas of the two theorists, rather than providing us with anything new. Where are you in all this?

Most political science papers require you to make an argument, rather than just summarize the course material. You demonstrate a good understanding of Hobbes and Locke, but you need to make a claim that responds to the assignment question. Be bold and direct--don't be afraid to take a stand!

Four Myths about Grammar:

- Grammar errors indicate ignorance.

Reality: Students make errors for a variety of reasons: they are struggling with the material, they are experimenting with complex structures, they haven't taken the time to proofread.

- Students should learn grammar properly *before* they try to write.

Reality: Students who are stretching to accomplish complex cognitive tasks will make grammatical errors. Moreover, what is considered an “error” will change as students progress in their disciplines. Students can never be inoculated against making errors.

Four Myths about Grammar:

- The rules are not that hard. There is no reason for a student to break them.

Reality: “The” rules change from discipline to discipline. Writers in different English-speaking countries follow different rules. Different readers have different opinions about the rules. “The rules” are more complex than you might think.

- The UWC will clean up the errors for students so that I don’t need to address them.

Reality: The UWC is a teaching program with the goal of teaching students to write better. The UWC will ordinarily begin with the most significant issue first—often this issue is not grammar. Even when it is grammar, the UWC will focus on teaching students to proofread effectively / to learn how to avoid a particular error or two. The UWC does not attempt to correct all the errors that might exist.

Error Correction Priorities:

1. Errors that affect comprehension
2. Errors that you (or the student) are especially concerned about
3. Frequent occurrences of the same error
4. Errors that can be fixed by learning a rule
5. Errors that don't violate a particular rule, but rather are matters of idiom or preference

Beware of emphasizing error to the extent that students believe, “He doesn’t care about my ideas; he just wants to make sure I don’t mess up my commas.”

Strategies

- Don't edit or correct! Students usually can fix their own errors. Some options:
 - Collect drafts
 - Quickly find the worst offenders and return ungraded for a redo
 - Mark errors only in first paragraph/page (explain what you're doing)
 - Checks in margins

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. 0-7879-0203-9

University Writing Center. www.uwc.ucf.edu