



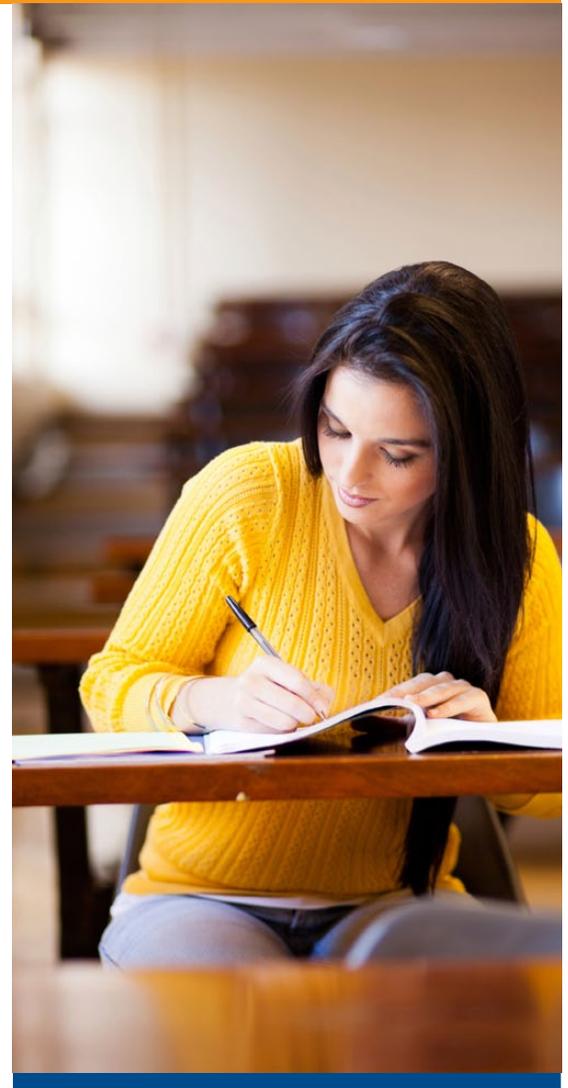
Put That in Writing: Helping Students Improve Writing Skills

College students often do not have adequate opportunities to engage in writing to demonstrate what they have learned and to synthesize and express their thoughts and ideas (Arum & Roksa, 2011). A study by the Partnership for the Study of Writing indicated only 42% of seniors surveyed reported that they were required to “argue a position using evidence and reasoning in most or all of their writing assignments” (as cited in Berrett, 2012, p. A5). In light of these findings, a growing number of instructors are looking for new ways to integrate writing assignments effectively and intentionally into course content.

Some institutions have created courses designated as writing intensive or, popularly, W courses, which include a specific number of pages students will write during the semester. Successfully completing a prescribed number of W courses often translates into credit for graduation requirements and writing competency. Varied criteria have been established for courses designated as writing intensive (Strachan, 2008). Generally, however, instructors in these courses assign a variety of writing tasks (e.g., essays, response papers, research projects, reviews of the literature), provide feedback on student work, and offer opportunities for revision of previously submitted work. Critics argue that the faculty-student ratio must necessarily be kept low for W courses to be effective.

Despite this concern, requiring students to engage in more and varied written assignments as part of the course content can be especially effective. The following strategies can help students become more proficient, versatile writers while improving critical thinking skills and other learning outcomes.

- **Provide assignments that require students to communicate in a variety of ways with different levels of formality.** As students leave higher education and enter the work world, they may be asked to write in a variety of genres, such as a memo, letter, executive summary, blog or discussion board entry, or an e-mail. Students who learn these skills in the classroom will have an edge in the workplace.
- **Give students feedback on their work.** If written work is worthy of being assigned, faculty have an obligation to provide students with feedback (i.e., places where the writing succeeds and places where additional attention is needed). Increasing the number of written assignments is a challenge—and deterrent—because responding to student writing is time consuming and often arduous. Instructors can manage the burden, however, by carefully scheduling due dates and committing to grade one assignment before the next is due.



“A writer doesn’t solve problems. He allows them to emerge.”

Friedrich Dürrenmatt,
Swiss author and
dramatist

- **Include peer review as part of the writing process.** Often in higher education, written assignments are seen by only the student and the instructor. Sharing writing through peer review, however, gives students feedback on their own work and allows them to practice reading critically as they evaluate the work of their classmates.
- **Encourage students to use electronic editing resources.** Electronic spelling and grammar checking tools are readily available online. For example, Grammarly (<http://www.grammarly.com>) is a web-based resource, and a rigorous assessment tool, that systematically checks for plagiarism, provides corrections for more than 150 grammatical errors, and offers improved word choices. To encourage use of these resources, faculty can review their features and how they work in class and then require students to show evidence that they have submitted a final version of their written work to an editing tool before turning it in. These resources are not infallible and do not substitute for careful proofreading and editing. However, online editing tools can decrease the number of basic grammatical and spelling errors and, thus, improve the quality of student writing.
- **Focus on quality rather than quantity.** Although this recommendation may apply to some disciplines more than others (i.e., courses and disciplines in which longer, more detailed writing is considered to be a vital skill set), consider requiring and scheduling shorter written assignments throughout the semester rather than one large project due at the end of the term. Shorter, more frequent assignments provide greater opportunities for feedback and improvement during the course.

Asking students to put their thoughts in writing requires them to move beyond simply recalling isolated bits of information to higher levels of thinking that include analysis, synthesis, and creativity. Carefully crafted writing assignments allow students to evaluate content critically and express their findings clearly and concisely. This process, however, also challenges faculty to think carefully about what they want students to learn and write and then take the time to provide them with thoughtful critiques of their work. Planning, implementing, and evaluating student writing is time well spent in the learning process.

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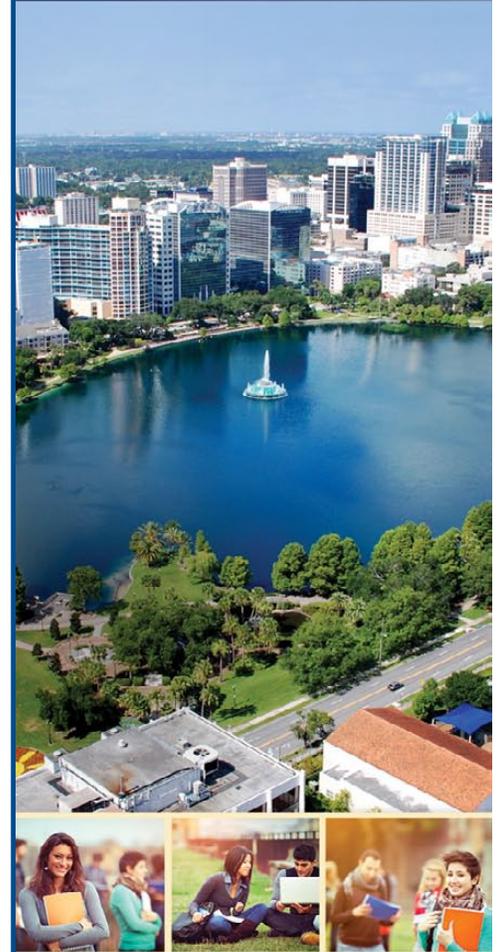
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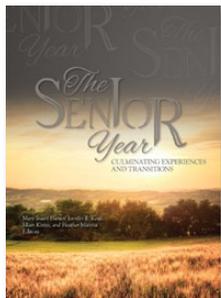


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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

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