

## 10 Tips for Teaching Writing in FYS

1. **Be clear about what you want and when you want it.** To some extent, this is common sense, but for first-year students, structure is essential. Be specific about what the assignment is (focus, grading, formatting style, number of pages) and when you want it (the due date and how it is to be submitted). And, for first-year students who are unaccustomed to college note-taking, consider giving them a sheet with all of this information printed (or one that is partially complete that they fill in as you discuss the assignment).

2. **Consider offering a checklist for each assignment to guide students through the process.** In addition to providing a roadmap for completing the assignment, explicitly identifying implicit steps helps students to slow down and pay attention to how process shapes product. Consider adding steps such as “create an outline,” “refine your thesis,” “evaluate transitions,” and “proofread.”

3. **Provide samples.** Give students sample thesis statements and/or introductory paragraphs. Discuss them in class, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each. Consider doing this with students’ actual drafts as a kind of group peer edit.

4. **Triage student concerns and explain how to get help.** If students have questions about the assignment itself, explain how they should approach you about it. If you find that they are concerned about the actual writing part (as opposed to your expectations), recommend the Writing Center.

5. **Integrate writing instruction into your regular class discussions.** When reading an article or book chapter, focus not only on what arguments are made but also *how* they are made. What is the thesis and where does it appear? What details and evidence are used? How does the organization support understanding and enhance the argument?

6. **Call attention to common errors.** If a large portion of the class appears to struggle with a particular skill or grammar rule, take 5 minutes of class to address the issue. Explain the error, what it looks like, why it impairs a reader’s understanding, and how to fix it. Those five minutes go a long way.

7. **Consider conferencing individually with students about their papers.** This is time consuming, but it’s an investment. Reading a paper through with a student—highlighting what you think worked well and what you think did not work so well—provides feedback to the student but also provides one-on-one interaction and conveys that you care about helping them improve. Also, one-on-one, students are more likely to ask the questions they don’t ask in class, and their final drafts will reflect the extra attention spent on the rough drafts. Most importantly, if you value the process, students will as well.

8. **Allow students to revise and resubmit, and set the criteria for that policy.** For example, allow it only if students submitted a complete draft on time for their initial submission. Consider only accepting revisions if students provide proof of a visit to the Writing Center. Consider having them submit both their original draft and the revised

version so it is clear what they changed. The more students revisit their own writing, the more they learn about the necessity of revision. Also, revising/resubmitting trains students to read comments and make changes.

9. **Sometimes less is more.** Writing one highly effective page is sometimes a greater achievement than writing 20 moderately effective pages. Consider requiring shorter papers but having students write several drafts. This allows you faster turnaround in grading, but it also encourages concision and allows students to think in terms of mastery instead of completion. When assigning longer papers, consider requiring a brief proposal that students revise multiple times in order to organize their ideas before they begin the full paper.

10. **Remember that teaching writing has more to do with the people than with a particular assignment or skill.** Writing is a process. Writing assignments are merely a vehicle through which students practice that process. Individual papers may show incremental improvement, but that gradual improvement adds up over time as the individual practices and refines skills.