Integrating Writing into Any Course: Starting Points

Kate Kiefer Colorado State University

As teachers in all disciplines think about how to integrate writing into their courses, they often get stumped right at the beginning. Where to start? Fortunately, after teachers articulate their goals for incorporating writing into the courses, working backwards from the goals to specific assignments can be relatively straightforward. And moving from the writing to evaluating need not be as daunting as it sounds.

State your goals for the course in general

To get started integrating writing, state your goals for the course as specifically as possible. Although teachers are sometimes tempted to settle for general statements such as, "cover the material clearly," being more specific will help you see how writing can support your discipline-specific goals in the course. For example, if your introductory course should help students learn the ways that experts in your field pose questions and problems, you can easily work in writing activities that reinforce this goal. If one of your course goals is to introduce students to the range of current issues in your field, paired reading and writing tasks can help you meet this goal. In other words, if you think about writing tasks as an "add-on" to the course material, students are likely to perceive the writing as busy-work unconnected to the central goals of the course. If you think about writing as another way to have students learn the course material, they are much more likely to see the connections and value the writing assignments. (As I'll explain later, when students see the value in writing assignments, your evaluation task becomes much more straightforward as well.)

Move from goals to specific writing tasks

After you've stated your goals as precisely as possible, start thinking about the kinds of writing that will help students meet the course goals. Don't limit
yourself at this point to the standard formats that students typically write in college (research papers and lab reports). What kinds of writing do you produce as a working professional in the field? Might any of these kinds of tasks be appropriate for students to write? Think, too, about the various readers professionals in your field typically write to. If you or your colleagues need to communicate in writing with audiences totally unfamiliar with "insider" or advanced knowledge in your field, then you might consider assigning writing that could appear in brochures, newsletters, or popular magazines. Thinking about a wide range of formal and informal writing may help you restate your goals, and thus lead you to assignments that better fulfill your course goals.

You might, at this point, also find it helpful to note specific goals for the writing assignments. For example, if you are only concerned that students understand the range of current controversial issues in your discipline, then you might not want to have students write a formal, carefully edited paper. But if one of your goals is to help students use the professional language conventions of your discipline, then a more formal paper is a much more appropriate option.

In the next section, I'll cover briefly a range of writing tasks and some reasons for assigning these various kinds of writing.

**A common writing task: The research paper**

One of the most commonly assigned papers in college courses is the research paper. Teachers often want students to read widely on topics pertinent to course materials, and the research paper spurs students to learn and use library and other sources of information on these topics. But a research paper isn't always the best assignment:

- Students often see research papers as formulaic and thus they may not think through the material as carefully as you'd like them to.
- Even at the upper division, students don't consistently synthesize material they read when they write about it.
- One big paper can get put off until students don't have the time to do more than superficial work.
But if your course goals—and your goals for assigning writing—are best met by a research paper, consider these ways to improve both the learning and the final papers you'll receive:

• Write out a prompt that calls for critical thinking skills as opposed to a prompt that emphasizes the format of the final paper. In other words, if you tell students, "for this class you'll write a research paper," students are most likely to think of the task in limited ways, often as they first learned the task in high school. If you give students a question to answer or, even better, a set of target readers and a reason for writing to those readers, students are more likely to approach the task in a fresh way.

• Set up intermediate products and deadlines. An easy way to guarantee a high percentage of disappointing papers is to walk into class and announce that "a research paper is due in the last week of classes." Students will put off the reading and writing until the last minute when they are likely to be busiest with other papers and exam preparation. If you can break the large paper into smaller chunks, you can have students show you the parts well before the final product is due. Even if you can't break the entire project into parts, set deadlines well before the final due date. For example, a proposal and research plan could be due a week or due after you give the overall assignment. A review of key sources could be required two weeks after that. A complete rough draft can be due two weeks before the final due date so that students can complete a peer review sheet for each other. Such intermediate deadlines help keep students on track and assure that you won't get papers written (and often not reread) the day or two before the final due date.

• Give out sample papers that show what kinds of skills you see the task emphasizing and what kinds of skills students often have trouble with. Even if you don't have other samples from your own students, ask colleagues or check online sources for typical papers like the one you're assigning. (You local writing center might have samples that will work for your assignment.) Or use professional models if you don't have student samples, and be sure to show students how they can approximate what the professionals have done in their writing.
Another option: Writing-to-learn tasks

Teachers often set up writing tasks that emphasize learning the content of their courses. These can range from two-minute impromptu jottings in class to a learning log that students write in regularly. You can also use these kinds of tasks in multiple combinations. The examples below suggest the range of possibilities outlined in much fuller detail in the FAQ about WAC on the CSU Online Writing Center (writing.colostate.edu/references/teaching/wac-faq/page2.htm).

• Impromptu in-class writing to check understanding - At the end of class, ask "what's the most important idea we talked about today?" At the beginning of class, ask "what confuses you most about what we covered in class last session?" or "if the person sitting next to you missed class last time, how would you summarize what we talked about?" (Tip: you don't have to read all of these. You can ask students to exchange and have volunteers read the clearest recaps of the class. Or you can ask students to turn them in and skim all but respond only to a few that seem to focus on a common problem or misunderstanding.)

• Impromptu in-class writing to create links in your course material - As you begin a new chunk of the course, ask students to write briefly about how they can imagine the preceding chunk relating to the new chunk. Or you might ask students to reflect on two laboratory assignments or two readings to show relationships between the content/concepts in the two. (This task can also be assigned as a fuller out-of-class writing task.)

• Writing to find out on what students already know - Before you begin a new chunk of your course, ask students to jot down everything they already know about the topic. Sometimes you flush out misconceptions; more often you reassure students that they aren't heading into absolutely foreign territory. Again, this can be a short in-class, impromptu task or a fuller, out-of-class assignment.

• Writing about reading (two-column log) - I use these with students ranging from freshmen to grad students. I ask students to keep a log-on the computer or in a loose-leaf notebook—that has a summary of each assigned reading on one side of the page (left side or top half) and their
reactions to the readings on the other side or half. Occasionally, I specifically assign tasks that require re-reading and connecting their reactions or synthesizing material.

**One more option: Writing-in-the-discipline tasks**

Certain kinds of writing tasks, often more formally prepared, emphasize learning disciplinary writing conventions. Most teachers use these in upper-division classes with students majoring in the field. Again, you can read much more about these tasks and others that promote similar kinds of skills on the CSU's Online Writing Center (writing.colostate.edu/references/teaching/wac-faq/page2.htm).

First, try to define a range of possible audiences within your discipline and gear the writing to one or more of those audiences. (Having students write to a "general" audience is least effective because they think they know what's involved in writing for Newsweek and they are usually mistaken.) If you don't specify target audiences, students are most likely to write to you, and that can catch them in a different set of snares. Try to make the task as realistic as possible.

Then think about formats:

- Management plan
- Issue paper
- Professional article
- Concept paper
- Poster session
- Empirical research article
- Field notes

Give out or point them to real samples in professional journals, in casebooks, in corporate archives. Samples are especially valuable for these kinds of writing tasks because one of the most effective ways to learn about organization and style concerns in a field is to read many samples written by working professionals in the field.
Yet another option: Combining writing-to-learn with writing-in-the-discipline

Writing tasks can emphasize both learning course material and writing for disciplinary contexts. Teachers have successfully used these formats to help students learn both content and conventions:

- Letter to client/patient
- Brochures or other public-relations materials
- Poster session for more general audience
- Web pages

A few tips on evaluating students' writing

How you evaluate and comment will depend on the formality of your final "paper." Teachers in most disciplines feel uncomfortable editing student papers for grammatical and stylistic issues. Doing so is not a good use of your time anyway, particularly in terms of what students will learn from your commentary. Instead, focus on your goals for the writing tasks and comment about how well students seem to have met those goals.

You might also want to consider some of the following ideas for giving students feedback without taking up inordinate amounts of time:

- If the writing tasks are informal-writing-to-learn, for example-have students swap and comment. You can simply use a 3 for completion or color-coded "swipes."
- If the writing tasks are more formal, consider posting them on a class bulletin board for responses from students in the class.
- Or simply write a short note pointing out key strengths and weaknesses (especially helpful if you are scaffolding assignments that lead from one to the next).
- Consider an e-mail exchange about strengths and weaknesses.
- Ask for a reflective piece from students and comment briefly on what they identify as most important.
- Only if you feel compulsive about mechanics should you mark them on a formal, writing-in-the-disciplines paper. (If the paper is unreadable,
just hand it back. Students quickly get the message that editing and proofreading are important, and they'll seek out help through your campus writing center.)

**Writing does help students learn**

Writing about course material can help students clarify and deepen their thinking about the material, and it can help them remember the material more fully. Integrating writing into courses, thus, is worth the time and energy, and the whole process need not be so daunting even for teachers using writing-to-learn or writing-in-the-disciplines tasks for the first time. Moreover, most universities have local experts in a WAC program or writing center who can offer advice, and more and more Web-based advice is freely available.


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