

First Seminar Writing-Intensive requirement

The writing in the First Seminar should strengthen students' communication skills. The Seminar should require approximately 20 pages of written work, in the form of 4 to 6 shorter papers, with feedback and opportunities for revision.

Writing in the First Seminar is an effective tool for helping students capture and process the reading, discussion, viewing, and activities of the course. In addition to writing short essays, other activities that use composing processes, like preparing presentations, creating websites, making short films, and designing posters can all contribute to the critical thinking skills at the heart of the writing-intensive requirement.

WRITING OUTCOMES AND CRITERIA FOR WRITING IN THE FSP

Writing Outcomes

By the end of this course:

- Students will be able to write for a specific audience, with a specific purpose.
- Students will be able to write rhetorically effective and well-structured arguments with clear thesis statements which accurately forecast the paper.
- Students will be able to apply feedback received on writing to revise all elements of an argument, from its organization and logic to its paragraph unity and coherence.
- Students will be able to offer tactful and productive feedback to others on their written arguments.

Criteria

The following criteria, adapted from the University of Texas at Austin writing-intensive guidelines, help expand on our Writing-Intensive guidelines by providing detailed examples of how we might approach writing in a First Seminar.

Criterion 1:

Require students to write regularly—several times during the semester—and to complete writing projects that are substantial. It is only through the practice of writing that students learn to improve their writing.

Interpretation:

“Substantial” writing projects will vary in purpose and scope, but their development and organization should reflect sustained intellectual work. Substantial writing should be built from a sequence of smaller projects. Overall, substantiality should be judged by looking at the writing projects within the context of the class.

Assignments that would typically be considered substantial, *depending on the discipline and the course*:

- Essays of analysis, criticism, or argument

- Reviews (of books, articles, lectures, films)
- Position papers, reaction papers
- Research papers
- Persuasive letters
- Theatrical scenes/plays
- Magazine or newspaper articles
- Annotated bibliographies
- Poetry, narratives, screenplays, works of fiction

Assignments that, *when assigned in isolation*, would typically not be considered substantial:

- Peer responses
- Freewriting or brainstorming exercises
- Flowcharts, outlines, storyboards

Some types of writing may or may not be considered substantial, depending on the amount of sustained, connected, and organized writing they demand. For example:

- Essay exams, when students write them outside of class, or revise them in response to instructor feedback, would typically be considered substantial. In-class essay exams that students complete in one sitting and do not revise would typically not be considered substantive.
- Reading and lab journals that receive regular instructor commentary, that demonstrate the building of a body of knowledge, and that collect information later synthesized in a larger project, would typically be considered substantial. Journals that merely record discrete observations without synthesizing or analyzing them, and that do not receive detailed instructor feedback throughout the course, would not.
- Oral presentations, poster presentations, and PowerPoint presentations would typically not be considered substantial; however, they may be drawn from written documents that would be considered substantial—e.g., a research paper or case study.
- Sustained writing in the development of Web sites or blogs could be considered substantial, but isolated blog postings or responses in class Web forums would not.

Substantial assignments could involve research. Not all writing assignments require research, but a writing-intensive course should give students a brief introduction to college-level information skills. It is strongly recommended that instructors thoroughly prepare students for interacting with sources (including close reading for interpreting, quoting, and paraphrasing skills) before asking students to find sources independently. For any assignment requiring students to independently identify and locate sources, it is the instructor's responsibility to explain (and provide examples of) research sources that are appropriate for the course's context.

Criterion 2:

Courses should be structured around the principle that good writing requires rewriting and that careful reading and analysis of the writing of others is a valuable part of the learning process. Students must receive meaningful feedback from the instructor, so they can improve successive drafts. Instructors are encouraged to have students read each other's work in order to offer constructive criticism.

Interpretation:

At least one writing project should involve revision. “Rewriting” goes beyond the correction of grammar, mechanics, and usage. It typically involves the re-thinking of major arguments, organizational elements, perspectives, or stylistic choices in the project.

“Meaningful” feedback guides revision and improvement. It does more than point out error or sum up overall performance. Feedback need not consist solely of written comments; student-instructor conferences, for example, are an excellent means of providing meaningful feedback.

While peer mentors can give valuable help to writers, students’ writing in a class should be guided by the professional expertise of the instructor.

Constructive peer criticism can take many forms. Instructors may, for example,

- Have students respond substantively to one another’s work in online forums
- Analyze a student paper as a class via overhead projection
- Meet with small groups of students to revise papers
- Have students respond to peers’ oral presentations based on written projects
- Conduct formal, written peer review assignments

Criterion 3:

Include writing assignments that, in total, constitute at least one-third of the final grade in the course. These assignments must be graded on writing quality as well as content.

Interpretation:

Writing quality and content are often inseparable. This requirement simply holds students accountable for both their ideas and the clarity with which they express them.

The expert evaluation of written work is central to the Writing Intensive designation. Students must have the benefit of evaluation by the instructor.

RECOMMENDED APPROACHES

Assignments

Building writing through sequenced steps can help students better see how these stages lead to stronger finished work. These steps might consist of:

- short, exploratory writing exercises, including, reflective writing, personal responses, posts and responses in the Canvas discussion board
- one-page synopses
- two-page drafts
- parts of a longer essay submitted in stages, such as an annotated bibliography, a literature review and a short draft
- summaries/synthesis of instructor-provided resources

By the end of the semester, students will have created at least 20 pages of finished written work that can take many forms.

FEEDBACK and REVISION

Opportunity for revision will allow students the time that can help them formulate and polish ideas and help them understand how essential time is to polished written work.

Instructor Feedback

Instructors can focus feedback on the direction of the essay, its organization, thesis, use of evidence for the claim or position, and facility with transition. Instructors will provide feedback on at least two assignments using a variety of methods, which could include:

- written feedback;
- an individual office meeting;
- a small group office meeting;
- a small group classroom meeting.

In providing guidance on patterns of difficulty with mechanics correctness (grammar, punctuation, spelling, typos, etc), focus only on one or two patterns, noting only two or three instances of each to make the student aware. Copyediting would take all your time, would accomplish very little and would overwhelm the student. Faculty find it helpful to:

- guide students on how to use the Purdue OWL site
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html ;
- assign a handbook, such as Hacker and Sommers 2015 or Williams and Bizup 2014;
- use excerpts from student work to cover common issues with the whole class.

Peer and Tutor Feedback

Using peer resources before students submit the final essay allows students to discuss, reflect, revise, and polish, all skills that are essential to stronger finished written work.

Instructors can provide opportunities for peer feedback through:

- classroom peer workshops guided by the instructor;
- visiting tutor teams in the classroom;
- individual consultation with a tutor.

FACULTY WORKSHOPS

The Writing Program offers three workshops for instructors. In addition to the full-day First Seminar workshop each May, we offer two during the first half of the semester that help us explore:

- Assignment design that allows instructors to think through the clarity of the task(s), the assignment question(s), and the steps students will take to achieve the desired outcome.
- Suggestions for creating and utilizing rubrics in conjunction with the assignment.
- A range of methods for providing feedback on drafts that is useful and manageable for the student and an efficient use of the instructor's time.