

Writing Assignments: Concerns and Helpful Hints for Non-English Instructors

Concern: I don't have time to teach writing.

Hint: You don't need to!

- ❖ You don't need to teach writing—that's the job for English instructors!
- ❖ Instead, use writing assignments to assess students' understanding of the subject matter you teach in your courses.
- ❖ Having students write in your classes helps you teach the material and helps students learn the material you teach.

Concern: Commenting on and grading research papers takes too much time.

Hint: Prioritize your feedback according to the goals of the assignment.

- ❖ Focus your commenting energy (students can only grasp so much).
- ❖ Focus on two important aspects:
 - Areas of strength
 - Areas of weakness
- ❖ Use these time-saving tips:
 - Use a rubric or grading sheet (share with students ahead of time to clarify priorities)
 - Don't edit student writing
 - Consider replacing an existing assignment with a writing assignment—don't start from scratch.

Concern: I'm not a grammar expert, so how can I grade writing?

Hint: Focus on your area of expertise

- ❖ Consider the goals of your assignment—what knowledge should your students demonstrate?—and focus commenting on that area only.
 - If grammar, mechanical, or stylistic errors interfere with the communication of the essay's ideas, consider adding a comment stating as much, but there is no need to edit line-by-line or explain grammar rules. (A statement such as “Poor sentence structure muddies your explanations” should suffice.)

Concern: I'm frustrated!

Hint: Focus on the value of writing for your students and yourself.

- ❖ Remember, writing equals engagement!
 - A report from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education indicates that “Writing [is] a better predictor of intellectual engagement than any other factor, including class size or student's reason for taking the course.”
- ❖ Writing helps student better learn and understand the material, retain subject matter knowledge, build confidence in reading and writing about the subject in different contexts, and find it easier to think critically about the subject at hand.
- ❖ Writing assignments can provide an avenue to revolutionize stale assignments.
- ❖ Low-stakes writing assignments are an effective way to gauge student progress preceding high-stakes assignments.