

Dealing With Writing Assignments

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)

-Carol Martin 2007

1. **Set and maintain high standards for written work.** Students write up—or down—to the standards we set. Students do not infrequently think that “writing doesn’t count” except in English classes, so if it counts in yours, tell them so, and stick to your standards; they’ll probably try testing you to see whether you mean what you’ve said. Good writing takes time, and most students think they don’t have enough time--so they’ll try for shortcuts if they think they can get away with them. If you like, you can check the criteria and standards for essays described on the Writing Center website. (npuwritingcenter.com)
2. **Articulate your expectations on syllabi and assignment sheets.** Each discipline has its own priorities and forms, and unless we make them explicit and understandable, students find conflicting demands between disciplines extremely confusing. For example, it’s proper in writing up scientific experiments to use the passive voice and down-play the role of the experimenter/author, whereas the humanities tend to accentuate the role of the author in making choices and coming up with ideas—and so discourage use of the passive voice. Students need our help to learn the ropes of our disciplines and to understand the appropriate occasions for using them. And if our expectations include personal pet peeves, we need to recognize them as such, and students deserve to know what rules they’re playing by. (Pet peeves are legitimate, as long as we don’t universalize them.) And a word of encouragement: We need to proofread our own hand-outs; actions speak louder than words.
3. **In designing assignments, be specific about what students are supposed to do and accomplish.** If they need to narrowly address a definite question, say so; if they need to take a large subject area and narrow it to their own topic, specify that focusing is a part of their assignment. Since students are asked sometimes to respond to particular questions, sometimes to develop their own ideas, they need to understand what we’re asking them to do in order to do it well.
4. **Allow adequate time for students to write well.** It’s certainly realistic to ask students to write a summary of an article or lecture between Monday and Friday, but it wouldn’t be very realistic to ask them in the same time span to research and synthesize information, come up with an opinion of their own, then draft, revise, edit, and proofread a 5-page essay. If we give them this sort of assignment, they almost *have* to write it the night before it’s due, and we’ll get their first draft as their final draft. Granted, some students—maybe most--will still wait until the night before the paper’s due to write it, but not all will. Setting unrealistic time limits simply reinforces bad habits and discourages those students who might be working at developing better habits. Tip: If you set a due-date for having a working draft due, then send your whole class over to the Writing Center to confer on their drafts, they’ll *have* to have the paper drafted before the last minute, and they’ll get some sound advice on how to revise, too. See the description of what happens in conferences with designated classes on the faculty page of the Writing Center website. (npuwritingcenter.com)

5. **Vary the functions of writing assignments, and explain how they are integrated with other classwork.** Not all pedagogical purposes are best served by the same writing genre, and if students don't write in various forms and with varying levels of polish and formality, they won't believe it when we say that writing can be a useful strategy for their own learning process. Suggestions: assign formal essays when students need to synthesize information from a variety of sources and when they need to develop a position of their own (a thesis); assign reports or summaries when students need to absorb accurate information and ideational connections of a piece of writing or a lecture; assign journals, homework assignments, letters, or other forms of informal writing when students simply need to interact with reading and/or lectures—and give quizzes or tests when students need to learn information primarily as an act of memory. Students on the whole do not see a syllabus as an integrated project, with readings and lectures and writing assignments intended to work together; they read a syllabus as a checklist of separate activities they need to fulfill. Teaching them how to integrate their work will teach them important forms of thought as well as improve the benefits they glean from individual assignments.
6. **Vary the level of formality of writing assignments.** Practically, this means both that we can vary both the degree of formality and polish students need to put into a piece of writing and that we can vary the formality and amount of our feedback on the work. We can let up on formal responses to journals and homework assignments, though we can also use them to point out (briefly) language habits which students probably ought to begin to focus on. But if we underscore every flaw, students will soon stop thinking ideas and instead think about their comma placement (or whatever). The appropriate time to think about comma placement is in formal work which is revised, edited, and proofread, but not all writing assignments need to follow through the whole process.
7. **When we encounter student writing in which grammar or language flaws are so flagrant that they distract a reader's attention from the writer's points,** it's often more effective to single out two or three of the most disruptive issues to address than to try to address everything at once. Mark one or two examples of each issue, explain the problems (and possibly refer them to the appropriate section of Diana Hacker's *Rules for Writers*, a handbook all students should own), and then ask them to find the rest of the places in the paper where they've made the same mistakes. It can be both helpful and encouraging to offer to raise their grade slightly if they can hand-correct the rest of their errors in another color (which makes them easy to see when the corrected paper comes back).
8. **In writing responses to formal papers,** we will get a fuller hearing if we observe two practices: Begin with specific acknowledgment and legitimate praise of whatever the paper has done well (or at least best), and keep our comments and attention focused. If students can believe that we see their work as partially achieved (in contrast to not making the grade), they might be able to believe that our constructive criticisms are really intended as constructive. (And then, of course, they need the chance to make use of them, so the opportunity to revise or edit thoughtfully—not just mechanically--can be instructive.) If we can keep our responses focused, we can help students learn how to recognize and prioritize both what they do well (so they can repeat it) and what they need to work on. The *number* of comments on a paper doesn't tell them which achievements are the best, or which shortcomings are most important to address. If you would like to see sample feedback to typical Dialogue 1 papers, visit the Faculty section of the Writing Center's website.

