Assigning and Assessing Writing in Large Classes

Many faculty believe that writing is an indispensable aspect of student learning, and some wonder if it will be possible to include writing in their courses if classes grow larger or TA assistance is limited. In this Bulletin, we suggest ways to assign, assess and manage writing assignments that can promote learning in large classes.

PROVIDING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Making expectations clear will help improve the quality of student writing and reduce student queries and complaints:

- Provide and explain clear criteria orally and in writing. Rubrics are very helpful for this purpose.
- Use models and examples to illustrate criteria and expectations.
- Clarify for students the benefits and rationale for each assignment and what type of feedback they can expect.

USING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS THAT ADDRESS A VARIETY OF LEARNING GOALS

Consider including different types of writing assignments that address a variety of learning goals. For example, you might assign a short, in-class writing for the purpose of encouraging student reflection, or you might require a summary of research as a preparatory step for a longer paper. Some ideas include:

- A series of very short “low stakes” assignments (that don’t count highly towards the final grade) that help students build skills in preparation for a more highly weighted final paper.
- Response papers: Students write brief papers describing their responses to a reading or issue.
- Short, highly focused research papers of just a few pages. Students can often gain as much from developing a tightly crafted short research paper as they can from a longer one.
- Learning paragraphs: At the end of each week or every few weeks, have students submit a paragraph that summarizes what they’ve learned and relates course content to their own previous experiences and learning. Students can submit through WebQ, which makes skimming through assignments easy for the instructor.
- In-class writings as discussion starters: Have each student write a paragraph in class on a topic. Ask various students to share the gist of what they’ve written. Students then turn paragraphs in.
- In-class letters: Ask students in small groups to compose a short letter in response to some historical figure, author or issue in the course. Ask each group to turn to a neighboring group and read their letters aloud to each other. Later call on a few groups to explain what they heard from their “partner” groups.
- Minute papers. Students write for 1-2 minutes summarizing what they understand about the day’s lecture or responding to a question you pose.
RESPONDING TO ASSIGNMENTS EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

You can be strategic with regard to the amount of feedback you provide in writing on individual papers. A short reflection such as the learning paragraphs described above probably requires no individual feedback from you. You can check such assignments off as “done” or “not done”. In such cases, the act of writing itself is worthwhile as a learning activity. On the other hand, you may want to provide more substantive feedback on a short paper that is leading into a final project. Ideas for streamlining feedback include:

- Use a rubric or set of clearly defined criteria to help focus, clarify and limit your feedback. Attach the rubric to the back of the paper and indicate on the rubric where students have done well and where they need to improve. If you number the criteria of the rubric, you can mark pages of the paper with the numbers of criteria relevant to issues and strengths in the paper.
- Simplify your marking for certain kinds of writing. Record work as “done” or “not done” without marking it or mark it using a “1”, “2” or “3” or check/check plus system.
- Focus your feedback on a few key issues.
- Use 2 colors of highlighter, one indicating strengths and the other indicating areas that need improvement.
- Rather than writing lengthy detailed comments on each student’s paper, read through papers quickly without writing on them and identify key issues and strengths across papers. Prepare a handout of these issues and strengths and/or talk through these in class using examples. Ask students to write a paragraph describing how they will change their papers in response to your feedback, and require them to attach the paragraph to their final paper as a way of encouraging them to pay attention to your comments.
- Involve students as peer reviewers to provide students with an audience for their work and an opportunity to see how other students are approaching the assignment.
- Give oral feedback or minimal written feedback on a series of short papers through the quarter. Then, at the end, ask students to turn in a portfolio of all their work and to pick the one or two papers they would like you to grade.
- Set yourself a time limit (and perhaps set a physical timer) to spend per paper.

LOGISTICS OF PAPER HANDLING

- When returning papers, sort into a series of alphabetized boxes and have students retrieve their papers from the appropriate box. Or position boxes around the room with one TA or undergraduate helper stationed at each “pick-up” site. Write grades on the back pages of assignments so that grades won’t be visible when papers are picked up.
- When collecting papers, place a box next to the door of the classroom and ask students to drop their papers in the box as they come in.
- Use Catalyst Gradebook to regularly allow students to view their scores in order to reduce student queries about grades.

For more information on writing, visit UW Writes http://depts.washington.edu/writeuw/ or CIDR’s “Changing Times” website http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/change/index.html

CIDR staff are available to consult with you as you develop assignments and think through plans for incorporating writing into your course. Call us at 206-543-6588 or send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu to arrange an appointment.