

Pei

A chronological overview of teaching a writing course

I was asked in a workshop to give a general outline of the teaching of a writing course, from beginning to end, and the following is the result.

I have inserted references to other documents on teaching writing that are available at <http://my.simmons.edu/services/asc/wac/teachingwriting/>.

You start a course by **creating some sort of expectations in the students** about what they will write, why they will write, how you will read it, how they will work together on writing, etc., etc. You try to **set a tone**, to **create a learningful social situation in the classroom**. This begins as early as the time of writing your syllabus.

I think the question of **why write** is especially central.

(For example, suppose I'm teaching a creative writing class. I might say something to the effect that for me, making art works through the written word is a vocation that says who I am. In turn, why make these art works? Ultimately, I think one tries to make art in an attempt to communicate one's truths and to create imaginative ways of bridging the separateness between people. My "why write" has a lot to do with human aloneness, not that one can make the aloneness go away, but that through writing and the exercise of the imagination one can reach moments of shared understanding.)

Students come with a "why" of their own, their own reason for taking a writing course in the first place, which may or may not be articulated. I think if my version of "why write" hits home with them, that helps get us to a place where we can work together successfully.

Now of course the answer to "why write" is different in different fields – even in different writing courses within the English department. But in any teaching situation it's crucial to give students reasons to care, because we ask them to do hard work, and caring is required to power the work. And it's crucial to **give positive reasons to care**, not just penalties to be avoided, and to give reasons that are intrinsic, not extrinsic rewards like grades. You can't get true commitment by means of carrots and sticks. In some subject areas, a commitment to the field may not seem, to students, to entail a commitment to working on writing. This becomes a connection you need to make.

So. Now the course is underway.

You get the student's work going by **making writing assignments – first conceptualizing them, thinking them out, and then phrasing those assignments** in words, on paper, so that they communicate effectively to students. The writing of writing assignments is a challenge: getting the assignment to ask for what you actually want, and not to ask for something you don't want.

You always need to define **the kind of thinking that is central to a writing assignment**, which equals talking about the kind of thinking underlying a course, or even a major.

See especially "Creating Writing Assignments," "Crucial Verb in an Assignment," and "Teaching Writing That's Reflective."

You give the assignment, the student goes away and writes the paper, she turns it in. This leads to . . .

Commenting on the papers you receive.

See "Commenting on Student Papers" and "Writing Process and Teaching Process."

Working with student writing in the classroom. (For me this is the #1 priority for use of class time, because writing is the subject I teach.)

See especially "Classroom Work on Student Writing" and "Peer Review of Student Writing."

In my world of teaching writing, **the first draft is not the last draft.** Your comments on the first draft lead to a revision, and so forth.

See "Writing Process and Teaching Process," "Proofreading & Copy-Editing."

When you do finally get to the last draft, you arrive at **evaluating and grading.**

See "Criteria for Grading Writing."

Completion can be followed by **reflection on the assignment, possibly leading to revision of the assignment.**

See "Reflecting on Writing Assignments."

A sequence of writing assignments, working toward some goals, becomes a whole course. Then there is an opportunity for reflection on the course, possibly leading to redesign of the course as well as revision of assignments.

After this point what happens for the student is no longer within your control (if it ever was) unless the student enrolls in another course you teach.

A series of courses becomes a major, or, for better or worse, an education in some discipline.

The graduate continues to use the skills taught in the major in some other setting, where learning continues.