

WAC handbook for writing assistants

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This Writing Across the Curriculum initiative (WAC) has been designed to foreground writing in the Simmons undergraduate experience throughout the full course of study, across all disciplines. Rather than making a certain number of writing courses a graduation requirement, this initiative will make writing an essential and integral part of a Simmons degree. When this program is fully developed, each department will have established defined writing goals that articulate what it means to write well in the discipline, and departments will have designated a set of writing intensive courses at the 100, 200 and 300 levels to meet those goals.

As peer writing assistants to your undergraduate classmates, you will draw on your own developing disciplinary expertise and distinction in writing. This program offers faculty support in the teaching of writing, offers writing assistants mentoring and teaching experience, and offers all Simmons undergraduates the opportunity to develop their writing and critical engagement with their majors.

As a new program, Writing Across the Curriculum will be evaluated carefully to ensure a flexible, collaborative and open-to-revision program that will meet the diverse needs of the many departments, students and administrators involved. The aim is for WAC to be a shared project across the college.

This initiative is overseen by a group that includes Dawn Mendoza from Academic Support, Lowry Pei from English, Gary Oakes from MCC and Education, and Cathryn Mercier, associate dean, CAS.

Contact Information

Dawn Mendoza 617-521-2470
 Lowry Pei 617-521-2216
 Gary Oakes 617-521-2203
 Cathryn Mercier 617-521-2541

dawn.mendoza@simmons.edu
lowry.pei@simmons.edu
gary.oakes@simmons.edu
cathryn.mercier@simmons.edu

What is a writing intensive class?

A writing intensive class should include *frequent writing* over the course of the whole semester. The actual number of required pages per student is up to the faculty. Assignments in a WAC course often reflect two kinds of writing: writing to learn, and process writing.

Writing-to-Learn	Process Writing
<p>These assignments are ungraded, and intended to reinforce engagement with texts and ideas. They emphasize exploration, speculation and interpretation. They give students the chance to try out thoughts and ideas in a risk-free format, as well as to internalize and manipulate course concepts.</p>	<p>These assignments can be graded or ungraded, and include a series of developmental writing steps. This can mean revision of a single work, or a series of sequenced assignments that build toward a final product of some kind.</p>
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summarizing a reading 2. Critiquing a reading 3. Forming detailed questions about a reading 4. Describing how a real-life situation or film/text illustrates or contradicts a reading 5. Debating opposing theories or texts 6. Self-reflections on personal experience with the topic, theory, or concept. 7. 5-10 minute free-writes on a specific question at the beginning of class 8. 5 minute end-of-period writes <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) top 3 things I learned today b) 1 thing I still don't understand c) I wanted to say _____ but I didn't get a chance in discussion 9. 1-page reviews of class textbooks 10. Reflective writing after getting an exam or test or paper back 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One final paper with several written steps leading up to it: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) research question b) annotated list of sources c) reflection/critique on two important sources d) reflection on problems encountered so far e) first draft of paper f) final draft of research paper g) reflection on completed process 2. One or more papers with a first draft and a revision. 3. A set of writing assignments that builds connected skills – without a culminating final paper. If you wanted to teach lab report writing, you might assign 4 papers that break down the segments of a full paper. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) a problem statement paper b) a methods paper c) a results and conclusion paper d) a reflection on the different tasks of each assignment

How a writing assistant can help the professor

As a writing assistant (WA), think of yourself as a writing tutor specifically for the class – with the added advantage that you will have expertise and knowledge in the major. Not only will you be able to help students write with more clarity, depth and correctness, but you will also have disciplinary insight into the habits of thought and rhetorical conventions of the discipline. The WA's role is to assist the students as they use writing to engage more deeply with course content.

The benefits of peer teaching are many: the relatively small power difference between student and WA means students are more likely to ask the basic, simple questions that need answering before more sophisticated work can happen; student writing teachers mean more time for one-to-one meetings, more specific comments on assignments, and an informed, but fresh perspective; and peer teachers can offer a tremendous amount of empathy and insight when the learning curve is steep because you so recently have grappled with the material yourselves.

WA presence in the course

1. WAs will come to class a few times early in the semester so that they can introduce themselves to the students, and the students can put a face to a name.
2. WAs will share the burden and pleasure of giving good feedback to students on their writing. They will reinforce faculty writing standards, expectations and criteria.
3. WAs will meet with faculty at the beginning of the semester to review grading criteria and assignments, and establish the dates when writing will be handed back and forth. Also, they will meet with faculty 2-3 times during the semester (or more if desirable) to receive further guidance and give feedback on the writing they are seeing and commenting on.
4. If WAs haven't taken the course before, they will review enough of the reading to help students with specific questions.
5. WAs will be available for meetings with students outside of class.
6. WAs will give four writing workshops during the semester: 1) avoiding wordiness and redundancy; 2) fragments, run-ons, comma splices and semi colons; 3) tools for good organization; 4) paraphrases and plagiarism.

The WA can help the professor by:

- I. Commenting on first drafts
 - Pointing out what is acceptable evidence for an argument in the major
 - Pointing out inaccuracies, generalizations and vagueness
 - Reinforcing conventions like appropriate verb tenses and use of passive voice

- Helping students understand what goes in a methods section versus a results section versus a discussion section
 - Helping students understand and use credible sources, and integrate outside texts into their writing
 - Suggesting/correcting discipline specific vocabulary
 - Helping students focus and avoid tangents
 - Helping students organize the flow of their ideas
 - Pointing out sentence-level problems and grammatical errors
2. Meeting one-to-one with students at any stage of the writing process: deciding how to approach an assignment, outlining an idea, revising a draft, editing for grammar, style and citation use.
 3. Assessing early writing attempts to identify and support students with the weakest writing skills.
 4. Meeting one-to-one with students who are struggling to understand course material
 5. Meeting with writing groups in various stages of their writing project
 6. Commenting on writing-to-learn exercises:
 - Pointing out when students have correctly gotten a concept
 - Explaining when students have misread or misunderstood, or only partially grasped an idea
 - Offering feedback on thoughtful, intriguing ideas
 - Making connections to other course concepts and suggestions for future assignments or projects.
 7. Giving faculty insight into what students are struggling with and questioning, and convincing the individual students who really need the faculty's direct attention to go for help.
 8. Giving the students insight into the faculty's assignments, expectations and standards.

What WAs won't do

1. Give grades. While WAs can track credit/no credit assignments and give feedback according to the faculty's grading criteria and expectations, they won't grade.
2. Attend class regularly. While Teaching Assistants attend class, this is unworkable for WAs for two reasons. Most importantly, the Simmons curriculum has not been structured to support a large body of TAs (not big enough, or flexible enough to accommodate complex schedules). Second, the compensation for the job would be inadequate for the number of extra hours required.
3. Teach course content in a lecture, section or workshop format. The WA's purpose is to help students with their writing, and through that writing with their understanding of the course material. Using class time for the writing workshops that the WA will be trained to offer is acceptable as long as the WA can work this into his or her schedule.

Limits on WAs' time

While this writing initiative offers great flexibility in terms of how much writing faculty assign and how much commenting WAs do, we also want to make sure that WAs are not overwhelmed with work. The following guidelines will help faculty plan how to use your time.

1. In general, we have planned for the WAs to work eight to ten hours a week, with the understanding that some weeks may 2-3 hours and others 12-15, depending on when assignments are due
2. The WA cannot be expected to do all the course reading because this would require more time than the program budget can fairly accommodate.
3. The WA cannot be required to meet individually with every student in the class on a single assignment. Individual student meetings with the WA can be voluntary, with small incentives offered to encourage participation. Or, in a class of 20, student meetings could be divided between WA and faculty. Sending project groups of 3-4 students who are working on one paper would also be appropriate.

How faculty can help their WAs

Before classes begin

1. Put course texts on reserve so that the Assistant does not have to buy them, in the event that she needs to do some reading in order to best help students.
2. Designate a handbook and/or citation style guide for the course, and list it on the syllabus. It needn't be a required text, just a reference to common ground.
3. Meet in person with the WA to give her a copy of the syllabus, settle on when writing will be passed back and forth, and explain writing goals for the course are.
4. Share clear, written criteria for grading writing assignments.

In the first week of classes

1. Introduce the WA to your class and give her five minutes to talk about what she can do to help students.
2. Distribute any promotional flyers or materials for the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, so students know how and when to contact their WA.

During the semester

1. Periodically remind students to go see their WA. Consider offering small incentives to get them to go.
2. Meet deadlines that you have arranged with your WA.
3. Remember that the WA is also a student with a full course load of her own, and has planned her own work around the schedule mutually arranged.
4. Continue, over the semester, to meet in person two or three times with the WA to talk over particular assignments.
5. Stay available through phone or e-mail, and answer any questions promptly.

At the end of the semester

Have a final short meeting with the WA to close out the semester.

Getting off to a good start

In the initial meeting between you, the WA, and the professor, the two of you should look over the syllabus and writing assignments carefully, and decide on the dates and times when writing will be handed back and forth. In addition to setting these deadlines, you'll want to establish a drop-off and pick-up site for student writing because two busy schedules do not always allow for a hand-off to occur in person.

At this meeting, you'll also want to discuss the professor's writing goals for the course and for specific assignments, grading criteria, any special problems you should look out for, grammatical pet peeves and any other commenting instructions the professor might have. If there is a preferred citation system or handbook, make sure you know what it is. (Of course, these conversations will continue and develop throughout the semester.)

Also at this first meeting, you'll want to complete the "Writing Assistant – Faculty Agreement" form, also available on this Web page. The purpose of this form is to help you and the professor negotiate and make clear expectations and deadlines, for the benefit of you both, especially, and for students and WAC coordinators as well.

- Fill it in either before your meeting, or while you talk.
- Both of you should sign it.
- Make **three copies**: one copy is for you; one is for the professor; the third copy is for WAC files and should be delivered to Dawn Mendoza.