How to help students in your courses become better writers

You don’t have to be an academic literacy practitioner or a writing teacher to create assignments and related reading, writing and thinking activities that will help your students engage more deeply and effectively with the knowledge they are learning in your course. Students need to learn the disciplinary writing, reading and thinking strategies and skills from the people who have mastered them and use them all the time: their lecturers and tutors. These are some ideas and strategies you can use in your teaching and tutoring to assist your students’ learning.

Share useful strategies with students

Many of the writing strategies that experienced academics take for granted, like writing introductions, or conducting successful research or literature surveys, are not at all obvious to students when they enter university. And yet, students are often expected to know how to write, read and think in fairly specific and specialised ways without necessarily being taught these ways explicitly. There are many resources that academic lecturers and tutors can draw on to help their students get started with finding relevant academic sources, doing literature surveys and conducting secondary research. The library has subject librarians for each faculty, and they are all also to assist students with conducting literature surveys, evaluating sources and with finding information needed for assignments. Working with the librarians by sharing your assignments with them ahead of time can help, as they can advise on ways in which to make the information literacy students need part of your assignments in more explicit and useful ways.

Here are some other useful strategies to share with students as part of giving out and working with course content knowledge and written assignments. With all of them the key is to start discussions, and to make these strategies part of the learning for the course in explicit and clear ways.

Idea 1: Task analysis

Do some task analysis with your students on a document camera. Print out the assignment you have given them and place on the document camera. Take two coloured pens and highlight the words that indicate what the ‘content’ of the assignment is, and with another colour the words that tell them what to do with the content (e.g., ‘discuss, explain, elaborate). Then start working through some questions you would ask yourself if this was your essay. What is this essay about? What have I been learning about in classes that ties in with this topic? What are some of the main ideas I am going to have to do some research on? Write these things down and try to draw the class into this task analysis process. If they analyse and read the question for the assignment incorrectly, or misunderstand it, the rest of the writing process is likely to flounder, so this is a simple yet enormously valuable exercise to take your students through with each assignment. Once you have done it on the ‘board’ a couple of times, you can change the activities to make the students do more of this work, using ‘think-pair-share’ or other small group work activities in class.
Provide examples
Use examples of good student writing to discuss with your students what makes these pieces of writing effective. Use actual examples from previous years if you are setting similar types of assignments, like essays or reports. Anonymize the students’ writing and share these examples with students, talking through the essay or report, or parts of these, using a document camera so that you can annotate the text if necessary and show exactly where certain strengths and weaknesses can be found and what could be done to overcome the weaknesses and build on the strengths. This helps students identify the elements of good work for particular assignments within particular disciplinary domains that, in turn, helps them become conscious of these elements in their own work. Diverse models of student work also illustrate that there are different ways to approach the same assignment, thus offering students some sense of creative scope.

Model your own writing process
It may also be helpful for you to share with students your process in approaching writing tasks. This is helpful in terms of sharing helpful tips and writing strategies with students, and it also shows them a writer in progress, because you are also learning and growing as a writer, even though you are further along that
journey than they are. Students really appreciate hearing that the people they look up to also struggle from time to time, but that they keep working until they get through the struggle.

For example, you can tell students:

- What questions you ask yourself before you begin (you might, for example, ask: Who is my audience? What am I trying to convince them of? What do I want to say, and what evidence can I use to back it up?)
- How you go about writing (Do you sketch out ideas on scrap paper? write an outline? hold off on writing your introductory paragraph until you have written the body of the paper?). Can you show them work in progress and explain to them how you are shaping your writing as you go and where you are stuck. If you are stuck, explain what you think you will do to get unstuck, so you are also sharing your own writing strategies which they could perhaps try themselves.
- How you go about recognising problems and making revisions in your writing. (Do you ask a friend to read and comment on your work? Do you step away from the paper for a day and return to it with fresh eyes?). Why do you choose certain strategies at certain times?

This is not always easy: it means we must become aware of and then make explicit the processes we engage in unconsciously and automatically. However, illuminating the complex steps involved in writing and revising to both you and your students is a useful exercise. As you help your students to develop as writers, you will likely also gain new insight into your own writing process.

**Design assignments that offer appropriate practice with feedback**

One of the best ways for students to become better writers is through practice – it may be the only way that any writer becomes more capable and successful. However, not all practice is equally effective. An important way to help students develop as writers, even in a course not solely designed for this purpose, is to match the writing assignments to the students' skill level and offer practice (with feedback) on the aspects of writing where they can benefit. This means designing assignments that are aligned with your learning outcomes, and that offer students opportunities to work on the different disciplinary thinking, reading and writing practices they need to master, like summary writing, or summary and synthesis writing, or argumentation, or description and analysis of results... the list goes on. Try not to cram too many different practices into one assignment; rather focus on developing their mastery of the elements of writing with feedback and smaller, more focused tasks and then gradually build on these foundations by putting those elements together into larger or more demanding assignments that will allow them to demonstrate that mastery.

**IDEA:** You could also break a larger assignment down into small parts, so that students can write drafts, and write for an assignment more consistently. You can use peer feedback exercises to get students to comment on one another’s’ drafts, and give feedback, or this process can become part of the tutorials for your course if that option is available to you. This will help students to avoid leaving the whole assignment to the last minute, and will give them repeated opportunities to get feedback, and to practice their writing. You can set deadlines for the component parts, so that students don’t get left behind.

**Require drafts**

Few people are able to turn out high-quality writing in first drafts. For most people, good writing requires rereading, rethinkig, and sometimes fairly extensive revising. Many students, however, misconstrue or
underestimate what good writing involves, believing that it's a simple linear process when, in fact, it is complex and iterative. Many students leave writing assignments to the last minute, expecting to be able to sit down and rapidly turn out a good paper. Thus, they may not give themselves enough time to re-examine premises, adjust the organizational scheme, refine their arguments, etc. Requiring drafts forces students to build in appropriate time frames for their work.

**IDEA:** This can feel like too much of a challenge for large classes where there is little help from skilled tutors or colleagues. But well-designed and managed peer feedback exercises can assist students in giving one another feedback, and you as the lecturer can read a representative sample of the drafts and give the class global or group feedback in lectures based on what you have read, with the aim of making the expectations of the assignment clearer. Peer feedback, when well-managed and designed, is very effective and students are quite capable of reading and commenting on one another’s work. This also helps them to become more aware of errors and also strengths in their own writing.

Create rubrics and Model a marking process

A detailed scoring guide or performance rubric helps students to recognize the component parts of a writing task and understand how their competence will be assessed in each of these areas. A good rubric helps students to see what comprises high quality writing and to identify the skills they will need to perform well. It is recommended that you provide your rubric to students along with the assignment so they know what the criteria are in advance and can plan appropriately. This is an important part of making your expectations very clear to them, and you can explain the rubric to them by talking through it in class.

**IDEA:** Another idea is to model your marking process by putting up a sample assignment on a document camera or overhead projector so that you can write on or annotate it. Mark the assignment ’out loud’ telling students as you go what you are thinking and what kinds of comments you are making and why you are making them. This can give them insight into how you approach their writing, and what you expect from them for the assignment. If you don’t want to do this ’live’ in class you can make a video of yourself marking by putting a camera over your shoulder as you mark the paper out loud. You can then edit the video and post it on your e-teaching. You could do this for a good, average and poor paper to give students three different examples of your marking approach and thought process. There may be examples of other lecturers who have done this on YouTube that could be helpful.

Recognize Cultural Differences

Besides the differences between skilled and unskilled writers, there are cultural differences that often manifest themselves in the written work of non-native speakers of English. For example, Arabic speakers may develop their arguments by restating their position rather than stating rationales. Japanese speakers are inclined to argue both for and against an issue, and to be more tentative in their conclusions. Some non-native speakers generally provide lengthier treatments of historical context, minimizing their own arguments. Awareness of these kinds of conventions should be a part of your approach to your students.
Be explicit with students about the behaviours of skilled writers

Understanding the behavioural differences between skilled and unskilled writers can help us work more effectively with students, even to "warn" them in advance of potential pitfalls to be avoided.

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<tr>
<th>Skilled/successful writers</th>
<th>Unskilled/unsuccessful writers</th>
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<tr>
<td>● Conceive the writing problem in its complexity, including issues of audience, purpose, and context.</td>
<td>● Conceive the writing problem narrowly, primarily in terms of topic.</td>
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<td>● Shape writing to the needs of the audience.</td>
<td>● Have little concept of audience or who they need to write to.</td>
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<td>● Are committed to the writing.</td>
<td>● Care little about the writing.</td>
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<td>● Are less easily satisfied with first drafts.</td>
<td>● Are more easily satisfied with the first draft.</td>
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<td>● Think of revision as finding the line of argument. Revise extensively at the level of structure and content.</td>
<td>● Are able to pay selective attention to various aspects of the writing task, depending on the stage of the writing process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Often tried to do everything well on the first draft. Are mindful of and working on word choices or on punctuation, even at early stages.</td>
<td>● Think of revision as changing words or crossing out and throwing away. Revise only at the level of single word or sentence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Tend to believe that the more you write and work on your writing, the more competent you will become over time.</td>
<td>● Are less mindful of how punctuation and word choices can affect the meaning of the text, and tend to neglect these issues.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Tend to believe that writing well is a gift you either have or don't have.</td>
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Sharing this information with students in advance of writing assignments can aid them in the writing process.

This guide was adapted from and expands on the following document from Carnegie Mellon University. This can also be found under ‘Resources’, which is on the ‘General Pages’ sub-site. It is available online at: http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/writing/helpstudentwriters.html [Accessed September 2012].