

Writing Intensive Resources: Handling the Paper Load and Responding to Student Writing

INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this handout, it's likely because you are teaching (or will teach) a course designated Writing Intensive (W.I.) here at CMU. Stakeholders across campus are very excited about the requirement, because "Thinking is so closely linked to writing, at least in mature adults, that the two are practically twins. Individuals who write well are seen as substantive thinkers, [and] the composition of extended texts is widely recognized as a form of problem solving" (Kellogg, 2008, p. 2).¹ The W.I. requirement is a way to help foster not only student learning and critical thinking in subject areas but also performance in a variety of discipline-specific and professional genres.

Accordingly, the W.I. requirement is intended to provide students with more exposure to both writing to learn activities and opportunities to learn to write in the genres specific to their fields of study. Faculty members are often ambivalent, however, about using writing-to-learn activities or direct instruction on writing practices in their field. On the one hand, they recognize the value of writing well and of the beneficial effects of writing for learning; on the other, they often worry that it may be time-consuming, labor-intensive process or that they may do more harm by offering poor feedback. Given the complexities of writing and the amount of material faculty feel obligated to cover, such ambivalence is understandable.

The resources offered in this handout are thus a way to help faculty members ethically and efficiently incorporate writing meaningfully into their W.I. courses. Most specifically, it offers brief and concise pieces of advice on how to manage the "paper load" that comes with requiring student writing and how best to respond to student writing in a variety of genres, modes of evaluation, and rhetorical contexts. It is pieced together from a number of different sources and collected here for your convenience. Citations and links for each resource are provided in footnotes if you wish to learn more about a given topic.

Finally, you should feel free to contact Writing Center Director Daniel Lawson with questions about incorporating writing into your course. In addition to consulting with faculty members about writing assignments, rubrics, and peer review, the Writing Center provides in-class presentations and workshops on a variety of topics such as research writing, citation styles and formatting, peer review and the writing process, and more!

¹ Kellogg, R. T. (2008). Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Journal of Writing Research, 1*, 1-26.

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MYTHS ABOUT HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD²

The kind of patient work that goes into devising appropriate writing assignments and responding to them intelligently does take more time than other kinds of teaching. But it need not pose impossible burdens. And some work that faculty undertake with the best intentions is actually counter-productive to the goals of improving student writing and thinking. Here are some common myths about teaching writing-intensive courses and explanations of what research shows to be effective.

Myth: Conscientious teaching requires marking all grammar and language errors.

Research shows that **students can catch more than 60% of their own errors if they are taught to proofread** and held to appropriate standards of correctness. By marking every error, we actually train our students to rely on us as copy-editors. Teachers may instead

- mark errors on the first page only.
- mark representative errors.
- place checks in the margins where errors occur.
- quickly scan papers and return error-laden essays for proofreading and correction.
- use software to scan student writing for error. (This requires awareness of the software's limitations.)
- create peer editing groups in their classes.

Myth: Teachers need to read everything that students write.

Research shows that having students write for brief periods at the beginning or end of a class helps them focus or achieve closure. When discussion lags or reaches an impasse, students can be asked to write out a response to share. Students can bring to class written questions to stimulate discussion or definitions of key terms to debate. This kind of **informal writing need not even be collected. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and encourage active engagement with the material.**

Myth: More response is better.

Research shows that students are often overwhelmed and paralyzed when they receive essays on which the instructor's comments trail into every margin and leave a depressing map of error and negative response. Even when response is positive, saying too much is often confusing. It is better to **choose two or three elements of the essay to focus on, giving highly specific constructive advice or commentary**, than to attempt to cover all possible areas of concern.

² From "Quick Tips for Instructors of Writing Intensive Courses" at The University of Hawaii Manoa Writing Program, adapted from the Virginia Tech University Writing Program's web site.

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Myth: Teachers need to evaluate every piece of writing they collect.

Research shows that **non-evaluated assignments can work well and even be the most frequent type of writing used in a WI class**. For example, journals and informal writings, if collected, can be evaluated using a "minimal marking" scheme (i.e., points for completing the assignment plus extra points or a "+" for an insightful response). Or students can be awarded credit for the number of entries submitted, and they can single out a limited number of these for closer scrutiny, grading, and response.

Myth: Requiring two drafts of an essay doubles the work.

Research shows that **students usually attend to comments only when they are given a chance to revise**. Otherwise, they are likely to give a one-minute glance to the remarks you spent twenty minutes writing—or worse still, look at the grade and toss the essay. It makes more sense to invest time and energy responding to the first draft and to make these comments truly facilitative. Respond to the final draft only briefly, and let your comments be more evaluative.

Myth: "Writing intensive" means that students should do 3-5 separate, unrelated assignments.

Research shows that **students often benefit when the work of the semester can be conceived as one project, phased in logical sequences or in stages**. Moving through a logical sequence of assignments is one way to increase the level of conceptual difficulty gradually and to ensure that students build on material they have studied in earlier portions of the syllabus. It is more cost-effective for instructors as well, since in some cases they will have seen and responded to smaller components of a project before the cumulative work comes in.

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STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD ³

The Key:

- Students write lots.
- Teachers PLAN lots and evaluate moderately.

Strategy #1: Use Ungraded Focused Freewriting as a Teaching/ Learning Tool

- Student responses to reading, a class activity, or their personal performances
- Summary of discussion or lesson
- Writing to assess student understanding(s)
- To identify student confusion(s)
- Journal entries
- To build a longer paper

Strategy #2: Use Group Writing

- Letters to classmates
- Class stories
- Writing roulette
- Partner essays
- Group writing that leads to group reports
- Research projects
- Essay exams

Strategy #3: Manage Writing Evaluation

- Stagger due dates.
- Have big projects due on Monday (NOT Friday!).
- Design the FORM for easy reading
- Separate the rhetorical and editorial assessments

Strategy #5: Scaffold for Success

- Give students a clearly defined task.
- Share the evaluation rubric in advance.

³ Taken from California State University, Northridge:

http://www.csun.edu/~krowlands/Content/Academic_Resources/Composition/Responding/Handling%20the%20Paper%20Load.pdf

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- Give students enough time to do a good job.
- Help with processes (invention, organization, revision, group response, editing).
- Conference *during* the process.

Strategy #6: Think Variety!

- Offer choices.
- Vary length, type, and formality of assignments.
- Teach students to develop their own topics.

Strategy #7: Use Smart Evaluation Tools

- Develop clear rubrics for different writing tasks (students can help with this).
- Use holistic grading.
- Use selective evaluation; focus on only part of a particular assignment (tied to a teaching focus).

Strategy #8: Use Your Time Wisely

- Spend more time evaluating papers at the beginning of the course.
- Skim/ read all papers before grading any.
- Use directed peer comment instead of teacher evaluation.
- Develop an effective method to deal with mechanical errors efficiently.

Strategy #9: Put Students to Work

- Student created rubrics
- Writing response groups
- Student editors

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COACHING THE WRITING PROCESS AND HANDLING THE PAPER LOAD ⁴

1. Design Good Assignments

- Consider using low-stakes exploratory writing as a way of deepening learning and engagement.
- Consider the value of short assignments, including microthemes
- Consider giving the whole class the same problem-based assignment (rather than having them choose their own topics).
- For formal assignments, create assignment handouts that provide a rhetorical context and engage student with a problem.

2. Clarify Your Grading Criteria

- Create task-specific rubrics.
- Hold an in-class norming session.

3. Build in Exploratory Writing or Class Discussion to Help Generate Ideas

- Develop exploratory writing tasks that help students generate ideas for a formal paper.
- Create a small group brainstorming task.
- Have students work in pairs to interview one another.

4. Have Students Submit Something Early in the Writing Process

- Consider asking for a prospectus, a question/thesis summary, or an abstract (but not an outline).
- Use these to identify students who need extra help.

5. Have Students Conduct Peer Reviews of Drafts

- Require peer reviews (either response-centered or advice-centered).
- To preserve class-time, consider online out-of-class peer reviews.

6. Refer Students to the Writing Center

- Recognize the value of writing centers for all writers, not just weak writers.
- Stress the usefulness of writing centers at all stages of the writing process.
- Consider asking the Writing Center to review your assignment handout.

7. Make One-on-One Writing Conferences as Efficient as Possible

- Focus first on early higher-order concerns (ideas, focus, organization, and development).
- Begin each conference by setting an agenda.
- Develop a repertoire of conferencing strategies.
- Consider using idea maps and tree diagrams to help students generate and organize

⁴ Taken from John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Print. 315-316.

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ideas.

8. Hold Occasional Group Paper Conferences Early On

9. Use Efficient Methods for Giving Written Feedback

- Comment on late drafts rather than final products (or allow rewrites).
- Make revision-oriented comments, focusing first on higher-order concerns.
- For microthemes, use models feedback in lieu of traditional comments.
- When time is at a premium (or on final products that won't be revised), use a rubric instead of making comments.

10. Put Minimal Comments on Finished Products

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SEQUENCING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS TO HANDLE THE PAPER LOAD ⁵

There are several benefits of sequencing writing assignments:

1. Sequencing provides a sense of coherence for the course.
2. This approach helps students see progress and purpose in their work rather than seeing the writing assignments as separate exercises.
3. It encourages complexity through sustained attention, revision, and consideration of multiple perspectives.
4. If you have only one large paper due near the end of the course, you might create a sequence of smaller assignments leading up to and providing a foundation for that larger paper (e.g., proposal of the topic, an annotated bibliography, a progress report, a summary of the paper's key argument, a first draft of the paper itself). This approach allows you to give students guidance and also discourages plagiarism.
5. It mirrors the approach to written work in many professions.

The concept of sequencing writing assignments also allows for a wide range of options in creating the assignment. It is often beneficial to have students submit the components suggested below to your course's STELLAR web site.

Use the writing process itself. In its simplest form, "sequencing an assignment" can mean establishing some sort of "official" check of the prewriting and drafting steps in the writing process. This step guarantees that students will not write the whole paper in one sitting and also gives students more time to let their ideas develop. This check might be something as informal as having students work on their prewriting or draft for a few minutes at the end of class. Or it might be something more formal such as collecting the prewriting and giving a few suggestions and comments.

Have students submit drafts. You might ask students to submit a first draft in order to receive your quick responses to its content, or have them submit written questions about the content and scope of their projects after they have completed their first draft.

Establish small groups. Set up small writing groups of three-five students from the class. Allow them to meet for a few minutes in class or have them arrange a meeting outside of class to comment constructively on each other's drafts. The students do not need to be writing on the

⁵ From <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/resources/teachers/creating-writing-assignments/>

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same topic.

Require consultations. Have students consult with someone in the Writing and Communication Center about their prewriting and/or drafts. The Center has yellow forms that we can give to students to inform you that such a visit was made.

Explore a subject in increasingly complex ways. A series of reading and writing assignments may be linked by the same subject matter or topic. Students encounter new perspectives and competing ideas with each new reading, and thus must evaluate and balance various views and adopt a position that considers the various points of view.

Change modes of discourse. In this approach, students' assignments move from less complex to more complex modes of discourse (e.g., from expressive to analytic to argumentative; or from lab report to position paper to research article).

Change audiences. In this approach, students create drafts for different audiences, moving from personal to public (e.g., from self-reflection to an audience of peers to an audience of specialists). Each change would require different tasks and more extensive knowledge.

Change perspective through time. In this approach, students might write a statement of their understanding of a subject or issue at the beginning of a course and then return at the end of the semester to write an analysis of that original stance in the light of the experiences and knowledge gained in the course.

Use a natural sequence. A different approach to sequencing is to create a series of assignments culminating in a final writing project. In scientific and technical writing, for example, students could write a proposal requesting approval of a particular topic. The next assignment might be a progress report (or a series of progress reports), and the final assignment could be the report or document itself. For humanities and social science courses, students might write a proposal requesting approval of a particular topic, then hand in an annotated bibliography, and then a draft, and then the final version of the paper.

Have students submit sections. A variation of the previous approach is to have students submit various sections of their final document throughout the semester (e.g., their bibliography, review of the literature, methods section).

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RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING ⁶

Perhaps no aspect of teaching with writing provokes as much instructor anxiety as providing written or oral responses to student texts. Here are two typical comments from professors:

- *I know I could give my students better feedback on their writing. How, though, should I be looking at their writing? I never get enough response to my comments to know what works or what doesn't.*
- *I spend a lot of time writing comments. But I wonder, is all the work I do worth anything?*

Students look for instructor comments. In fact, in our assessment work at the Mānoa Writing Program, we find that no other topic generates more student comment than what professors say about their writing. Here are a couple of typical comments from students:

- *I thought all the check marks in the margins meant I was doing OK and the plus signs meant the writing was "really good." If my essay was really good, how come she made me rewrite it again?*
- *The professor corrected all my grammar errors on my first draft. But he also wrote, "You miss the epistemological value of the text." I didn't know what he meant and I didn't know how to revise my paper! I was really confused.*

COMMENTS AS SOURCES OF CONFUSION

Professors' comments, like other forms of communication, are fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding. Our assessments show that misunderstandings of professors' responses to student writing usually stem from one or more of three possibilities:

- students aren't clear on what the professor is looking for, and why;
- students don't understand what the comments mean; and
- students, although they may understand comments, don't know how to do what a comment suggests.

HELPING STUDENTS BY ANTICIPATING STUDENT QUESTIONS

In the last issue of *Writing Matters*, we listed several questions students want to ask their professors about writing assignments. Here we list two questions students tell us they want to ask their professors about comments on their writing.

⁶ From The University of Hawaii Manoa: <http://manoa.hawaii.edu/mwp/program-research/writing-matters/wm-2>

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1. What Are You Going to Be Looking for?

Students want some sense of what instructors will be looking for as they respond to the writing. What you tell them will in part be determined by the purpose of the writing assignment. It will also be determined by what you expect students to do next--something we will see in students' second question below. The best time to answer this question is while you are designing the assignment.

Here are ways in which some professors deal with this question.

- With certain assignments for example, journals or personal responses to readings you may be looking simply to see whether or not a student has done the writing. You can **tell your students to anticipate a "+" or "-" based on quantity**; because the writing will not be revised, no extensive comments are necessary. Some professors give bonus points for particularly full responses. Others underscore special insights with a highlighter and put wavy lines under content that is unclear.
- Students value assignments that help them learn a genre they will use in their work or in advanced courses for example, a prospectus, a report of findings, or a site analysis. Because students need repeated practice to master specialized forms of writing, you frequently will be making comments to guide their revising. You can help them even with their first draft by **listing on the assignment sheet two or three specific features (such as attention to reader's familiarity with the topic or appropriate selection of quotations and references) you will be looking for.**
- Sometimes it is useful to turn this question back to your students. **Have them write a brief self-assessment and attach it to the draft they are giving you.** Ask them to describe two or three things they have done well and two or three things that they plan to revise. Ask what kind of feedback they want. Their own assessments and requests can then guide your responses.

2. What Do You Want Me to Do with Your Comments?

Students report that they sometimes read over a professor's comments but don't know what next to do.

You can save yourself a lot of time and energy by doing two things before you even write your first comment.

Read quickly over the whole draft before you comment. Writing comments from the beginning can often set you off on tangents. With a sense of the whole, you are more likely to focus your comments on what is most useful.

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Figure out what you want the student to do with your comments. This works best when you've structured your assignments so that students have both the knowledge and the time they need to do what your comments intend. Students find suggestions on how to do better next time more helpful than comments that merely identify what they have done well or poorly.

While your comments on student writing will vary from student to student, very often you will find that several students need help with the same process. Rather than write the same thing on several papers, you can use five minutes of class time to review a process. Or if you prefer to type responses on a word processor, you can write up the general comments in a macro and personalize your specific comments to several students.

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HOW CAN I EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY RESPOND TO STUDENT WRITING? ⁷

Even for faculty who do not consider themselves well prepared for this task or who do not have much time to spend on it, there are several options for responding to student writing. Three of these are discussed below: commenting on student work, creating rubrics, and using peer review. In addition, it is important to note that designing effective assignments in the first place – ones that state clear goals and explicit grading criteria – is a key component of effectively responding to students' writing.

Commenting on student work

One thing many faculty do not realize is that there are many approaches to commenting on student writing, and they differ in terms of the effect they have on students and the time they take faculty. In the ideal case, commenting on students' writing offers constructive feedback to students without being burdensome to faculty. Research on commenting (adapted from Walvoord, B.F. & Smith, H.L., (1982). "Coaching the Process of Writing," in Teaching Writing in all Disciplines, ed. C. Williams Griffin (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass); and Palmquist, M. & Young, R. (1992). "The Notion of Giftedness and Student Expectations About Writing", Written Communication, Vol. 9, p. 137-168) indicates that:

Novice teachers of writing...	Experienced teachers of writing...
Read to find fault. Frequently stop reading, even in mid-sentence. Comment at all levels. Give attention to surface details. Make suggestions for stylistic revisions.	Read to understand. Read in large units of text. Comment on major strengths or weaknesses. Give attention to meaning and organization. Make suggestions for major reorganizations and expansions.

There are several points to keep in mind when responding to students' writing.

Making comments is a skill that improves with practice. So, what may seem difficult and time-consuming at first can and should become easier and faster over time.

Feedback is intended to help our students improve their own writing. So, even if it is tempting to do so, it is usually a bad idea in the long run to correct students' papers for syntax and grammar errors: (1) It takes more of our time, and (2) it takes away a practice/revision opportunity from students. If a paper contains many syntactic and grammatical errors, one option is simply to return the paper to the student, so he or she can revise. Another option is to circle the errors without making corrections. A third option is to give grammatical help on a sample paragraph rather than on the entire paper.

⁷ From Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center:

<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design/teach/design/instructionalstrategies/writing/respond.html>

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Not all assignments require the same level of detail in grading and feedback. For instance, low-stakes writing typically warrants minimal commenting. For example, an overall comment about a specific issue that jumped out at you suffices, e.g., “your thoughts are unorganized, so I had difficulty seeing your argument” or “your prose clearly and concisely articulated your position/perspective.” Or, you might make it clear to students in advance that on Assignment X they will only receive feedback on the strength of their argument and evidence but not on any other aspect of their writing. This helps students focus on one aspect of their writing at a time.

Detailed feedback throughout the document may actually diminish the student’s ability to use the feedback effectively. Students can be easily overwhelmed by too many comments. Moreover, they may not be able to distinguish high-priority comments (where we feel a change is definitely warranted) from lower-priority comments, and hence they spend their revision time on the quick, detail-level fixes without addressing more important structural problems. So, instead of making extensive margin comments, focus on “end comments” that address one or two substantive issues in the piece of writing. Note that focusing on one or two issues does not mean that we have to accept poor grammar, sentence structure, etc.; by simply pointing these out to students and giving them the responsibility for finding and correcting problems, they are encouraged to do more self-assessment while writing.

Comments we make on earlier drafts of papers are more likely to be read and used in revision, whereas comments on a final draft are most useful if they connect to a future writing assignment, e.g., “In your next paper, you’ll need to state more clearly how the minor points support your major claim”.

Creating Rubrics. When creating a larger or more formal assignment, it is often worthwhile to create a performance rubric (or scoring tool) that specifies the performance expectations you have for a piece of work. A rubric identifies components of the assigned work (e.g., organizational structure of the paper, logic of the argument, grammar and syntax of the writing) and for each component provides clear descriptions of various levels of mastery exhibited in the work (e.g., features of a well organized vs. poorly organized paper). The rubric can then be used as a way of communicating to students what level of performance their work has shown for each of the components you are evaluating. In addition, the rubric can be shared with students in advance (e.g., when the assignment is distributed), so students have an even better sense of the goals and grading criteria and hence can better self-assess their work and revise accordingly.

Using Peer Review. Peer review is a process in which students read and comment on each others’ work as a way to improve their own and their peers’ writing. Reading classmates’ work can help students become better at diagnosing their own writing problems. However, conducting effective peer reviews requires careful planning on the part of the instructor because, if done poorly, it can cause more harm than good.