

# THE WRITE APPROACH: INTEGRATING WRITING ACTIVITIES INTO YOUR TEACHING

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There is a belief among students that assessment of student writing ability takes place only in courses in the English department. However, as lecturers we expect our undergraduate students to write for assessment in most disciplines, most likely a research paper, report, or an examination essay. And no matter how bright their ideas, how well-researched their information or how analytic their thoughts, their grade will suffer if these thoughts aren't communicated in a clear, accessible, well-organised, and competently-written fashion. Academic writing is a skill that all disciplines demand so, at the very least, we need to offer our students strategies to help them deal with the challenges of writing effectively.

I studied English in university, eventually completing an MA and a PhD. Yet during all this time – and I was there many years – I was never, never once, offered a formal or indeed, informal, class on how to write academically. And never once was I asked do any writing activities in lectures or tutorials other than perfunctory note-taking, despite being expected to submit written assignments all the time.

As an academic, writing is a key skill I use every day; however, it is also a competency that many other professions value highly. Writing skills thus need to be actively cultivated in undergraduates across all disciplines, as not only will the ability to write clearly and persuasively stand to our students in their professional life, but the act of learning through writing will also help them become more effective critical thinkers. Since thinking is an essential component of meaning construction, classrooms that actively cultivate that construction of meaning through writing will produce not only better writers, but also better thinkers (Tierney and Shanahan 1991).

This chapter will argue that writing should form an integral part of teaching in all disciplines. While it is beyond its scope to fully elucidate the practices of writing across the curriculum, this chapter is more than just a reflection on the various principles of academic writing; underpinned by theory, its objective is to delineate realistic, feasible and immediate strategies to integrate writing activities into the classroom or lecture hall.

## **Why should we care about writing in subjects outside of English?**

As academics, most of us would react with some worry if we had to submit written assessments in order to apply for positions at third level. Indeed, often one of the greatest professional challenges we face as academics is our academic writing. For many of us the simple fact is, good quality academic writing is difficult. And though academia may be content-driven we are aware that, at the end of the day, no amount of intelligence or mastery of a particular discipline can guarantee good written communication skills.

According to the social constructivists, writing is always conditioned by social context (Bazerman 1981; Bizzell 1982; Myers 1985). In university, writing takes place within the context of an academic discipline and is the means by which our students can extend their thinking and explore

meaning. Writing brokers learning; it plays a crucial role in developing critical thinking skills and can help students amalgamate, evaluate and apply course content. By combining content instruction with writing activities, learners can achieve better reasoning and higher-level thinking than is normally achieved through either process alone (McGinley and Tierney 1989). Therefore, as is the case with reading, writing should be an integral part of all content disciplines, not just a means for students to express *what* they have been taught, but to demonstrate their responses to this knowledge, and ultimately to *apply* it.

Writing is also a lifelong skill, an essential tool for graduates across all disciplines to communicate effectively in the working world. This may seem like an obvious point, but it's one that often needs to be more suitably applied in our disciplines. How often do you get your students to write essays? And how often do you get them to write other forms of written communication that they may use in future discipline-related careers? My guess is that the prevailing way you assess content is through the essay – by far the most dominant form of writing within the academic context, but far less so (at least in its pure state) in life outside university.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that there are writing forms other than the traditional essay, so if your subject discipline requires your graduates to write prescriptions, reports, memos, emails, proposals, policy manuals, business analyses, plans, or strategies, to name but a few, then surely it's a good idea to get your students to practice writing these forms, and assess them accordingly? Similarly, by designing writing activities that allow room for students to incorporate their experiences into their writing, the level of clarity and depth in their writing will not only increase, but they will be more likely to engage in their work if they can connect it to the experience they bring to the classroom.

### **But how can I teach something I've never been taught?**

The very real concern for many lecturers is that if we ourselves have never been taught explicitly how to write academically, either within or outside our own curricular areas, then how can we be expected to teach writing? However, I am not suggesting that we teach our students *how* to write; rather that we teach content partially *through* writing.

What we must also remember is that, as lecturers, most of us have learnt to write academically primarily through years of academic-related reading, coupled with acquired knowledge of discipline-related spoken discourse which we learn to translate into text. In short we know what being critical or being analytic looks like as text in our field of study – and that's an awful lot more than most of our undergraduate students know when they first attend university.

A metaphor often applied to learning academic writing is that it is like being initiated into a conversation, before eventually finding a personal voice. As lecturers, we form part of a disciplinary community. We possess both content knowledge and discourse knowledge, having long since learnt our community's specialised language and conventions; and most of us have found a personal voice – though this is arguably an ongoing, dynamic process. Therefore, we are actually in a good position to pass on these skills to our students, to teach them the rules of discourse, both generic and content-specific, and to show them how to become a critical writer: to move from merely quoting experts to eventually using these experts' ideas as springboards from which to launch their own theories.

As an expert in your field, you are often in the best position to teach the particular rules of discourse within that discipline. Knowledge is encoded in the language and communication forum your community members use. Graduates need to learn the rules of discourse, not only to recognise and use appropriate linguistic communication conventions within this forum, but to decipher the expectations of the discipline underpinning the language. There are obvious pedagogical advantages to this approach when a specialist teacher is the immediate audience, or indeed emulates the immediate audience, for students' writing can be as technical as it needs to be without having to be translated into conventional lay language. Of course, the correlative disadvantage of this approach is when you allow your students slip into a language that is inappropriately jargon-filled, or that makes no attempt to speak outside the discourse community

when it should. As one critic notes, 'training those future professionals to write only in expository prose is training them to ignore their political and ethical responsibilities.' (Kinleavy 1983)

As academic writers, knowledge of writing practices outside our discipline is also essential if we want to communicate to and become part of a broader university community, and in so doing move from an isolated plura-versity to a linguistically unified uni-versity<sup>1</sup>.

## Suggested Activity

To encourage writing activities that not only analyse our own discourse community, but that recognise other discourse communities also, divide students into small groups and give them an appropriate research article in their field. They must read the article and generate a list of discipline-specific discursive conventions (writing style, organization patterns, specialized terminologies etc). Next, ask them to generate a list of discourse conventions that could be transferred to other disciplines or to more generic writing.

Another version of this activity is to ask students to rewrite parts of the research article using a different voice, persona, or point of view, or indeed to rewrite any published piece in a new genre (eg. turn a lab report into a poem; turn a poem into an essay)

As educators, we need to become more aware of what constitutes 'good writing', as well as recognising that characteristics of 'good writing' vary from discipline to discipline. When McQueeney and Jones (1996) and Zerger and McQueeney (1998) asked university lecturers to describe 'good' writing, the spectrum ranged from *interesting* and *bold* at one end to *precise, succinct*, and *accurate in punctuation and grammar* at the other. Zerger and McQueeney's study (1998) confirmed the hypothesis that words used to describe good writing could be categorised by discipline. For example, humanities used the terms *eloquent, vivacious, and aesthetically satisfying*, whereas social scientists preferred *non-trivial, relevant, and plausible*. Arts favoured *creative, imaginative* and *persuasive*, whereas natural science used *theory-driven* and *analytic*<sup>2</sup>.

## Suggested writing activity

This research only becomes relevant in this context if we can make our students aware of what constitutes good writing within a particular discipline/genre. One way to approach this is to create a table, such as the one below, and ask your students to circle the relevant adjectives to describe the sort of writing that is acceptable for your particular subject/discipline. They then have five minutes to choose which one they think is the most relevant and to write down why.

Clever	Creative	Structured	Persuasive
Vivacious	Thoughtful	Insightful	Accurate
Eloquent	Bold	Well reasoned	Theory-driven
Clear	Imaginative	Reflective	Understandable
Precise	Succinct	Analytical	Inquiring

A group/class discussion can then ensue where students have the opportunity to express their reasons for their choices, and you, as lecturer, have the opportunity to put forward the discipline's writing expectations to an active and hopefully engaged audience.

<sup>1</sup> For a further analysis of this idea see James L. Kinleavy's article, 'Writing Across the Curriculum', ADE Bulletin, 076 (winter 1983): 14-21

<sup>2</sup> However, despite the seeming differences in attitude to what constitutes 'good' writing, there were some generic words chosen by all disciplines, including *clear, precise and succinct, organized, accurate in punctuation and grammar, cohesive, and understandable*. These characteristics are generic to all good writing, and should not be forgotten when teaching writing in a discipline-specific context.

## Can't I send my students to the English Department for training?

Well perhaps, but that's assuming that writing is always transferable; in fact, though some of the principles remain the same, writing differs by discipline, so while it is important to learn the generic principles of writing and grammar, your students also need to learn to write as a chemist, or an engineer, or a literary critic, as the case may be.

Embedding writing activities within your discipline can not only initiate your students into your specific discourse community, but it can help them demystify and master what that community's particular conventions are. Charles Bazerman (1981) compared articles published in professional journals in the fields of biology, sociology, and literary criticism, and deduced that there exists a large difference in what constituted acceptable evidence: biologists favoured experimental results, sociologists trusted statistics and theoretic models, while literary critics cited evidence from texts. Likewise, the types of writing expected by students within a university will vary from discipline to discipline. For example, the term 'essay' is used broadly across disciplines, but there are differences between a literary analysis, a research paper, an evaluative essay, a term assignment, a literature review, a research report, or a book review. Further, writing in the sciences might favour lab reports, journal article critiques, or abstracts, and some of its particular characteristics might include clarity, objectivity and formality. Writing in the Arts, on the other hand, may favour essays, literary analysis or book reviews, and encourage secondary research, literary analysis, and eloquence of expression.

## Suggested writing activity

Students need to know what is expected of their writing within the discipline, that's obvious; but as their lecturer you also need to ensure that they understand what is expected of them. One way to do this is, for each assignment or task, is to give students a few minutes in class to freewrite what they understand by its genre, its methodology, or any other of its characteristics. Suggested writing prompts can be as broad or as specific as you want them to be. For example:

- What is the purpose of a lab report?
- What should an abstract set out to do?
- What does the word 'analyse' mean in this context?
- What should the title of a proposal indicate?
- What makes a good introduction to an essay?
- What are some of the dangers of email writing?
- What should a conclusion include and what should it not include?
- What are the differences between conclusions and recommendations?

After ten minutes writing, students will have formulated their thoughts, and some brief explanations by you to the group will act to reinforce or modify their approaches as appropriate. Not only will students be more confident starting their written task, but they are also likely to be motivated to actually begin writing it.

## How do I know what writing activities to use?

Luckily there is a wealth of resources specific to multi-discipline writing<sup>3</sup>. Just type in 'WAC' (Writing Across the Curriculum) to your search engine and you will be directed to numerous

<sup>3</sup> Purdue has one of the largest online writing laboratories, with many printable handouts on research and writing, categorised by subject. See <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index2.html>

See also The University of Guelph for advice on academic writing: <http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca>

pedagogical practices in this area. A movement begun in the United States in the mid-1970s, WAC is premised on the theory that writing is a valuable learning tool. Many institutions began by offering workshops that showed faculty how to productively incorporate writing exercises into their courses, and it is now common to see college-led WAC programs both advocating and supporting third level adoption of writing as an important component of all courses in all disciplines<sup>4</sup>. Some universities have set up writing centres to offer training, consultations, workshops and other resources<sup>5</sup>. Here in Ireland, WAC centres or departments are not common but the methods, principles and pedagogy they espouse can be borrowed and adapted, both cognitively and rhetorically, in the lecture hall or classroom.

It's never too late to introduce activity writing into your classroom, but the earlier you get your students writing, the better the results will be. How about trying something like the following in your first lecture of the academic year:

### **Suggested writing activity**

Ask your students to write anonymously an answer to the following question: 'What concerns do you have about the essays you will have to write this year?'

After five minutes writing, collect your students' answers.

This activity works particularly well because students tend to focus on what they're going to be assessed on, and because their responses are anonymous, the variety of concerns is broad and honest. Previous responses to my employment of this activity have included:

- What exactly is a university essay?
- How will these essays differ to ones I had to write in school?
- What does my lecturer/tutor expect from my academic writing?
- What does critical reading/writing mean?
- How do I structure my writing?
- Are there any resources to help me out?
- How do I begin to write?
- If I fail, will I get the chance to re-write my essays?

I normally collect the sheets, take them away with me, and the following lecture spend ten minutes answering both some of the general, and some of the more specific concerns.

You can introduce writing into your course through a variety of means. You can use 'formal' writing assignments such as research papers, essay exams, lab reports etc. However, you can also assign more, 'informal' 'freewriting' assignments such as brief, in-class writing prompts, reflections, or journal entries, to name but a few. First introduced in Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (1985), freewriting is where you write whatever comes into your head. Focused freewriting, on the other hand, is writing about a particular subject or question which has been posed. Here are some ideas for some informal in-class writing activities:

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<sup>4</sup> The Writing Center at Colorado State University is a good starting point to explore a university that 'supports writers and teachers of writing inside and outside the CSU community'. See <http://writing.colostate.edu> Georgia State University

<sup>5</sup> For example, the WAC program at Georgia State University was established in direct response to one of the University's strategic plan's goals to '... emphasise the importance of writing skills in all disciplines, [and] initiate a Writing Across the Curriculum Program, in which all students will take at least one course designated as writing intensive in their major department.' See: <http://wac.gsu.edu> for their WAC website.

### **Activity: What I know about. . .**

Ask students write down what they know about a topic before you introduce it into your lecture or discussion. This will help focus them on the topic and since they will have something written in front of them before class begins, it should contribute to student participation.

### **Activity: The Problem Statement**

If you introduce a new concept into your course, ask students to write out a practical (or theoretical) problem that the concept just explained will help to solve. Students can work in pairs or alone, and can exchange problems and/or solutions as you wish.

Another version is for students to write a problem statement and pass it to the student beside them who must solve it. This works particularly well in large classes.

### **Activity: Summary writing**

Tell students they will have to write a brief summary at the end of the class. This technique will help students concentrate on the class/lecture, and if you collect the summaries you can ascertain what they remembered from class and if they identified the main issues covered.

### **Activity: Focus questions**

Compose specific questions for your students and get them to freewrite accordingly e.g.

Q: What points in the article you read for today's tutorial are the most (or least) convincing?

Q: Of what value is the knowledge you learned in today's lecture?

Q: How does what we studied today apply to the world around you?

### **Activity: 'The center of gravity'**

Ask students to compose a single sentence that summarizes the main point of the lecture/discussion. Collect or discuss to ensure that your students grasped the main points of the discussion/lecture.

Informal in-class writing activities like these can present more latitude than formal writing assignments. Because they are unedited and unrevised, they are generally best used to promote student reflection and engagement with the content, and can be a useful tool for generating ideas and discovering attitudes.

### **But I just don't have the time!**

From the lecturer's point of view, integrating writing into the classroom may sound reasonable and even desirable, but the concern is often a time-related one: how can one cover the curriculum and meet curriculum requirements within time if one adds another component to classroom instruction? However, proponents of WAC agree that when teachers incorporate regular writing activities into their classes, the need for revision and re-teaching after testing is significantly reduced (Hightshue et al 1988; Worsley and Mayer 1989).

Certainly, some writing activities can be formal, but critical thinking, organization/synthesis skills, summarizing and reflective skills (among others) can be equally taught through informal, formative, five-minute class exercises that are both feasible and effective. Diane Miller Miller, in her article, 'Begin Mathematics Class with Writing' (1991), gives many samples of succinct yet effective writing assignments. Two follow here:

## Activities for mathematics

- General mathematics: You have studied the commutative property for addition and multiplication of real numbers. Not all operators are commutative. If you were asked to explain to a friend why division is not commutative, what would you say?
- Algebra: Suppose a friend asks you to check your answers to some homework problems. Would you mark the following problem correct or incorrect. Explain why ...

$$(a + b)^2 = a^2 + b^2$$

Obviously, timely feedback is an important factor when setting writing tasks, especially those that are less 'reflective'<sup>6</sup>, as one of the purposes of feedback is to ensure students have grasped what you are trying to teach them, and to enable them improve their performance. One way for both student and lecturer to assess the degree to which students have understood an important concept or procedure is by using 'directed paraphrasing', like the maths example above does, where students write an explanation of a concept or a set of instructions in their own words as if writing for someone who is not on the course<sup>7</sup>.

As well as imparting such skills as focus, organization and support, asking students to work together can also be time efficient. For example, you could divide a lecture into small groups to revise a document that has already been written. Either have them sit down together cold in class, or to be more time efficient, get them to work individually on the document before class and then pool their suggested changes. By assigning a group writing project, you can cut back on the amount of papers you have to grade.

## Suggested activity:

Instructors in sociology, speech communication and political science might divide their classes into 5 or 6 groups in order to investigate local problems or issues. Some students do the background research while others conduct interviews or surveys. Each student prepares a draft of his or her results for the group. Then the group as a whole must synthesize the information, organize, and prepare a report for presentation to the entire class<sup>8</sup>.

Using class time to promote writing activities, and offering feedback on them can be highly effective and efficient given the benefits it can bring. Writing in small groups promotes a classroom community; and if writing is emphasised correctly, a myriad of other skills and abilities are gained, such as the ability to think clearly, to pose worthwhile questions, to articulate a complex thought simply, to evaluate the adequacy of an argument, and to give and receive criticism.

## Will my students want to write in a lecture? It's not what they're used to.

A recent study found that student engagement with the subject matter being taught increased dramatically when students were frequently asked to write about that subject<sup>9</sup>. In-class writing activities can certainly pull students from their passivity. Had any of my lecturers regularly paused and asked us to write for five minutes on our reactions to key arguments, I for one would have not only learnt more quickly how to formulate my own ideas, but would also have been roused from the type of concentration stupor I often fell into in the latter part of a lecture – and often sooner depending on the lecturer.

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<sup>6</sup> Tools such as peer and self assessment can be effectively used to promote feedback, and though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these tools in any detail, a quick web search should guide you to the benefits of this kind of formative assessment.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Diana Kelly for pointing me to this strategy.

<sup>8</sup> Activity quoted from the Center for Instruction Development and Research at University of Washington at Seattle, see the following website for more information: <http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/grpwrite.html>

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Light. 'Writing and Students' Engagement' *Peer Review* 6.1 (Fall 2003): 28-31. Rpt. of 'The Most Effective Classes' in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* by Richard J. Light. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 54-62.

In-class writing activities encourage active learning – after all one cannot write without thinking, and developing critical thinking is key to students being active rather than passive participants in their education. If you spend your hour’s lecture trying to jam facts and figures into your student’s heads, their learning will stagnate at lower level or ‘surface’ learning. However, if you encourage them to try a variety of thought processes in class, they will move to a ‘deeper’ learning, and develop critical thinking skills. As Bina Shah writes:

Writing is just such a way to develop these critical thinking skills, because when you have to put your ideas down on paper and support them with evidence and argument, you sharpen your ability to reason, to extrapolate, and to draw conclusions from the information presented to you. Writing exercises challenge students to go beyond what is presented to them, and encourage them to come back with their own ideas and thoughts, which they will then develop into well thought out and well reasoned arguments.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Writing within an academic context is much more than an exclusive concern with correct grammar and should go beyond the technicalities of stylistic accuracy. This chapter has shown you how to help your students enter writing through content, and has delineated strategies to facilitate your learners developing their own writing voices within their particular academic discipline and context – voices that are certainly grammatically accurate and stylistically proficient, but also cogent, engaging and suitably analytic.

We have seen that writing and learning are inextricably linked, that writing is different in different disciplines and contexts, and that as lecturers we should guide the writing process, not merely judge the written product. Finally, by integrating writing into our teaching, we have seen how we can afford our learners not just generic writing skills, but also the tool to become higher level thinkers, a lifelong skill of indeterminable value.

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<sup>10</sup> Shah, Bina, ‘The need for Writing Across the Curriculum’, see website: [http://www.chowk.com/show\\_article.cgi?aid=00003629](http://www.chowk.com/show_article.cgi?aid=00003629)



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