

Teaching WI Courses: Recommendations from the Writing and Public Discourse Committee

The Smith writing compact

Smith has a long tradition of valuing writing as an essential capacity in the liberal arts, so much so that we created a [Writing Intensive \(WI\) Requirement](#) in our otherwise open curriculum. We recognize that writing is thinking, that writing is a tool and a process as much as it is an outcome, and that becoming a stronger writer is an ever-evolving, lifelong pursuit. Recently we have also broadened our understanding of college writing to include public-facing writing presented in print and in digital platforms, in addition to traditional scholarly work.

Smith faculty demonstrate their pedagogical commitment to writing by assigning it frequently, giving students feedback on their work, and strategically integrating writing into the disciplines through the [Writing Enriched Curriculum](#) program. We also demonstrate our commitment by teaching WI courses, which have writing instruction as a core goal.

Some writing teachers are trained teachers of writing, but most are not. This is not a problem, however. In fact, we believe no one is better positioned to teach disciplinary writing than the scholars, researchers, and teachers who practice the craft. As writers, researchers, and teachers, we have a lot of wisdom to impart to novices just starting out, though sometimes it takes a little digging to get to it.

Still, we recognize that many faculty can be anxious about teaching writing, and we hope to allay some of that anxiety here by providing some answers to the most frequently asked questions about teaching WI courses.

What makes WI courses different from other courses that assign writing?

Many courses assign writing and even teach writing. What makes WI courses distinct is that:

- They pay consistent and systematic attention to writing *as writing*, not just content.
- They devote class time to talking about writing.
- They require a substantial amount of writing. The Writing Intensive (WI) Requirement statement speaks of “an array of discrete writing assignments.” We recommend a total of 15 pages of

polished work broken up over a minimum of three assignments, starting with a short assignment and working up from there.

- They present students with “significant opportunities to revise work, guided by feedback from both instructors and peers,” as stated in the Writing Intensive (WI) Requirement document. We recommend putting the effort into mid-process feedback. Feedback at the end of the writing process with no opportunity for revision is not pedagogically effective. At that point, it is best to keep comments short.

What is the best way to structure a WI course?

There are many ways to structure a WI course effectively, but we find that courses that engage students in answering a critical, debatable question in a discipline or in society work especially well. These questions do not have simple answers and require students to weigh evidence carefully. For example:

- Is foreign aid an effective strategy in the eradication of global poverty?
- Should Big Astronomy be allowed to build billion-dollar telescopes on top of sacred mountaintops worshipped by indigenous people?
- While historic injustices have been rampant, at what point might they be superseded, and how? Do reparations make sense for disadvantaged groups in the 21st century, and in what form?
- Should museums consider deaccessioning works by white artists to fund the diversification of their collections?
- Should certain kinds of objects should be deaccessioned by museums and returned to the cultures and communities whence they originated? If so, through which processes?
- Is a film whose message is powerfully and effectively about sustainability worth the potentially enormous amount of waste inherent in many dominant film production practices?
- If acting means being able to embody and perform any role, does casting Black actors in Black roles, or trans actors in trans roles, etc. matter?
- Journalism is often understood as the first draft of history. But if digital archives of past newspapers deliberately erase information that relates to expunged criminal records, in order to protect and affirm the reason for the expunction, do we protect a single person's legal reputation knowing we might be undermining an entire specific historical discourse?

All fields have such questions. The evidence required to answer any of them is complex and conflicting. In answering them, students will need to read both popular and academic texts and make all the writerly moves writers make: address the relevance of context, review the history of the debate, analyze data, identify strengths and weaknesses, address counterarguments, etc. For more mainstream inspiration, check out *The New York Times'* [Student Opinion Questions](#).

What kinds of writing should my students do?

A variety of writing tasks helps students strengthen their writing skills as novice scholars and civic writers. We recommend that you:

- Regularly assign informal/exploratory/reflective writing, especially in preparation for formal writing.
- Introduce students to the writing practices and genres of your discipline.
- Assign at least one public-facing writing task. For example, you could ask students to reconceptualize an academic paper as an op-ed or a podcast. The Jacobson Center's [Public Discourse Modules](#) provides a wide array of ideas for public-facing writing, and you can also see examples of the work that Smith students are publishing in the mainstream press in [Smith Public Voices](#).

Independent of the genre, students will have the opportunity to submit their best work to [Smith Writes](#), the Jacobson Center's online publication of outstanding writing produced in WI courses.

How do I *teach* writing?

There are many ways to teach writing effectively. However, we have a few recommendations:

- We encourage you to communicate to your students that writing is the way scholars participate in conversation with one another, and that some of these conversations have been going on for centuries and will continue well into the future. Written responses to assignments (papers) are not meant to be definitive settlements of a debate (conversation stoppers) but turns in the ongoing conversation. To participate, however, novices have to understand the history of the conversation, who the participants are, where the conversation is at this moment, how they are going to enter into it, with whom they are going to align themselves, and whom they are going to debate. The course (readings, discussions, lectures) helps them do that. Ultimately, what is important is what they, the students, have to say and how they say it.
- Mid-process feedback on written work (drafts) is a common, effective way to teach writing. We encourage you to engage your students in the feedback process, to think of feedback as a semester-long conversation you are having with your students about their work. You could even go as far as asking your students to annotate their papers with questions about writing (e.g. Do I have enough evidence here? Is this transition clear? I think this is my strongest point. Do you agree? In peer review, I was told this piece of evidence does not support the point. I think it does. What do you think?). Student questions are a great way to start and energize the back-and-forth about feedback. They ensure that you and your students are having the same conversation about writing.
- We think our comments on student work are crystal clear, but they are not always so to students. To avoid miscommunication (and build community), we recommend that you meet with your students in individual 20/30-minute conferences twice in the semester in place of written feedback. Cancel class for the week if you need to. The tradeoff is worth it.
- A little writing instruction on a regular basis goes a lot further than a lot once in a while. Consider doing regular 10/20-minute mini-lessons on the aspects of writing you deem most critical, and ground these in actual student writing. For example, put up a thesis/paragraph/sentence, and ask students, what's going well here and what could be improved? The benefit is cumulative.

Can I get support in preparing my WI course?

The Jacobson Center offers support for faculty in preparing WI courses. You can start with [Faculty Services and Resources](#) on the center's website, but you can also meet with the writing instructors there (trained teachers of writing) to review course structure, assignment development, pedagogical strategies, or anything else related to teaching WI courses. If you are interested, contact Julio Alves, director, at jalves@smith.edu.

Can my students get support with their writing?

Professional staff and peer tutors at the [Jacobson Center](#) provide individualized writing support for all students, including students in WI courses. Additionally, the center may be able to arrange for a dedicated peer tutor exclusive to your course. This is a relatively new program for the center, but the staff are eager to pilot it (pending budgetary constraints). The professional staff at the Jacobson Center can also work with you in providing extra support for students who need more help than you alone can provide. For these arrangements, contact Julio Alves, director, at jalves@smith.edu.

Further reading

We hope you find the above suggestions helpful. We close by recommending two Smith publications and further reading:

- [Writing Papers](#), the writing handbook prepared by the Jacobson Center for Smith students, is available free of charge to all students and faculty. It contains much of what Smith students need to know about academic writing.
- The companion [Teaching Writing](#), also prepared by the Jacobson Center, is available free to all faculty. It distills advice about teaching writing from generations of Smith faculty, Jacobson Center staff, and experts in writing studies.

Both handbooks are available digitally and in paper copy, and are brief, focused, and useful. That is their virtue. They are far from comprehensive, however. If you want something more comprehensive, for a handbook, we recommend Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers' [A Writer's Reference](#). For a guide to teaching writing, we recommend John Bean and Dan Melzer's [Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom](#). An older edition by John Bean (sole author) will also do the trick.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions for the Writing and Public Discourse Committee, we encourage you to be in touch with us. Please direct your emails to Julio Alves at jalves@smith.edu.