

TEACHING WRITING ONLINE: TIPS FOR FACULTY

JACOBSON CENTER FOR WRITING, TEACHING AND LEARNING

It's safe to say that we can create a more effective learning environment on campus than we can in an online class. In transitioning our in-person courses to an online environment, we've likely dropped activities that we would have done on campus, making us feel that the online course is not as substantial as the in-person course.

It's not reasonable to expect that in-person courses and online courses will have the same riches, but they can have different, equally powerful riches. We just need to leverage the strengths of each approach. Regarding writing in particular, the online environment can be just as effective as the classroom environment — if we adapt our pedagogy to harness the potential and to mitigate the drawbacks of a remote classroom.

We hope you find these tips for teaching writing online helpful.

FOSTER CONNECTEDNESS THROUGH WRITING

In the classroom, we stay connected with students through our physical presence and talk. In addition, we might see students in office hours, in passing everywhere, at lectures, at the gym, etc. Together, these encounters contribute to a sense of connectedness, a feeling that's very fragile online.

Use writing to foster connectedness in the remote classroom. Here are some examples of what you might do and ask students to do:

- When you ask students to do a reading, ask them also to respond to it. The assignment might be as long as a formal response or as short as a tweet. Look over the responses and write back a general reply.
- In the pre-COVID era, we might not have responded to online posts. In a remote environment, it's important to do so. Students benefit from feeling your presence in all the work they do. You don't need to respond to every post, but consider summarizing student responses and writing a general response.
- Encourage group chats, messaging, and collaborative work on a document (email, Moodle, Slack). Students can work synchronously or asynchronously. Participate as you see fit.
- Record and post short videos or narrated presentations on specific topics, so students can see you and hear you regularly at their convenience (Zoom, VoiceThread). These videos and presentations can be very effective, for example, as mini-lessons on writing or as supplements to a written assignment.

GO DEEP BY ALIGNING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS WITH LEARNING GOALS

On campus, we often organize courses around readings or themes, and then develop assignments and activities that help students probe their complexities. In an environment that's not as bountiful with ancillary discussions and activities, we need to think more deliberately about what our goals are and how to align them more strategically with formal and exploratory writing assignments.

The more challenging the goal, the more writing students should do, especially directed informal writing in preparation for demanding assignments. Writing is a form of learning, and students work through and solidify their understanding of the material through it. However, they can easily feel that informal/low stakes writing (like response posts) is busy work because it's often ungraded. To counteract this perception, it's more critical than usual to be very open and descriptive about exactly what

function a piece of writing is fulfilling, even if it's exploratory or responsive in nature. For example, something like this: "I'd like you to send me/post a paragraph between now and Thursday informally describing what you want to do for your final project. Writing about this informally, at the start of your thinking process, will help you establish some of the questions you'll need to answer, and will help you cut through formal academic language to what you actually understand (or want to learn) about the topic you're looking at." Use these opportunities to remind students of the learning goals for the course, and close the loop on these assignments by writing back a general response.

KEEP IT SIMPLE BY LEVERAGING THE DIGITAL TOOLS THAT STUDENTS ARE ALREADY LIKELY TO BE FAMILIAR WITH

Email, Moodle, GoogleDocs, GoogleForms, and WordPress likely offer most of the tools we need to successfully teach writing online. Students working remotely don't have all of the support that they traditionally have on campus, and we don't want them to be using the time and energy they should be devoting to the content in our courses to figuring out how to use unfamiliar software. Here are a few examples of tools with which students are already likely familiar that can be put to very productive use:

- Consider using email and discussion boards to conduct substantive conversations with students.
- Consider using GoogleDocs to facilitate peer review. We highly recommend a structured peer review process in which the instructor has full access as the host of the shared drive space on which the documents reside. Consider also modeling the peer review process with students and giving them written instructions. Otherwise the process can easily run amok.
- Consider using GoogleDocs for submissions and feedback. GoogleDocs allows for threaded comment conversations with students about their work. You'll likely find students replying to your comments to ask questions and give feedback.
- Consider using GoogleForms at the end of each formal writing assignment to get feedback on what went well and what was a struggle. This can be a starting point for targeted feedback to

students. It also empowers students as a full, active participants in the feedback process. Feedback will feel more like a two-way conversation instead of a monologue. GoogleForms also allows file attachments if you want to use them to collect work.

- Consider using WordPress to facilitate a threaded conversation in which students respond not only to a post but to each other's responses to a post. This is an invaluable communal exploratory writing assignment that facilitates formal writing later on.

Consider using WordPress as a format for public-facing writing, which seems all the more important when we don't have an in-person structure for our courses. WordPress allows you to limit the scope of the audience (the students in the class, anyone with a Smith.edu email address, the public at large).

THINK BROADLY ABOUT WHAT WRITING MEANS

We tend to think of writing as word processing that's eventually printed on paper, and there is nothing wrong with that, especially with formal writing. Writing on the page slows down the reading and thinking process and allows us to be more critical and reflective. However, the online environment gives us many options for expressing ourselves that we should leverage. For example, instead of responding to a text in a written format, why not respond with a sound file or a video? As much as possible, we should allow students to choose the medium and audience that suits them best to think through the material, and maybe even to express formally what they have learned. Writing for the general public, such as on social media, is just as valuable as the academic essay and can be used as a way to demonstrate learning.

Likewise, explore different ways of giving feedback to students. Perhaps you choose to give written comments on a mid-process draft, but why not respond to a final draft with a sound file or a video? Students benefit from the opportunity to see you and hear you. Our brains engage us with one another intellectually, but there's an emotional component to learning as well, one that is communicated through voice and gesture.

KEEP THE COURSE FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE

Many of us who work in higher education are blessed with offices (at school and at home), powerful equipment, and generous bandwidth. Our students may not be so blessed. In addition, we decide when we want to teach, which may be an inconvenient time for students in different time zones. The suggestions here require low bandwidth and lend themselves to asynchronous teaching. It's important that we keep courses accessible as much as possible and capitalize on the flexibility that online teaching affords.