

Bringing Writing Into the Classroom

1. Here are two simple prompts that can help raise students' awareness of their writing process and the choices they have made. Most can be done either in class or as homework; either way, they lead to rich conversations in the classroom.

- Once an essay has been assigned, have students look back at previous essays (from your class, another class, or L&T) and ask them to write about what they can learn from those earlier efforts. What comments did they receive on their last essay that they can pre-empt on this next essay? What went well that they want to replicate? What went poorly and is worth re-thinking? What didn't they do last time that they would like to do this time?
- For any essay you collect, it can be useful to have students write a cover letter in which they describe their writing process: what did they do from the time the essay was assigned to the time they handed it in? This helps us understand which errors are the result of haste and which are the result of inability, and this in turn lets us know what we need to focus on when the next essay rolls around.

2. Using Alex Johnson's "Why Isaac Bashevis Singer, Truman Capote, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf (Among Others) Were Having a Bad Morning."

Students typically enjoy this article a great deal, and many are relieved to learn that writing isn't always easy. In fact, Johnson makes quite clear that all writers – professionals included – struggle with writing, and she goes into detail regarding some of the authors mentioned in her title. She does two other useful things: first, she outlines a writing process that is broken down into five different stages, making it clear that no one can expect to get an essay done in one sitting. Second, she names and explores the "demons" that get in the way of creating solid writing, such as procrastination, perfectionism, editing-while-writing, etc.

Here are some ways to make good use of it:

- After reading the essay, have students write about which demon is theirs. This can be either in-class writing or homework alongside the essay. Discussing these demons and then moving into a discussion of how to overcome them can be extremely useful.
- Similarly, have students describe their writing process on their latest essay: what exactly did they do from the time they received the assignment to the time they handed it in? Then (in writing or in discussion) compare it to the one described in Johnson's article. A good question to ask and discuss is, What can I learn from Johnson's article for my own writing process? Be sure these get written down so they are available when the next essay assignment is near.
- In both cases, at the end of the session, have students make resolutions about how they will approach their next essay.
- Finally, when they hand in their next essay, have them write a quick cover letter in which they describe their writing process. This can be extremely useful for the student (it brings their choices about writing to the surface) and for the professor (it helps us understand why certain errors were made).

3. Using Nancy Sommers's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers."

Like Johnson's article but to an even greater degree, this essay brings home the fact that good writing is the result of revision. If you've already used the Johnson article, this essay is a good way to revisit the topic. Sommers presents her research on approaches to revision on the part of both beginning, student writers and older, experienced writers. Not surprisingly, she finds that while student writers revise words and (maybe) sentences, experienced writers revise ideas and rethink arguments. Some students are quick to say that they don't have the time needed for substantial revision, but this article is useful for the image of the writing process that it holds up: revision is essential.

Some ways to put it to use: As with the essay by Johnson, this essay leads easily to both writing assignments and discussions about how students write and revise their essays. But this essay works best in the context of revision: where the Johnson essay is useful in having students consider how they *write* their essays, the Sommers essay is useful in having them consider how they *revise* their essays. If they have a draft, ask which ideas need serious revision; once a revision is complete, ask them to describe their revision process and to consider how it might have been more radical. Over time, these habits of deeper revision will sink in, but the main thing that students need to learn is to allot sufficient time for revision. Building that time into your syllabus is a great gift to them, as it ensures they will have that important experience.

4. Painless Revision

One reason faculty are hesitant to include revision in a course is because it requires extra reading (of drafts) in an already tightly packed syllabus and semester. In some ways, this is the price we pay for making student writing a priority in the class. But there are ways to make it easier:

- Work with a Writing Fellow: In FYSEM as well as other classes, a tutor can be assigned to your class. This tutor reads drafts and meets with students as they revise their papers towards a final essay that is handed in to you. Students get the experience of revision and faculty get to read better papers – everyone wins!
- Peer Review: On the due date for an essay, have students bring two copies. Divide students into groups of three, and send everyone home with two essays by classmates. Then dedicate the next class meeting to peer review: students meet in their groups of three to give feedback on the two essays they read. Faculty can circulate to trouble shoot and make sure everyone is on the right track. The key here is to give students specific criteria with which to read and evaluate the drafts by their peers, e.g. What is the thesis? Is it strong? What is the argument and what evidence is offered? Are sentences clear?
- Self-Editing: On the day a paper is due, give students time in class to review it themselves. Again, it's important to give them specific things to look for, e.g. thesis, argument, evidence – here you can pick those aspects of essay writing that most concern you. Then give students the option of handing it in or taking it home to revise. Be sure to have them hand in both versions, so that you can glance at the old one if necessary. Even if you don't, the fact that you will be collecting it will prod students to revise seriously. Have them describe how they revised, which leads nicely into a discussion of the essay by Sommers.

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