

Teaching Writing Intensive Courses Suggestions for New and Seasoned Instructors

The key to teaching writing-intensive courses that are beneficial to students without being overwhelming to faculty is to focus on giving more feedback to students rather than giving more assignments.

Fewer assignments with more feedback and more opportunities for students to revise often is a better pedagogical approach than requiring lots of writing on which the instructor has little time to provide feedback, and students have little time to think about how to improve.

W courses do not have to include more writing than non-W versions of the course.

W courses do need to include more feedback to students about writing, and more opportunities for students to revise writing based on feedback, and submit again.

This suggests that at least one draft of all major work should be required, and students should be required to revise according to feedback in order to improve their grade.

It is possible to do LESS work while giving MORE feedback.

(1) Consider limiting how write much on students' papers. Instead give feedback in class.

(2) Instead of writing feedback on papers, consider making a list of the common errors you see, using actual student work as examples (without names, of course). Project the original work in class, have students discuss how to improve the work, and show some alternative approaches. You may choose to post the day's lesson on Bb so that if students are absent, they have to get the feedback from Bb—not from you.

(3) Multiple SMALL assignments may lead to better learning than fewer big assignments. As an example, if the ultimate goal is to have students write a research paper, you could consider requiring small sections of the paper at a time. This gives you time to provide feedback on small sections, and for students to incorporate that feedback into subsequent sections. For example, a research question might be one assignment, and a prediction might be another assignment. This developmental approach ensures that most students will have a good research question (after feedback and revisions) before you expect them to write a prediction. On the same hand, you might require a summary on one article as one assignment, a summary of the second article as another assignment, and a topic sentence to connect the two as a third assignment. By providing feedback on each step students should be expected to improve on each subsequent assignment. This results in more opportunities for students to demonstrate improvement, and makes the instructor's task of grading less painful.

(4) When giving feedback in class, consider asking students to find in their own assignment examples of the "problems" that are being discussed in class. You might mark their assignment with one or two or three checkmarks to indicate they need to look for one, or two, or three separate problems. All of those problems would be discussed in class in the feedback sessions. Alternatively, you might mark an "a" "b" or "c" on their assignment to indicate that "lesson a" or "lesson b" etc. applies to their errors.

(5) When feedback is given in class it is best to have a strict attendance policy. Many faculty report better student progress and grades simply from making their attendance policy stricter. Ultimately, students who miss class and then expect you to repeat your lessons, become a drain on your much-needed time. On the other hand, if you don't repeat lessons for students who miss class, it is very difficult for them to succeed. Many problems are avoided when students know that the instructor is serious about the attendance policy.