



Students Have Taken Several Classes That Require Writing: Why Can't They Write?

It can be irritating to assign writing to students, even those who are juniors and seniors, and find that the results are poor.

Students have had to write papers for other classes; why is their writing so mediocre?

The Problem of Code Switching

As students enroll in a variety of General Education courses, they are often required to “switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). **[Note: this landmark study has been cited over 2500 times.]** This process is often referred to as “course switching” or “code switching” Students may be required to write in a variety of academic disciplines, each with different cultures and genres.

Frustrated Attempts to Transfer Writing Skills

McCarthy (1987) conducted a hallmark longitudinal case study: "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." He explored the problem of students' requirements to complete courses that assign different types of writing. For example, in a single semester, students may be writing papers for an introduction to psychology course, an overview of historical civilization, an election-based political science class, and an American novel seminar. Students may resent the inability to “automatically reuse and adapt writing knowledge from one context to another” (Donahue & Foster-Johnson. 2018. Liminality and transition: Text features in post-secondary student writing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 52(4), pp. 361-362). This frustration for students not only occurs in the transition from high school to college, but from one college discipline to another (e.g., history to neuroscience).

“Students rely on their own experiences when responding to writing assignments. One student described the frustration of course switching in writing this way: ‘The thing I’m finding most difficult . . . moving from subject to subject and knowing how you’re meant to write in each one and for a particular instructor’ (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 164).

Conflicting Assessments of Student Writing

One frustrated student “received positive feedback and high grades in both history and politics; [however, he] was shocked when he used a similar format for another class. The instructor criticized his writing because of its ‘lack of structure and argument’ and added ‘You really have a problem with this essay, mainly for the reason that it is so incoherent. It has no beginning, middle and end, no structure, no argument’ (Lea & Street, 1998, pp. 165-166). He had used the same structure as the papers for which he received A’s and received positive feedback, such as ‘I like your conclusion to what is a carefully argued and relevant essay’” (p. 166). Receiving conflicting assessments of the same topic and content further bewilders students.

But I am not Trained to Assess Writing in my Discipline!

Instructors may feel that writing concepts are “generic and transferable or represent ‘common sense ways of knowing’” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 162). In reality, understanding how to write in the disciplines must be taught – not just the format and structure of papers – but also to address the culture of the disciplinary audience. Teaching discipline-specific writing may add unnecessary anxiety and work for faculty: even though instructors recognize successful writing, they may not understand how to “make explicit what a well-developed argument looks like in a written assignment” (p. 163). Without sufficient instruction, students are left to flounder through various writing tasks.

Recommendations

Over the next two semesters, the FHSS Writing Lab newsletter will contain suggestions for helping students write better in general and in your discipline specifically. Suggestions could include the following or email Joyce with your suggestions (joyce_adams@byu.edu):

- Create explicit guidelines for writing tasks (and rubrics whenever appropriate).
- Respond to the writing using relevant advice – what are the strengths? What are the weaknesses?
- Are problems mostly related to content or format?
- Teach students how to understand your feedback.
- Overtly teach students how to critically read scholarly material.
- Introduce students to the culture and academic discourse in your discipline.
- Offer responses that guide students to revise the content of papers rather than emphasizing format or mechanics.
- Provide opportunities for students to revise (using resources other than just the instructor)

Simply giving students writing assignments is not sufficient to improve writing quality. We must provide effective instruction about writing and offer motivation for writing.

Teach and motivate students to understand and write well.

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