



Supporting Students With Writing Assignments in Our Disciplines

At this time of the semester, students may be engaging deeply in research and writing for their major papers. What are we hoping students will gain from these labor-intensive writing assignments? In addition to a more complete engagement with the content of our courses, we may hope to see more discipline-based research, reading, and writing.

What Support Can We Offer At This Point?

One way to encourage students in their writing tasks is through having students respond to questions that help them reflect in disciplinary ways on their own writing process. A set of possible questions that could be asked of students can be found in the table below. These responses do not need to be graded or take significant class time. Simply invite students to respond to questions to motivate them:

**a 5-minute “Rush Write” in class
or returned through an Email or posted on Learning Suite
or used as prompts to Pair and Share with another student**

Examples of Questions to Keep Students on Task
<p>What stand will you take in your paper? How does it differ from what you are reading? How are you planning to “bring something new to the conversation”? (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 21).</p> <p><i>[Students often do not like to address opposing views “because everyone has a right to his or her own opinion” and they may “see little purpose in defending any particular view and thus are not compelled through the process of rigorous thinking that intellectually mature writing demands” (William Perry (1970) as cited in Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 22).]</i></p>
<p>Consider your scholarly sources. What are the authors trying to persuade readers to believe? What is your response to their claims? What evidence supports or disputes your claim?</p> <p><i>[Students may think writing in the disciplines is reporting “discrete bits of information,” rather than joining “a conversation.” Students need to be taught that in disciplinary writing, scholarly authors/researchers often “try to change [the] readers’ view about something through analysis or argument” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 21).]</i></p>
<p>Compare 2-3 of your sources: How are they different? How can you use these differences in your paper?</p> <p><i>[“Most beginning college students . . . [imagine] knowledge as the acquisition of correct information and right answers. They see themselves as empty buckets being filled with data by their professors” (William Perry (1970) as cited in Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 21) as opposed to being discerning readers and critical thinkers. Help students understand that in disciplinary scholarly writing, all claims & evidence are subject to question, and differing viewpoints are encouraged. The goal is to evaluate research, not simply report on it.]</i></p>

What differences have you found in researching scholarly sources through the lens of your major as opposed to skimming sources to simply find evidence to support your original claim? How have the research and writing deepened your engagement with course content?

[Scholars in a discipline typically “enter an ongoing conversation” when they do research and publish articles. They often engage in efforts to solve a problem in the discipline; “each discipline poses its own kinds of questions and conducts inquiries, uses data, and makes arguments in its own characteristic fashion” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 3). To successfully understand research in a discipline, students need more than just knowledge about the content of the course, but also “knowledge about the discipline’s genre conventions, its methods of argument, its typical kinds of evidence, its ways of referencing other researchers, and its typical rhetorical contexts and audiences [often referred to as the discourse community]” (Anne Beaufort, 2007, as cited in Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 3).]

Reflect on how your current research has changed your original claims.

[Students may not understand how a writing task that requires critical thinking differs from an assignment that simply asks students to report on what they find in the research literature on the topic. It may be helpful to explain that when “given a critical thinking problem,” students should avoid reaching quick closures. Instead, they should “suspend judgment, question assumptions, evaluate evidence, imagine alternative answers, play with data, enter into the spirit of opposing views, and just plain linger over questions” and they will need instruction on how to proceed (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 8).]

“Now What?” What steps do you need to take next to complete your paper and meet the expectations of the assignment?

Peer Review of Drafts

Consider using peer reviews to give feedback to the students, as well as providing an opportunity for students to see how at least one other person responded to the assignment prompt.

FHSS Writing Lab

Consider assigning students to take a well-developed draft to the FHSS Writing Lab. The student advisors can be trained on your assignment prompt and rubrics (if you have them). Advisors will NOT write for the students but can respond to the papers with a “reader response” format to analyze structure, claim, etc.

Writing can “deepen student learning. In writing assignments, students grapple with both content and disciplinary conventions. Writing helps students make new connections with course content” (Daly, 2017, blog post).

We can encourage students to keep going!

FHSS Writing Lab

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Bean, J. C., & Melzer, D. (2021). *Engaging ideas: The professor’s guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. Jossey-Bass.

Daly, K. (2017). University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Department blog: <https://dept.writing.wisc.edu/blog/not-it-resistance-to-teaching-writing-across-the-curriculum/> Posted February 28, 2017; downloaded March