

Effective Writing Instruction Techniques

Objective: Support students in synthesizing information from multiple sources and distinguishing relevant from irrelevant details.

Writing Instruction Activity	Disadvantages	Advantages
When the assignment is handed in:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage rhetorically with the student on details of topic – i.e. to help them clarify their understanding Ask students to write a reflective piece outlining their own perceptions of their successes and failures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students often do not read comments on final assignments – or even pick them up. Unless it is worth grades, students may not put much energy into it – or they may be unwilling to admit weakness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students get an opportunity to learn more about the topic – and will be more likely to remember because of their work on it Provides a model for and encourages good habits in self-evaluation
If the assignment is still a draft:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Point to where confusions arise, where key points are getting lost in the details; suggest revisions (orally or in writing) Suggest an editing strategy (e.g. reverse outlining or concept mapping) to help student see the difficulties themselves Peer review Provide models (with explanations of why they are successful – or not) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can take significant time and resources, especially in large classes May not work with students who have a weak grasp of material or language Requires set-up and coaching – and sometimes students can lead each other astray Unless specifically chosen for scope and detail, models may not address the issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence shows that students are engaged by these types of comments and will often take them to heart Gives students a specific technique to help them identify connections and organize their ideas. Feedback would likely indicate areas of confusion; seeing other samples might suggest ways to handle details Similar benefits to peer review, with opportunity to hear expert reader reactions
Before even designing the assignment:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure lectures on topics precede assignments to give students a foundation Define a purpose and audience to help students determine relevance Sequence assignment or include exercises or activities (pre-writing, writing-to-learn) to support writing process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not always possible, or even desirable (if, e.g., goal is to encourage exploration beyond course content) Students often misconstrue audience (especially if they lack requisite experience) Need to be tailored to the individual course, with clear prompts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives background and structure to help students categorize information Probably the two most important considerations in effective communication Provides low-stakes opportunities to identify connections and key ideas before submitting final draft

Objective: Encourage students to move beyond superficial overviews that border on plagiarism

Writing Instruction Activity	Disadvantages	Advantages
When the assignment is handed in:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage rhetorically, identify gaps and probe with further questions about the material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students often do not read comments on final assignments – or even pick them up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates where students need to further develop their ideas and model s effective critical thinking about the topic
If the assignment is still a draft:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage rhetorically, probe with further questions (either in writing or orally) – and suggest global revisions Peer review Provide models (with explanations of why they are successful – or not) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can take significant time and resources, especially in large classes Students may not yet be sufficiently attuned to subject matter to see the problems Often a fairly sophisticated understanding is required to extrapolate critical thinking issues to new contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence shows that students are engaged by these types of comments and take them to heart Seeing multiple writing samples gives students a better sense of the appropriate depth Similar benefits to peer review, with opportunity to hear expert reader response
When designing the assignment:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require use of specific sources Ensure assignments are authentic to the discipline Reduce scope of assignment (but not page length!) to encourage focus and depth Teach the conflicts Sequence assignments by dividing into steps or adding pre-writing and reflection components 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not necessarily appropriate (e.g. if independent research is a key objective) It might be easier, rather than harder, to plagiarize certain authentic assignment types (e.g. code or fact sheet) Can defeat the purpose of certain types of assignments, especially in lower level survey courses Can be overwhelming to students, especially when foundational concepts are very abstract or complex Must be customized to fit with course learning objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures sources are high quality and provide different perspectives Students tend to find authentic assignments engaging, and put more effort into them Sends a clear signal about the need to develop ideas in depth Helps students see the key disciplinary issues and types of questions they need to address Provides opportunities to push students to think more deeply throughout the writing process