

Writing-to-Learn Program Philosophy

In addition to teaching course content, WL courses are designed to enhance students' ability to formulate and articulate complex ideas and to convey those ideas in writing to a professional and/or academic audience. While it is essential that faculty have room to develop assignments and approaches suitable to their subject matter and teaching style, it is also essential that courses bearing WL credit give students a writing experience that will contribute to their overall development as writers.

To that end, we ask that faculty consider the following general principles as they plan a WL course and develop writing assignments and grading criteria for it.

a. The writing required by WL courses can include both informal and formal writing. Formal writing assignments in a WL course should entail writing that makes a clearly indicated claim and supports it with evidence and/or reasoning, organizes ideas into multiple paragraphs, and requires a polished final draft.

b. Faculty evaluation of student writing in a WL course should be based on a grading system whose requirements and criteria are stated in writing and provided to students before submission of the final draft. Faculty may choose to use the Pittsburg State University Writing Rubric or to develop their own grading criteria.

c. The assignment sequence should be designed to allow students to benefit from feedback on their writing during the course of the semester.

Best Practices for Writing-to-Learn Courses

1. Grading Criteria

Formal writing submitted in a WL course is evaluated on the quality of content and effectiveness of writing according to criteria that are clearly stated in the instructions for the assignment or other course document (such as a grading rubric) distributed to students before they submit the final draft.

2. Writing and the Course Grade

The writing component of a WL course represents a significant portion of the course grade, and a student cannot pass a WL course without earning a passing grade on the writing component of the course.

3. Amount of Writing

In addition to any informal writing, assigned at the instructor's discretion, a WL course includes a minimum of 15 pages of formal writing (15 pages of finished draft, not counting any working drafts submitted for review), distributed across the course in any combination of paper types and lengths.

4. Instructor Feedback

Students in a WL course receives formative feedback on their writing while there is still time in the semester for students to act on instructor feedback.

5. Academic Honesty and Integrity

WL courses follow the University's Academic Honesty and Integrity policy on plagiarism. Therefore, assignments that allow or require students to use information from outside sources hold students accountable for using source material in an academically appropriate way.

Frequently Asked Questions

What counts as “formal writing”?

Formal writing can include a wide variety of document types, including--but not limited to--lab reports, research papers, analytical essays, case studies, failure analysis reports, proposals, recommendation reports, instructions, take-home essay exams, and book reviews.

Whatever the task, however, formal writing is designed to communicate ideas effectively to an academic audience or to real or fictional readers modeled on readers addressed by professionals in the discipline, treats its subject in a way that goes beyond merely representing a personal experience or response, and is revised and edited for submission in an academic or professional setting.

NOTE: To count as formal writing, a “one page” writing assignment must consist of a minimum of 200 words and more than one paragraph of text. Writing tasks that can be completed in one paragraph or less do not provide enough evidence for readers to evaluate the writers' ability to sustain focus and to develop and organize ideas.

What is “informal writing”?

Informal writing includes writing assignments begun and completed in a single class period, such as in-class essay exams or in-class answers to discussion questions; writing tasks that generate responses less than 200 words in length; writing tasks graded only on completion, not on quality; writing tasks that generate responses not organized around a single main idea (such as definitions

for vocabulary terms or short answers to reading questions); and writing assignments that invite students to limit their discussion to entirely personal experience (such as a response paper that asks students for a personal reaction to a work of art or literature or a recollection of a personal event).

Do I have to give students formative feedback on every piece of formal writing submitted for the course?

Yes and No. All formal writing must receive an evaluative grade based on the quality of writing and understanding of the material. A quality grade based on clearly stated grading criteria is a form of feedback, so in that sense, students will get feedback on every piece of formal writing.

However, a quality grade by itself, even when based on clearly stated grading criteria, is not sufficient feedback to give students clear and explicit direction for improving their writing. Therefore, some (but not necessarily all) writing assignments submitted for a grade should also be given more detailed individual feedback.

If the course includes more than one writing assignment, this could be accomplished through formative feedback on papers submitted early in the semester, with the expectation that feedback will address concerns that will be relevant to later assignments in that same course.

A course that meets the 15 pages of finished draft requirement with a single 15-page paper submitted at the end of the semester could accomplish the same goal through formative feedback on individual sections or working drafts of the paper submitted prior to submission of the final draft.

How can I document that my course meets the Best Practices?

To apply for the WL Best Practices Stipend, submit the following documents to the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee (send to jzeperni@pittstate.edu) by the third Friday of the semester:

- a copy of your course syllabus, including the course schedule showing the due dates for all formal (out of class) writing assignments,
- the instructions for each formal writing assignment (the assignment sheets you plan to hand out to students),
- grading criteria for each formal writing assignment (the rubric or other statement of grading criteria you plan to hand out to students),
- an explanation of how and when students will get formative feedback on their writing. This might include peer review (if so, include your green pen check or other peer review instrument), required Writing Center visits, and/or formative feedback from a course grader, but it should also include formative feedback from the course instructor.