



## THE WRITING CENTER

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### Situating Student Writers

At the Writing Center each year, we work with thousands of students at all skill levels and from all disciplines. Over the years, we've learned a lot from student writers about their assumptions and attitudes about writing and learning. Their conceptions of academic writing inform, and sometimes overwhelm, any individual instructor's assignments, advice, or guidelines, so it may be helpful to have a sense of the range of possible starting points for students when approaching writing tasks. Note that what follows is a broad range of possibilities. It doesn't describe all students, nor does every student carry all these attitudes or assumptions. It does provide an overview of the potential writing experience and attitudes that may exist in any one classroom at any one time. That said, the descriptions below are real and based on actual interactions with many Carolina students. Strategies for finding more about students in a particular course can be found at the end.

It helps to remember that for most students writing has been almost exclusively a school-based activity. While some may be devoted journal keepers or closet poets, they often rightly identify that intellectual activity as "creative" or "personal," another kind of writing than that which is required and experienced in school. Carolina students have had twelve years or more to accumulate conceptions about what writing in school and for teachers requires. That felt experience about academic writing and teachers ideas about good writing is a powerful, although sometimes ill-founded or misdirected guide. Because students' writing histories (like our own) are so strong, it's helpful to imagine students' situations as we begin to shape writing activities for them and respond to their ideas. While the debate and production of ideas through writing is the water that academics swim in, the practice of writing is something quite different for most students. Imagining their assumptions about writing and what their prior experiences have been may inform how we make opportunities for them to use writing.

The following list describes attitudes, behaviors, experience relevant to students who are writing in the academy.

Your students...

- May not have written a paper longer than ten pages in their lives.
- May *only* have ever written assignments the night before they are due. They may not have developed a more sophisticated writing process and may not believe they really need to do so.

- May not be aware of what an “argument” is in the academy. When told that a paper requires an “argument” they may be mystified by the term.
- May be avid writers on email, instant message systems, and listservs. May enjoy writing in this frame and be strong, sophisticated communicators through this medium.
- May be used to receiving writing assignments orally in class. They may not have learned to rely on assignment sheets before and may not have a good sense of how to read an assignment. They may take the whole assignment as a topic suggestion rather than specific, carefully crafted, directions or requirements. They may ignore the assignment sheet and believe that any comment you make about the assignment in class is the “real” assignment and that your comments supersede (rather than supplements or complements) a written assignment sheet.
- May struggle with completing writing assignments because they are having serious, legitimate difficulty deciphering the purpose or prose of reading assignments in the course. May not have skill in digesting or integrating reading material and not know or see how writing can function as a tool to do either.
- May not have a good sense of how long it might take to produce a well-written, typed page. Some may woefully underestimate and some may exaggerate the number of hours required. Either assumption precipitates procrastination and leads to writing the paper the night before it’s due.
- May believe that they will not ever have to write because they are going into the sciences or because their “secretaries” will take care of writing in their futures.
- May be novice computer and Internet users—although some may be techno-whiz kids. In either case, they will learn these skills relatively quickly, mostly from their peers.
- May expect writing assignments to be difficult and misconstrue a short writing assignment as “easy” or not very important.
- May believe that they are very strong writers.
- May believe that they are terrible writers.
- May get caught up in doing research for a paper. They may be excited about their new knowledge even though they have discovered an overwhelming amount of material and have little skill in sorting, discarding, and organizing the material.

- May be afraid that you or their peers will think or see how ill-prepared they are as writers or thinkers. Having met their academic/intellectual peers for the first time at Carolina, they may feel suddenly “dumb” and wary of exposure.
- May feel great relief at successfully communicating a complicated idea and make quick progress in their writing as they gain response and confidence.
- May be seriously invested in becoming strong writers during their college careers i.e. recognize strong writing skills as important and marketable.
- May expect and dread your rewriting of their prose. They may not view teachers’ comments as a learning opportunity. Accordingly, they may avoid reading written comments on a paper and only want to know the letter grade assigned. This attitude has developed out of experience with teachers’ harsh, cryptic, unclear comments on papers.
- May not believe that writing is important to an instructor when the instructor doesn’t devote any class time to discussing the assignment or how to execute the assignment.
- May be investing in maintaining what they feel is their original, personal, signature writing style. May see your attempts to guide them otherwise as disrespect for their individual voice or dislike for their ideas.
- May not view their instructor as a writer. Accordingly, it may not occur to them to ask you about the writing you do in your profession. An instructor who describes his/her writing process and shows a draft of something to students serves as a powerful model and sends a strong message that writing is valued in the course.
- May enjoy communicating ideas, in writing, with peers. Some students thrive in the repartee of debate and role-playing when given a chance to do so in the reflective time and space that writing provides.
- May seek to emulate the tone and vocabulary of a teacher or the assigned readings without clear or precise use of the vocabulary. These attempts often result in garbled prose that will make you question their basic writing abilities. Sometimes these attempts are actually signs of risk-taking and intellectual growth. Other times, these writers believe that “sounding good” or “sounding smart” is what they are supposed to do. These students may not have tried yet to really understand the course material.
- May write convoluted, awkward sentences as they struggle to express complex or new ideas. When their ideas become more sharply focused, their struggles with grammar, punctuation, or mechanics may significantly decrease.
- May see writing as their strongest academic skill whether they enjoy writing or not.

- May rely heavily on and trust completely the writing advice from a high school teacher, despite another teacher's instructions in class or the requirements of an assignment.
- May follow rigid "rules" about what they are "allowed" or "not allowed" to write in an academic paper (e.g. never use "I," avoid semi-colons) that may not match your assumptions or that may be in conflict with the demands of your assignment.
- May have one, well-developed writing skill (e.g. writing summaries or a five paragraph theme) that they use as an all-purpose strategy when responding to any assignment.
- May not believe that they have any valid ideas on a subject or that they are supposed to express their own ideas in a paper. They may see their role only as a sponge, a regurgitator or a teacher pleaser. Some may resist writing having another function in a course; others may embrace an opportunity to honestly explore ideas in writing.
- May never have cited a source in a paper before (while they receive training in this during required first-year English courses, all first-years do not take these courses or if they are first-years they may not have covered citation yet in the required course.)
- May have no idea what "APA," "MLA" or "documentation" mean.
- May take specific formatting instructions (e.g. Use APA documentation) with a grain of salt because in other courses they have been allowed to "use anything—just be consistent" or "make up a system—just be sure you cite sources adequately."
- May use the Internet the way people used the card catalogue in the past. They may see it as their primary, and most efficient, gateway for browsing and sorting information available on a given topic.
- May not be inclined to go the stacks to seek out a book (preferring Infotrac or other computer file databanks because they are quicker).
- May not know how to evaluate online sources.
- May have structured their course schedules to avoid writing. They may initially evaluate your course based on the length of the paper assignments and the number of writing assignments.
- May seek writing intensive courses because they feel more suited to them.
- May believe that writing cannot be "fairly" graded because it's all "subjective."
- May try very hard to figure out "what the teacher really wants them to write" rather than following their own interests and/or instincts about a topic or idea.

- May not share your definition or have operational definitions for terms such as “analyze,” “synthesize,” “argue,” or “critique.”
- May be simultaneously enrolled in two or more courses that have contradictory “rules” and assumptions about writing. The question “what do you really want us to do?” may be an honest one.
- May assume teachers only use writing as a “way to grade us” and assume that as the primary reason for any given writing assignment.
- May wish they had a chance (or obligation) to get feedback on an early draft of a paper. May appreciate pre-set deadlines throughout the course for turning in topics, outlines, drafts before the final due date.

## Discovering Your Students’ Writing Perspectives

If you are curious about students’ writing experience in a particular course or how they might respond to a particular assignment—ask them about their writing lives. Here are some quick and easy ways to gather their conceptions about writing:

- Ask them to take five minutes to write an ending to this sentence: Writing is like...
- Ask them to describe their best writing experience and why it was a good one.
- Ask them to guess what role writing may play for them in the future. What kind of writing will they be doing and what skills do they need to begin practicing now?
- Ask them to submit a list of questions they’d like to know about you as a writer.
- Ask them to describe what is most difficult for them about writing in school.
- Ask them what they like to write outside of class assignments.
- Ask them to describe a writing assignment in their own words.
- Ask them to guess why you designed an assignment in a particular way.
- Ask them how you could help them to become stronger writers. What have they found helpful? What doesn’t seem to help them as much?
- Ask them to identify the person who has taught them most about writing so far and the most important thing they learned from that person.

- Ask them what they think is special about writing in your discipline.
- Ask them to identify who they perceive as good writers?
- Ask them what they think of the writing style in the assigned course readings.
- Ask them to make a list of the rules they think should never be broken when writing an academic paper.
- Ask them to describe their ideal writing assignment.
- Ask them what they think the relationship is between writing and reading or writing and researching.

This information gathering could happen a number of different ways:

- five-minute in class writing exercises (collect and read quickly for your own edification)
- questions posted to a discussion board for response
- homework (write a paragraph response)
- write an answer in class then trade with neighbor and discuss for 5 minutes
- writing inventory given as one assignment during the first week of class
- ask students to write their “writing histories” in 2-3 pages

For more information about student writing or to talk with someone about your writing assignments, contact Kimberly Abels [kabels@email.unc.edu](mailto:kabels@email.unc.edu) at the Writing Center or Lynne Degitz [degitz@email.unc.edu](mailto:degitz@email.unc.edu) at the Center for Teaching and Learning.