

Writing Component for Two-Semester FYE Seminar

**Based on Summer/fall 2005 discussion in the GE Initiative Task Force
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This First-Year-Experience course constitutes your foundational learning in writing for the University. As such, it includes study and practice in the expression of facts and ideas; principles of investigation, of organization, and of effective writing style, with emphasis upon expository writing and upon developing analytical reading ability. The reading and writing components of the course satisfy GE, category A2.

Most of the reading and writing you do for this course will address the class theme of American Politics in 2004, presented in association with the SSU Library's "It Matters" lecture series. Why a theme? Learning to write, we believe, means becoming a member of a broader community or conversation--the goodness in good writing, in effect, is defined by the criteria and terms set forth by that community or conversation. As I hope you'll see, the topic of American Politics in 2004--its relations to us as individuals and to the society of which we are part--is a richly fascinating and relevant one addressed by many commentators both within and outside of the academy. They do so in multitudes of separate and/or interconnected conversations, in hopes of understanding human needs, pleasures, and desires; the ways that social and economic trends shape our individual political decisions; and the best visions of human society, for the present and for the long term.

Note that this will be an intellectually challenging class requiring a great deal of reading and writing.

Writing Assignments--Fall Term

Journal. At least three times per week, you will write short (one-page) entries in a class journal. Some of these will be "open" entries, in which you're free to write whatever you wish (development fluency and learning to use writing as modes of personal exploration and development are the goals here). Please also write one entry per week in response to the week's lecture. In this entry, simply name something in the lecture you found to be interesting and explain how and why it interested you.

Response Papers. Three times during the term, write a three-page critical response to a particular class reading (or readings) or to a weekly lecture. In a good critical response, the aim is to advance the conversation in some rich and interesting way. This goal frequently entails disagreeing with a writer or speaker--but it doesn't necessarily mean that. Good critical responses can agree with other commentators as well. They can also argue a related point or problematize the discussion or take issue with the *way* the writer or speaker argues or extend some point or explore implications. The aim is for you to say something interesting in response to something a person says that you find interesting.

In your critical response, briefly summarize the particular point or points in the reading or lecture you wish to take issue with and then develop an essay that argues your side of the issue. Critical responses will be graded on the quality of both their summary portions and their essay-responses.

Once during the term, you'll offer a class presentation based on your critical response. In your presentation, offer a ten-minute statement, in which you describe (not read) the author's or speaker's point and then your response to it; and then provide questions to stimulate class discussion.

Statement of Research Problem. Early in the term, you will write a one-page announcement of a problem or question that was raised for you by a lecturer, a reading, or a class discussion.

Annotated Bibliography and Bibliographic Essay. This assignment is designed to help you develop academic information literacy. In other words, it will help you learn essential skills of seeking and finding information using a variety of sources and kinds of information, and it will offer you the opportunity to practice and reflect on the challenging task of writing in concert with the voices of other commentators. It will also require you to learn and practice habits of high academic integrity, using source material ethically and without plagiarizing in any way.

The assignment: perform research as needed to find some answers to the problem or question you articulated in your Statement of Research Problem. Then develop a bibliography with one- or two-paragraph annotations displaying your learning and offering the reader an overview of some of the research and commentary on this problem or question. Your aim here is to accurately reflect the reading and researching you've done and to accurately cite, summarize, and paraphrase the readings in question. The annotated bibliography should be about five pages in length. The bibliography should be introduced by a bibliographic essay in which you reflect on your search process and evaluate the quality and quantity of the material you were able to find. The essay should answer questions like the following: how mature is the field of study geared to answering your question? What are the important works in the field? What are the major controversies-- i.e., what do scholars and commentators agree on and what do they argue about? Feel free to use your "I" voice as you reflect on and evaluate your experiences seeking information and the material you found.

"It Matters" Editorial Essay. For your final project for the term, please write an editorial essay (approximately 1000 words), aimed at a publication of your choice, in which you offer your opinion on the issue you raised and explored in the previous two assignments and explain why it matters (or mattered) for the election, its aftermath, or the American political scene in general. Cite research appropriately for the publication in question and link such citations well into your broader argument use strong and engaging rhetorical strategies appropriate for a contribution to a national civic discussion on your topic.

Writing Assignments--Spring Term

(I'm just going to name these for the time being.)

Creative Non-Fiction Piece exploring some vital issue in American political life.

More Critical Responses.

More Journaling.

Research Project culminating in an extended class presentation.

Learning Outcomes and How to Meet Them

FYE will endeavor to produce students who are

capable of developing academic (i.e., argumentative) prose in a variety of genres produced for a variety of audiences

able to write correctly (using punctuational, grammatical, and rhetorical strategies effectively) most of the time

sensitive to the challenges associated with writing--conscious of how difficult it is to write well yet aware of the benefits (personally, academically, socially, politically) of doing so

equipped with various writing strategies necessary to address unfamiliar writing tasks capable of orchestrating their own voices in concert with other commentators' voices (i.e., able to cite and incorporate quotations well and without plagiarizing, either intentionally or unintentionally)

aware of their own idiosyncratic writing challenges (e.g., a student with dyslexia will understand something about his or her challenges and emerge equipped with a repertoire of strategies for addressing them)

More as we think of them

Assessment Strategies

Some fairly random thoughts:

I think the first essential discovery we'll want to make is simply that all students are accomplishing something like the same quantity of writing and that they are responding to approximately the same expectations quality-wise. I think we'll learn this by collecting random samples.

In making assessments of some of the more qualitative elements of students' growth in writing abilities, I believe fairly strongly that there is no "scientific," quantifiable way of doing so. The approved methods of writing assessment include holistic evaluation of a random sample of responses to a common prompt and random sampling of writing portfolios. I know of no other good ones; I'm consulting my colleagues on this.

We may wish to make judicious use of Turnitin.com to assess extent of plagiarism, but I admit that I find this problematic.

Initial Thoughts on Writing Learning Outcomes for FYE

1. Students need to be doing a LOT of writing, and the writing needs to be fully integrated into the reading and discussions, but using different genres and rhetorical approaches (e.g., creative nonfiction, response/position papers, research-based answer-finding, and definitely some civic engagement (like letters to the editor))
2. The standards should be rigorous

3. Student writing should occupy part of the in-class curriculum--discussed for both its quality and for its contributions to the debates underway
4. When possible, students should have the benefit of models for excellence (fine essays, good letters to the editor, etc.)
5. Research component should be integrated throughout the course and involve several different assignments
6. Most writing assignments should have the structure of read-then-write, e.g., 'critical response essays'
7. Explicit discussion of rules and rhetorical strategies and good style and all that should mostly take place in the context of discussing real student writing.