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Teaching Freshman Composition— Getting Started

Bonnie W. Epstein

My first semester as a Freshman Composition instructor has ended. The anxiety has also subsided. I can now look back with some new-found confidence to see what worked and didn't work for me in the teaching of writing.

Determining What To Do

How does a new instructor determine what to do? First, I thought about a course objective. What skills do beginning students need to learn? One thing I believed then and am more sure of now is that freshmen must have help learning how to write in ways that other instructors will expect of them: summarizing readings, synthesizing sources, critiquing assigned materials and preparing the typical research essay. Perhaps nothing confirmed the correctness of this belief more than the evaluations of my students, one of whom said:

. . . this was an in-depth course. I'm not complaining at all because what I have learned will give me an edge on other areas, like when I have to summarize an article or evaluate a piece.

Choosing A Text Book and Setting It All Up

Determining what I wanted to do sent me on to the next step: finding a structured textbook and creating a syllabus that would provide such skill-building. Colleagues were most helpful in offering options, but I learned the hard way that nothing is more paralyzing to the new instructor than information overload. So I just decided to work with a text and syllabus recently used by a more experienced instructor.

Following a pre-set syllabus as a framework allowed me to focus my time more on the assignment and the actual preparation of lesson plans and materials. There just wasn't enough time to agonize over what text to use and what content areas to cover.

The use of a more structured text was a plus in another way as well: it did some of the work and planning *for* me. Seasoned instructors who are comfortable with both the material and the method of presentation can work from a more open-ended text or no text at all. For a new instructor, however, difficulties come in learning how to lecture, how to initiate and sustain class discussion, and how to motivate and keep interest in assignments that students may not wish to do. So, the more prep time devoted to familiarizing myself with course materials, the better.

As a last comment on the value of a structured text, I am never comfortable with ambiguity, and my fears about effective presentation of material were allayed somewhat by knowing exactly what to cover in each class meeting.

Hand in hand with a textbook selection was choice of method. Again, colleagues in the department pointed to the success of the portfolio method which views writing as a "process." The portfolio method allows students to prepare multiple drafts of each assignment and submit them to the instructor for comment and revision. No grade is given until a final copy of each assignment

(with all previous drafts attached) is submitted in a portfolio. Students have praised this technique for allowing the chance for improvement prior to final submission of the work.

Most likely, no method will succeed, however, unless the course objectives and requirements are clear. A syllabus designed to achieve

these aims will focus the course. Vital information such as required text and materials, grading, and attendance policies must be clearly outlined. Individual class assignments should then be listed. Ordinarily the syllabus will be less structured as the semester progresses.

Some Caveats

No textbook, syllabus or amount of preparation can speak to the unexpected. Each class of students is different and requires renegotiating and thinking on your feet. However, here are some well-tested thoughts I gathered from more experienced instructors:

- Be sensitive to the fact that writing is a difficult skill to perfect. Allow sufficient time to learn techniques and to practice them. Everything takes longer than you think, and squeezing in too much material can overwhelm and discourage students.
- Be prepared to expect a wide range of student skills and preparations. The variety will require that you adapt your materials and the pace of your classes.
- Be consistent. If you say one unexcused absence is allowed, be sure that is all you allow. Classroom decorum disintegrates quickly when students perceive the instructor vacillating on policies and procedures.

- Be sure to communicate your expectations to the students; also be sure to find out what the students' expectations are. If you require students to keep a journal in the course, this would be a fine place to ask them to communicate their expectations.
- Be aware that conducting class discussion is tough on a new instructor. Know your textbook and your material well; being comfortable in the classroom depends on it. Build slowly, including more discussion as instructor and class members become more comfortable with one another.

As a Last Point...

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Remember that someone has been there before you. Colleagues are usually more than happy to offer suggestions and sample materials. Indeed, a faculty member is usually pleased to be **Afterword** by someone who knows the craft.

As I cast an eye over my first ever published piece, one obvious difference strikes me immediately: the title "freshman composition" no longer exists. The course is now "Composition" and freshmen are "first year students." Has anything else changed since 1989? My thinking? My teaching philosophy? My process? You bet. Has anything stayed the same? Sure enough.

I still believe in:

- teaching students modes of discourse that will produce effective writing both in college and the professional work world.

- providing structure for discovering one's writing strengths and weaknesses.
- stating clear objectives and requirements.
- preparing to deal with a wide range of student skills and preparations.
- being consistent about policies such as attendance and due dates.
- writing, writing and writing some more.
- first year students. They are fun to assist as they learn about themselves through their writing.

What has changed besides the course title? I now teach on the computer, for one. What a difference it makes to do revisions on the spot. What a difference it makes to have the library's on-line catalog in front of every student as they receive bibliographic instruction!

Other changes include:

- my greater tolerance for ambiguity. If an issue arises that wasn't planned, I feel more confident that something in my repertoire will meet the challenge.
- more comfort with deviating from the pre-set. Classes vary greatly in attitude and skill level. Not everything you plan will work with every group. I'm now better at adapting the plan to the audience.

- a better sense for the amount of material students can handle and still produce fine written products.
- no more portfolios. They created too much concentrated work for me and too much grade anxiety for the students.
- a different grading system, one that uses words instead of letter grades. An employer is not going to say, "Gee, this is a B+ memo." You'll probably hear that it's superior, adequate or in need of more revision. I use the same evaluation process--one that is more closely aligned with the work world. Each evaluative category is worth a certain number of points, so the student can keep track of her progress throughout the semester and adjust her performance level as she so desires. I also allow the option to do two re-writes for the possibility of a higher grade--no guarantees for such unless the revision is substantial.

As a last point:

Colleagues still offer support, suggestions and sample materials. I'm pleased to say that I can now offer back to them support, ideas and materials of my own.