

WAC in FYW: Building Bridges and Teachers as Architects

Before building a structurally-sound bridge to connect two places, an intricate blueprint must be developed. Such a detailed plan calls for a knowledgeable architect—one who can see across the divide and envision the final product that will link one piece of land to another. When it comes to academic writing, first-year writing students often encounter a gap between the expectations of high school and college; this divide is confusing, overwhelming, and frustrating. As a first-year writing instructor, I often hear students say that they feel like they have to “write differently for every class.” I can’t say that I blame them—especially when I see assignment sheets from across the curriculum that range from two-paragraph, generic topics to three-page, bullet-pointed guidelines that practically dictate the paper’s template. Further, many assignment sheets from non-English disciplines emphasize content mastery and call for evidence of comprehension. Proficiency in writing, in those assignments, is implicitly assumed.

What students need to help them navigate such an overwhelming continuum is an architect with a blueprint—someone who will show them how to write for every course across the curriculum, and who will help them build bridges. That architect is the first-year writing instructor, and the blueprint he or she designs is rooted in the first-year writing curriculum. Students may be apprehensive when they are told that first-year writing will prepare them for academic writing across *all* disciplines, and instructors may be skeptical about how well these lessons can be incorporated into an already-dense curriculum. However, I argue that the first-year writing classroom is the ideal site for introducing writing across the curriculum.

It might sound like I am arguing that first-year writing instructors should go out of their way to adjust their curricula and sacrifice teaching what we know in order to teach what the

university wants *students* to know. Actually, all we must do is adjust our vision; we must look for the explicit connections that we can help our students make between first-year writing and their other courses. Embracing our roles as architects will help make our courses—and college-level writing—more meaningful.

I. College from the students' eyes

First-year writing presents many pedagogical challenges for instructors. We're constantly fighting to prove the legitimacy of the course to students who took Honors courses and got all A's in high school, believe they already know how to write, or just don't want to try because the course is not (as they see it) directly related to their majors. Despite their objections, the fact remains that first-year writing serves a universal purpose—preparing students for academic writing in any discipline.

In discussing the purpose of first-year writing, Keith Hjortshoj writes that “freshmen writing courses usually serve the purposes of general education: to help you write, read, and think more effectively in all of your other courses” (28). Further, Michael Pemberton discusses an approach that he believes governs the objectives and curriculum development of first-year writing courses; he calls this the “pedagogy of the generic” (444). Though first-year writing is considered a core course and usually is designated by introductory-level course numbers, phrases like “general education” and “pedagogy of the generic” diminish its importance and complexity. These identifications mimic the core course mindset that many students maintain about our courses and make the contents seem simple, basic, and easy to teach.

I would like to counter Hjortshoj and Pemberton by saying that first-year writing is a complex, demanding course to teach. Yes, we instruct students in the foundations of writing—

but we do so in a way that situates first-year writing as *central* to general education. What we teach is governed by the *pedagogy of the universal*. Students often do not see on their own how the writing skills they learn and practice in first-year writing become implicit expectations in other courses across the curriculum. Such assumed requirements actually elevate the importance of first-year writing, because as I heard one first-year writing instructor tell her class, “this is the last time that someone will actually *teach* you about writing.” With more universities incorporating WAC programs and the ever-increasing importance of writing proficiency, I argue that students *must* leave first-year writing courses with the practical knowledge of how to independently transfer these skills—and instructors can help them build these bridges.

II. Solutions and bridge-building

A. The FYW classroom as the blueprint

To embrace the mindset of architect, instructors must begin by changing their perspectives on the importance and function of the first-year writing classroom in order to change students’ perspectives. Treating the classroom as an ideal location to prepare students for writing across the curriculum lays the groundwork for them to make connections between what they learn in first-year writing and the writing they will do throughout college. After all, Writing Across the Curriculum assumes that students have practiced—and are somewhat proficient with—academic writing. Logically, that thorough preparation takes place in the first-year writing classroom.

To initiate the shift in attitude and perspective, instructors must examine their blueprints: the curriculum of first-year writing. I believe that we should view first-year writing classrooms as

sites of cross-curricular acknowledgment, bringing the language of non-English disciplines into our class discussions. By preparing students to expect that they will write case studies in the social sciences, formally-organized reports in business, and analytical responses in the humanities, the first-year writing classroom recognizes writing as a *universal discourse community* and demonstrates to students that they will have to write in every college course.

The good news for instructors is that the standard first-year writing curriculum already incorporates universally-useful elements of and lessons about writing. To enhance the course's objectives and make them more immediately meaningful and applicable, instructors must simply make a conscious effort to connect the elements of academic writing to courses across the curriculum. Here are a few examples, as well as suggestions for enhancing the lessons by acknowledging other disciplines:

1. Invention and idea development

"Some courses will present you with very specific directions for the questions or readings you will respond to. Others will give you basic guidelines, but will leave you responsible for designing your own research question. You must be prepared to report on the specifics of wood distillation for your chemistry courses, as well as arguing which book out of the Old Testament tells the best story for your religion courses."

2. Thesis statement/central argument

"Papers in any course must contain an identifiable central focus that lets your readers know what you are thinking. Political science papers need a specific argument that summarizes your position or belief, and literature papers must contain your interpretation of a character, theme, etc."

3. Organization

“Some documents—like lab reports or business analyses—follow a specific template that contains specially-designated sections. In freeform essays (both formal and informal), you must find a way to make your ideas flow and develop to strengthen your point.”

4. Writing as a process

“Take what you gain out of the writing process required in this course—the improvements between a first and final draft, a trip to the Writing Center, or even starting with brainstorming or an outline—and make that a part of writing for any class. It will make a difference on your unit plans for your Education class and your Philosophy reading summaries, just like it makes a difference in our first-year writing course.”

5. Academic research

“When you are looking up interpretations of Emily Dickinson’s poetry or searching for creative ways to teach elementary-school students their multiplication tables, you must be adept at searching for credible information.”

6. Citation

“Though there are different citation styles for each discipline, you must know how and why to cite your sources. In empirical reports, listing sources is more important than discussing them. However, in philosophy or literature, you must elaborate on the quotes you include to show how they contribute to your argument.” (Linton, Madigan, and Johnson 173)

As you can see, simple conversation pieces like these fit themselves easily into the lessons that first-year writing instructors already teach. Mentioning the writing that students will do in other

courses shows our hyper-awareness of our responsibilities to the university—and introduces students to the idea and expectations of writing across the curriculum.

B. The FYW teacher as the architect

You may have some objections to my assertion, thinking that you already have quite enough to discuss in first-year writing. Or you may not want to take on this responsibility because it means sacrificing what you want to teach. I would respond by saying that shifting our approaches and perspectives means creating an opportunity to elevate the value of first-year writing above “general education” and a governing “pedagogy of the generic.” Expanding our vision of writing within the first-year writing classroom means preparing our students more fully for academic success; all we must do is embrace our role as architects and make connections explicit.

To gather the framework for these bridges, we should familiarize ourselves with the core components of effective writing, as set forth by both the first-year writing program *and* the university. Sharing these learning outcomes and assessment criteria with students will show them how writing is continuously and universally valued and assessed beyond first-year writing classrooms. Discussing these objectives adds credibility to our notion that writing is a crucial part of every course, and that professors will consistently expect students to write in accordance with these objectives.

One of the enriching benefits of a Writing Across the Curriculum program is that it encourages cross-disciplinary conversation amongst faculty members. By re-creating first-year writing classrooms into sites where “meetings of the minds” occur, we invite our students to

have these same discussions. Here are some curriculum strategies:

1. Select a textbook that contains a chapter or section on WAC, like Lisa Ede's *The Academic Writer* or Andrea Lunsford's *The St. Martin's Handbook* to enhance your own lessons.
2. Talk as a group about what constitutes "good writing" on the first day of class. Not only will this help you start with where your students are, it will create an ideal segue point to show how the course will be relevant for all other courses.
3. Ask your students what other courses they are taking, as well as what types of writing assignments the courses require. Holding these discussions early in the semester will give you the opportunity to incorporate those courses and assignments into lessons throughout the rest of the semester. At the end of the semester, ask students to reflect on how the skills they learned during first-year writing were useful in other courses in an effort to help them put it all together.
4. Talk about the language (and the many verbs) of assignment sheets to help students navigate general, short, specific, picky, open-ended, and everything in between.
5. Incorporate a variety of different writing assignments into the course to help students practice different styles of writing: freewriting, Discussion Board responses, academic research, summary and response, multimedia presentations, proposals, and analytical essays, just to name a few.

Finally, make previously-mastered skills implicit expectations for following assignments. Doing so will help students accumulate and build upon the skills and lessons each unit contains. If unit one focused on writing thesis statements, include it in the list of evaluation criteria in papers two through four. Discuss the writing expectations of professors across the university,

and show how students are learning to fulfill and incorporate those expectations within the first-year writing classroom. Having an open conversation *across* the curriculum *within* the first-year writing classroom will help students learn to *decipher* what their courses require of them and how to *transfer* the skills they are acquiring. Acting as architects will build bridges between first-year writing and the wider college curriculum.

III. Reassurance and reinforcement

This may sound like a lot of pressure and responsibility; and truthfully, the expectation that we will adequately prepare students for academic writing *is* a little overwhelming. Plus, persuading students to find first-year writing relevant is relentless and sometimes defeating. On top of that, there's the frustration of hearing professors say that "my students are *terrible* writers. Shouldn't they have learned how to write paragraphs and thesis statements in first-year writing?" In an ideal world, a Writing Across the Curriculum program means that, as Louise Smith asserts, "writing is everybody's business." If so, professors across all disciplines would reinforce and make time for writing, and professors who complain that students cannot write would work to improve it within their classrooms instead of placing blame on the first-year writing program.

Overall, my point is that with just a few simple adjustments to our classroom conversations, we can enhance the value of first-year writing without sacrificing our own objectives and the enjoyment of teaching. We don't have to discuss and incorporate the details of every discipline and assignment, nor should we feel the weight of the entire university on our shoulders. What we *can* do invokes the following qualities:

**openmindedness* – ask for information about other courses and assignments and think about how students might write them

**creativity* – design assignments that allow students to explore a topic based on their areas of interest. Since most students will deem the writing they do within their majors most important, have them research the ways they may use writing in the careers they are pursuing (Hilgers et al 272). Or, find a story about a major world/country/state/city event, and have students think about what different academic audiences would want to know about it

**flexibility* – be inquisitive and learn from what students are studying in other classes. This can enhance discussions about writing in the first-year writing classroom.

**explicit persuasion* – sometimes we just have to be willing to repeat ourselves; as I learned in an education class, “three times for emphasis.” If we make it our business to prove the value of first-year writing to students, we set forth the expectation that they should make it their business to understand that.

The structure, atmosphere, and curriculum of first-year writing set the stage for beginning the conversations about writing across the curriculum. If we embrace our roles as architects and consciously construct writing bridges between our classrooms and those outside, we will elevate the importance of first-year writing. Most importantly, cross-curricular acknowledgment will reinforce writing as a crucial skill to master, and a fully-developed foundation will ensure that students will continue to develop their writing skills across and through the college curriculum.

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