Teaching with Writing

Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip
Motivating student writing in the disciplines

Rationale: Like all writers, students are motivated to write when they know not just what they are writing but why they are writing. Research shows that student writers are most successful when they are "intrinsically motivated" – that is, when they "find the writing assignment significant and therefore worthy of assessment."

Tip #1: Help students see writing in terms of their own professional and educational goals

- Students often think of writing assignments simply as tests of their understanding of materials, of their ability to write properly, and so on. Since students are rarely motivated by the idea of being tested, writing assignments are better motivators when they explain to students why the writing is important *from the student's own perspective*.

    o For example, instead of rationalizing a lab report or case study assignment as "testing students' understanding of…", consider explicit explanations of WHY the writing assignment is important in terms of what the students will actually be doing: "Lab reports are crucial to the field because... Mastering the ability to write lab reports prepares you to work in this field by…"

    o More on designing effective writing prompts can be found here.

- Students similarly benefit from seeing that other professionals writing in their discipline also need motivation. When studying a representative text (article abstract, book chapter, textbook section, etc.), model motivation by spending five minutes discussing why the text exists. Ask students to discuss the new contribution the author is trying to make to the discipline, or, in other words, why the text "needed" to be written.

- Students are also motivated by locating their own activity within the larger field of disciplinary knowledge. Include a blurb on your syllabus that explains the role of writing in your discipline.

Tip #2: Help students focus on why their writing matters

- Create frequent opportunities for students to reflect on their own thinking and their own work. For example, provide short templates for students to fill out before, during, and after they write. These templates can help students keep their focus on why the writing exists as well as what the writing is about. For example:

    o A research assignment might require a template that says "Researcher one says ____. Researcher Two says ____. This shows ____ about the state of knowledge on this topic. We need my paper because ____."

- A lab report might require a template that says "By examining ____, I show the consequences of ____, which is important because ____."
- A thesis-driven essay might require a template that says "Before my essay, people thought ____. After my essay, people will think ____. Changing this view is important because ____."

- Choice and ownership are also linked to student motivation; whenever possible, allow students to choose among topics and tasks or to create their own. Doing so can motivate students to think of and characterize themselves as experts on some area of the discipline rather than as simply responding to someone else's expertise.

Learn more:

- Gardner, Traci. "Designing Writing Assignments."
- Kizza, Immaculate. "Developing Intrinsic Motivation for Students' Writing."
- Sweetland Center for Writing. "Motivating Students to Read and Write in All Disciplines."
- Sweetland Center for Writing. "Metacognition – Cultivating Reflection to Help Students Become Self-Directed Learners"
- Troia, Gary A., et al. "Motivation Research in Writing: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations."
- University of Minnesota. "Teaching with Writing: Activities and Assignments."

Further support: Visit us online at http://writing.umn.edu/tww. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, click here.

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.