



Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

The Roles of Writing in a Promising Syllabus

In [What the Best College Teachers Do](#) (Harvard 2004), Ken Bain describes the “[promising syllabus](#)” as a key text among excellent faculty across the disciplines. Such a syllabus lays out the opportunities a course offers to students, explains how students will engage in specific ways to learn new material, and provides clear criteria for how students and the instructor will know that learning is taking place. Moving beyond the nuts and bolts of a class, the promising syllabus can become “a powerful influence on setting high standards and encouraging students to learn them” (75). Bain’s concept may be of use as you characterize the kinds of writing students will be doing in your courses, so this month’s tip provides a few suggestions for describing writing-oriented opportunities, expectations, and criteria in your syllabus.

Connect Writing to Discipline-Specific Thinking

[Research in learning sciences](#) has shown that expertise among faculty and professionals often leads to tacit knowledge. This tacit understanding can create assumptions that undergraduates better understand the core intellectual habits, moves, knowledge structures, and expectations in a discipline than they do. By making explicit how your discipline thinks, specifically how your discipline uses writing as tool to promote and demonstrate learning, you can provide students with a vital context for the work they do in your course. Consider how this statement from a Biological Sciences syllabus provides context for writing in the course and the field:

Writing is more important in the biological sciences than many people might expect. Scientists write to convey the methods and results of their research to their colleagues and to record their day-to-day work in the laboratory or in the field. They also write grant proposals to win funding for their research, and reviews of each other's work. Writing in biology is an integral part of scientific discovery and analysis, and thus must be clear, concise, and logical. Even when they write only for themselves, biologists must convey information accurately and precisely—often in limited space. In this course, students will document their work in lab notebooks and reports, and they will review each other's work as scientific colleagues.

For additional samples of how writing can be framed in discipline-specific ways, please visit the [Teaching with Writing website](#).

Align Writing Tasks and Assignments to Course Goals and Objectives

As L. Dee Fink (2003) has persuasively shown, course goals and learning outcomes can be tremendously valuable for helping students see the big picture of your course and for producing [significant learning experiences](#). Because writing is an excellent way to meet such goals, you might provide language that aligns your formal and informal writing assignments to your vision for the course. As you design your syllabus, consider questions such as the following: Why bother assigning writing? What kinds of intellectual, physical, emotional, or social abilities will writing tasks and assignments help students develop? How does writing help students to process information? What role do reading, lecture, and/or field notes play in developing understanding?

The following excerpt from a first-year writing course models this kind of language:

In addition to formal assignments, you will perform a variety of other writing tasks, such as reading responses, in-class journal prompts, and online postings. As with discussion, these shorter writing tasks are designed to help you investigate and clarify ideas in the readings and to begin to discover your own positions and the reasons that justify them.

For assistance with crafting statements that align writing tasks and assignments with learning goals and objectives, consider signing up for a [teaching consultation](#).

Provide Resources

As Bain argues, “a promising syllabus offers suggestions for how students can succeed in the course, if they are willing to put in the effort” (75). These suggestions can take many forms – inviting students to meet during office hours and by appointment to discuss assignments and feedback, using in-class time to support specific writing tasks, and directing students toward specific online and campus resources. On the Center for Writing’s [Student Writing Support \(SWS\) website](#), you will find materials to help you introduce SWS to your students. You can include the following language on your syllabus:

Student Writing Support (SWS) offers free writing instruction for all University of Minnesota students—graduate and undergraduate—at all stages of the writing process. In face-to-face and online collaborative consultations, SWS consultants from across the disciplines help students develop productive writing habits and revision strategies.

Consulting is available by appointment online and in Nicholson Hall, and on a walk-in basis in Appleby Hall. For more information, go to writing.umn.edu/sws or call 612.625.1893.

In addition, SWS offers a number of [web-based resources](#) on topics such as avoiding plagiarism, documenting sources, and planning and completing a writing project.

Further support:

See the [Teaching with Writing pages](#) on the Center for Writing website for teaching resources, including sample assignments and syllabi. As many of you know, our WAC program also hosts the popular [Teaching with Writing event series](#). Each semester, this series offers free workshops and discussions. Visit us [online](#). To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).