



## Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

### Using Meta-Teaching Strategies to Support Student Writing

Last month's [TWW tip](#) focused on ways to highlight the discipline-specific roles and relevance of writing in your course syllabus. This month's tip extends this practice of making explicit the intellectual moves and conventions in your field through the use of meta-teaching strategies.

### What is Meta-Teaching?

Meta-teaching is “the act of stepping back and explicitly naming the intellectual operation that is being performed” ([Walk 4](#)). Such teaching moments can help students see and learn from models of effective writing practice in action – to see a writer’s strategy for addressing target readers, organizing ideas, etc. along with her content.

### Meta-teaching Strategies

One of the key values of meta-teaching is that it can occur at virtually any instructional moment and is adaptable to any discipline. Here are a few suggestions:

#### *Use Assigned Readings as Writing Samples*

Opportunities to teach good writing can occur alongside discussion of course content. When unpacking readings, graphs, charts, figures, or tables, take a few minutes to illustrate the effective writing strategies they exhibit.

**Example:** In an American History class, the instructor discusses a text’s content (e.g. the impact of 17th-century tobacco farms on population displacement) and makes explicit reference to the scholarly moves the author makes in the article, either didactically (“Notice here how Richter has asked a question that prompts his thesis statement”) or inductively (“Take a minute to converse with your neighbor about who the intended audience is in this article. How do you know? What assumptions does the writer make about his audience?”). Here the meta-discussion provides an infrared perspective on effective scholarly writing that might otherwise remain dark for students.

#### *Think Aloud & Model*

[Research in learning theory](#) confirms the value of thinking aloud while modeling problem-solving and meaning-making activities with students. As students engage in drafting an abstract for an article, determining an appropriate graphic format, or creating a concept map, our participating alongside them can make effective strategies and approaches more visible and immediate.

**Example:** In preparation for a literature review assignment in her capstone course, a Nursing professor spends time in class drafting summaries of two or three articles students have read. She writes with her students, describing her process of identifying meaningful connections within and between the texts, and indicating how she distinguishes essential points from non-essential ones. This in-class exercise exposes students to effective writing strategies in action, and it models what Susan Ambrose describes as the “richly connected” and “meaningful knowledge organization” that often distinguishes expert thinking from novice thinking (45).

### *Share Your Own Scholarly Writing Process*

As [John Bean](#) has noted, many undergraduate writers follow a linear “think-then-write” model of composition that belies a messier, more complex and recursive process practiced by expert writers (33). Talking candidly about your own experiences and development as a writer can help students shift their mindsets about fixed and limiting modes of composition and more authentically engage them with writing in the discipline. As an academic researcher and writer, what compositional processes work for you? Do you draft a discussion section before the introduction? Does your opening paragraph go through a half dozen rewrites before you complete a first draft? Do you use post-its, index cards, or mind maps? Making real the messy yet productive work of writing does more than expose students to new strategies; it can improve student mindsets about your course, assignments, and workload expectations, and it can remind you to schedule time in your course to support specific writing practices.

**Example:** Dr. Walid Sodok, Assistant Professor in the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics, helps students understand the structure and rationale of scientific papers through the use of analogies. He explains that after all the experiments are done, the materials and methods sections serve as a “recipe.” For the analytical sections of the paper, Dr. Sodok encourages students “to select the best figures/tables that highlight the investigation, much like a “storyboard” sequences the keys shots for a movie. Thinking of figures and tables as a storyboard enables students to better “write the legends and the text that links all these together.” Finally, Dr. Sodok recommends that students write their papers out of sequence. He explains that “the discussion and the introduction should come last because they are basically mirror images of each other. I know this sounds weird (and it is), but in my field this is the most effective strategy for writing a scientific paper. There are always surprises in the results (otherwise your hypotheses are not that good or sophisticated). As a result, you can't really properly introduce your experiments before seeing how they finally played out.” Along with providing your own informed writing perspective, as Dr. Sodok does, consider sharing [The Chronicle of Higher Education's “Scholars Talk Writing”](#) series. Students might be surprised and perhaps comforted to read how successful scholars struggle to produce clear writing and how much they value it in their peers' work.

### *Require Students to Be Meta*

The focus of meta-teaching is on what you, the instructor, can do to make effective writing and critical thinking practices more visible to students. However, meta-teaching also models an important precedent for students. As [earlier TWW tips](#) have shared, metacognitive-oriented writing tasks, such as revision memos and learning logs, can be very effective modes for knowledge retention and transfer of learning. Brief metacognitive tasks can also serve as effective starting points for writing.

**Example:** Ask students to explain in their own words what they think an assignment's main goal is and the specific strategies that will work most effectively for them. You, or a student peer, can then provide quick feedback that might include alternative strategies. With just a little prompting, you can set students up for more successful drafts.

### **Sources:**

Ambrose, Susan, et al. *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart*

*Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Sodok, Walid. Email Correspondence. 2 September 2016.

Toor, Rachel. "Scholars Talk Writing." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Web.

Walk, Kerry. *Teaching with Writing: A Guide for Faculty and Graduate Students*. The Trustees of Princeton University, 2007. Web.

**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](#).