

Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip Increasing student motivation with writing assignments



Instructors and students alike recognize that getting an early start on an assignment and spending time on task can lead to both smoother writing processes and stronger written products. Nonetheless, students often seem to wait too long to get started, fail to effectively manage their time when assigned with an unfamiliar writing task, or appear to put forth minimal effort. This Tip addresses some key factors that influence student motivation and discuss instructional strategies to both promote student self-efficacy and reduce the consequences of procrastination due to demotivation.

Some critical considerations for motivation

Motivation is a challenging concept for some instructors, both because we often assume motivation is a matter of self-discipline and because the extrinsic demands of receiving a score and completing a course might seem sufficient external pressure to motivate students to produce their best work. As experts in our fields, we may always been motivated by the questions, concepts, and practices associated with doing our work with little need for encouragement. Nevertheless, because students are balancing multiple priorities (and multiple classes and assignments), it is worth considering key factors related to motivation. [Wigfield and Eccles \(2002\)](#) provides a wide-ranging overview of psychological theories of motivation that emphasize two key concepts: value and expectancy.

Perception of value: In discussing the values associated with motivation, they identify attainment value (the satisfaction of completing meaningful work), intrinsic value (the appreciation of doing the task, rather than simply completing it) and instrumental value (the value derived from the ability to gain extrinsic rewards).

Expectancies: Expectancies are the set of beliefs about a given task, including the perception of challenge or difficulty, the perception of competence or self-efficacy, and the perceived likelihood of a desirable outcome.

Together, these considerations explain students' choice of tasks and their likelihood of persistence.

Strategies for addressing perception of value

- Design your courses and assignments to build upon prior knowledge: Making meaningful connections to students' prior experience and prior knowledge can increase the sense of attainment associated with new writing tasks. This strategy may involve explicitly describing the relevance of prior course work ("As you remember from your Principles course...") or asking students to make connections to their own relevant prior knowledge.
- Make explicit connections between students' goals and aspirations and the writing task: Show students that they will be able to use skills developed in this writing tasks in the context of future assignments. For example, an annotated bibliography assignment involves simple skills of summary, but the ability to summarize individual selections leads to more cognitively complex

tasks (synthesizing information) and more challenging writing assignments (literature reviews and research papers).

- Provide students with skills and information at the time of need: For large projects, students benefit from having a clear sense of the finished product. However, it can be valuable to offer students glimpses of documents in process and to address particular skills at the time of need. For instance, students might be asked to bring drafts of their completed charts and tables for an initial workshop and discussion before completing a results section of a lab report or research paper.

Strategies for addressing expectancies

- Describe how prior writing tasks compare with new tasks: Draw explicit connections to the ways a new writing task relates to a prior task, and to the important differences. For example, if a previous class activity included producing an annotated bibliography, you might note that while a literature review requires a summary of existing scholarship, it also requires that students make a larger claim about the state of research.
- Provide clear success criteria: Students often ask for sample assignments or previous student work for models. Rather than providing a single example, describe the criteria that you will use to assess the students' work and provide multiple examples of specific textual features that show what successful writing looks like.

Learn more

- F. Pajares, [Self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and achievement in writing](#).
- R. Bruning, M. Dempsey, D. F. Kauffman, C. McKim, and S. Zumbunn. [Examining dimensions of self-efficacy in writing](#).

Upcoming Teaching with Writing Events: Events are filling quickly!

[Using Conferences to Support Student Writing](#) (Workshop) Wednesday, April 12, 1–3 pm

[Does plagiarism detection software benefit or diminish student writing?](#) (Engaging Controversies) Friday, April 7, 2017, 9:00–10:15 am

[Quick strategies for helping students improve prose style](#) (Workshop) Wednesday, May 3, 2017, 1–3 pm

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.