

WHY LEARNING TO WRITE WELL IN COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT

VARIATIONS FROM DISCIPLINE TO DISCIPLINE

Disciplines are discourse communities with their own methods of developing and communicating knowledge. However, students take classes in several disciplines at the same time and have difficulty mastering the different forms of inquiry and the different stylistic conventions that apply. It takes a long time to develop writing proficiency in one discipline—let alone several.

LACK OF UNIFORM CRITERIA AND STANDARDS

Criteria, standards, and definitions of good writing differ from course to course, even within the same department. Students develop the idea these are arbitrary and a matter of instructors' personal preferences. This prompts them to search out "what you're looking for" or "what you want" in assignments.

UNCLEAR OR UNSTATED EXPECTATIONS

In some courses, students have little or no information about what constitutes appropriate writing, no clear sense of the ideal they are supposed to be pursuing. Even when criteria are presented, students may not understand or be able to apply them. The meaning of "clarity," for example, can be relative to the context, and "correctness" can refer to hundreds of unstated conventions related to grammar, usage, and style.

UNDEVELOPED WRITING PROCESSES

Many courses do not try to develop students' writing; they simply require it. Students are left to use whatever strategies and competencies they have. Students may not improve their writing abilities simply by writing a lot. Indeed, without opportunities to make revisions based on feedback and self-assessment, students may be reinforcing poor writing habits and misconceptions.

INCOMPLETE WRITING INSTRUCTION

Formal writing is sometimes reduced to a list of rules governing the use of language (grammar, spelling, punctuation) rather than treated as purposeful communication of ideas. When the mechanical aspects of language are overvalued, important conceptual abilities related to purpose, audience, and genre may be neglected. Students never learn how to achieve different purposes, use the language of the discipline, analyze and negotiate the needs of diverse audiences, etc.

PARTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBJECT

Students often write about subjects that are unfamiliar to them. Typical of novices in any subject area, they have incomplete and naïve understandings. Thus, it is very common that their writing lacks coherence and structure—reflecting their fragmented

understanding of the topic, not necessarily their incompetence as writers. For some students, surface errors become more frequent when they are struggling to understand complex ideas.

LACK OF EXPERIENCE WITH REAL GENRES

Many assignments are academic exercises: "tests" in which students demonstrate their knowledge to the teacher, who already possesses the knowledge being demonstrated. For this reason, term paper and essay assignments can be rhetorically difficult. In key respects they do not resemble the kinds of writing many students will experience after they graduate—e.g. memos, letters, grant proposals, articles, strategic plans, reviews, lesson plans, press releases, web pages, etc.

LACK OF EXAMPLES AND MODELS

Students often write without reading examples of the types of work they must produce. Without access to a range of examples or models students may find it impossible to judge the adequacy of their own work. When samples are provided, students are sometimes unsure how to analyze or use them; they may simply imitate them.

LACK OF CUMULATIVE LEARNING

As students go from class to class, they experience writing as a hodgepodge of activities, assignments, advice, etc. It is unlikely that these seemingly unrelated, discrete experiences promote cumulative learning and develop writing expertise that transfers to new contexts.

LACK OF SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PEER REVIEW

Students seldom analyze their own writing or reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, and development as writers. Moreover, when they practice peer review, they find it challenging to offer anything more than generic comments, praise, or copy-editing advice. An inability to assess their own or others' writing suggests they have not internalized criteria for evaluating effectiveness.

LACK OF MOTIVATION

Students often perceive academic writing as a chore rather than as a meaningful learning experience. While this perception may be widespread, it is not inevitable. Students are more likely to be invested in their work when they have some control over the topic or approach and when the work has an authentic purpose in addition to earning a grade.