

## **PART 1: Using *The College Writer* to Teach College Composition**

### **WHERE TO START? PLANNING YOUR COURSE**

#### **Establishing Course Goals**

Chances are that you have only limited control over this aspect of course planning. Most English and writing departments have clearly stated goals for their composition programs, and they have hired you to help them meet those goals. Read the course description in the college catalogue and any other printed materials that relate to the writing program. Talk to your department chair or writing director about his or her goals for the course. Is the emphasis on learning the rhetorical strategies of writing (such as comparison, description, and persuasion)? Or does your department place equal value on the ability to read and think critically? How many papers should you assign, with a total of how many pages of polished writing? How does research-based writing fit in the mix? How many students will be in each class? Is this the only composition course required by your school? How is your course integrated with other writing classes throughout the department and the college?

After speaking with the program director, you will have a better sense of which chapters of *The College Writer* to emphasize in your planning. For example, if your college has another required writing class that focuses on research, you may choose to de-emphasize that section and focus on the writing process itself. If your college places a high value on student writing, you may choose to teach fewer professional essays and more student models, supplementing those in the text with essays written by your own students.

If you can, you should also contact other teachers in your department who teach the same course. Ask to see their syllabi, and find out what kinds of challenges they have faced in their classrooms. How many papers do they assign? Do they comment on individual drafts? How do they conduct conferences? If there are any other new instructors, you might get together to brainstorm some ideas for planning your courses. Similarly, meet with the writing center director to learn about coordinating your course with the center's services.

No doubt you have your own goals for a writing course, and you should try to articulate these as clearly as you can, for yourself and for your students. As long as your goals do not directly conflict with those of the department, you should of course incorporate them into your planning. For example, if your department does not emphasize critical reading and viewing, but you consider them to be an important aspect of thinking and writing well (as we do), you should certainly include the first chapter of the textbook, and you should make sure that your students are asking critical questions of the material they encounter in the course. Note, for example, the critical-thinking activities at the end of each chapter in the text, and at the end of each essay in the Reader section (color-coded red). In addition, *The College Writer* includes useful guidelines, models, and checklists in each chapter. Be aware of what these offer and use them. They can help you to save some preparation time—there's no need to reinvent the wheel.

#### **Establishing Course Requirements**

Once you know what your goals are, you need to determine what you and your students should do to reach those goals. Some of your course requirements, such as the number and types of papers to assign, may be dictated to you by the department. Find out what these requirements are if you haven't done so already. The other requirements are up to you, but you may want to develop these requirements based on the following questions:

- How many papers should students write?
- What types of papers should they write (e.g., personal, analytical, argumentative, research-based)?
- How many revisions will you require (or allow) from students?
- How long will their papers be?
- What other kinds of writing (such as journals or freewriting) will your students be asked to do?
- What are your formatting guidelines for formal writing (e.g., MLA or APA)?
- What are your expectations for student participation?
- Will your students be required to share their work with their classmates?
- Will you be mandating student-teacher conferences?
- What are your expectations for other course policies regarding attendance, preparation and participation, make-up work, cell phones, laptops, e-readers, tablets, food and drink, etc.?
- What are your institution's plagiarism or academic honesty definitions and policies? How will you incorporate this material into your syllabus? If your institution allows each instructor to determine this standard individually, be sure that you present your definition and policy clearly and completely.

The important (and nearly impossible) challenge is to strike a balance between maintaining high expectations of your students and not overburdening yourself and them to the point of becoming burned out.

## Developing a Syllabus

Your syllabus is usually your first introduction to your students, and as such, the tone of your syllabus is almost as important as the information it contains. Some instructors have a somewhat playful syllabus, with questions, cartoons, quotations from writers, and so on. Others contain just the facts, the information students need to succeed in the course. Your approach will depend on your personal style, but remember that your syllabus is a contract between you and your class. Your students should be able to find all the information they need: contact details, required texts, coursework expectations, method for determining grades, and an outline of what the students will be doing (more or less) in each class.

Beginning on the next page is a detailed and thorough syllabus to accompany *The College Writer*. This syllabus assumes a fourteen-week semester. It contains all the information that you as an instructor are *required* to include on a syllabus and some information that is not required but might be helpful. Obviously, it would be impossible to cover all the material in the text in that short period, so certain chapters have been left out. You will probably make some different choices for your class. You will have to decide for yourself how quickly you wish to move through the text and which material you want to cover.

## Sample Syllabus

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**Term:** Fall 2013

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**Office Hours:** MWF 9:50–10:50 or by appointment

**Required Text (available in the bookstore):**

- VanderMey et al., *The College Writer*, Fifth Edition
- You are also required to have a folder with pockets for your final portfolio.

**Course Description:** Writing is much more than an important skill that is essential to your success in college and in the working world. People with the ability to sort through their ideas in writing and to express themselves through the written word are empowered. They are able to effect change in their personal lives and in their communities. Although strong writing ability may seem to come naturally to some people, every effective writer has to work hard to make what he or she writes seem effortless.

This course requires you to *think*. You will not be rewarded for doing what comes easily to you, no matter how well you do it. You will be rewarded for taking risks, for asking questions, and for seeing things in a new way. Most of our time will be spent writing and discussing. For each of the major papers assigned this semester, you will write multiple drafts, which will be workshopped in class with your classmates and me, as well as in office conferences. You will write six formal essays this semester (four to seven pages each), in addition to a number of shorter writing assignments. We will work on topic and thesis generation, organization, paragraph development, revision, and mechanics. We will also familiarize ourselves with research and the library.

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

— *Mark Twain*

“The wastepaper basket is the writer’s best friend.”

— *Isaac Bashevis Singer*

**Course Objectives:** *College Writing* is designed to strengthen your expository writing abilities by building on skills that you already have. The primary goal of the course is to enable you to become accomplished in writing critical academic essays. Another important goal is to recognize the important relationships between strong writing, reading, thinking, and viewing abilities. We will accomplish these goals through frequent written and verbal responses to student and professional writings. These readings will serve as models of expository writing as well as subjects for written response.

**Policies (if you choose to remain in this course beyond the add/drop period, you are agreeing to abide by these policies and course requirements):**

- *College Writing* is a discussion course. Your *active participation in every class is vital*. As a result, you should be present and on time for every class meeting. Moreover, you should be prepared to ask questions and offer thoughtful interpretations on the readings, as well as to offer constructive criticism to your classmates and to receive it from them and from me.
- Every time you are absent, you will miss important information, as well as the opportunity to contribute to discussions and writing workshops. You might also miss an in-class writing assignment, which cannot be made up. In the rare event that you must miss a class, you can make up for your absence by writing a *500-word essay* in response to the material we covered that day in class, regardless of your reason for missing class. This requirement ensures that you remain up to date with the coursework. The essay should be thoughtful and carefully constructed. It should contain ideas and opinions that you would have raised