

The 10 Most Common Approaches to Teaching Writing Skills at UTM

Approaches¹

1. Assignment-specific Writing Workshops
2. Detailed (formative) feedback on written work
3. Criterion-Referenced Assessment (teaching to a rubric so that assessment drives learning)
4. Generic Workshops
5. Nested Assignments (with associated in-class instruction)
6. Benchmarking sessions (with training on providing effective, consistent feedback)
7. Peer-feedback sessions (in lecture and tutorial)
8. Face-to-face conferences
9. Writing-intensive disciplinary tutorials
10. Embedded "Writing Modules"

1. Assignment-specific Writing Workshops

What are some positive aspects of this approach to writing?

What are some drawbacks?

¹ This handout was used as a discussion prompt for RGASC Writing TA Training sessions. Some of the approaches are not discussed here because they were discussed at length in separate sessions.

6 Tips on Running an Assignment-specific Writing Workshop

1. Discuss assignment (“if I were you, here’s what I would focus on”)
2. Discuss rationale for assignment (learning outcomes)
3. Provide overview of genre (typical structure, organization)
4. Suggest an approach (questions to ask, models to consider for paragraphs or sections)
5. Work with text (sample of student writing)
6. Provide options for follow-up instruction/support

Example: Critical Book Review

A Critical Book Review shows that you:

- understand main points of text
- can identify and analyze a thesis and argument
- can select criteria for evaluating the text
- can evaluate an argument
- can write in clear and focused manner
- can read “critically”

Typical Structure:

- **Introduction**
- **Summary**
- **Evaluation**, which is the primary focus of your paper, between 2/3 and 3/4 of total length
- **Evaluation discusses** and **evaluates** strengths and weaknesses of text as historical argument, includes “criteria” for evaluation, and refers to other sources (as required by assignment)
- **Conclusion**

Specific Structure:

- One paragraph (a thesis paragraph)
- Situate text (author, title, genre of writing)
- Summarize key arguments or methods (the text’s thesis, if possible)
- Present your methodology (the kinds of evidence you’ll be using; the theoretical approach)
- [if applicable, a counter-argument]
- Conclude with YOUR evaluation (your thesis about the thesis)

Editing or reverse engineering exercise:

Historians and social scientists have long explored the impact of everyday on the configurations of class and power in the global economy. What has become known as

commodity chain analysis is now commonplace in academic disciplines, but it remains largely untouched among authors writing for a mass market. Koepfel's recent book covers terrain already examined in greater depth in a number of academic volumes, but renders this material interesting and accessible to general readers. Therein lies its central merit.

This is an extremely wide-ranging book, and if there is a central theme in the volume it is the banana's unique susceptibility to disease, arising from its genetic uniformity and the difficulties in developing cultivars that resist fast-spreading pathogens. The Gros Michel cultivar that became the basis of the global banana trade in the late nineteenth century was especially vulnerable to Panama Disease, a virulent soil-borne fungus first described in 1903. Koepfel examines how the plant's susceptibilities account for many of the notorious machinations of the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita), which acquired huge tracts of land throughout Central America to keep in reserve as future sites of production. The extensive, even reckless use of highly toxic chemicals against other diseases, such as Black Sigatoka, firmly established the company's record for wholesale disregard of its workers. Lacking access to such chemicals and devastated by new pathogens, small farmers were virtually eliminated from the Central American banana sector by the late 1930s, further contributing to land consolidation among the major banana companies.

3. Criterion-Referenced

1. Show sample of student writing and get students to discuss & evaluate (globally)
2. Introduce and explain specific assessment criteria and / or rubric
3. Use assessment criteria to grade a piece of actual writing

What are the benefits of this approach?

4. Generic Workshops

Not generally effective for writing instruction, but . . .

- Can serve as gateway to other forms of support (triage?)
- Can help students identify their own strengths and weaknesses
- Can help with “transition” issues
- Provide a forum for discussion

Best practices:

- Focus on one learning outcome (just thesis statements OR paragraph structure OR a specific stage of writing process)
- Use plenty of examples
- Encourage students to bring their own drafts
- Use peer-feedback exercises
- Learn by doing, not by reading PowerPoint slides

Example:

Slide #1:

- A thesis answers a question (*how* or *why*, NOT just what, who, where, when)
 - Note: “what / who / where / when” questions generate endless description without analysis

- A thesis must be **arguable**
- A thesis should have three parts:
 - Subject
 - Claim about subject
 - Strategy for proving claim (including an implied pattern of argument)

Slide #2:

Taking into account everything we have just discussed about thesis statements, use your i>clicker to grade this thesis statement.

A = Excellent; B = Good; C = Adequate; D = Inadequate; E = Fail

Essay Question: Write an essay exploring the representation of European imperialism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

Thesis Statement: The narrator describes the setting of Africa as the negation of civilization thereby suggesting that he supports European imperialism.

Slide #3:

Essay Question: Write an essay exploring the representation of European imperialism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

Thesis Statement: The narrator describes the setting of Africa as the negation of civilization thereby suggesting that he supports European imperialism.

This is an "A" quality thesis statement. Why?

Claim: the narrator supports imperialism

Strategy: analyze setting

Patterns of Argument: example / illustration; definition; analysis; description

5. Nested Assignments

Positives:

- Allow for formative feedback
- Model writing as an iterative or recursive “process”
- Provide multiple opportunities for instruction, discussion, interaction with students
- Teach time management skills
- And, students like them!

Date	Topic	Readings*	Notes
Jan 7	Introduction to the Course and to Research	Chapters 1 and 2	
Jan 14	Planning your Research I <i>Research Topic Workshop</i>	Chapter 5 (beginning bottom of page 80)	
Jan 21	Planning your Research II <i>Library and Annotated Bibliography Workshop</i>	Chapter 6	Research topic due at the beginning of class (12 pm)
Jan 28	Ethics in Research	Chapter 3	Annotated bibliography due at the beginning of class (12 pm)
Feb 4	Sampling <i>Literature Review Workshop</i>	Chapter 7	
Feb 11	MIDTERM		
Feb 18	READING WEEK		
Feb 25	Field Research	Chapter 13	Literature review due at the beginning of class (12 pm)
Mar 4	Nonreactive Qualitative Methods <i>Research Proposal Workshop</i>	Chapter 14 (pages 294, 300-305, 307-312)	
Mar 11	Surveys	Chapter 8	
Mar 18	Experimental Research <i>Peer-to-Peer Critical Review of Proposal</i>	Chapter 9 (pages 184-190, 196-204)	
Mar 25	Nonreactive Quantitative Methods	Chapter 10	Research proposal due at the beginning of class (12 pm)
Apr 1	Research Day		

7. Peer Feedback

Best Practices:

1. Develop and use detailed rubrics, guidelines
2. Dedicate sufficient time (it will take longer than you expect)
3. Can be done in lecture, but tutorial or smaller space is preferable
4. Focus more on argument & organization, rather than on grammar and syntax

See Hedengren, Chapter 5; Bean, "Peer Review" excerpt from *Engaging Ideas*

8. Face-to-Face Conferences

Key Principles Include:

- Teach, don't fix
- Don't usurp student's authority as writer
- Anticipate standard questions:
 - Am I answering the question?
 - Is this structure ok?
 - Is the too much (or enough) information / evidence?
 - Can you check this for grammar?
 - Do you like my thesis?
- Read out loud, or get student to read out loud
- Try not to "tell" student what to do or what is wrong
- Use questions the student can always answer

Questions a Good Writing TA Asks

- What are you trying to say here? Can you explain this further?
- Is there anything that doesn't fit in your paper / outline? Do some parts fit better than others?
- What effect would it have on the reader if you chose a different order of ideas or sub-arguments?
- What evidence do you have for this? Can you provide more detail or explanation?
- How might someone disagree with this?
- Can you think of a different interpretation?
- Can you read this out loud and tell me if something doesn't sound quite right?

Writing Conference Strategies

- Sit side by side
- Get student writing on white-board, chalk-board, or paper
- Give mini-lessons rather than revising errors
- Get students to explain an idea or paragraph "in their own words" without looking at the paper
- Create maps, charts, outlines using students' words
- Have students annotate their own writing (under your direction)

- Praise must be constructive, specific, and connected to a part of the paper (ideally, an assessment criterion)
- Always provide a “take-away” by summarizing your accomplishments at the end of a session

9. Writing Intensive Tutorials

- In the past, many taught by RGASC faculty; now more will be taught by disciplinary TAs
- Often involve specific training or resource development by RGASC faculty

Best Practices:

- Feature both “write-to-learn” and “learn-to-write” exercises
- Include a mix of instruction and practice

Typical outline:

1. Create teachable moment (5 minutes)
 - Students don't know what they don't know, so you need to convince them that you can teach them something useful
 - Choose one of the following: a) pretest; b) personal story or anecdote about this kind of writing; c) short exercise (for example, where they edit / evaluate body paragraph with integrated quotation).
2. Intervention (15 minutes)
 - One “Learning Outcome” ONLY
 - Deliver information, using lots of concrete examples; students need to see it to believe it
 - “Assessment-driven learning” (connect to assignment)
 - Draw from course readings and relate to actual assignment wherever possible
 - 20 minutes of actual information, maximum
 - Examples or discussion or Q and A every 5 minutes
3. Exercise (25 minutes)
 - Need model / sample text to work with (best to have both “A” and “C” samples)
 - Alternative between group and individual exercises
 - Editing exercises are great, but need clear direction / guidelines
 - Reverse outlining exercises are also great, but can take a lot of time to generate
 - Formative assessment, if possible
4. Ticket out the door (5 minutes)

Sample Exercise:

Read, grade, and edit the following body paragraph. Pay particular attention to the topic sentence, quality of evidence, organization (strategies for integrating evidence, transitional expressions, parallelism, repetition, coordination / subordination, etc.), and grammar.

Thesis: Communication skills are more important than math skills because, irrespective of the quality of their math skills, business leaders need to be able to communicate them to a variety of stakeholders.

Body Paragraph: The workplace is competitive. It requires a number of skills. To get a job where one's math skills can be used, one needs to communicate, you need to speak and write effectively. For example, when being interviewed one needs to tell one's prospective boss that one is a better accountant than the other candidates'. And once you get the job, you need to communicate with the client threw the phone, email, and other forms of writing in order to convince them that you can solve their money problems. Conversely, the large amount of writing one does when interacting with clients means that you need to be able to be concise, always trying for precision, and the words should be easy to understand. Most business professionals also need to do presentations at meetings or conferences; and some even need to conduct workshops, seminars, etc. So, many of us need to be able to communicate orally and in writing in order to be successful in our globalized workplace. Even a good accountant with strong math skills cannot succeed if they do not have good communication skills.

10. Embedded Writing Modules

A "third session," alongside lecture and tutorial, integrated into the course and focusing on course- and assignment-specific writing skills.

Ticket out the Door

1. Which of these 10 strategies identified above is/are the most appropriate for your department? Spend 3 minutes explaining why.

2. Which is/are least appropriate? Spend 3 minutes explaining why.