

Helping Students Become Rhetorically Aware Writers

Excerpted from advice Terry wrote for Bedford St. Martin's *Instructor's Guide to Writing in Disciplines* and *Teaching with the Hacker Handbook*.

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Reflecting on already-acquired rhetorical knowledge. Active learning and reflection on learning are critical components in the transfer of knowledge from one context to another. To set the stage for the transferable skills you want students to learn in your course, early in the semester, you can invite them to reflect on the rhetorical knowledge, skills, and abilities they have already acquired from their years of experience writing for a variety of courses and teachers across the curriculum.

At the same time, you can model this reflective process for your students by reflecting on your own writing experiences and how you learned to write with confidence for academic audiences who may have had very different expectations for you as a writer.

Reflection questions for teachers: How I learned to be an academic writer

1. What kinds of texts do I routinely write as a scholar and a teacher? Which ones do I enjoy the most? Why?
2. What writing skills and abilities do I rely on to accomplish my goals no matter what the task?
3. What strategies do I use to analyze unfamiliar writing tasks and audiences?
4. How do I define academic writing based on the writing I typically do? How does my definition change when I write for different audiences and purposes?
5. When it comes to stylistic conventions, is my academic writing typically rather formal, i.e. I don't believe in using "I" or contractions, or somewhat informal? How do I typically write introductions and conclusions? Phrase a thesis? Do my paragraphs tend to be relatively short, say five sentences or less, or typically longer than five sentences? Do I tend to write longer, more complex sentences or do I prefer shorter, concise sentences?
6. To what extent and in what ways might my preferences be typical of the preferences of teachers across disciplines? To what extent and in what ways might they reflect my own disciplinary training?

Reflection questions for students: What you've learned about academic writing

1. What kinds of writing assignments have you been asked to do in courses across the curriculum? Which ones were most enjoyable? Why? Which least enjoyable? Why?
2. What assignments have you written with the most confidence? Why? Which ones have made you feel less than confident about your writing? Why?

3. How would you describe the characteristics of academic writing, as teachers have taught it or described it to you?
4. What are some of the biggest differences you've noticed in the assignments teachers give and the expectations they seem to have? How would you explain these differences?
5. What strategies do you use to analyze new or unfamiliar academic writing tasks and audiences?
6. What writing skills do you rely on to accomplish your goals no matter what the task?
7. When it comes to advice about format, tone, and style, what have different teachers told you about, for example, ways to organize your paper? About how to write introductions, thesis sentences, and conclusions? About preferred paragraph and sentence length? About using "I" and contractions in your writing?
8. Have you noticed any similarities or differences in the writing advice you've been given based on the kind of course it is? Explain.

Advice on teaching reflective practice:

As educational researchers have found, reflection plays a crucial role in learning. Self-reflection, on its own, however, may not help students experience all of these benefits. For that reason, it is important to *give them the opportunity to share their insights and discoveries with their peers*. Besides sharing their reflections with peers, students will also likely benefit from having you share your insights about how you learned to become a confident writer and writing teacher.

To help students stay on track with this discussion, ask for one or more volunteers from each group to take notes on what students are sharing related to each question. Groups can report out to the class on the similarities and differences in students' responses.

Based on what they report (and on what you have overheard them saying), *create two handouts*. One handout should list the features of academic writing, as they've experienced it, that seem to cut across disciplines, courses, and teachers. The second handout should be drawn from the list students created of the writing skills, abilities, and strategies they rely on to write papers for teachers across the curriculum.

You should also be sure you make room throughout the semester for students to engage in ongoing reflection on their learning. You can do this by *giving them two or three short questions to answer about every paper they turn in*. You might ask them, for example, to reflect on the strategies they've used to figure out how to respond to the assignment, the rhetorical modes they've employed and why, the choices they made in writing their introduction/thesis/body paragraphs/conclusion, how confident they feel about what they've written, and other similar questions based on the handouts or charts you created early in the semester.