

Effective Instructional Techniques

The following teaching strategies have been used successfully by faculty across the disciplines at the University of Toronto to give students a chance to improve their confidence and skills in writing, while also learning their subject by writing about it. Many of the instructional activities listed in the first section can be implemented by course TAs, who will also gain awareness of writing. The assignment design techniques in the second section help ensure writing skills become an integral part of student learning in your course.

<i>Instructional Activity</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Challenges</i>
Demonstrate ways to read and analyse the assignment instructions	Encourages students to read prompts carefully; gives an opportunity to clarify expectations; models meta-cognitive skills	Requires well-designed assignment sheet
Provide samples of student work (with explanations of why they are successful – or not)	Gives students a concrete example that demonstrates expectations	Unless samples are from a very similar assignment, they may not address key issues
Provide detailed rubrics or discussion of evaluation criteria	Ensures a consistent standard; makes the hidden curriculum transparent	Poorly designed rubric will be difficult to use and can cause more confusion than clarity
Demonstrate effective strategies for reading sources	Gives students insight into typical genres, methods, and evidence used in the disciplines; encourages students to read as writers	Can easily be taken over by content-related questions
Assign in-class (or tutorial) writing-to-learn exercises: e.g., 1-minute paper outlining most important (or most confusing) point from lecture or reading	Gives students a low-stakes opportunity to practice relevant skills and develop their assignment ideas	Requires some class or tutorial time
Conduct in-class (or out-of-class) workshops on particular writing skills (e.g. research, revision, referencing, etc.)	Shows students particular strategies they can employ to improve their writing	Connections to assignment must be explicit; also, if out of class, attendance can be poor
Provide one-on-one consultations / office hours	Engages students with their own ideas and gives them an opportunity to ensure they are on track	Requires significant time and resources, especially in a large class
Hold a peer review session	Helps students learn how to assess their own work	Needs set-up and coaching – and sometimes students can lead each other astray

Ask students to write a reflective piece outlining their own perceptions of their writing	Encourages meta-cognition and self-evaluation, both of which aid in transfer of skills	Unless it is worth grades, students may not put much energy into it – or they may be afraid to admit weakness
Provide formative feedback (written or oral), keeping comments focussed on higher-order concerns and your reactions as a reader	Students gain a genuine reader and have the opportunity to engage with their specific assignments	Some students are reluctant to read comments on their work; office hours or substantial written comments take time
After grading, provide group feedback during class or tutorial on common issues that students struggled with	Gives students genuine reader responses and a better sense of the evaluative criteria; can also be used to provide specific writing strategies	May not be relevant to all students; takes class and tutorial time

<i>Assignment Design</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Challenges</i>
Ensure assignments are authentic to the discipline	Students tend to find authentic assignments engaging, and put more effort into them	It might be easier to plagiarize certain authentic assignment types (e.g., code or fact sheet)
Define purpose and audience	Helps students determine the appropriate level of detail and tone required for the assignment	Students often misconstrue audience (especially if they lack requisite experience)
Detail expectations for genre, research, argument, and evaluation	Helps ensure students are on the right track from the beginning	Even clear prompts leave room for confusion because of differences across courses and disciplines
Sequence (or scaffold) larger, more complex assignments	Builds skills gradually, giving opportunities for students to improve over the term; reduces plagiarism	Needs to be tailored to the individual course, and can require significant resources for grading
Provide writing-to-learn opportunities such as learning journals, problem statements, progress reports	Gives students a chance to formulate and work through their ideas in a low-stakes environment	Students may not take these seriously if not worth grades
Include revision opportunities	Helps students appreciate writing as process; gives them an opportunity to re-think and improve their ideas	Difficult to articulate higher-order concerns that will most improve the paper, without demoralizing the student.