WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY | Writing Workshop

A Guide to Teaching Writing Online

The Basics

Transforming an in-person writing class to an online platform presents particular challenges. Luckily, the core writing aspects of a course—from assignments to editing to instructor comments—often already happen online. While every instructor ultimately has to find their own unique approach, this document summarizes some common themes from the online writing instruction (OWI) literature to get you thinking about the most important aspects of transitioning your writing course to an online platform.

Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

The benefits of asynchronous OWI revolve around accessibility, flexibility, and increased allowable time for processing and reflection. Asynchronous methods can be particularly helpful if students are scattered around the world in different time zones with different accesses to technology. However, as Mick and Middlebrook (2015) consider, asynchronous courses "may contribute to a sense of participant isolation" (p.131). Synchronous class time encourages high connectivity, which is one of the most important aspects of teaching writing online, and point #1 below. Read more in: *Asynchronous and Synchronous Modalities*.

Key Themes from the Literature on Online Writing Instruction Pedagogy

1   Fostering Connection + Community Building

This is one of the most frequently cited elements of a successful online writing course (OWC). As participants are disconnected from physical cues, OWCs demand creative approaches to building a sense of social connection in the class. Mick and Middlebrook (2015) report that OWCs are more successful when they have:

- **High Authenticity:** Sharing your authentic self can increase students' sense of connection. Consider narrating and showing your humanness.

- **High Interactivity:** Writing courses should be as interactive as possible, especially between students.

- **High Collaboration:** Online writing courses benefit from a heightened collaborative element that reduces teacher-student hierarchy. Ask for student feedback early on. Consider self-grading or contract-grading so students feel they have more control over the learning process.

2   Less is Often More

While it may be tempting to teach the exact same course you always have, successful OWCs tend to have less content than in-person courses. This is because the actual reading and writing, between online forums, chats, and emails, tend to be higher in an online course. Here are some tips:

- **Slow It Down:** The pace of the course is essential. Make a list of what is essential for the learning outcomes, cut what you can, and slow down the pace. Consider also mixing up content: use podcasts, films, observation exercises, and other non-reading/non-writing activities.

- **Simplify Online Design:** Make the day-to-day navigation straightforward and simple.

- **Scaffold Assignments:** Let the writing assignments build. Instead of assigning new material, consider integrating re-writing and editing assignments. This can also foster a deeper understanding of the themes of the course.

3   Success Is in the Details

There are so many things that can be easily overlooked in an OWC, by both students and instructors. Making sure the course runs smoothly is about attending to the details. Plan out the details before your course begins!

- **Map the Course:** Borgman and McCardle (2019) recommend thinking of your OWC as building a user experience for your students. We encourage you to visit usability.gov and "Designing an Accessible Online Course" to help you think of ways to simplify the online experience for a variety of users.

- **Contact Points:** Build in various types of contact points where the students know they can connect with the instructor.

- **Be Explicit:** Let students know what the course expectations are and exactly what they should expect from you (e.g. will you comment on course discussion boards?). Make this clear in a variety of different ways (verbally, on Moodle, in assignments).

- **Manage Your Time:** Part of being responsive to students in an OWI is managing your "on" time. This prevents "zoom fatigue" and makes sure you are available when you say you will be.

4   Inclusivity and Accessibility

Inclusivity and accessibility are the bedrock of the modern college curriculum, and underlie most of the suggestions above. While many aspects of inclusivity and accessibility are no different in an in-person course, a successful online course requires a consideration of technological access (e.g. "the digital divide") related to socioeconomic issues and should be user-friendly, navigable by a variety of users, simply-designed, and intuitive (again, consider visiting usability.gov and "Designing an Accessible Online Course"). We also refer you to the Faculty Guide for Accessibility Services and Accessibility Services and Distance Learning at Wesleyan.

On More Thing… Is there a benefit to a hybrid in-person/online model?

Writing instruction actually translates well to online models, in part because there are still a number of constraints with the current alternative, the socially-distanced classroom. However, meeting in-person, even on a limited basis, has benefits. If you're still debating whether or not you want to meet in-person or adopt a hybrid model, we suggest considering the specific activities you want students to participate in. You may want to check out the University of Denver Writing Program's post "The Nature of Hybrid Courses," which breaks down some of the affordances and constraints of socially-distanced face-to-face writing instruction vs. online writing instruction.

Assignment Inspiration from the Writing Workshop Faculty

General Online Writing Assignment Ideas

- Writing assignments with instructor response
- Writing assignments with peer review
- Re-writing assignments to work on editing skills
- Discussion questions and forums with peer-to-peer contact
- Peer-to-peer contact groups of 3-4 students
- Private journals for instructor review and response
- Public blog writing with peer and instructor comments
- Chat rooms with peers or instructor
- Read writing-focused essays or instructional manuals

Specific Assignment Ideas

- **Class preparation + paragraph structure** (*Stephanie Weiner, Director of Academic Writing*): In writing-intensive courses, I often ask students to do a targeted exercise in reading, summarizing, or analyzing class material and then write a paragraph based on what they discover. Students seem to enjoy these assignments, which they recognize ask them to practice multiple skills without a huge time investment. In the online context, they proved more valuable than ever in helping students focus their class preparation and contribute eagerly to our synchronous sessions. I've assigned charts, maps, word clouds, three-sentence summaries, collages of motifs drawn from the assigned reading, and lists of everything students notice in a passage. And as we move through the semester, we pay attention to particular aspects of strong paragraphs, from topic sentences, evidence, and analysis to concision and internal logic.

- **Peer Review/Exchange of Papers** (*Beth Hepford, Assistant Professor of the Practice in TESOL*): I like to include peer reviews of writing in my classes so that students can practice editing, see what other students are doing, and think more deeply about the topic by reading someone else's point of view. To make this an online activity, I pair them with another student based on topic and/or level and they exchange papers that I've already seen via email. I also provide a peer review worksheet based loosely on the rubrics I use to grade the assignment. I always start with "List three strengths of this paper," then have them focus on content (Does this essay answer the question? Are there areas that could use more detail?), structure (Did the paper follow its thesis statement? Is it clear and easy to follow?), and lastly grammar (I ask them to mark it, but not correct). I found that students appreciate the feedback and that their writing improves in the next draft.

- **The Inclusion Credo** (*Sarah Ryan, Associate Professor of Practice in Oral Communication*): In 3-4 person teams, students write a 1-page credo for a specific organization (e.g., public middle school in Middletown, CT). Students can use the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication as a model (https://bit.ly/30hAfBC). The credo should have two parts: a prefatory paragraph describing what inclusion is, and a list of principles for achieving inclusive communication in this community. This project is open-ended enough to encourage research and debate. The principles focus students' attention on parallel structure and word choice. A version of this assignment was initially created by Michael G. Strawser (https://bit.ly/3glb8n8).

- **The Podcast Analysis Paper** (*Sarah Ryan, Associate Professor of Practice in Oral Communication*): I assign 2-3 journal articles with divergent views of a research term such as aggression, and 1-2 related episodes of *This American Life* (e.g., #449: Middle School; #538 Is this Working? [school discipline]). Each student then writes a 2-page paper in the style of a book or film review. The review should discuss the research term, the podcasts, and the author's related experience, and offer an appraisal of the podcasts and/or a take-away lesson from the collection of incongruous "texts." This assignment challenges students to capture complex, conflicting ideas succinctly, and to critically respond to the texts they consume. A version of this assignment was initially created by Elizabeth Fish Hatfield (https://bit.ly/30gMe2i).

- **The Podcast Assignment** (*Tess Bird, Mellon Fellow in Writing for the Social Sciences*): I always have my students write one essay as a 10-15 min podcast script, which I have them record, listen to, and re-record to practice communicating in a clear, understandable way. They hand in the podcast and the script. I find this is also an equalizing assignment: often those that struggle with writing end up doing much better with the podcast.

- **Writing an Op-Ed** (*Tess Bird, Mellon Fellow in Writing for the Social Sciences*): I often assign one essay as a 750-word Op-Ed on a subject related to the course of the student's choosing. The short length really helps students focus in on a clear and concise argument. I encourage them to submit their edited Op-Eds, after my comments and peers' comments, to local newspapers.

- **WesCreates Blog** (*Tess Bird, Mellon Fellow in Writing for the Social Sciences*): I loved my experience using WesCreates for a course blog. I transformed all the assignments into ones that could be posted on a blog by providing specific audiences per assignment. This helped the students think about public writing, and I think they really felt proud of creating something.

Further Readings and Resources | Works Cited

- The Online Writing Instruction Community (owicommunity.org)
- *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors* (2019) Borgman and McCardle. Available online
- *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction* (2015) Hewett and DePew, Eds. Available online.
- "Designing an Accessible Online Course" from *Explore Access* web resource, University of Arkansas
- "The Nature of Hybrid Courses, Particularly in Writing" (2020), Doug Hesse, University of Denver Writing Program
- Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (gsole.org)