

SUPPORTING ESL STUDENT WRITERS

Writing in a second or other language at the university level is one of the biggest challenges many ESL students face. Some students find the process extremely frustrating, as they consider themselves to be competent, confident, and articulate writers in their first language, but find they haven't the vocabulary or the command of complex grammatical structures to translate their ideas into English.

Language itself is not the only issue that makes writing in English particularly challenging for ESL writers. Writers from other academic cultures often need to adjust to a whole new idea of what makes an essay and how to structure an argument. For example, in some traditions, the thesis appears at the end of an essay after, and only after, the argument supporting it has been fully developed. In others, the standard essay may require artful digressions from the topic. Many written traditions favour a much more indirect style than North American academic writing. In these, spelling out cause and effect too explicitly can be considered condescending to the reader – the writer's job is to carefully lay out the facts, leaving the reader to “connect the dots.” In some written traditions, the skillful writer weaves in the words of authorities in ways that would be considered plagiarism at OCAD (see “ESL Writers and Plagiarism”). And as one final example, the culture of writing in many countries favours the display

of sophisticated language and poetic embellishment, even in academic writing. To these writers, North American writing may seem drab or even childish. Writers from any of these traditions can come across as untrained writers when writing for their courses at OCAD. It is useful to keep in mind that what appears to be an inappropriate written voice or essay structure may have been the result of the student's careful training in another tradition.

With a little extra guidance, over time many students are able to write clear, compelling papers and reports on a variety of topics for classes in diverse fields. Below are several suggestions that will help you set your students up for success in their written assignments. With the time limitations that all faculty are faced with, you may not be able to integrate all these suggestions into your classes. But any that you can adopt will pay off in better quality writing from all your students, native and non-native speakers alike.

Break down assignments. Be sure to provide clear, detailed assignment sheets with obvious deliverables and requirements. Take some time to go through the assignment sheet with students. Rephrase any language that is overly specialized, technical, or colloquial. Give students the opportunity to ask questions about the assignment either in class or during office hours.

Some students may want to speak with you immediately after class if they were too shy to ask questions during the class itself.

Encourage students to adopt a simple, direct style. Let them know that that you value clarity of expression over eloquence and sophisticated vocabulary. This will alleviate a lot of pressure on ESL students, and will prevent students from overusing the thesaurus.

Emphasize “process” rather than “product” writing. Build a topic approval, proposal, or draft stage into the assignment so you can give students early feedback. Consider using a guided peer-editing session to help students revise their first drafts. Some professors at OCAD have also allowed students to resubmit final papers once they have received feedback: only some students will take advantage of this opportunity to elevate their grade on a paper – usually those students that will get the most out of your feedback and the revision process itself. You might also encourage your students to bring their proposals or rough drafts to the Writing and Learning Centre for a one-on-one tutoring session.

Incorporate low-stakes writing assignments into your course. In addition to the main written assignments for the course, consider includ-

ing “low-stakes” assignments: quick take-home or in-class assignments for little or no marks. These might include reading responses or index cards where students summarize key concepts from the lecture in one or two sentences. These assignments offer students low-pressure opportunities to practice critical thinking skills and exercise their “writing muscle.”

Provide models. Students will find it helpful to see models of strong writing to give them an idea of what they are working toward. This is particularly helpful in answering questions about structure, voice, and proper use of sources. Think about collecting these models from previous years. If you are concerned that students will mimic the models too closely, offer them examples with a range of styles and structures and draw attention to the diversity of approach and voice.

Use explicit rubrics. It is helpful for students to see, in writing, your grading criteria. One option is to have students come up with the rubric as a class, based on each assignment. This will encourage students to really think about and anticipate the qualities that you'll be looking for in their papers. Whether you come up with the rubric, or have the class design it as an activity, make sure this rubric is widely available (posted on My Courses or handed out with the assignment sheet).

FAQ

How can I help ESL students keep on top of their readings?

Many ESL students struggle with the amount of readings assigned in their courses. Some come from educational cultures where they were expected to master readings line by line. Working in a second language, they may feel the need to look up every fifth word in the dictionary so they don't miss anything. It is also very difficult to skim an article or scan for key information in a second language. And for students from other cultures, many of the readings assigned at OCAD are rife with unfamiliar cultural references and assumptions.

Telling students explicitly what to look for in a reading – why you are assigning a particular chapter or article – provides much-needed direction for the student who is spending hours pouring over the week's reading assignment. Some explanation of the context the article was written in, its purpose and intended audience, and the cultural assumptions it makes can be helpful. You might also come up with pre-reading questions to help direct the students' attention to essential material. An in-class discussion of readings can also help students to develop a practical approach to their reading assignments.



FACULTY STORY



I've recently taught an ESL section of the Essay and the Argument. When I planned the course, I decided to embed regular, low-stakes,

writing assignments for the students into the curriculum (e.g., in-class writing and submissions of drafts for review). I thought that the low-stakes writing would get my students used to "thinking on paper" and provide a context for them to take risks as communicators in English.

I think the low-stakes writing achieved what I wanted it to – at least for some students in the class. The surprise was how useful this authentic writing was for me in my teaching.

For example, for one assignment, a student turned in a paper that was very well structured overall and right down to the sentence level. I'd spent a fair amount of time guiding my class on essay, paragraph, and sentence structure, so this particular student had been paying attention! But every sentence had two or more words that just didn't quite fit.

I knew, from the student's in-class writing and drafts, that this was not how he normally wrote. So I talked to him about the paper he turned in and I learned that he had relied on an electronic, Korean-Canadian dictionary to write this paper – more so than for his other papers. I encouraged

him to write in his own voice, even if it wasn't perfect. We talked about why it was better for him to use an English-English dictionary. And then he went away to revise and resubmit. I think it would have been harder to start this conversation with my student if I didn't already have a strong sense of what he really was as a writer in my class.

Low-stakes writing benefited me at other times in the class as well. With two other students who had submitted drafts of their essays, I was able to assess with confidence when they weren't using their own voices. And then I was able to talk to them about why the choices they had made, in writing, represented plagiarism at OCAD. Those two students turned in authentic writing for their final drafts.

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RESOURCE

For ideas for low-stakes writing assignments, see the tipsheet on this topic from University of Waterloo under "Assessing and Evaluating Student Work" at http://cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching_resources