Chapter 5

Collaboration in the Composition Classroom

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You may find that collaboration of different forms helps you and your students achieve many of the learning goals you set for English 131, including the fourth course outcome: “To practice composing as a recursive, collaborative process and to develop flexible strategies for revising throughout the composition process.” Formal education and writing are often unproductively isolating activities; this chapter highlights some of the ways you can enable productive collaboration as a teacher and it provides sample activities that you can adapt for your own course objectives and lesson plans.

# Why Collaborate?

It’s fairly obvious that before assigning any type of task to your students—collaborative or otherwise—you will want to first spell out what it is you are trying to accomplish. In addition to helping facilitate the accomplishment of learning goals that deal with reading and writing, collaboration *itself* can foster several things in the classroom:

* an increase in "talk-time" for students
* a feeling of community and connectedness
* the potential for students to learn from other students
* the sense of students as agents in the education of others
* the validation of students’ experiences and knowledge
* the creation of an immediate audience for student writing
* the practicing of close reading and critical analysis at an adjustable pace
* a de-centering of authority in the classroom
* an increase in the knowledge-base in the classroom
* a reduction of your workload (although the opposite can also be true!)

# Planning Effective Collaborative Activities

If an assignment could just as easily be completed independently, there may be no reason to devise a collaborative assignment. Even if you do ask students to collaborate on something they could just as easily do themselves, they may choose to work individually on the assignment and then share their findings at the last minute, or one vocal student might dominate the activity to the exclusion of others. When choosing to have students collaborate, it's usually a good idea to make it clear from the beginning why an assignment is best done collaboratively and not individually or as a class.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford identify three types of tasks that invite collaboration: “‘labor-intensive’ tasks that need to be divided into smaller subtasks in order to be accomplished effectively and efficiently; ‘specialization’ tasks that call for multiple areas of expertise; and ‘synthesis’ tasks that demand that divergent perspectives be brought together into a solution acceptable to the whole group or an outside group” (123).

* **A** **labor-intensive task** could be a collaborative research project, in which groups of students each research part of a question and then exchange their findings; or it could be an annotation project, in which students or groups take the responsibility for annotating one part of a text.
* **A specialization task** might have students each take responsibility for becoming “experts” on a section of the text and then teaching the rest of the class about it; you might ask students to plan a presentation on relevant contextual information.
* **A synthesis task** brings different groups together as a class to process the work they’ve completed. The key to a synthesis task is to make each group responsible for the work of the other groups and to have students learning from and teaching each other. One trick for encouraging accountability is to provide a handout for students with spaces structured for note-taking.

**Example 1**: Note-Taking Handout on Evidence and Analysis (for use with Example #2)

*Use the space below to record the arguments of each group. Note questions you’d like to bring up in discussion.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **Evidence** | **Analysis** |
| **1** |  |  |
| **2** |  |  |
| **3** |  |  |

## Establish Clear Expectations

It is frustrating for students to be asked to “work in groups” without a clear sense of what they are being asked to accomplish. It can help to:

* assign a note taker in each group (to record findings)
* assign a reporter in each group (to report findings)
* give students a set amount of time and monitor how things are getting done
* give students a clear set of goals (handouts or notes on the board are *very helpful*!)
* go around to groups to facilitate discussion

## Provide Closure

Asking students to report the results of group work (either in class to the other groups or as individuals to you) validates group work and can take its ideas one step further. Talking about what groups “find” also allows students from other groups to learn from and interrogate the findings of others. Remember to budget time for this important step in group work.

**Example 2**: Handout for “Specialization Task” Activity That Includes Out-of-Class Work

This example gives each group a different passage from the text to summarize and be responsible for. The group assignments are clear, and students prepare for the group work by completing their own individual homework the first night. With a long article, breaking up responsibility for the text can be a good way to get coverage of more material and make groups of students experts on a particular topic. (Adapted from J. Lundgren)

**For Wednesday:**

The text is subdivided into three sections. Each group re-reads the section corresponding to their group number (Group 1 reads section 1, and so on):

1. Pages Group 1: (student names)
2. Pages Group 2: (student names)
3. Pages Group 3: (student names)
4. Re-read and summarize your section (about 250 words). Be prepared to present your part to the rest of the class in 2-3 minutes, and to respond to questions. Bring 7 copies of your summary to class.
5. Generate two substantial questions that get at the heart of your section and could provide a springboard for discussion. Hand these in to me in class on Wednesday.

**In class on Wednesday:**

During the first 10 minutes of class, the three “homework groups” will convene to read each other’s summaries: discuss them, and agree upon what's important to present to the other two groups.

A reporter from each group will present these findings to the class. As presentations take place, take notes on the Example #1 handout and think of questions to ask. After each presentation, members of the class will ask questions about the text and presentation.

**Example 3**: Handout for In-Class Collaborative Activity

This example (from a 200-level class) shows one way to structure an in-class collaborative activity. Students were asked to prepare the argument for their “position” individually outside of class and then rework their ideas with a partner. The top of the handout summarizes the readings that served as the focus of the debate.

**The policy**: Reuters asks its reporters to “avoid the use of emotive terms” (such as “terrorist” in referring to individuals involved in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and in the 9/11 attacks). Instead of “label[ing] or characteris[ing] the subjects of news stories,” Reuters reporters instead “report their actions, identity, and background.”

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reasons given to support the policy:** | **Reasons given to oppose the policy:** |
| * It ensures “factual, unbiased reporting.”
* Allows readers to make their own decisions, “based on facts.”
* Terms such as “terrorist” are unevenly applied, and so until we use them consistently (i.e. by acknowledging that governments also engage in terrorist acts), we should just avoid them completely.
 | * “Terrorist” is being used to describe many situations, so it should be applied consistently to *all* applicable situations.
* “[W]hen you don’t call this a terrorist attack, you’re not telling the truth.”
* Reporting requires “judgment based on principles, not rules”; better to allow for human judgment—no matter how “flawed and inconsistent”—than to follow a rule blindly.
 |

**Today’s class**:

9:30 Get together with the other person(s) who has your text and position (there are two people assigned to each text and position, except Spurr who has three). Share the textual evidence you’ve identified and decide what points will be most compelling for supporting your position and arguing against the opposing position.

9:40 In the first go-round, each group will get to present one point supporting their position and one point arguing against the opposing view. We’ll take turns, starting with Gorgias (in support), then Gorgias (opposed), and continuing through Cohn, Butler, Cameron, and Spurr. Try to keep your presentation succinct (around one minute). You will need to take notes for each group (see the back of this handout).

9:55 You’ll then have five minutes to talk again with your partner(s)—or with the others sharing your position—to plan your response. You can respond to the points made by any of the opposing groups (not just those sharing your text). Be able to refer specifically to the point you’re contesting before presenting your response.

10:00 For the rest of the discussion, each group should contribute at least one point in response; however, we won’t follow any specific order this time. You can just jump in whenever it’s relevant to the conversation. Continue taking notes.

10:15 Wrap up and conclusions.

# Troubleshooting

Despite its potential benefits, there can be some definite drawbacks to collaborative work. You and your students are probably intimately familiar with most of them. The biggest challenges are listed below with some suggestions for addressing them.

## Maximizing Participation

No matter what you do, some students will always participate more than others…and who participates more does not always correspond to who learns or helps others learn more. Some suggestions for dealing with uneven or unproductive levels of participation follow:

* Think about group size. Smaller groups give members the chance to do and say more, but limit the resources of the group. Also, if groups will be reporting on their work, forming many groups means a lot of time for group reports. Large groups maximize resources and reduce reporting time, but reduce individual students’ talk-time.
* Grouping students by ability can be successful, especially for tasks where you want the stronger students to go ahead and leave you with time to give more guidance/support to weaker students. Grouping students by mixed ability can also be productive if you want students to learn from and teach each other.
* Try grouping traditionally silenced and/or outspoken folks together. This may seem counterintuitive, but can work to facilitate balanced and productive discussion.
* Assign specific roles to groups and group members and remind students of their roles.
* Work with students individually who seem to participate in unproductive ways.
* Discuss how group work is working! Taking time out to “go meta” about your classroom can be a bit scary at first, but is often productive. Imagine asking, “Hey, how did group work go today? What can we do differently?” or even “So, why is no one doing the assignment?”

## Conflicts with Group Work

For a variety of reasons, students may find it challenging to participate in all kinds of group work, particularly out-of-class group projects. The current political climate, family obligations, work, athletic practices, learning disabilities, a long commute, etc. can make it difficult for a student to contribute effectively in out-of-class group work. In-class group work can be hampered by learning styles, learning difficulties, interpersonal relationships, and various differences/similarities between students. As you get to know your students, you can usually group students more productively. Some suggestions include:

* **Get to know your students***.* If you plan to do out-of-class group projects, mention in your syllabus and in class that you need to know of anything that might interfere with group projects. If students respond, you could work with individual students to plan around such considerations. For instance, you could put commuters in a group together and increase their chances for finding time to meet.
* **Give students time to plan ahead for group projects**. Even mentioning a day ahead that “We’ll be working in groups tomorrow” can help alleviate anxiety and help students plan.
* **Facilitate groups and troubleshoot problems as they unfold***.* Group projects can be unpredictable and often take extra attention on the part of the instructor, monitoring how the projects are coming along and encouraging students to get work done on time. Breaking a large project into smaller chunks can be helpful.

# Some Collaborative Activities

## Peer Review

Peer review can help students write more effectively as they learn from what their peers have to say about their own writing and see what everyone else is doing. Peer review can also help put the course outcomes and associated traits into the hands of students as they use the language of the outcomes to discuss each other’s writing. An added benefit is that students also develop the reflective skills they will need when they write critical reflections, in which they identify and make arguments about how their writing demonstrates and fulfills the course outcomes. There are many ways to structure peer review; some instructors have had success with using different formats for peer review throughout the quarter and with doing peer review at different times in the assignment sequences. Peer review can happen in the invention phase, once students have a draft, or closer to the final draft. Please remember that tutors from the Odegaard Writing and Research Center are happy to come to your classroom to model and help lead peer review sessions. To arrange for an appointment please email Director Misty Anne Winzenried at owrc@uw.edu.

### Preparing for Peer Review

As with most things we do as instructors, it generally helps to justify to students why peer review is important. Many students have a hard time trusting their peers for productive feedback; they feel that the teacher is the expert, and that their peers don’t have much to offer. Furthermore, because your students will have had a variety of previous experiences with peer review, you will want to teach them what you want them to do with the papers they review and with the comments they receive. Some suggestions:

* **Discuss the peer review process**. Have students freewrite, brainstorm, and/or get into small groups to talk about their past experiences with feedback (from teachers, coaches, friends, theater directors) and/or with peer review. As a group, you can decide what you want to get out of peer review and how you want it to work.
* **Model the kind of feedback you would like students to give**. This can be done real-time, using the overhead, or by circulating a handout. Without a model of what you see as effective comments in a peer review session, students may be unsure of what is expected.
* **Have students practice with a sample essay**. Give students a copy of a paper to review (or just one page of one). Have students respond in the way you have modeled, then have students discuss (in groups or as a class) the review process, working through difficulties.
* **Provide a student-generated feedback worksheet**. In small groups, you may want to ask students to generate suggestions for a peer feedback worksheet. You can then compile their suggestions to make up a peer review handout. If working with a set of questions for peer review, it is also important to phrase questions in such a way that they require something more substantial than “yes” or “no” responses. For example: asking students to put their peer’s main claim in their own words or to annotate each complex claim component on the paper itself can be much more effective than “is there a complex claim in this paper?”
* **Emphasize the importance of peer review**. Depending on when you have writing conferences, you may want to begin by asking, “So, what did you learn in peer review?” and start there with plans for revision. This can challenge students’ idea that what their peers think doesn’t matter (i.e., “It’s what the teacher thinks that matters”).
* **Ask students to justify their responses to their peers**. In order to encourage thoughtful peer feedback and incorporation of feedback, it can be helpful to have students explain in an email, conference, or journal what elements of their peers’ feedback they incorporated into their revisions and why. You can also ask them to note what they learned from the peer review and how they can use that knowledge in their future work.
* **Make peer review a major part of the participation grade**. Giving, receiving, interpreting, and incorporating constructive peer feedback on paper revisions is one of the stated outcome traits. However, despite your best efforts at carefully modeling productive peer review techniques and explaining why peer reviewing is important, some students will still not be convinced of its usefulness and may not put in a good faith effort at offering advice. It may help these reluctant students “buy in” to the approach by explaining that their thoughtful participation in peer review is a major part of their participation grade. This will require you to devise some concrete way of evaluating students’ peer feedback, and you can do this by asking for copies of comments as they are produced, explaining that you’ll be taking a look at all peer reviews when you collect portfolios, or by asking students to evaluate their peers’ feedback themselves.

### Structuring Peer Review

Essential to successful peer review is a clearly articulated set of expectations for your students. Students need to know when to bring drafts, how many copies to bring, what state the drafts need to be in, and the consequences for not meeting expectations. If you do not emphasize the importance of peer review, students may not participate. Questions to ask yourself when planning include:

* What size groups will students work in?
* Will students remain in the same groups throughout the quarter?
* When will students read each other’s papers: in class or for homework?
* Will peer reviewers be anonymous?
* How much time will I give students to respond and discuss with their peers?
* To what degree will I structure students’ responses and what should student feedback look like? Will they use marginal comments, typed memos, answer specific questions, fill out a worksheet? Will students respond in writing at all, or only orally?
* Will I encourage or discourage commenting on grammar issues?
* Will I comment on or otherwise assess the quality of student feedback?
* At what stage in the drafting process will peer review take place? Will this remain constant throughout the quarter?

**Example 5**: Peer Review Worksheet

This example lists specific questions for students to answer about their peers’ work. A worksheet of some kind can help student reviewers avoid commenting only on grammar and focus on outcome traits targeted by the assignment. Peer review can take a lot of time, so you'll want to think about how many essays you want each student to be able to read when devising such a handout.

Read your peer’s paper and answer the following questions. Write your answers on the back of the final page of the paper that you return to the writer.

1. What is the author interested in exploring and what is/are the argument(s)?
2. Why are you, as a reader, ultimately persuaded (or not) by the central argument?
3. Identify a place in the text where textual evidence is being used particularly well. Why is this moment so compelling? Next, identify a place where evidence isn’t being used as successfully. Why isn’t this working as well? How could this moment be improved—would it be better to not make this point at all (perhaps to allow for further development elsewhere), or is it about the way it is framed/explained?
4. Make a brief outline of the paper, noting what each paragraph is about and what it does.

**Example 6**: Peer Review Guidelines

This example justifies and explains peer review (briefly), and then gives students some guidance about the kinds of feedback that will be expected from them. These “fill-in-the-blank” type questions can be useful for students, giving them an idea of how “academic” discussion is carried on.

**Why Peer Review?**

Peer review exercises are designed to benefit you in several different ways: 1) You will get feedback from your peers that will let you know how your paper comes across to other readers; 2) You will learn to be a critical reader of academic writing, which will help you evaluate and revise your own writing, especially when you get to your portfolio critical reflection; and 3) You will get a chance to see how other writers have approached the same writing situation, giving you new ideas for your own papers.

**Getting into “Peer Review Mode”**

Think of the peer review groups, and the class in general, as a community full of resources. We’re all here to help one another. We are all readers, and we are all writers. But we are all at different places in our development, all come from different places, and subsequently all have different writing and reading experiences to share.

Think of yourself and your peers as **readers.** Respond to your peers’ papers ***as*** ***a reader*.** It might be useful to begin every comment with the phrase, “As a reader, I thought. . .” Instead of relying on evaluative language (such as “I liked this” or “The paper is good”), put your comments in terms of the **effectiveness** of the paper (“This was effective because \_\_\_\_”). Instead of telling your peers what to do or where they did something “wrong,” try to indicate what seemed confusing, unclear, out of place, or irrelevant, or where you, **as** **a** **reader,** were lost, confused, or had questions. If you want to make suggestions to the author, say something like “At this point, I wanted to know (to hear, to see) \_\_\_\_” or “It would have helped me if you had done (explained, showed) \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Using the Feedback You Receive**

When reading or listening to your peers’ comments on your papers, remember that they are trying to give you valuable information about their experiences **as** **readers** of your paper. Since they have also been struggling with similar issues in their own papers, they may be able to suggest helpful ways for you to approach yours. Also, remember that you do not have to act on everything that your peers say; take their comments seriously as extra information, but remember that you must make the final choice of what to put in your paper.

**Example 7**: Writer’s/Reader’s Memos

Writer’s and reader’s memos can be effective alternatives or additions to the standard peer review worksheet. These memos function as correspondence between the author and the reviewer about the text (often done over email). A writer’s memo is usually one or two paragraphs, addressed to potential readers, giving a brief introduction to the paper. Most importantly, in a writer’s memo, the student asks for specific feedback from the reader. The reader’s memo, then, is a response to the writer’s memo: it addresses the questions raised in the writer’s memo and offers any other relevant feedback. Here is one example of how to use memos in the revision process:

**After the first draft . . .**

You’ll be writing at least two drafts for each unit: the first will be read by your peers, the second will be read by me, and the final draft is for your portfolio. Here are the basics of the feedback process:

1. **First draft**: Bring three copies. (You will be turning this draft into me later.) *You will also need to* *include a typed writer’s memo* (see below) introducing your paper to your peers and giving specific suggestions for the kind of feedback you want (i.e., “Do I support my first claim well enough?” or “Would it be clearer to move the fifth paragraph closer to the beginning?”).

2. **Comment on peers’ papers**: Before the next class, read your peers’ drafts and comment on them. You will need to both: 1) make comments within the text of the paper, and 2) **type** up your overall comments about the paper and suggestions for revision in a *reader’s memo* (see below) addressed to your peer. Your reader’s memo *must* address the questions posed in the writer’s memo. We’ll talk in class about what makes helpful feedback.

3. **Meet with peer group**: The day your feedback is due, you will discuss your papers with your peer group. Your written comments are meant to serve as a starting point for further discussion.

4. **Second draft**: You will typically have a week to finish a revised draft to turn into me along with a writer’s memo and all previous drafts with peer comments and memos (I will be evaluating your peer feedback, so make sure I get all the marked drafts and reader’s memos you received). *I will be looking for how you take your peers’ comments into consideration when you revise*.

5. **Further revisions**: I will typically comment on and return your papers within one week. If you think it’s a paper that you would like to include in your portfolio, then you’ll need to revise it further. I am more than willing to look at additional revisions, and you can always visit one of the writing centers on campus. If you want to conference with me about a revision, I ask that you give me a few days to look at your paper before we meet.

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**What is a writer’s memo?** A writer’s memo is a letter to your readers giving them an overview of the process you went through in writing this paper. You might choose to start with some kind of explanation of why you chose to write on this topic, what your goals are for the paper, or what you feel are its strengths and weaknesses. In each writer’s memo, you must include some discussion of the kind of feedback you want from your readers. If it is a memo for a revised draft, then *you must also include some discussion of your peer feedback comments and how you are (or aren’t) incorporating them in this revision*.

**What is a reader’s memo?** A reader’s memo is basically a response to your peer’s paper and her writer’s memo. In the reader's memo you should address all the questions/requests in the writer’s memo. Also comment on anything else you feel should be noted. Remember that it’s always easier to keep doing the same thing than to learn something new, so be sure to point out what you like about the paper—in addition to suggestions for changes—so that your peers can keep doing what's working.

**Sample memos from student writers and reviewers**

Writer’s Memo:

Dear Reader:

The focus of my essay is on how contact zones bring the school systems to become a better unity. Because of authorities, people tend to lose their self-identities. If contact zones existed, there would not be so much differences between people. My thesis is: “The existence of contact zones not only eliminates the authorities from people who have powers, it also help to bring principals, teachers, and students together and become a better unity.” Here are some questions that I would like specific feedback and comments on:

🖉 My thesis: I would like any comments on my thesis statements. I feel like it does not really coherent with my body paragraphs, so just feel free to let me know how do you think about my thesis statement.

🖉 Body paragraphs: I just want to make sure I’ve shown both similarities and differences from both Pratt and Anzaldua’s point of view on authorities and their needs of contact zones.

🖉 Conclusion: Just feel free to insert comments . . . I’m always not sure in concluding my essay.

Thanks a lot.

Cheers,

Natalie

Reader’s Memo:

I’ll first address some things from your writer’s memo, and then go on to some general comments. I felt that your thesis statement was fine, but didn’t entirely reflect what you actually discussed in your essay. I felt that you were able to prove the point that “contact zones help to bring principals, teachers, and students together to become a better unit”. However, I didn’t really feel that you proved “contact zones eliminate the authority from people who have power.” The definition of contact zone that Pratt gives in her essay says, “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power” (Pratt 575). I feel that you are almost arguing the definition of contact zones, which I don’t think is a good idea at this point. If you took that part out of you thesis statement, so that it was simply, “The existence of contact zones helps to bring principals, teachers, and students together to become a better unit.” It would match much better with the body of your text. The body paragraphs were fine, with good uses of textual evidence. Just make sure you cite ideas or stories from the texts, even if you don’t quote them directly. The conclusion I felt might be improved if you took out the example of the Christmas party. I wasn’t really sure what you were trying to prove with that. The use of authority in that case (if loud talking was the only reason you couldn’t go to the party) is very different from the use of authority to oppress someone because of their culture or heritage. One is simply trying to impose discipline on a class because of a behavioral wrong (meaning something that you could have changed by acting differently), where as the other is oppressing someone for being born a certain race (something you don’t have any control over). Other than that I thought it was good. The works cited list was perfect! Good luck on your revisions! -Elizabeth

## Editing Exercises

As the time comes to turn in final, edited drafts, take advantage of the times your students have drafts in class by scheduling group editing exercises. These can be short, focusing only on one grammatical rule or writing “trick.” For example: in pairs, small groups, or as a round robin exercise, have students complete specific editing tasks: looking for passive voice, applying the known-new contract, improving transitions, brainstorming introduction ideas such as “roadmaps,” punctuation, etc.

## Workshopping

Though it can be time consuming, you might choose to set aside time to workshop an individual student’s paper with the whole class. Provide enough copies of a student’s draft to everyone in the class with sufficient time for guided discussion and commentary. Besides giving the student extensive feedback, this approach can reinforce good feedback practices and demonstrate what you mean by thorough revision.

## Collaborative Journals & Online Discussions

Some 131 instructors have had good luck using email discussion lists, electronic discussion boards in Canvas, and sometimes group blogs. Class email lists are easy to set up using MyUW (just follow the link in the “My Class Resources” box, but be aware that course email lists are generated overnight and won’t be available the same day you decide to create them)., These technologies encourage writing (!) and are meant to provide students with potentially less intimidating spaces in which to work through their understanding of the texts and ideas. Students can also use these forums to refine paper ideas and reflect on their writing practices. Discussion lists and electronic message boards are adaptable: they can be assigned as a continuing assignment throughout the quarter or as part of a single assignment sequence. Providing specific prompts, required minimum number of postings, and deadlines for posting are usually important.

You may find that these technologies encourage otherwise quiet or seemingly withdrawn students to participate actively with their peers. Other students who are talkative in class may not feel as comfortable contributing online. Clarifying the goals of these collaborative spaces is usually a good idea, lest they fall into dis- or misuse.

**Example 10**: Collaborative Journals

This is an example of a quarter-long collaborative journal assignment.

In the syllabus I proposed that writing is a process: that authors don’t sit alone waiting for inspiration to strike, but rather interact with texts and other people as they work through ideas. It’s also possible to think of reading as a process. Especially with the difficult essays we’ll be working with in the next sequence, you’ll need to keep reading, re-reading, and writing about these texts in order to formulate arguments about them. You’ll also need to get other people’s perspectives on the essays to compare with your own. Collaborative journals are meant to give you and your peers space to work through your reading and writing processes together.

Your journals can serve two functions. One, they are a space for you to engage in critical, reflective thinking about what you’re learning in this class. And two, they are an opportunity for you to work through your understanding of the texts (using *close reading*) in preparation for the sequence’s assignments.

In your journal you can reflect on class readings, written assignments, and/or class discussions. I expect much of the journal to be devoted to simply figuring out difficult readings and concepts. You can also talk about things happening *outside of* class (other readings, current events, personal experiences, the latest episode of *American Idol*), **if** you think they are relevant to what we’ve been doing *in* class. I’m always excited to see students making connections in their journals: when they can say “This reminds me of that essay we read three weeks ago and here’s why.”

Most importantly, this is a *working* space, a *productive* space, a space for critical reflection and close reading. This is *not* a diary recording the events of your day and your feelings about them. There is room for engaging your feelings in these journals, but only as a starting point for critical reflection. You need to ask questions and then try to answer them. And when you give an answer, support it and push on it—see how far it takes you. **In other words, strive for an “ah ha!” moment each time you write a journal entry**.

**Some different approaches:**

* **Write through your confusion**. Pick what you think is the most difficult part of the text and have a try at explaining what it means. Even if you’re totally off, just making the attempt can help clarify your understanding. And your partners might be able to give you some insight.
* **Write through your frustration**. If you had trouble with a reading (because it was boring or confusing or exclusive or too long), then explain why and analyze why the author might have chosen to write in such a way. Or consider how your own reading practices or expectations have influenced your reaction. What can you learn from your frustration?
* **Analyze the rhetorical moves of the texts we read**. What impact do the rhetorical choices of the author have on her text? Discuss how an author’s choices reinforce or undermine his argument and draw conclusions about how you’ll include/avoid similar choices in your own writing. What values do the author’s rhetorical choices reveal?
* **Look for gaps**. Explain the contradictions or connections you see operating in the texts we’re reading or in what people have discussed in class. Are there places where you can take an author’s argument further or in new directions?
* **Start working through paper ideas**. See if you can explain the thesis you're planning on arguing. Send your partners a draft of the introduction for your paper or a paragraph explaining a key term and ask for feedback.

**The specifics:**

You and at least two other members of the class will be journal partners for the quarter. To get started, one of you will email the others an entry that makes an argument about the texts using close reading (supported with reliable evidence). Include any questions you’d like your partners to address. The other members will then reply to that message—responding to the ideas/questions raised in the first message and introducing new ideas/questions of their own —being careful to include the text of the original message in the reply. *Date your correspondence*. Continue back and forth until the next due date. You each should have sent at least two messages before the due date. Each of you will need to contribute at least 1 1/2 – 2 pages of *single-spaced* text for each due date.

On the due date, each group needs to turn in *one* copy of their correspondence. In addition, each group member needs to attach a one-page, *double-spaced* cover letter addressed to me.

While I expect your email exchanges to be somewhat messy (jumping from idea to idea, informal in tone: it’s your place to play with ideas), your cover letter will be more formal. In it I expect you to present a single, cohesive argument stemming from your email discussion. The cover letter is *not* a summary of your correspondence. Instead, it’s a chance for you to glean a single idea from that exchange and present it in a clear, well-supported, focused argument. You only have a page, so keep a narrow focus; attempt too much and you won’t be able to sufficiently support your claims. As in all close reading assignments, you will need to back up your claims with sufficient support and/or textual evidence. All references to texts must be properly cited.

## Long(er) Term Group Projects

Another way to encourage students to work together both inside and outside of the classroom, as well as to vary the everyday routine of the class, is to assign group projects. Group presentations, cooperative research projects, even collaborative essay writing can expose students to the different writing practices of their peers. These projects may also be used to help expose students to material that you do not have enough time to cover in detail in class. Most importantly, group projects maximize the resources of the class and place responsibility on the students for “teaching” some aspect of the course. For a portion of a class period, they are the experts on the subject while the instructor adopts a secondary and/or facilitating role.

**Example 11**: Longer Group Work (Several Days)

This example demonstrates how a longer-term group project can give students practice not only with electronic and library resources, but with working and writing together. The project has many steps and aspects—making working together an added benefit. This exercise also provides a mix of individual work and group collaboration. In the project, students were asked to form groups and research (in the library, online, and in person) departmental writing requirements, gathering textual artifacts and conducting interviews. (From S. Schaffner)

This project is meant as a chance to explore your new writing environment, the University of Washington, and then to share your findings with the class. The project will have two parts: a presentation and a paper. First, however, you will have to choose an academic department you are interested in researching: sociology, business administration, English, or history. (I’ve selected these four departments because it is relatively easy to find information online about their writing requirements. If you want to research another department, let me know.) On Monday, we will meet at the computer lab again, this time to research departmental writing requirements that are posted online. I have linked to requirements on the website.

1. **Xeroxed Article by a Faculty Member in “Your” Department (Due Nov. 4th)**
Go to the homepage of the department you are researching. View the list of faculty members. Search the appropriate database (under “top 20 databases” on the Libraries homepage) to find an article written by a faculty member. Take note of the journal the article appears in, the volume, the issue, the date, and the page number. In the periodicals section of Suzzallo-Allen libraries, locate the journal and copy the article. We will discuss this article in class and you will have a short writing project on it.
2. **Write Up of Findings (2 pages max; Due November 5th)**You can think of this assignment as a practical report on your research. Your group has researched writing requirements in a department on campus, both online and in person, and now it’s your job to condense your findings into a single document. A reader of your write-up should be able to get a strong sense of what’s expected of students taking a class in your department. In a short paragraph, make perfectly clear what type of student writing—and writers!—you see as privileged in this department.
3. **Group Presentation of Findings (10-15 minutes; Due November 5th - 7th)**This is your group’s informal chance to let us know what you learned about the writing expectations in your department. Sharing the responsibility between group members, let the rest of the class know: 1) what’s expected of student writers in your department and how you found this out, 2) your sense of the “general attitude” toward student writers in your department, 3) if it seems fairly easy or difficult to meet the writing expectations in your department, and most importantly, 4) what is implied by your findings. By this I mean that you should address the following questions: What type of writing and writers are privileged in your department? What forms of micro-discipline (Foucault) are mandated by your department and what do they imply? Does your department seem sensitive to the issues Amy Tan and Victor Villanueva raise? Insensitive?

# Further Reading

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