

Successfully Tackling Writing: Business and the Sciences

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In *Making it Stick*, Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel note that putting ideas in their own words is a kind of “active processing” that helps students remember more than only listening to an explanation or copying text from a slide. Including writing can be part of teaching the content, not a distraction from it. Here are six strategies for using writing to complement other teaching approaches.

Strategy 1: Use what you know about your discipline

- Just as you do with demanding concepts, **sequence writing assignments**.
- **Divide complex writing tasks**, keeping in mind what's needed to succeed at each stage.

Strategy 2: Include Informal Writing

- This **short, lightly graded writing** focusses on mastery of the material. Some informal writing may be done in class and included in a participation grade.
- In **the minute-paper**, students anonymously answer two questions: What was the major point today and what is still unclear? Address misconceptions in the next class.
- **Paragraph templates** help students quickly summarize key content while they practice creating a well-crafted paragraph. Here's an example: “Although some think that wind power is. . . others argue that. . .”

Strategy 3: Replace Error-Hunting with Coaching

- In the first reading, **listen to the student's ideas** before marking a lot.
- **Comment on an early draft** so students can use your comments to improve.
- Use **rubrics** and **minimal marking** to respond to the most important writing issues.
- **Focus your comment** on what's important: the ideas, strengths, and a constructive suggestion or two about problems.

Strategy 4: Remember It's Not Just What Students Know

- When the cognitive demands of a writing task rise, errors may increase, even in areas where students previously seemed reasonably skilled. **Building confidence** can address this problem.
- Assign a **less challenging format first** like a report before a more challenging one like analysis.
- **Break large assignments into parts** that students complete separately.

Strategy 5: Climb Part of the Mountain with Students

- Show a few **models of good work to** clarify expectations from the start.
- Have **students correct important errors** from papers submitted the previous semester.
- Ask **students to use the rubric** to evaluate an old paper with you.

Strategy 6: Work with Colleagues

- Identify specific writing skills, documents or **formats that matter** and give students lots of practice with them.
- Create a **writing ladder**, a series of courses that include a discipline-specific writing task at increasingly more sophisticated levels.
- Use a **departmental rubric** to help students see the characteristics of writing in that discipline.

Helpful Resources

Barkley, E.F., Major, C. H. & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This useful and widely consulted book on collaborative learning includes a section on activities that emphasize writing. Activities in which small groups write together, either inside or outside of class, can be particularly helpful to those including more writing in large classes.

Bean, J. C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bean addresses professors in disciplines other than English and provides comprehensive advice for helping students read and write more effectively. Particularly helpful are sections on using rubrics, responding to formal writing, and creating informal writing activities, including the paragraph template mentioned earlier.

Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L. III & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

These authors provide a readable and practical overview of current research into memory. While writing is not a major focus, the book provides several short discussions of why informal, “writing-to-learn” activities are an effective way to help students remember important material.