Developing Students’ Knowledge Through Writing: A Guide for Faculty

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Introduction

Teaching at Yale-NUS can be exciting and rewarding as we watch our students rise to the challenges of learning complex content and methodologies in a wide variety of disciplines. But teaching students at such a high level also brings challenges for faculty, as we frequently have to make tough decisions about what content and methods of inquiry we can teach in just one semester. Often, talking about and designing activities to support student writing may seem like yet another item for which it is difficult to find time during the semester.

Rather than thinking of writing as another topic that needs to be covered during the semester, it may be more helpful for us and our students to see writing as another means through which students develop knowledge about a subject.

Writing to develop knowledge

While many students think about academic writing as a product or report of prior work, most professional academics have come to understand that the very act of writing is generative. Our thinking is refined and deepened by the act of communicating our research and arguments through writing. This phenomenon arises because the conventions of academic writing facilitate this complex thinking.

For example, mastering the expectations of a scientific lab report is also about developing a deeper understanding of scientific thinking and methodologies. Learning to write a strong lab report introduction helps students learn how to frame scientific problems and relate them to previous research. Distinguishing in their writing between methods and results helps students understand how good experiments can be structured and replicated, and how the presentation of results can shape the conclusions that can be drawn from those results.

Devoting just a few minutes a few times per semester to making these connections between how we develop knowledge and how we write can make a big difference to students’ understanding and engagement with the course’s ideas and in the quality of their writing for the course. Below are some suggestions for activities that can help you support students’ writing and learning.

Plan writing assignments to align with goals for student learning

As you develop your syllabus and plan your writing assignments, it may be helpful to articulate for yourself what you’d like students to be able to do as thinkers and writers by the end of your course. Some examples of goals might include being able to: explain clearly the steps in a mathematical proof; organise a public policy memo to speak to a specific professional audience; or effectively create a historical argument based on literary and material evidence. Then consider what kinds of writing assignments can help students achieve these goals.
For example, if one of the goals for the course is to help students understand and synthesize the current academic debate about the course’s topic, then creating a writing assignment that asks students to make an argument about two readings from the course can help students practice that synthesis. As you plan the course, think about what you’d like the students to do with the course content, and try to translate that practice into writing assignments.

Also, consider how the writing assignments you create can help students build towards more complex thinking and writing over the course of the semester. If students are working towards a large final project, identify the different methods of research or analysis they may need to draw upon to be successful. Design smaller, lower-stakes assignments earlier in the semester that allow students to practice and get feedback on their work as they build to the final, higher-stakes project. If the final project is a research essay, setting deadlines for parts of the writing process such as topic proposals, annotated bibliographies, outlines, or drafts can be helpful. These strategies also offer the opportunity for you to provide briefer, less onerous feedback earlier in students’ writing processes that can have a significant impact on the quality of students’ final drafts.

Learn about your students’ previous writing experiences

One of the unique features of Yale-NUS is the radically diverse educational experiences that students bring to the college. Singaporean junior colleges, private international schools, and state-sponsored high schools in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, China and other countries around the world all approach the teaching of writing differently. Students’ writing in multiple languages and cultural contexts can also affect the experiences and assumptions they bring to writing in the liberal arts context of Yale-NUS.

Helping students to write effectively at Yale-NUS requires bridging the gap between these previous experiences and the expectations of your classroom. To build that bridge, knowing more about students’ previous writing experiences can help.

A relatively easy way to find out this information is to ask. Here’s an example of a quick assignment students can finish via email or Canvas:

“Email me with a brief introductory paragraph about yourself and what you think you might find interesting about this course. Also, tell me a little bit about the writing you’ve done previously (in high school, junior college, etc.) and what you’d like to learn about research and writing while engaged in this course.”

This assignment does not require a response from the faculty member, but it can elicit some excellent information that may help guide how you address writing in your teaching. For example, knowing that a number of first-year students in your course have almost exclusively written timed essay exams may mean it might be helpful to spend a few minutes of class time talking about how to organize a long, research-based essay.
Make disciplinary and professional writing expectations visible

One of the ways in which Yale-NUS's curriculum challenges students is in the variety of writing tasks that they are assigned. Within the same semester, a student might be asked to write a close reading of a literary text, a physics problem set, a public policy brief, and a philosophy essay. Each of these assignments asks students to write for a very different audience, using different kinds of evidence and making different kinds of arguments. As you might imagine, students can quickly get overwhelmed and sometimes confused as they try to understand and manage all of these different disciplinary expectations for their writing. Here are a few things that faculty can do to make the expectations for writing in their disciplines more visible:

*Create a consistent vocabulary for writing and describe what key writing terms mean for your course:* While writing assignments in all disciplines commonly ask students to “analyze,” what analysis entails in each discipline is slightly different. Naming the actions students need to take in performing these activities can be helpful as well. For example, “Analysis in this context means showing how the evidence you’ve cited illuminates how and why your claim is persuasive.”

*Name what you value in good writing for your discipline and share this information with students:* It may be helpful to create a brief guide for students on how your discipline approaches common writing elements. (You can find some examples of writing guides [here](#).) Some elements you may want to give guidance on include:

- **Audience:** How should students imagine the reader for their work?
- **Voice:** Should writers use the personal “I”? Should they be writing in active voice?
- **Argument:** How are arguments framed? Where do you expect to find them in the essay?
- **Structure:** Is there a common structure that writers in the discipline use to present their arguments?
- **Evidence:** What counts as evidence in the discipline, and how should it be presented? What citation style should be used?
- **Style:** Are there expectations for presentation at the sentence level?

*Explain the writing process students can use to develop these strong writing elements:* Students may quickly grasp what the key elements of strong writing are, but still struggle with the process by which they can produce them. Especially for first-year students and students new to a discipline, explaining the process by which they can generate these elements can be helpful. For example, students new to developing critical arguments from close reading may need examples of the kinds of questions they can ask about a passage. In scientific writing, students may need a guide to determining what goes into the methods section versus the results section.
Design strong writing prompts

Developing a writing assignment that prompts students’ best writing can be difficult. Even the most experienced faculty can struggle with creating their writing prompts, often rewriting them over successive semesters. Perhaps the first step for faculty is to let go of trying to create the perfect assignment question, and instead focus on conveying how students can most effectively develop and present their ideas.

First, consider that the writing prompt is not the only means by which you can help students understand their writing assignment. You will be prompting their work even before giving them their official assignment by modeling the kinds of questions and methods scholars in your discipline use to create knowledge. You will also have time in class and in office hours to further explain the prompt and answer student questions.

A strong writing prompt describes the intellectual work that students must do to develop a well-written essay on the topic. Here are some examples of language that might be included in a prompt to indicate the kinds of work you want them to do:

- make an argument
- analyze
- support with textual evidence
- interpret
- describe a procedure
- develop a hypothesis

Moreover, students can better respond to prompts when they understand the purpose or goal of the assignment in contributing to their learning in the class. Additionally, they may benefit from suggestions for how to get started. Here are some principles for making writing prompts easier for students to navigate:

- Clearly state the purpose of the assignment
- Use specific verbs to indicate what the students should do (make an argument, analyze textual evidence, develop a theory, etc.)
- Clearly separate out and label the different parts of the assignment
  - Make sure that students can immediately identify the essential question/task you're assigning
  - If you provide context, questions to consider, or general writing advice in your prompt, visually separate these supporting comments from the main question/task

Consider activities you can do before, during, and after giving students the assignment that can support their writing, such as discussing the assignment in class, modeling the work you want
students to do during class discussion, or assigning small tasks that can contribute to students’ drafting process.

**Brief writing activities**

Talking about student writing for 5-10 minutes a few times per semester can have a positive impact on the quality of writing students produce. Faculty can use these moments to provide models or have students practice elements of their writing in a low-stakes context. Often these writing moments also can serve to help students deepen their understanding of the course material. Here are some suggestions for in-class writing activities:

- When introducing a writing assignment in class, ask students to write briefly about what they understand and what questions they have. Use the students’ responses to begin a discussion about the assignment in the moment, or collect the responses and address common questions in the next class or via email/Canvas comments.
- While discussing a reading in class, take a few moments to identify and talk about elements in the reading that you would like students to emulate in their own writing, such as the framing of the introduction, overall argument, choice of evidence, analysis, or structure.
- In the lead-up to a paper, ask students to bring to class a potential statement of argument, introduction, or outline. Have students exchange work in pairs and give brief feedback.
- With the student’s permission, excerpt an introduction, body paragraph, conclusion, or section from a lab report from a student essay. Anonymize the excerpt and ask students in your current class to articulate what they notice about how the passage is composed and why the presentation is effective.

**Use models**

Sometimes students learn best when they can see an example of what you consider to be strong writing. If you have a strong essay from a previous course, ask the writer’s permission to anonymize it and distribute it to students. (To forestall plagiarism, consider using an essay for a topic you no longer assign.) Annotate the draft with your written comments that identify the strong features of writing evident in the essay, and, if possible, spend a few minutes in class discussing it. You can also use models for elements of writing that students find particularly challenging, such as an abstract, introduction, or conclusion.

**Cultivate students’ ownership of their writing**

Many Yale-NUS students come from previous learning environments that offered very standardized expectations for both the content and the form of student writing. Some of these writers may be very concerned with writing the “perfect” essay that conveys the “right” answer that the instructor is looking for, lest they jeopardize their essay grade.
It is important for instructors to talk to students about the role writing plays in their learning, and the agency students have in developing their own ideas through writing. Through writing, students learn to add their ideas to the wider scholarly conversation about a topic. They are writing not just for the instructor, but also for their wider peer community at Yale-NUS. Faculty value the singular experiences, creative thinking, and knowledge each student brings and is invested in supporting each student in developing their unique ideas.

Emphasize that a piece of writing should always take shape around the writers’ own topic and ideas. Rather than seeing models, writing guides, and grading rubrics as checklists for what is required in student writing, encourage students to see these as offering methods and tools they can use to develop their own arguments. These elements of writing in a given discipline are designed to help the writer generate strong, creative thinking about the topic.

**Working with multilingual writers**

One of the strengths of Yale-NUS is the diversity of its students, particularly in the breadth of languages and cultural knowledge that students use to enrich their collective understanding of the Southeast Asian region and the world. However, sometimes this breadth of language experience can make it more challenging to adapt quickly to the rhetoric of Anglophone academic writing that generally serves standard for undergraduate work at Yale-NUS. Here are ideas to keep in mind when working with multilingual writers:

_Rhetorical expectations from another language can often unconsciously influence students’ writing in English._ As a result, how multilingual students approach writing elements like audience and structure can be shaped by the expectations for academic writing in another language and culture. The experience of reading such student writing can be confusing for instructors, who may be expecting students to employ rhetorical moves common in U.S. or British academic writing. Looking at models and previewing some of the rhetorical features you expect in student writing can help multilingual writers who face this challenge more quickly adjust to your expectations.

_The syntactic elements of another language can also subtly influence students’ English sentence structures._ If you find that students tend to be writing sentences overloaded with clauses or overflowing with awkward phrases, students may be unconsciously transferring the structures of other familiar languages into their writing in English. Doing a brief, 5-minute activity in which you ask students to revise at the sentence level can be helpful. A good guide for this kind of sentence-level revision is _Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace_ (5th edition) by Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup.

_If students make grammar errors, it is more impactful to identify the 1-2 mistakes that have the most significant impact on the clarity of the students’ writing than to line edit the students’ papers._ It is very tempting to line edit unclear writing, with the hope that the edits will serve as a model for future writing. However, most students will simply make the changes indicated
without taking the time to understand how and why they are making these mistakes. Instead, try this method:

- In your comments, explain the 1 or 2 most prevalent grammar errors (such as comma splices, subject-verb agreement errors, tense errors).
- Identify 1 sentence where the error occurs and correct it.
- Identify 1 other sentence where the error occurs, and suggest that students practice correcting it themselves.
- Make it clear that you expect the student to be able to identify and correct this issue in future assignments.

Discuss citation, plagiarism, and academic integrity

Because Yale-NUS’s standards for academic integrity may seem more robust than in their previous educational contexts, many Yale-NUS students express worry that they may inadvertently violate the College’s policies. Here are ways you can inform students and help them incorporate appropriate citation practices into their academic work:

- Most students see academic integrity as a set of rules they must not break. They often conceive of plagiarism as “stealing” others’ ideas. Instead, frame citation as a central part of the academic conversation. For example: “When we contribute to the academic conversation, we need to recognize the ideas contributed by others in the field. Citation allows us to acknowledge others’ contributions and show how we developed our ideas in conversation with others.”
- Reiterate that you are interested in work that reflects the students’ original ideas, not what they think the “right” answer is.
- Frame plagiarism as students denying themselves the opportunity to learn. Writing is an opportunity for learning; if they don’t write their own work, they are losing the opportunity to process and better understand what they are learning.
- Give students direct guidance on how to cite for your discipline. Identify a resource they can use to learn the citation style you prefer. Share with them the Library’s resources: https://library.yale-nus.edu.sg/avoiding-plagiarism/
- Provide examples of how to appropriately cite evidence in a paper. It may be helpful to create a handout with the original passage being cited, an example of an improper incorporation of the evidence into a student’s paper, and example of a proper incorporation of evidence. (For an example, see this discussion of fair paraphrase for a psychology paper from the Yale Writing Center website: https://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism/fair-paraphrase.) Talk over these examples in class.
- For more resources on helping students use sources, see the Yale CTL website: https://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources