

## Shelley's Quick Guides for Writing Teachers: Designing Designing and Teaching a Class Session

1. **Provide preparation time and guidance to increase class-time accomplishments**
  - a. Assign short written homework on higher-order concepts that can become the basis for in-class work
  - b. Use short in-class writing tasks, think-pair-share opportunities, or open-note quizzes to help students focus their thoughts before a session or activity begins
  - c. Provide discussion questions in advance, or tell students to all think for 15-30 seconds before you call on the first person for an answer
2. **Set a few key teaching goals for yourself, and a few key learning goals for students, for each activity or session**
  - a. Teaching goals are the aspects you have some control over: the level of interaction that you want students to engage in, the mood or energy level you want to try to generate (quiet/serious, playful/active), the topics you want addressed during an activity or session
  - b. Learning goals are what you will support students in taking away from an activity or session: increased understanding of X, better abilities in Y, new skills at Z
  - c. You and students may make gains beyond the key goals, but you need to have a baseline so you can judge when and whether the activity/class is being (mostly) successful
3. **Make your expectations and reasons clear to students**
  - a. Let students know what you'll be doing before you do it (unless surprise is a necessary part of the learning) so that they come to it mentally prepared for the learning
  - b. Explain to students why/how their tasks or assignments are helping them learn to write better, so that they see how to connect pieces of learning to their own work as writers
  - c. Alternately, ask students if they can tell you how an activity or class session has relevance to their writing projects, to help them learn to become responsible for self-guided learning
4. **Hold students accountable**
  - a. Require and collect short but relevant homework when you need students to have read or prepared something in order for a particular class session to go well
  - b. Don't "go over" the previously assigned reading: instead, require students to put it to use in an assignment, activity, or discussion
  - c. When possible (unless you're short on time), start a "mini-lecture" or presentation by asking what students already know about an issue or topic: this step values their knowledge, lets you know what they already know accurately that you may not need to "cover," helps you see what mis-knowledge you may need to correct, and engages students in the process of building the knowledge base
  - d. Give individuals or groups specific tasks (written on a board or screen) to be accomplished in a specific amount of time
  - e. Grade or evaluate some homework and in-class work, especially early in the semester: collect and check-mark it, rubber-stamp it "present" in class, require all members of a group to write the group's work and turn it in, call on students to read aloud or present at the board, count online discussion-board posts as Honors/Satisfactory/Zero (with or without commenting on them).

5. **Keep students engaged in learning**
  - a. Provide time and information for organization and adaptation: present instructions clearly first, in a visible written format, and make clear the process and amount of time you think students should take to set up their tools, partners, and/or first steps, so that they can move quickly into learning mode and stay there
  - b. Make the first step easy, so that students start with learning rather than with delays: a question everyone can answer, a sentence everyone can write, a link everyone can find, a connection everyone will say “aha!” about
  - c. For individual or group-work tasks, assign more than most students will accomplish during the allotted time (six questions when you only need them to accomplish three) so that while your slowest group is nearly finishing the core work, your fast group is still engaged in meaningful learning; learn to keep an eye out for “finished” students or groups whom you can encourage to take a second look at an earlier step
  - d. Don’t always have groups “report out” on their findings, which can take an “everyone’s engaged” session back to “one person’s talking and 18 are distracted.” Alternately: go to “mixed groups” (from AAAA BBBB CCCC DDDD to ABCD ABCD ABCD ABCD) and have members tell their new group what their old group found; have all groups write their top findings on a board or online post and then read and respond to another group’s findings; or have them turn in their findings to you and simply move on to the next discussion/activity, with perhaps a brief summary from you, if the learning has mostly been accomplished within the groups.
  - e. In full-class discussion, ask questions with multiple answers and gather those answers—perhaps visibly collecting them on a board or screen—before asking the class to help you decide on better or worse choices, to involve as many voices as possible in the process. Toss questions back out to everyone (“write for 30 seconds” or “ask a partner about X”) to bring all learners back into learning mode.
  
6. **Create time for practice, application, and sharing linked to students’ own writing**
  - a. Open a class session with writing or journaling about students’ own projects, and explain how the work of the class session will contribute to their ongoing work on their project
  - b. Explicitly design activities to use topics or examples from (some) students’ current projects, or ask students to follow-up the practice examples by trying out an approach with an argument, supporting example, introductory strategy, secondary source, or genre option related to their project.
  - c. Assign “zero drafts,” rants, sh---y first drafts, or proposals very early in the writing process so that students always have an early draft with them to which they can turn and practice a strategy you’ve just discussed, or which they can share with a peer for feedback about how they have already practiced that strategy
  - d. Once students have tried out a strategy, leave time for directed feedback, if not from you than from a peer—not so much because the feedback they give one another will be accurate, but because the process of their learning to identify whether a strategy has been well or poorly implemented “in real life,” not in a textbook example, is a crucial stage in the learning process, and your guidance as students review each others’ tryouts will help solidify the learning you’re seeking from them
  
7. **Draw connections explicitly to support transfer, so that students used to “learning for the moment” learn to learn for the long haul**
  - a. Explicitly draw connections for students between an activity and their own writing projects: how does Zombie Attack Survival Plan help them write a thesis about factory-style pig farms?
  - b. Explicitly draw connections for students between last week’s work and this week’s work: how does all the thinking about paragraphs relate to all the thinking about critical reading?
  - c. Explicitly draw connections for students between rules and rhetoric: why is MLA

citation or having a topic sentence related to a writer's purpose or audience or disciplinary context?

- d. Explicitly draw connections for students between Project 1 and Project 2, and between FYC and their writing elsewhere: a thesis isn't a thesis isn't a thesis, and yet it is; an essay isn't a memo isn't a lab report, and yet writers can transfer problem-solving strategies from one to the next

## 8. Balance routine and high-octane activities

- a. Use high-octane activities (Harry Potter Source Evaluation, Speed Date: Thesis Night) for high-octane purposes: to generate energy, to emphasize a point you want students to remember, to gain students' enthusiasm and trust in you and your class, to engage a range of learning styles
- b. Remember the disadvantages of high-octane activities: the time it takes to plan them and fit them into your curriculum, the timing and in-class management challenges, the time it takes to redirect students' attention to writing-learning afterwards
- c. Remember the advantages of routine activities, like individual writing/posting, small group analysis of a text or section, mini-peer-review, reverse-outlining: students are writing or focused on writing/reading, traditional-age learners often benefit from learning in repeated routines, returning-to-school learners often respect more "serious" learning activities, multilingual learners often have more time to adapt to the learning activity, you have less prep time and more time for consulting with groups/individuals in class
- d. Design your class sessions to meet your learning goals and your students' needs, not someone else's standards about precisely how "fun" every day of learning to write in a college classroom should or should not be

## 9. Stay ready to adjust your initial plans to match your and your students' needs

- a. Have a back-up plan: know what you can cancel if an activity starts to run long and you really want it to keep going; keep a handout or a freewrite topic handy for the class that inexplicably suddenly is running 15 minutes short or has an activity crash-and-burn; practice in the mirror for your best "Ok, we're going to just need to stop this and do something else, right? Right." approach.
- b. Be ready to allow for difference, or perhaps to tinker. Class groups are less predictable than weather fronts: what worked at 9:30 may not work (the same) at 10:30; what worked for your mentor may not work (as well) in your class; what worked for you last year may go completely differently for you next year; what flies smoothly in one peer group is likely to befuddle another peer group. It might be something you're doing; it might not: all you can control is how you respond—which needs to be with patience (sometimes students just need time to figure it out, or to get used to it not being their favorite thing), an alternative question, additional instructions, another example on the board/screen, advice from the group across the room, and/or even just your sympathy.
- c. You don't need to provide 20 classes for 20 students, but you might sometimes create class sessions that allow for differentiated learning: a menu of invention, inquiry, or revision activities for students to choose from depending on their writing stage; different assignments for small groups arranged by progress, topic choice, or engagement-levels; a set of tasks for all students to work on while you "mini-conference" with individual students on their thesis statements or revision plans.
- d. Don't chase your students; instead, as needed, consider changing the class structure around them. The quiet class won't become more talkative if you pursue and pressure them and beg them to talk; the three always-with-an-in-your-face-question students won't usually become charmingly, quietly engaged if you either confront or try valiantly to ignore them. But you can switch the class structure to see if that helps learning continue without the frustrations: maybe your quiet class will work productively in paired activities for a week or so and build some interactive comfort level; maybe you can start class with journaling and analyzing

activities rather than open discussion to break the rhythm of the Q&A bunch (or meet with them individually outside of class).

10. **Raise the bar as the semester/term proceeds**

- a. Particularly in a class of first-semester college students, you can guess that they might need some practice in becoming responsible, regular participants in their own education, so a structured but low-stakes environment in the early weeks can help build community and learn about your expectations.
- b. You can expect more from your students' in-class contributions as the semester/term proceeds: use more follow-up questions ("can you give a more specific example of that?"), ask for more in-depth written responses in group tasks, explain that peer review comments need to provide a wider range of suggested solutions to assist writers in your community. If you inform students that you are making changes because they have reached a level where you believe they're ready to "step up," they can often make those steps with you.
- c. You can design your own activity sequences to use a slightly steeper learning curve as you get to know your students' abilities: homework questions can push students to think a little harder, mini-lectures can push more toward rhetorical complexity or critical thinking, class activities can still start with an easy task but move into more thought-provoking ventures.