

Essential Goals for First-Year Writing Courses

Writing Program, Department of English, IUSB

The first-year writing program is designed to help students improve abilities vital to academic success: understanding and interpreting college level readings, explaining their own ideas in relation to the readings, and focusing those ideas into source-based, thesis-driven, well-organized, and well-edited four-page papers. The following guidelines identify those core goals and will be used to evaluate student writing in each of the three first-year writing courses W031, W130, and W131. Teachers apply the guidelines with increasing rigor as students move through this sequence of courses. Other aspects of writing also play into the evaluation of student writing, but overall these guidelines define the central goals of the first-year writing program.

The first six of these guidelines are central to the assessment of each student's essays. The final three guidelines address behaviors and practices essential for a student's productive participation in the many activities of each course. Additional guidelines may be added to specific courses and by individual instructors.

Six guidelines for evaluating papers:

- 1. Reading actively.** Successful essays show the student writer's ability to understand, explain, and analyze the course readings. Active reading goes beyond summarizing readings or class discussion by giving detailed analyses of quotations and using ideas from the readings to make larger points.
- 2. Developing a set of ideas.** Successful essays elaborate confidently on the writer's own ideas, on ideas from the readings, and on the relationships between them. These ideas are developed through detailed examples and analysis to create substantial and sustained explorations of the assigned topics. Because we value thorough and detailed investigation of issues, revised essays in W130 and W131 need to be at least four pages long; some W031 papers may also be that long, and the research paper in W131 will be longer. All finished papers will be in MLA format.
- 3. Connecting texts.** Successful essays discuss how one reading relates to (confirms, contradicts, complicates) another reading and the student writer's own experience (if the student wishes to include it). Because of this, most paragraphs incorporate evidence (key terms, ideas, examples) from two or more readings primarily through direct quotation supplemented by summary, paraphrase, and/or implicit references. Effective paragraphs establish relationships between different readings by testing theories and examples from one reading against theories and examples from another and by drawing conclusions about the significance of those relationships.

4. **Creating a thesis or theory.** Successful essays have a theory—sometimes called a thesis, an argument, or a controlling idea—that establishes the main issue, problem, or question to be explored in the essay and helps the writer to develop a response to that issue, problem, or question throughout the essay. Because each paragraph considers a new piece of evidence or a fresh perspective in relation to the theory, it provides focus and momentum to the essay.
5. **Organizing an essay and guiding a reader.** Successful essays guide readers through a well reasoned line of thought by providing transitions from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph and by showing how paragraphs build on one another, adding to the overall development of the theory.
6. **Editing for correctness and clarity.** Successful essays have only occasional passages with unclear wording or errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and formatting. They show that the student has worked throughout the semester to identify his or her patterns of error and has learned to correct them. In W130 the ability to edit independently must also be demonstrated in the final hand-written, in-class writing.

Three guidelines essential to productive classroom participation:

1. **Responding constructively to writing by class members.** Reading each other's work with insight and giving thoughtful responses contribute to students' development as writers and thinkers. Successful written responses are respectful but honest; they advance a classmate's revision process, often by bringing new insight from the readings or from personal experience.
2. **Revising and rethinking.** Successful thinkers and writers reevaluate their work. Such openness can be shown by changing successive drafts to bring in new ideas and examples, to discuss a reading more closely, and to show reconsideration of an idea in light of a new reading and feedback from classmates.
3. **Participating through involvement in classroom work.** Successful academic work is done in collaboration with others, a commitment which can be shown by regular attendance, having work ready on the day it will be discussed, and participating in class work. See the English Department attendance policy.