

The Writing Assistant Program at Carleton: Some Ways Faculty Can Integrate Writing Assistants in Writing-Rich Courses

Writing Assistants promote active dialogue between writers and readers and encourage peers to see revision as a crucial part of all successful writing. WAs focus on helping students write more clearly and effectively, but they do not grade papers. Assistants are not expected to be a specialist in the subject area of the courses in which they work, and are not expected to answer questions about the course content; such questions should be referred to the professor. Instead, WAs make suggestions for revision and talk with student writers about how to express their ideas as effectively as possible.¹

1. Require students to turn in drafts of assigned papers to the WA at least two weeks before the papers are due for a grade. During those two weeks, the WA reads drafts and holds individual conferences with students. After students and the WA meet for their one-to-one writing conferences, students revise their papers and submit to the instructor for evaluation both the first draft with and the final, revised draft.
2. Require every student in the course to meet with the WA concerning at least one draft of one paper during the course of the term.
3. Ask students to turn in portions of long papers to WAs well before the due date so writers obtain feedback along the way rather than waiting until the last minute to write a paper.
4. Ask the WA to conduct in-or out-of-class workshops to help students brainstorm topics and discuss the writing assignment. Students benefit from hearing how their peers are making sense of the assignment and responding to it. You might also require each student to visit with the WA to brainstorm ideas for a paper, or to bring a tentative thesis paragraph for feedback and discussion.
5. Encourage students to meet with the WA to go over outlines for an upcoming paper.
6. Require your students to meet with the WA to discuss their rough drafts of the first paper, and then at least once more during the course of the term.
7. If you allow students to revise a graded paper, encourage them to visit with the WA to compare the graded paper (with your comments) with the revision.
8. Ask the WA to act as a peer-review group facilitator. Students exchange rough drafts in class and then respond to them in writing according to your evaluation criteria. Students then bring the drafts and their comments to a small peer-review group; the WA asks the students to share their revision suggestions with one another in conversation.
9. Ask WAs to comment in writing on students' drafts with the goal of focusing on how well the draft fulfills the evaluation criteria for the assignment. Then the WA meets individually

¹ Slightly modified from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's online Writing Assistant handbook: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/wf/handbookwf/overview.html>.

with the students to revision strategies. As they read, WAs will keep in mind what you tell them about your goals for individual paper assignments as well as the general principles they learn during new-consultant training. However, they will not necessarily be specialists in your discipline, and thus they will not be in a position to evaluate the course-specific content of papers.

10. Ask the WA to hold regular office hours, and require students to set up conferences with the WA once or twice during the course of the term. Tell students that how they use their conference time is up to each individual (brainstorming, getting feedback on a thesis paragraph, asking for feedback about evidence/support for an argument, etc.).

The Thirty-Hour Guideline

Writing Assistants' work contracts are for three hours per week, which means they have thirty hours per term to support your class.

Some Issues That WAs and Professors Might Want to Discuss

1. What are the evaluation criteria for writing in the course? Do the criteria change from paper to paper, or do they stay the same?
 - Does the professor want the WA to work with students on different aspects of writing for each paper (e.g., thesis, developing a question/problem, thinking critically about the assumptions the writer is making, thinking critically about and integrating evidence/support for an argument, identifying conclusions/implications/consequences of the argument, organization/flow, etc.)?
2. How far in advance of a due date (for a rough draft and/or a final draft) should students meet with the WA to discuss a piece of writing? (What would be most feasible for the WA and prof., as well as the students?)
3. Will the WA be involved with all writers in the class for every paper, or just some?
4. Will students be required or just encouraged to meet with the WA?
5. What is the WA's course schedule like? (Are there weeks when it's possible to work more than 3 hours?)
6. How often should the WA come to class? (Attending class "counts" as work hours.)
7. Can the WA be added to a class email list, so s/he can email students about office hours, sign-up times for conferences, etc.?