

## Writing in First Year Seminar (Spring)

Student writing has long been an important component of First Year Seminar. As a common course for all incoming students, and with its overall focus on developing students' skills of interpretation, analysis, and argumentation, FYSEM offers us a particular opportunity to help students become more confident and accomplished writers at an important point in their college trajectory. FYSEM cannot accomplish everything; it cannot make students "perfect" writers by the end of their first year in college, nor can it -- or should it -- prepare students for writing in specific disciplines. But it should help students develop skills that are foundational for writing across many fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences, on which the rest of their college education will build. Perhaps most crucially, it should set them up with certain important habits and practices that they will carry with them beyond their first year and even beyond Bard.

In consultation with the Dean of the College, the Institute for Writing and Thinking, the Center for Faculty and Curricular Development, and the Bard Learning Commons, we have developed a suggested sequence of writing assignments over the course of the two semesters of First Year Seminar. We encourage you to adopt the suggested assignment structure for the spring in broad outline and personalize in your teaching. In brief, we have decided to move away from a traditional model in which students write a series of 5-page papers over the course of the year. Instead, we envision a more gradually calibrated trajectory comprising three primary writing assignments that will be assessed, graded, and receive feedback. Our decision is informed by the following broad observations:

- ***Students come to College with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences***

We have heard repeatedly from a wide range of colleagues across the College, and have faced in the course of our own teaching at Bard, the following question: How can we ensure that students who arrive at the College with very different educational experiences confidently and effectively acquire the tools of critical reading and writing that will allow them to make the most out of the intense seminar-style setting that defines Bard teaching? Our typical seminar-style setting creates challenges for both faculty and students. Because seminars rely on discussion, a self-assured student may dominate a discussion based on a cursory glance at the assigned reading. Another student will dedicate considerably more time and effort to scrutinizing a text but will not readily possess the vocabulary or the skill that would allow them to articulate an analytical stance on its finer points in writing or in conversation with their peers. The Fall semester of FYSEM introduced analytical writing gradually, through a first reflective portfolio assignment and then two increasingly long critical essays, in an attempt to overcome these challenges and prepare members of the incoming class for a certain shared level of depth in engaging with their coursework in the following semesters.

- ***An individual student is not the same writer at the beginning and end of the first year***

The gradual sequence of assignments takes into account the simple fact that a year is a long time in the life of any writer's development, especially a first-year college student. We aim to give students the room and opportunity for growth, emphasizing different skills into the writing process at different points along the way. Moreover, at Bard there is another trajectory to consider, which is curricular. In the Fall, the first assignment was tied closely to the methodologies of L&T in order to create a smooth transition. In the Spring, we assume that students are ready (to differing extents) to dive into analytical work, and that they would benefit at the end of the year from a broader reflection on the many common elements of the first-year academic experience.

- *The best writers -- and indeed, all professional writers -- constantly revise and edit their work, and reflect critically upon their own progress*

Built into all three assignments below is the opportunity for students to revise their work through multiple drafts and therefore learn, through constant practice, the important art of refining and clarifying one's ideas. Too often students think that "revision" means simple copy-editing, rather than an opportunity to make significant and substantive improvement to their work. Many sections of FYSEM will be working with a Writing Fellow, upper-college students who are specially selected and trained by Jim Keller, Director of the Learning Commons, to help students with the revision process. If you are not working with a Writing Fellow -- or indeed, if you want to incorporate further means of revision into your class -- you might consider having students offer feedback on each other's work (peer review, for which there are handouts on the FYSEM faculty Moodle site), or offering your own feedback on multiple drafts of an assignment.

- *"Writing" is not a single monolithic practice, but comprised of many different attempts, moments, and phases, any and all of which can be generative*

As Bard's FYSEM faculty know, from teaching Montaigne for many years, "essay" means "attempt." Our first-year students, during L&T and the first semester of FYSEM, will have also learned an approach to writing that foregrounds "thinking through writing" and encourages them to write freely and often as a way of generating ideas. We hope that faculty will encourage students to informally generate ideas through writing, above and beyond the three formal, graded essays. This can be achieved through various means, including:

- In-class writing assignments: Instructors write a question on the blackboard in class, ask students to write about it for five or so minutes, and then have them share their thoughts. This can be an effective way to jumpstart a discussion in the beginning of a class or to reflect upon what has been covered at its conclusion.
- Ask students to keep a reading journal in which they jot down ideas that they then draw upon for more formal writing assignments (instructors collect the journals periodically or allow students to keep them private, as you wish).
- Creating a Moodle forum where students write a paragraph before class (whether in response to a specific prompt from you, in the form of a completely open response, or by having students pose a question about the text that they would like to discuss in class). These tend to work best when students are asked to write by a specific deadline ahead of time (e.g. 5pm the evening before class), so the instructor can look at the responses in advance and work them into the lesson plan.

For 22 ways to incorporate exploratory writing into your classroom, see the handout from Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, on the faculty Moodle site.

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### **Suggested Assignment Sequence for Spring 2020**

**Assignment 1 of 3: Constructing a concise argument** (a model of this assignment is included below, and on the faculty Moodle site)

- Focus texts: Shelley, Rousseau
- Weeks 3-4: Writing; Weeks 5-6: Revision
- Total pages: 5-6

At the beginning of the semester, students will write a relatively short critical essay focused on the first assigned texts, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and/or Rousseau's *Discourse*. Sample prompts can be distributed, but if faculty have encouraged students to generate their own ideas and questions during the first couple of weeks before the formal assignment is given, students can also be asked to develop their own question about the text. A sample assignment is given on p. 19-21 of this document.

### **Assignment 2: Deepening your critical voice**

- Focus texts: Douglass, Marx, Woolf, Freud, Dickinson, Whitman
- Weeks 7-9: Writing; Weeks 10-12: Revision
- Total pages: 8-10

During the middle weeks of the semester, the students will be asked to write the longest and most ambitious critical essay that they have attempted during the first year. This essay builds on the thesis-driven approach of spring assignment #1. In addition, it asks students to write about more than one text, considering how a single idea, question, or theme is treated differently in these different works. Thus, they are challenged to develop their ability to synthesize ideas as well as to control and sustain an argument over a longer paper. **We recommend that this paper be weighted more than the others in the final grade, since it is the longest and most challenging assignment.** A sample assignment will be distributed nearer the time.

### **Assignment 3: Critical and personal reflection**

- Focus texts: Homer, *Odyssey*
- Weeks 13-14: Writing; Weeks 15-16 (into completion days): Revision
- Total pages: 5-6

During the last few weeks of the semester, students will be asked to move into a different genre of writing, which interweaves personal and critical reflection on the course as a whole, and the first-year academic journey at large. This is a kind of writing they will be familiar with from L&T and the Fall semester of FYSEM, but which is also meaningful and constructive as a way of wrapping up the end of the first year. Homer's *Odyssey*, which encapsulates many of the themes of the course—especially journeys and self-knowledge—and which returns us, in an act of ring composition, to the beginning of the literary tradition, is a highly appropriate text on which to base such an assignment. A sample assignment will be distributed nearer the time.

## Some Advice

Here are a few additional practices and ideas that many Bard faculty find to be helpful:

- **Individual Meetings:** It can be helpful, at least once a semester, to meet with each student individually to go over his or her work. Such meetings are often most productive if instructors do not just reiterate the comments they made on the paper but, rather, engage in conversation with the students. If the student's thesis was weak, for example, the instructor can ask for a reiteration of the argument and then perhaps challenge it ("I am going to play the devil's advocate here"), to get the student to refine what he or she is saying. When the student does succeed in complicating the argument, the instructor can then pivot back to the paper by saying, "This is what you could have said in the essay." Students appreciate it when instructors show a genuine interest in what they are thinking.

- **Grammar and Style:** Some students have no serious problems with grammar or style. Other students do have serious problems. It is disheartening for those students to receive papers back covered in ink, with every error corrected. Instead of appreciating their instructors' assiduousness, they are likely to block out the criticism. It is more effective for the instructor to identify the one or two major patterns in the student's errors and to ensure that the student can recognize this pattern. If one merely circles these errors, one can ask the student to correct them and to resubmit the paper, perhaps for a better grade. It is worth keeping in mind that, by this point in students' educations, the mistakes they are making have often been corrected by high school teachers—sometimes many times. For that reason, it is important to hold them accountable for the mistakes by giving them the responsibility of correcting them themselves and avoiding them in the next essay.

If a significant number of students in a class make the same grammatical and stylistic mistakes on their papers, it can be worthwhile to spend a few minutes writing mock sentences on the blackboard and asking them to identify and correct the errors. The most common mistakes Bard students make are run-on sentences; dangling modifiers; the use of contractions; the use of "however" and other adverbial expressions as conjunctions; and awkward shifts between impersonal pronouns.

Students are often silently (or not silently) resistant to attending to grammar and style. They think that these are superficial concerns, in contrast to their ideas about the text, which are of interest to them. It can be helpful to acknowledge that they are indeed superficial concerns, but superficial concerns can be important: if they wear a dirty t-shirt and jeans to an interview, for example, they might be less likely to get the job.

- **Tone of Comments:** Students will be more receptive to instructors' comments if they are phrased constructively. It is helpful to present comments as suggestions for areas to work on, not as explanations of what went wrong. Again, students appreciate it if instructors engage with their ideas instead of just criticize them. What is interesting in what the student was getting at? How could the student further develop the best part of the paper?

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## Other Resources on College Writing

**Jim Keller** (x 7051, [keller@bard.edu](mailto:keller@bard.edu)) is the Director of the Learning Commons. He helps students work on their writing. He arranges for writing fellows, trains them, and works with faculty to ensure the effectiveness of this program. He also supervises peer writing consultants, who provide feedback to students about their papers on a drop-in basis. For students who need additional assistance with their writing, the Learning Commons offers courses on "Intensive ESL," "Grammar for Writers," and "Essay

and Revision.” In August, the Language and Thinking instructors identify the students who would benefit from taking one of these courses in the Fall semester and have them steered in this direction. In November, First Year Seminar instructors are also asked to recommend students who would be well advised to take one of these courses in the spring.

**Erica Kaufman** (x 7383, [kaufman@bard.edu](mailto:kaufman@bard.edu)) is the Director of the Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT). IWT, the umbrella institute of Language & Thinking, offers professional development workshops focused on working with teachers to develop and refine writing practices with the goal of enlivening and enriching classroom learning through writing. The philosophy and the practice of IWT are one: writing is both a record of completed thought and an exploratory process that supports teaching and deepens learning across disciplines. IWT's workshops and writing-to-learn pedagogical practices are interdisciplinary, practical, and experiential so that workshop content is easily transferable into classroom practice. All Bard faculty are welcome to attend any of IWT's on campus workshops free of charge. Erica is teaching FYSEM in the spring and more than happy to discuss low stakes (informal) writing strategies and assignments throughout the year.