

# Faculty and Writing at NPU: An Explanation from the Writing Coordinator

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“I need to make a confession,” said the professor. “I don’t consider myself a writing teacher, and I’ll admit that sometimes I’ve sat here, listening pretty skeptically to those of you who do, talk about writing to get class conversation going. I couldn’t see that writing on the spot would be of any use. But today I was utterly desperate in my Dialogue class. *Nothing* I did could get them talking. As a very last resort, I finally tried something you guys have recommended for a couple of years but I never thought made much sense—I made the whole class write on a particular question for 10 minutes. And, you know, it *worked*—after those 10 minutes, they had thought of something to talk about.”

This incident implies two different approaches to the role of writing in a liberal arts education. One—the more usual outside of composition classrooms and writing centers—presumes that “writing” is something done to produce formal assignments for a grade, usually outside of the usual frameworks of class meetings. The other looks for ways to integrate the functions of writing into daily learning processes. To understand what we mean by “writing” in the North Park educational goals and curriculum, it would be helpful to clarify our use of the term right from the start. Our approach is most likely somewhat different from the approach through which most of us ourselves learned to write, and that has implications for our teaching. Understanding how writing fits into the NPU curriculum can make our teaching job easier; moreover, the more clearly all faculty understand the goals and standards of writing expected of students, the more seamless we can make our entire curriculum.

When we refer to “writing,” we are using the term very broadly; we are not concerned merely about grammatical, linguistic, or syntactic correctness. We are even more concerned about energy and preciseness of thinking and about connecting thinking to clear logic and use of

language. Formal writing instruction at NPU is integrated into Core Curriculum classes rather than delegated to discrete composition classes. The Core Curriculum works at all three levels of the old *trivium* disciplines—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—though teaching and exercising writing skills are the responsibility of the whole faculty. Trained student Writing Advisors work alongside of students enrolled in Core Curriculum courses; they function primarily as sympathetic first readers of drafts who can give writers targeted feedback on their drafts, though they may lend assistance at any point of the process of putting papers together. Since WA's are undergraduate students and may themselves be enrolled in Exploring courses or Capstone Seminars, their role is close to that of a genuine peer, and their work is a form of collaborative learning. In addition to our work with Core Curriculum classes, we also run a "drop-in center" where students in any undergraduate class may come to consult on their writing projects.

The NPU Writing Center's primary function is to support all undergraduate students in learning how to use writing in their general learning purposes. We are not primarily a remedial service; we work with students at *all* levels of competence, on the principle that *all* writers benefit from hearing how sympathetic readers engage with their writing and that *all* writers, including (and even especially) professionals, don't produce good prose without substantial revision. Conferencing with WA's helps even good writers to focus their thinking and to learn a more varied field of questions to ask their own work. Letting students know that conferring on their writing is a *normal* practice of good, professional writers helps them to get past what they might perceive as the stigma of seeking "tutoring." For those wishing a fuller discussion of the theoretical rationale behind this approach, a look at *Writing to Learn*, available on our Student Resources page, might be useful.

Faculty as well as students should understand that we are also not an editing service; we don't correct or edit student papers to make them easier to read but instead work with students to show

them how to improve their own editing and proofreading skills. It would be simpler for us if we did edit and proofread—teachers would be happy if the papers they need to read were all well-written, students would like to turn in better papers, and WA's wouldn't have to expend so much energy explaining why we don't edit or labor to explain quirks we've internalized about the peculiar language we live with.

We all live in a world of minds-in-progress, though, and learning to write well is part of that progress; students wouldn't learn much from handing in papers nicely edited by someone else—and a paper edited by someone else wouldn't be wholly the work of the student. Papers generally *will* be easier to understand and read when teachers receive them, but that's a coincidental bonus, not our primary goal. Our mission is to help students sort out and clearly articulate their thinking, sort out and reinforce their language skills, and recognize and retain the skills and strategies they can build upon in their next paper. Most papers do improve in quality, but they probably will not look like perfectly polished, fully correct pieces of writing. The “final product” a teacher sees could even look worse than the original; sometimes students who have long-established, smooth but hackneyed strategies of thinking or who resort to “safe” topics will produce much rougher-looking texts if they dare to depart from their old strategies—so there are times when students do really *need* to regress in order to progress. They deserve some recognition and credit for this sort of “progress,” because it *is* progress, no matter what the product looks like. A comparison of the drafts they worked over with WA's and the drafts they actually turned in can help to reveal not only their conclusions they reached or attempted to reach but the process by which they arrived at their conclusions. Asking students to turn in both drafts can provide very helpful insights to a teacher.

When we respond to a paper draft in our Core Curriculum conferencing or in the Writing Center, our first concern is with the focus and precision of the argument the paper advances, or, if no

argument is called for, with the main point upon which the paper is built. We see little point in beginning from grammatical correctness if, even in correct form, the prose has little to say, or if the student is likely to cut a great deal of material in order to concentrate their attention. We regard grammar as a service to the meaning of the argument: Ideally, nobody should notice the grammar of a piece of formal writing; the grammar should be transparent. George Orwell, whose rigorous concern for the English language led to one of the most influential modern essays on topic, understood the role of grammar in good writing this way: “. . . Defense of the English language . . . has nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one’s meaning clear . . . . What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word . . . .” (“Politics and the English Language,” 1946) Obviously, grammar which is so faulty that it obscures meaning needs work—but helping students to find meaning worth laboring to make clear also motivates them to put up with the humdrum tasks of learning grammar. If they care about what they’re saying, they can be induced to care about how they say it.

In the Writing Center and the Core Curriculum, we rank the importance of writing issues—for instance, helping a student to craft a clear, focused, and concrete thesis in an essay is a higher priority (usually) than local small details of form and correctness. That doesn’t mean that we ignore grammar—it just means that we talk more, and sooner, about issues related to substance, coherence, and arrangement than about most grammar issues. If a student’s grammar interferes substantially with intelligibility in her or his writing, we address one or two (three at the most) of those grammar issues which most substantially disrupt meaning. As in any form of learning, students can absorb and digest only a limited amount of information at once, so we usually do not address all grammar mistakes at once; we aim at helping students to understand and recognize their own habits and to move towards improved habits themselves.

This approach applies even to students who are not yet comfortable with any form of English or specifically with the dialect of English known to linguists as Standard American English (never mind the Edited American English which exists in academic settings). We tend to forget that "Standard" American English is, in fact, itself a dialect, and we sometimes treat it as an absolute "standard," taking its own situatedness in geography, culture, class, gender, and a host of other variables for granted. North Park has substantial populations of both new-acquisition English speakers and dialect speakers. Dialect speakers and even new-English speakers are frequently not using "poor grammar" but are, in fact, observing a distinct set of grammatical principles. They will need to learn to operate well in SAE in order to function well in American culture, and they will need to learn to discern the appropriate occasions for using varying levels of language, but they will do so most readily if we treat their language and dialect with respect and provide appropriate occasions for its use, so that they have occasion when they can speak and write freely (for example, in informal writing assignments). For a succinct summary of how linguists regard dialects, Stanford's John R. Rickford's "How Linguists Approach the Study of Language and Dialect" provides a clearly-written guide ([www.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/](http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/)). Rickford's *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (John R. and Russell John Rickford, NY: John Wiley, 2000) explains in terms understandable to non-linguists the history and structure of African-American Vernacular English; the dialect your particular students speak might be a different dialect, but the principles he recommends for working with AAVE speakers would work for other dialects as well. The primary principle to keep in mind when dealing with these students is that they're not necessarily being lazy; many of them are working harder than SAE speakers because they need to translate everything they hear and say into a different vocabulary and grammar, never mind into a different culture.

Taking this stance makes the fundamental presumption that "writing" is an activity, a process or conversation writers engage in, rather than an artifact produced to turn in to a teacher. We follow

a recursive process of global revision, line editing, and proofreading. To most entering students, solid substantive revision is a foreign concept—they think they’re revising when they’re just line-editing or proofreading—so we work hard in the Core Curriculum to model and instruct students how to revise. (The four basic strategies of good revisers: limit focus; add information; switch or transform sequence, perspective, or point of view; cut irrelevant or tangential material.) The aim is to convey the presumption that even a “final draft” is merely a snapshot of where their thinking is at a particular moment—an attitude which intends to foster the further presumption that learning doesn’t stop when the paper does. To regard writing as a process reduces the pressure to make writing a paper a perfect and complete performance (which lessens the temptation to write safe commonplaces) and instead posits writing as investigative and exploratory—as a useful set of strategies for learning and thinking. This can mean that the very process of writing can be useful in teaching and learning, in various ways; not all writing needs to result in a formal, graded assignment, and formal assignments work best when they’re organically related to your teaching and to your students’ learning processes.

How did we decide upon this approach? The short answer is that much of the best research in composition and writing center theory, pedagogy, and practice have been pointing in this direction for about 40 years. Moreover, unlike many institutions, *all* writing-related programs and instruction at NPU are developed collaboratively among the faculty at large, and the writing program and the Writing Center are lodged in the same institutional corner; our Writing Coordinator is responsible for both program development and for running the Writing Center. The title “Coordinator” is significant: Several years ago, the faculty at large voted to accept joint responsibility for teaching our students how to write. The burden of formal instruction may have fallen upon faculty teaching Dialogue 1 and 2, and now those teaching the Core Curriculum courses, and the Writing Coordinator may have particular responsibility for designing,

monitoring, and supporting types and uses of writing instruction, but all faculty have accepted a share in developing our students' writing abilities.

Non-Core Curriculum faculty contribute to university writing goals in several ways. They can model and require sound writing, craft well-written hand-outs and formal writing assignments which exercise students' writing and thinking skills, make use of Writing Center resources and encourage (or even require) students to use them, and use informal writing strategies as teaching strategies; these all help students to understand that writing can be a learning skill *they* can use for their own learning goals. The Core Curriculum program also sponsors a faculty seminar each spring, open to all faculty members though originally designed for Dialogue faculty, which introduces strategies and theory of writing pedagogy, for any NPU faculty member who wishes to think more deliberately about using writing to teach.

But above all, you can help to establish and maintain high standards of writing, reasoning, and arguing. In past years, the single loudest complaint in student feedback about Dialogue 1 was “I don't need to work this hard at writing anywhere else on campus, so why should I have to work this hard in Dialogue?” This perception may or may not be true—as we know, students notoriously misjudge teachers, because they don't always register pedagogical strategies and goals. But contrary to the reasoning behind this complaint, we think the appropriate strategy would be to raise the level of expectations across campus rather than ease them in the Core Curriculum. To assess how your expectations stack up against expectations of your colleagues, look over the grade criteria used in the Core Curriculum and the sample essays and their commentary. At the present moment, our cache of essays is limited to examples from first-year courses, but we plan to expand our collection across disciplines and levels of sophistication.

So how does this work practically? Topics traditionally taught in dedicated freshman composition classes are not neglected in the Core Curriculum but have been redistributed over more than one core class; students encounter fewer but more intensive writing-related concepts and tasks at each level of the Core Curriculum and, presumably, in other classes they will have encountered the need to develop their writing skills. By focusing their learning tasks more narrowly, they can concentrate on learning and integrating those fewer tasks with some thoroughness—and therefore some hope of retention and even habituation. Students emerging from Cornerstone should be able to craft clear and coherent essays, but they will need more and wider experience in other classes to mature their writing.

It can be helpful to non-Core Curriculum faculty to know that, in the Core Curriculum, writing is taught not as an isolated subject but is taught in the context of learning about something else, as a means towards learning itself. The Core Curriculum's strategies, then, easily adapt to all classes. The Core Curriculum and the Writing Center use and invite the NPU faculty at large to promote varied forms of writing as learning strategies. The goal is to integrate writing instruction into our subject areas and into the community in which we're learning. Core Curriculum teachers aim not to sacrifice "coverage" of a subject in order to teach writing but to teaching their subject *by means of* writing strategies. Understanding how to make efficient use of this program will help you to network efficiently in this institution. The various links on this site are designed not only to explain our programs but also to provide practical suggestions, information, and teaching aids.