Some course material and class goals lend themselves to more highly structured class plans—more structured than the typical full-class discussion. This chapter provides nine tried-and-true plans, which cover a range of different goals and activities.

**Information Exchange**

For information exchange students read an assigned segment of course material at home and then present a summary of the readings in class to their classmates.

**When to Use It**

Information exchanges work very well when you are trying to cover a lot of information quickly and you think that students may not be doing all the reading (or at least not doing all of it very carefully). You are, in a sense, organizing a class study session, and it is often better to have the students learn the information this way than (1) have you lecture to them about it or (2) not learn it at all.

Students can teach each other, and they often learn a lot from it. You are not shirking your duties if students run the class according to a structure you have planned; you already have done plenty of work to create that situation. Smaller informational exchanges can be organized and completed in one class period, but it is usually more effective to have students prepare ahead of time so that they are ready to teach their classmates when they walk into class.

**Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant**

If students are supposed to read, for example, four articles that week, divide the class (or a subsection of the class) into four groups the week before (see “Debate” in this chapter for grouping strategies). Assign each group an article and tell them that the next week they will have a
certain amount of time (say, fifteen minutes) to help their classmates get the most out of that article. (Remind them that they must read all the articles; they will get more out of the next class if they do.) It often works well to require each group to have a handout for their classmates: it can summarize relevant information, provide questions for other students to answer, list important terms, and so forth. Tell them that if they get it to you the day before, you will copy it and have it ready for class.

**Advance Preparation for Students**

When you do this activity for the first time, prepare students for their fifteen minutes of teaching. Remind them that talking at their peers is not interesting and it will be much livelier if they can get the other students involved. Go so far as to suggest activities, such as pair work you have done as a class before, freewriting, or creating lists. Encourage them to make handouts that you will copy before class. Make yourself available to meet with the groups during office hours to go over their teaching plans. It also helps to remind students that they will be graded on the quality of their presentations.

**Steps for an Information Exchange**

1. Tell groups in what order they will present. You can organize this thematically or draw numbers out of a hat.

2. Have the presenting group move to the front of the room where they command attention. It never hurts to have students move around, and it makes them seem more like the leaders of the class.

3. Keep very close track of time so that you can get to all the presentations. You may want to make a warning “five minutes left” sign to flash at the presenters.

**Wrapping Up**

At the end of class, you need to synthesize all this information into a more coherent whole. Take a few minutes and talk to students about how their presentations fit together in a larger scheme and what the most important points are. This is a very appropriate time to lecture; they have not heard your voice for the entire class, and even with good
presentations, the students need to understand how the pieces fit together. And be sure to compliment them specifically on a job well done. Even when there are shortcomings in the presentations, you need to point out where students have succeeded. Students need to hear a balance of constructive criticism and encouragement from you.

Debate

When to Use It

Debates encourage students to challenge each other’s and their own thinking about controversial issues. While debating may seem like a gimmick, the ability to take information and construct a coherent, compelling argument is at the heart of a liberal arts education. Debates may be especially useful in cases in which you think that your students already have firm positions on an issue or when you want to encourage them to make a thoughtful argument for their position. Debates are also a good way for students to hear both sides of an argument where a full discussion might be stifled by students’ efforts to be politically correct. Debates are an excellent option when you want to spend less time preparing for class (e.g., during your own academic crunch periods).

Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant

To have a debate, you will need to divide students into two groups, each of which will argue for a particular position on the topic you choose. Before the debate, you will need to decide the topic and how you will divide your students into groups.

Examples

- Should marijuana be legalized?
- Should animals be used for testing possible human immunizations?
- Should U.S. citizens not born in the United States be allowed to run for president?

Advance Preparation for Students

You may want to remind your students to bring informational materials to class or to examine specific readings before class on the day you
are planning to hold a debate. But, because debating can seem like a
corny exercise, you may want to wait until the day you are planning to
hold a debate to tell students about this class plan. The longer they
know about it, the longer they have to decide that they may not feel like
participating.

**Grouping Strategies**

Here are several different strategies for dividing students into groups.

- Divide students into groups by having them number off. This can
  have the advantage of separating friends who usually sit next to
each other in class into different groups. Separating friends is a good
idea if you suspect that they will not stay on task or challenge each
other’s ideas if assigned to the same group.

- Decide before class which students you would like in each group.
  This method gives you an opportunity to create groups of students
who you think will work well together and to put at least one good
talker in each group.

- Ask students to divide themselves into two groups. This method
  may take more time than you want to spend, as students can be
slow to take initiative on this type of task.

- Divide the classroom down the middle. This method is efficient, but
  it gives you less control over who ends up in each group. The
advantage of “natural grouping” is that in these groups, students
are already comfortable talking among themselves.

**Steps for Debates**

1. Start by telling the class that you will begin today’s discussion with
a debate.

2. Divide the students into two groups. Once they are in groups, ask
each group to pick a “secretary” to record the group’s ideas. Assign
each group a position with regard to the debate topic.

3. Give them ten minutes to work together to come up with all of the
arguments that they can on behalf of their position. Remind the
secretary to take notes.
4. Give the groups a two minute warning so they know when they need to start wrapping up.

5. Pick one of the groups to start the debate and instruct the group that will be going first that it is to make the first point by stating and explaining one of its arguments for or against the issue at hand. For example, the first group might say, “Marijuana should be legalized because it can be used to treat some medical disorders,” and then briefly explain this position. Groups should select one or two speakers for each point.

6. Instruct the second group that they are to confer with each other and respond to the first group’s point. Once the second group responds, give the first group the opportunity to comment on the response.

7. Once the first point has been exhausted, ask the second group to offer a new point.

Throughout this process, it is your job to keep the debate running smoothly. Be sure the groups take turns in making and rebutting points and that no one group or student dominates the debate. You should decide when a point has been exhausted and when to raise a new one.

You also may encourage the students to take turns speaking for their group. For example, the members of each group may take turns stating each point or rebuttal. Be sure to give the groups time to confer with each other before they make or rebut a point if they need the time to consolidate their argument.

Once the debate is under way, you may go one of two ways with it. You do not need to decide in advance; see how the debate is progressing.

Option One

8. Continue the process of point making, responding, and rebutting for five to ten minutes. Allow this to go on long enough for each group to become involved in arguing carefully for its position but stop the debate before a majority of the important points have been raised.

9. Stop the debate, instruct the groups to reconvene, and ask each group to prepare to argue the opposite position of the one they just argued.
10. Give the groups five minutes to work out the opposing position and then start the debate in the same manner as before.

11. Allow the debate to continue as long as the groups are making thoughtful points but leave at least ten minutes at the end of class to wrap up.

By forcing the students to take the position opposite of the one they just debated, you expand their thinking and almost certainly force them to challenge some of the ideas they held before class. The downside of this format is that it can cut into a smoothly flowing debate.

**Option Two**

8. Allow the debate to continue until the groups make most of the significant points related to the issue at hand.

9. Stop the debate before your students seem bored with it or the debate activity begins to drag.

When students do not have to change their position on the issue, they may be able to think through one position thoroughly. In addition, by not stopping the debate midway, you allow it to follow a more natural course. The downside of this format is that your students may leave the classroom without challenging their own thinking about the issue.

Your decision to follow option one or option two may rest on the students’ familiarity with the material. Decide if the goal of the class is to generate as many ideas on the topic as possible or to generate a coherent, point-by-point argument on the topic.

**Wrapping Up**

After you stop the debate, have your students move back into their regular classroom positions. To help them reflect on the results of the debate, you have a few different options.

- Ask your students if they were surprised by any of the arguments or if they have changed their own views on the topic.

- Have your students go through the various points and group the arguments under appropriate headings. As you do this, explain to students how they can apply a similar process when constructing the argument for a paper.
• Have your students pick out fallacious or circular arguments. Find out why they think people would make those weak arguments.

• Focus on the politically incorrect arguments. Who makes these arguments? Are they completely wrong, or do they have elements of truth?

• Find the arguments that oppose each other. Talk about the importance of addressing opposing arguments when making a point.

• Find arguments without any clear opposition and discuss how you would argue against them.

• Acknowledge that these are complex issues that can have reasoned and thoughtful opposing arguments.

**Pros and Cons**

**When to Use It**

This is a particularly good exercise to use when you want to bring out a variety of opinions about a controversial topic but you do not have enough time or energy to stage a debate. Pros and Cons can be used to jump-start what you hope will be a more free-flowing discussion. Like debating, Pros and Cons allows students to voice a variety of opinions (even those that are not politically correct) without worrying about being held personally accountable for their views.

**Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant**

Before doing Pros and Cons in your classroom, you need to think of a controversial issue and write down in your class plan arguments on both sides of the issue. As with debates, pros and cons can help students see the many complex sides of an issue on which they may already have taken a firm position, thus helping them construct a more thoughtful, persuasive argument.

**Advance Preparation for Students**

The amount of preparation your students will need depends on the topic you have in mind. If you are covering a topic about which students will benefit from having factual information available to them (e.g., “Should Puerto Rico be made a U.S. State?”), you should encour-
age your students to review certain materials before they come to class. If you are covering a topic with which students are already familiar, you won’t need to give them advance warning.

**Steps for Pros and Cons**

1. Divide the board in half, and write PRO on one side and CON on the other.

2. Tell your students the controversial issue that you have in mind and ask them to come up with all of the arguments that someone might make for or against the issue. You can ask them to do this in pairs first and then share with the full class, or you can work with the full class.

3. Be sure that you ask students to give you all of the available arguments, as opposed to asking them their opinions on the topic. This way, students will be liberated to say things that they might otherwise worry will be held against them personally.

4. Write the arguments on the board as they are given to you by the students. Keep your own list in front of you so that you can add important points that the students leave out. You may have to make the first politically incorrect comment in order to get that side of the issue “on the board.” If you find your class tiptoeing around politically charged issues, be the first to say, for example, “Well, some people feel that Puerto Rico should not be made a state because most of its citizens are minorities.”

5. Continue until you feel both sides of the issue have been exhausted.

**Wrapping Up**

Once you have extensive lists for both sides of the issue, point out to your students that this is the process through which meaningful arguments (e.g., papers) are composed. They can use a similar process to generate ideas, choose a position, and organize an argument while considering plausible counterarguments. See “Wrapping Up” under “Debate” in this chapter for a list of suggested closing activities. The advantage with this class plan is that you have all the ideas on the board so that you can physically connect or group them with your chalk or pen.
Consolidating Lists

When to Use It

When you have a question with discrete, “listable” answers, this class plan can be an effective way to generate discussion. It works particularly well with a topic that seems at first glance too abstract to define but that can, in fact, be characterized (e.g., good writing). This exercise also helps students sift through and prioritize ideas and arguments. It is inherently artificial to ask students to come up with a certain number of answers; it is perfectly appropriate for you to recognize that fact when you introduce the activity, but it is not a reason to dismiss the exercise.

Examples

List ten characteristics of good writing.

List five possible arguments against the English Language Amendment.

List six potential flaws in a sociological study like the one in the article.

Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant

All you need to do ahead of time is think of the question, decide how many points to put on the list, and decide how many times you want to consolidate lists. You should also make your own list in your class plan so that you can be sure that students cover all of the points you think are important.

Steps for Consolidating Lists

1. Ask each student to get out a piece of paper and explain the list you would like them to create.

2. Give them five to ten minutes to complete their lists.

3. When all of the students have lists, put them in pairs and tell them to consolidate their two lists into one with the original number of items. They must, therefore, decide which items can be combined and which items are more important than others.

4. Optional: next, put the pairs into groups of four and ask them to consolidate the two lists into one. At this point, they will begin to identify common threads. You also can ask them to rank these elements in order of importance.
Wrapping Up

The easiest way to bring this exercise back to a full-class discussion is to create a class list on the board. With you as the transcriber, ask each group to provide one or two items for the master list. Once you reach the designated number, ask for additional items; as a class, determine whether they should displace or be combined with an item already on the board. When the list is finished, you can talk to the class about how this exercise proves how much shared knowledge we do or do not possess about what is important or characteristic of this given issue.

You also can use any of the suggested activities in “Wrapping Up” under “Debate” in this chapter.

Video Presentation

Before you plan the viewing of a video into your syllabus, check with the media center at your institution to learn the policy for showing films in the classroom for educational purposes.

When to Use It

Showing a video or a movie can bring a perspective into your classroom that is not available in other ways. Your goal can be purely informational (a documentary about South African politics), to provide a needed example (a feature film with an excellent example of psychopathology), or to introduce a novel viewpoint (labor relations from the perspective of the union workers’ families).

Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant

Watch the movie or program at least once before showing it to the class. Be sure it will fit into the time allotted. If not, determine what parts you can skip. Decide which points or themes you think the students should focus on as they watch. Prepare questions for your students that fit the goal you had in mind when you chose the video material; you can either put these questions on a handout that you distribute at the beginning of class or keep them for a full-class discussion after the video.

Reserve the necessary equipment: TV, VCR, and so forth. Get to class early that day to make sure everything is there and working.
Advance Preparation for Students

Unfortunately, some students think of a day with video material as a nonrequired class. Tell your students that you will be showing a video at least a week before you plan to do so and explain why it is important for them to see it (this way, they will not see the projector and turn tail). Your job is to show and enforce for students how these programs or films are educational, because students’ immediate reaction will be to leave or, if they stay, to sit back, relax, turn off their brains, and enjoy the show. In the week before, you should mention some incentive for watching the video carefully (an assignment, the final exam, etc.).

Steps for a Video Presentation

1. You will want to introduce the video material either in the previous class or just prior to showing the movie or both. Remember, it is your responsibility to frame this as an educational experience. Tell them about the director, the making of the production, its relevance to the course, and so on.

2. If possible, help students to watch and talk about the video critically. Ask students to take notes during the movie or write down their reflections afterward in response to questions from your handout. You also can ask students to write responses to the movie for homework (either general responses or responses to a specific question that you pose).

Wrapping Up

A postvideo discussion can cover questions from the handout or questions that you prepared in advance. This is also a good time to talk about how useful students found the video, if they felt that it challenged or expanded their thinking, and how you envisioned the video enhancing other course material.

Guest Speaker

When to Use Them

Guest speakers are especially helpful when you are dealing with a topic that would be enhanced by the perspective of someone who has very
specific experience in the area. Depending on your field, a guest speaker might be a fellow graduate student who does research in the area of interest, the director of the local recycling plant, a dissident from a country discussed in your course, or an ex-convict. Be creative when thinking about the kind of speakers who could enhance the teaching in your course!

**Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant**

You will want to invite only guest speakers who will be able to speak thoughtfully and effectively in front of your students. Although you may know a fascinating person who is also an accomplished environmentalist, you will not want to invite them to speak to your class on natural resources if they are painfully shy in front of groups. Often, you will be able to find guest speakers who are accustomed to speaking to large groups, but if you have any concerns about the person you would like to invite, do not hesitate to ask them how they feel about speaking in front of thirty students for an hour.

Once you have selected a guest speaker, talk with them about what kind of presentation will work for your class. Be sure to cover these points:

- how long the guest speaker will speak (e.g., the entire class period, only fifteen minutes);
- how their talk fits in with the structure of the course;
- whether they should be prepared to answer questions from your students;
- what your students already know about the topic;
- particular interests your students have expressed.

**Advance Preparation for Students**

Let your students know in advance when you will have a guest speaker. If you plan to have the speaker take questions from students, have your students write questions as a homework assignment before the speaker arrives. This forces the students to prepare for the presentation, allows you to ensure that there are questions, and can help your speaker to prepare their presentation. Also, remind your students that the speaker is a
guest of the class, so, of course, they will arrive at class on time and give the speaker their full attention for the duration of the period.

**Steps for a Class with a Guest Speaker**

1. Begin class by dealing with minor class business (if necessary) and then introduce the speaker. Tell students the format for the presentation (e.g., whether there will be time left at the end of class for questions).

2. Turn the class over to the guest speaker. Your advance preparation with the guest speaker should make for a thoughtful, appropriate, and interesting presentation. If it turns out that your guest speaker is pitching their talk too high, too low, or in the wrong place altogether, you must wait patiently until a natural break occurs in the presentation for an opportunity to help the speaker focus on the useful subjects for your class.

3. If questions from the class or a whole-class discussion are included as part of the presentation, it is your job to call on students or to moderate the discussion unless the speaker indicates otherwise. It is always a good idea to have a few questions of your own prepared in case the discussion needs a jump start.

4. It is your job to end class on time. When the end of class arrives, thank your speaker for coming and tell your students to hold any unanswered questions; you can find time in the following week to discuss them as a class.

**Wrapping Up**

It is always a good idea to send your guest speaker a note thanking them for their contributions to your class. If time and logistics allow, bring a card with you to the following class and have your students sign the thank-you note before you send it.

In the first class meeting after you have had a guest speaker, ask your students what they thought about the presentation, what they found useful, surprising, or unsettling. While you may want to put a time limit on this discussion so that you can get on to the rest of your class plan, it is important to get feedback from your students about the speaker before you think about whether to invite the same speaker back next semester.
Exam Preparation

When to Use It

If you plan to devote all or most of a class to preparing your students for an exam, do so in the last class meeting before an exam is administered. Although it would be wonderful to help students prepare for an exam two weeks in advance, it is not practical. It is a rare college student who begins to study for an exam more than a few days before they have to take it.

Some teaching assistants feel that they are pandering to grade-grubbing students when they devote class time to exam preparation, but taking time for this kind of review is exactly the purpose of giving exams in the first place. Exams provide an excellent opportunity to encourage students to consolidate and synthesize what they have learned in your course by capitalizing on their motivation to do well on the exam. In addition, exam taking is an academic skill like any other. When you teach students exam preparation skills, you help them recognize and remember what is important in your course.

Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant

You will need to go over all the material that will be covered on the exam to make sure that it all makes sense to you. If you choose option one from the following group of options, make copies of an old exam to hand out to your students in the class meeting before the exam preparation session. If you choose option two, leave time to create a handout of student questions.

Advance Preparation for Students

How you ask students to prepare for the exam preparation session will dictate how you run the session itself. Choose one or two options that will work best for the material you will review.

Option One

If you have copies of old exams that are similar to the one you will administer, ask your students to work through the old exams before the exam preparation session and take note of areas where they have
difficulty. If you are uncomfortable giving out an old exam, check to see if students have access to one anyway. Many fraternities, sororities, and other student groups save old exams. In this case, not distributing an old exam may only penalize students with poor access.

Option Two

Before the exam preparation session, ask students to go through the material the exam will cover and write three questions they would ask if they were writing the exam. They must get these questions to you (in your box or by e-mail) two days before the preparation session.

Option Three

Before the exam preparation session, have your students go through the material and come up with specific questions about areas that they do not understand. Tell your students that you will be happy to clarify any topic for them but that you will not answer questions like “What parts of the text do you think we should study?”

With any of these three options, you can spend part of the class period talking with students about test-taking strategies. For example, you can talk over with students how to write a successful in-class essay (e.g., foregrounding your main point), what counts as “explaining the significance” of a passage in an identification section, and so on. Many of them will probably be willing to share their successful (or dramatically unsuccessful!) strategies both for studying and for taking similar exams.

Steps for Exam Preparation

The steps that you use for your exam preparation session will depend on the options you chose from those listed previously.

Option One

1. Give your students the correct answers to the sample exam on a handout. Or have pairs of students compare their answers to look for discrepancies.

2. Have your students ask specific questions about areas where they struggled on the sample exam.
3. Encourage students to help each other toward the correct answers and clarify any controversies about the material. If no one in the class seems to know a given answer, give the answer to the class. Even if similar material will be covered on the upcoming exam, what counts is that the students learn and remember it!

4. Work through as many questions as you can in the time available.

Option Two

1. Have a handout prepared with as many of the students’ questions as you feel are appropriate (you may need to consolidate some questions or add a few of your own).

2. Put students in groups of three or four to work through the questions together. Be available to answer groups’ questions as they go.

3. Bring the discussion back to the full class to go over questions that caused trouble.

4. Finally, ask students to volunteer additional questions that did not come up and go over them as a class.

Option Three

1. Begin class by reminding your students that you will limit the preparation session to answering specific questions; your students should not expect you to summarize the exam material for them.

2. Field questions from your students one at a time. Solicit input from the class on each question but answer questions where no one has the correct answer or if too much time will be spent on getting the correct answer.

3. Continue to take questions on the exam material for as long as the class period allows, or until they run out of specific questions.

Wrapping Up

Regardless of the option you choose, you will want to keep track of the topics that are addressed in the exam preparation session and note any areas of the material that will be on the exam that were not adequately
addressed in the preparation session. Remind students about these important topics and encourage them to study those areas also.

**Grammar and Usage Review**

**When to Use It**

In a course in which you are reading student writing, you may find yourself becoming frustrated by recurring usage problems. This activity is a quick and easy way to review and correct common usage mistakes.

When you do this exercise, you can remind students that part of “good grammar” is mastering a set of written conventions. The written language differs from the spoken, and your students may not always be able to find a logic to a particular written convention; but in many contexts, they will be judged by their control of these grammatical usage rules. Setting up written grammar in this way can make this exercise seem more like a challenging game than a test of the students’ intellect or fluency.

**Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant**

Select eight to ten sentences from your students’ writing that exemplify the problems you want to tackle. You may need to alter students’ sentences slightly or make up a couple of examples. Using actual student writing makes the exercise seem less abstract, and students usually find the usage issues in their own writing to be more amusing than embarrassing (and the sentences are anonymous unless a student opts to claim ownership during class).

Keep the sentences fairly short so that the students do not become distracted from the targeted usage questions. Choose your sentences thematically: do not try to cover ten different usage problems; select two or three problems instead (e.g., comma splices, lack of parallelism, dangling modifiers) and use the sentences to cover different variations of these problems.

Type these sentences onto a handout (without the student authors’ names). Make sure to leave space between the sentences so that students can add their corrections.
Sentence Revision (a.k.a. Usage Questions)

Revise the following sentences so that they are clear and no longer contain usage problems. (Some of these sentences should look familiar!)

1. The comparison of two simultaneous trials should identify any idiosyncratic problems with the sample collection, this methodology helps to ensure more accurate results.

2. The artist captures the serenity of the scene in the diffusion of soft colors; although the overlaid short brush strokes imbue the painting with living vitality.

3. The governor has tried to defend his actions, however, his press secretary has tried to pretend the incident never occurred.

Steps for Grammar and Usage Review

1. Explain to the students why you have decided they will benefit from a review of usage questions and explicitly give them a time limit for the exercise if you are planning to cover other material that day.

2. Give each student a copy of the handout and have them revise the sentences in pairs. This strategy allows students to compare grammatical knowledge and answer some of their own questions.

3. While students are working, put numbers on the board for the number of sentences on the handout, leaving space for students to write the corrected sentences.

4. After five minutes, walk around the room and ask various pairs to have one partner put a revised version of the sentence on the board when they are ready.

5. As a class, go over the revised versions of the sentences. Ask students for other possible revisions or for other questions that come to mind.

6. If time allows, ask students what other grammatical issues have been giving them trouble.

Wrapping Up

Tell students that you expect never to see any of these problems again in their writing. They laugh, you laugh, and you hope that at least they
understand a little more about usage conventions than they did before they walked into the classroom. Then move on to the next class activity.

**Paper Workshop**

**When to Use It**

If students are writing a paper for your class and you want to emphasize the process of writing (drafts and revision), workshops are an effective way to make students put more time into their writing. Students work in small groups (three or four students) to help each other improve their drafts. They will have read the papers beforehand and made written comments, so the workshop involves talking about the drafts rather than reading them.

**Advance Preparation for the Teaching Assistant**

You must create workshop groups; you can announce these when you give the paper assignment. Groups of three work best, but groups of four are possible. The directions that follow assume your students will be working in groups of three. If you know the students’ writing, try to put at least one strong writer in each group to act both as a model for the other students and as a trusty peer responder.

Before the first workshop, you should provide guidelines about how students should compose their written responses to drafts of other students’ essays and about how the workshop is supposed to run.

Create a schedule of due dates: draft due date (when students will give their drafts to the other members of their group); workshop date (a few days after the draft due date, when students will come prepared with their written responses to the two other papers in their group); final paper due date.

Emphasize to students their responsibility for the success of this activity. They must have their drafts ready, and they must be present in class for the workshop. You may want to stress repercussions for missing the workshop, as this will inevitably doom the group’s effectiveness and is not fair to the student’s peers.

If the draft due date is a class day, have students exchange papers at the beginning or end of class. If the draft due date has to be a nonclass day, make sure that students have each other’s e-mail addresses and
phone numbers so that they can contact each other and make the exchange.

Before the first workshop, go over with students how the workshop should unfold. You may want to hold a practice full-class workshop with an essay from another class you have taught or from another teaching assistant so that students can see how a workshop should progress; you can ask one student to pretend to be the author (or volunteer yourself) so that the other students direct their (sensitive and constructive) comments to an “author figure.” Encourage them to provide positive comments along with constructive suggestions. You can also provide written workshop guidelines for students.

See appendix E for a sample set of written guidelines and further information about how to run a paper workshop.

Advance Preparation for Students

Students must have the drafts of their papers prepared by the draft due date and should bring three copies of their draft to class that day: one for themselves and one for each of the other people in their workshop group. You may opt to have them make a copy for you also but be very clear about whether you are planning to read it or whether you are simply checking to make sure they have written it.

Students will take the other two students’ papers home and write a peer response to each, commenting on the argument, tone, organization, and so forth. When students come to class on the day of the workshop, they will bring two copies of each response: one for the student writer and one for you (you probably will want to grade these responses so that students put time and effort into them).

Provide students with a set of guidelines about how to write these responses to other students’ essays. Emphasize that they should focus first on the big issues (the argument, organization) and only later on punctuation and grammar (if it even becomes relevant). Explain how long the response should be (one to two pages works well) and how you will grade it.

See appendix F for a sample set of guidelines for writing a peer response.

Steps for Paper Workshops

1. On the day of the workshop, have all students pull out their copy of their own papers. Ask them to take a few minutes and write on
the top of their papers three questions they would like to ask their peer responders (e.g., “How can I fix the conclusion?”).

2. Put the students into their groups, remind them of their task, and let them go at it. Tell them about how long they should spend on each paper. Encourage them to look at their drafts of and responses to the one student’s paper but not to read their written responses verbatim to the student; the student can read the responses at home later—the workshop is a time for two-way dialogue.

3. Walk around the room and keep an eye on the progress of all the groups. Feel free to join in a group for a few minutes if they seem to be struggling or having a disagreement.

Wrapping Up

When all the groups have finished discussing the papers, remind students of the due date for the final draft. If you are willing to meet with students about their papers before then, you may want to stipulate that they must revise the draft after the workshop before they talk to you about it.

Grading

You will want to grade the written responses to ensure that students put some time and care into them—you may want to use grades or a simple number system (e.g., 1–5). If you choose to collect the first drafts, you will have to decide whether you want to grade these for effort or simply to refer to them when grading the final versions. Obviously, students benefit from getting your written feedback on paper drafts, but there are serious downsides to doing so.

- Reading and commenting on two drafts of a paper takes an inordinate amount of your time.
- Students may dismiss their peers’ comments on the draft, waiting only for your comments.
- Students often believe that if they respond to all of your written comments on the draft (and no more), they will get an A. As this is often not the case, they may feel misled.

An effective alternative for helping students with paper drafts is arranging individual meetings with students during your office hours to
discuss their papers. You can offer to skim through drafts and provide general feedback that will help students rewrite their work.

**An Optional Final Class Exercise for a Paper Workshop**

Most students make no distinction between revising and editing. The workshop will help them to see that revision can involve a structural overhaul, the addition or subtraction of ideas, the reworking of the introduction, and so forth. If you want to teach them a lesson about editing—about the importance of proofreading for good presentation—try this exercise.

**Steps for this Final Exercise**

1. On the day the paper is due, pair up students and have them exchange papers. (They will groan, but you can explain that if anyone has a perfect paper at the end of the class, you will be happy to take it. If not, they have a chance to fix it.)

2. Ask them to proofread each other’s papers for grammar and punctuation. Ask every student to give their partner permission to write on their paper. Encourage them to go slowly, to read aloud if they want to.

3. Provide them with a proofreading guide sheet of common problems if you have one prepared.

4. Make yourself available for any and all usage questions that may arise.

5. Determine whether anyone has an unmarked paper. If so, collect it. If not, tell the students that they have until the next day to fix the problems and get the paper into your mailbox.

This exercise works wonderfully the first time because students are not expecting it and they come to class with final drafts. Once the element of surprise is gone, however, they tend to use this editing session as a second revision session, and they do not come prepared with final drafts.
Proofreading Guide Sheet

Here is a list of some common problems to watch for when you edit your draft, after you have revised it:

1. **This/That**
   When these words stand alone at the beginning of a sentence, their reference is often unclear; putting a noun after “this” or “that” (e.g., “this fact” or “this situation”) will help make the reference clear.

2. **Verb tense**
   Pay attention to verb tense. Do not change tense randomly.

3. **Comma splices**
   Commas cannot connect two independent clauses alone (semicolon can).

4. **You**
   If you use “you” in the paper, make sure that you have a reason for directly addressing the audience at that particular point in the paper.

   *(And so on)*

Further Reading


