

**Philosophy of Composition**  
*established by the Pitt Community College*  
*Department of English and Humanities*

**We accept the following description of writing:**

Writing is a complex and idiosyncratic process, recursive rather than linear in nature, involving exploration, discovery, planning, drafting, editing, and proofreading.

**We make this requirement of writing instructors:**

Teachers of writing must be writers themselves – in some capacity – who truly understand the process of writing, its complexity, its idiosyncrasies, and its reward.

**We believe the following statements should guide the teaching of composition:**

The more a student engages in exploratory writing (prewriting), the better the final draft. So writing instruction should include strategies for getting started and activities in prewriting.

The more realistic an assignment is, the more the student will be engaged by it and the more motivated he or she will be to work on it. So writing assignments should, where possible, be grounded in a real context with a clearly identified audience.

The more clearly a student understands his audience, the better a student can make decisions that affect his audience. So writing assignments should always include some reference to audience and should provide an audience, where possible, among his peers.

The more feedback a student receives from various readers, the more polished her writing becomes. So teachers should provide opportunities to communicate with an audience other than the teacher, to publish student work for these other audiences, and to receive feedback from a variety of readers.

The more a student reads, the better his writing will be. So writing classes should involve reading selections and some discussion of and/or reaction to rhetorical strategies used in those selections.

The more at ease and confident a student feels, the better her writing will be. So writing classrooms should be friendly, supportive places.

The more a student writes about a given topic, the more clearly he understands his own relationship to that topic. So writing classrooms should provide students with safe places in which to discover and define meaning in their lives.

The more a student writes, the better writer she becomes. So writing instruction should involve a number of opportunities for writing, including graded assignments and non-graded ones. The more a student understands her own writing and thinking processes, the more efficient writer she will be. So teachers should engage students in metacognition: thinking about their own thinking.

**We believe the following statements should guide the administration of writing programs:**

Students become better writers by working in a variety of modes. So a writing program should give students opportunities to work on a number of different writing tasks.

Some students need help with writing outside of their regular English class. So instructors, tutors, and computer labs should be available for students at convenient times of day.

Students can learn from each other as well as the teacher, so writing groups and collaborative learning should be a part of every classroom.

Students learn from on-to-one instruction. So individual conferences should be a part of every writing classroom.

Writing fosters excitement and enthusiasm for sharing ideas and opinions. We believe writing classrooms should, at times, be active and noisy places where every individual's ideas is respected, where tolerance and open-mindedness are encouraged.

Students become better learners and thinkers when they write. So write-to-learn activities, note taking, journal writing, and summarizing, should be a part of all composition classes.

Students need time to complete each stage of the writing process in a meaningful way. So a writing program should encourage fewer graded writing tasks that students can complete with thoroughness not possible when students have to rush through many writing tasks. More non-graded assignments can then be added to the course to keep students writing, with grades being given to selected assignments on which students can spend more time.

Credible research on writing and the teaching of writing can offer valuable insights to writing teachers. So writing programs should be grounded in current, valid research.

Technology can enhance a writing program. So writing programs should keep abreast of current technology and see ways to use technology in writing classes.

Students with learning differences find writing especially challenging. So teachers should help identified LD students by establishing an individual plan of instruction for each student and by working closely with student support services available on campus.

Students for whom English is a second language present special challenges to writing instructors. So every effort should be made to provide instructors with resources and lesson plans to accommodate ESL students.

**We believe the following statements should guide teachers in evaluating writing assignments:**

Emphasis on aspects of writing can vary from teacher to teacher, from level to level, and from assignment to assignment. So teachers should provide students with checklists and rubrics for each assignment that remind students of the priorities for the current assignment.

Students learn more when they are granted ownership of their work. So teachers should act like coaches, guiding a student through the writing process, careful not to control the composition by dictating their own preferences. Teachers should allow students choices, and encourage them to make their own decisions about their writing.

Students learn more when they are responsible for their own learning. So students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own grammar / mechanical problems. Error analysis sheets, referral to a tutor, editing exercises, and peer groups can all help students take responsibility for their mistakes.

Writing is idiosyncratic, and students' personal styles are likely to be determined more by their personalities, background, and learning styles than by formal instruction. Writing is an art form, a creation of individual expression. So teachers cannot always insist on a single standard for all students. Teachers should balance a tolerance for individual differences while maintaining the integrity of the rubric.

Writing is very personal and writers are vulnerable to teacher comments. So comments on students writing – as a rule – should be positive, encouraging, pointing out strengths as well as weaknesses.

Writing progresses in stages, and good writing involves re-writing. So teachers should monitor the stages of the writing process and encourage revision.

Students benefit from frequent feedback. So every effort should be made to return

student papers within one week.

Students benefit from careful analysis of their papers. So comments on papers should always include statements about content. Such comments should be varied: evaluation of the guidelines set forth in the rubric, reaction to the content, and questions that require students to make judgments.

Students need to be thinkers first and grammarians second. So, while grammar and mechanics need to take their rightful places in the writing process, teachers should never look at errors at the expense of content.

Errors are opportunities for learning. Teachers should use student errors as guides for what to teach.

Some aspects of writing are more important than others. Teachers should help students improve their writing by focusing on the most important first and the least important last, e.g., subject, controlling idea, development, organization and style before grammar and mechanics (or a similar list of priorities set forth in a rubric).