



# SSH Writing Fellows Program

## Orientation and Procedures: The Nuts and Bolts of “Following”

### *Orientation*

At the beginning of each semester, you will attend an orientation session where you will learn about the policies and protocols of working as a Writing Fellow with students and professors. You may find that other Writing Fellows are also assigned to the same professor. In this case, you should designate one Writing Fellow to be the coordinator. You may also want to consider how you will divide the workload if there are an odd number of students in the course.

### *Meeting Your Professor*

At the end of the first semester, you will be assigned a mentoring faculty member whom you will collaborate with through the course of the spring semester. You will meet several times throughout the semester to set goals and expectations for your partnership and to review any concerns over student assignments and writing.

#### First Meeting

You should meet with your mentoring faculty member during the first week of classes to set goals and expectations for your partnership. You can expect to discuss the types of students in the course, course syllabus, assignment instructions and rubrics, as well as the schedule for receiving student drafts, commenting and consulting, and turning in final drafts. You should set dates for assignments, a way to exchange student drafts, and set policies for late submissions and/or missing submissions. (Note: you generally should not accept late submissions.) You should also agree on a time to introduce yourself to the students in this course. Note that faculty members will dedicate a section of the syllabus to introducing you and your role in the course and how valuable your expertise will be for student learning.

You can prepare for the meeting by having a needs analysis prepared for the students to fill out. You should also ask the professor what he/she hopes to gain from this experience. (Some professors have asked Writing Fellows to check assignment instructions for clarity; others have asked for input on rubrics. As a collaborative pair, you are not just a TA - you can offer your expertise as well!) This is also a good opportunity for you to verify that the mentoring professor understands what the role and purpose of a Writing Fellow is the course. If you sense that there is a misalignment between what the professor perceives you do and what you actually do, it is appropriate to reiterate what you as a Writing Fellow can do and won't do.

Finally, as you very well may be working in a discipline that you are not majoring in, you must not hesitate to ask your mentoring professor any questions you may have regarding writing conventions in their specific disciplines, i.e. literature papers have a completely different way of incorporating evidence than history, political science, and sociology, etc.

#### Assignment Meetings

You will conduct the following brief meetings before, during, and after each assignment.

#### *Before Receiving the Drafts*

Before you receive the drafts, you must be familiar with the assignment goals, instructions, and rubrics. You need to clarify with the professor any terms, expectations, and academic conventions that students are expected to use. You should also be aware that different disciplines treat arguments, analysis, and evidence differently, so you must be prepared to ask



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your mentoring professor to provide examples of what that looks like in his/her specific discipline.

## ***During Commenting***

You may want to glance through all the drafts you receive before you start commenting. You will select a draft to read and comment on (perhaps the most difficult one). After you comment on this first draft, schedule a meeting with the professor to make sure that your comments are on par with what the professor would note him/herself. If your course has multiple Writing Fellows, you may want to schedule this norming meeting together. After you have met to discuss the comments on your first paper, you can complete commenting on the rest of the drafts and schedule consultations with your students.

## ***After Papers are Graded***

You should schedule a meeting with the mentoring professor to review any concerns you may have had about any student writing or the assignment itself. Note that student writers are required to submit a cover sheet that addresses your comments and consultation along with their final draft. This meeting is a good opportunity for you and the professor to discuss what went well and what could be improved for the next assignment.

## ***Introducing Yourself to the Class***

You and your mentoring professor should agree on a time during the second week of classes to introduce yourself to the students in the course. This is an opportunity for you to give a brief explanation about the way the program works and how students will benefit from working with you. Many will not have worked with Writing Fellows before, so you may want to explain the purpose of the program - that you are here for writing support and that the student is responsible for understanding content knowledge. If you are working with a team of Writing Fellows, then you will want to divide up speaking responsibilities.

For the introduction, you may want to:

- Introduce yourself and your role as a Writing Fellow in this course
- Emphasize the program's benefits:
  - that having students prepared to discuss content knowledge with you during consultations will give them a deeper understanding of the course material;
  - that turning in drafts that are not thought through will not help
  - that reading your comments and having consultations with you will help them develop writing strategies not *just* for the assignment but also for their writing skills in general;
  - that turning in drafts on time and attending conferences are essential to their progress, and that late or missing drafts and appointments are detrimental to progress and learning;
  - that working with a Writing Fellow can actually help them manage their assignments in a timely manner because the drafting and revision process breaks down a daunting task into manageable pieces; and
  - any other points you may find useful
- Distribute and collect a needs analysis:



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*A needs analysis is a form that collects students' basic information (name, email, major, year) and asks them to identify what they think their strengths are in writing, and what areas in writing they hope to improve for their academic/(professional) careers. For a sample of endnote comments, please refer to your Student Handbook.*

You should be sure to practice your introduction, keep the speech brief and concise, and allow the students enough time to complete the needs analysis in class. You will receive more responses this way.

Following the introduction, you should try to reach out to your students via email with a brief, but more personalized, introduction based on their responses to the needs analysis.

## ***Semester Wrap-Up***

At the end of the semester, your mentoring faculty member as well as the students you worked will be able to review your individual performance. They will receive an evaluation form to complete; you will be able to review your evaluations at the end of the semester.

### Common Misconceptions

You may receive comments on your lack of content knowledge or awareness of what is going on in the course. This is a very common comment that you should not worry about, as you are a Writing Fellow, not a Teaching Assistant. It is ultimately the students' responsibility to be aware of their own knowledge and misunderstandings as they are the ones enrolled in the course, not you.

You may also receive comments on your lack of grammar and language support in student writing. This is also a common complaint that you should not stress about, as you have not been trained to be a linguist or a language teacher.



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## Guidelines for Commenting & Conferencing

The commenting and conferencing process represents the bulk of Writing Fellows' responsibilities. As the process can become confusing and messy, you should establish a protocol for collecting drafts, commenting, and conferencing.

### *Deadlines & Drafts*

There are two due dates for each assignment: the Writing Fellow deadline and the final assignment deadline. The Writing Fellow deadline is 12-14 days before the final assignment deadline. During this 12-14 day period, you will prepare for the commenting period (read the drafts without writing, choose one to comment on, review the comments with your mentoring professor, and discuss the comments in a mock consultation with the Writing Fellow Coordinator) before actually commenting on all the drafts and conferencing with your student writers. This is a very time-consuming but extremely rewarding period!

You will receive the drafts from your mentoring professor who may or may not have had time to read them before handing them off to you. They may choose to provide them to you electronically (via email) or in hard copy. You should keep an extra copy (either photocopied or scanned) with you just in case the student loses the copy with your comments.

You may receive late or missing drafts, in which case, you should follow the policy that you and your professors have set at the start of the semester. You should not feel obligated to follow a student's request to accept a late assignment; you also have your own workload to consider. In the event that students ask you for an extension, you need to remind them that the only person allowed to grant extensions is the professor.

### *Commenting*

You may comment on your students' papers electronically or by hand. As you comment, you should keep in mind the following:

- Read all the drafts first to get an idea of what is representative of this assignment. You may notice common flaws in analysis, argumentation, interpretation and use of sources, etc. Having a prepared list of common flaws will be helpful when you have your norming meeting with your professor.
- Read charitably, as there are often strengths to any piece of writing. Perhaps the content is expressed clearly, or the argument attempts to be sophisticated. Writers deserve to know what they done well.
- Be specific with your praise and critical comments. Writers need to know not only what is done well or incorrectly, but also why it is done well or incorrectly.
- Raise insightful questions to clarify meaning or prompt deeper thinking and exploration.
- Prioritize your comments so as not to overwhelm the writer. You may want to follow the categories of higher order concerns set out by McAndrew & Reigstad (2000) and narrow down to specific instances within the paper itself.



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- Focus on endnote comments as they tend to be less distracting. A solid endnote commentary focuses all of your comments and allows you to go back and make relevant marginal comments. For a sample of endnote comments, please refer to your Student Handbook.

## ***Scheduling Conferences***

After you have finished your commentary, you need to schedule conferences with students. You may do so by emailing the students yourself, and including your availability (link to an appointment calendar is fine) and where the conferences will be held. You should also send the students a copy of their paper with your comments on it, but only *after* they have committed to meeting with you. Fellows have found more success when the mentoring professor sends the students a link to a digital appointment calendar. It is not ideal, as the purpose of this is to increase student autonomy, but it is an option if you have difficulty receiving student responses.

You will want to schedule your conferences early enough so that students have enough time to revise their drafts before submitting the final version to their professors. You should look to schedule roughly two appointments per hour, but note that some appointments may take longer, while others might be shorter. You should note that in 30 minutes, you will not be able to cover every single aspect of the paper that may need fixing, and you may need to remind the student that this is why you will set an agenda that prioritizes certain writing goals over others.

Student writers should prepare for the conferences by having questions about your comments readied and by being open to working and trying out strategies to develop their writing. They should also have a good command of the course content and should not look to you to clarify or interpret course materials and knowledge they have learned in class. If they do have such questions, you can direct them to their professors.

## ***Holding Conferences***

There are several points to keep in mind when holding conferences, and in general you should look to set a comfortable, supportive atmosphere for learning and discussion. You may want to:

- Set the tone for an informal conversation by starting with some small talk about how writers feel they are doing in class.
- Ask what the student writer wants to work on most based on your comments, and negotiate an agenda. While you may have certain insights based on the comments you've made, you need to provide the writer an opportunity to talk about their perceptions of your comments and what changes they might want to make.
- Don't simply repeat your comments, expand on them by pointing out other instances where the same type of mistake might have occurred. You may also elect to practice a writing strategy with the writer that is appropriate for the paper, but you may also want to state how it might apply to other writing assignments.
- Provide more opportunities for the writer to speak. You may want to reserve your turn for insightful questions that encourage writers to really unpack the ideas they want to discuss. While writers may look to you for definitive answers, you need to remain assertive that there is no right answer that can come from you, and that the best answer comes from collaborative exploration between the writer and you. If, however, you sense that the writer just doesn't understand *how to do* something, you may have to explicitly explain or model the task.