

“Using the Writing Center to Support Student Learning in Your Course”

Title slide

Hello! I’m Dr. Susan Lawrence, director of Mason’s Writing Center.

In this video I’ll share some ideas for using the Writing Center to enhance student learning in your courses.

The Writing Center offers free one-on-one writing consultations to Mason students across the disciplines. Student writers can meet with a peer writing consultant at any phase of the writing project to get thoughtful, inclusive feedback and learn strategies for writing. We serve undergraduate and graduate writers from all language backgrounds.

I’ll begin by touching on the kinds of learning we support; then move on to strategies for using the Writing Center to support that learning.

Slide 2: Talking about writing is associated with deep learning

Writing Center sessions can support a student writer’s *disciplinary* learning.

In a study that examined the relationship between writing and learning in undergraduate education, a team of researchers found that among the 70,000 students in their sample, those who reported discussing their writing projects with others also reported more engagement in deep learning activities *and* more progress in learning and development generally.

In a Writing Center session, peer consultants ask questions that get writers talking about their ideas and arguments: how they’ve developed them, structured them, provided evidence for them, and shaped them for specific audiences and purposes. When writers elaborate on these ideas, disciplinary learning can be reinforced and enhanced.

Slide 3: Students learn strategies for planning, organizing, drafting, revising, and analyzing model texts

And, of course, Writing Center sessions support learning about *writing*. Peer consultants share a terrific toolkit of strategies for planning, organizing, drafting, revising, and analyzing model texts. When writers build this kind of strategic knowledge, they gain confidence and greater control over their writing process.

More locally, student writers learn how an actual reader responds to their draft, and can develop a plan for revising accordingly.

So how can you incorporate writing center services into your course assignments?

Slide 4:

1. Build a writing center visit into your students' process deadlines.

You can build a writing center visit into your assignment process deadlines. For example, establish a deadline for a first draft. Then establish a deadline for a writing center visit, followed by the due date for a subsequent draft or final version. Be sure to create time between the writing center session and the due date for the next draft, so students have ample time to revise.

If you want your students to talk with a writing consultant *before* they draft—in order to brainstorm or plan, for example—you can build the visit in earlier in your assignment schedule.

Slide 5:

2. Let us support peer review in your course.

Let us support peer review in your course. If you've avoided having students review each others' drafts because you're underwhelmed by the feedback they give each other, invite us in to deliver a workshop, or assign our video on doing peer review.

We can work with you on a real-time workshop that offers instruction on doing peer review, then allows time for your students to provide feedback on a sample draft of the assignment they are working toward. After this workshop, they're not only better peer reviewers generally; they've also had a chance to read and discuss a sample draft of the assignment they're working on.

Slide 6: Request a workshop or view our Peer Review video

To request a workshop, go our class workshops page and send us your request.

If you don't have class time to devote to a full workshop, assign our video, which directs student reviewers to the most important elements of a draft, gives them some commenting strategies, and helps them build rapport with the writer. This video is also linked to from our Class workshops page.

Slide 7: Ask your students to reflect on how they revised in response to the feedback they received.

3. If you want to support revision, you can ask your students to compose a brief reflection on how they revised in response to the feedback they received. You could ask them to discuss three specific revisions they made, and why; or to discuss the suggestions they took up for revision and those they decided against taking up, and why. This kind of reflection builds metacognitive awareness of revision and shows that you value that part of the writing process.

Slide 8: Connect your students to our writing guides

Peruse our collection of 80+ quick-guides, and in your assignment descriptions, point students to the guides that are relevant. You can find these in the Resources section of our website.

Slide 9: Include a writing center invitation in your syllabus

And even if you don't build the writing center more formally in to your writing assignments, you can include a blurb in your syllabus. We have one you can copy and paste or tailor in our website's For Faculty section

If you're teaching online, you can link to our video roadshow, which tells students about our services.

Slide 10: Help students get the most out of their consultations

If you do incorporate the Writing Center into your course, consider helping them get the most out of their sessions:

1. Invite *all* your students to book sessions for feedback on an early draft. You can do this with a syllabus blurb or when you introduce your first major assignment.

Why all students? Getting feedback on a high-stakes piece of writing is for everyone. Every article submitted to an academic journal is peer reviewed, not just those by new or struggling authors. When an organization has a formal process for reviewing documents, all documents go through that process; there is no picking and choosing by author.

If you have specific students whom you'd like to see use the Writing Center, you can of course make those individual recommendations as well. But issuing the general invitation underscores the importance of feedback and revision in high-stakes writing.

2. This brings me to my next suggestion: Consider *recommending* rather than requiring students to visit the writing center. By the middle of the term, we may be booked a week or more in advance. Trying to book a required visit can be stressful for a student who has difficulty finding an appointment.
3. Recommend the ESOL opt-in program to your multilingual writers. Students who sign up for this program meet once a week with the same writing consultant, an arrangement that helps writers expand their linguistic resources and provides continuity in learning.
4. Suggest that students book a real-time conversation (in person or on Zoom) rather than submitting the draft for written feedback only. We offer the written-feedback option to

increase access to our consulting services, but it's the real-time interaction allows for actual conversation between students.

5. Prompt students to identify specific goals for their writing center session. That is, position them as the agents of their own writing and writing development.

Before I leave this slide: A quick note about take-home essay exams: we need your permission to work with writers on take-home exams, so consider putting a note in your syllabus or assignment prompt that writers can show us when we ask for that permission.

Slide 11: Talk to your students about your own writing

Finally: talk to your students about your own writing, writing processes, and processes for eliciting feedback. Students are likely to be intrigued by this glimpse into your writing life, especially if it shows them that for most writers, writing can be difficult, and that we all benefit from feedback on that writing.

Slide 12: Closing

You can find a summary of these strategies in the handout attached to this session. Feel free to contact us with questions or feedback. Thank you for viewing!