

Part 4: Writing papers: Tips and Tricks when working with students

My name is Megan Goldfarb and I am an undergraduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University, graduating in spring 2018. Since fall of 2016, I have served as an academic support with ACE-IT at VCU, which is a certificate track for college students who have intellectual disabilities.

In my four semesters working as an academic support with students with ACE-IT in College at Virginia Commonwealth University, I have had many different opportunities to work with my peers as they complete writing assignments for classes; be it blog posts, reflection papers, or reading responses. Every student is going to have a very different approach to writing papers and they are going to have different support needs when doing so. At your school, you may have a writing center that a student can go to, or the student might have a lot of outside support. But, if your school is similar to mine and you attend class with your peers, then sometimes you, as their support, might find yourself helping students begin to transfer their thoughts about class material into written responses.

Because, like I mentioned, the writing process is different for everyone, I will be going over a few of the experiences that I've had working on writing assignments with my peers and some strategies that we have used to see their ideas to fruition.

When it comes to answering a writing prompt, the first thing that I like to do is break the writing prompt down. It's sort of a "task analysis" way of handling the prompt itself. We break apart each sentence, or each part of what the question is asking. We separate the parts of the prompt up into a numbered list. Often, we will look up words that the student is unfamiliar with and rephrase the prompt into language that is a little bit more readily understandable for them. These are the preliminary steps to a writing assignment: To address the prompt itself and make sure students know what it is asking, in their own terms.

Then, the prompt can be addressed in segments. While looking at a multi-part prompt as a whole can be very daunting, taking it piece by piece allows students to focus on one thing at a time.

The next crucial step is to gather ideas. This step is particularly important if the writing assignment doesn't have a prompt and the subject matter is more open. I have found that a good way to record students' thoughts and ideas is to start out with a conversation. So, while you might jump right into writing a paper or planning to write a paper on your own, when working with your peers it's a good idea to, instead of starting with a question like, "What do you want to write your paper about?" or "How would you answer this question?", start out by having a conversation about the material. If the writing prompt is talking about a particular reading that a student had to do, for example, then instead of jumping right into analyzing that reading, backtrack a little bit. Ask the question, "What was the reading talking about?" "What did the video show?" By having your peers tell you what they learned or got out of a reading, video, or class discussion, you can formulate additional questions that ask that student to think a little further about that, and build your conversation from there.

Some students might have a little more difficulty recalling their thoughts and verbalizing them. I worked with a student one semester who, when I asked her questions about what she thought about certain topics, would often respond with the words, “I don’t know.” When this happened, I soon realized that part of the reason why she often responded with “I don’t know” was because 1) she was uncertain what the question meant and 2) she didn’t know where to look to find the answer to that question. If it was a question that asked her to self-reflect about her own thoughts, she would need a little bit of guidance on what kinds of things she might want to think about. This is where it again becomes important to review what you’ve seen and read for the class. Here is a generic procedure for the writing process:

1. Break down the prompt. Create a step by step list of parts of the question. Rephrase the question to be in terms that are accessible for the student. If the prompt is open-ended, identify the goal of the writing: what is it that the professor wants me to do?
2. Recap the learning material. Have your peer summarize their understanding of what they have learned leading up to the writing assignment.

What if the student has trouble recalling and verbalizing their thoughts?

3) Return to the notes or text. Use them to review things that have been discussed in class recently. Ask students questions about specific parts of that material.

4) If the student has trouble pinpointing an idea, present them with choices. (Do you think x, or do you think y, or do you think z?) Sometimes helping narrow down a question with a great number of possible answers to a list of various choices helps them to pinpoint their own idea.

Putting thoughts into writing:

During that conversation phase with a student, I have found that it is helpful to act as a scribe. As we talk, I write down the things that students say, in their own words. We might use a big white board to visually arrange their ideas, or we might make notes on a Word or Google Document, or on note cards. Then, students’ statements turn into their notes that they will use for their writing.

The next step we often take is to make an outline. (This is particularly important for bigger papers). We look at the conversation that we had and the students’ individual ideas, and decide how they can use those ideas to answer the question or prompt. We will arrange the outline so that students’ notes answer the questions that the prompt asks.

Depending on how much interaction you have when working with a peer, you may or may not be involved when they actually write out their essay. This might have to be done outside of your mentoring time, at a school writing center or with a family member, or on the student’s own. If you take class with a student, you are going to be well equipped to discuss course material with them and model how to take their ideas and put them into written form in response to a particular question.

Note that when you support a student for writing, each student will have a different desire for how they will flesh out their thoughts. Some students like to just talk about their thinking with you as a scribe because their thoughts come together more easily that way. Other times, students might like to do the writing themselves because it allows them to see their thoughts on the page. I worked with one student once who, on some days, liked to speak about what she was thinking while I wrote down what she said. On other days, we found that she might forget my facilitative questions more easily, or forget her previous thoughts which made it more difficult for her to build upon them. On those days, she liked to type out her thoughts because her typed words served as a reminder of what she was talking about. For other students, typing out words brings the distraction of spelling and grammar that make it harder for them to get their initial ideas down when they also have to focus on figuring out spelling. For these students, speaking allows their ideas to flow easily while their coach can record them in brainstorming sessions.

Because the whole idea is to enable the independence of your peers that you work with, it's a good idea to build strategies for students to use to work independently wherever possible. One way that I've done this recently with a student who struggles more with reading and writing is through using audio recording technology on his laptop and smartphone. This student is required to write a blog post reflection every week. When he is at home, instead of always having someone there to type down the words that he speaks, he takes autonomy by recording himself speaking on his computer voice recorder or speaks into his cell phone in his "Notes" app, which translates his speech into text. This enables him to record his responses independently.

Other students who have more trouble with reading and writing might also be more comfortable with delivering their thoughts in the format of a video or audio recording as opposed to a paper. At my school, some students have arranged with professors to turn in alternative formats for their assignments. Other students have turned in assignments in a numbered format as opposed to paragraphs in situations where the numbering helped them to sort out their ideas.

Once a student gets their initial thoughts written down or recorded, if time allows, it is always good to go through the paper together and check for spelling and grammar, if students have not gotten support for this elsewhere. Word processing tools that check spelling and grammar are another mechanism for independence. Additionally, students might often be able to elaborate on their writing in some places. If you have the opportunity, asking further questions about things that students wrote helps them think about the ways that they can expand their ideas.

Again, depending on the school that you go to, the ability for a peer mentor to support a student in the writing process may vary. These tactics provide a flexible structure that can be used when tackling the process of writing with a student, and will shift depending on that student's needs.

To recap:

1. Break down and rephrase the prompt
2. Brainstorm ideas through conversation, and record them. Use charts to help sort ideas.
3. Use guiding questions for students to respond to for each section of their paper.
4. Create an outline where they answer these questions.

5. Student will respond to these questions and write or speak their thoughts, and may use a scribe, microphone recorder, or speech to text recorder.
6. Go over ideas and ask further questions.
7. Make sure that thoughts are complete sentences. Correct spelling and grammar.