

Thoughts on ENGL 1010

Writing paragraphs and essays based on close readings of various texts, with an emphasis on clear, grammatically correct expository prose.

I first taught the equivalent of ENGL 1010 in 1985 when I was a graduate student. I've taught the course off and on ever since at community colleges and at the university level. The one thing I know for sure about 1010 is that it is not a throwaway course. It is not a course that can be ignored because it isn't full of upper division students. ENGL 1010 is a fundamental course for all students entering the university. It is part of what other departments might call a foundations course in that it provides students with fundamental, bedrock principles for communicating effectively in college and in their careers beyond college. As such, we should always consider ENGL 1010 to be a vitally important part of what we do in our department and instrumental to our students' educational experience in higher education.

ENGL 1010 is a place for real learning to occur. I recall the student who informed me that her husband "hated me" because I had assigned essays that called into question the idea that men are more important than women in marriage and relationships. I've had many students realize while working in 1010 what it was they wanted to study while at the university. And I've watched countless students move from aimless, cloudy thinking to sharp, focused critical thinking simply because they were willing to participate in the course.

When I think about assignments for 1010, I try to incorporate discussions and assignments that encourage students to communicate who they are as individuals and what they think about the world community in which they live, part of the [soft skills](#) that are so important in work environments. Early in the term, I ask students to consider an experience that defines who they are. We discuss examples in class, and then I have them write about their own experience. I use that assignment in place of a traditional narrative essay because I find it helps students focus on the life experiences that shape them and that determine where they go in life. An excellent resource for this kind of writing can be found via NPR's [Storycorps](#).

In my own courses, I like to bring elements of the humanities into play. One of my favorite methods is to talk about great art. For instance, Claude Monet or Georgia O'Keeffe would consider an empty canvas an invitation to create a painting. They used additive techniques to alter a blank space. From a different perspective, Michelangelo used reductive techniques in his sculpture. He once said that he could see an angel in a slab of marble, and that it was his job to set that angel free. Michelangelo's job was to remove the marble that did not belong. In a very real sense, writing encompasses both additive and reductive elements of painting and sculpture. During the composition process, writers add and reduce words in order to compose something that is effective and efficient. That additive/reductive process forms the basis for my instruction in basic writing courses. I find that it is an effective way to underscore the process of writing and editing, and it reminds students that writing can be an elegant form of art.

Teaching ENGL 1010 can be an exhausting experience. There are loads of papers to be graded, and 1010 students oftentimes require additional assistance to navigate their way through the college experience. As instructors, we have to play several roles, including gatekeeper, emotional support, and font of higher education wisdom. It's a tough job, but it's a very rewarding experience. I hope you enjoy your time with ENGL 1010.

Notes for ENGL 1010:

- Keep in mind that ENGL 1010 is a course designed to help students become better writers. The course description mentions paragraphs and essays only...no research papers.
- While it isn't a research course, it is a good place to show students how to choose information to quote in an essay. You might want to design an in-class discussion and exercise to give students practice choosing and formatting quotations for their essays. It is best, however, to leave MLA/APA instruction to 1020 instructors.
- Encourage class attendance and contact students who are not attending regularly.
- Email students early in the term and urge them to be in touch if they have questions or concerns about their academic performance in the course.
- Give a graded assignment or test within the first month of the term and make sure students understand the grading system. Remember, there are no D grades at the end of the term. There are also no Incompletes allowed in composition courses.
- Participate in [Academic Alert](#), ETSU's early intervention program for freshmen.
- Have students write a diagnostic essay in class during the first full week of the semester. You can use the diagnostic essay to help guide what your students work on during the term.
- Have students work on critical reading and critical writing skills.
 - [Critical Reading Towards Critical Writing](#)
- Plan on having students read and discuss at least one essay each week.
- Spend time in class going over an essay in terms of its meaning and its structure.
 - Have students read sections aloud.
 - Ask students to comment on specific paragraphs or sections.
 - Point out particularly well-written sections. Highlight such things as sentence structure, rhetoric, and organization of ideas.
 - Ask students to think about the importance of rhetoric to the overall meaning of the essay.
 - Have students use a section of an essay as a model for an in-class writing exercise. For instance, such an assignment would be good for showing students how to set up an introduction or a conclusion or how to word a thesis statement.
- **Emphasize that writing is a process.** It is a practice that we follow in order to communicate more effectively.
 - [Purdue OWL: The Writing Process](#)
 - [Donald Murray on the Process of Writing](#)
 - [Daily Writing Tips: The Writing Process](#)
- Include In-class writing and out-of-class writing assignments.
 - [The Obvious Benefits of In-Class Writing Assignments](#)

- Design in-class writing days as writing workshops. Perhaps an in-class writing assignment can be used to focus students' attention on a particular aspect of the writing process.
- Remind students that the writing skills they acquire in 1010 and 1020 will serve them well in college and in their careers after college.
- Ideally, have students write four or five formal essays during the semester, along with several shorter assignments along the way.
 - Students are required to write 5000 words in ENGL 1010.
 - A final exam is required for ENGL 1010 (and 1020).
 - Students should learn how to write for essay exams and other extemporaneous writing situations.