

Writing @ 

Writing Assistant Handbook

for

The Writing Assistants Program

WRITING ASSISTANTS PROGRAM

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR TALENTS!

Thank you for your interest in the Writing Assistant Program (WAP) at Adelphi, an exciting initiative designed to improve writing and communication skills across the University. This guide is for students who will be working as Writing Assistants (WAs) in various undergraduate classes. We will cover the expectations we have of participants in the program, and suggest some ideas for working with both students and faculty alike on writing-related activities in and out of the classroom.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE PROGRAM

The Writing Assistants Program (WAP) has been designed around a few central pedagogical principles. First, we assume that all writers, of whatever background and capability, benefit greatly from a thoughtful response to a draft of their writing. Indeed, good writers almost by definition understand the value of feedback and actively seek it out. Second, we are convinced that writing itself is a cognitive act central to learning, and that writing can be used fruitfully within any discipline as a tool of instruction. Third, we value improving the writing habits and processes of student writers more than ensuring the production of perfect papers. Finally, we believe firmly in the effectiveness of peer-assisted learning and the value of collaboration.

For these reasons, faculty using WAs should not expect every paper turned in to be perfect, but rather should share our goal of improving the writing ability of each student in the class. Finally, faculty using WAs must agree from the outset to make the WAP an integral part of their course for *all* students and not to “exempt” some students from working with the WA because they are already good writers.

A WORD ABOUT FACULTY MEMBERS USING WRITING ASSISTANTS

The faculty members involved in the Writing Assistant Program either nominated or requested the assignment of a Writing Assistant for their classes. They are eager to get extra assistance for their students and understand that this program will succeed only if they make the effort to communicate regularly with you, to design assignments (and deadlines) that enable you ample opportunity to work with students, and to encourage all of their students to meet with you. But keep in mind that developing stronger writing skills is just one of many learning goals and priorities that they each have for their seminars, whereas it will be your primary focus throughout the semester. Therefore, each professor’s priorities and focus might not always be on his or her class’s writing activities and progress—but yours will be! Further, this is a new program for them too and they will not necessarily have all the answers. So we hope you will

feel comfortable communicating with your seminar's professor—asking questions, making suggestions, brainstorming ideas, and the like—about your role and activities.

WRITING ASSISTANT RESPONSIBILITIES

Your job as a Writing Assistant is to help students with their writing processes; to help them devise strategies for tackling class assignments; to offer a reader's informed feedback on drafts of essays; and to build on the work of English 107 or any other writing classes the students have taken—all within five hours a week!

In order to do these things most effectively, you will need to be in constant communication with your assigned faculty member through some combination of meetings (during office hours or otherwise), email, or other communication. Please plan for at least one contact per week, at minimum.

In coordination with the professor, you will devise a strategy that is specific to your class's needs, assignment sequence, and writing goals. Your work will likely include such activities as:

- Holding regular office hours to assist students with class assignments
- Leading workshops for small groups of students on specific timely topics (such as composing a thesis statement or revising an essay)
- Attending class to assist with in-class writing activities. This could involve running a short lesson on a specific writing skill or activity (like preparing citations or generating ideas)
- Reading and commenting on low-stakes, ungraded writing activities or essay drafts
- Facilitating discussions on aspects of writing on the course Moodle
- Meeting with the professor to talk about how assignments might be broken down into small, discrete tasks, enabling you to work with students at several points in the writing process
- Providing feedback to the professor about class progress in regards to writing

Your job should not include tasks traditionally assigned to Teaching Assistants (TAs) (this might be a classroom relationship some of the faculty members are familiar with and, with no harm intended, tempted to replicate). So remember that you are not there to: grade papers; lead content-based discussion groups (that is, teach the course material); serve as a substitute teacher; or create, proctor, or grade exams. If you feel uncomfortable saying no to a professor who asks you to do such things, or if you are not sure what activities are appropriate for a Writing Assistant, please contact Matt Lavery or Michael Matto for assistance.

Training Meetings

We will work with you throughout the term in special training meetings for Writing Assistants. At minimum, we will schedule

- An orientation for all new Writing Assistants, to be held over two days before the start of the semester.
- Weekly meetings with the Coordinator of University-Wide Writing for the first half of the term, and as needed during the second half.

YOUR ROLE IN THE WRITING INTENSIVE CLASSROOM

Classes with WAs should be considered writing intensive. For this reason, you should expect to be kept busy all semester long, not just when drafts come due. Participating faculty members have been encouraged to plan a semester around a series of writing-related activities for which you can take some responsibility and which form a coherent instructional strategy in writing. You should have clear, weekly responsibilities or activities related to the course. For some classes, this might require that the professor tweak the syllabus and assignments, even midway through the semester as the two of you figure out how best to use your skills.

To this end, all Writing Assistants will have a copy of *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*, a helpful handbook on working with writing intensive classes in various disciplines. We encourage you to read through this book for ideas on how (and why) to teach writing within a course. It offers useful tips on teaching discrete parts of the writing process, holding office hours, leading in-class workshops, meeting with small groups of students, commenting on student writing, and much more.

Here are a few writing strategies and activities your professor might have already adopted in order to provide opportunities for you to assist students regularly throughout the semester. If he or she is not planning to use any of these, you might wish to make suggestions about where or when you think they might work well.

Scaffolding

Likely to be the most useful strategy for courses with WAs, “scaffolding” is a method for designing assignments that requires students to build up to large writing or research projects in stages, with check-ins along the way. The basic strategy is for the professor to 1. imagine the final product you want students to produce; 2. list the skills or tasks a student would have to master to do well on the project; 3. create a series of assignments, staggered over a number of weeks, that ask students to practice or produce short pieces that address those skills or tasks. These assignments may be ungraded but still required, or graded as a group at the end of the sequence. Such assignments are perfect for students to bring to a meeting with you. For instance, an assignment to write a “book review” might follow the following steps:

1. Description and summary
students write a short, relatively objective description of the contents of book to be reviewed.
2. Analysis of Purpose
students determine the author's purpose for writing, the intended audience, the context in which it was written, the genre, etc.
3. Establishment of Criteria
students determine what makes a "good" and "bad" example of this kind of book, based on what they determined in #2.
4. Review
students now incorporate the above parts into an essay that has the format, structure and argument of other reviews.

As a WA, you could assist students—meeting in class or during office hours, communicating via email, or by commenting on the completed work itself—at any or all stages of this scaffolded assignment.

Writing Groups

At the beginning of the term, you might help the class establish student writing groups of four or five students each, organized by available free time for meetings with you. (You could even coordinate this organization, based on your own availability.) You would then arrange to meet with the groups (rather than with individual students) to go over specific writing-related topics as the term progresses:

- how to plan a writing strategy
- strategies for generating good ideas
- use of library resources
- how to revise
- specific grammar or usage issues
- improvement of writing style
- citation style and formatting
- group workshops on essay drafts

Many of these topics will be covered in English 107 (The Art and Craft of Writing), but not necessarily in a way specific to this course. Also, students need direct exposure to such topics more than once to become practiced in them.

In-class Writing

Writing can be incorporated into a course not only in assignments, but as in-class activity. For example, there is no better introduction to a discipline than a discussion of the forms its scholarship takes (for instance, the structure of a "lab report" can be used to teach the scientific

method itself). As a WA, you might want to assist in, or even lead, discussions of the rhetorical strategies and form of a model essay within the course's discipline.

Also, in-class writing can be used fruitfully in short activities. As you become acquainted with the class's writing needs you may want to propose to the professor that you lead, or at least help plan, a five- or ten-minute writing exercise on a relevant topic.

Moodle and Email

If your class has a Moodle site, or uses some other form of regular electronic communication, you might be able to help moderate and respond to discussion. A "writing issues" discussion thread in Moodle could be useful, for instance. Email can also be used to facilitate turning papers in to both you and the instructor. Please ask your professor if you may have access to Moodle; staff in the Faculty Center for Professional Excellence can easily set that up for you.

RESOURCES

If you are working with a freshman seminar, you should know that every section has a FOrE class attached to it, which includes visits to the Library, the Learning Center and the Writing Center. Your seminar's professor might ask you to coordinate with Eloise Bellard at the library and Matthew Lavery in the Learning Center to make the FOrE visits to these places more specifically relevant to the course. Schedule permitting, you might even find it useful to join the FOrE class for these visits.

Writing Assistants should feel free to contact the Directors at any time for any reason:

Matt Lavery, Director of the Learning and
Writing Centers
mlavery@adelphi.edu
ext. 3202

Michael Matto, Coordinator of University-
Wide Writing
matto@adelphi.edu
ext. 4165

STIPENDS & TIME SHEETS

Each Writing Assistant will receive a stipend for the semester's work, to be paid in three or four installments. The stipend of \$850 for undergraduates and \$1350 for graduates is based on approximately 5 hours of work per week, over the course of a 15-week semester. Keep in mind that it is perfectly acceptable to spend, say, seven hours working during a busy week (perhaps when the class is about to hand in a paper) and then spend only four the next two weeks. It is up to you to keep track of your time so that, by the end of the semester, you have averaged five hours of work per week.

If you are a Writing Center tutor or work elsewhere in the University, please do not record your Writing Assistant hours on your regular timesheet, as WA work is covered by the stipend, not by your hourly payroll. However, we would like all Writing Assistants to track their hours for our own record keeping for the program on a separate form (you will receive form during the first week of the semester). Please track how much time you spend on various kinds of activities, such as meeting with the professor, holding office hours, attending class, and so on (the timesheet will have these separate categories broken down for you). This will enable us to have a clear understanding of how Writing Assistants tend to spend their time so we can effectively plan—and make adjustments to—the program in future semesters.

SCHEDULING APPOINTMENTS & COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CLASS

It is up to you to communicate with students in your class. You will want to attend class early in the semester to introduce yourself and explain your role (this should be arranged with your professor). Your name and preferred contact info should appear on the syllabus—confirm with your professor that this is so.

The Writing Assistants may use WOnline for scheduling appointments for their classes (<https://adelphi.mywconline.net/>). A separate schedule can be created for classes with Writing Assistants. Please contact Mary Wyeth if you'd like to coordinate such a schedule and then please direct your students to that schedule in order to book appointments with you. Keep in mind that it is all right for your office hours to vary from week to week; while WOnline does not require that hours remain consistent from day to day or week to week, it is imperative that you contact the Writing Center's Administrative Assistant, ideally a week in advance to coordinate changes in the online schedule. You can call the Writing Center's main number: 516-877-3296.