

# WRITE FREE OR DIE

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## "Nessie" at UNH

*Ed Mueller, Director, University Writing Programs*

The [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE) is an institution-level instrument with a variety of modules that purports to measure, among other things, the "value added" of an educational program. Going beyond survey information for the school, the NSSE also provides comparator information to a slate of schools chosen by the subscriber from among other NSSE participants. Although the NSSE is technically an indirect assessment, based on student self-reporting, it is recognized as a valid instrument, which brings us to the topic of this piece. In 2020, UNH added the [Student Experiences With Writing Module](#) to our NSSE survey.

The NSSE writing module addresses both student writing activity and faculty agency--asking students about the kinds of writing they've done, work done with peers, and also how faculty communicated about writing to them, whether assignments included writing standards, for instance. Although it is beyond the scope of this piece to provide a complete analysis of the module (it can be viewed at the above URL), here are some salient take-aways from the UNH results.

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### Future Tense: Upcoming Writing Across the Curriculum Events

#### **January 12, 2021 Workshop: The WI Guidelines and Your Course: Assigning Writing vs Teaching With Writing (9:00-11:00 am via Zoom)**

In this workshop, we will re-envision the "content vs writing" approach to course design. The writing program director will cover the WI Guidelines, the concepts and goals behind them, and illustrate how they provide an integrative framework for incorporating writing in any course (WI included). A cross-disciplinary faculty panel will then share their approaches and practices for incorporating writing in their courses and also discuss what adjustments or impacts (if any) teaching under COVID 19 conditions had on writing in their courses. Worth 1 CEITL Participation Point. Register on the [CEITL website](#) (Please watch for an announcement from CEITL on the January Workshops).

#### **Spring Semester WAC Brown Bags (Via Zoom): TBA**

A round-table event for faculty to share information and discuss writing in their courses. All faculty interested in discussing writing in their courses welcome. Worth 1 CEITL Participation Point. Registration will be posted on the [Writing Program Events](#) page of the CEITL Website. Watch for an announcement in the spring semester.

*Unprovided with original learning, unformed in the habits of thinking, unskilled in the arts of composition, I resolved to write a book.*      *--Edward Gibbon*

## WAC(ky) People

### UNH Writing Program

Ed Mueller, Director

Scott Lasley, Associate Director

Samantha Donnelly, Associate  
Director

### Writing Committee: College Representatives Term End

**Paul--** Huimin Li      **2021**  
(Finance)

**COLSA --** Davida      **2021**  
Margolin (MCBS)

**CEPS --** John LaCourse      **2020**  
(Engineering)

**COLA 1 --** Josh Lauer      **2022**  
(Communication)

**COLA 2 --** Michelle Gibbons **2023**  
(Communication)

**CHHS --** Lauren Ferguson **2022**  
(Recreation Management  
and Policy)

**UNHM --** C.C. Hendricks      **2020**  
(English, Director of First-  
Year Writing Program)

### Permanent Representatives:

*Writing Program Director:*

Ed Mueller (Academic Affairs)

*Writing Center Director:*

Meaghan Dittrich (Academic  
Affairs)

*Director of Composition:*

Cris Beemer\* (English)

*CEITL:*

Catherine Overson (Academic  
Affairs)

*Discovery Committee:*

Kathrine Aydelott  
(Diamond Library)

**Ex officio (non-voting):**

*Committee Secretary:*

Elizabeth Smith (Registrar)

\*Faculty Chair

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The 2020 NSSE Experiences With Writing survey showed that UNH seniors reported significantly higher rates of engagement with writing than seniors at UNH NSSE comparators; this includes high marks for faculty agency. Excluding comparator information, the internal UNH responses fell into the upper frequency ranges, indicating high levels of student engagement in a range of writing practices, with equally high marks for faculty agency. Although not a direct assessment of student writing or writing assignments, the writing experiences measured in the NSSE have been shown to correlate to effective writing outcomes (Anderson). In addition, the high frequency response rates are indicators of the "correlation between extensive writing and both higher order thinking and integrative learning" that writing across the curriculum promotes (Cox). Studies such as the [Meaningful Writing Project](#) and our own Student Exit Interviews have also validated the positive developmental influence of the distributed, embedded attention to writing across the curriculum indicated in the survey. Aside from these inferences, what do these results tell us about writing at UNH?

It would be too limiting to equate these findings to writing-intensive courses, or the writing "requirement." Instead, it would be more instructive consider these findings in light of the broader vision of the [UNH Goals for Writing and Learning](#). The many inputs and points of attention to writing that fall under these goals can be said to equate to a culture of writing. It is safe to assert that the NSSE Experiences With Writing Module suggests that the UNH goals for writing are being realized and that the culture of writing among both faculty and students at UNH is vibrant.

Anderson, Paul, et al. "The contributions of writing to learning and development: Results from a large-scale multi-institutional study." *Research in the Teaching of English* (2015): 199-235.

Cox, Michelle, et al. "Statement of WAC principles and practices." Retrieved February 28 (2014): 2017.

Eodice, Michele, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. *The meaningful writing project: Learning, Teaching and Writing in Higher Education*. University Press of Colorado, 2017. <http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/>

*You write with ease to show your breeding.  
But easy writing's curst hard reading.*

*--Richard Brinsley Sheridan*

## Ask Bear:

### *Your teaching concerns addressed by our very own Bear Donnelly*

*As Transposed from Paws to Person by Samantha Donnelly, UNH Writing Programs*

*My course has been migrated online, and I'm having trouble incorporating informal writing activities. My students feel like everything should be "finished" or "look nice" when it's submitted online. How do I make space for the messy classroom brainstorming that would typically happen during the writing process?*

--Tangled with Technology

Hi Tangled with Technology,

You aren't the only instructor who is having a *ruff* time with managing different types of writing under these circumstances. As always, I'm excited to toss and fetch ideas. But first, let me introduce myself. My name is Bear, and I will be taking over this column from Spence (the cat). I especially love words and language and am fond of helping others learn new tricks for teaching and writing. Here are some *pawsppectives* on the transition from managing in-person process or classroom writing to online.

The short answer is in order to make space for informal or heuristic writing, you must allow space. What do I mean? Let's get our paws dirty and dig deeper.

In her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instruction on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott has a segment titled, "Shitty First Drafts." This chapter reminds us that our writing does not often begin as "good" writing, but rather evolves through drafting and revision. Lamott explains that writers rarely sit down knowing exactly what they will write, but instead "[t]hey do a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across snow." Lamott noted that even when writing this advice *she* was having a terrible start: "Just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing [was] terrible." It is useful to also keep


in mind that "publishing" (as in making public) is the last step in the continuum of the writing process, regardless of form.

Whether posting on social media or submitting via a learning management system, chances are that students are thinking in terms of "published" forms of writing that they read online. As such, this will be their approach when producing digital content, particularly in asynchronous environments. Given these tendencies, here are a few ways to promote other forms of online writing:

**1) Give your students permission to submit "unfinished" writing.** I like to refer to this one as the Three Es: Explain, Encourage, and Embrace. *Explain* the process. *Encourage* students to use the process. *Embrace* the mess. Here's where you play an important role. Scaffolding early stage writing into the assignment to allow space for this to happen. Explain how messy "bad" first drafts are the norm that lead to improved later drafts. Make it clear that the writing they are doing, and that you want to see, is in draft and not intended to be finished. Embrace the unfinished sentences, thought processes, or incomplete moments within the text. Encourage those red zig zaggy lines from Microsoft Office to be on their submissions. This is what writing should look like at this stage.

**2) Be clear about your goals, why you are assigning the writing, and how it will be counted.** A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* explores how teaching online vs. teaching in person isn't simply "glorified skype." Colleen Flaherty explains that "just as there can be terrible in-classroom teaching, there can also be very bad online teaching... Their key is course design." To migrate informal, process writing from an in-person course to online, it is helpful to think rethink your goals for the new context and take the time to explain the purpose of the





assignment. Is it generative, an exercise in making thinking visible, or something else? How will it be shared and with whom (other students or just submitted to you)? How will the writing be credited? Although informal writing should be low stakes, and not normally "graded," best practices indicate that students will still need to be held accountable in some way. Being explicit about the purpose, goals, and objectives of the assignment will help students understand the role and form of the writing.

**3) Indicate what qualifies as unpolished writing in an online setting.** "Freewriting" is a great way to explain what unpolished writing might be. Peter Elbow calls freewriting "automatic writing, babbling, or jabbering." Another term might be "brainstorming"--working through an idea by putting it on paper. In this kind of writing, the concern is not about misspelled words, worrying about ideas that don't quite make sense, or straying into self-referential comments or asides. All of this is what freewriting should be. Prompting this kind of writing in a conventional class is not all that unusual, and easily explained in the moment. For instance, Elbow sets aside a few minutes several times a week for he and his students to free write:

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or

to think about what you are doing...the only requirement is that you never stop. It is also interesting to note that Elbow free writes along with his students, another practice that is more easily done in a conventional setting than online. Done asynchronously and online, more parameters may be needed to generate meaningful informal writing.

Online free writes could be less open ended and more directly tied to a goal, listing topics, responding to a text, or posing questions for discussion, for instance. You might also want to specify how long students should spend on the particular free write. By sharing these concepts with students and explicitly defining the purpose and form of a particular submission, students will be better able to meet your aims.



I hope this helps answer your question, Tangled. Please *forgive* me, but it's about that time for me to chase the squirrels in the backyard. They are frantic this year. Please let me know if you'd like any more resources. It's the *leashed* I can do given the interesting semester we are all having.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 1999.

Flaherty, Colleen. "Not 'Glorified Skype.'" *Inside Higher Ed*. 27 August 2020.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007.

For more information, please email Bear at [samantha.donnely@grad.unh.edu](mailto:samantha.donnely@grad.unh.edu)



*How do the slight touches of the chisel, the pencil, the pen, the fiddle-stick, et cetera, give the true swell, which gives the true pleasure! O my countrymen! Be nice; be cautious of your language, and never, O! never let it be forgotten upon what small particles your eloquence and your fame may depend.*

-- Laurence Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*)

# Tips On Teaching With Writing In Writing Online Courses

Excerpt from [Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction](#) (Open Source)

## Straightforward Communication and Clear Textual Teaching Practices

A teacher's incomplete or underdeveloped thought in an email or discussion post can lead to multiple problems of student comprehension and teacher ethos. Instructors must carefully proofread their own work for content and clarity; this work places them in the role of modeling communication behavior and strong writing skills...It is interesting how such modeling can change practice; for instance, in my message board conversations, I ask students to use cited evidence whenever possible. Online, with search engines at your fingertips, there is little excuse to say, "I once heard about a study." Of course, as a teacher I am pressed for time occasionally and want to say, "I once heard about a study," but I just cannot say that and expect students not to do so, too. Everything I write in an online writing course provides a model—strong or weak—for student writers.

### Remember to Connect Via Writing

A great—and perhaps revolutionary—thing in online writing instruction (OWI) is that students will engage in most course interactions via writing, and, although plenty of technologies exist to connect students and teachers without writing (including the humble phone), OWI teachers may want to encourage students deliberately to pose logistical questions via writing. In doing so, students can learn by practicing the "how to" variety of exposition while seeing how teachers and peers explain step-by-step directions. After all, students can learn from these transactional written interactions, including simple things like how to provide a good subject line or how to name documents effectively. While teachers all have amusing teaching anecdotes of receiving emails with subjects like "Yo dude" or receiving a pool of student project files and discovering 50 of them are named "Essay1," there are deeper rhetorical ideas at work in such practices—especially in terms of providing students with reflective moments in fast-paced digital communications.

Warnock, Scott, "Remember to Connect via Writing" *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*. Hewett, Beth L., and DePew, Kevin Eric (Eds.). (2015). The WAC Clearinghouse; Parlor Press. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/owi/> 164-5, 168-9.

## The Grammar Box: Run On Sentences

Scott Lasley, Associate Director, UNH Writing Program (contact [sel2005@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:sel2005@wildcats.unh.edu))

Run-on sentences are two or more complete thoughts fused together into one sentence. For example, this sentence is a run-on:

**There is nowhere I would rather be than bundled up next to a fire with a cup of hot cocoa it's the best feeling on a cold winter's night.**

Run-ons can be resolved in a variety of ways (see also the [Sentence Boundaries](#) Connors Writing Center Handout)

### Ending Punctuation (Period)

Splitting the sentences into two or more separate sentences using ending punctuation is the most conventional fix.

**There is nowhere I would rather be than bundled up next to a fire with a cup of hot cocoa. It's the best feeling on a cold winter's night.**

### Semicolon

To show a close, equal relationship between the two ideas, a run-on can be revised using a semicolon.

**There is nowhere I would rather be than bundled up next to a fire with a cup of hot cocoa; it's the best feeling on a cold winter's night.**

### Comma with a Coordinating Conjunction

A relationship between the two ideas can also be shown using a comma and coordinating conjunction (and, or, but)

**There is nowhere I would rather be than bundled up next to a fire with a cup of hot cocoa, and it's the best feeling on a cold winter's night.**

### Subordinating Conjunction

To show time progression, contrast, or a causal relationship between the ideas, a run-on can be revised using a subordinating conjunction (because, while, however, despite, although to name a few).

**Because it's the best feeling on a cold winter's night, there is nowhere I would rather be than bundled up next to a fire with a cup of hot cocoa.**





# Dangling Modifier: Synchronous and Asynchronous Peer Response

*Scott Lasley, Associate Director, University Writing Programs*

The onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic generated much conversation (and stress) about the challenges of rapidly shifting to remote/online teaching, with the discussion being dominated by the technical challenges involved. Much of the advice seemed to center on synchronous online learning (often via Zoom) as the most direct translation of in-person methods to online courses. Although technical questions have largely been addressed, questions remain about how to best translate teaching methods from in-person to hybrid and online. A recent study found that “students felt they missed out on learning from their classmates’ questions in class, and the subsequent conversation, as well as on organic discussions with faculty that often arise in and after class” (McDaniel et al. 10). Considering this finding and our discussion of peer response in a previous newsletter, what follows are some suggestions and considerations for migrating peer response activities into online and hybrid modes.

## **Synchronous and Asynchronous Peer Feedback: Both Have A Role**

When thinking about online vs face to face courses, the choices often present themselves as binary: synchronous vs asynchronous, mediated vs unmediated. In-person courses are generally characterized as synchronous and unmediated, for instance. Take activities individually, however, and things become less binary. Reading and writing assigned outside of class, for instance, is an example of an asynchronous component of an in-person (synchronous) course. The use of a learning management system in a face to face course replicates the mediated (“digital”) environment of an online course. Examining the aims of the peer feedback exercise and questions


of time and place help to broaden options and define the mode.

## **Characteristics**

Both approaches have strengths and challenges. Synchronous feedback is interactive and dynamic, allowing students to see how a reader reacts to a draft in real time. Often, synchronous feedback is oral or mainly oral and supported by limited writing. Asynchronous feedback affords readers time to consider the draft and respond in writing. Logistics also define options (scheduling, time available). A synchronous feedback exercise is more limited by logistics than an asynchronous exercise. In the end, it is also important to keep in mind that the act of responding, particularly in writing, to another student’s writing benefits the reviewer as much (or more) than any feedback they may provide. In other words, the activity itself has value, which can also expand ways of thinking about the exercise. What follows are three ways to structure synchronous and asynchronous feedback opportunities:

### **Hybrid: Online Writer’s Workshops:**

For these workshops, students read through two or three peer drafts for homework, providing in-text comments and some general discussion questions in preparation for the workshop. Then, during a regular Zoom class meeting, students have a small group discussion of the drafts using the homework questions they created. For Zoom classes, this approach could be utilized using the breakout rooms. This approach not only allows for students to have different ways of responding (through written and oral feedback), but it also interactive and allows students to get clarification and consensus on potential areas of disagreement. As with most synchronous feedback approaches, an Online Writer’s Workshop requires quite a bit of class time. The point with



this approach isn't to try and simulate an in-person writing workshop but rather to provide students with a means of still having a meaningful conversation with peers about their writing in an online space.

**Asynchronous: Guided Online Writing Response Sessions:** This approach can be useful in larger classes or if you are looking for a way to provide more varied peer response exercises than what is feasible in a Zoom class session. Assign students to groups of three or four. For homework have students prepare three guiding questions for peer reviewers to read and respond to in their feedback. These questions should be tailored to the stage of the draft. If it's a rough draft, then suggest students focus on conceptual, higher-order questions, such as on organization or use of evidence. If it is a final draft, they might focus on stylistic or lower-order issues, such as sentence clarity or citation. You can also provide students with guiding questions or some other framework based on your goals. For the purposes of the exercise, student's respondents focus on the three questions posed by the peer-author (unless there are major issues with the draft, such as not fulfilling requirements of the assignment).

Students may then respond to one another asynchronously via in-text comments in a word processor program like Word, via a discussion board, by filling out templated worksheet, or by drafting a written response of their own in response to the questions.

**Synchronous: Guided Online Writing Response Sessions** can also be handled synchronously. One way that can be done is through a collaborative writing platform like Google Docs where students can comment on their peers' drafts and respond to each other in real time, potentially during a class session or as part of an out-of-class meeting organized by the students. The guiding questions would still be the same; however, students would be able to

make comments and ask questions about the draft as they are reading the draft using Google Docs chat feature or by responding to the comments their peers make.

This approach works best with small pieces of writing or partial drafts, so responders have enough time to read and respond to their peer's work.


### Final Considerations

These suggestions are a useful starting point for considering how to navigate the challenges of designing online peer response exercises. Despite the digital screen drain we are all feeling right now, it is still worthwhile for students to have opportunities to respond to their peers' writing just as it has been for in-person courses. Here are three final considerations as you continue to evolve your teaching to meet these new challenges: 1) remember to be explicit in terms of what digital platforms you want students to respond on and how to use those platforms effectively; 2) explain what your expectations are for their feedback, make the exercise accountable, and guide them in understanding what effective feedback entails; and 3) approach peer response as an ongoing process that requires multiple opportunities for students to hone their craft and become better responders and readers.


For more on teaching, please visit the [Faculty Resources Section](#) on the Writing Program Website. You may want to consider the Connors Writing Center's [Suggestions For Peer Review](#) handout.

McDaniel, Christy, Catherine Suffern, Jenna Joo, and Rayane Alamuddin. *Student and Faculty Experiences with Emergency Remote Learning in Spring 2020*. Ithaca S&R, October 2020.

For more information, contact [sel2005@wildcats.unh.edu](mailto:sel2005@wildcats.unh.edu)



*Science, demystified, is just another nonfiction subject. Writing, demystified, is just another way for scientists to transmit what they know. --William Zinsser*



*A man who thinks much of his words as he writes them will generally leave behind him work that smells of oil.*

*--Anthony Trollope*

## Past Perfect: Director's Notes

Ed Mueller, Director, University Writing Programs



### NSSE: Now What?

In the opening piece of this newsletter, I covered the results of the Writing Experiences Module of the NSSE administered at UNH in 2020. From it, I suggested that we can infer that the aims of the goals for writing and learning at UNH are being met:

*As the cornerstone of any higher education, academic and disciplinary literacy is the concern of the entire faculty and the whole university curriculum. Understanding that literacy is a long-term developmental process, the university community is committed to the following goals for student writing and learning.*

- *Students should use writing as an intellectual process to learn material, to discover, construct, and order meaning.*
- *Students should learn to write effectively in various academic and disciplinary genres for professional and lay audiences.*
- *Students should learn to display competence with the generic features and conventions of academic language.*

*Writing assignments which support course and curricular objectives are strongly encouraged in all courses, whether they are designated Writing Intensive or not.*

Put another way, the NSSE Writing Experiences Module informs us that student experiences reflect the broad vision for the place of writing in the academic program at UNH. What the NSSE does not give us, however, is a measure of student writing itself: a direct assessment of student writing as an outcome. This is the other part of the assessment picture, one that cannot be done via an instrument like the NSSE.

Direct assessment of student writing must be embedded and disciplinary. In other words, it must be done using writing drawn from the curriculum and measured by faculty versed in the disciplinary writing conventions. A composite made up of multiple local direct assessments from across units combined with large, indirect assessments like the NSSE would provide a complete assessment picture, one that would not only meet accreditation requirements but (more importantly) also be useful to help guide and improve teaching and learning at UNH.

The UNH Writing Program has produced a toolkit, the *Department Guide for Writing Goals, Outcomes and Assessment*, to help promote local direct writing assessment. It is available through Writing Committee representatives, College Accreditation Fellows, or by contacting the UNH Writing Program, which is available to assist with implementation. Contact [edward.mueller@unh.edu](mailto:edward.mueller@unh.edu) if interested.



## Last Word

*The person who does not respect words and their proper relationships cannot have much respect for ideas--very possibly cannot have ideas at all.*

*--John Simon*