

Freshman Seminars in Weinberg College

Freshman seminars are among the most rewarding—and challenging—classes taught by Northwestern faculty. This document is intended to acquaint you with the Seminar requirement and to suggest strategies for making your course as successful as possible. It is not a script: there are as many ways to hone students' writing and to facilitate critical thinking as there are seminar instructors.

Freshman seminars are the key component of the first-year experience in Weinberg. With a few exceptions, students must complete two freshman seminars in their first year, the first in the fall and the second in either the winter or spring quarter. (Students who are in special programs like HPME, ISP, MMSS, and the BA/BMus dual degree program do not take fall seminars.) Although seminars accomplish many things, the primary goals are to hone students' skills as critical thinkers and writers and to familiarize them with the canons of academic research. Because enrollment is limited to fifteen or sixteen students, instructors are able to pay far more attention to individual students and to their writing than is possible in other settings. More information about the requirement can be found here: <http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/advising/freshmen/seminars/>.

The most successful seminars challenge students to become active participants in the learning process, helping them to develop arguments of their own and to evaluate those of others based on the reasoned use of evidence. To that end, instructors should be bold in designing course formats that encourage students to express their ideas both in writing and aloud. Some instructors require students to post seminar papers on Blackboard and either ask or require others in the class to respond in kind. Others stage debates, asking students to argue various sides of an issue. Still others require students to make individual or group presentations or ask them to critique other students' work. The sky really is the limit here. You can experiment and consult with other instructors on techniques that have and haven't worked in their seminar rooms. You can see the descriptions of current seminars here: <http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/advising/freshmen/seminars/choosing.html>.

Most importantly, perhaps, seminars are the core writing experiences for many first-year students, and your evaluation of a student's competence as a writer is the principal criterion by which the College determines whether that student has satisfied the Writing Requirement. It is imperative that you assign frequent (even weekly) writing assignments and provide timely critique so that you have ample basis on which to assess students' writing. Frequent assignments are also the best way to ensure that students see what distinguishes successful college-level writing from the kinds of writing they did in high school.

As a general rule, the more opportunities students have to write in a quarter, the better. Those opportunities don't all have to take the form of formal papers, though: They can include ungraded but regular reading responses, blog entries, and peer reviews that are discussed briefly in class. Still... the more times students encounter your mind in written responses to their writing, the greater the chance that they will understand your expectations and be able to incorporate your editorial suggestions. Fall-quarter seminar instructors are especially encouraged to assign frequent, relatively short writing assignments and to provide feedback starting as early in the quarter as humanly possible. Although winter- and spring-quarter instructors should also provide early, substantive feedback on student writing, they are also encouraged to build on the foundation afforded by fall-quarter instructors. Winter- and spring-quarter instructors might, for

example, organize their seminars around the production of a longer (say 10-12 page), research-based piece of writing. In all likelihood, the final paper in such a course would be preceded by multiple shorter assignments in which students propose research questions, identify relevant sources (perhaps after a required consultation with a reference librarian), and share outlines, draft thesis paragraphs, and so on. The bottom line is that seminar instructors should think about their courses as part of a larger goal: to prepare students for work in upper-division classes in Weinberg.

If you're uncertain about how much to assign, how to go about the task of evaluating freshman writing effectively and efficiently, or how best to meet the needs of an individual student, you can consult with faculty in the Writing Program and to investigate the online resources in the 'Freshman Seminar Instructors Community' on NuWrite (www.nuwrite.northwestern.edu), which have been posted by Charly Yarnoff, Jeanne Herrick, and other freshman seminar instructors. If you would like to schedule an individual consultation about teaching writing, direct queries to Ellen Wright, elwright@northwestern.edu.

You should encourage all of your students to make use of the Writing Place, a peer-tutoring center located in the University Library. For more information, call Barbara Shwom at 491-7690 or e-mail writingplace@northwestern.edu. The Writing Place website (www.writing.northwestern.edu) is also an excellent repository of links to online resources on a host of topics including choosing a topic, experiencing writer's block, and deciding when to footnote.

Academic Integrity. Precisely because the Freshman Seminar is the key writing experience for most freshmen, it is vitally important that you spend time – an entire class session, perhaps – familiarizing students with the canons of academic research and with Northwestern's policy on Academic Integrity. At a minimum, please devote a portion of at least one class early in the quarter to questions of evidence and documentation and to the consequences of academic dishonesty. Beyond that, seize any opportunity to focus attention on citational practices as both practical and ethical matters. One place to start is with a document entitled "Academic Integrity: A Brief Guide" found here: <http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/students/integrity/>. Charles Lipson's guide to citation and academic integrity, *Doing Honest Work in College*, is another terrific resource.

"Seminar Enhancement." Because Freshman Seminars are so small, instructors often organize course-related events outside the classroom. To encourage this kind of effort, the College maintains a fund with which to underwrite a wide range of course-related activities. Funds are not unlimited, of course, but even with microgrants of \$150-\$200 instructors have been able to involve students in prairie restoration, take them on tours of the local art scene, show them the workings of a particle accelerator, and on and on. Contact the freshman dean for more information.



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Freshman Seminars: Best Practices

Anyone can teach writing in a freshman seminar... but it can be a challenging enterprise. Here are some best practices for shaping a freshman seminar overall and its writing assignments in particular. Remember: even if you are not trained in teaching writing, you know what a good argument looks like in your discipline, how evidence should be used, and how to construct a written analysis – and you can communicate that to your students.

1. **Don't assume anything.** Many first-year college students, while expert high school writers and very sharp thinkers, don't understand how to write or think critically at a college level. It is the job of the freshman seminar – *your job* – to teach them what we mean by making an argument, using evidence to prove that argument, citing sources properly, and so forth. You will need to make your expectations clear not only through the assignments you give, but also through class discussion about argumentation, evidence, and analysis in both the texts you assign and the writing your students produce.
2. **Keep reading assignments manageable.** Your class's goal should not be cultivating mastery over a particular topic or even introducing students to a particular field of inquiry. Instead, freshman seminars aim to hone students' critical skills and introduce them to the art of academic conversation. Shorter reading assignments that can be discussed in great depth are often far more successful in this regard than lengthier ones – although short doesn't have to mean “fluffy.”
3. **Shorter, more frequent writing assignments often work better than longer, less frequent ones.** The more students write – and the more they engage their professors' minds via written and oral feedback – the more their writing improves *and* the more they take away from the seminar. Of course, this only works if feedback is timely. Workshopping papers through one-on-one meetings with students is one way to provide in-depth commentary on drafts without your spending hours writing detailed notes.
4. **Build in opportunities for revision.** The Writing Program faculty is insistent on this point: students need to be taught to think about writing in terms of subsequent drafts. Revision means many things: it's important to be clear – and realistic – about your expectations. If a student needs work on grammar, syntax, sentence structure, or paragraphing, don't also expect her to make major substantive changes.
5. **Consider building in peer review.** Some instructors ask students to trade papers with one or two other students and then identify what they think best about each paper and what could be improved. (It's often best to start by asking students to identify each other's thesis statements.) Others have had luck requiring one or more students a week to post their papers on blackboard for the group to read before one of the sessions. Whatever the strategy, there is perhaps no better way to train student writers to think about audience than to have them read and react to one another's writing.

