



What we discovered at
Alberta Writes 1

What we're thinking at
Alberta Writes 2

Writing Beyond Schools

We want to connect and understand our roles as educators in a broader context. We came to here to understand the challenges our students will face in their educational futures, particularly the values and expectations in University writing.

We needed to learn about different forms and formats of writing: what styles and types of writing and citation are (or have been) available to - and required of - our students? How do these change in different levels and different disciplines?

We came to improve writing and pedagogical skills. How can we help students get started, get organized and get 'unstuck' when they need to? How do we link changes in content and audience to changes in grammar, voice and style - and how do we teach complex ideas if students' writing mechanics are poor?

How do we balance success on evaluations with preparation for post-secondary and 'real life'? How can we show students ways to apply literacy to their futures whether or not that future includes further formal education?

How can we integrate writing into more aspects of the teaching process, and help students see writing as necessary to communication?



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What Are the Qualities that You Value in Your Own Writing?

Formal and mechanical correctness - organized, well-structured writing, with purposeful word choice and clarity.

Contextual appropriateness - writing that is appropriate to its audiences' needs. Writing should be truthful, address important topics and have a clear purpose.

Thoughtful and interesting content - we value writing that takes a new perspective, and writes who are passionate, take risks, and can prove they've thought deeply about the questions at hand.

Community building -we value the social aspect of writing: writing creates a bond between people.

Voice and experience - experience and vocabulary are important to voice; experience should inform writing.

Writing as a process - writing can be a way of learning and thinking: it can help the author organize thoughts, make connections, and write for the purpose of understanding (not just communicating with others).

Relevance to writers - How can we help students link their personal narrative and values to their academic writing experience?

Writing as a safe space - writing can be a safe way for students to discover what they think and what is true.

Writing in Educational Contexts

Students need to understand the purpose behind an assignment, and what criteria their work is being assessed on. When students are aware and have a strong grasp of the assignment's purpose, their writing is stronger. Often, when content overshadows process, the writing suffers.

One way to improve students' writing in STEM disciplines is to integrate the technical language and vocabulary for that field early on, allowing students to apply it earlier. Students often practice writing by analyzing a literary text, and have little practice with expository forms required in the STEM fields.

Scientists need to tell the story of their research – how can we devise in-class activities or teaching that encourage students in this type of writing?

Writing Across Contexts

How can we help students write successfully across scholarly disciplines?

In the classroom, we can ensure students are aware of the genre they are writing in, and the criteria on which they're assessed. Providing clear criteria is a cue to the student to produce the right thing. A fundamental skill the student needs to have is the ability to accurately read and understand the expectations in an assignment. This can be achieved by teaching them to: identify key verbs; begin with a timeline in mind; ask for feedback, and finally, revise before submitting!

Collectively, writing skills needs to be emphasized within the school system, particularly in science and math courses. Every discipline can ensure there are useful and transferable writing skills taught consistently and across all grade levels. By reinforcing these writing skills within every discipline, departments can collaborate on a central theme important to the community and integrate it into each discipline.

Mapping the Conversations

What themes emerged within and between the conversations that occurred today?

All disciplines cultivate critical thought, and excellent writing is essential to communicating this process effectively. All writing demands structure, organization and clarity of expression, voice, and syntax, and students ideally should be able to transfer these skills into any domain. Revisiting the role of process is also a priority: making mistakes and revising is crucial to thoughtful and well-developed writing. Clear expectations in an assignment produce clear and accurate results.

What gaps have become apparent through these conversations?

Biases in an instructor's disciplines can create obstacles in teaching clear and consistent writing practices. Sharing resources, assessments and exercises could be an effective way of ensuring consistent practices. A large disparity is evident between what is taught at the secondary level and what is expected of students at the post-secondary level.

What implications for writing curricula and assessment practices might be drawn from these conversations?

Context is key – writing for self, for others, for the world, for assessment, etc. All instructors would benefit from interdisciplinary discussions and collaboration, as every discipline requires clear and effective writing, with a purpose (thesis), support (evidence) and a voice.

What's next?

We can build practical strategies: what can we do in our own classrooms? What can our colleagues do right now, to start? The conversation must be broadened to include new voices from different backgrounds and regions, and between disciplines.