

First-Year Seminar Professors & Writing Assistants: A User's Guide

The purpose of this document is to establish some common guidelines to enable First-Year Seminar Professors and their Writing Assistants to collaborate most productively. Every WA has some specified duties, primarily meeting one-on-one with students in the FYS, but much is left to be worked out between the FYS professor and the WA. And so we have also outlined under a section headed "Sites for Negotiation" various practices that the two parties will want to discuss. Many of us find the relationship between the FYS Prof and the WA to be a special collaboration, in which both come to learn from, think with, and depend upon each other. The foundation of this relationship is communication.

The Basics:

1. All WA's have taken Writing Theory, a full-semester course on the theory and practice of tutoring and writing instruction. This year the course is being taught by Jill Stephen and David Rosenwasser. Linda Bips has worked with the trainees on student development; reference librarians Kelly Cannon and Jen Jarson offered two classes on research.
2. All WA's participate in monthly staff development meetings.
3. Many WA's also have a two hour shift per week tutoring in the Writing Center.
4. WA's have been trained to work collaboratively with students on papers-in-progress and have learned ways to avoid plagiarism while doing so. They can help students understand assigned topics, brainstorm ideas, develop and revise drafts, and work on technical matters.
5. WA's are paid monthly, and there are limits to how much they can work per monthly pay period.
6. WA's are paid by the hour for the following activities:
 - a. class time (they should attend all class meetings)
 - b. one meeting with their FYS professor per week
 - c. individual and small group sessions with student writers, wherein the WA and students read student writing together and talk about it
 - d. offering presentations/workshops
 - e. two hours of prep work per monthly pay period (reading and preparing for class, planning presentations or workshops, looking at papers the professor has commented on): tutors normally read and comment on student papers during tutoring sessions

Recommended Practices:

1. Ideally, the professor and WA will meet weekly to discuss students' progress and to work out the role of the WA in the coming week. The WA can be a resource in planning day-to-day work in the seminar and can keep the professor informed, from a student's point of view, about any problems seminar members might be experiencing.
2. The WA and the professor should review together any materials that the WA wishes to distribute to the class—prior to distribution. This includes the contact & information sheet that WA's normally create and hand-out at the beginning of the semester. In this way, the WA and the professor will have the opportunity to work out together the scheduling of tutoring sessions between class members and the WA at various points in the semester.
3. WA's may need a few minutes of class time to field questions, schedule one-on-one meetings, and address other issues decided upon by the professor and the WA. WA's are not paid for tutoring sessions when the student does not show up, so in-class sign-up sheets rather than open office hours are better.
4. Normally WA's meet with students individually or in small groups outside of class at least three different times in the semester. Ideally, the WA should meet with students at different points in their writing process—at the invention stage (early), as they develop drafts, and as they respond to and revise on the basis of the professor's written comments.

5. WA's do not grade papers, nor do they write written comments on them. Normally, they read student papers in the context of a tutoring session.

6. It is usually productive for the WA and the professor to meet in order to go over a set of papers that the professor has written comments on and graded; this gives the WA a sense of how the professor responds to writing. It is also helpful for the WA to see a paper that the professor considers to be well-written.

7. When possible, faculty should discuss writing assignments with the WA before giving them to students. This helps the WA answer students' questions about the assignment and opens the possibility of the professor and the WA together eliciting discussion of assignments during class time. It is also helpful if the professor makes assignments in writing.

8. Conferences between students and the WA are usually most productive if the professor emphasizes in class that students bring some writing (even if only a list of ideas) to their meetings with WA's.

Sites for Negotiation between FYS Professor and WA:

1. The role of the WA in class discussion: determine how often and how much the WA should participate. The goal is for the WA to model careful reading and thoughtful commenting but without usurping the students' role.

2. Making in-class presentations on writing: some professors think this is a good idea, and others don't. In any case, the professor and WA will want to talk about how such presentations might be made collaborative. Otherwise, they run the risk of casting the WA as the only authority on writing and making the professor seem interested only in content. When WA's are foregrounded as the writing experts, there is the possibility that the faculty member can be seen by seminar members as not interested in writing. This split interferes with students understanding that writing is a tool of thinking.

3. Creating writing groups with students outside of class: some professors and WA's like working this way; others don't. The writing group (in which three or four students meet with the WA and read their work to each other) doesn't replace one-on-one conferences, but it may supplement or provide an alternative to some of them.

4. If the professor must miss a class for a conference or other matter, the WA might lead class discussion for that session.

5. Negotiating the workload: the professor and the WA should talk about timing of due dates and tutoring sessions, so that neither is deluged. One method would be for the WA to talk with one half of the class on a given paper while the professor talks to the other half. They would then switch students for the next round. This practice also helps to communicate to the students that the professor and the WA are a team.