

Thesis: Individual professors are doing a good job of teaching writing, but the College needs to build on that success to achieve a more coherent and systematic system of teaching writing.

What the portfolios taught us about the current state of teaching writing at Grinnell

- Students write better with focused, clear, well-written and well-proofread assignments. These should specify the audience and clarify expectations.
- Models (either professional or student-written) can help students by clarifying expectations. Professors should discuss such models in class, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps should not let students keep copies, so as to discourage slavish imitation. Models illustrating process (drafts written in response to feedback) might be useful.
- Students do better writing when engaged; faculty can offer real-life problem-based assignments, choices of writing topics, and flexibility about when the paper is due.
- Students need clear teaching about what revision is, how to do it, and how it will count. They need to understand that revision involves not just line editing but macro-level changes, including sometimes discarding parts of what they've written.
- The process of assembling a portfolio, which involves selection and reflection, appears to help students become more self-aware about their writing. Faculty can assign reflections to gain a window into students' perspective on the assignment and the material.
- International students struggling with English, and any students unused to conventions of academic writing, need time and instruction in order to improve.
- For first year students especially, short papers (1-2 pages), can be an effective teaching tool.
- We need more research on optimal methods for responding to student writing. Our tentative findings suggest that students learn better when professors might respond as readers rather than correctors; when at some point in the paper they stop doing grammatical corrections, leaving the remainder to the students; when they ask students questions like, "What can you do to fix this problem?" Carefully supervised peer review can help student writers as they write and revise. Finally, feedback forms that zero in on the main writing concept being emphasized can help both students and faculty. Such forms, if shared with students before they write, can guide them as they revise and faculty as they respond.

- Where appropriate, writing assignments should attend to “source sense”—to instructing students in evaluating sources, choosing which ones to use, and documenting their use properly. These foci may be only touched on in intro courses, but should definitely be a part of all seminars.