

Intensive Writing Class

Student Profile:

This class is for students who are committed to improving their writing. It is for students whose writing has been identified as their weakest skill and whose CASAS listening and reading scores are at least two levels higher than their writing placement. In addition, in order to succeed in the class, we have determined that a student should qualify for a CASAS L 85 or 86. This class is not a dumping ground for students who are treading water in a particular level. Improving writing takes a lot of work both inside and outside of class. Students must be motivated to do the work required in order to be successful in this class.

When you advise students who fit this profile, please stress that this class targets their weak skill (writing) but also addresses their stronger skills (reading/listening/speaking). The focus is writing improvement, but all skills will be practiced. The alternative to this class is to be placed in a low level apropos to their R/L/S skills. That is, a student may have level 4 reading/speaking/listening skills but be a level 2 writer. That student would be placed into a level 2 class. The chances of being bored and frustrated are high. This new intensive writing class was designed to fill that need and keep students engaged and focused on the skill they need to improve.

Background:

As our department contemplated the need for this class and Jean Jewell, Mary Tharrington , and I started to design it, I went back to the literature and research in the field to corroborate our approach. Three sources proved especially useful for this project:

“Talking Adult ESL Students into Writing: Building on Oral Fluency to Promote Literacy. ERIC Digest. Publication Date: 1990-08-00

Author: Linda Blanton

“The Power of Writing, the Writing of Power

Approaches to adult ESOL writing instruction” by Elsa Auerbach

This was part of Literacy Volume 3, issue D December 1999 from “Focus on Basics” from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning.

The entire issue was devoted to writing, but I was especially interested in the Auerbach article.

Errors and Expectations

A guide for the teacher of basic writing by Mina P. Shaughnessy

Oxford University Press, New York 1977.

The book is old, yes, and the articles go back a few years. However, in my professional opinion based on my 25+ years of teaching experience, these authors know what they are talking about. I have brought many years of experience matched with high interest to the question of writing with ESOL students, and in that time, I have read about writing, thought about writing, and designed writing curriculum. I believe we are on the right track with this new class.

The main points from these resources are as follows.

It is now common to differentiate between two kinds of English, BICS and CALP. BICS refers to basic interpersonal communication skills and CALP refers to cognitive academic language proficiency. For the most part, the students in our program have the first to whatever extent that they have it, but lack the second. Obviously this gap becomes a barrier for students who are interested in continuing their education.

The ideal student for this new class would have strong speaking/listening/reading skills required for basic interpersonal communication, but lack the writing skills for this basic communication (much less the more demanding academic proficiency.) We see this class as an important step for students for acquiring both BICS and or CALP.

One of our goals is to use the skills that the students do have (speaking, listening, reading) in service of improving the one they don't have (writing). Our other major goal is the focus on fluency. Because writing is a skill that must be explicitly taught to native speakers, (unlike speaking and listening) it presents a double challenge for non-native English speakers. They must be fluent in English before they can begin the challenge of learning academic English writing.

Linda Blanton writes thatj students are not used to accessing their own ideas and need to invent themselves as both readers and writers. I bring this up because reading and writing are so closely connected. She believes, and I agree, that we must help students understand that when they look at a text, the meaning therein is a result of both the words on the page and the meaning that they, the reader, assign them. She believes, and I agree, that a useful way to transition between reading and writing is to start with personal experiences. Students can begin grappling with their own text as preparation for grappling with other texts. She concludes, *“Not with grammar correction, not with academic assignments, not with workbook exercises, but with the students—who they are, what they have, and what they need to do to function in academia. This is where they can develop the deep base of literacy on which all other academic work rests.”*

Elsa Auerbach’s article is a concise summary of various writing pedagogies. She believes that the way writing is taught has powerful messages attached to it influencing “who they are as writers, what is entailed in the act of writing, what they can do with writing, and what writing can do for them.”She breaks down the approaches like this.

Behavioral and Functional Approaches: Writing for Assimilation

This is writing centered on forms and context specific tasks: job applications, checks, medical records, etc. The message: Learn how to assimilate quickly.

Cognitive Approaches: Writing for Self-Expression and Meaning-Making

Here we get process writing, (brainstorming, revision, editing, publishing), conferencing, dialogue journals, using writing to discover what one thinks, heavy emphasis on the personal narrative, the use of poetry, focus on meaning where form is addressed both implicitly and explicitly. The message: Find your voice. Your life has value.

(Our general programmatic approach to writing, and the Writing Standard work in WA state falls mainly under the cognitive approach.)

The Socio-Cultural Practices Approach: Writing for Affirmation

This is a focus on blending culture and what people know into the writing tasks. The importance of maintaining the first culture is key. The message: Your culture can be a bridge to the new culture.

The Genre Approach: Writing for Access to Powerful Discourses.

This argues that real power is not in finding your voice or celebrating your culture. It is in understanding the rules and standards of the dominant culture. It involves deconstruction. The message: understand the genre of power to get access to power.

The Critical Approach: Writing for Social Change

The focus is on social issues and how to be an agent for change. Look at the institutions of power. Simply deconstructing it will not bring you access to power. This is Paulo Freire territory. The message: writing can be a tool for action and social change.

Auerbach concludes: “There is widespread consensus within the field of ESOL writing on several points: 1)that a focus on meaning rather than form (grammatical correctness) encourages writing development; 2) that instruction should stress writing for real reasons, to real audiences in order to promote authentic communication; that writing should be contextualized and that content should be meaningful and relevant to learners; that learners need some degree of overt instruction, which includes talk about writing, substantive, specific feedback, and multiple

opportunities for revision; that social and cultural variation in writing practices and genres needs to be taken into account; and 6) that all writing pedagogy reflects a stance about the learner in relation to the social order. The most important point is that teachers need to be conscious of implications of their practices and of the power of the messages that their pedagogical practices convey.”

The curriculum for this new class echoes this consensus. The grammar addressed comes from the students’ own writing. The writing assignments and activities are contextualized and relevant. The color coded error correction technique helps students see patterns of error in their own writing so they can learn to describe and analyze their errors as an important first step in remediating it. Simple instruction in diagramming sentences gives students the language to talk about their writing. Teacher- student conferences focus on the individual and allow the student to take responsibility and ownership of her writing. Vocabulary development, extensive reading, spelling, and phonics will all help strengthen both reading and writing skills.

I consider Mina Shaughnessy a goldmine of information and inspiration. I was introduced to her work while I was in graduate school. Her definition of and research around basic writers includes both native and non-native speakers.

She explains that a key problem for basic writers is that the leap from spoken to written English requires what she calls “syntactic and semantic consolidations.” Lacking command over the language, the basic writer produces a lot of errors in vocabulary and sentence structure. She makes the point that students must be shown that corrections aren’t arbitrary—language is complex but it is still governed by rules and patterns that can be learned—by producing sentences and then correcting them. Vocabulary issues are complex because a student may lack both the word and/or the form that she needs. She believes vocabulary development is a slow process, helped by reading and conferences with the teacher. None of these difficulties are likely to disappear quickly in response to explicit instruction. She writes that students learn about the allowable contexts of a word by making a mistake and having it corrected—not by memorizing rules. . (In our color coded system, purple means the wrong word. I have found that a student with a lot of purple is in a great position to learn vocabulary. In our conference, I can explain the word she used and the word she needs. The student is given the precise word she needs to say what she wants to say—which goes a long way toward retention.)

Shaughnessy likes classifying errors—a student may make 20 errors but if they are all the same kind of error—it is encouraging and fixable rather than overwhelming. Classifying errors in spelling can be useful too.

Shaughnessy has a fascinating insight on why it is so hard for students to truly revise or even edit their work, rather than just producing a neater copy of the same sentence. She believes students do not see the parts of a sentence. “He sees no seams nor joints nor points of intersection-only irrevocable wholes.” Hence, she has enthusiasm for diagramming sentences, sentence expansion word by word, sentence combining, and scrambled sentences. She says, “Whatever its direct influence on writing, a rudimentary grasp of such grammatical concepts as subject, verb, object, indirect object, modifier, etc. is almost indispensable if *one intends to talk* with students about their sentences.” Jean, Mary, and I had independently come to the same conclusion. Students have to understand the way sentences work.

Another common experience, which becomes a psychological struggle, is that these students tend to think that a “good” writer gets everything right the first time. Any revising or editing then becomes evidence of incompetence, when it is really just the opposite. It is very hard to break that idea and to embrace the concept that the skill in writing is to be able to wrangle your thought on paper to match your meaning. It is messy. The more the teacher can show the messiness, the better.

Shaughnessy also points out that the ability to rework sentences is directly tied to how aware the writer is of what he wants to say-which may in fact only be revealed by the process of writing. The questions during a conference then, should include “What is the most important thing you have written? Then the teacher and the student can see how close she has come to communicating it.

Shaughnessy believes a student has to have, as she puts it, “something to mean” in order to carry on the kind of conversation with himself that leads to writing. As Andrea Nash, one of our Standards Training facilitators said, writing about what you had for breakfast is not likely to induce great engagement for getting it right.

I believe our approach to this new class is well thought out. We will, of course, tweak and modify as we fine tune the class. This year, I will be part of a cadre of teachers working on the WA State Writing Standard as applied to low level writers. As these workshops progress, I intend to bring any new insights and ideas to this work in progress.

Respectfully submitted by C. Duva

Logistics:

Students can be registered into this class as current, returning, or new students. This class has three different item numbers corresponding to level 2, level 3, and level 4. You should use the item number that corresponds to the level class the student is coming from, or would be in. On the profile card, indicate the intensive writing class as the next suggested class. When the student completes one quarter of the intensive writing class, her teacher should assess whether the student should continue in the same section of the intensive writing class, advance to a higher section of the intensive writing class, return to a level class, or advance to a higher level class. The intensive writing class may be taken three times. After three times, it is teacher discretion.

At the end of the quarter, students will take the CASAS. This will give them a reading and listening score. They should also take the reading tests and C-tests that are being given at the appropriate level for that quarter. The grammar subcommittee will make a decision about including a grammar test. There will be no final speaking assessment for this class. You will also be keeping a writing portfolio for each student. At the end of the quarter, the portfolio will be returned to the student and the final writing assessment will go into the file, regardless of whether or not the student passed. Like all the other level classes, if a student passes, we will put in all other tests that show passing to the next level.

Students in the Intensive Writing Class will not participate as a group in Transitions Week, but individual students who could benefit from a particular workshop should be encouraged to attend.

Materials:

All the materials that have been created for this class are aligned with the WA State Standard for writing. They will be available on the ESOL website as they are developed and/or tweaked after use.

The activities for this class will include :

- Pre-Post Writing Sample
- Four portfolio tasks with a standard rubric that will be finessed for each assignment
- Library fieldtrip
- Lab Work
 - Learn to type
 - Spelling city
 - Word
- Diagramming Sentences
- Targeted grammar
- Journals, Dialogue/Reading
- Reading Book
- Student teacher conferences
- Shaun the Sheep videos
- Writing (based on new activities test driven in the writing support class)

EXAMPLE SYLLABUS:

ESOL 12, 13, 14

Intensive Writing for levels 2, 3, 4

Quarter
Office hours: where/when
Contact numbers and email

Class days
Class time

Course Description: This is an intensive writing courses for students in ESOL levels 2, 3, and 4. Students will improve their ability to communicate in written English. You will study all language skills, but with a particular emphasis on writing. You will study other things such as grammar, spelling, error correction and sentence formation. You will do homework, in-class work, portfolio work, and tests in this class.

Required Materials: You will need paper and a pen or pencil. You will need a three-ring binder for handouts from your teacher.

You will practice English by:

Listening to the teacher
independently

Working with a partner or a group

Working



Course Objectives:

You will improve your writing skills, so that you can express yourself more clearly in written English.

I expect you to:

come to class **on time**.

Return from break **on time**.

participate actively in class.

speak English in class.

listen and work with each other.
do your homework **before class**.
respect each other.



If you have a question or do not understand, please say:

I don't understand

Could you repeat that?

Could you say that again?

Going to the next level:

To go to the next level you need to:

Finish all your portfolio assignments.

Take the final writing and grammar tests.

Have good attendance. **NO EARLY REGISTRATION** if you have more than 8 absences.

Have 80% on homework, portfolio work, class work and tests.

You must take end of the quarter CASAS tests.

Your teacher must agree that you are ready for the next level.

Academic Honesty: I encourage you to learn from and help each other, but you must be responsible for your own work. I expect you to do your **own** homework, and any quizzes or tests. Please **don't** copy other students' work.

Homework: A note about homework.

Improving writing takes hard work. If you really want to improve your writing, you will need to practice writing as often as possible this quarter. There will be homework in this class and you will need to take time and effort to complete it. The more effort you put into improving your writing, the stronger result you will get.

Course Outcomes: (things students should be able to do at the end of the class)

- Write several related sentences on a familiar topic.
- Use present, simple future, and some common irregular past tense verbs, to write affirmative and negative sentences, and questions.
- Write short messages or notes using models (phone messages, thank you card, and email).
- Apply sound/symbol relationships to spell simple words.
- Use and understand simple phrases in English to communicate basic, everyday needs.
- Participate in a discussion, express opinions and agree or disagree with others.
- Give accurate personal history in a social setting.
- Read and follow 2-3 step directions.
- Read simple stories and be able to answer questions and identify the main idea.
- Read multi-paragraph texts and write and answer Wh- questions about it.
- Read and follow written directions.

- Use context to guess meaning of unfamiliar words in a multiple paragraphs.

Campus Wide Outcomes:

In this class, we will develop responsibility, and written communication skills.

This is how we will address responsibility.

- Students will understand and agree to the teacher's and the school's rules and expectations.
- Students will do what is required to complete individual and group tasks.
- Students will be polite, and will respect the needs, difficulties, and rights of others.

This is how we will address written communication

- Students will gain confidence in their written communication
- Students will improve their ability to evaluate, edit, proofread, and revise their own work and the work of others.
- Students will show clear organization of their thoughts in written form.



Remember to turn off your cell phones during class. If you need to make a phone call, you can do that before class, after class or during the break. At all other times your cell phone should be turned off.

Children and babies are not allowed to attend classes. This is a GRCC policy.

CASAS:

You must complete your CASAS post reading and listening tests in order to receive a registration paper for the following quarter.

Student Behavior:

Our time in ESOL class is for learning English. Students are expected to cooperate with the teacher and other students to help everyone learn English. If any student does not follow college and class rules, does not respect the teacher or other students, makes it difficult for other students to learn, or makes it difficult for the teacher to work with the class, that student will be asked to leave the class and cannot come back until meeting with the teacher and signing a paper to agree to good classroom behavior. Any student who has a specific problem, must meet with the teacher outside of class.