**Best Practices for Increasing Student Engagement -- Teaching First Year English**

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**Emphasize and Reward Attendance Early and Frequently**

Many first year students struggle with the discipline and structure that a college schedule requires. Emphasize the critical importance of attendance early in your course, and have frequent and unannounced in-class grades, where students who come and participate in the group work or in-class exercises are given a 10/10. This serves two purposes: Students grow in skill and confidence from working together in groups; and frequent and unannounced in-class activity that is turned in for grades (present = 10/10, absent is 0/10) helps give many students the push to prioritize attendance.

**Include Frequent Group-Work and In-Class Writing Exercises**

Students must write frequently to write successfully. Working in groups greatly decreases the anxiety that can accompany writing. Group work allows beginning writers to learn from and emulate more experienced writers and allows the stronger writers the chance to mentor newer writers. Exercises:

* Provide students a question and have them write thesis statements together; have students write intro paragraphs or body paragraphs together. Then, as time allows, take up thesis statements or body paragraphs from students and place them on the board. Analyze the work and edit as an entire class to improve the work.
* Fix-This Exercises: Students enjoy and learn a great deal from correcting sentences and paragraphs in groups. Make an Errors document drawn from previous student essays of paragraphs with common problems (run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, comma splicing) and place a paragraph on the board (either handwritten or with the projector). (Alternatively you can use a printed handout). Have the students correct the paragraphs together in small groups or 2 or 3. Students will correct in different ways. After a period of time, ask students how they each corrected the sentences and write the corrected paragraphs on the board. Work as an entire class to reach a polished and correct version. Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of changing the sentences in different ways and highlight how a problematic sentences or paragraphs is now a correct and polished paragraph with simply some time and attention to editing. This is a great confidence-building activity for new writers.

**Reinforce Fundamentals of Writing Early in the Course**

Reinforce fundamental topics, such as the introduction, the thesis statement, topic sentence, refutation. What are the requirements of each? Many students have come into 1310 and 1320 with incomplete understanding of the purpose of the introduction, on what makes a thesis statement successful, how topic sentences in the body paragraph need to be focused and clear, and most importantly, be derived from and tie back to the original thesis statement, as well as the fundamentals of a successful refutation. Spend a class period providing a handout on each, as well as student examples.

**Provide Example Successful Student Essays**

Students greatly benefit by frequently seeing student essays that were successful. Provide anonymous example essays from previous years. Read over the essays together as a class and frequently point out areas of success within the essay, even going line by line to show was each line is accomplishing. Point out where a clear and specific thesis statement was followed by topic sentences that derived from the thesis statement. Show students where a research study was sufficiently and successfully explained and cited correctly. Point out how a refutation provided a counterargument as well as a successful rebuttal of that counterargument.

**Emphasize and Model Robust and Brave Discourse in Class Discussions**

Many students lack the confidence and practice with speaking in class. Yet writing is discussion by other means, and class discussion is a wonderful place to model the tenants of good rhetoric. Student engagement deceases when students fear the professor or other students will shame or ostracize any viewpoints different than theirs. Explain that xollege education is not in the business of enforcing groupthink or punishing those who hold different opinions. Instead, emphasize how to argue fairly with oneself. Include micro-lesson on “straw man vs strong man” arguments. A strong man argument requires fairly considering the pros of opposing views and the cons to one’s own position. Engaging intellectually and fairly with opposing positions is a crucial part of education.

Topics that directly relate to students lives today make excellent discussion lectures. Some examples include: Cancel Culture, Social Media, Screen-time and the smart phone in the modern world. Assign interesting articles on relevant topics. For homework, have students write a brief reflection post (2 – 3 paragraphs about the main argument of the essay and their feelings on the essay). Then, in class, simply open the class up to discussion. This aspect is especially powerful if the professor remains a beacon of engagement with ideas and new perspectives, even or especially if those ideas the professor herself may not hold.

**Reinforce Grammar Lessons Frequently in the Semester**

Grammar is undertaught in American high school education and many students arrive to college unable to write a complete sentence. Comma splices, run-on sentences, and incomplete sentences will prevent an essay from being successful in nearly every college course these students will take. Taking a day or two to teach what is a run-on sentence and what is an incomplete sentence can greatly benefit students. Sparkle English is a wonderful channel on YouTube that provides lessons on run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, comma usage, among other topics. Students can do the in-class practice quizzes Sparkle English provides, and then turn them in for in-class credit.

Comma Practice and Rules

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLlfuIAjaC0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ermReOvTELs>

Run-on sentences

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYc0rzqiQQE](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DnYc0rzqiQQE&data=05%7C01%7Csjs190%40txstate.edu%7C97a9fdb18b314d3a531408db1f0f0d99%7Cb19c134a14c94d4caf65c420f94c8cbb%7C0%7C0%7C638137921734776233%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=H2jGNNQT%2BuVBFZTf5jgrRfu3QzncM2UX%2Fb%2FouLBEW1Y%3D&reserved=0)

Sentence Fragments

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfXbyn8P0\_k](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DhfXbyn8P0_k&data=05%7C01%7Csjs190%40txstate.edu%7C97a9fdb18b314d3a531408db1f0f0d99%7Cb19c134a14c94d4caf65c420f94c8cbb%7C0%7C0%7C638137921734776233%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=qpmkKnaOzKfNINKL1V9l3D5pa0QGsroBhdKtP9pWoOs%3D&reserved=0)

Comma Splices

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XorH8g81PDM](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DXorH8g81PDM&data=05%7C01%7Csjs190%40txstate.edu%7C97a9fdb18b314d3a531408db1f0f0d99%7Cb19c134a14c94d4caf65c420f94c8cbb%7C0%7C0%7C638137921734776233%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=y0WGXg1ajKL3IJiPH9apck2r156ez2nSi6Ia%2FDVcXD4%3D&reserved=0)

**Infuse Your Course with General Life-Skills Applicable to College Students**

Discipline, Time-Management, Screen-time management, philosophy on goals and the financial investment of college are all helpful topics to occasionally weave into your lessons. Emphasize the importance of establishing healthy sleep habits, creating balance between fun and school work, and coming up with a schedule that both gives them needed relaxation times and keeps success in school as a priority. Mental health and anxiety in the classroom also are topics students will benefit from hearing about.