

The Rhetoric Associates Program

A Guide for Instructors



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Thank you for your support of the Rhetoric Associates Program. We hope that you will find, as so many other instructors have, that the RA Program improves the quality of the papers that you receive and helps your students become better writers. If at any time during your experience with the RA Program you have questions, concerns, or suggestions, please contact program director Julie Foust Andrew at 797-3648 or julie.foust@usu.edu. We appreciate your cooperation in helping the program to run smoothly.

Ground Rules

The Rhetoric Associates Program has a few basic ground rules that you must follow in order to use RAs in your classes. We have derived these policies over the course of several years, based upon successful practices. By requesting RAs for your classes, you agree to abide by the following requirements:

- All courses using RAs must have at least two, and no more than three, writing assignments (or a combination of writing and speaking) that are handled by the RAs.
- One paper must be completed before midterm and one after midterm.
- The writing assignments and meetings with RAs must be a required part of the course.
- All students in the class must be required work with RAs.
- Any papers submitted unaccompanied by RA comments should be deemed incomplete and unacceptable, or at least less successful.
- Papers submitted to the RAs late are not acceptable.
- Instructors will inform RAs of any change in paper dates or assignment at least ten days in advance.

Also, as you work with RAs, please remember the following:

- RAs do not grade papers—they act as coaches and guides.
- RAs need about two weeks to write comments and to meet with students in a 30-minute conference session.
- RAs have a 60-hour contract, most of which is spent in writing critiques and meeting with students—they may attend the class a few times to introduce themselves or pick up papers, but they do not sit in on class regularly. (Inquire about the Undergraduate Teaching Fellows Program if you need more intensive support than RAs provide).

The Ideal Instructor

What can you do to accommodate your RAs? Below are a few pointers gleaned from past RAs to guide you in preparing your syllabus and assignments, as well as preparing your students for their RA conferences.

The ideal instructor . . .

- Meets with RAs early in the term to discuss goals, expectations, syllabi, assignments.
- Introduces RAs to the class early in the term.
- Requires word processed drafts for RAs.
- Includes names and phone numbers of RAs on syllabus for easy reference. (This also shows respect and that RAs are members of the "team.")
- Allows sufficient time for written critiques (as much as one week) and for conferences (as much as one week) and revision.
- Makes clear to students that there will be a penalty for 1) not having a good draft ready on due date and 2) not showing up for a conference.
- Counts writing assignments as a weighty part of the total evaluation.
- Defines "best draft" as not an outline or paragraph but probably a second or third complete draft.
- Talks consistently to students in the class about the importance of RAs.
- Repeats important cues to students, such as "Make sure you have your best draft ready for the RA"; "Please be on time for your conference."
- Holds students responsible for their work.
- Shows enthusiasm for the program.
- Is open to suggestions.
- Reads both drafts of student papers; when appropriate, reinforces RA comments (e.g., "you should have followed your RA's advice").

Meeting with RAs

A conference between the RAs and the cooperating instructor is an indispensable aid to organizing each semester's RA-student conferences. *These meetings should occur before the beginning of the term.*

Each RA group is headed by a "lead" RA responsible for contacting you and arranging a meeting time. At this meeting, you should provide a syllabus which contains a detailed description of the assignment, expound upon the writing assignments, and tell the RAs what your expectations of the RA program are and what role specifically the RAs will be playing in the course.

Please also be prepared to address the following issues in the initial meeting:

- Questions concerning the assignments, so that the RAs completely understand the project assigned to the students.
- Method of pick-up or delivery of the papers.
- Due dates for the assignments, both to turn in to the RAs and to turn in the final draft. (Please make sure that you as the instructor allow the RAs adequate time to read and comment on the papers and hold conferences.)

- The consequences that student will face for not meeting with the RAs, not handing in drafts on time, etc.
- A class session for the Rhetoric Associates to come to the class to introduce themselves, where possible.
- The specific style guide required for documentation format, if any.
- How conferences should be set up: should the RAs come to class with sign-up sheets? Should the RAs give sign-up sheets to the instructor to pass around? Post the sign-up sheets?
- A follow-up meeting to discuss the first assignment and give the RAs feedback.
- Contact information for both yourself and the RAs working with your class.

Good Assignments

Writing assignments are difficult to design. One of the most common college-level assignments of all time goes something like this: "Ten page library research paper on a topic of your choice, due on the last day of classes." While most writing assignments are not as vague as this one, many create more difficulty for students than is necessary. A bit of care taken with the design of the assignment sheet can produce better papers that are easier to read and easier to grade. Here are a few pointers to help make yours top-notch.

1. DEFINE THE TASK CAREFULLY

When planning a writing assignment, first ask yourself how the assignment will integrate with the rest of the course. What do you want students to learn? How does the assignment serve the objectives of the course? Is it designed to demonstrate content mastery, to teach disciplinary practices and procedures, or both? A writing assignment can be a learning tool as well as an evaluation method.

It is also important to think carefully about exactly what you want them to do, and make sure that the language of your assignment clearly and unambiguously defines that task. Look carefully at the words, and ask yourself if there is anything in the assignment that would allow students to avoid the task and do something else. Vague or contradictory words often lead to inappropriate responses.

2. MAKE THE PROCESS EXPLICIT

The process or steps necessary to complete the writing assignment may need to be made explicit. Researchers have found that students use the assignment sheet as a recipe, keeping it in front of them as they compose. They see the assignment sheet as explicit, step-by-step instructions for completing the task and interpret it very literally. Are the steps of the assignment clearly presented? Is the order of the activities a workable one?

3. DEFINE THE WRITER'S ROLE

The role the writer is to play in the situation is often a crucial part of the assignment. Without clear guidance, students often take up either a "text-processing" role, in which they synthesize material from different sources without responding to it, or the role of the "street-corner debater," who argues propositions from his or her own personal experience and judgement, without sources or professional vocabulary. The most appropriate role is often that of a "professional-in-training" who utilizes the perspective and conceptual tools of the discipline.

4. DEFINE THE AUDIENCE

Related to the question of the writer's role in the situation is the question of audience—for whom are they writing? Students often write for the instructor, but they feel that the instructor already knows all the material anyway, so they have trouble deciding what to leave in and what to leave out. Defining a hypothetical audience for the writing and helping students understand the expectations of that audience will help students make these decisions.

5. USE A REAL-WORLD MODEL

Many of the problems mentioned above can be solved if the writing task is modeled on a professional, real-world task. Research papers and other common academic assignments often have no real audience other than the instructor, and no purpose other than demonstrating that certain material has been covered. Reports, memos, articles, and instructions have real or potentially real audiences and purposes and thus are easier to teach and easier to write.

Another solution is to provide a model or sample of what the finished product should look like. Even a quick glance at a representative sample can clear up a lot of confusion.

6. PROVIDE EVALUATION CRITERIA

Finally, think about how you are going to evaluate the finished product. What are your criteria? Will your criteria allow you to make clear distinctions when assigning grades? Will your students understand your decisions? Students need to know how much emphasis you will place on such things as focus, organization, format, grammar, punctuation, critical thinking, logic, evidence, and use of sources.

FURTHER READING

Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines, by Barbara Walvoord
Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines, by Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy.

"Specify: PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT, FORMAT, EVALUATION STANDARDS." -- John R. Edlund, Cal State, LA, 1993

Sample Assignment

We feel this sample assignment is an excellent illustration of what goes into a well-designed writing assignment. This level of specificity is especially valuable to novice student writers.

LAS 125 Pathways to Knowledge

Writing Assignment #1--Why Am I a University Student?

Purpose: To help you explore goals and objectives.

1. Before you write your essay, list the reasons you chose to become a university student. Then list your goals and objectives as a university student. Why are you really at USU. You are obviously here for an education. Be specific and personalize your answers.

These two lists will be due:

[Note to instructor: at this point, try peer response in class so that students can share ideas and add to their lists. As an entire class, discuss various responses. Emphasize "uniqueness."]

2. Write an essay in which you place yourself in one of the following scenarios. Use one scenario as the "frame" of the essay.

You find yourself in the following situation: through an unfortunate series of events, it appears that you will not have the tuition money to continue university studies beyond this term. There is a possibility you may be able to earn a scholarship through a fund set up by an anonymous donor that will allow you to remain in school. The application for this scholarship includes a personal essay. The donor, who reads each application, values honest self-appraisal and good writing skills. Draft an essay in which you 1) enumerate your goals & objectives briefly and then 2) analyze and criticize these goals. To what extent are your goals shared by your classmates? by your family? How does each goal relate to our discussion of "The Idea of a University"? Support your analysis with references to class lectures, discussions, and readings.

A friend says to you, "you don't need to go to school to be successful." At the time, you do not have a response, but after a rather sleepless night in which you think about the issue, you want to compose an articulate response. Draft an essay in which you answer the question. Define what your idea of "success" is. You may use some of the questions in scenario 1 to think about your essay. Support your analysis with references to class lectures, discussions, and readings.

A younger sibling says to you, "I don't want to go to college." Alarmed by this reaction, you want to encourage that person to reconsider by using yourself as an example. Draft an essay (a letter home is appropriate) in which you discuss your own reasons for being a university student. You may use some of the questions in scenario 1 to think about your essay. Support your analysis with references to class lectures, discussions, and readings.

As a non-traditional student, you have decided to attend the University, but you are not sure if this is really the right path for you. In a personal essay, reflect on your motives for becoming a university student and speculate on what you believe your goals to be. Address potential roadblocks to achieving your goals. You may use some of the questions in scenario 1 to think about your essay. Support your analysis with references to class lectures, discussions, and readings.

The draft you submit for RA critique should be your best possible work. Only if you do this will you get the best possible help--which affects what grade your essay receives. Below is a checklist you should use in preparing the draft of the essay your RA will see.

The essay will be due:

Format: essay; maximum length of 3 pages; word processed, double-spaced (no hand-written essays will be accepted either for RA conference or final draft).

Questions to Ask About the Essay:

Does the introduction include a summary of goals.

Does most of the essay focus on analysis/criticism of these goals? Are references to readings and lectures made?

Are references documented correctly? (See "Ready Reference Guide")

Are specific examples included?

Is the prose lively? (Would someone else WANT to read this?)

What makes the essay unique?

What conclusions have you come to?

Have you given the essay a lively title?

Is the essay well-organized?

Is there a variety of sentence beginnings?

Are active verbs used when appropriate?

Have you--or someone else--proofread the essay?

Please note: I look especially for analysis and criticism.

Student Evaluation

As part of the RA process, please have your students complete the evaluation forms that follow this page at the appropriate times during the semester. Return the completed evaluation forms to Julie Foust Andrew in RBW 413.

Faculty Evaluation

Whenever you work with RAs we want to know how the program worked for you. When it is convenient, we would appreciate your comments—every semester, if possible. You might use the following questions as ways to think about your work with the RAs:

Did the papers you received improve because of the RAs? If so, how?

Describe any concerns you have about the quality or effectiveness of individual RAs.

Did you get sufficient information on how the program works?

How might we be more helpful?

What problems, if any, did you encounter in the mechanics of collecting, distributing, and returning papers in a timely fashion?

Have you suggestions for improving this process?

Have you any suggestions that we should share with the instructors who use RAs—anything that worked particularly well that you would recommend?

Please email your comments to Julie Foust Andrew at julie.foust@usu.edu.

MID-TERM RHETORIC ASSOCIATE EVALUATION (after the first paper and conferences)

Class: _____

Instructor Name: _____

Date: _____

The RAs appreciate your anonymous feedback about their work with you--both the written critiques and the conferences. Please use specific details as much as possible; avoid generalities.

1. My RA's name is _____
2. My RA really helped me to . . .

3. My RA could help me more by . . .

4. For the next paper/conference, I know that I need to improve by doing . . .

5. Help us understand how the assignment might be improved. When I started to write the assignment, I didn't understand . . .

END OF TERM RHETORIC ASSOCIATE EVALUATION (after the second/third paper and conferences)

Class: _____

Instructor Name: _____

Date: _____

The RAs appreciate your anonymous feedback about their work with you--both the written critiques and the conferences. Please use specific details as much as possible; avoid generalities.

My RA's name is: _____

My RA really helped me to . . .

My RA could help me more by . . .

My writing has improved in these specific ways . . .