

Introduction

The Writing Centre can offer many supports to learners as they work through various types of assessments. Read the interview below with two tutors in Humber's Writing Centre to learn more about assessment challenges and approaches.

What are the most frequent/common types of writing assessments that students are given in their college classes?

Monique: At The Writing Centre, I see a lot of students from the core writing courses (WRIT/ESOL), and the most common types of assignments are paraphrasing, summarising and critical analysis. The students usually interact with an opinion piece and have to write a paragraph or two to demonstrate their knowledge and comprehension of the concepts taught. They are also given activities that focus on understanding English grammar, most notably identifying and correcting errors in sentence structures, which are usually given as quizzes. Outside of the core writing courses, students also book appointments for help with other types of essays, reports and reflections. Additionally, to stress the importance of crediting sources and preventing plagiarism, many assignments focus on proper APA (or other) formatting and may take the form of quizzes, spotting and fixing errors, or correctly formatting the student's own assignment.

Joanne: This year at the Writing Centre I have been working with many students from the social sciences, including ECE, Nursing and Social Services. The typical assignments include reflection papers, summaries, a summary of the article with targeted questions, case studies, critical analysis, an awareness campaign related to a social problem, and critical analysis with applying evidence informed practice. In addition to this, I see literature review assignments and responses to a blog/discussion post.

Joanne Evanoff completed the TESL Post-Graduate Certificate at Humber College. She is a Tutor at the Humber Writing Centre and occasionally teaches English at Humber College and in LINC ESL community courses. She has a Bachelor of Commerce from McGill University & is trained as a Registered Nurse.

Monique Melbourne is a graduate of Humber College's TESL program. She has taught several English courses at the College and currently works as a writing tutor to help students improve their grammar and writing style. As a certified language assessor, she also assesses the English language proficiency of newcomers to place them in language training programs that meet their needs.

When you are reviewing the assignment with students, do you notice that there are certain types of assessments or instructions that English Language Learners struggle with?

Monique: The overarching problems that students, whether native or ESL speakers, struggle with are reading comprehension and critical analysis. I asked one of my Writing Centre colleagues, Karen Snell, this question, and she agreed that there is a reading comprehension gap. Many students come to the Writing Centre unclear of how to start an assignment because they do not understand what is being asked of them. From our observations, this could be explained by several factors: a) the content may be new to the student and they feel they did not get enough class time to become more familiar with the

information; b) the instructions may be too wordy/long, or the language used is too advanced for the student.

Students coming directly from high school and other countries also struggle with critically reading and responding to a publication for an assignment. They may have been used to rote learning or superficial interaction with written materials, so to look at an opinion piece through critical eyes to verify its validity, reliability and persuasiveness can be a cognitive load that requires some adjustment. On top of that, ESL learners especially struggle with grammar. They may have the knowledge to address the task but not the right vocabulary or grammar to accurately and comprehensively express themselves.

Joanne: I definitely agree that reading comprehension is a common issue in understanding the instructions in an assignment. This is further compounded when the instructions lack clarity or are not written in plain English. In my experience, ESL students also struggle with assignments that are less familiar to them, such as Literature Reviews.

Lisa, a Writing Centre colleague, adds she sees a lot of summaries. And in CORE courses, she finds that being able to identify pathos/ethos/logos and discuss how the author uses them to persuade, can be confusing for students. There is often a temptation to discuss from a personal perspective rather than from the objective standpoint of whether the author was successful in persuading through their use, and why.

Pat, a Writing Centre colleague, comments that ESL students often struggle with deciphering opinion vs. fact.

Janice, another Writing Centre colleague, adds that in general, first year students often experience challenges following/interpreting instructions for their assignments.

I reached out to a former Humber college student who noted that: adapting the writing process of starting early to write the first draft, reviewing the first draft with the Writing Centre, then making corrections and again reviewing the final draft at the Writing Centre, worked very well in the EAP program. He attributed this writing process to improving his English and largely contributing to experiencing little difficulty in understanding instructions or completing writing assignments in his subsequent college program. However, he commented that many of his friends had difficulties with writing assignments using the APA format and citations.

Another former college student indicated that group writing assignments were sometimes difficult as it was more challenging to understand some of the native speakers' comments in the group setting. She also sometimes had difficulty understanding the assignment instructions.

What types of feedback from their professors do students find most helpful?

Monique: Students have told us that they appreciate personalised, specific feedback with examples that highlight their achievements and challenges. When students are recognised for what they do well and encouraged for their efforts, they are more motivated to work on their areas of improvement and have a better understanding of how to approach future assignments. However, we do not get to see much of

the instructors' feedback unless the students make an appointment to discuss it, likely because the professor referred them to the Writing Centre.

Joanne: Generally, students say they benefit most from feedback that is very specific and individualized. Like Monique, it is not common for me to see the instructor's feedback on a given assignment.

Lisa adds that very specific feedback with examples from their writing piece, and some direction would be very helpful for students. At times feedback is a general statement like "Your writing is all over the place/disconnected, etc." References to sources or class discussions might also help.

Pat comments feedback is most helpful when the teacher gives specific examples of what they are talking about.

A former student also states "for me, as an ESL student, I consider detailed written feedback essential to improve my learning".

Are students able to notice differences in expectations between what is expected in a North American post-secondary classroom and in their previous educational settings? What strategies do you find helpful for this?

Monique: Students quickly realise the difference in expectations from their previous educational settings. They are challenged from early to write clear, cohesive and informed assignments using academic language with few or no errors and credit given to all sources. Students can successfully meet this challenge if the outcomes for the courses are clearly explained and modeled. This includes giving ample time in class to understand and interact with course concepts, and clear, direct instructions for all activities. Too often students come to the Writing Centre unsure of how to approach an assignment because they do not understand the outcomes of the task and end up feeling overwhelmed. Time management strategies, accessible instructors, and making use of the many resources that Humber College offers for student success and engagement (such as the Writing Centre and Peer Tutoring) are helpful in meeting expectations.

Joanne: There may be a gap in the level of autonomy and self-directed learning expected in our classrooms vs. students' home countries. The ESL learners' orientation to Humber should include a clear outline of the resources available to them, including the Library (how to research), Peer Tutoring, the Writing Centre, and Learning skills workshops. This could be followed up in a few weeks with a refresher awareness campaign of what resources are available particularly for ESL students, including a mentoring program targeting ESL students.

Since group work is a component in many courses, ensuring that at the start of a group assignment professors provide an overview on how to work successfully in a group would be advantageous.

Using the APA style format may be unfamiliar to many ESL students, so it is important that professors outline the APA workshops and resources that are available.

Pat comments that she finds the ESL students can usually respond to comprehension questions. However, they struggle with deeper thinking kinds of questions such as contrast and

compare, relating two or more thoughts to the text, or relating their proof (for example a quote) to what the author is trying to say.

A former student contributed: “Canadian colleges have a student-centred teaching system. The professors give a general outline of the subject; the student's responsibility is to research, learn, organize/compare information, and present what they have learned. Professors also expect students to work in groups and complete the project in collaboration with each other. I believe that group work is an incredibly useful and fantastic method that prepares students for the real-life business environment”.

Another former student believes that the expectations of a post-secondary classroom in North America and Brazil are ultimately the same. “Most students want to be outstanding by building their professional network, learning from recognized professors connected with the marketplace, and receiving a certificate/diploma from a respected university/college”.

What advice would you give professors to better support their English Language Learners' writing?

Monique: I believe that professors should incorporate more student participation in the class lectures and activities so that the students can actively practice and thus better understand the concepts taught. Instructors should also understand that students are juggling multiple responsibilities from other courses and professional and personal tasks that impact how much time they have available to complete written assignments. Taking the time to understand their students' needs, expectations and realities should give professors better insight into how they plan and deliver their courses, in order to help students better meet the course outcomes. Added to this, Karen has also stressed the importance of professors giving clear, step-by-step instructions about assignment expectations, so that students know what is required of them. Students have indicated that they find it extremely helpful when professors dedicate class time to explaining and modelling how written assignments are to be done.

Joanne: As Karen mentioned, I think it is critical for professors to provide very clear step-by-step instructions, ideally numbered. Including a grading rubric with every assignment is very helpful for students to clearly understand and break down the expectations. I find the nursing assignment instructions/outlines consistently offer a good example of clearly outlining the assignment's requirements. I also agree with Monique that devoting class time to reviewing and breaking down what is expected in an assignment is valuable to the students.

Since some ESL students may be intimidated about making a one-on-one appointment with the professor, I believe offering a tutorial session for key written assignments would be helpful as a forum for students to review their work, ask questions and clarify the assignment expectations.

Further to this point a former student added, as ESL students come from different countries and cultures, they may hesitate to ask questions to their professors. “Thus, the approach of the professors becomes essential”.

Given that 18% of the students at Humber are international students and that number is growing (Humber International Centre web page), I suggest that each course offers a one-time grammar lab session to address the main grammar issues the professor encounters in their writing assignments.

For major assignments, professors may consider incentivizing students to use the Writing Centre by adding a bonus mark for students who show confirmation they used this service. This would motivate more students to make use of this resource.

For courses that rely heavily on assignments that require documenting research, I suggest making an APA workshop attendance as a mandatory part of the students' grade. As mentioned, APA formatting can be quite unfamiliar to many students, in particular ESL students.

Pat adds: be very explicit with what you want. For example, she just finished previewing an assignment where the student had to do an Annotated Bibliography. The only "help" that the student was provided with consisted of nine questions that the teacher wanted answered. Although that's a good start, it would have helped if the teacher had given an example, highlighting where in the example the questions were answered. Pat ended up directing the student to the "Humber Student Resources" website for more guidance. Please refer students to the Humber Student Resources, it offers valuable resources.

Janice notes that students need to have more of an awareness of the drafting, proofreading, and editing process, and guidelines around the proportion of time spent on each. Sometimes students have challenges just getting their initial thoughts on paper, and then don't seem to fully appreciate the steps involved and the amount of time required to arrive at a final version of their paper. This seems to apply to all students, but more so for ELLs.

As well, studying good paragraph and sentence structure while reading actively would go a long way in helping some ESL students to become better writers.