

Why Composition Courses Are So Challenging

Posted on October 11, 2019

Composition courses are challenging because writing is not a single skill that students either possess or lack. A successful academic paper requires the writer to interpret an assignment, select and narrow a topic, understand an audience, develop a claim, organize evidence, use sources ethically, control sentences, revise ideas, edit language, and meet disciplinary expectations. The original essay correctly identifies the individual responsibility of writing, the number of technical requirements, the difficulty of judging quality, and the difference between spoken and written language. It also suggests that composition can feel isolating when students are expected to produce original work without enough collaboration. These ideas remain important, but writing instruction should not be described as an inflexible test of punctuation. Contemporary composition pedagogy treats writing as an iterative, social, rhetorical process. The challenge is real because students must coordinate many decisions at once, but the course can become more manageable when instructors provide models, staged assignments, feedback, revision, language support, and meaningful purposes for writing.

Writing Is a Complex Act of Decision-Making

A composition is not created by applying one formula. Writers decide what readers need, which information matters, what order will be persuasive, and what tone fits the situation. Even a short essay requires planning at several levels. The writer must manage the main argument while choosing individual words and sentences. Experienced writers perform many of these actions with habits developed over years. Beginning writers must make them consciously, which increases cognitive load. Difficulty is therefore not evidence that a student is unintelligent. It reflects the complexity of coordinating rhetorical, linguistic, and research decisions.

The Problem of the Blank Page

The original essay observes that composition “comes undone until it is done,” meaning that writers may not know whether an idea works until they develop it. This uncertainty can make starting difficult. A mathematics problem may provide a defined set of steps, while an open writing prompt allows many possible directions. Students may delay because they believe the first sentence must be excellent. Freewriting, questioning, outlining, discussion, and low-stakes drafts help separate discovery from final presentation. The first version can be treated as material to think with rather than a product that must already satisfy every criterion.

Interpreting the Assignment

Many writing problems begin before drafting. Terms such as analyze, discuss, evaluate, reflect, compare, and argue can be interpreted differently across courses. A student may summarize when the instructor expects analysis or state an opinion when evidence is required. Clear assignment sheets should explain purpose, audience, genre, source expectations, and evaluation criteria. Instructors can examine sample responses and invite students to restate the task. Students should ask which question the paper must answer and what kind of reasoning will demonstrate success.

Originality and Academic Integrity

Composition courses often require each student to create an individual text. The original essay connects originality with similarity checking. Academic integrity is important, but originality does not mean that no two students can discuss the same idea or use the same source. It means that the writer develops a responsible argument, represents sources accurately, and distinguishes borrowed material from personal analysis. Similarity software can identify matching text but cannot determine intention or quality by itself. Teachers should explain quotation, paraphrase, synthesis, citation, and the difference between common knowledge and source-dependent claims.

Writing Is Social Even When the Final Paper Is Individual

The final submission may carry one student's name, yet writing develops through conversation. Writers test ideas with classmates, receive teacher feedback, consult librarians, study published examples, and imagine readers. Peer review does not violate individual responsibility when each writer makes the final decisions. The Conference on College Composition and Communication emphasizes writing as an iterative and relational process in which no single source of feedback is automatically authoritative. Students need training to give useful feedback rather than simply correct grammar or say that a paper is "good."

The Importance of Audience

Students often write only for a teacher who already knows the topic. This artificial situation can produce vague explanations and attempts to guess what the instructor wants. Assignments become more meaningful when they identify a real or plausible audience: classmates, community members, professionals, policymakers, or readers of a particular publication. Audience affects background information, examples, vocabulary, evidence, and tone. Learning to adjust for readers is more important than memorizing one universal essay structure.

Genre Expectations

A personal reflection, laboratory report, literary analysis, business memo, research argument, and policy brief organize information differently. Students may perform well in one genre and struggle in another because writing knowledge does not transfer automatically. Composition courses introduce rhetorical concepts that can travel across contexts: purpose, audience, evidence, organization, and convention. Teachers should also explain that conventions are not arbitrary decoration. A methods section allows researchers to evaluate a study, while a thesis in an analytical essay helps readers understand the line of reasoning.

Developing a Thesis

A thesis is difficult because it must be specific enough to guide the paper but complex enough to support analysis. Students sometimes write a topic statement instead of an arguable claim or announce that the essay will “discuss” an issue. Drafting can reveal a stronger thesis than the writer had at the beginning. The thesis should therefore be revisited after evidence and counterarguments are examined. Revision may require changing the claim rather than forcing every paragraph to support the first idea.

Organization and Coherence

The original essay emphasizes “effortless linkage” among ideas. Coherence is not created by inserting transition words mechanically. It develops when each paragraph has a clear function in the overall argument and when the relationship between ideas is explained. An outline can identify missing steps or repetition. Topic sentences help readers understand the local claim, while key terms carried across paragraphs create continuity. Some essays use chronological or problem-solution structures; others organize by themes, cases, or competing interpretations. The form should follow the reasoning.

Paragraph Development

Students may produce paragraphs containing a quotation followed by little explanation or several unrelated points. A developed paragraph usually presents a claim, evidence or example, analysis, and connection to the larger purpose. This is not a rigid formula requiring the same sentence count. It is a reminder that evidence does not interpret itself. Writers should explain why a detail matters, how it supports the claim, and what limitation or alternative interpretation remains.

Research and Source Evaluation

Academic writing often requires the student to enter an existing conversation. Searching can be overwhelming because results differ in quality, authority, relevance, and date. Students need information literacy: selecting databases, identifying peer-reviewed and primary sources, evaluating methods, and recognizing conflicts of interest. A source should not be included simply because it contains a sentence supporting the writer's opinion. Strong research also examines evidence that complicates the claim. Librarian instruction and source-evaluation exercises can reduce this challenge.

Synthesis

Synthesis requires writers to connect sources rather than summarize them one at a time. A paper becomes difficult when five authors use different definitions, methods, and conclusions. The student must identify patterns, disagreement, and gaps. A synthesis matrix can organize sources by themes. The writer can then build paragraphs around ideas instead of beginning each paragraph with a new author's name. This skill develops gradually and should be modeled explicitly.

Sentence-Level Control

Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure affect clarity, but trying to correct every sentence while generating ideas can interrupt thought. Drafting and editing are related but distinct stages. During revision, the writer examines argument and organization. During editing, the writer improves clarity and correctness. Students benefit from identifying recurring patterns in their own writing rather than receiving every error marked without explanation. A small number of focused language goals can produce more learning than a page covered in corrections.

Spoken and Written Language

The original essay correctly notes that spoken and written language differ. Speech depends on gesture, tone, shared context, immediate clarification, and repetition. Academic prose must often supply that context through words and structure. Spoken language is not an inferior form needing correction; it has different conventions. Students who are fluent speakers may still need to learn unfamiliar written genres. Conversely, formal written language is not always appropriate for a speech, email, or community post. Composition teaches choices among registers rather than one "proper" language for every situation.

English and Historical Complexity

English developed through contact among Germanic languages, Norse, French, Latin, and many other languages, contributing to irregular spelling and vocabulary. Historical complexity partly explains why rules contain exceptions. Yet composition difficulty should not be attributed only to a language being poorly designed. All languages have patterns and variation. Students struggle because academic English represents specialized conventions learned through exposure and practice. Teaching the reasoning behind a convention is more helpful than presenting grammar as a collection of unexplained prohibitions.

Multilingual Writers

Multilingual students bring linguistic and cultural resources that can enrich academic work. The CCCC statement on second-language writing recognizes campuses as multilingual spaces and warns against treating difference as deficiency. These writers may need additional time, language feedback, models, or opportunities to discuss rhetorical expectations. Instructors should distinguish language features from weak ideas. A paper can contain grammatical variation while demonstrating sophisticated analysis. Support should help students expand choices without demanding that they erase identity.

Assessment Can Feel Subjective

The original essay argues that compositions lack standardized ranking beyond grammar. Writing assessment does involve judgment, but it does not have to be arbitrary. Rubrics can define criteria such as purpose, development, evidence, organization, style, and correctness. Multiple examples and instructor explanations help students understand quality. No rubric can remove all interpretation, because writing effectiveness depends on context. Ethical assessment acknowledges this judgment, permits revision, and avoids pretending that a numerical score measures every aspect of writing precisely.

Why Rubrics Sometimes Fail

A rubric can become a checklist that rewards surface compliance and discourages risk. Students may insert a thesis, five paragraphs, and transitions without developing meaningful reasoning. Criteria should describe functions rather than fixed forms. Teachers should explain how priorities differ by assignment. For an early exploratory draft, discovery may matter more than correctness. For a final public document, clarity and editing may receive greater weight. Students should receive the rubric before submission and use it during self-review.

Feedback

Feedback is challenging when it arrives as a list of faults after the paper has been graded. Useful feedback identifies priorities and gives the writer an opportunity to act. It can ask questions, explain reader response, identify patterns, and suggest strategies without rewriting the paper. Students also need positive information about choices that work so they can repeat them. The National Council of Teachers of English emphasizes that writers grow in a culture of feedback and that feedback should fuel revision.

Revision

Revision means seeing again. It may involve changing the thesis, moving sections, adding evidence, deleting attractive but irrelevant material, or reconsidering the audience. Students often equate revision with correcting commas because major changes feel risky after time has been invested. Teachers can require process notes that explain which decisions changed and why. Comparing drafts makes development visible. Revision is where much of the learning in composition occurs.

Time Management

Writing takes longer when research, drafting, citation, and editing are postponed until the deadline. A staged schedule can include topic proposal, source search, outline, draft, feedback, revision, and proofreading. These stages may overlap, but milestones prevent the entire task from becoming one crisis. Students should estimate time based on the assignment's difficulty rather than the page count alone. A short analytical essay can require more thought than a longer summary.

Writing Anxiety and Perfectionism

Some students interpret difficulty as proof that they are not writers. Fear of judgment makes every sentence feel permanent. Low-stakes writing, private brainstorming, supportive conferences, and permission to draft imperfectly can reduce anxiety. Serious or persistent anxiety may require counseling or disability support. Instructors should maintain standards while avoiding humiliation. A course designed around public failure will not produce intellectual risk-taking.

Technology and Artificial Intelligence

Word processors, grammar tools, citation managers, and generative AI can assist writing, but they can also conceal gaps in understanding or produce inaccurate material. Students need explicit guidance on permitted use, disclosure, privacy, and verification. AI-generated prose may sound fluent

while inventing sources or flattening individual thinking. Composition courses remain important because they teach the judgment needed to evaluate tools. Writing is not only the production of sentences; it is the development and communication of reasoning.

What Instructors Can Do

Instructors can make difficult writing learnable by sequencing assignments, showing models, discussing the rhetorical situation, teaching research, providing low-stakes practice, and allowing revision. Collaborative activities should support individual authorship rather than replace it. Language feedback should be focused and respectful. Assessment should align with what was taught. Students should understand why a requirement matters and how it transfers beyond the course.

What Students Can Do

Students can begin early, clarify the assignment, break the project into actions, and seek feedback before the deadline. Reading as a writer helps: instead of only asking what a text says, the student can examine how it introduces a problem, uses evidence, and guides readers. A personal error log can identify recurring language issues. Writing-center consultations, librarian support, and peer discussion are resources rather than signs of weakness. Strong writers use assistance while retaining responsibility for decisions.

Conclusion

Composition courses are challenging because writing integrates thinking, research, language, genre, audience, ethics, and revision. The work is individually accountable but socially developed. Technical correctness matters, yet it is only one part of effective writing. Assessment contains judgment, but transparent criteria and revision can make it fairer. Spoken and written language differ, multilingual writers face particular expectations, and no single formula works for every genre. The appropriate response is not to simplify composition into punctuation drills or conclude that some students cannot write. Courses should teach writing as an iterative practice in which complex abilities develop through models, feedback, collaboration, reflection, and repeated purposeful work.

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