

Special Issues

Students with Special Needs: Some of the students in your classes are bound to have special needs. These range from who needs the support of the [Reading/Writing Center](#) to those who need academic or financial aid advice to those who need help from other offices on campus including the Student Disability Resource Center, Student Counseling Services, and other campus groups. If you feel you have students with special needs in your classes, see the Director of First-Year Composition, **at the beginning of the semester** to discuss ways you can support their learning.

Students with Disabilities: Know that the Director of the Student Disability Resource Center is available to offer you advice on ways to enhance the learning of the students she works with. For more information on the [Student Disability Resource Center](#), please visit their website. All First-Year Writing instructors are required to include the following ADA statement in their course policies:

What to Do If You Suspect Plagiarism

While reading a student paper, you start to wonder if the student wrote this piece herself, got too much help from a friend, or copied the paper from another student, the internet, or another published source. What do you do?

- Read the paper carefully looking for specific places where the text doesn't seem like your student's work. Highlight words, sentences, concepts, and sources to ask the student about in a conference. Perhaps read over other writing the student has turned in to compare the style of writing. You may try to find the actual text copied from by checking her cited sources, Internet paper sites, or asking fellow TAs if they have seen this paper before. Specifically, try Googling one sentence from the student's text; if you get a hit, try it a few more times. You may also want to use SafeAssign (available through Blackboard).
- Share the writing and your concerns with a more experienced teacher and with our First-Year Composition Program Assistants to get additional opinions. If you decide to move forward with your concerns, contact the Director of FYC to tell her that you suspect a plagiarized paper. You may also contact the Director of Undergraduate Studies, who is responsible for plagiarism issues with FYC students.
- Meet with the student and ask her to talk about the paper. You might start by saying, "I have some questions about your paper. Can you tell me why you chose this topic?" Then go on to ask the student about the words, sentences, concepts, and sources that you highlighted in the text. You may ask the student to show documentation that she wrote the paper (such as notes, pre-writing, and rough drafts). If the student clearly cannot talk about the topic, word choice, rhetorical choices, and/or concepts and sources, your suspicions that the student plagiarized or otherwise did not write the paper alone may be confirmed in your mind. If you believe the student acted out of ignorance or misunderstanding, rewriting the paper is an appropriate requirement to pass the course. Should you believe the student willfully and knowingly plagiarized, you must consult with the Director of Undergraduate Studies before taking further action. Additional conferences with you, the student, and the Director of Undergraduate Studies will likely take place. **Do not tell a student that she will receive an F for the paper sequence or an F for the course before you have talked with the Director Undergraduate Studies.**
- To pursue penalties for plagiarism after meeting with the student, write a brief memo to the Director of Undergraduate Studies describing the incident. This should include a narrative concerning how you discovered the alleged offense as well as the penalty you recommend. For a first offense, the most severe penalty you may recommend is failure for the course. You also have the option of recommending lesser penalties, including a failing or lower grade on the assignment, make-up work or revisions, or a combination thereof. We do suggest, however, that your penalty be one that will have a significant and permanent impact on the student's grade. Also include:
 1. A copy of your syllabus and course policy sheet.
 2. If you are teaching a FYC course with a plagiarism exercise, the student's signed exercise.
 3. The original assignment.
 4. The plagiarized material (that is, the student's essay).
 5. Evidence (a copy of the source, website etc. from which the student plagiarized).
 6. Provide any other evidence that you will help prove that the material in question was indeed plagiarized or that the student committed an act of academic dishonesty.

The student will need to meet directly with the Director of Undergraduate Studies; **make sure that you have told the student why she is being sent to this meeting before she goes.** Do not let the student go into this meeting unless you have

first discussed your concerns with her. Have her make an appointment with the Director of Undergraduate Studies ASAP, and explain the charges and the evidence before they go.

Student Athletes

Nearly all our student-athletes are hard-working, motivated students. However, a very few student-athletes seem to think they deserve special attention and that rules do not apply to them. Student-athletes have to give you their travel schedule on the first day of class, and if any of your students claim that they will be absent more than the allowed absences, you and that student need to see the FYC Director immediately. Each student-athlete will also bring a signed excuse letter from a coach before they leave for a game or match. You will be contacted via email throughout the semester by student-athlete academic advisors. They will request updates on the performance of the student-athletes in your class. The student-athletes have signed a waiver that allows all of their information to be shared with the advisor. Be as open and honest with the advisor as you can; they are there to help, to encourage, and to motivate the student-athlete if necessary. Things to consider mentioning in your emails are paper grades, attendance, journals, and class participation.

Parents of Students

You have no legal right to talk to parents about the progress of any of your students. A student's work is between you and the student only. Parents can give **you** information about a student which might help you ask the student good questions, but you can't volunteer information to parents, such as telling them when the student was absent from class or explaining a grade you gave a student. So listen to a parent's concerns and tell him/her that you will "look into it" and that you are "also concerned" about the student's progress and welfare. If the parent gives you any trouble, tell the Director of First-Year Composition.

Emotions and the Writing Class: Some Thoughts about Risk-Taking, Defenses and Safety Nets

The Age of Tell-All is upon us. The stories we hear quite regularly, via Oprah, Dr. Phil, or on late night radio talk shows, have left nothing taboo as a topic of conversation—or of an essay. These past few semesters, with an "open-topic" format, I have had student writers submit papers on issues such as incest, eating disorders, forced sex, messy divorces, the violence of an abusive father, and the death of a good friend. Other teaching assistants will tell of similar narratives. However, the essay that prompted me to begin asking about the message inherent in the seemingly safe forums we provide was a young woman's description of her own funeral and her concluding sentence: "I always knew I wanted to die young."

Fortunately, she was not close to suicide, but I didn't know that for several days, and while waiting anxiously for our student/teacher conference, I thought about the process of revelation and how narrow the view is that we receive of those being vulnerable on the tell-all talk shows (and how little discussion there is about the exploitation of guests). We don't see the **afterwards**, when guests return home and realize just how large the audience was and just how much was exposed, on air, of their darkest family secrets.

What we do see is how they are rewarded for telling, for prompting dialogue, for getting on television. Similarly, we tend to reward students for delving into the murky waters of past experiences. Our reader response notes encourage student writers to dare, both in form and in content, as we emphasize that the strongest writings come through the handling of personal narratives, through the examination of lessons learned, and through the taking of risks. Gambling with risk, however, means high stakes; there is potentially much writers can lose, especially if it means dropping a layer of defense. Creative works may result but, as with drug or alcohol-induced defense lowering, a delicately balanced sense of self may be thrown for a loop. Defenses have a purpose: they protect us from the unfamiliar and the threatening. When First-Year Composition students enter our small, amiable classrooms—an environment more informal and intimate than their other classes—and one in which they're invited to write about anything of interest to them, the situation is ripe for lowering defenses and "telling-all."

When I met with the "I want to die young" student, I identified my concern for her safety and talked about the University's Student Counseling Center. She was quick to reassure me that she was quite positive about living at this point in her life; she also seemed surprised and pleased that I was concerned—perhaps a signal that she was subconsciously asking for such

attention. A less-successful instance, I think, was that of a student who had written about being a victim of incest with her grandfather. (When she told a friend who told the authorities, her grandfather became so ill that he died two weeks after being visited by the police.) Her descriptions of the years of sexual abuse were quite matter-of-fact, while her tone was surprisingly objective—as though she had accepted the scarring and come out a clear survivor. Over the course of the semester, however, she became quieter and quieter, less focused and participatory in class, and I wondered how much had to do with the degree to which she had opened up in the early fall.

For some students, this “tell all, if you wish” permission does work in their favor. One student told me how beneficial these essays were for her to write because she had integrated them with her therapy, using them to help her deal with the anorexia which had hospitalized her the previous year and which she was still struggling with on a daily basis. Another student, who seemed alternately defiant and depressed all semester, concluded her portfolio cover sheet with the comment, “In some cases you have acted as an inspiration for me when I could find no other.” The effect of this was somewhat staggering; I took her comment to mean my encouragement to experiment with technique and voice (in her case, fiction and poetry), but I was sobered by the reminder that it is still quite a role we may play, without realizing it, in our students’ lives.

To let students test out their dramas and traumas on paper, before other students, may help them better accept their own particular set of circumstances. But giving them lots of permission to opt for the highly descriptive paper about the birthday puppy, or the little league game in which they starred, or the memorable fishing trip, or the years of training to be a polished dancer, is equally important. Keeping in mind that student defenses are most shaky in the first few months of arrival on campus may help us in respecting the resistances or limits they can instinctively erect. And cautioning those students who seem at risk to avoid testing their limits is an equally viable option. When a student claims, in private, after class, that there’s something she wants to write about, but she doesn’t want anyone else in the class to read her work, then the instructor has to decide whether or not to accept this as an essay-to-be-graded. The safer suggestion might be to have the student explore this material as a journal entry. Or to make a fiction of the work, thus providing both writer and reader with some distance on the subject (a choice I believe many professional writers may subconsciously make—without realizing how close to home the feelings and experiences are being crafted into their prose).

Therapists we are not. But responsible responders to sensitive subjects we can be, noting our concerns on manuscript drafts (a chance to validate both a student’s and our own fears or reactions, while avoiding passing judgment on any of the persons being written about), and requesting conferences when our antennae let us know that more is at stake for a student than completing an assignment and receiving a grade. These initial exchanges will indicate the “power” of the material—over the student and over her ability to set appropriate behavioral limits. Fortunately, the University has a safety net set up for those individuals who are unable to determine these limits, and it is our responsibility to direct a student toward these trained professionals.

What to do when you’re worried about a student’s stability?

- Notify the Director of the First-Year Composition Program.
- Convey your concern to the student—just a kind word can let a student know you are someone to trust.
- Seek advice from the [University Counseling Center](#) website or call 644-2003. The UCC has an excellent site and resourceful links; included are ways to identify and address students under stress and how to refer them to the Counseling Center.
- Document all interactions with your student and photocopy written responses to their work.
- Talk to others: your program director, your mentor, or veteran teaching assistants—while maintaining your student’s anonymity, respecting her confidences.

Some References on Emotions and the Writing Classroom

Anderson, Charles, and Marian MacCurdy. *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000.

Brand, Alice. *The Psychology of Writing: The Affective Experience*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Understanding Student Resistance

As Graduate Assistants teaching in the First-Year Composition Program at Florida State University, we are in a unique position to understand the issues of student resistance. Because we are both student and teacher, we share with our own students an understanding of what it means to resist institutional demands placed upon us. We sometimes even share their inability to fully understand our own resistance to the laws and rules which are placed upon us from those in positions of power above us.

First of all, not only do our students ask of the institution why it demands that we take certain courses, but we do likewise. Our students may not see how our required First-Year Composition courses are going to help them with their engineering and business degrees, and we often have a hard time seeing how a semester course concerned with reading knowledge of a foreign language is going to help us with our English degrees. In fact, we often do what our students cannot do and put these courses off in hopes that the requirements may somehow go away.

We often share student resistance of another sort as well. Our students often come into our writing classrooms from high school classrooms which stressed formulaic writing and grammar skills. They have often learned how to manipulate this system so that they have actually had to do little thinking beyond giving the teacher what she wants. Therefore, they are often unwilling to work within a classroom which does not value their previous learning experience. We, too, often come to the First-Year Composition Program with little understanding of the pedagogical issues which drive this program. Some of us are new teachers whose past experience is that of our students. We have been quite successful in classrooms which ask us to write formulaic, academic papers. Others of us have taught elsewhere, drawing upon current-traditional models. Almost all of us have resisted at some level being told how to teach our ENC 1101 and ENC 1102 classes.

Some of us also share our most resistant students' distrust of authority no matter the institution. Our students resist by either cracking jokes at our expense, by not attending, or by sitting in the back of the classroom with arms crossed and mouths tightly shut. We resist by questioning all authority and by using our clothing and hair to show that we are counter-culture. We also resist by neglecting to turn in materials required by the First-Year Composition Program or by refusing to attend the workshops. We may even refuse to open up this teaching guide at all.

According to Beth Daniell and Art Young in their essay "Resisting Writing/Resisting Writing Teachers," we need to resist authority because we need to learn to think critically for ourselves (156-165). As children we accepted the adult rules; as adults we need to question rules in order to ascertain whether they are still effective. We need to become critically engaged in understanding our world and the part we play in such a world. When we simply accept the rules and laws which our government and educational institutions deem good for us, we miss out on active learning, and as Daniell and Young point out, in America we often honor those, like Rosa Parks, who have the courage to act out against unfair laws (157 and 164). We are glad when unfair laws are repealed.

Because our students' resistance (and our own) is sometimes focused on not wanting to question how we teach and learn (it is easier just to do what has been done before), we need to resist the urge not to be engaged in our own learning and questioning of the world. When we resist being responsible for creating our own world, we then have "to accept someone else's view of it" (165). We have to accept laws and rules with which we may not agree. Our students need to learn how to read carefully and write thoughtfully; they need the chance to take risks and to speak their minds, even if this sometimes brings chaos to our classrooms. As teachers we need to understand that our students often will offer some type of resistance to the work we ask them to do. Much of this resistance is "underground" and discussed outside of the classroom since students often believe they have little power in the classroom itself. This resistance does not mean our teaching is ineffective or that a particular strand is not effective. We should not always see resistance in a negative light because our students have a chance to learn from their resistance. Instead, we should attempt to help our students understand their own resistance, and maybe we should even help them to understand why authority should be resisted and ways in which they can resist and still work within the institution of higher education. If we allow resistance to rise to the surface of our classroom, we may even learn more about what we resist and how we deal with resistance ourselves.

Handling Student Problems

Students who are angry: You don't have to put up with abusive language or behavior. Tell the student you're willing to make an appointment to talk to her later (ideally the next day, no later), but that you need to leave (or she needs to leave) now. Don't let angry students get you angry. Raising your voice, stomping off, or refusing to listen only makes the situation worse. You have a responsibility to **explain** grades and policies to students, but you don't have to defend them over and over again to the same student. Keep records of your interactions with the student: dates, what was said, what was done, etc. Afterwards, discuss with the Director of First-Year Composition or program assistants what you think caused the episode and form some plans for handling the problem in the future.

Students who seem very under-prepared for college-level writing: In the writing samples you collect the first day of class, you may find mechanical problems or coherency problems of unusual magnitude. These students should be recommended or even pressed to attend the [Reading/Writing Center](#) for regular appointments (for credit or not). If you aren't sure whether a writing sample indicates a problem or not, or you can't figure out what the problem is, ask an

experienced TA in the RWC or the Director of First-Year Composition.

Students with wild stories about why they were absent, late, couldn't hand in a paper, etc.: You often must decide whether to believe a student's excuses or not. "Students in good standing" are students with all their work handed in, are prepared and participate helpfully, and are trying their best. These students often deserve one break during a semester. If it's at all possible that **you** weren't in your office during office hours, or **you** misunderstood the conference, it is better to give the student the benefit of the doubt. If a student seems to be spinning out of control and not likely to pass the course, let her know about [counseling services](#) available on campus.

Students who are disruptive in class: The very first time a student acts out of line in class is the best time to talk to her about her behavior. Tell her why her actions can't be tolerated: she doesn't allow other students to express opinions freely for fear of being attacked, she doesn't allow your voice to be heard, and/or she doesn't keep the class focused on the assignments and your agenda. Always try to conference with these students after class or in your office. Try to find out what's causing the problem—it often has nothing to do with you or your class. Make sure the student knows how her behavior will directly affect her participation grade. Make a list of what she is doing well in class and how she could help the class go better. If the problem persists, tell the student she needs to talk to the Director of First-Year Composition and then make an appointment for all three: the student, you, and the director. You can ask a student to leave the classroom, but you can't exactly "kick" the student out permanently. If you think you may need to permanently remove a student, start documenting incidents and dates. We can bring students up on Honor Code charges. For more information, see the FSU Academic Honor Code on the registrar's page of the FSU website.

You can also call the Crisis Management Unit in the FSU Police Department, 644-1234, if you've asked a student to leave because she or he has become violent or abusive and he or she refuses to leave.

Students who seem emotionally unstable: Report any suicidal writing to the Director of First-Year Composition. Make sure the student knows about [counseling services](#). Don't become a counselor yourself, but be sympathetic. Read the section in this guide titled "Emotions and the Writing Class."

Students who come to class stoned, drunk, or hung over: These students are generally not disruptive but are merely unable to participate or fall asleep during class. Most teachers let them alone during class, but inform them as soon as possible that their participation grade for the class period is a "0." On the other hand, a student who is regularly totally unresponsive to what's going on in class and who regularly does not come prepared for class is a distraction and has no reason to be in class. You can ask the student to leave, making sure she realizes that she will be counted "absent" for the day or receive "0" for participation that day.

Students who disappear and/or reappear: You aren't responsible for tracking down students who don't hand in papers or simply don't come to class for weeks, although you are free to contact students if you want. When students reappear after clearly missing more classes than your attendance policy allows, pull the student aside after class and inform her of the consequences of her absences. Reiterate the program policy on absences and explain why so many absences are not acceptable. Some TAs prepare short notes to students listing the dates they were absent, the date they signed a statement acknowledging the number of absences, etc. Only if the student remains upset and/or abusive (unless you are uncertain of how to apply your attendance policy) should you send the student to the Director of First-Year Composition. She will reiterate the program policy and listen sympathetically to the student.

Students who hand in offensive papers: If you discuss with your class the parameters of topics which will help the whole class improve their writing, you shouldn't run into this problem too often. Some TAs have a short list of topics to stay away from: writing about things too close to the writer (a current love interest) or writing about highly polarized issues where emotions run hot on both sides (abortion, gun control). Nevertheless, a few students every year manage to misunderstand their audiences and write homophobic, misogynist, or such polarized papers that the rest of the class has no idea how to respond to. You can refuse to accept a truly offensive paper on the grounds that it doesn't meet the assignment you have given and that the other students in the class won't be able to respond effectively to the paper. However, the student needs to rewrite the paper, perhaps from a new perspective, after conferencing with you and after you are certain she understands what was offensive in the paper. Or you may ask the student to rewrite the paper on a different topic. Most offensive papers can be handled before they become evaluation issues by always asking students to hand in drafts. Then, look at all drafts, even if you don't respond to them. Assess what caused the offensive paper and see if you can head off this problem next time by organizing discussions of audience and responsibility, appropriate and effective paper topic ideas, and so on.