

**Handbook
for
Teaching
First-Year
Writing
at
MSU**

Prepared by Emily Isaacs
Director of First-Year Writing
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Dear New First-Year Writing Faculty Member:

Welcome to the MSU First-Year Writing Faculty! I hope you will find teaching first-year writing here at MSU rewarding. Our students in their diversity of backgrounds, interests and points of view are, I suspect, what is best about working at MSU. In addition I hope that the institution itself, and the department and program in particular, will be a supportive, collegial place where you will find the support that you need and deserve. As director of first-year writing, I see my job of making the first-year writing program as strong as it can be in large part fulfilled by working to be supportive of the diverse, talented group of faculty who teach here. To that end, I try to be responsive to concerns, both specific and shared, and to be available for consultation on teaching and other matters, as needed. I am supported by the Department secretary Phyllis Brooks (who can answer your administrative questions, as well as many other questions), the department administrator Rashida Batte, and also the chair, Dan Bronson. Of course, though I hate to say it, we're stretched thin with over 60 first-year writing faculty, nearly half of whom are new to the department this year. But please, ask if you have a question, and we'll see what we can do.

I've put together this handbook, primarily from materials that are also available on the teaching writing web site: <http://english.montclair.edu/teachingwriting/>, though also some materials are from other locations on MSU web page. I have decided to put together a printed handbook in an effort to consolidate some information more conveniently, and also because I think this information is particularly crucial. I am hoping the pleasure of paper will induce closer reading of these materials! That said, please do not ignore or forget the web page, which is frequently updated. Most important, be sure to keep up with your MSU email. You can have it forwarded to a preferred email address, but be sure you're checking it twice a week.

I am most easily available by email, and from there we can set up a phone appointment, in the evenings or weekends if necessary. I don't mind talking "off-hours," though you will find that I am not in my office more than several hours a week, quite possibly not the same hours that you're on campus! But I'm working—via email or phone, or by appointment. If I do not respond to your email within two or three days, or less if it's urgent, by all means call Phyllis and/or email me again. I miss/overlook emails sometimes and will only be grateful if you send me a reminder.

I hope you have a wonderful semester and year.

Sincerely,

Emily Isaacs
Director of First-Year Writing
Department of English

Who Are MSU Students?

Ten years ago, when I arrived, I was told that MSU students are “very nice,” committed to their families and communities, and oriented toward work/careers. I have found this to be true, and to flesh this out a bit, I’d say that first-year writing students are quite willing to try the game plan you introduce, if you introduce it quickly. They are over-committed with work, family and other obligations, so you need to help them make school work a priority—ideally by requiring regular and accounted for assignments early and often. They are not familiar with extensive homework, and they are experienced with high grades, so both of those expectations need to be directly addressed, with kindness, but also firmly.

Here are a few facts that I can give you to introduce our students. The first-year full-time class (as of fall’05 or ’06 data) is 57 percent female; 97 percent of them are from New Jersey, and for 67 percent, Montclair State University was their first choice for college admissions. Eleven percent are African-American, 7 percent are Asian, 19 percent are Latino/a, and 61 percent are white. Just 1.6 students identify as international, yet 17 percent report that their first language is not English.

Forty-six percent of incoming students identify as Roman Catholic, and the most popular description for political philosophy is “middle-of-the-road.” Thirty-nine percent report that both their parents are college-educated; one-third of first-year students indicate that their combined parental income is less than \$50,000 and yet another one-third indicate a combined income between \$75,000 and \$150,000. Between 50 and 60 percent of students graduate from MSU within six years, suggesting that most of the remaining students do not complete their degrees, though perhaps they do complete them elsewhere (these retention rates are typical for state universities like MSU).

Thirty percent of incoming first-year students indicated that they received As in high school, and fully 86 percent indicated they received Bs or better. Yet 84 percent spent 5 or fewer hours doing homework each week.

All of our students, if asked, will tell you about troubles with parking, housing, or registering for classes; for many of them, being a fairly anonymous student at an institution serving 16,000 students is a new experience. There is little you can do but sympathize, and interestingly, much of the issues around “adjustment” are really being addressed these days, in a required course for all first-year students, “The New Student Experience.” This course, just one-credit in length, is really devoted to helping students adjust to MSU life; it has been developed in response to data that such courses improve student retention.

The majority of first-year students are not only enrolled in “The New Student Experience,” but they are also part of a Learning Experience cohort in which a group of students are enrolled in two or three courses, thus giving students a chance to get to know each other better. As well, this may mean you have a group of 19 that have the same intended major or career most typically.

All statistical information came from MSU’s Office of Institutional Research:
<http://www.montclair.edu/pages/InstResearch/index.htm>

Requirements for Syllabi

The First-Year Writing Program reviews syllabi for all first-year writing faculty. Once reviewed, current syllabi are kept on file in the English Department office. On the first day that veteran faculty meet their classes, they need to give the English department secretary a paper copy of their syllabi. **New faculty should send (via email or paper mail) a draft copy by August 15th** or 3 weeks prior to the beginning of the first semester of teaching. All syllabi will be reviewed; if there are omissions or concerns, faculty will be contacted. If you hear nothing, your syllabus is in great shape.

A good syllabus introduces students to the instructor and course, provides practical information and guidance, and ultimately serves as a kind of contract between student and teacher. You are welcome to use, revised or not, any of the syllabi that you find on the main teaching writing web site. Below are some guidelines to use to help you in developing your syllabus.

You should establish:

- **Basic information about you:** name, office location, email address, office hours. Also, please include the English Department web page (english.montclair.edu) and let students know that if your class is canceled they will find this information on the web site. (A mass email via Blackboard also makes sense.) It follows that if you are going to have to miss class, be sure to call the department secretaries in as much advance as possible so that they can post the cancellation on the web site.
- **Required texts.** See [Textbook selection guide](#).
- **Purpose of the course.** To develop this section of your syllabus you should look over the description of your course from above, and then adapt into your own language.
- **Course requirements:** Cover such issues as length and number of essays and other writings, expectations for readings; requirements on revision, peer review, attendance, participation, timeliness, etc. Although you want to be clear about your requirements, you do not need to take on a punitive tone.
- **Writing expectations.** You need to define the kind of writing you expect, as specifically and clearly as possible. Phrases like "good expository prose" are too general. If you have a range of writing assignments, be sure to make clear what level of focus, personal engagement, formality, detail, and citation, for example, you expect. While a paragraph on your expectations will not answer all of your students' questions, it can open up a conversation as to what "good writing" might be. The method I employ is to provide a defined list of criteria (focus, development, analysis, organization, revision, mechanics) that I use to evaluate students, and which I then also use in peer review and as a kind of rubric in my comments. By using criteria I hope to help students gain close understanding of what it is that they do well and poorly. I strongly advocate criteria.
- **Reading and writing schedule.** While you may make some changes to such a schedule, students need to have a schedule of reading and writing for the semester, all laid out in black and white. Include readings, due dates (including drafts) and assignments, and ideally, topics covered. Be sure to identify the documented essay, and also a point during the semester when MLA material will be reviewed.
- **Conferences (optional).** Some faculty choose to cancel classes for one week, during which time they meet with each student individually. Typically students are still doing a week's worth of work--perhaps completing a final draft of one essay and bringing a first draft to the conference for discussion. If you choose to have conferences and to also cancel classes, be sure to cancel no more than one week.

- **Grading policy.** You need to make your grading policy clear. Although the vast majority of students accept grades that are given to them, a few do dispute grades and it is therefore in your interest as well as students to have a clearly articulated grading policy. Your policy should include two components: 1) criteria for evaluating written and other assignments; 2) a breakdown of how grades are determined (i.e., 15% journals; 10% attendance and participation; 50% major essays, 25% portfolio).

- **Plagiarism Policy:** Include an explicit statement on plagiarism, both to inform students of MSU's definition and policy, and also to warn them off of the practice.

The best way to avoid problems with plagiarism is to speak with students about it at the beginning of the semester, include explicit reference to it in your syllabus, and most important, create original assignments and collect early drafts of work along with final drafts.

If you suspect a student of plagiarism, and would like help in dealing with the student, please contact the director. In general, I recommend that students fail the course, without discussion, and be referred to the Dean of Students' Office for disciplinary action. I suggest that you put this language into your syllabus.

Grading

All final grades are submitted through the University's [web system](#). During the semester faculty are contacted, via the MSU mail account email, to set up and confirm student rosters and faculty identification and PIN. Be sure to respond to these email notices and follow through on them.

Grades can be submitted on the web anytime over several days, though the close date is hard and firm. **If you do not submit your grades on time, people get very upset. Strangely, often the deadline is at 9 am, which is unexpected and easy to miss.**

The policy for grading in first-year writing is as follows:

1. Grades will be fair and consistent.
2. Grading will be in accordance with criteria and distribution detailed in the syllabus. Students may not agree with the grades given, but they should be able to understand how each individual grade, as well as the final grade, is determined.
3. In evaluating student work on the letter system, faculty should take the following into account.

A is for excellent work

B is for very good work

C is for adequate/average work

D is for below average, inadequate work

F is for unacceptable work, i.e., work that is not at the college level.

4. Distribution systems for determining grades (i.e., x percent for essays, y percent for portfolio, z percent for homework, etc) need to be designed with a sense of caution for grade inflation. New faculty can find themselves with students who are regularly receiving Cs on papers suddenly earning Bs if they are not careful in their distribution systems.
5. First-year writing courses are indicator courses. Students and future professors need to be able to review these grades and have them be reasonably accurate indicators of students' writing abilities. Now, of course, every student who achieves a B in a 105 class may not choose to continue that level of performance in later courses, but you may find this imagined audience helpful to you as you fight off the pressure to raise grades. Students, quite reasonably, believe that the grade received is an indicator of their writing abilities and probable future success in writing. When fall 105 instructors become spring 106 instructors, they little like hearing from C or D performing students that they "always received Bs in 105." So we need to work together to consistently and fairly assess students' abilities as writers.
6. While there can be extraordinary sections--very weak ones and very strong ones--in general, most first-year writing sections are comprised of the full-range of students who are admitted to Montclair State University. Therefore, you can expect that your final grades will reflect this range, with close to an equal number of students earning final grades of C or B, and many, many fewer receiving As, Ds or Fs. If most of your students are heading for a B, you probably need to revise your criteria--it's unlikely that most of your students are truly above average as that would more or less defeat the meaning of average. B is not average, it is very good.
7. "Benchmark" grades -- sample papers with grades -- are available [here](#).

Grades of IN (Incomplete). Incomplete grades should be given out rarely. Incomplete grades should be given out, at student request, in situations where a student is doing passing work and then, because of some unexpected event (a death, an illness, a catastrophe, etc.) is unable to do work for a period of a few weeks. The purpose of the Incomplete is to allow students to do the reading and writing that they were unable to do during their incapacity.

First-year writing faculty may not give grades of incomplete without permission from the First-Year Writing Director. This is simply because we have such high turnover that we have had problems with Incomplete grades being given out by instructors who we can no longer reach after the semester is over.

If a faculty member has a case that warrants an Incomplete, contact the First-Year Writing Director. If the Director agrees to the Incomplete, the faculty member will also need to do the following:

- 1) Complete an Incomplete contract specifying exactly what needs to be done. (Available in the English Department Office.)
- 2) Have this form signed off on by the faculty member, the student, and the Director.
- 3) Write a memo detailing the grade-to-date (grades on all completed work as well as grades for anything else that is specified in the syllabus, i.e., participation) and the percentage weight of the work that is still to be completed, and submit it with the contract. The accompanying memo should provide enough information on the student's grade to date to allow the Director to assign a final grade if, by chance, the part-time faculty member were to become unavailable.

Policy on Withdrawal Grades: The provost has published a [revised policy on withdrawal grades](#). Essentially students can withdraw without discussion with you up until the 9th week of classes. After that, students appeal not to the instructor but to the Dean of Students' Office.

Grades of NC (No Credit). NC grades are only available for ENWR100 students. A NC grade should be reserved for those students who have worked hard and followed the syllabus (attended, participated, and completed assignments), but who demonstrate, through their writing, that they are not yet ready for College Writing I. (Note: the work of all borderline students should be submitted to the Borderline Review Readers, announced toward the end of the semester.) The NC grade is a grade given to students who simply need an additional semester of ENWR100: Introduction to Writing. An F is reserved for those students who fail to meet the requirements of the course (and may or may not write at an acceptable level). By mid-semester faculty should be in conversation with students whose work suggests the possibility of a NC. As well, general information about the NC grade should be available on syllabi. (See my sample syllabi for sample text.)

Additional Guidelines for Grading ENWR100 Students: The first concern for evaluating 100 students is their ability to succeed in ENWR105. Students whose writing does not seem to be at the level of ENWR105 incoming students should not pass ENWR100. It may be sad and painful all around, but these students should not pass the course. More broadly, the "one grade easier" rule of thumb may be a helpful one to follow. To explain, what would be a C in 105 (adequate) would be a B in 100 (very good). When I evaluate portfolios I find it helpful to consider the students' work primarily in terms of how they would look to a 105 instructor at the beginning of the term. If my student is receiving a B, that means I believe it's reasonable that s/he can receive a C in 105.

Useful Phone Numbers

Phyllis Brooks, English Department secretary: 973-655-4249 (x4249)
Rashida Batte, English Department administrator: x4274
Emily Isaacs, First-Year Writing director: x7502

Academic Advising x7114
Bookstore: x5460
Computer/Technology Support: x7835 (for college), x7971 (for university)
Counseling Services: x5211
Library: x4291
Office of the Dean of Students: x4118 or x4206
Parking: x7580
Police: x5222
Technological Training (Blackboard, etc.): x5449
University Ombudsperson: x4206
Women's Center: x5114

Useful MSU Web Sites

First-Year Writing Teaching Page: <http://English.montclair.edu/teachingwriting>

Writing Center: http://english.montclair.edu/Programs2/FirstYear/Writing_center.htm

Blackboard: <http://montclair.blackboard.com/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp>
Human Resources: "All in the Family" Program: benefits for staff
<http://www.montclair.edu/pages/hr/allinmsufamily.html>
Institutional Research: <http://www.montclair.edu/pages/InstResearch/index.htm> (At this location you can find "fact books" filled with interesting information about students, as well as other public statistical reports on MSU and its students.)
Library: <http://library.montclair.edu/>
Local Information: <http://www.montclair.edu/local/>
Services for Students with Disabilities: <http://www.montclair.edu/wellness/SSD/Index.html>
Student Handbook: <http://www.montclair.edu/studenthandbook/>
Teaching and Learning Center: <http://www.montclair.edu/teachingcenter/index.shtml>
Web for Faculty: <https://wfs.montclair.edu/afhomepg.htm> (payroll info, grading, etc.)

Useful MSU Email Addresses

Dan Bronson: BronsonD@mail.montclair.edu
Phyllis Brooks: Brooksp@mail.montclair.edu
Rashida Batte: Batte@mail.montclair.edu
Emily Isaacs: Isaacse@mail.montclair.edu
CHSS Tech Team: CHSSTech@mail.montclair.edu

General Administrative Information

Office Space

Office space is very, very tight, and not under the control of the Department. We have argued for more space, and are hopeful that in years to come we will see more of it. In the meantime, all part-time faculty work out of the CHSS Adjunct Suite, Dickson 281. Rashida and Phyllis will arrange, as best they can, to reserve space for your requested office hours. For a swipe card to access the Adjunct Suite, you will need to see Carmelita of the CHSS Tech Team.

Computers

Computers are in all the offices. You are free to use them to store materials and print. However, as soon as exams are over in May, the Tech Team will come through and wipe out all the hard drives, ready or not.

Copy Cards

Phyllis and Rashida will give faculty teaching one or two sections a copy card containing 500 copies. Faculty teaching four classes will be given two copy cards. This isn't enough, we know. Those of us who have been around for a while have figured out how to get around the low copying allowance. First, post everything you can on Blackboard, requiring students to print or view online. Second, get a veteran teacher or a member of the CHSS Tech team (located in rm 337) to teach you how to use the Ricoh machine (it's a little complicated), for which you are not charged.

Copy Machines

1st floor: rm 129 (Ricoh machine as well)
2nd floor: rm 216
3rd floor: rm 336 (Ricoh machine as well)
4th floor: rm 440

Overloading Courses

Invariably students will approach you about overloading your course; in other words, they will ask you to add them to your class roster even though it is already at capacity. You are not allowed to make this overload, and you should tell your students so. Inform students that there is a strict policy against overloading classes. Students with extraordinary circumstances should come to the English department. This policy does seem penal, but it is developed from years of experience and in light of the extraordinary efforts we have made, as a department, to request the resources to keep our class size unusually low. At present, a low class size is a promise that the University offers to first-year students. All that said, on occasion the Department will be requested to make special allowances for particular students or when enrollment has ballooned unexpectedly. We will resist these pressures strenuously, but on rare occasion the Director will inform you that one or two students have been added to your class.

University Identification Cards

New employees must obtain a University identification card. It can be used for attendance at on-campus or community-sponsored events. The card is required for withdrawal of books from the Library, access to University buildings after official closing, and other important purposes. Employee identification cards can be obtained from the ID Card Office, located in the Student Center near the computer lab. Employees must present their official offer letter (available from Phyllis once your paperwork is complete) or a signed verification of employment letter from Human Resources to obtain a card. The identification card must be returned to the Division of Human Resources when employment is terminated. Lost or damaged cards will be replaced at a fee of \$10.

E-Mail/ISP Accounts

MSU and the English Department in particular, is email dependent. You cannot function without one, and without checking your email at least twice a week. (If you have problems with too much

mail from discussion lists, simply follow the instructions at the bottom of the problematic email for removal from the list.) We do not make phone calls or seek you out via alternative means: MSU email is required.

Electronic Mail accounts are established for new hires and, as a general matter, are activated approximately twenty-four hours after the employee's appointment has been entered into the HRS system in the Division of Human Resources. The Office of Information Technology will issue the username and grant access upon verification of employment.

Parking Permits

Convenient parking comes at a cost, for students and for faculty, part-time and full-time. Free parking is only available for those willing and able to walk a distance, and even this parking requires a permit.

Employees must obtain a parking permit to utilize the parking facilities on campus. Permits can be obtained at the Parking Services Office in the Red Hawk Deck, level P1. Appropriate documentation must be obtained and presented in order to receive an employee parking permit. For more information, please call the department of Parking Services at extension 7581.

Payroll

First-year writing faculty are paid on the regular biweekly payroll. Paychecks are distributed one week after the pay period ends. Payday is Friday unless it is a holiday. Under certain limited circumstances, employees can elect to have their paychecks mailed to their home address by making a request to Payroll Services.

Regular biweekly paychecks and direct deposit stubs are distributed according to the Regular Payroll schedule. Please refer to the schedule for dates. Current checks are available on Fridays (paydays only) from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Pension forms must be filled out every year.

Part Time Employee Health Benefits

Chapter 172, P.L. 2003 provides part-time faculty members and employees at Montclair State University eligibility for enrollment for coverage in the State Health Benefits Program (SHBP), provided that the part-time employee is a member of a State administered retirement system. Under the law, the employee can enroll in NJ Plus and the Employee Prescription Drug Plan. If an eligible employee or faculty member elects to enroll and purchase coverage, the employee or faculty member must pay the full cost of the coverage.

First-Year Writing Faculty Requirements and Supervision

All first-year writing faculty are required to:

- 1) Meet classes on time, instruct students according to program guidelines, and provide appropriate and clear assessment of students' work in class.
- 2) While adjunct faculty are not required to hold office hours (half-time and instructor-faculty are), all faculty are required to be available for student consultation.
- 3) Submit book orders and syllabi to the English Department for review.
- 4) Attend one opening meeting each semester.
- 5) Attend one workshop each semester.
- 6) Cooperate along department guidelines for regular (though for veterans, increasingly less frequent) reviews of performance through student evaluations and faculty observations. As well, through electronic means faculty grades will be reviewed.

The English Department will support first-year writing faculty primarily through the Director of First-Year Writing, but also through the secretary, department administrator, and the Chair. Administrative questions should be sent first to the department secretary. All questions about teaching, students, and continuing employment should be directed to the Director. It's most effective to contact the Director first through email, but best efforts will be made to follow-up email contact through a meeting or at least a phone call. (With over 60 first-year writing faculty and just one director, support will not always be as we'd like it to be.) The English Department Chair works closely with the Director, and can provide guidance when the Director is unavailable.

The English Department seeks to re-hire successful faculty to the extent that administrative and legal rulings allow, and to the extent that we have courses that need faculty. If the Department observes problems or issues with an individual's teaching, our first action will be to consult with faculty and work together to understand the issue, and if necessary, make changes.

Administrative Limits to Re-Hiring:

Adjunct faculty are hired semester-to-semester, and can work, indefinitely.

Half-time faculty are hired on a year-to-year basis, on a two-year limited expectation; English Department policy mandates a two-year limit, with exceptions for extraordinary need.

Instructor faculty are hired on a year-to-year basis, with a limit of three years. There is no exception to this policy; it is set by the administration in connection with state law and union contracts which would, in effect, require a University to consider instructors for tenure at the point where instructors began working a fourth year.