

Chapter One: English 95/96 and the Portfolio Assessment

Welcome to English 95/96, Developmental Writing at SWIC.

This text is “in-house,” that is, written and compiled by various faculty in the English Department here at SWIC. It is used for all English 95 *and* English 96 classes. But that does not mean that all teachers use it in the same way, or that we all assign the same pages. In fact, if you end up taking both English 95 (Building Writing Strategies) and English 96 (Preparing for College Writing), you may find very little repetition of assignments. Each teacher has a unique way of approaching his/her class, but we all have the same common goal: to help our students use the writing process to become thoughtful, effective writers.

That process is a tried and true method used by student and professional writers alike. It involves a lot of trial and error, so it allows room for experimenting and making mistakes (a very natural part of the writing process), and that freedom helps us to grow and improve as writers. We begin with Invention, which is simply coming up with ideas in the same way that Thomas Edison *invented* - or came up with - the idea for the light bulb. It continues with drafting, followed by getting feedback from classmates, tutors, teachers, even friends. You then give more thought to your text, and you’ll use that feedback to revise: adding, deleting, moving, rewording your text as you carefully compose the next draft. Finally, you work on editing, which is cleaning up the spelling, punctuation, and grammar – what many English teachers call “mechanics.”

As you can see, this process can’t take place the night before a paper is due! It requires time to let things settle in and a willingness to come back to the text after more thought, more invention, more drafting. It requires a commitment to make the changes needed to create the most effective piece of writing possible. Your teachers will be assigning four essays, and they’ll give you time to take each one through this process. The beautiful thing about this method is that you don’t have to get it right the first time. And in fact, at the end of the semester, you will select just two out of the four drafts that you have completed for the class, and you will revise them to make them the best they can be for inclusion in your “portfolio.” You’ll probably select the two strongest papers, but maybe you’ll pick the ones that have the most potential if revised yet again in the final weeks of the semester? Your teacher will advise you on your selection and will work with you to revise and improve your drafts. Naturally, by the end of the semester you will have had lots of time and practice with writing, and you will have learned some new skills and strategies, so it makes perfect sense to use all that knowledge to revise one last time. And

sometimes we will see a paper with fresh eyes if we've put it away for a while: we have that "aha moment" that helps us see how to turn it into a really successful paper.

The portfolio you will assemble at the end of the semester is much like an artist's portfolio, showcasing the best work produced during that period of time. For the SWIC Writing Program, the portfolio will include two of your best essays, plus a third piece that gives readers an idea of who you are as a writer and student, and explains the writing process and strategies you used when composing and revising the essays you've included. It may be in the form of a Cover Letter, or it could be a Reflective Essay, depending on which one your teacher assigns. Either way, it will give the portfolio readers, a committee of SWIC English faculty, a glimpse into the mind of the writer who produced this portfolio. It will be your chance to explain your thinking, to point out successful moves you made, to describe the learning that has taken place over the semester. In a way, it can help you "sell" your portfolio to this committee of English faculty, who will read and evaluate your portfolio at the end of the semester.

Pass/Fail Grading

Both English 95 and English 96 are Pass/Fail courses. That means that you will not be graded with the usual A, B, C, D grades, and that your final grade for these English classes will not figure into your overall Grade Point Average, or GPA. Instead, you will earn one of three possibilities: P, PR, or F.

P is for "Pass."

Students who earn a P in the class have passed all the requirements for the course and have "made it through" the portfolio process successfully. They may move on to the next level of writing courses at SWIC.

PR is for "Progress-Repeat"

The PR grade indicates that you have made good progress in the class, but not enough to move to the next level, so you will need to repeat the class. Becoming a good writer often takes more time and practice than we can get in one semester, so this grade lets students know they are on the right track, but need more time to develop writing skills. Note: Students often misread this grade because they immediately see the "P" and think it means "Pass."

F is for "Fail"

We all know what this means: you failed to successfully complete all, or enough, of the work required for the course. This includes written work as well as in-class assignments, homework, small and large group participation within the class, and whatever else your teacher assigned to

you for credit within the course. You should understand that even though you will not receive a traditional grade at the *end* of this course, you may still receive grades or points from your teacher *within* the course. In fact, it is very common for teachers to require that students meet a certain level of completion and skill to qualify to turn in a portfolio to the committee. So, for example, your teacher will assign grades to daily assignments throughout the semester, and require that you successfully complete 60%, 65%, or even 70% of that work to earn the privilege of submitting a portfolio to the committee.

Placement Decisions

In addition to the “P,” “PR,” or “F” grade you receive at the end of this course, you will also receive a **placement**. If you receive a “P” in this course, you will also receive a placement evaluation that indicates where you will go next within the English department’s sequence of writing courses.

For example, if you are currently enrolled in English 95: Basic Writing I, and you receive a “P” grade at the end of the semester (which means that you have passed English 95) you will also receive a placement grade that could mean either of two options. One, you can enroll in English 96: Preparing for College Writing, the next level of writing course at SWIC. Or two, you can enroll in English 101: Rhetoric and Composition I, but only if you have completed your reading requirements. More on that below.

As you can see, it is possible for a student in English 95 to “skip” English 96 and go straight into English 101. It does not happen often, and only with a very strong portfolio, as well as exceptional daily work throughout the semester, but that possibility gives a lot of students that extra motivation to succeed, saving them time and money along the way too.

Learning to write well cannot be rushed. It really does take a lot of time and *lots* of writing practice, so the sequence of courses at SWIC (and most any other college or university) is designed to give you that time and plenty of guidance from your teachers to help you succeed.

The English department’s writing program sequence looks like this:

English 95: Building Writing Strategies (leads to)
English 96: Preparing for College Writing (leads to)
English 101: Rhetoric and Composition I (leads to)
English 102: Rhetoric and Composition II

The Reading Requirement

To enroll in English 101, you must have completed all reading requirements. That means that you either tested out of one or both of those courses, English 91 and English 92, or you took the class(es) and passed. Either way works.

You can also enroll in English ALP (Accelerated Learning Program) courses. These are paired courses where you have tested or placed into English 101 in writing and English 92 in reading, or English 101 in reading and English 96 in writing. See Chapter 9 for more information on ALP.

You should see your counselor if you have questions about your status in the Reading/Writing program as a whole. Your reading scores and placement is a separate issue, and your writing instructor has no control over that. In fact, writing teachers do not even know what your status is in regards to the reading requirement.

How It All Works

You will hear your teacher talk about “the portfolio” and “the committee” over and over, and with good reason, because that is how your work will eventually be evaluated at the end of the semester. In fact, your entire semester will be spent putting this presentation portfolio together, and your teacher, along with the peers in your class, will all be working very hard to help you put together the best portfolio you can.

Toward the end of the semester, if you have completed enough of the daily/weekly work successfully and have earned the right to submit your final portfolio, your professor will collect it from you (on the last class day) and present it to the Writing Assessment Committee when they meet for the all-day grading session to evaluate all the portfolios, usually on the Saturday before final exams begin. This committee is made up of writing instructors who teach English 95 and English 96, so they are familiar with the writing assignments and expectations of these courses, but they will not know who *you* are because only your student ID number and an instructor code will be on the portfolio, which is actually nothing more than a pocket folder containing the three pieces of writing you have selected.

You may be surprised to learn that during this all-day grading session that we affectionately call “the Hootenanny” (or the Hoot, for short) individual teachers do *not* read or evaluate their own students’ work. We read other instructors’ student portfolios, anonymously, in an effort to limit bias in grading. In this way, we are attempting to let the writing in the portfolio speak for itself.

Your portfolio will be read by a minimum of two instructors. If they both agree on your placement, that's the recommendation that your teacher will receive. If those two readers disagree on the placement, your portfolio will go to a third reader to break the tie. As teachers, we will carefully consider the feedback and recommendations from these other faculty because they also teach these courses. In fact, we faculty hold meetings and grading sessions throughout the semester to make sure we have similar standards and expectations. But because individual teachers are the ones who have worked with their students all semester, they do get the final say on their own students' placements and grades.

Believe it or not, you are a bit like an attorney in a courtroom. Your job in constructing this presentation portfolio is to persuade your readers (not just your individual teacher, but English department faculty as well) that you have learned and are able to demonstrate the skills, attitudes, and abilities required to be successful with college-level writing standards and expectations. Your portfolio is your evidence. Good attorneys spend a lot of time in preparation, and so will you – all semester long. The things that you do daily in your writing class, the mini-lectures your teacher gives, the activities you do, the talk and discussion, both with peers and your teacher, all these things are intended to teach you what this “jury of English teachers” expects from you. Then, it is your job to put together a presentation portfolio that will make your case for advancement in the English program at SWIC.

Grading Criteria

We've found that grading standards (also known as criteria) are hard to define. It can also be hard to talk about how we evaluate the success of an essay because we can't really separate and dissect all its various elements very neatly. Those elements overlap and intersect and work together to create a successful piece of writing. Some aspects might be stronger than others, but none of them works in isolation.

But we do need a way to talk about why and how a student's work is successful – or not. We need a common set of terms, so we've come up with a list of questions about essay quality that graders use to "weigh" the various strengths and weaknesses of the essay.

Since you are the ones whose writing is being evaluated, you should know up front what our criteria will be when we read your work and measure how successful it is. You can use this information as you are composing and revising, because you'll know what we are looking for when we read your portfolio.

Here is that list of questions. Please note that “Purposeful Development” is at the top of the list, and for good reason: writing teachers agree that only students who can achieve purposeful development will be able to succeed in later writing classes such as English 96 and English 101.

Basic Questions about Essay Quality

Purposeful Development: Does the writing have a sense of purpose? How well developed is the writing? (For instance, do the essays include plenty of examples, reasons, details, descriptions, anecdotes, and/or evidence?) Is the writer able to go beyond producing only a few short paragraphs?

The Writing Situation (Rhetorical Context): Does the writer demonstrate a good awareness of audience, of the topic, and of his or her stance/role toward the audience and topic?

Thought: Does the writing make the reader think? Has the writer gone beyond just stating the obvious? (Doing so might take the form of inferences, connections, analysis, logic, reason, persuasion, humor, analogies, mature outlook, etc.)

Order: Are the essays arranged for maximum effectiveness? Does the writing avoid seeming formulaic? How coherent is the writing—that is, does it hold together? How effective are the transitions?

Language: Are sentences generally clear? How correct are the mechanics? To what extent is there a real writing style (for instance: alternation of sentence lengths, use of rhythms, variety in sentence structure, etc.)?

Self-Assessment/Cover Letter: How aware is the writer of his/her own writing process? Of his/her strengths and weaknesses? How accurate and authentic is the writer when using terminology related to writing? (For instance: Is the writer merely echoing what others have said? Grabbing at frequently heard terms? Or does the writer reflect on his/her writing in a convincing way?)

Stay Focused and Organized Throughout the Semester

It may seem as though your destiny is up in the air until the very end of the semester, when you turn in your portfolio and it’s evaluated by members of the Writing Assessment Committee at the Hootenanny. Really, though, you have more control than you might imagine about how much your portfolio impresses the committee. Here’s some advice that will, if you follow it, improve your odds of doing well in the course.

Attend class faithfully. It’s easy to get off track, fall behind in assignments, and become discouraged if you are frequently absent. However, if you hold yourself accountable (and meet

or exceed your instructor's attendance expectations), you stand a good chance of getting your work done and improving your writing week by week.

Keep up with assignments, both small and large. Journal assignments and freewrites matter; often, in fact, instructors regard these things as tools that will help you build the larger assignments, such as your essays and Cover Letter or Reflective Essay, that may become an important part of your portfolio. Don't skip an activity simply because you already think you know what you want to write about. Take advantage of opportunities to explore a new topic or get deeper into a topic/situation you've been thinking about for a while. A couple good freewrites might set you on the path of a great essay idea—an essay that could help you move from English 95 to 96 or even 101.

Routinely ask yourself, "What should I change in my writing...and why?" If you hope to become a stronger writer, you will need to reflect on what's working and what's not working too well in the essay drafts you write. And once you start to do that, make notes to yourself (yes—write it out!) so you will be able to tell the Writing Assessment Committee about your revision choices in your reflective cover letter or reflective essay. No need to leave all of that thinking till the end of the semester. You might as well keep notes on those choices as the semester progresses – and while they are still fresh in your mind.

Keep track of your stuff: especially your various drafts, revisions, and notes about the changes you're making to your essays. Get in the habit of saving your work to a flash drive (also known as a "thumb drive")...and then make a habit of backing up your work somewhere else (e.g., as an attachment in email or Blackboard, or on your hard drive on a laptop or tablet computer). Many students end up scrambling at the end of the semester because they cannot find their latest, greatest draft of an essay. Flash drives disappear and/or sometimes break, but a draft saved in a "cloud" or email or a saving space in Blackboard will be there for you as long as you have internet access. Avoid that fateful scramble. Know where you can find your drafts. If you don't know how to save work to a flash drive or how to attach a file to an email that you send to yourself, ask someone to teach you this skill: your instructor, a classmate, or a tutor in the Success Center. This is a skill you'll want to learn early in the semester. Also save the drafts on which your instructor or a peer group has commented. Those suggestions will come in handy.

Conclusion

We take our English 95/96 seriously, and we take your work in these classes seriously. We hope you will make good use of your time in whichever course you are enrolled in. We view these courses as "on-ramps" for getting yourself ready for English 101 and beyond. Of course, no one

passes a course just by being in the course; therefore, you will need to work hard to show the portfolio readers what you have learned and how you have grown as a writer. But it *can* be done. Plenty of students succeed in these courses, and we're proud of the work they show us in their portfolios and in their day-to-day work in the courses.