

**Simple Strategies Academics Can Use  
To Help Students Improve Their Writing Skills**

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## Abstract

This article describes 16 simple strategies that university academics who do not teach a writing course can use to help their students improve their writing. The strategies are based on the teaching experiences of the authors and follow a teaching model that includes (a) motivating methods, (b) writing instruction, (c) writing practice, and (d) constructive feedback. The strategies are important because so many university students show poor writing skills. Also, students who write well can almost always improve.

### Model for helping students improve their writing skills

Academics who teach topics other than writing can help university students improve their writing skills by (a) increasing student **motivation** to have good writing skills, including by providing a model of someone who writes well and tries to improve his or her writing; (b) providing some **instruction** in writing processes and rules; (c) providing writing **practice**; and (d) giving students constructive **feedback** about their writing.

With high motivation, students will find ways to improve their writing and will persist in the effort. To write well, students need to apply appropriate processes, such as starting early, and to apply the rules of writing, such as grammar rules. Instruction helps provide students with information about how to write well. Practice with feedback increases writing skill. Writing practice helps most when students receive clear, specific, constructive feedback about what they have done well in writing and what they could do better in the future.

### Specific strategies for helping students improve their writing skills

These 16 strategies are organized according to the order in which an academic might use them. Following each strategy is a word that describes whether the strategy targets motivation, instruction, practice, or feedback. We have used these strategies in our teaching of psychology courses.

1. Emphasize to students that good writing skills are important, both to their satisfactory completion of the course and to their future careers. Encourage students to improve their writing skills. (Motivation)
2. Provide students with an anecdote about the implications of substandard writing or the value of good writing. For example, you might talk about a former student hired primarily to write. (Motivation)
3. Tell students how good writing has benefited you and how you try to improve your writing. (Motivation)
4. Encourage students to pay close attention to the grammar and punctuation they see in textbooks and other books and articles, as well as in any sample paper. (Instruction)
5. Encourage students to complete a practical writing course. (Instruction)
6. Refer students to university-created writing skills web sites. (Instruction)
7. Explain to students that certain writing skills are fundamental to almost all types of

writing, but there are also purpose-specific writing skills and styles. (Instruction)

8. Tell students that with practice and feedback on performance, they can improve their writing and that learning a complex skill like writing takes effort. Add that once a certain level of skill has been reached, the process of writing becomes increasingly enjoyable. (Motivation)

9. Describe to students the process you use to write journal articles and reports and how using the process benefits you. This process might include starting with an outline, completing several drafts of the document, checking the writing against requirements, and asking another individual to proofread the document. (Motivation, Instruction)

10. Give students information containing important writing rules. "The Writer's Workplace" by Sandra and John Scarry and the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association provide succinct statements of writing rules, with examples. (Instruction)

11. Toward the end of a class session, ask students to spend five minutes writing a summary of the content of the session. (Practice, Feedback)

12. Give a writing assignment and in the marking criteria set aside a specific number of points for writing quality. Give students a copy of the marking criteria before they begin writing. (Practice, Motivation)

13. Describe to students before they complete a writing assignment the most common writing errors made by students in the past as well as the rules the errors violate. (Instruction)

14. To the extent feasible, correct writing errors on student papers and provide printed statements of the rules violated by the errors. (Feedback, Instruction)

15. Encourage students to learn the rules they violated in making writing errors. (Instruction)

16. Praise students freely for excellent or improved writing. (Motivation)

**For additional ideas on how to help students improve their writing skills:**

*Efficient ways to improve student writing* (2018).

<https://www.uww.edu/learn/improving/restiptool/improve-student-writing>

Watanabe-Crockett, L (2016). *6 ways to improve students' academic writing skills*.

<https://globaldigitalcitizen.org/6-ways-improve-students-writing-skills>