

# Introduction. What This Book Does and How to Use It

## Why This Book?

The goal of this book is to introduce instructors from across fields to the idea that teaching writing and using writing for learning is everyone's responsibility—but that this responsibility is not an add-on or hardship. Writing is something we all do, and we write in the ways our fields require in order to get our work done. Everyone has learned to write over time, and the ways that we have learned are a result of where we have learned, how, who has taught us, and what has been rewarded by the audiences for whom we have written. Often our own learning as students and new professionals or instructors was through trial and error, and we did not necessarily realize we were learning to write and think in new ways as we became biologists or journalists, historians or engineers.

Regardless of how we learned, once we become experts at the work of our fields (academic disciplines, interdisciplines, or professions), our knowledge often moves from explicit to tacit. The term “tacit knowledge” refers to knowledge people forget they have and perhaps even forget how they learned it. Experts often don't consciously *know what they know* or think about it explicitly enough to explain it to someone else. This can make teaching difficult.

As we teach students and invite them into our work, we use language in the ways that our fields use it. We often don't realize that what we are asking students to do in an “essay” or “paper” or “proposal” reflects our own understanding of those ideas, which might be quite different from what students have done in other courses or settings. The work we do as professionals and scholars and the ideas we discuss and expand through our research and teaching all happen through very context-specific forms of language. The language and written conventions used by a biologist differ greatly from those used by an economist, dentist, or literary scholar. Teaching students to think, read, research, and practice requires inviting them into the written practices of our field.

Writing, then, is not separate from “content.” It is a central part of everything we do. Yet we often don't know how to explain what we do to students. We are sometimes frustrated by the work students produce, without being able to explain what, exactly, is “not right.” Their arguments might seem “off,” their evidence might not be appropriate, the questions they try to answer might not be the ones we see as relevant or worthwhile. Students might use outside sources too frequently, or not frequently enough. They might not know how or why to reference other scholarship (and might not even know what counts as “scholarship”).

Their terminology might feel “wrong,” or they might use the words or phrases we expect, but in the wrong way.

This book is intended to help instructors surface what they already know about writing within their fields and to help them make their assumptions and practices explicit and visible so that they can better help students engage in them.

It is also a book that asks instructors to interrogate their values and practices to see whether they offer students and newcomers opportunities to bring their own experiences and perspectives and add to the conversations and change them—or whether there are rigid rules and conventions that (intentionally or unintentionally) serve gatekeeping functions.

### Who Is the Book for and How Does It Work?

This book is intended to be used by instructors in higher education from across all fields. It can be used independently, in small groups by instructors from the same or different fields, or by faculty developers working with instructors on teaching using writing. Some of the book’s activities are written to be worked on in pairs, though they also can be completed independently. This is an interactive working book. That is, each chapter describes ideas and overviews scholarship, but the primary work of the book is the interactive activities spread throughout each chapter.

The book moves back and forth between three, related ways that people use writing in teaching and learning:

1. *teaching with writing*, thinking about the ways that writing facilitates learning;
2. *teaching writing*, reflecting on ideas of “good writing” and how to help students develop it; and
3. *teaching writers*—facilitating the learning of those most important people, the students in our classrooms.

The book is intended to be used in sequence.

Chapter 1 asks you to delve into your field’s work in order to identify your ways of thinking and practicing—your threshold concepts—and to consider where and why students typically find your field troublesome, or where they encounter learning bottlenecks.

With your field’s threshold concepts in mind, Chapter 2 asks you to explore how writing works in your life and communities, and to interrogate common misconceptions about writing. Chapter 3 takes a deeper dive into writing, asking you to examine how knowledge is enacted through writing in your own field.

Chapter 4 then asks you to turn your attention to students and find out how your students experience your courses.

Chapter 5 considers how to put the ideas from the previous chapters into practice in order to structure rigorous and effective learning environments. In the ap-

pendix for each chapter you'll find examples of course and assignment and curriculum design from instructors across fields to illustrate the ideas from Chapters 1–5.<sup>1</sup> As you move through the book, we encourage you to keep a notebook (digital or paper) of all the activities in order to be able to refer back to previous reflections. You'll also find examples from other instructors woven throughout the text. In the digital editions of this book, they are linked; in the print version, you'll be referred to the book's web page or to other websites where the materials can be found.

## Who Are the Authors?

We have both been teachers of writing in various forms for more than 60 combined years. We have taught first-year writing (aka “freshman comp”), upper division courses, and graduate courses; we've published many studies examining questions associated with writing, writers, and contexts for writing. We have also both been department chairs and administrators of various flavors in the universities where we have worked (public and private, of varying sizes). We both lead professional development events for faculty from across disciplines and across institutions.

Between us, we have worked with hundreds of instructors to think about writing and learning more broadly. We've listened closely as these colleagues have talked about their triumphs and struggles, about what they consider enjoyable and challenging about engaging with students as their ideas develop. As we've listened, taught our own courses, and conducted research about writing, learning, and cognition, we've developed our own faculty seminars and workshops. The framework for this book comes from our work with other faculty; many of the activities in the book are ones that we have used (or are modified from those), as well.

As we have written this book, we have thought a good deal about our positions as fellow instructors and faculty members, and as the authors of this book. Generally, we refer to readers as “you,” though we just as easily could have used the collective “we.” This is because this book comes from our own experiences as instructors who have learned to teach writing, teach with writing, and teach writers.

We are grateful to the faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate student colleagues from whom we've learned, and grateful to you as reader(s) for thinking about the ideas in this book. We hope that you will share your experiences and suggestions as users of the book so that we can continue to learn (and grow).

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1. In addition to linking directly to resources on the web, we provide archived versions of the materials in the appendix on this book's web page at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/expertise>.