

10 Ways to Whip the Freshman Composition Requirement

Learn how to tame the beast that is this required course.

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MANY STUDENTS STARTING college encounter something like this:

“ENGL1013 Composition I (Sp, Su, Fa) Required of all freshmen unless exempted by the Department of English. Prerequisite: ENGL 0003 or an acceptable score on the English section of the ACT or another approved test.”

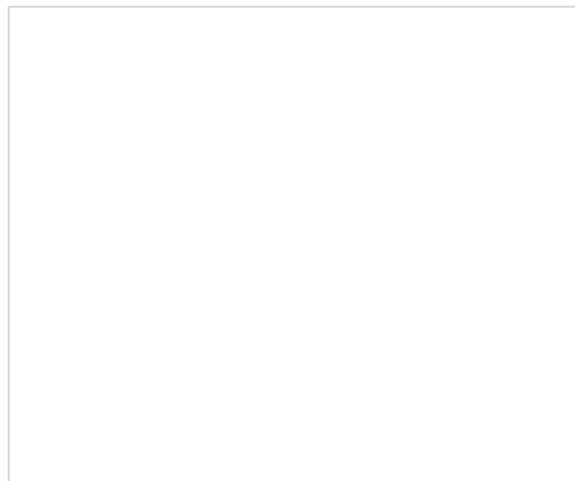
It's that most despised of all college courses, the freshman comp requirement. We wondered what could be done to tame this beast, and so we asked our friend Raina Smith Lyons, assistant director of the program in composition at the University of Arkansas, for her suggestions. Here's what she had to say:

1. Go to class. Sure, you might think that not much goes on in class. And maybe at your high school, it was true. But in freshman comp, a majority of the activities are centered on the class meetings: You might have one-on-one critiques of your papers, “workshopping” (that is, peer discussion of rough drafts), presentation of sources that go beyond the textbook, as well as actual in-class writing. And most instructors take roll and count it toward your grade, adding incentive and value to making all the classes.

2. Do all the work assigned. Most freshman comp classes have a graduated series of tasks. You start slow, perhaps just by presenting someone's argument, then build up to harder tasks as the semester progresses, say, comparing a number of positions, learning to evaluate the argument, and ultimately, presenting your own reasoned views. Miss a key step, or skill, and you're behind for future work.

Extra Pointer: Do all the work even if it doesn't make sense to you. Some instructors assign “free writing” or other assignments just to get the juices flowing and to motivate you to write more.

3. Talk to your teacher. Use E-mail, office hours, or a simple face-to-face conversation after class to make the teacher aware of any problems you're having. Maybe handing in a late assignment, a problem you're having getting started, not understanding the assignment, or an inability to “prewrite.” Whatever the case, your instructor is happy to help—that is, if you come to him or her while there is still time to correct the problem.



4. Finish your drafts early. One of the main things professors are trying to teach in these freshman comp courses is the importance of writing drafts of your work and of thinking through the issues over a time as you write the drafts. This process is thwarted when you leave the draft to the last minute—especially if the teacher has given you three or four weeks to do the essay.

4-Star Tip: Program yourself to think left to do a series of revisions. That way, you'll have a full week

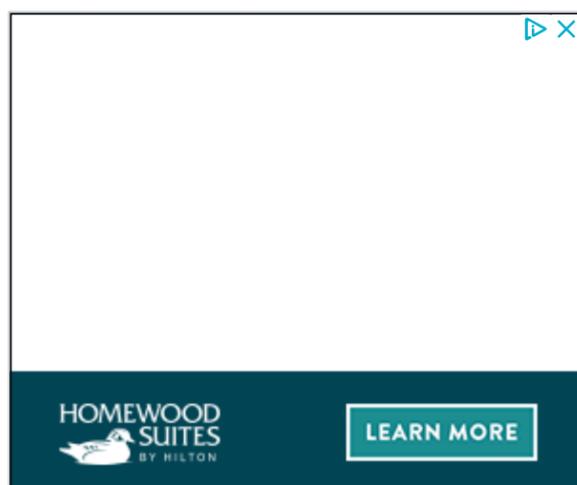
8-Week
Fastrac Sessions
Starting Soon



5. Be sure to understand the assignment. Teachers of freshman comp courses often try to teach you to “write across the curriculum”—that is, to write a general persuasive or critical essay, not to use the tools from any particular discipline or major. They typically teach a variety of kinds of papers, each with its own characteristic structure and tasks. Make sure that for each of the four or five paper assignments, you know exactly what’s being asked. If the instructor has gone over an outline in class, as many do, be sure to follow it in your paper.

5-Star Tip: Look to the verbs. Give a summary of a source is different from analyze or critique a point, which is different from provide a response.

Extra Pointer: Cite properly. When using citations, be sure to give proper footnotes, whether to a print source or the Web. Follow your instructor’s directives, but here are three good Web sources for proper footnoting style: Duke University’s library, the University of Wisconsin–Madison libraries, and Youngstown (Ohio) State University’s library site.



6. Offer up a good thesis. Part of the success of a freshman comp paper is determined by the quality of the thesis: the single sentence, usually at the beginning of the paper, that expresses the one key point you’re trying to get across in the paper. Pick a too obvious or simplistic thesis, and your paper is heading for a C. Pick a deeper thesis—one that finds a more interesting point of comparison or difference or one that locates deeper and more illuminating connections between the points you’re going to make—and your paper is on the express track to an A. If you’re not sure what your thesis should be, it’s well worth your while to run your thoughts by the teacher.

7. Be sure to prove what you’ve claimed. In some of the freshman comp assignments, you’re asked not only to compare or contrast points of view; you’re asked to provide reasons or arguments for a given claim, whether that of some author or your own. If asked, be sure to do so.

8. Go beyond your conclusion. Usually freshman comp papers ask you to sum up what you’ve shown at the end of your paper. A really good ending, though, can also go beyond what’s been shown in the paper: either some further dimension of the issue or a broader assessment of the importance of what you’ve shown. Sure, a conclusion is meant to point back. But it can also point forward.

9. Imaginatively use campus resources. The writing center, in which you can receive up to an hour’s worth of individualized help from a trained writing expert (often an English graduate student), can beat the 10 or 15 minutes you might get from a TA or lecturer. The reference librarian can help you use electronic databases that’ll provide stronger sources for your paper than you might find with a Google or Bing search. And did you know that your campus has experts in many departments? Your paper “What Effects Do Media Have on Young Children?” for example, could be strengthened by a chat with a professor of cognitive science or child development who actually does research on living, breathing children.

