

The Courage to Write
Alisha Geary's Teaching Philosophy

"I admire anybody who has the guts to write anything at all." ~ EB White

My philosophy of teaching draws upon the experiences that I have had as a writer, a student, and a writing tutor. If I have learned anything from these experiences it is that there is a great amount of anxiety and fear associated with writing. I feel that anxiety every time I sit down to write or turn in a manuscript to my editor. As a student I felt the fear of failure and judgment every time I turned in a paper. Through my ten years of experience as a writing tutor I encountered countless fearful students who were unsure of how to "fix" their writing for a good grade. I discovered that if I could help students identify and address their individual anxieties with writing, that we could move forward more quickly and that students wrote better in an atmosphere where their fears were not only heard but dealt with proactively. I learned that once anxiety is addressed writing can become an empowering act of learning and expression.

These experiences have informed my teaching style in the classroom. I am passionate and dedicated to helping students not only in learning to write better, but to be more successful college students. I am a facilitator, a coach to my students, helping them to learn the different conventions of writing and preparing them for different academic situations. These classes are an opportunity to teach good writing practices and effective habits that will help students succeed and hopefully become lifelong learners and contributors to society. As a teacher I am aware and attuned to the levels of experience and anxieties of my students. I have been teaching English 1010 and 2010 for over nine years now, first at Utah State University for three years, and for six years here at Utah Valley. The first day of class I ask my students what they love about writing and what they hate about writing. We then discuss the experiences that inform these loves and hates in a writing prompt called "My Past as a Writer". Through these discussions and essays, I have discovered that many of these students enter into our required writing classes with trepidation—bearing wounds from previous academic writing experiences. Most of these battle scars came from making mistakes in an environment that did not allow for the recursive nature of writing. For these students writing was a wild stab in the dark, a one time deal, a failed attempt. Once those attempts came back bloodied by red pen most students gave up the initial enthusiasm they had for writing and became automatons, doing just enough to get by, or resigning themselves to mediocrity.

Sensing this resignation and desiring more for my students, I have designed my courses around the principle that writing is never finished, it is only due. My classes are portfolio based in an attempt to encourage my students to "own" their writing. These portfolios become a case where students prove that they have learned the course objectives and have mastered, or are beginning to master, the writing requirements of postsecondary schools. The revision process is an integral part of the portfolio based

classes I teach. Each student has the opportunity to attempt each assignment, receiving feedback from peer groups, and then from me as the instructor. Each attempt or draft is assigned a number from one to five that shows students where they are on a scale that symbolizes the quality of academic work expected from university students. Each student is encouraged to revise as many times as necessary to receive a five—five being the equivalent to work that would earn an “A”. These “fivers”, as my students have come to call them, are then put into their portfolios to celebrate the hard work done by each student that semester. By taking away the negative connotations of a letter grading system and emphasizing the multiple draft approach to writing, I have seen my students begin to take responsibility for and feel empowered by their writing. During paper conferences and my regular conference hours many students express the realization that they are suddenly allowed to make mistakes and have the opportunity to learn from them. This approach does create a lot of work for me as a teacher, but I am willing to sacrifice my time in order for my students to succeed. One of perks of this approach is that I can demand excellence while facilitating the opportunities to achieve that excellence.

I challenge myself every semester to assess the strategies I use to help students achieve the course objectives for English 1010 and 2010. I take what works and try to make it better. I meticulously look over lesson plans that seem to have failed and find how to make them more effective. This constant assessment allows me to evolve with changing core standards and keeps me actively engaged in my teaching. I am constantly looking for new ways to engage unmotivated students, and designing class time to appeal to the many different kinds of learners that I teach. Teaching is a joy in my life. I never want to become too sedentary in my ways—I am constantly revising my teaching and my life. My teaching philosophy has been built out of my need to overcome my own fears and anxieties as a writer, a teacher, a student, and a person. I respect the fearsome act of expression that we call writing and as such I am honored to work alongside anyone who has the courage to write.