

Teaching First-Year Writing through Classics

I am a trained classicist who teaches as a part-time adjunct at a four-year institution of higher education without a classics program. This means I have found an unusual niche for myself by teaching first-year writing courses, as well as first-year seminars and honors courses. Nevertheless, for each of these classes, I strive to incorporate as much classical material as I can because it could very well be the only time in the college career of any of my students that they are exposed to Homer, Euripides, Plato, Virgil, and Cicero – in other words, to the foundational texts of Western culture. In this paper, I will detail my pedagogical approach to using classics as a vehicle to teach first-year writing, and vice versa.

My institution's first-year writing course is required of all students, even if they have previously passed a college writing course at another institution. The course is made up of multiple sections taught by different English faculty members. While there are goals common to all sections (including revising multiple drafts, using multiple sources, giving and receiving peer critique, and writing a minimum of 15 pages of prose), individual instructors have a great deal of latitude in how they structure the course to meet these goals. In this paper, I will lay out these common goals and explain the process I went through to design my course, including talking to three instructors about their radically different approaches and struggling with creating an overarching theme for the course. As I will explain, I settled on organizing the class around four writing skills important for university-level discourse: analyzing a text, understanding the historical and cultural context of primary and secondary sources, positioning oneself in relation to secondary scholarship, and conducting a written research project. This paper will detail how each of these skill-based units involves reading and discussing ancient literature in translation – Euripides' *Bacchae*, Plato's *Apology*, and the "Altar of Victory" letters of Symmachus and

Ambrose – as well as secondary scholarship on these works. Following this reading and discussion, students complete a number of short writing assignments that serve as building blocks for their unit-ending paper. These assignments include writing topic sentences and paragraphs, contextualizing quotations, producing outlines, and composing introductory paragraphs. Finally, this paper will share some results of anonymous student evaluations of the course and make the argument that a classics-based writing course can achieve two objectives: help students learn the basics of academic writing and introduce them to major works and themes from the ancient world at a school which rarely provides other curriculum on these topics.

Overall, this paper can contribute to broader discussions of the pedagogy of classics, particularly at institutions without a traditional classics program. In a world with a large number of classics PhD holders and an ever-declining number of tenure-track classics jobs (and even classics departments as a whole), I believe we need to think more creatively about how to share our passion for the ancient world and its importance and relevance. My experience teaching a classics-based first-year writing course provides one example of that and, hopefully, can help spark thoughts on other ways to teach classics in unconventional ways. In addition, for those at institutions who possess a fully-fledged classics department, the type of course I describe can serve as a way to spark student interest in ancient Mediterranean cultures at an early stage in their college career. Doing so could be one way to boost enrollment in a classics department's regular course offerings.