

## Supporting Non-Traditional Students

Writing, because of its potential to generate ideas as well as communicate them, should be the "in" to the academic community for all students; instead, for the non-traditional student, writing often seems emblematic of all that makes her feel like an outsider.

For those re-entering school after a significant absence, Freshman Composition seems a long way off. Their sentence-level skills may be superior to those of traditional students, but that is small consolation when trying to juggle real-world writing experiences with the expectations of academia. But often the major interferences to the returning student using writing effectively are broader than the academic process itself:

- **Living in more than one community.** A non-traditional student may live in--and be expected to be loyal to--more than one community. She may have a job in one, family in another, and classes in a third.
- **Time.** She feels rushed because competing communities are placing demands on her; she is older and may feel that years are moving by; and she is likely to feel that she is operating "off-time"--that she is out of sync because everyone around her seems younger and more aware academically.
- **Mixed-emotions.** Although determined and goal-oriented, the non-traditional student is also likely to be apprehensive (i.e., doubting his qualifications as he struggles with whether choice was correct one), anxious (i.e., coping with the time-related issues), and guilt ridden (i.e., regretting the burden he may be placing on others).

Academic factors play a role too. The class setting with its younger students, possibly a younger professor, and 1990s' protocols may confound a returning student. Comfortable with job-specific writing, he may be confused by the academic audience and discipline-specific conventions, including formatting, usage, and vocabulary. Rusty study and library skills further threaten confidence, while technological innovations can inhibit both writing and information gathering. And he may have to face these interferences in isolation, since non-traditional students tend to lack academic networks.

Pressured by these constraints, returning students may initially view writing as a product and punishment rather than as a functional tool. Instructors can help these students--and the traditional ones in the process--become comfortable with writing by:

1. making clear to students the course's expectations and the goals of individual assignments
2. explaining the relevancy of written communication to the field
3. making clear the field's conventions (i.e., forms of documents, citation systems), and the nature of the academic audience
4. sharing samples of representative writing by professionals in the field
5. tying theory to practice when possible
6. giving the opportunity to write both to generate ideas and to communicate them

7. commenting on papers in ways that will help students de-vest their egos from the writing
8. encouraging the establishment of study groups as a way that students can assume responsibility for their own education by building academic networks.

*Reference:*

Polson, Cheryl J. *Responding to the Adult Learner in the Classroom*. KRCHE Workshop. Johnson County Community College, September 24, 1991.

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