

The Writerly Framework: An Observation Protocol for Online Courses

Step 1: Gather and review context information provided by the instructor

Before you can do a meaningful job of evaluating a course, or even a single teaching and learning scenario, it is important to have a clear sense of the context and purpose of the course, as well as of the various factors that impact how the course can be practically and realistically offered.

Consider these core questions and the specific questions that stem from them:

CQ1. What are the relevant situational factors that shape the design of the course?

Where does the course fit in the program's curriculum? What level is the course? What do students need from previous courses in the program to get the most out of this one? What can the instructor count on the students knowing when they arrive? What will students need to carry with them from this course to future courses in the program? In their careers?

CQ2. What is the nature or disciplinary norms of the subject in regard to teaching and learning?

Is the subject theoretical, practical, or somewhere in between? Is it more convergent or divergent? Does it address controversial or constantly changing topics? Does teaching in the discipline tend to emphasize memorizing facts and concepts, or does it call more for critical thinking and analysis? Does the teacher of the course tend to push for memorizing facts and concepts, or do they call more for critical thinking and analysis?

CQ3. What are the characteristics of the students in the course?

How many students will be in the course? Where are they in their study program and disciplinary preparedness? Where do they come from? (Socio-economic background? First-generation students? Work and family obligations? International students? Diversity of backgrounds, identities, and abilities?)

CQ4. What are the characteristics of the teacher?

What are the instructor's beliefs and values about teaching and learning? What are the instructor's expectations and intentions for how they intend to facilitate and foster their students' learning in the course? How does the instructor rate their teaching ability and their expertise in the subject matter being taught in the course?

CQ5. What are the characteristics of the course?

In what modality is it offered (face-to-face, online, blended, etc.)? How often does it meet and for how long? How often is it offered? How often is it taught by this instructor?

CQ6. What are the core design principles in the course?

*What is the nature of the course's learning outcomes? What is implicit and is explicit?
Are they more focused on memorizing and "knowing" or are they more about critical thinking and analysis?*

CQ7. What are the primary strategies used to engage students?

How often and in what ways are students assessed (formatively and/or summatively)? What deliverables are expected from them? How often and in what ways are students asked to interact? With the content? With each other? With the instructor?

CQ8. What are the goals and expectations for this review?

Why is the course being put up for review? What is the instructor hoping to get out of the review? How will the reviewer gain access to the course and its materials?

Step 2: Acclimate to the course

Before you dig deeply into the course and its different elements to find writerly moments, it is important to take a little time and get a "big picture" overview of the course. A better sense of the larger system will enable a clearer and deeper recognition of what is happening in specific elements of the course.

CQ1. What are the core design principles of the course?

To what extent do these reflect the instructor's intentions? To what extent might they be improved or augmented to better align with those intentions?

CQ2. What primary strategies is the instructor using to engage the students?

To what extent do these reflect the instructor's intentions? To what extent might they be improved or augmented to better align with those intentions?

CQ3. Where do the course learning outcomes and situational factors fit into the design?

Are the learning outcomes formulated appropriately to lead to a more writerly learning experience? Are the assessments and activities in alignment with a writerly approach to teaching and learning?

Step 3: Identify the writerly moments in the course

Based on Roland Barthes's concept of the writerly text, writerly teaching and learning is something that happens on a micro scale, in discreet moments. It would be difficult to identify a course (or text) that is fully writerly. Barthes admitted it would be hard to find a writerly text in a bookstore, but he also argued that the only value we can use to determine the quality of a text is by how writerly it is. Therefore, the more writerly something is, whether a course or text, depends on how often writerly moments happen along the way, whether in how a lecture is delivered in a way that provokes thought, or in how an assignment prompts students to (re)write new understandings.

The purpose of the protocol is not to pass judgment on whether a course (or an individual aspect of that course) is "good enough" or whether it meets or fails to meet a particular standard. Rather, the purpose this observation protocol is to identify which parts of a course achieve the writerly and which parts, with a little tweaking, have the opportunity to become (more) writerly. That is, what are the "exemplary moments" that already exist in the course? And what are the opportunities to reach writerliness?

One of the fundamental values behind the writerly protocol is that it is a purely constructive process. The identification of exemplary moments can be expressed in declarative statements; however, the identification of opportunities should, whenever possible, be expressed as questions (e.g., instead of saying "you need to change or fix x ...", say something more along the lines of "what if you did x ?" or "would it be possible to x ?").

The writerly framework has three dimensions: creating spaces, engaging in dialogue, and making meaning. These dimensions work as complementary parts of the same process, where creating spaces is the stimulus that sets the process in motion, while engaging in dialogue is the process in action, and making meaning is outcome of the process. Although, it is important not to think about it too linearly. Neither teaching nor learning are linear enterprises. They are iterative and oscillating, dialogic and dialectical, moving forward and back in fits and starts before finding their way (while never finding their ultimate destination).

Each dimension has six prompts. These prompts are to help you recognize where and how these spaces may be created. They are not intended as sub-criteria or separate tests. Also, the final prompt for each dimension is "challenging the readerly," which might be the most important value of this writerly review process. It might be difficult for some instructors to achieve true writerliness, but anyone can recognize when their teaching is being readerly (e.g., too authoritative, declarative, coercive, or final) and then try to make it less so.

Creating Spaces

The first dimension of the writerly framework is Creating Spaces. This dimension has to do with providing students with the room to explore, think, and make connections. The poet Wallace Stevens talks about the moment "just after" a blackbird sings, which is when the listener has the opportunity to reflect on the song and give it meaning. A huge part of the writerly is giving students room to think and to generate new ideas and understandings.

| Creating Spaces for students to think, generate, make connections | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>Exemplary Moments</i> | <i>Opportunities</i> |
| 1. Planting seeds of suggestion 2. Cultivating co-creation 3. Taking risks 4. Pausing for reflection 5. Shifting agency 6. Challenging the readerly | | |

Engaging in Dialogue

The next dimension of the writerly framework is Engaging in Dialogue. This is where meaningful interaction comes in, where students enter into a conversation with the content, with other students, and/or with the instructor. Writerly teaching in this dimension becomes about asking and prompting questions more than delivering answers. It is also important to remember that true interaction—whether with the content, other students, or the instructor—means that both sides change.

| Engaging in Dialogue where students interact and engage with the content and each other | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>Exemplary Moments</i> | <i>Opportunities</i> |
| 1. Generating questions 2. Co-constructing knowledge 3. Fostering interaction 4. Delving into the content 5. Prompting feedback 6. Challenging the readerly | | |

Making Meaning

The final dimension of the writerly framework is Making Meaning. This is where things move from inputs and processing to outputs, meanings and understandings that the students can then take out

into the world. For students to make meaning, they need to have the freedom and agency to generate new ways of understanding, as well as new ways to situating those new meanings into their existing knowledge structures.

| Making Meaning where students don't "record" the content but rather create new understandings of it | | |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>Exemplary Moments</i> | <i>Opportunities</i> |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enhancing retention 2. Generating understanding 3. Fostering integration 4. Distributing practice 5. Solving problems 6. Challenging the readerly | | |

Step 4: Prepare a review report to share with the instructor

The most important part of any peer-review activity is when the feedback you have generated is shared back with the instructor/designer of the course.

We are currently developing a template for these reports, as well as a suggested agenda/protocol for the meeting. These reports and meetings should be interactive, supportive, constructive, and most importantly, part of an ongoing dialogue. The report should offer as many or more questions than answers, and it should prompt the receiver of the report to generate questions as well.

Step 5: Follow up review (optional)

Ideally, when the instructor/designer receives the evaluation report on the writerliness of the course, they will want to make changes. We recommend that these changes be shared back with reviewer for feedback and, if necessary, suggestions for further refinement. This second round should rarely be as extensive or intensive as the first one; however, this opportunity to close the feedback loop is an important step in making the course more writerly.