Bard Prison Initiative

Some Thoughts and Suggestions for Writing-Based Course Revision

What's most important to keep in mind is that students want to keep working. They want to stay connected, and they want to keep learning. Obviously, your revised class will not be what it would have been. That doesn't mean it won't be rich for students or that they won't learn important things from it, and from you. You can still have a strong influence on their understanding -- you already have, in the weeks you've been working with them, and it won't end now. You can continue to actively guide and support their thinking, and offer them a way through the work that is rich and meaningful. You might think of it as a group independent study. How would you guide an individual student from afar?

Some things to consider as you're devising prompts and guidelines for independent study. In the spirit of practicing what we preach, you might consider freewriting in response to these questions:

- What were your key goals for the course at the start of the semester and did they shift as you grew familiar with your students? If so, why, and in what ways? Would you be willing to share that with your students as a way of guiding their thinking?
- What themes, patterns, issues, ideas, questions about this material were you planning to draw out or emphasize? What themes emerged as you worked with your class?
- Assuming that there was a considerable amount of context you expected to provide, which of those themes etc. can you still guide students toward, from a distance?
- What challenges or difficulties did you anticipate your students having with the course material, and how were you planning to address them?

It seems to me that sharing these considerations with your students could be useful for them as an introduction to the revised coursework, and a good way of modeling metacognitive thinking. But of course it's up to you.

Here are some possible approaches to revising specific aspects of your course. Following the chart, I've elaborated on some of the strategies.

Original	**Revised Suggestions/Ideas**	**Resources**
Reading	• Reading Journals (prompts here) • "Weekly" Response Papers • Questions Log (think about what kind of questions you want students to ask) • Design another course unit (see EH page) • Pastiche lecture: ask students to write the lecture they imagine you might deliver on a particular group of readings • Annotation/Close Reading Strategies (dialogic journal, annotate a paragraph…) • Dialectical Notebook	**Linked in the Revised Suggestions/Ideas column.**

Essay Assignment	• Write two drafts (instructions for each draft here) and a reflection (prompt here) • Provide rubrics for students to self-assess (on draft vs final paper--what are the changes) • Physically highlight or underline the key revisions/changes made in your final draft • See possible assignment to final paper trajectories here • Cover Letter prompts here	
Class Discussion	If students can get with classmates: • Assign small groups (use group roles here) If students cannot meet: • Write a virtual or imagined discussion (see below) • Write a dialogue or play between the key issues/players of the course. • Visualize, diagram or draw out a key tension or problem you see in a few of the readings **Each of these could have a reflection component that asks students to think about their work and the process.**	
Revision	• Take peer-review guidelines and turn them into self review guidelines (possible peer-review guidelines or formats) • Reverse Outline • Take your weakest paragraph and rewrite it in two different ways. • Draw out or mind map your developing ideas • Take your first draft and highlight the most interesting ideas. Develop a plan of action based on these highlights and how you want to further strengthen them. • Look at "8 Strategies for Critically Engaging Sources" and discuss which one your own paper most closely resembles and why. What	Nancy Sommers' "Revision Strategies," Peter Elbow's "More Ways to Revise," from *Writing with Power*, or Carley Moore's "Radical Revision" (all available in Texts folder)

	"moves" do you make as a writer in your argumentation? How can you strengthen them?	
Portfolio or Final Independent Study Collection	• Final Portfolio (with an assignment sheet that prof provides with everything it must include) • Self-Directed Portfolio (students choose from a selection of possible assignments) • Final Portfolio Reflection	Self-Directed Portfolio Examples

Notes on some specific strategies:

From my perspective, a **reading and thinking journal** is an ideal tool for these circumstances. Indeed, it's a good one even in ideal circumstances. Such journals can work for classes across the curriculum, though they'll be most obvious for writing-based courses. Here is a list of journal prompts that I've used in the past for history classes, as a kind of seed. Feel free to borrow and revise as you like.

Journal entries can be very useful fodder for more formal papers, and are an excellent way of both tracking and deepening thinking as it develops. Since such a journal is standing in for class discussion, you can ask students to really put some time into it, either in that you ask for more entries, or longer ones, than you might do under normal circumstances.

A variation on the journal is what you might call a **reading log**. Rather than coming up with specific reading guides or questions for each text or group of texts, you might pull back and instead give them three questions you want them to answer for every text. Such questions might be aimed at drawing out the themes you've identified, or they might be a way of instilling certain habits in them as readers. What habits do you want them to develop?

Another idea is **virtual or imagined discussion**. A prompt for this might go along these lines: "You had five weeks with your classmates, your professor, and the course material. What kinds of responses would you expect from this group to this week's reading? Construct a dialogue, trying to give voice to the various perspectives in the room, and be sure to include your own. What kinds of insights would your classmates have? What kinds of questions? How do you think the professor might guide the

discussion?" Also along these lines, one of our colleagues has asked his students to **write the lecture** they imagine he would deliver on one week's readings.

I'd strongly suggest a **metacognitive** follow-up to these kinds of assignments: what did you have to do to imagine the responses of others? What did you learn about the text from trying to imagine how others would see it?

In fact, **metacognitive or reflective writing**, always helpful, could be particularly useful in this independent study context. For me, this involves devising ways for students to step back and try to see *how* they figured something out, how they approached a question or solved a problem, so that they can see how much they know, and begin to understand and build upon how they learn. Good metacognitive questions work to help students see the choices they made and to reflect on why they made those choices -- what did they already understand that helped them see or figure out something new? This will not only help students see what they understand, but it should be helpful to you in gauging their learning.

You might also ask students to try to come up with **discussion questions or writing prompts** for the material. Ask them to consider the kinds of questions and prompts you've given them, to try and decipher what you're getting at with such prompts and questions, and see if they can construct similar ones.

If they are able to meet they might share them with one another, and use someone else's question or prompt for one of their journal entries. Or they can attempt an answer to their own questions. Either way, ask them to consider the kinds of questions and prompts they've already heard from you this semester: what kinds of questions do they think you'd have for a given text or group of texts? If you have shared your goals and expectations, per my first suggestion, they can draw on those in coming up with these questions.

As a way to pull together their work, you could ask students to put it together as a **portfolio**. You can tell them which specific assignments must go into it and mark where on your revised syllabus they should do work for it. Journal entries? Essay Assignments? Reflective writing? I generally specify which assignments must be included, and then ask them to choose from among the rest of the work what they want me to see, either because they like it, or it marks an important moment in their thinking or understanding. A **cover letter** that introduces each document can be very useful. I ask them to say something about each thing they're including in the portfolio, and then reflect on what they all show, taken together. Some prompts for cover letters:

Here's one of a number of helpful ideas from Bard's Center for Experimental Humanities, on their Teaching at a Distance page (which you might check out for other ideas as well):

Design another course unit If you are using a course reader, anthology, or course textbook, have students explore parts of this text not covered by your course (or recycle extant course readings into new pairings) in order to design a 1-week "unit" of readings (excerpts, chapters, poems, passages) complete with a short introductory lecture, handouts, and discussion questions.

Formal papers and revision -- you might decide to have fewer formal assignments, and instead to add rounds of revision. This is fine -- the guidelines for FYS and WI courses are not written in stone and if you think your students will get more out of an additional round of revising than they would from embarking on an additional project, that's what you should do.

In your thinking about how you guide revision, you may not have to change a great deal. You can ask them to read their drafts drawing on the feedback you've given them on prior assignments, and also referring carefully to what you're asking for in the assignment, your peer feedback handouts, and on your rubrics for the essays. For more ideas on revision, please visit the Revision folder in the FYS/WI drive, and see Nancy Sommers' "Revision Strategies," Peter Elbow's "More Ways to Revise," from *Writing with Power*, or Carley Moore's "Radical Revision" -- all in the Course Revision google folder.

Pointing to and elaborating upon your **grading rubrics** or criteria would also be helpful for their revision process. Students, especially in WI courses, will probably be familiar with rubrics, but drawing their attention to them, and perhaps drawing out the reasons for and goals of each aspect and how it could guide revision -- not for the sake of the grade but for the sake of the deepening that would come from it -- could be illuminating. Over the years I've collected a variety of rubrics.

For those who will be able to connect with classmates, you might suggest groupings for their study groups, with roles they can experiment with -- suggest specific roles, as Wendy does in her handout "Small group roles." Check out "Ways of Responding" from Peter Elbow for more advice on guiding peer feedback, and again keep in mind that if they can't get with other students, you can ask them to try and read their work from the point of view of someone else, whether that's you or a classmate, or even a family member or friend.

Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* is available as an ebook from Stevenson Library here. You may want to take a look there for specific exercises, but also more generally for helpful ways of thinking about what students can do on their own and how they can do it.

A closing note: as always in formulating assignments, the more clarity and specificity you can give your students the better. But you can't recreate the class in writing -- that's not the goal here, or anyone's expectation. As Kristen said in her first email, "replicating the classroom is not a useful standard." You might feel you need to write up lesson plans for each class session, and I'm not going to try to convince you not to. But it may be that a lighter touch will be more effective, both for your thinking (and peace of mind) and for their process. Might it make more sense to have general guidelines for each week's reading, and then specific instructions about the formal writing assignments? Would a set of questions that's the same for every reading work just fine, and even allow them to see how much more they see each time they do it? Please do consider letting them see behind the curtain, sharing with them your goals and intentions for the course be a more effective way to guide them?

Please be kind to yourself as you go through this process. This is a deeply challenging task, in tremendously difficult circumstances. Know that your students are going to work hard, as they always do. And they will make progress. It won't be the same as it would -- and should -- have been, with class meetings and the kind of feedback you could give them, of course. But as I said above, you can guide and support them nonetheless, and it will be a meaningful, substantial aspect of their college experience, as well as, for many, a real anchor during a difficult and uncertain time in their lives.

Thank you for your hard work and care.