

Think back to the last time you were dazzled by a piece of student writing -- why was it so impressive? I'm guessing your answer (if not, "this has never happened to me"!) has two themes running through it: the writing was clear and elegant, and the ideas were really "good". In fact, if you didn't notice the writing much at all -- that is, you mostly found yourself reacting to content, marveling at incisive thought, overjoyed by quality analysis -- then you may not even have been aware that you were reacting both to writing AND content. When we read good stuff, we conflate the two. But when you're frustrated, you may also be conflating the two, and to provide students a course correction, writing and content must be separated.

Discipline-specific prose is not simply about format: it also reflects and embodies ways of thinking within the discipline. Teachers, then, must be very clear about what they **want** when they say "I wish students could write better". Do you really mean the nuts-and-bolts of effective writing or do you mean you wish students thought more like practitioners in your field? And there is a difference! You will meet students who are naturally gifted thinkers in a particular area -- for instance, they are able to think about behavior in a way that is very social-science-y -- and still be inexperienced, ineffective writers. If you find yourself saying "yes, that's the right idea, why couldn't you write it better??!", then you are really complaining about writing. If, on the other hand, you find yourself exclaiming "Ugh -- what on earth is this about? This has nothing to do with the assignment!!", then you are grieving the lack of discipline-specific thinking. The writing may be perfectly clear, but the ideas themselves are not right. That is not a composition problem; it is a thinking problem.

Writing assignments can address both composition and thinking, which is what makes discipline-specific writing such a fine exercise for professional development. But to **teach** discipline-specific composition effectively, writing and thinking must first be separated. A psychologist watches the goings-on at a skateboard park very differently from a physicist or an EMT. Help your students learn to think within your discipline by presenting a situation, and demonstrate how a disciplinary practitioner thinks about it. Then, show how that knowledge is written. Finally, bring the two together.