Promising Practices for FY Studies Faculty to Support the Transition from High School to College Writing

The following is a list of practices supported by research as benefitting FY writers. This list also corresponds to the types of practices reported by FY LFC faculty in 2001 on a survey conducted by the Director of Writing Programs. Just so you know that you are not alone when you do the following or support the following with your students.

1. A vast majority of the faculty were explicit about writing expectations for all assignments on syllabus and assignment sheets.
2. Frequent writing is the norm. The highest number of pages assigned in 2001: 65; the lowest, 22; the average, 42.
3. Both informal and formal writing assignments were included in FYS courses. Journal writes, daily response papers, in-class writing exercises as well as 3-5 page papers and longer papers.
4. Nearly all faculty members encouraged revision by accepting multiple drafts and giving feedback on each.
5. Faculty provided in text comments as well as summary comments which included guidance on writing goals as well as ideas for further reflection or requests for clarification of ideas.
6. Faculty claimed that the following were the key problem areas for students: (1) grammar and usage (2) organization (3) thesis statement and development. All claimed students struggled with analytic writing.
7. A majority of faculty held individual writing conferences with students.

You may also want to consider the following advice (again based on research):

1. Consider giving several short assignments that follow the same basic form or genre considerations. Variety of writing assignments is usually recommended, but for FY students focusing on the short, analytic paper where they work with one or two sources on several papers in the beginning of the semester is good for them to be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses as analytic writers.
2. Consider explaining or even modeling or demonstrating how you read a paper, making clear to students your expectations and responses. Many don’t understand the importance of the first paragraph, for example, in determining a reader’s response. They are surprised to find that you are looking for thesis statements, logic of ideas, and use of evidence. In high school, they were not given as much feedback on these areas. They are not used to being “read” for their ideas, not just their completeness or their form.
3. Developmentally, FY writers are reaching for more complicated ideas and reading more complicated texts and, as a result, their writing will suffer. They will be trying on more complex sentence structures and more sophisticated vocabulary and messing up as they do so. Try to be as patient as possible with clarity issues and practice “reading for intention” of the writer rather than responding to what is actually on the page. This is where writing conferences or asking students to submit cover pages explaining their confusions, difficulties and processes with the assignment can be useful.

4. Although grammar and usage are important, especially for clarity, at first focus on thesis development, framing an argument in the introduction, and concluding a paper properly. Once students have some confidence about communicating their ideas, they will spend more time on clarity and grammar.

Here is how Rand Smith summarizes these three areas in his advice to students:

Argue: Every paper must have a thesis, that is , a central point, argument or idea that it is trying to accomplish.
Frame: Pose the problem, states the rationale (why the topic matters), and gives a roadmap to the paper and what it will cover.
Conclude: Re-frames the paper for the reader and discusses the implications of the thesis.

5. Teach summarizing. Summarizing is the first step to all good analytic work. Not every student should produce the same summary. The material they are reading is so complex, each should be able to find his/her focus and write a personalized summary.

6. Quoting—especially short embedded quotes—will be new to your students. Don’t be surprised that you need to teach how to frame a quote—introduce, choose good quotes and then transition out of a quote.

7. Give feedback on growth as a writer. Some faculty use the same writing rubric for several assignments to show students how they are progressing in various areas on their writing. Students who know what they need to work on are less anxious writers and less likely to “hide” and not seek help.