

To: AWD Students
From:
Re: Realistic Advice to Succeed in AWD

Introduction:

Like pulling an all-nighter at Club Snell, taking AWD is a rite of passage that is essential to the Northeastern experience (and by essential I mean a NU core requirement that everyone must take before being permitted to graduate). I am well aware of the reputation that is associated with AWD: nobody is excited to take it*. Perhaps it is the feeling that by 'middler' year of college you already know how to write and would rather take more exciting courses in your discipline. Or perhaps you hate writing and enduring what is essentially the sequel to 'Freshmen English' and prequel to 'Capstone' does not rank high in your book. I am not going to dispute what you may have heard about this 'middler' year writing course, or your feelings on it. But, in the interest of at least a good grade – and potentially improving your writing and portfolio repertoire – I am going to provide some advice.

Advice:

Navigating the Learning Goals

By now you have at least glanced at the Learning Goals. I know, it is really hard not to laugh.* They are entirely specific and concurrently ambiguous: “strong understanding”, “confidence” in the process of revision, reflection on your role in your own practice of critical reasoning. What do these actually mean? My initial thought: am I in middle school again? Because in my state, each student had to provide examples of his or her writing and prove how it exemplified mastery of one of the ‘Guiding Principles of the Learning Results’ in order to pass each grade and proceed to the next. These included principals such as creative and practical problem solver, self-directed and lifelong learner, and clear and effective communicator. (Take the fact that I recalled those principals from memory as a testament to their superfluosity).

This course appears to be clouded in superficiality in which proving the mastery of these ‘Goals’ is more important than actually improving your writing skills. But give AWD a chance. No doubt great effort, time, and collaboration went into developing these goals. Yes, they are a bit off-putting to students (especially if it brings up dormant emotional scarring from middle school English class), but these ‘Learning Goals’ are well-intentioned. For the moment, do not get bogged down their details; AWD is a process and you will interpret and define these goals as you journey through. For now, understand that AWD is an opportunity to practice the writing you will use in your field. As long as you remind yourself of that along the way, you will be fine.

Identifying and developing your writing habits

Everyone has a unique writing practice. By this I do not mean the style of your writing, but literally how, when, and where you write. Some people do their best writing late the night before the assignment is due with music streaming from Pandora, a big mug of coffee, and a browser full of tabs marking each source. Others prefer to research first and then write a little part of a larger assignment each day while sitting at a café or the quiet floor of Snell. In any case, know your writing habits. If you have yet to figure it out, this is the time. If you already know what works for you, take advantage of it. You are about to do a lot of writing (and depending on your

major, significantly more than you are used to doing), so be comfortable with your writing habits.

Submitting solid drafts

For each unit of AWD, you will prepare a draft that will be reviewed by two of your peers. Each peer reviewer must write a review of your draft that includes a summary, major points of concern (i.e. content) and minor points (i.e. grammar errors and spelling mistakes). You will use the peer reviews to edit and revise your draft and develop your final unit paper. Simply put, the more complete your draft is, the better your peer feedback will be.

It is tempting to throw some words on paper the morning your draft is due and figure that you will spend the necessary time writing the final version. But then your peer reviews will basically say “do the assignment” instead of offering constructive advice. It is a waste of your time and that of your peer reviewers. If you spend the bulk of your time constructing a solid draft, then you will minimize the time it takes to revise it for your final product.

Providing helpful peer reviews

As noted above, peer reviews have the potential to be very helpful to authors. But they also may be a waste of time. Probably since peer reviews are graded, students feel that they must find a few things ‘wrong’ with the draft they are reading so they can write a review of decent length. But this is not necessarily helpful to authors. Rather than focusing on quantity focus on quality. Ask yourself, is this earnest advice and constructive criticism that I am offering, or is it fluff? It is simply a waste of your time and the authors’ to make useless comments, but helpful critiques are invaluable to the writing process.

Motivating yourself

As I mentioned earlier, AWD is about exploring the genre of writing that is used in your field (which will be referred to as your “discourse community” during the course). You have to take this course, so make the best of it. You probably know your weaknesses as a writer, so now is the time to get help in those areas and turn your weaknesses into strengths. Have fun with it too. Most of the assignments are designed to be open-ended so that they are applicable to students from various majors. This is the time to choose topics that interest you and try out different writing genres.

Best Wishes:

There is no way around it AWD is a lot of work. You will write, and rewrite, and revise, and then write about your peers’ work and then reflect on your writing. But take advantage of this opportunity to explore your field and interests, refine your skills, and challenge yourself. The more you put into this course, the more you will get out of it. You are armed with the best advice (and a handful of tangential cynicism) I can provide for navigating this course. Best of luck!

*Apologies to all AWD instructors reading this memo.