

# Some Quick Facts About English 120

Several years ago, thirty-five English instructors met to develop a rubric and to make decisions about what the course should emphasize. As a result of these discussions, English 120 has several components teachers ought to keep in mind while planning the class.

## I. We Conduct an Article-Based Common Final.

We give this final during the last week of regular session, that is, the week before the finals scheduled for the other college courses. The teacher decides which day to give the exam during that week.

Although this essay must be written in class in sixty minutes, students have a week to prepare margin notes on the articles. Two weeks before the end of regular session, teachers receive article packets and instructions to be given to students. The articles in the packet have the same general focus, e.g., immigration issues, the effects of television etc. The articles present facts and contrasting viewpoints.

At this point in the class, students should take over most of the preparation. Although they are not given the exact essay topics until the day of the final, they are allowed to make any margin notes they wish and bring the article packet to the final (no other pages of notes will be allowed). As part of their support and commentary, they will be expected to make and cite references to the readings. Teachers may answer clarifying questions about the articles, such as what a statement means, but it should be up to the students to read, identify issues, discuss, debate, write thesis sentences etc. This is because the course heavily emphasizes efficient study skills and analysis of readings as a preparation to write.

Rather than one mass grading session, teachers meet in relatively small grading groups.

Teachers do not have to meet with their classes during the regular finals schedule. Instead, they meet in groups of four to six at a time they deem convenient.

The grading sessions usually take about four to five hours. During the first half hour, group members norm by discussing the grading criteria in The English 120 Rubric and examining both the graded samples attached to the rubric and “live” samples taken from the actual student exams. The small group structure allows each member to express opinions and ask questions.

Teachers do not grade the essays from their own classes. Two other teachers put their scores on a cover sheet. In the case of a disagreement about whether the essay should pass, a third reader will score it.

The teacher determines the final grade a student receives in the course, but the purpose of the final is, of course, to keep our standards fairly precise and consistent, especially since they are the beginning standards for English 101, so most teachers take the results seriously, making the final scores at least twenty-five percent of the grade calculation.

## II. The English 120 Course Emphasizes Two Writing Processes.

The 120 course outline requires half of the essays to be written in class. This is simply because students will encounter two obvious kinds of writing settings in the future, ones in which they will have a lot of time to work on their writing and ones in which they will not. Just as obvious, each setting requires a different process of preparation.

**The process of in-class writing includes:**

- the ability to write clear, grammatical sentences on the spot;
- the ability to anticipate what sort of writing will be required in a setting;
- the ability to read and take notes efficiently, to put information into a useful form in both margin and outside notes in order to work quickly;
- the ability to brainstorm when necessary to get ideas and prevent getting stuck;
- efficient, useful patterns of writing on which students can rely when they have little time, including the traditional thesis/ topics sentences/ support pattern.

**The out-of-class process includes:**

- the ability to write clear, grammatical sentences on the spot;
- the ability to anticipate what sort of writing will be required in a setting;
- how to gather information, that is, do research;
- the ability to read and take notes efficiently, to put information into a useful form in both margin and outside notes;
- how to think through issues and ideas and consider evidence carefully;
- several possible approaches to critical thinking and development.

### **III. English 120 Has a Research Component.**

The students should be taught the skills necessary in research, but teachers may choose to do this in at least two shorter papers or do this as a unit leading to one longer research essay.

The college library has excellent on-line research data banks available to all students on and off campus, accessed through the library home page.

### **IV. English 120 Strongly Emphasizes Grammar and Sentence Writing.**

The course outline requires at least twelve hours of instruction in grammar and sentence writing. Although a majority of teachers opted not to assign a maximum number of grammatical errors student writers may commit, The English 120 Rubric contains a breakdown of errors considered “major” and errors considered “minor,” and “C” essays must contain “few major errors.” Distortion in essays due to grammar errors has been the problem most frequently cited by English 101 instructors.

### **V. The English 120 Rubric is Intended for Both Students and Instructors.**

The rubric, which can be accessed on-line through the English Division Home Page, contains a good deal of specific information about what constitutes a passing essay and samples with commentary. The rubric is especially useful while students are preparing for the final exam, since they can use the rubric to evaluate their own and others’ essays.