When I teach composition, my goal is to help students gain confidence as writers and to develop writing strategies that they can use across the curriculum and in practical situations. When I teach literature, my goal is to provide students with opportunities to strengthen their literary analysis skills, to think critically, to improve their writing, and to connect our readings to their own experiences and historical knowledge. My course design draws on Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s concept of “backward design,” in which curricular activities must have a clear relation to course objectives that are defined in terms of student competencies rather than in terms of material covered. For example, although I use lecture to introduce and reinforce academic writing norms and grammar concepts, I devote the majority of composition classes to process-oriented activities like brainstorming, writing, and peer review.

Backward design and process-oriented pedagogy are the major influences on how I understand and use assessment. Because my goal is to assess students’ competencies—meaning their writing and reading skills and processes, not just their final products—I provide formative as well as summative assessment. For example, I require multiple drafts of all major papers and provide formative feedback through written comments and individual conferences. Similarly, I use low-stakes assignments like response papers and brief, frequent quizzes to assess student reading comprehension.

I routinely use instructional technology, including course management software like Blackboard and Sakai. When integrating technology into my courses, I do so thoughtfully, always asking how a given tool will engage students, make course materials more accessible, or serve specific learning objectives. As one example, I sometimes supplement the traditional research paper—an assignment which too often produces perfunctory results—with a research project that engages students by requiring them to identify a problem or gap in Wikipedia’s coverage of a particular topic. Students must find, evaluate, and synthesize sources that will solve the problem or fill the gap. In addition to strengthening research and digital literacy skills, this project motivates students by challenging them not simply to receive information passively, but to become participants in a public process of constructing knowledge.

The motto “students are adults and should be treated as such” encapsulates my classroom management strategies. While I warmly invite students to consult me, I also emphasize that they are ultimately responsible for their own education. In my experience, setting high expectations and modeling respectful communication can effectively preempt many classroom management problems. If students do become disruptive or distracted, my approach is to engage them more actively. For example, distracted students can regain focus when asked to fulfill a special responsibility, such as writing model sentences on the board or summarizing a reading for the rest of the class.

My student evaluations demonstrate that I successfully invite students to think about the connections between their coursework and their lives and to reflect on the transferable writing skills they are cultivating. When asked what aspects of my courses challenged them, representative student responses include, “I was challenged in my writing style,” “Being able to create an effective thesis,” and “defending my answers.” In sum, my pedagogical strategies provide students with both the skills and the supportive environment that they need in order to become confident, proficient writers and readers who reflect on the ways that their coursework connects to their lives outside the classroom.