

Professor Craig Livingston and I joined forces and created a writing project as a joint History/Criminal Justice effort. Our plan was simple: We would invite students to a 2 hour Writing Boot Camp wherein they would learn the secrets of excellent essay writing.

The Writing Boot Camp was a purely voluntary affair and we offered it at two different times and dates to accommodate our students' needs. Each Boot Camp session was 2 hours long, but the students only had to attend either one of the two hour sessions.

In the first hour we kept the History and Criminal Justice students together and Dr. Livingston and I discussed essay writing techniques with them. I primarily focused on pre-essay writing matters, such as reading the question carefully, spotting the important issues the instructor was seeking in the answer, and creating a list of specific matters the student wanted to address in answering the question.

Dr. Livingston focused primarily on practical writing techniques, such as turning passive writing into active voice writing. We each used real student essays as examples of what good essay writing looks like.

Then, for the second hour we separated into History students and Criminal Justice students and Dr. Livingston and I discussed discipline specific matters with our respective students.

We evaluated the effectiveness of our Writing Boot Camp by comparing essay grades from our students' first essay (which was pre-Boot Camp) to their second essay (which was post-Boot Camp). We also compared the difference between essay grades from students who attended the Boot Camp with students who did not attend the Boot Camp (the control group).

The results for my students were as follows: Students who did NOT attend the Essay Writing Boot Camp scored 1.5% worse on their second essay than they did on their first essay. However, students who DID attend the Writing Boot Camp scored 1% better on their second essay than they did on their first essay.

In other words, students who attended the Writing Boot Camp enjoyed a net 2.5% grade increase compared with the students who did not attend the Writing Boot Camp.

Practical Tips and Advice: If you choose to engage in a similar exercise in one of your classes, I would recommend two things: First, provide the students who attend with some complimentary donuts and drinks! We did this and they appreciated it. Second, make the experience seem like something elite and special. We made the Boot Camp seem like a fun adventure for the few, the proud, and the brave! And finally, if I had to do it all over again, I would spend less time lecturing at the Boot Camp and more time with hands on writing exercises that the students could actively engage in. It is difficult to craft a writing exercise that can be completed, evaluated, and discussed with a large group of students in a short time period, but getting the students to actively write rather than passively listen is, I think, extremely important and I will strive for that in the future.

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