

Edited by **Rachelle M Smith**

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

COMPOSITION

MANUAL

**Third
Edition**

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"The Syllabus Said Something About Participation . . . ?"

by Seeta L. Mangra

Figuring out what needs to be done to get the best grade you can in a composition class isn't too difficult. All a composition class consists of is writing papers, showing up, and talking every now and then. Simple, right? But what's this participation thing, and how did it get to be fifteen to twenty percent of the grade? Many students have seen participation on a syllabus before, but does anyone know what it really means? The details of the definition may vary by instructor, but there are standards you can follow to ensure your participation grade will be up to par.

Attendance

Have you ever been told a story by one of your friends that he/she thought was hilarious, and at the end of the story, you didn't laugh? Then your friend says, "I guess you had to be there." This is exactly what it is like for an instructor when a student asks, "What did I miss when I was gone?" Experiences cannot be reproduced. Coming to class is crucial because the material presented is a part of a larger idea. Missing a day here and there, is like putting together a 500-piece puzzle and finding out at the end that 50 pieces are missing.

Also, many students don't realize that if they have a class that meets three times a week, missing six times means two week's worth—or half a month—of class. In addition to being there, it is important to keep in mind that it is the student's responsibility to find out what has been missed, not the teacher's responsibility.

However, attendance isn't just about showing up to class. It's about showing up to class regularly and missing few or no class periods. It also means that students need to show up on time. While tardy policies vary from instructor to instructor, you should not make a habit of arriving late to class. Not only is this type of late arrival unacceptable, but it's also a distraction to the instructor, the other students, and an embarrassing situation for you.

Excessive tardiness will affect your overall participation grade, and for some instructors, missing more than 15 minutes of a class period often constitutes an absence. Therefore, tardiness should be avoided. If you must come in late, this should be done in a non-disruptive manner out of respect for the other people in the classroom.

Completing Homework

Homework is inevitable. Again, students often see homework as "busy" work. A way to look at it is to think of an algebra class. The instructor goes through the process of solving a long equation in class so that each student can do it on his/her own later. Yet, when those

students sit down to solve each problem at home alone, without those notes, it would be considerably more difficult. In other words, something may make perfect sense in class, but once out of the classroom setting, thoughts of how to write an effective argument get lost with the everyday distractions of missing keys, expiring meters, a need for lunch, and lack of sleep.

Think of taking notes and doing homework as a way to reinforce the knowledge gained in class. It's a chance to prove to yourself and to your teacher that you know what's going on. And that's why homework is a significant part of your participation grade. If the homework is done, it shows the instructor that learning and making an effort to learn are being taken seriously. It also helps you to understand better what is going on in the classroom by having you play a part in your own education.

Making an Effort

How do you impress a teacher? By showing you care about what you are learning. Many times, a grade can be raised simply because the student made a clear effort. Making an effort involves asking questions both during class and individually, coming to class regularly, doing the class activities, coming in for conferences, being prepared, stopping by the teacher's office to discuss assignments, following directions, participating during class, taking an active role in the writing process, helping other students, and most importantly, making an attempt to learn throughout the semester.

While this list may seem daunting, many of these things happen without even a second thought. The main thing a student can do is follow directions and be honest when unfamiliar issues or words arise. Since you are still a student, the instructor does not expect you to know the answers to everything. You are here for an education, and instructors and students alike must remember that learning is not a passive undertaking.

Partaking in Class Discussions

Speaking up in class comes naturally for some, while for others it is a nightmare. Either way is OK. But what if you are one of those students who simply does not like to talk? There are many reasons why students don't want to speak up in the class, such as concerns about being judged, fear of public speaking, or lack of interest in the class material. There is nothing wrong with staying quiet in class. However, do not be surprised if the instructor asks you for your input. Sometimes talking too much may also be a concern for your teacher. Still, everyone's comments are welcome. However, make sure you aren't speaking over or interrupting other students. Everyone should have a chance to speak.

As long as what you say pertains to the topic at hand, it is always welcome. You should feel stupid for anything you might say. In turn, you should avoid saying anything that would make others not feel as if their contributions to the class are unwelcome.

Insulting one another during a heated discussion is a sure fire way to make an entire class uncomfortable. Yet, what if you weren't aware that something you said was offensive or insulting? All of us come with differing experiences, opinions, and attitudes. Remember, we are here to attack issues and not people. (If you feel you have been verbally attacked, you should immediately speak with your instructor.)

Partaking in Class Activities

Your instructor has designed activities in order to provide the best learning opportunities for all students in the classroom. That's why participation in class activities is so valuable. The activities are designed to help you learn what you need to know in order to write a cohesive paper. Simply participating in these class activities to get a good grade is not enough. Some exchange of knowledge should take place. If the activities are seen as busy work, the importance of the activity will be lost.

Depending on the instructor, these activities may include in-class writings, group activities, writing on the chalkboard, in-class reading, and class discussions. Such activities are designed to help you improve your writing; therefore, your involvement is crucial. Most teachers rely on this type of participation to gauge how much each student is involved. Be aware, however, that there is nothing more discouraging and disappointing to an instructor than to find students are not taking the in-class activities seriously. If, for example, you are talking about last night's party instead of the assigned group activity, you should expect your teacher to get upset. The teacher may even dock your grade.

A good way to see if you are participating enough in class activities is to make sure you understand the directions, to ask questions of your classmates and your instructor, and to take thorough notes.

Being Active in Peer Revision

Peer revision is the most interactive and beneficial thing you can do in a composition class. It can be fun to see what other people write about, but it can also be a nerve-racking experience to have someone else looking at what you've written. It's similar to speaking in class. You may feel like you could be judged based on what you have written. Students often don't want to share their writing because they don't want to risk ridicule. Peer revision is not designed for this purpose. In fact, it is designed to do just the opposite by allowing your peers to help you write a better paper. It isn't just about finding mistakes; it's about helping you convey exactly what you want to say.

You may be typing a paper and discover you are unable come up with just the right way to phrase something. Take advantage of your peer response time for these particular situations. Participation in peer revision shows you want to improve your writing skills.

Participation is about active learning. Learning how to write should not be about frustration, but about discovery. Anyone would be bored just sitting in the classroom hour after hour and not engaging in the challenge of discovering knowledge. Participation, especially in composition class, allows you to learn to do new things and improve your writing skills as well. Participating in class is not just for nerds or losers. Instead, it offers students a chance to become better at communicating, which is a skill everyone can always use.