Arts First Courses: Best Practices for Instructors

1. Arts First is an opportunity for instructors to model their passion for their discipline and research, without mandatory coverage of disciplinary material. Instructors can use this opportunity to showcase how they engage in their own research and thereby cultivate in their students receptivity and engagement, habits of mind and dispositions.

2. For this reason, Arts First courses should foreground active student engagement and background discipline-specific knowledge.

3. To achieve this, Arts First courses should contain about 50%-60% of the material that a regular, discipline-specific seminar would include. This means that instructors should assign less reading, reduce discipline-specific content, and focus more on practice and discussion than lecture modes of teaching.

4. This balance between content and in-class practice creates opportunities for students—and instructors—to reflect on what they are learning and why. Instructors can facilitate this by offering clear and thorough explanations of the purpose of assignments; by guiding students to consider audience, purpose, and context for communication; and by prompting written and spoken reflection by students about assignments and communication processes.

5. Instructors should create a classroom experience that includes frequent opportunities for student writing and speaking, as well as frequent opportunities for critical thinking, problem solving, and other learning activities that promote deep learning. Instructors are encouraged to partner with the library and orient students to library resources and research tools and methods.

6. To encourage student reflection on the purposes of communication, the needs of different audiences, and their own social positioning as communicators, instructors are encouraged to include assignments that incorporate information, evidence, and perspectives from outside students’ own experience.

7. Instructors should offer high-quality, substantive formative feedback to students on assignments and other forms of student participation. That feedback should include detailed comments designed to guide student revision and/or iteration, and coach students on recognizing their own revision opportunities. With guidance and coaching, peer workshopping and revision become opportunities for students to practice giving and receiving formative feedback.

Instructors can find ideas for devising course components and activities on the Arts First website: https://uwaterloo.ca/arts-first/