

WRITING @ CENTER

PUBLICATION OF THE GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM

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This issue has a dual focus on how to foster students' critical thinking and writing and how to help them work more critically and effectively with their peers' writing.

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

During the academic year of Fall 2003 to Spring 2004, the Writing Center saw a total of

 **2,203** clients in
 **3,583** sessions.

Congrats to six faculty who presented at the 7th National WAC Conference in St. Louis in May:

Stanley Zoltek, Mathematics and Computational Science; Ashley Williams and Sarah Sweetman, NCC; Chris Thaiss, Terry Zawacki, and Megan Kelly, English.

The Writing Center joins Fall for the Book,

hosting a two-day open house and a pair of unique workshops. The first, "Mind Over (Writing) Matter," led by TA Eleanor Graves, focused on the basic tenets of Zen Buddhist meditation and how a calm and focused mind can enhance one's writing. The second workshop, "What is the Sound of No Hand Clapping?" led by Professor Don Gallehr, offered secularized zen koans as aids to the writing process.

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ARE WE HELPING STUDENTS THINK CRITICALLY? WAYS TO EVALUATE ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESS STUDENTS' RESPONSES

by Laurie Fathe, Director, Center for Teaching Excellence

"Critical Thinking is the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. In this process we give reasoned consideration to the evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria by which those judgments are made."

--"The Delphi Report." *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction*. American Philosophical Association. 1990.

Fostering the development of critical thinking (CT) is a major focus in higher education today. Employers, governing boards, faculty members, and graduates routinely advise greater emphasis on developing this facility. In Virginia, the main impetus for such action has come from the State Council on Higher Education (SCHEV), which recently mandated that all state institutions assess their students' CT abilities, along with five other core competencies (writing, oral communication, IT literacy, scientific reasoning, and quantitative literacy). The choice of how to approach this complex measurement, however, has been left up to each institution. Here at Mason we are in the process of grappling with this task. *Karen Gentemann, Director of the Institutional Assessment*, is working with faculty members and administrators from across the university to determine the most effective way to measure CT.

To help us with the process, and to bring an outside perspective, Karen invited Dr. Bill Condon from the University of Washington to deliver a day-long workshop on "Critical Thinking in the Classroom: Making it Happen." Condon is the director of a U.S. Department of Education FIPSE-funded "Critical Thinking Project" and a nationally known leader in the field of writing in the disciplines and critical thinking. About 45 faculty and library staff from across the campus attended the September 17 workshop, which was focused on making CT an explicit component of teaching, developing assignments that elicit CT, and recognizing when students have engaged in CT. The following are *key ideas, tips, and insights* from that workshop that may be helpful in your own teaching:

1. Think about the ways in which students practice and demonstrate critical thinking in your discipline. Discuss these with your colleagues. Decide how you will incorporate these into your own classes, writing assignments, and the departmental curriculum. At the workshop, participants cited the following as evidence of critical thinking in their students' written work (though all may not be present in all disciplines or assignments):

- Identifying the problem and limiting its scope
- Problem solving
- Giving evidence for claims, and evaluation of that evidence, including visual evidence

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HELP STUDENTS THINK CRITICALLY*continued from page 1*

- Incorporating multiple sources/perspectives
 - Identifying assumptions behind approaches and beliefs
 - Bringing disparate pieces into a meaningful whole
 - Tolerating ambiguities
 - Understanding that there may be different cultural logics
 - Reflecting on one's own processes, procedures, logic, and assumptions (thinking about one's thinking)
 - Being aware of the impact of one's thinking and writing on various audiences
2. The clarity of the writing assignment strongly affects the quality of the student submissions. You need to know in advance what kinds of critical thinking you want students to demonstrate and how the assignment fits into the larger course goals. Once you have defined the purpose and parameters of the assignment, you can use this information to develop a new grading rubric, or modify an existing one.
 3. Students are more likely to reach the goals you've set for them if they understand the goals themselves, and how you will assess their achievement of the goals. At Washington State, Condon and his colleagues determined that incorporating their CT rubric into instructional expectations improved students' scores in CT by more than a factor of 3 over those courses that didn't use the rubric in instruction.
 4. In teaching and assessing CT, one size does not fit all. Different disciplines have different needs, and different approaches to CT. The ways in which you ask students to demonstrate CT and the ways in which you measure it must be appropriate to the discipline. At the workshop, the nuances in how different cross-disciplinary groups articulated similar concepts highlighted the variations of viewpoints across disciplines, and illustrated why a single rubric for assessing CT in writing may not be workable across disciplines.
 5. However, an easy way to begin is to use an existing rubric (of which there are many) with its basic set of criteria. From these basic criteria, disciplines can make adjustments to meet their local needs. The Washington State CT rubric was adapted by different groups on their campus to be locally appropriate.

Information on the Washington State Critical Thinking Project, including their basic rubric for assessing CT, adapted rubrics from different disciplines, and data on student outcomes from courses using the rubric, can be found at:
<http://wsuctproject.cltl.wsu.edu>.

Here is one sample critical thinking assignment out of six created in the workshop by small groups from a mix of disciplines and backgrounds. Assignment directions were more detailed than there is space here to represent:

Critical Analysis of Media Information Assignment

In this (300-level) course, we think about the influence of media and evaluating information. Now it's your turn to think and write about how you make decisions. Choose a controversial issue treated by the media today for which there is conflicting expertise or information (preferably an issue that you are interested in). Analyze the challenges involved in examining conflicting claims made by experts reported in the media from your perspective, and compare and contrast with those identified in course readings.

1. Identify and describe the issue and its context
2. What are your assumptions and criteria involved in your decisions about what to believe?
3. Identify and include a range of useful sources.
4. What conclusions can you reach about the difficulty non-experts confront in the face of conflicting claims made by experts, as reported in the media?

*"Students think we live by answers,
but in fact we live by questions."*

—Bill Condon

Some tips from Bill Condon for engaging students in a critical thinking process:

1. Web-based "question and response" activity:
 - Each week, have students frame and post a question on Web CT or Townhall about some aspect of the course and also respond to someone else's question. Procedure: By Wednesday, they should post their question. By Sunday, they should have responded to one of the questions with a one-page answer.
 - Five points can be given for posting the question and five points for responding on time. You don't need to grade on quality. Students generally will learn from each other how to write the questions and also learn from the answers what constitutes an effective response.
2. Individual questions and responses:
 - Ask students to write one question based on the lecture and/or readings for the day or week and answer the question in one page. You can also ask them to exchange their question with someone else who must then write a response.
 - Collect all of the papers but randomly select which ones you'll grade. Use a rubric for grading their questions and answers. Share the rubric with them beforehand.
3. Select student questions for your exams to show them that you take the process and their questions seriously.

—T.Z.

HOW TO HELP STUDENTS GIVE EFFECTIVE PEER RESPONSE

Give students specific guidelines for each peer response session:

- Give students questions to answer about their peers' drafts. Consider using a checklist that includes room for written responses, not just a "yes" or "no" response.
- Explain how students should monitor their time in the group and/or in pairs.
- Suggest a set amount of time they should spend on each peer's draft.
- Make students responsible for turning something in at the end of the peer review session, both writer and reviewer.
- Acknowledge and respect the advice students give one another even though you may not fully agree. Explain that they are free to use or ignore their peers' advice based on their own best judgement.

Questions students might use in responding to each other's drafts:

- How would you sum up the writer's main claim or focus?
- What two big questions do you have about the writer's argument? How would getting these questions answered help you as the reader?
- What is the most interesting part of the draft for you? (I call it a "hot spot.") Why?
- What part of the draft is clearest and/or most effective?
- What part is least clear and/or effective?
- What specific suggestions do you have for revising the unclear parts?

Ideas for processing peer review commentary:

- Each peer reviewer should write a note recommending revisions to the writer based on responses to the questions above.
- Once reviewers have responded to their peers' drafts, ask the writer to re-read his/her draft with the peers' responses in mind, then to write a note to him/herself outlining the revisions to be undertaken.
- Students might also be asked to pick the draft from their group that they liked the best and explain all of the reasons they liked it. This discussion can help the other writers determine characteristics readers value. The group should then make a list of characteristics they think are important in papers written in response to this assignment.

—*from Terry Zawacki, Director, WAC / University Writing Center*

STUDENT WRITERS MAKE GOOD STUDENT READERS: GUIDELINES FOR HELPING STUDENTS FORM WRITING GROUPS

by Amy Amoroso, English Department TA

Do you have students who struggle with their writing or want more attention to their writing than you have time for in class? Or perhaps you have students who would like to have more than one reader to give them feedback on their work. Rather than having students relying solely on you for feedback, you can help them to help each other become better writers whether inside or outside of the classroom. In response to several teachers' requests, the University Writing Center created a set of guidelines for students to use to organize and participate in peer writing groups, whether they are working on graduate theses or short stories. Teachers will find they can use the guidelines as an integral part of the class or as an option for students wanting more support with their writing.

The guidelines, which cover how to set up and prepare for the first meeting and how to read and respond effectively to peers' work, can be found on the Writing Across the Curriculum website at: http://wac.gmu.edu/teaching/prg_template.pdf.

As good preparation for the first meeting with a peer writing group, we recommend that each member complete a short writing inventory and personal goals questionnaire (available at the url above) so that everyone begins to think about their writing needs and goals for the group. A second step involves group members getting to know one another, setting group goals, and deciding on logistics (i.e. When and where will the group meet? How will the group communicate between meetings and exchange work? Who will submit pieces when? etc.). The writing center guidelines also suggest some ground rules for the writing group to follow in order to make sure that everyone has time to share their work and to get the most out of each other's comments.

We also offer advice for responding to other people's writing (i.e. Critique the writing, not the writer; prioritize your comments; and so on.) and questions to ponder while evaluating peer writing. These questions allow students to organize their comments into global and local concerns, which is helpful, because often writers focus first on local concerns, such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling, because these are easier to spot. Instead they should be spending time on more important global concerns like focus, organization, and quality and relevance of evidence used to back up a claim.

The guidelines are designed to be comprehensive, yet easy to follow so that students can work in groups without guidance from their instructors. With the use of peer writing groups, students are not only engaging in the work of their classmates, they are also learning much more about how to improve their own writing.



Grammar Corner PASSIVE V. ACTIVE: THE JURY IS IN

by David Beach, Assistant Director,
English Composition

While active verbs may make prose stronger, our communication is filled with examples in which passive verb use is more meaningful and appropriate. Some studies have found that passives are used least in conversation and most in scientific writing. In business writing, passives are often used when tact, diplomacy and objectivity are necessary. In all cases, writers should strive for clarity, and if that means using a passive construction, then the Grammar Gods will allow it!

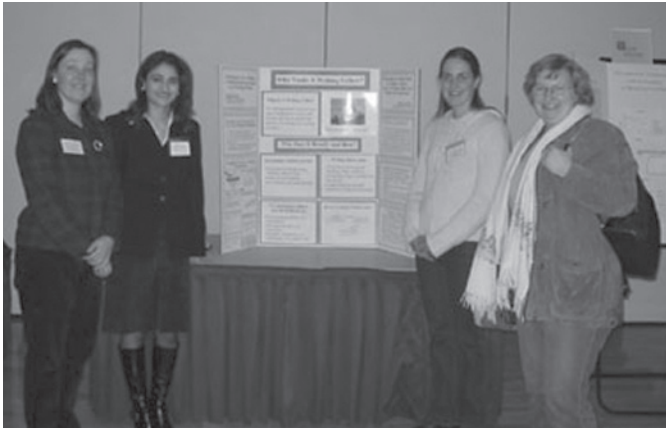
Passives can change the meaning of a sentence, so one should be careful when using them. Here is an example:

- Everyone in the room speaks two languages. (i.e., each person speaks 2 languages)
- Two languages *are spoken* by everyone in the room. (i.e., all the people only speak two specific languages)

Below are some examples of appropriate uses of passive constructions. The passive constructions are italicized.

1. When the agent (the person or thing doing the action of the verb) is redundant (i.e., easy to supply and therefore not expressed).
Grapes *are grown* in California.
(The agent here is "vintners" which is not necessary.)
2. When the writer wants to emphasize the receiver or result of the action.
Six people *were killed* in the fire.
(As opposed to: The fire killed six people.)
3. When the writer wants to be tactful or evasive by not mentioning the agent.
Mary *was given* some bad advice.
(As opposed to: John gave Mary some bad advice.)
4. When the writer wants to make a statement sound more objective without revealing the source of information.
It is believed that she will announce her resignation today.
5. When the theme is given information and the agent is new information.
What a lovely tie! Thank you. *It was given* to me by Mary.

WRITING FELLOWS: WHO THEY ARE AND HOW THEY HELP FACULTY



From left, director of the Center for Teaching Excellence Dr. Laurie Fathe, writing fellows Shabnam Tehrani and Courtney Chiapanas, and New Century College faculty mentor Dr. Lesley Smith at the 2004 Undergraduate Research Exposition at George Mason University

If you believe strongly in giving students lots of opportunities to write in your courses and you try to provide meaningful feedback to help them improve their critical thinking abilities as well as their prose style, you may enjoy working with a writing fellow. GMU writing fellows are like coaches: they support student writers and act as informal writing advisors to the teacher. They are not teachers or graders. They are selected to become writing fellows based on their talent as writers and ability to relate to faculty and peers. To qualify as a writing fellow, students must have tutored for at least a semester in the writing center where they have gained experience working with diverse writers and writing tasks. While in your class, they will help you help your students with writing-related assignments, while you mentor them in the ways of classroom teaching and the discipline.

Below are the related experiences of two current writing fellows.



Priyanka Champaneri

This is my first semester as a Writing Fellow. The majority of my time is spent helping students with the writing process in Dr. Burns' Religion 251 class – The Old Testament. While I've been able to help students through multiple workshops and one-on-one paper advising sessions, I think I will be making a more lasting impact by developing an online writing in the disciplines manual for the Religious Studies department. The manual will serve as a detailed guide specific to writing that focuses on sacred texts and other religion-based topics. It will also feature sections with writing advice from professors in the department, as well as portions devoted to revision and research. My experiences so far have been exciting; I'm probably learning just as much from the students as they (hopefully) are learning from me!



Shabnam Tehrani

After serving as a peer tutor for one semester at the Writing Center, I became a writing fellow. So far I've held three fellowships, one in an NCC course on multimedia and two in business, SOM 301. The former was a new field for me and allowed me to expand my knowledge of creative writing, while the latter has allowed me to work in my own field of study and build on my existing business writing skills. In addition to my work with students on their drafts, my faculty mentors have also given me the support and flexibility to create handouts and conduct workshops on topics I feel are important. The privilege of working with experienced and supportive faculty has taught me a great deal about teaching and writing and that, in itself, has been very rewarding. My experience has also been quite worthwhile because I've been able to observe student writing at many different levels. I continually learn new ways to teach effective writing skills. Receiving "thank you" notes from students and assurance from my mentors certainly contribute to a rewarding experience and to my gaining confidence as a writer whose first language is not English. I regret that my fellowship will soon come to an end, but I am reflecting on the possibility of pursuing a career in teaching or technical writing.

Writing Fellows play an integral role in advancing and reinforcing the goals of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Teachers, students in the course, and the writing fellows all benefit from the opportunity to have focused discussions about writing processes and practices. To learn more about the program, please visit <http://wac.gmu.edu/fellows/index.html>.

WAC COMMITTEE CONDUCTS THIRD REVIEW OF WRITING-INTENSIVE SYLLABI: EXCERPTS FROM THE 2003-04 REPORT

As part of its charge from the Faculty Senate to conduct ongoing assessment of the writing intensive (WI) requirement, the WAC Committee periodically collects and reviews syllabi from WI courses across the university. In Spring 2004, the Committee conducted its third review of syllabi from designated WI courses taught in Fall 2003 and Spring 2004. Syllabi were collected from the College of Visual and Performing Arts, the School of Management, the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, the School of Information Technology and Engineering, and the College of Arts and Sciences. While a few departments have still not submitted syllabi, of the 69 syllabi collected, 78% met the guidelines for WI courses. Those syllabi not fully meeting the requirements, as we learned from follow-up contact with departments, may have been prepared by faculty who were unaware that explicit descriptions of the guidelines for WI courses must appear on the syllabus and/or were unaware that they were teaching a WI course.

During the process of collecting syllabi, the committee was also able to identify WI courses that were either incorrectly listed or not listed at all in the university catalog. As a result of the syllabi review, some departments reexamined the way in which they satisfy the WI requirement. For example, Tamara Maddox, a WAC Committee member, led the development of a new WI course sequence for the Computer Science Department.

Clearly a systematic review of WI syllabi allows for ongoing oversight of the WI requirement. The WAC Committee agrees, in fact, that we should conduct ongoing WI syllabi review, focusing on different departments and units each year. Other important features of this kind of ongoing attention to WI courses include semesterly checks of enrollments in WI courses to be sure that enrollment caps are being followed and regular reminders to WI teachers and to Chairs and unit leaders about the WI requirement.

We believe that our continued high national ranking in the *U.S. News and World Report* College Issue and the recognition that's been given to our WAC website by the National Education Association *Advocate Online* (February 2004) speak to the success of our WAC program and the hard work of our faculty. We conclude by thanking all of those whose efforts have contributed to our success.

*by Terry Zawacki, Director, WAC
and Megan Kelly, WAC Assistant*

NEWS FROM THE CENTER cont.

Each year the Writing Center judges submissions to the Family Weekend essay contest, sponsored by the Orientation Office. Congratulations to *Chelsea Boyer*, winner of this year's contest on the topic of "Most Influential Family Member."

Grad writing tutors Eugenia Sozzi, Gretchen Sullivan, Connie Barrett and Anna Habib conducted a workshop on "Editing Tips for Advanced Writers" to Public Policy and Analysis Masters students at our Arlington Campus. The workshop is part of Public Policy's effort to bring tutorial services to the Arlington campus. *Talks are also underway about extending writing center services to the Prince William campus.*

The 2004-05 members of the Senate WAC Committee: Stanley Zoltek, Chair, Mathematics; Susan Durham, CNHS; Tom Owens, CVPA; Beth Schneider, SOM; Chris Thaiss, CAS; Tamara Maddox, ITE; Terry Zawacki, ex officio/WAC Director. Consultants: Shelley Reid, Director of Composition; Vicky Salmon, Higher Ed Program; Kevin Simons, Library liaison; Don Kelso, Biology; Steve Klein, Communication; Megan Kelly, English.

TELL YOUR STUDENTS TO LOOK FOR THE WRITING CENTER'S SPRING WORKSHOP SERIES

Workshop #1: Using research effectively and correctly: How to evaluate, document, and cite sources.

Workshop #2: Integrating sources into your papers: How and when to summarize, paraphrase, and quote your research.

Workshop #3: Making your research flow: How to organize your paper clearly, create a strong thesis, and write effective introductions and conclusions.

Look for **Librarian's Corner** by Kevin Simons to return in the Spring issue with news about EndNote. In the meantime, you can download EndNote at <http://cas.gmu.edu/tac/endnote/endnote.html>

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