

# WRITING @ CENTER

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

[wac.gmu.edu](http://wac.gmu.edu)

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*In this issue, we're featuring articles on assessing writing and what we can learn about our student writers from various data-gathering approaches, such as the graduation senior survey, WI syllabi review, and departmental assessment workshops.*

## NEWS FROM THE CENTER

As of October 24th, the Writing Center had seen a total of

 **526** tutees

 **836** sessions

Writing Center tutors have also given 73 roadshows in courses across the university, with 65% from disciplines other than English.

## WRITING CENTER TUTORS JUDGE FAMILY ESSAY CONTEST

Each year, tutors judge submissions to the Family Essay contest, sponsored by the Office of Orientation and Family Programs and Services. Congratulations to this year's winners: 1st place, *Joe Hinrichs*; 2nd place, *Caitlin Hoffen*; 3rd place, *Joary Casey*.

## Writing Center Director Terry Zawacki and Assistant Director Anna Habib

were honored to be invited to present at the symposium to celebrate the \$10 million-endowed Miami University Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence. They shared their research on non-native students' perceptions of writing in the disciplines, and across languages and cultures. The title of their talk was *Learning to be Original Through Writing: Conversations with U.S. and International Students*.

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## SOM IMPLEMENTS WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

*by Frank Allen Philpot, School of Management*

Most teachers have a store of examples of student papers that consist of one paragraph that runs on for three or four pages, contains seemingly random capitalization or endlessly confuses "their" and "there." These are the problems we share around the lunch table or in teaching seminars when we complain, "Students today just can't write!" But are these anecdotal examples representative of a systematic problem or are they just the items that are seared onto our brains?

### *Toward a Systematic Assessment*

In the spring of 2007 the School of Management (SOM) set out to address the question of student writing quality in a systematic manner. Alison O'Brien, the school's Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, invited a group of faculty to serve as a task force to review student writing. As a marketing professor passionate about good written communication, I served as chair of that task force.

The School of Management does not profess to graduate students who are necessarily gifted writers. Elegant analogies and rhetorical flourishes are, in fact, out of place in business writing. As faculty, we want to send students into the workplace whose writing is not noticeable, since writing that calls attention to itself gets in the way of communicating a clear and direct message. Our goal is workmanlike prose that fades into the background because the ideas expressed are important and the message is clear.

### *Justification and Procedures*

Our task force undertook this project because we think writing is important and because our accreditation body (The Association for the Advancement of Colleges and Schools of Business) asks us to assess learning goals continuously, while the Mason Writing Assessment Group (WAG) expects a formal

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## WHAT GRADUATING SENIOR SURVEY TELLS US ABOUT STUDENTS' WRITING EXPERIENCES IN THE MAJOR

*by Sarah E. Baker, English, WAC Assistant*

Each year, the Office of Institutional Assessment (OIA) surveys graduating seniors about their academic experiences at Mason. To learn more about students' experiences with writing in their major, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) committee looked at the 2006 survey results for each major. We found the results interesting, encouraging, and sometimes worrisome when it came to students' recollections and perceptions of their writing experiences. The survey includes three questions that ask about students' opportunities for revision and feedback in 300-level courses and above (excluding English 302, the required advanced composition class) and the effect of receiving feedback in improving their writing, their confidence, and their understanding of their field.

### *Some Results*

Because all students are required to take a writing-intensive course in their major, they should have at minimum one upper-level class that provides opportunities for revision and feedback. Yet, when asked how many courses allowed this opportunity, 11% of students overall answered that no course did. On another question, 19% of students overall reported that they rarely (12%) or did not (7%) have sufficient opportunity to revise after feedback. Majors for which this percentage is higher than average, which includes several

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## HOW WELL IS THE WRITING-INTENSIVE (WI) REQUIREMENT BEING MET?

by Sue Durham, Nursing, WAC Assistant Director

When contemplating writing about the WI requirement, my thought was, “How am I going to give this information a new slant?” WI requirement, sounds so, well, “required.” And I know that at this busy time of the semester, the last thing anyone wants to read about is another requirement. But, in fact, that is exactly what the WI course is, and making sure that each unit in the university meets the WI criteria constitutes the charge of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) committee.

Because curricula and course requirements change, every three years the WAC committee collects WI syllabi from every major to understand what writing is being assigned and how it is taught in these courses. To define the enormity of this task, GMU has 50 undergraduate programs and each of those programs has one or more WI requirements, often with several sections of the same course being taught each semester. This means that our approximately 18,000 undergraduates leave GMU with at least one opportunity to develop a significant piece of writing within their discipline.

WAC success cannot happen without dedicated faculty buy-in and cooperation. GMU is fortunate in that most units cooperate fully in the development and designation of a WI course within their majors. However, each year WI course designations change, as do the faculty who teach them; each change may entail a reorientation to the WAC mission.

Writing-intensive courses must meet certain criteria: classes are limited to 35 students and each student must submit 3,500 words of graded writing. Most importantly, however, writing assignments must emphasize the process of drafting, revision with teacher feedback, and resubmission so that students improve and grow as writers. This challenge is met in a variety of ways. In some courses, in Math and Physics, for example,

students are given iterative assignments rather than a revision option. And in some majors, the requirement is met by two or more courses.

Many faculty wonder why teaching writing is not left up to the English Department because fitting in discipline-specific course content is already a challenge. Adding a writing requirement to the mix may seem hard to accomplish. Yet we know that students don't learn writing once and for all in one course. We all have a stake in ensuring that GMU graduates have mastered general academic **and** discipline-specific writing skills. By teaching the WI course within the discipline, faculty are able to teach the particular types of writing that will be demanded of their graduates when they leave our courses. When our students write well in their workplaces, their success reflects well on the teaching-with-writing efforts of all of us.

### SYLLABI COLLECTED TO DATE

Number of WI Syllabi submitted for assessment: 25

Number of WI Syllabi still outstanding: 25

Number of submitted syllabi within WI compliance: 25

**WI Pedagogy Tip:** According to research on writing (see Richard Light's *Making the Most of College*, for example), students benefit most from short writing assignments given throughout the semester and returned with feedback.

### GRAMMAR CORNER

## COMMA, COMMA, COMMA, COMMA, COMMA, CHAMELEON!

by Kristin von Kundra, MFA / TA,  
Personal Statements Tutor

The general trend with writing is that, if there is not a specific rule dictating the necessity of a comma, it can be omitted. Since there are many rules dictating comma usage, this issue of “Grammar Corner”

focuses on tricky situations when it comes to using commas. For example, sometimes the use of a comma depends on the meaning of a sentence. Here's a sentence that will help illustrate this: *The police officer is concerned about the college students, who were injured in the car crash.* As written, the sentence indicates all the students were injured. Without a comma,

the sentence would indicate that only some of the students were injured. The grid below gives more examples like this.

For a more complete tutorial on comma usage, check out: [http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/handouts/com\\_semi\\_colon.pdf](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/handouts/com_semi_colon.pdf)

	EXCEPTIONS	RULE OF THUMB	EXAMPLES
Commas in a series	Commas are necessary for separating coordinate adjectives (adjectives of equal status) that modify the same noun, but not necessary for non-coordinating adjectives (adjectives of unequal status).	If the word <i>and</i> can replace the comma without creating an awkward effect, then the comma is appropriate.	Anthropologists dedicate their careers to creating positive, sustainable change.  Carlos married a young Italian actress. (Note the comma is omitted because the adjectives are non-coordinate and the sentence would read awkwardly as <i>Carlos married a young and Italian actress.</i> )
Commas that set off appositives, clauses, and phrases	Do not use a comma for essential adjective clauses and phrases. An essential clause or phrase is one that is necessary to identify the noun it modifies.	When an appositive, phrase, or clause is essential, a comma is NOT essential.	Ashley and Jasmine, wearing their snorkeling gear and flippers, jumped into the Caribbean waters. (Non-essential phrase)  The employees participating in the protest were fired. (Note that all employees were not fired, only those participating in the protest, so we omit the comma to clarify the meaning of the sentence.)
Commas regarding introductory elements	If omitting a comma does not affect the meaning of the sentence, it is not necessary.	Usually, if the introductory element is a long phrase or a clause (as this one is), it needs a comma. Always use a comma if the sentence could be misread.	Last semester I took nineteen credits while working at the restaurant ten hours a week.  Several days before, Isabella flew to New York and was mugged. (Note that the comma is necessary to prevent misreading).

## DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CAPACITY FOR INFORMED RESEARCH

by Craig Gibson, Libraries, Associate University Librarian for Research, Instructional, and Outreach Services

How can teachers assist students in their research projects in a time when an acquaintance with the workings of a search engine or two and a few favorite web sites often passes for “good enough” research competence with many students? Today’s students conduct a kind of “cost-benefit analysis” in their research processes and often choose what is most convenient rather than what is most appropriate for college-level academic research and writing. The temptation to be satisfied with a few results from a search engine is a seductive one, given that a few appropriate or high-quality sources may be found in this fashion.

Given the complexity of the information resources available to them, in multiple formats and locations, we should not be

surprised by the uninformed research behaviors of many students—the constant drive toward facile (as opposed to legitimate) simplification and satisfaction with less than quality resources.

Changing this dynamic requires a different approach from teachers, librarians, technologists, and others (and the approach advocated here truly requires collaboration). Teaching to the specific resource—database, encyclopedia, journal—will not enable students to become more independent in their thinking, writing, and research if such teaching is not tied to a larger repertoire of strategies that students gradually learn during their college years. Essentially, students must “unlearn” some unfortunate habits—settling for the first few results

from a database search, and moving quickly through the research process. These habits prevent students from adjusting the scope of their topic and placing the necessary boundaries around it to help them position it in a more informed way in the information landscape.

*Students must develop a behavioral repertoire for research, and that repertoire must be based on an understanding of a **complex information environment**, which is examined on the opposite side of this page, and by using a method known as “**question analysis**” that can be applied to any research topic, regardless of discipline.*

### THE ELEMENTS OF QUESTION ANALYSIS

Teaching question analysis involves modeling a thought process for students that allows them to gradually become more independent in their research, and therefore able to position their topics within the **information landscape** and to move within it with greater certainty.

When the elements of question analysis are taught repeatedly, students begin to internalize them and to conduct their own “reference interview” that enables them to position their topics more strategically and more imaginatively within the information landscape, and to move from source to source (whether organization, individual,

database, or blog) within that landscape. This process equips the student to become relatively more self-sufficient, more self-aware, and more confident, and better able to modify a search process and to conduct more informed research in other papers, in future courses, and in non-academic pursuits.

#### 1. **Position (at least initially) within the information landscape (see other side)**

What is the terrain: pre-bibliographic; traditional bibliographic (library terrain); new content environment (Web 2.0)? The student can productively conduct research within any of these sectors, or across them, depending on the topic and how it “maps” into information resources, their structure, and the flow of information from one part of the terrain to another.

#### 2. **Time (currency)**

How current does the information need to be? This has significant implications as to where the student will search, even within each part of the landscape.

#### 3. **Geographical scope**

Does the topic suggest an exclusive U.S. focus or perspectives from other countries? Is there an aspect of the topic that is strictly local or regional? Answering these questions suggests directions, perspectives, experts, and formal sources best suited to provide context from a particular culture or locality.

#### 4. **Type of information needed**

Background or overview? Popular or scholarly treatment? Statistical compilations? Hybrid formats (scholarly texts with simulations, experiments, and the like)?

#### 5. **Disciplines/experts**

Which research communities are most interested in/engaged with a particular topic, issue, or controversy? Interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary perspectives may be important.

#### 6. **Key concepts of the topic**

What are the search terms? The actual process of finding information in most parts of the terrain involves using search words describing the key facets of the topic, articulated by the student in such a way that the expert consulted or the database searched can produce relevant sources. The process of refining and combining search terminology, through a recursive process of adjustment, mirrors key aspects of the writing process.

## DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CAPACITY FOR INFORMED RESEARCH

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Teachers and librarians should work together to help students understand how to position their topics more productively in a complex information environment. The metaphor of “**information landscape**” is one way of conveying this complexity, so that students become increasingly sophisticated and intentional about their choices and can make better “moves” within this terrain. The notion of “sectors” or parts of the terrain can be

illuminated using the instances represented below on this page.

The great challenge is to help students understand how to formulate a research question or topic and then position it fruitfully within this information landscape, some parts of which are relatively stable but others which increasingly are unstable, uncertain, and full of many uncertain

pathways. Charting a course to collect appropriate information sources in various sectors, especially with a topic that leads across all three of them, requires more imagination on the part of the student, as well as persistence and willingness to suspend judgment about initial search results in order to locate better ones.

### THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

#### “Pre-bibliographic Terrain”

This is the domain of primary research coming from associations, think tanks, community organizations, and networks of experts. This terrain has existed in the landscape for many years, but the often invaluable information within it is hidden or invisible to many researchers because research results or data are not published or not promoted widely, or because a certain amount of persistence (worthy of an investigative reporter) is essential to ferret out unpublished information. The student who wants data for a paper on charitable giving in Fairfax County, Virginia, will have to learn which local organizations to approach to collect some of this information. The search paths aren't clear in this part of the landscape, and it requires a certain act of imagination to predict which organization, association, or group of individuals might have the needed research or data.

#### “Bibliographic Terrain”

This is the traditional library-based or library-sponsored terrain of catalogs, indexes, databases, reference sources, and other tools. The traditional library-oriented way of teaching research is to show students how to use an array of these resources and tools, connecting them in a “flow chart” or strategy. However, the migration of many of these resources to the online environment has meant both great convenience and great confusion for the uninitiated: which of these resources is authoritative? Are there tools not sponsored by the library that are equally appropriate? Where does one start researching in the online environment, which can produce many dead ends and much frustration for the student? Many students are confused by the hybrid print-and-electronic bibliographic terrain that currently exists, where the library still offers many print reference sources, yet many online reference sources offer the convenience of downloadable citations, abstracts, and fulltext articles, with no sense of relation to the overall flow of research results, findings, and data that have accumulated over time within a discipline or scholarly conversation. The online resources within this “bibliographic terrain” may provide students with a truncated or foreshortened view of how the research process works because of the rapidity with which citations and online articles are retrieved, eliminating the need for students to reflect, to imagine other potential sources for research, or to revision their own research process, just as they need to revision their writing process.

#### “New Content Environments”

By now, students and their instructors are familiar with the panoply of Web 2.0 environments—participative, collaborative online spaces in which groups contribute content—the catchphrase is now “user-generated content.” The issues with authority of information described previously in the bibliographic terrain, become compounded many times over in the “New Content Environments” of blogs, wikis, user-produced videos and photographs, open-access publishing, and other environments and formats that see little or none of the peer review found in the traditional bibliographic terrain. These New Content Environments, best exemplified by Wikipedia, are now growing over or supplanting older and legitimate information resources, or perhaps more productively, being grafted onto them (a good example is the practice of social bookmarking or tagging, where the student provides his own indexing terms to help “tag” a resource—a paper, a photograph, a video—and other students can locate the resource using the same term). The world of user-generated content, grafted onto legitimate traditional resources, does produce many questions about appropriateness, authority, currency, and sustainability of information resources; the very instability of this part of the terrain suggests quicksand.

For more information about teaching research skills to students in writing courses, please contact Craig Gibson, Libraries, at [jgibson1@gmu.edu](mailto:jgibson1@gmu.edu) or at 3-3716.

## SOM IMPLEMENTS FIRST PHASE OF WRITING ASSESSMENT PLAN

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review every five years. Our goal was to know with greater certainty the level of competency in student writing and, if necessary, to provide a foundation for recommendations to improve our curriculum – especially our writing intensive course, SOM 301.

As a first step, Dean O'Brien asked faculty to save student papers from the spring semester '07. We received a total of 260 papers from six courses representing assignments in SOM 301 and other major and core courses. We asked that the papers come without names or faculty comments or grades, and a sample of 111 papers received was prepared for use in the scoring process.

For this project we focused on the distinction between competent and not-competent writing although we also discussed the category of highly competent writing for future assessments.

### *Creating a Scoring Rubric*

Our first task was to determine if a group of faculty could agree on the elements of competent writing. With the help of Dr. Terry Zawacki, Director of the University's Writing Across the Curriculum program, our task force met to create a rubric, or assessment matrix, that would allow us to identify the elements of good writing and provide a tool to determine if a specific paper met the standard of competency. Five faculty of the School of Management participated in this process. For this calibration process, we used papers from our introductory business communications course, SOM 301.

As you might imagine, the five faculty had differing opinions on the level of competence each

writing sample represented. After about three hours of review and debate, we agreed upon the elements of good writing for business students and the common types of errors that would render an assignment not competent.

Over the next week, we exchanged electronic versions of the rubric and collectively produced the matrix we would use for the next phase of the writing assessment process. Individual faculty differences and preferences were considered, and sometimes compromises were made, to produce a workable assessment tool. Next, a team of six SOM faculty members and three faculty members from outside the school met to review a sample of papers collected from spring semester. We agreed that each paper would be read by two faculty members and designated as either competent or not-competent; a third reading was used in the event of disagreements.

### *Results of the Scoring Process*

During the six-hour rating session, the group read 51 papers – all from major courses. The raters agreed on 82% of the papers – a surprisingly high level of inter-rater reliability for what initially seemed a subjective task. An examination of the nine papers that had required a third reading to resolve a difference of opinion among raters showed that the initial readers had usually agreed in identifying problems but had made slightly different decisions as to whether the papers fell just over or under the competent line.

An analysis of the papers showed 73% to be considered competent and 27% not-competent. The number of competent papers was slightly higher than some faculty had estimated, an outcome

that pleased the task force. However, the 27% of not-competent papers represents a problem and a challenge to the School of Management – particularly since these came from SOM students who had successfully passed English 302, as well as the SOM writing-intensive course.

### *Next Steps and Goals*

Our next step to address this problem is to find a way to reduce the number of students not competent in written communication from graduating. We are also developing proposals to set a writing standard for admission to the SOM to insure that students who lack minimal writing skills do not begin our major coursework until they demonstrate competent writing skills. We may also recommend that students who are already highly competent writers be allowed to pass out of SOM 301 and spend their time on additional major electives further developing their writing skills and content knowledge. The combination of these two factors would allow us to concentrate the resources we have for SOM 301 on the students who can best benefit from the course.

We would like to reach the situation in which every SOM graduate is a competent writer; however, we know there will always be a few who slip through the cracks. In the long run the task force believes that we can reduce the number of non-competent writers we graduate and increase the written communication skills for those who successfully pass through our program. By emphasizing a higher level of writing competence, we will better prepare our students for the world of work, satisfy the needs of the employers who hire our graduates, and improve the reputation of George Mason University graduates.

## GRADUATING SENIOR SURVEY AND WRITING IN THE MAJORS

*continued from page 1*

across the colleges, are meriting a second look by the WAC Committee to figure out why students either are not being given this opportunity or are not aware of the writing-intensive requirements. Especially worrisome may be those majors in which writing plays a large role in all upper-level courses and yet students report only one or no class that enabled feedback and revision.

Three survey questions deal with whether students perceive that upper-level courses helped them improve their writing, their confidence, and their understanding of their field. The most interest-

ing finding here is in the degree of agreement among students. For example, 85% of seniors overall agree that the writing assignments increased their understanding of their field, of which 43% strongly agree and 42% somewhat agree. However, in looking at the results for individual majors, even though overall agreement is comparable to the average, the WAC Committee noted the range of scores in the "strongly agree" category. In some majors, for example, only 32% strongly agree that writing helped them learn their field, while in other majors as high as 65% strongly agree. The WAC Committee will look closely at these kinds

of fluctuations and will make recommendations to departments whose graduating seniors are giving low scores when asked about their writing experiences in the major.

*To access senior survey results overall, by college, and by department, visit:*

<http://www.assessment.gmu.edu/Results/GraduatingSenior/senior.html>

## WRITING CENTER & WAC PARTICIPATE IN FALL FOR THE BOOK FESTIVITIES

*Writing Center Co-sponsors Personal Statement Workshop for Graduate School and Scholarship Applications*

**Joe Schall**, author of *Writing Personal Statements and Scholarship Application Essays*, led two full-house workshops at Mason for students writing their personal statements for graduate school and for nationally competitive fellowships and scholarships.

The workshops were co-sponsored by the University Writing Center, the Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships Program, the Undergraduate Apprenticeship Program, and the Pre-Health Advising Program. In collaboration with the Postgraduate Fellowships and Scholarships Program, the writing center is pleased to support a personal statement tutor who works primarily with students applying for nationally competitive scholarships and graduate programs.



*Joe Schall in front of a full house during a workshop for students writing personal statements.*

*Tutors Write Poems "On Demand"*  
Festival goers interested in producing a poem didn't have to ask politely; they could demand a poem from writing center tutors at the *Poetry on Demand* booth during Fall for the Book. Visitors filled out content questionnaires that tutors used to compose poems in a variety of genres. The tutors who participated are MFA poets.

### *Writers Center Themselves and Their Writing*

In a crowded writing center, with all chairs filled and writers sitting crossed-legged on the floor, Professor Don Gallehr conducted a workshop on using meditation as a pre-writing strategy. He emphasized breathing techniques, proper posture, and methods of focus to help writers let go of their distracting thoughts and worries and to lead them to discover "what their writing wants to become."

## WELCOME TO OUR PEER TUTORS...

...who span a wide range of majors:

- *KT Ahner*: History.
- *Patti Dickinson*: Linguistics.
- *Adina Horvath*: Government and International Politics.
- *Tammy Najarian*: Nonfiction Writing and Editing.
- *Afra Saeed*: Psychology.
- *Molly Simons*: Government and International Politics.
- *Jeff Sears*: Information Technology. Mason Topics Tutor
- *Matt Brooks*: Global Affairs. Tutor at Mason's Ras al Khaimah campus, United Arab Emirates

## ...AND CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR WRITING FELLOWS...

- *Angela Panayotopoulos*: Writing Fellow with *Prof. Rose Cherubin* in Philosophy 301: History of Ancient Western Philosophy
- *Abriel Harris*: Writing Fellow with *Prof. Beth Schneider* in SOM 301: Business Models, a gateway WI course.

*News from the Center is reported by Anna Habib, Assistant Director of the Writing Center*

## WRITING @ CENTER

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## THE GEORGE MASON REVIEW REVIVES ITS WAC FOCUS

Jennifer Janisch, writing center tutor and TA, and new editor of *The GM Review*, along with faculty advisors, Terry Zawacki and Anna Habib, is working on a new initiative to bring a WAC focus back to *The GM Review*. *The GM Review* staff distributed free copies of past issues to undergraduate students and faculty across

the curriculum during Fall for the Book. Current issues are available in the bookstore.

The journal is calling for compelling essay submissions from all disciplines. **Please let Jennifer know about strong student writing** that should be a part of *The GM Review* by sending an e-mail to her at [gmreview@gmu.edu](mailto:gmreview@gmu.edu).