

Teaching with

# WRITING Across the Curriculum

wac.gmu.edu

Spring 2010

writingcenter.gmu.edu

we're also online at: [wac.gmu.edu/program/newsletter](http://wac.gmu.edu/program/newsletter)

## Writing Center News

So far this year, the Writing Center:

- saw more than **1900** students, for a total of more than **4200** appointments; and
- conducted **16** workshops.

*Spring 2010 Peer Tutors:* **Amy**

**Crabtree**, English; **Conner Morgan**, Sociology; **Carol Petty**, English

*Spring 2010 Writing Fellow:* **Jessica**

**Brenchick**, English/History, with faculty mentor Kate Mattingly, Dance 390

## Initiatives & Outreach

- In response to faculty and student interest in better supporting our ESL students, the Writing Center launched an **ESL Opt-in Program**, which offers students the continuity of meeting with the same tutor for up to 15 sessions per semester, direct help on specific assignments with both sentence-level and higher-order concerns, and a grammar workshop designed specifically for ESL students. The program is aimed at students whose first language is not English who feel they might benefit from additional, targeted support over the course of an entire semester. For more information, please visit our website at <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/esl>

- To promote **High School and Community Outreach**, two of the Writing Center's graduate tutors are training four high school students from West Potomac High School in Alexandria, VA, to become peer tutors at their high school's newly launched writing center. This collaboration is part of an initiative by Fairfax County Public Schools to open high school writing centers that provide support for their students in all subject areas with a particular focus on academic writing skills needed for post-secondary education.

*submitted by Anna Habib, WC director*

## Help Students Learn Better and More Deeply Through Informal Writing Opportunities

If you're concerned about giving up valuable class time for writing, the pullout page has quick writing-to-learn strategies and, on the reverse side, questions to help students reflect on their own writing. *See p.3 & p.4.*

## Engaging ABET Writing Outcomes in Writing and Engineering Learning Communities

The Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) requires programs to assess students' communication competence; an employer survey also rated this outcome as highly important in hiring decisions. Ken Thompson links Mason's introductory composition course with Volgenau faculty-taught University 100 courses to promote a focus on writing for students interested in pursuing careers in engineering or technology. *See p.2.*

## Writing Assessment: SCHEV, SACS, APR, Oh My!

The State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV) mandates the assessment of written communication. Our writing assessment process, designed to help departments improve the teaching and learning of writing within the discipline, can also be used for various learning outcomes for SACS reaccreditation, for Mason's internal Academic Program Review (APR), and for outside accrediting organizations. *See p. 6.*

## AND ALSO...

### COS Offers Curriculum-based Writing Tutoring

This spring, the College of Science offered curriculum-based writing tutoring to assist undergraduate science writers. Recent Mason biology graduate and former peer tutor and writing fellow, Caroline Gergel, has been meeting with students from COS writing-intensive courses on writing in their courses. Student response thus far has shown that targeted science writing assistance is appreciated and productive. *See p. 6.*

### Students as Writers-Researchers: Ethnography of Diversity Project

Since 2008, 22 students have participated as writer-researchers in the interdisciplinary Ethnography of Diversity Project. Guided by faculty mentors, students explore the construction and meaning of diversity in higher education through individual research projects and have the opportunity to present their research in local and national events and publications. *See p. 5.*

## Engaging ABET Writing Outcomes in Writing and Engineering Learning Communities

MANY ENGINEERING AND IT STUDENTS COME TO MASON NOT LIKING WRITING AND BELIEVING THAT THEY WILL NOT HAVE TO DO MUCH WRITING. The fact that the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) includes training in writing and communication in its evaluations of Engineering and IT programs probably means less to students than it does to administrators and faculty, for whom students' writing competence is vitally important. Some reasons why: In 1996, ABET adopted new standards for evaluating programs in applied science, computing, engineering, and related fields. The EC2000 (Engineering Criteria 2000) lists 11 specific learning outcomes. The ability to apply knowledge from science and engineering, design and conduct experiments, and develop systems, processes and devices are, as we might expect, key parts of the list. But also included are the ability to communicate effectively, to work in interdisciplinary teams, and to understand the social impact of technology on a global level. In 2002, ABET commissioned a group at Pennsylvania State University to study the impact of the new criteria on Engineering education. As part of the study, when the Penn State team surveyed 1,622 employers on the importance of these outcomes in their hiring decisions, 91% rated communicating effectively as "highly important" or "essential." No other criterion scored as highly. (Executive Summary 11)

These data and the fact that Engineering and IT students have to make important career choices quite early in their academic careers provides an opening for the teaching of writing. In my experience, as I'll explain, writing courses that provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the career choices they face as well as to learn about the history of technology have been far more successful than stand-alone writing courses I've taught. I first developed writing courses linked to Science and Technology Studies for the Mason Topics program. Since the demise of Mason Topics, I have been working with the Freshman Center to create and teach a learning community that links English 101: Introductory Composition with University 100 sections taught by Volgenau administrators.

Teaching writing to students in the applied sciences through focusing on subject areas more in alignment with their interests works, but not always for the reasons I expected. The first semester I taught a writing course for engineers, we focused on the so-called War of the Currents in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Sometimes called the first standards war, this was a struggle between Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse over whose system would be used to electrify the country. Students wrote on how devices like transformers operate but also on the differences between the work styles of figures such as Edison and Tesla. By the end of the class, they had written a series of blog posts and a paper on the ethical issues raised by some of Edison's more questionable business practices.

What I didn't fully understand at first was that student interest in the subject came partly from the fact that they were looking for career models, both negative and positive. Here, one of the original sources for my plan proved to have more to teach me than I originally realized. In the 1860s, Samuel Smiles' *Lives of the Engineers* was published in three volumes. In this and earlier works, Smiles celebrated the careers of figures like George Stephenson, the English railway inventor and pioneer. I had read and taught Smiles' work before but with a detached historical interest in his doctrine of self-help. My approach to the War of the Currents was similarly academic. That is not how my students saw the subject, and I now believe that is why my assignments worked so well. Besides providing inspiring stories, the readings I assigned also showed them a range of career options. In the end, they wrote better papers and developed their powers of analysis and critical thinking because they connected with the material beyond the learning goals I'd imagined when I designed my syllabus. Writing courses taught in disciplinary contexts, like the learning community model I've described, not only forward writing across the curriculum goals, they also engage in a very real way with the ABET communication outcomes.

*Ken Thompson, English department*

### What does competent writing look like in engineering and the technological sciences?

Since 2000, ABET has required academic programs to report on their students' communicative competence in several "soft skills" areas. These include the ability to design and conduct experiments and to interpret and analyze the resulting data; to collaborate well in teams and with students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds; and to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. Students should know, for example, what type of communication to use in a given rhetorical situation; how to use evidence that the target audience recognizes as accurate and credible, and how to organize their team to achieve their communicative ends. For an informative discussion of how students learn to develop these competencies in their technical studies, I highly recommend a new book from the MIT press, *Learning to Communicate in Science and Engineering: Case Studies from MIT* by Mya Poe, Neal Lerner, and Jennifer Craig. Each chapter of this valuable book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how students acquire communicative competence in a range of genres and contexts, how they learn to collaborate across differences, how they respond to high-stakes peer review processes typical of the sciences and engineering, and how, as writers, they learn the discipline better through writing.

*Terry Zawacki*

*Worried about giving up valuable class time? Try these:*

## Quick Writing Strategies to Help Students Learn

**Think, Pair, Share:** Ask a question and have students write a short response. Give them a few minutes to talk to a partner about their response.

**Priming the Pump:** At the start of class, ask students to write down a question they would like to ask you about the material from the last class or the reading for the day. Collect the questions and pick one or two to discuss at the end of class or the start of the next class.

**Clarification Pauses:** About 15-20 minutes into the class, ask students to write down any questions they have at that point. Or ask them to summarize what they've heard so far. They can share their questions or summaries with a partner.

**Think, Pair, Share at close of class:** Ask students to summarize in 3-5 sentences the key points of the material you presented that day. They should discuss what they've written with a partner. You may want to collect their notes and choose one or more to read for the next class.

**Minute Paper:** At the end of class, ask a question about the day's material for students to answer in writing. Some useful minute questions:

- Give the most important point from today's class.
- Give an example of a specific thing the professor does that helps you (or makes it more difficult) to learn [insert appropriate topic for your course].
- What was the most difficult or confusing thing in today's class?

*Not all informal writing needs to be done in class:*

### Practice essay exams:

- Give students a sample question with clear directions and criteria. Ask them to read the question in class and mark any parts that are unclear or that they are unsure about.
- Students complete the essay outside of class and then meet in groups to compare their responses. Ask them to select one practice essay from each group to turn in to you. [You may want to give the student who wrote the selected essay extra credit.]
- Use the best practice essay(s) of those submitted as models with the class, explaining what makes the essays good.

### Microthemes:

- Have students write 200-250 words [on the reading, the lecture] with a thesis and evidence.
- Collect and choose a random number to score each time. Give a number score and tell students the criteria for each score. Use best microthemes as models and for teaching course concepts.

**Journals:** Journals work best if you give students specific prompts, e.g.:

- Connect a course concept with personal or observed experiences.
- Describe material you're having trouble understanding: what's difficult about the lesson?
- Explain course content to a peer.
- Write a letter to your peer about a concept(s) from today's lecture/readings/discussion/etc.

*From Terry Myers Zawacki, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum*

Turn over for questions to guide students in reflecting on their own writing 

## Questions to Guide Students in Reflecting on Their Own Writing

Self reflection can help students become better learners and more efficient writers. As so much of the research shows, reflection on one's learning is central to our ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one context to another.

You can help students acquire a habit of reflective practice and, in the process, understand them better as writers by asking them to write about one or more of these questions on the day a paper is due. It's usually a good idea to ask them to do this writing in class and, in the interests of time, to limit the number of reflective questions you ask them to write about for any given paper. Three is usually a manageable number. Your goal is to prompt students to read the assignment and their own work carefully, to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as writers, and to provide other information that will help you be a better reader of their writing.

### Questions about reading the assignment, their own papers, and their peers' response:

- In your own words, describe the assignment to which you responded.
- Summarize your paper in six or fewer sentences, being sure to start your summary with your thesis.
- What did your other readers say about this paper?

### Questions for reflecting on strengths and weaknesses as a writer and on this piece of writing:

- How well does this paper demonstrate your strengths as a writer?
- How confident are you about this paper? Why?
- Are there places in the paper about which you feel unsure? Why?
- At this point in time, what do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?
- About how much time did you spend writing this paper?
- Describe your writing process for this paper.
- If you were to revise this paper, what changes would you make?

### Questions for reporting and reflecting on what they learned from your comments on previous papers:

- What were the most useful comments you received from me on your previous paper?
- Do you have any questions about how to act on the comments you received on your last paper?
- How did you try to incorporate the advice I gave into this paper?
- How has your paper improved based on what you learned from writing your last paper?
- What advice about writing would you give your peers based on what you've learned from writing this and/or other papers?

## Students as Writers-Researchers: the Ethnography of Diversity Project

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF DIVERSITY PROJECT EXPLORES THE CONSTRUCTION AND MEANING OF DIVERSITY IN higher education, using George Mason as the research site. Research is conducted by undergraduate and graduate students, in collaboration with faculty affiliated with the project. The Project is an interdisciplinary umbrella, bringing together individual research projects and encompassing a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Students work with a faculty member to identify, design, and pursue a one- or two-semester research project; receive course credit through independent/directed study or as part of a course requirement; earn certification in research with human subjects; participate in a monthly colloquium with other students in the project; present their research at a university scholarship event, a Mason student conference, or a professional conference with funding provided for travel; present research-based suggestions for improving campus life at Mason; and/or have their research considered for publication in a collection of project papers.

In the first year of the Ethnography of Diversity project (2008-2009), 12 undergraduate students participated, most over two semesters. All students produced a paper about their research, many of which were published in a Summer 2009 volume, *Diversity at Mason: Student Research on Student Identity*. The research topics included the gendered sense of campus safety, the experience

of Hispanic/Latino students, the effects of membership in the local LGBTQ organization, the experience of students with invisible illnesses, returning women students, and the experience of students returning to the U.S. after a significant period abroad including military service, called the Returnee Project.

Another 10 undergraduates enrolled for the 2009-2010 academic year. To date, their topics have included the interplay of national and religious identity among Iranian-American students; the connections between ethnic background, body image, and campus gym experience; and the campus exoticization of drag culture. Several students have returned to work for a second year on the Returnee Project.

In the first year of Mason's project, about half of the students pursued their research through the two-semester course sequence, Feminist Approaches to Social Research and Gender Research Project. This sequence, taught by sociologist Amy Best, included graduate students and advanced undergraduates. Other students have pursued their research through courses such as Writing Ethnography (English), Comparative Perspectives on Immigration (anthropology), Education in Contemporary Society (sociology), and Contemporary Sociological Theory (sociology).

For more information contact [krosenblu@gmu.edu](mailto:krosenblu@gmu.edu) or look at our website <http://drg.gmu.edu/about/projects.php>.

*Karen Rosenblum, Sociology*

### Library Corner: An Exercise to Help Students Evaluate Information Critically

A RECENT BLOG POST AT [LIBRARYVOICE.COM](http://LIBRARYVOICE.COM) DESCRIBES AN INTERESTING EXERCISE USED IN A LIBRARY instruction session in a first-year English class at Ohio University. In this brief exercise, students watch a YouTube clip of a news report about a potentially controversial issue (in this case, the topic is sex in video games), and then the librarian asks what questions might be raised by the report: Does the news report present the topic objectively? What criteria make the guest commentator an "expert" on the topic? Are the statistics cited in the report accurate? How can we know for sure? For more details about how the librarian examines these questions to guide the students through the process of evaluating information critically, see <http://tinyurl.com/evaluationexercise>.

Prior to arranging a library instruction session, think about how the session might best contribute to the specific research-related outcomes you want students to achieve in the course and how it might best support these desired outcomes. We invite you to contact your Mason librarians in Educational Services to discuss how we might best support the specific research needs of your students: [edserv@gmu.edu](mailto:edserv@gmu.edu).

*Scott Watkins, Head of Educational Services, Mason Libraries*

### Social Work Begins Implementing WIN(ning) Initiative in Undergraduate Curriculum

AS A PROGRAM THAT ALREADY INFUSES WRITING THROUGHOUT ITS UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM, SOCIAL WORK HAS joined with WAC's WIN(ning) initiative to make an explicit commitment to providing faculty development in best practices for teaching with writing and support for student writers in the major. The WIN(ning) effort is being led by Cathy Tompkins, who has arranged for brown-bag discussions of teaching effectively with writing and who is also collaborating with the writing center in a study designed to find out how much struggling writers will improve if they meet up to 15 times with the same tutor who has become familiar with the conventions of writing in social work. The students, tutors, and faculty members will complete a pre- and post-program survey to assess whether student writing improves when they work consistently with the same tutor.

For another component of its WIN(ning) efforts, social work will begin mapping writing expectations for students from their first year in the program to the final year as a starting point for thinking about how students are supported in their development as writers as they proceed throughout the curriculum. The role played by English 101 and 302 also will be part of this discussion in consultation with composition program director, Shelley Reid. To learn how your undergraduate program can be part of the WIN(ning) initiative, contact *Terry Zawacki* at [tzawacki@gmu.edu](mailto:tzawacki@gmu.edu).

## WAC News

The WAC program supports and funds an average of 30 undergraduate **writing excellence awards** in the disciplines each year. Contact sbaker@gmu.edu to learn more.

The WAC Program extends its **end-of-year thanks** to its committee members and consultants—*Members:* Stanley Zoltek (chair, COS), Ben Carton (CHSS, Fall 2009), Joan Bristol (CHSS, Spring 2010), Sue Durham (CHSS), Tamara Maddox (VSITE), Anne Magro (SOM), Tom Owens (CVPA), Ellen Rodgers (CEHD), Dan Rothbart (ICAR). *Consultants:* Melissa Allen (English Language Institute), Irene Bruno (VSITE), Anna Habib (Writing Center), Shelley Reid (Composition), Sia Rose-Robinson (SOM), Nicola Scott (SOM), Scott Watkins (Library Educational Services).

### TAC-WAC Learning Community

The Writing Across the Curriculum and Technology Across the Curriculum (TAC) programs paired up again in Spring 2010 for a new faculty learning community. Based on lessons learned and positive feedback from the Fall 2008 cross-disciplinary cohort, we located this learning community in a single department, Public and International Affairs. **Jennifer Bowie, John Sacco, Hugh Sockett, and Roger Paden** (who teaches cross-listed Philosophy/PIA courses) are developing projects to look at and implement technologies that intersect with their learning goals for writing in their courses.

### Presentations & Publications

- **Terry Zawacki** will deliver the keynote address at the May 2010 Writing Across the Curriculum conference in Bloomington, IN. **Sarah Baker** and **David Beach** will also present.
- **Terry Zawacki, Shelley Reid,** Composition Director, **Ying Zhou,** Director of Institutional Assessment, and **Sarah Baker** authored an article about Mason's assessment process in a special issue of *Across the Disciplines* (<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/assessment/zawackietal.cfm>).

## Writing Assessment: SCHEV, SACS, APR, Oh My!

**W**E ARE NOW IN OUR NINTH YEAR OF DEPARTMENTAL WRITING ASSESSMENT EFFORTS. SINCE OUR LAST REPORT IN SPRING 2009, 18 NEW UNITS either have completed or initiated their writing assessment. Although the process of conducting workshops to generate faculty-created rubrics was designed to address the SCHEV mandate, it also can be used by units in Academic Program Review (APR) and by units not in APR but who must develop learning outcomes and measures for the SACS reaccreditation process. Some units also are using their findings for outside accrediting agency reporting, such as ABET, as many of these agencies also ask for the assessment of communication and/or written competence. These rubrics also can address more than one learning outcome, in addition to writing, such as critical thinking or disciplinary knowledge. Every academic unit must enter its learning and program outcomes, measures, and findings into the WEAVEonline web-based assessment management system.

*Completed (since 2006):* Administration of Justice, Anthropology, Applied Information Technology, Art History, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, Electrical & Computer Engineering, English, Individualized Studies (BIS), Mathematical Sciences, Modern and Classical Languages (French, Spanish), Nursing, Physics, Recreation, Health, and Tourism, School of Management.

*In Process:* Civil, Environmental & Infrastructure Engineering, Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Dance, Global Affairs, History, Music, Social Work, Sociology, Systems Engineering.

*Sarah Baker, WAC/Assessment Liaison*

## COS Offers Curriculum-based Writing Tutoring

**U**NDERGRADUATE WRITERS IN THE SCIENCES ARE EXPECTED TO MIMIC THE FORM, PROSE STYLE, AND TONE USED BY PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELD, yet the specifics of how to write in a scientific style are seldom explained by professors. Proficient writers may absorb the conventions over time and with experience, but students who are less proficient or who are still struggling with the basics of writing in English need some direct assistance, as Professors Rick Diecchio and Larry Rockwood recognized when they arranged for me to tutor student writers through a new College of Science writing assistance initiative.

As a recently graduated biology major with an earth science minor, I had spent two semesters in experiential coursework in CHSS 390: Peer Tutoring in the Disciplines and a third semester in CHSS 490 as a writing fellow working with Professor Giuseppina Kysar. As a writing fellow, I introduced students to the basic writing elements through a presentation, "Writing in the Sciences," that addressed, among other things, concision, accuracy, and precision. I then invited interested students to meet with me individually to review and revise their science writing habits.

Now, in COS, I am continuing to provide a similar tutorial service. I began with a focus on BIOL 307 student writing improvement and then opened my schedule to students in all COS writing-intensive courses. Although I have no large scale data, no reliable t-tests or p-values to prove it, student response has shown that targeted science writing assistance is an appreciated and productive service. Moreover, I know this tutoring experience will be invaluable to me when I have completed my masters of education and secured a position teaching high school biology.

*Caroline Gergel, peer tutor and writing fellow, Biology*

### The George Mason University WAC Program Newsletter

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