

Writing At Center

Online Assignments for Techno-Skeptics

Mary L. De Nys, Department of English
Patricia Shields, Department of Biology

Let's be clear about this: both of us not infrequently consider the retractable ballpoint pen to be the last technological device we really mastered. And both of us are skeptical of technological marvels as the saviors of the classroom. We believe that students learn if they attend class, pay attention to the material, organize and focus ideas, relate those ideas to their experience and observations in life and lab, and communicate them in lucid prose and animated discussion. Frankly, we do not think technology has a lot to do with any of this.

However, as we have worked together for the past year in the linked program, we have found that we can use the online environment to further some of the activities through which the students learn. We have developed our online assignments through trial and error, not always knowing just what we were doing, but they do seem to work. Let us stress that we have accomplished this without being "techies." If we can do this, you can too.

How Our Assignments Work

We use Town Hall for our web-based assignments. It can be rather clunky to set up and navigate, but it requires no computer expertise to use. Other programs may work as well or better. Neither of us has yet learned the new WebCT program, but we expect that it would be useful for assignments such as these. Because there are a variety of programs for communicating on the web, we will not give detailed directions here for using Town Hall itself.

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JC Library/Writing Center Research Workshops

November 30: 12:30-4:30
December 1: 12:30-4:30 and
5-8 PM
December 2: 12:30-4:30

Tell your students to drop in!

UWC Flash Report: 1998-99
2314 Appointments
1012 Clients

Getting Better Responses on Essay Exams

Bernie Cabral and Emily Tuszynska, UWC Tutors

Frustrated by the essays produced by some of your students on exams and short assignments? Here is a five-step approach that you can use to teach your students to be better test-takers. The process below was developed by UWC tutors, who are available to present this step-by-step guide to your students as an in-class workshop. Please call the UWC for more details.

- Exam Pre-Writing:** Suggest students do some strategic work before they put pen to paper: Read through the whole exam; talk back to the questions; set up a plan for responding; plan and manage time carefully.
- Decoding the Question:** Define and help students recognize the meaning of key words within your questions.
- Thesis Statement:** Explain to students the components of a strong thesis statement, where the statement belongs, and its critical importance to the rest of the response.
- Coherence, Transitions, and Repetition:** Address issues of organization and achieving "flow" by using key words and repetition of key ideas.
- Polishing (Editing and Proofreading):** Suggest an appropriate length for responses and offer some recommendations for fine-tuning that take your particular "pet peeves" into consideration.

Breaking the essay exam process down and simplifying the concepts helps give students confidence to write accurately what they know. You may also find that in presenting each of these steps you're explaining what your grading criteria are. If you do invite a UWC tutor to present the workshop in class, the tutor will work with your sample questions and responses. For more information about this or other in-class workshops call the UWC at 993-1200.

Online Discussions

Our online discussions require students to post one message to each assigned discussion by its specified date during the course of the semester. The first assignment asks them to introduce themselves and tell something about their experience of science and their expectations for this class. Two later assignments ask them to respond to a previous posting by a classmate. The rest of the assignments give them links to biology-oriented web sites, many of them interactive, and ask them to explore the sites and answer questions about them.

One of these web-based assignments provides the students with a link to a web site that offers criteria for evaluating web sites. Each student is assigned a disease to research. The student must go to the web site that offers the evaluation criteria. Then he or she must use a search engine to find a web site dealing with the assigned disease and evaluate the site for relevance, authority, and accuracy according to the criteria in the first web site.

If a student registers for Town Hall and completes all nine assignments on time and in sufficient detail (about twelve lines), that student receives ten points toward his or her lab grade in the biology course, and since ours is a linked course, the student also receives an *A* for the assignment in English (10% of the course grade). If one posting is missing, nine points are credited to the lab grade, and the grade for the assignment in the English course is *B*, and so on.

Responding to Student Postings. We think it is important not to grade the postings on the quality of the writing. This gives the students a chance to write without the pressure of grades. And they tend to write quite well. Some of them, in fact, do their best writing for the online assignments. This may well be because the questions are fairly easy and unthreatening. Many students find their voices better in unpressured situations. Our assignment gets them to write naturally and informally on an academic topic, thereby enhancing their investment and interest in the course work.

We differ on whether we get involved in the discussions ourselves. Patty posts occasional messages to the discussions, partly to let her hundreds of students know that she does indeed read the messages, and partly to model what a good response might be. Mary, whose classes are small, has a “hands-off” policy for posting; she posts no messages to the discussions and avoids referring to individual postings in order to keep the writing situation as unthreatening as possible. She does, however, comment occasionally on areas of interest in a discussion as a whole. Both of us intervene privately with students who violate netiquette and offer general guidance to our classes on proper use of the Internet.

Online Peer Editing

Mary assigns online editing of drafts for half of the papers in her English courses. The students work in small groups in class for the first paper of the semester. On this paper, they follow a tightly structured worksheet in commenting on each other's drafts. On the second and third papers, they are divided into small groups, but the groups are set up in Town Hall, each with its own folder accessible only to members of the group and the teacher. Students are required to post drafts to their small group on Town Hall, and they are required to post comments to the drafts as well. About fifteen minutes of organizational time is scheduled during class, so that students can chat face-to-face and exchange e-mail addresses. The online editing has proven remarkably similar to the in-class version in terms of quality of drafts, comments, rates of participation, and the quality of the final versions of the papers. Some students love it; others are relieved when the class returns to in-class workshops for the last paper of the semester. Both types of workshops are effective for the class as a whole, but individual students vary as to which approach works better for them. Providing both approaches seems to meet a wider range of learning styles than either would by itself.

Using Macros to Comment on Student Papers

Star Muir, Department of Communication

Macros increase efficiency, save time, raise your quality of life during the semester, and give students more information and feedback about their work. My focus here is on using macros as a tool for grading student writing, and on the ways that the overall quality of feedback can be enhanced while avoiding the rote application of grading rubrics.

So how easy is it to set up macros? Pretty simple, since the two hardest parts are constructing the comments and keeping track of the location of the macros and comments (necessary only if you plan to use the macros on more than one computer).

1) After grading a stack of papers, go back through and jot down the ten (or so) most common comments you have written on papers. Make choices about which comments could use developing in some depth and are frequent enough to justify using a macro.

2) Take each comment you have selected and type it up into a developed paragraph using Word97. Apart from the direct comment you might just write in the margins of a paper, you can also include other information: page numbers, examples, or other resources. Save these files, and be sure to note where you have saved them.

3) Once you open a new Word97 window, you can record a macro by selecting *Tools, Macro, Record New Macro*. Name your macro using short codes or names that are easy and quick to type. Once you have named the macro hit *Enter* to start recording.

4) Select *Insert, File*, and then browse for the Word97 files you created and saved in step 2. Select and Click *OK*. Now position your cursor at the end of the comment file and add any additional thoughts you might have.

5) Select *Macro Stop Recording* on the *Tools* menu and you are done.

Making Peer Review and Editing Work

Reading and writing always—invariably, inevitably—go hand-in-hand. This simple fact is one of the most compelling reasons why peer review is an important part of the writing process. Students develop a critical eye for reading their own papers by reading and evaluating their peers' work. Too frequently, however, students feel they don't know what professors expect from papers, and so they feel unqualified to offer any criticism of their classmates' writing. The following evaluation criteria sheet is used by **Margaret Miklancie** of the **College of Nursing and Health Science** to help students feel more confident in both the drafting and peer review processes.

| Criteria Sheet for Position Paper NURS/HSCI 465 | | |
|---|-------|---|
| Points | | |
| 10 | _____ | 1. Write a concise introductory paragraph clearly stating position on issue. |
| 25 | _____ | 2. Provide sufficient factual and observational background discussion for professional/non-professional reader to understand terminology, impact and effects of the issue. |
| 25 | _____ | 3. Provide a defensible documentation and discussion to support an understanding of the issue and a clear rationale for the position. |
| 10 | _____ | 4. Synthesize major points in conclusion paragraph. |
| 10 | _____ | 5. Identify appropriate audiences for persuasion by the position statement. |
| 20 | _____ | 6. Apply principles of good composition including appropriate sentence structure, grammar, and meticulous attention to details of every aspect of the position statement. Strict APA format standards will apply. Include a title page. |
| 100 pts. _____ X .35 = _____ | | Grade (This position statement will constitute 35% of the course grade.) |
| Additional Comments: | | |
| _____ | | |
| _____ | | |
| _____ | | |
| _____ | | |

Miklancie's criteria sheet provides a framework students can use when working on their own drafts and revisions. It also gives every member of the class a concrete way of approaching and critiquing their peers' work.

To make the process of peer review even less daunting, Miklancie begins the peer review phase by breaking students up into small groups (between four and six students is usually effective) and giving each group model papers for the same assignment. The group is then asked to discuss each paper and rate it as *good*, *mediocre*, or *poor*, based on the objectives of the assignment and the criteria for evaluation. The groups then discuss their evaluations with the class before they begin reviewing each others' work.

—S.P.

Responding to Student Writing

Sarah Perrier, Graduate Teaching Assistant

Unlike most professional performers, we teachers carry our audience, our students, with us—their papers in our briefcases or bags, their e-mails waiting in our inboxes. When we aren't in front of our classes, though, it's easy to forget that we're still presenting ourselves to students through our comments on their written work.

Being Aware When We Respond

When I began working as a TA, the first thing I was told about responding to my students' writing was that I shouldn't use a red pen. I figured if this were the most important thing to know, then this teaching thing was going to be a snap. As I settled in to grade the first set of papers from my English 101 students, I felt ready. I mean I was going to really *respond*. So why did my students all bristle when they got their papers back? I assumed they were nervous about their grades. Not necessarily so, a colleague later pointed out. What I didn't realize was that *what I wrote* on my students' papers was as much a part of my presentation of myself as a teacher as what I did in the classroom. Because I wasn't consistent in both my written comments and my classroom practices, my students had a problem on their hands: Which teacher was I really? Better advice for a new teacher than avoiding red pens might have been "*Be consistent, and be consistently aware of how your words affect your students.*"

Grade Less, Get More

One approach to responding to student writing that can help to reduce the risk of this Jekyll-and-Hyde problem is minimal marking. Minimal marking is a system that takes the professor out of the role of being the corrector. Rather than repeatedly marking and fixing an error, a professor places a check mark (or some other small notation) in the margin next to the line in which the error occurs. The first time an error occurs, a professor might take a moment to explain the error, but after that, the check marks replace explanations. Sometimes patterns of errors appear in students' writing. Instead of using check marks in this case, professors might choose to use numbers; each number would correspond to a particular kind of error.

Among the benefits of minimal marking is that it facilitates improvement rather than judging a student's lack of performance. Students are given an opportunity to correct errors before final drafts are turned in (or before the next paper is due), and they tend to become more self-aware as writers as they learn to identify and correct their own mistakes. On a more practical note, this system can reduce the amount of time professors spend with any single paper, and thus the overall time commitment for each set of papers.

Minimal marking does have some limitations. Large structural problems and questions about complex ideas generally cannot be addressed with a small check mark. Only surface-

level elements that are undeniably errors can be addressed with this system. Moreover, as **Dennis Young** (English Department) explains it, minimal marking doesn't mean "as little ink as possible on the page." Professors should still provide affective responses to their students' work in the form of reactions, questions, and appraisals, as appropriate.

A very different idea for grading less and getting more comes from WAC Director **Terry Zawacki**. When a student turns in a paper that contains numerous errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, or sentence structure, she will stop reading, return the paper to the student, explain the problem, and offer the student an opportunity to revise and resubmit the paper for a grade (usually with some grade reduction for being late).

No matter how much you choose to write on your students' papers, consistency and caution are still critically important. Your students will read your comments not only as a reflection of their own success, but also as a representation of you as a professor.

Responding to Non-Native Speakers of English

As a new TA in the English Department at George Mason, I spent my first year working as a tutor in the UWC. Between fifty and sixty percent of the students with whom I worked were non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Often, professors referred these students to the UWC because their writing was not up-to-par, as far as syntax, grammar, spelling, or other mechanical issues were concerned. These students usually brought in papers that were covered with corrective markings, question marks, and lengthy endnotes about the need to proof-read. The comments focused on making students aware of the fact that their work contained errors (a fact which would not surprise most NNSs). What surprised me most, though, was that these students frequently did not receive any remarks evaluating their work outside of its grammatical or mechanical problems.

So what's to be done? **Claudia Kilmer**, the ESL specialist at the UWC, emphasizes the importance of thinking of writing as an ongoing process. "What draft are we looking at here?" is the question she suggests starting with when responding to *any* student's writing. Making corrections on students' papers or emphasizing errors over interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of ideas can cause students to misuse their time for drafting as time for correcting.

Kilmer also recommends that professors "Pick their battles wisely." By taking class time to negotiate the expectations and priorities that you have as a professor, you can save both you and your students hours of frustration in the grading and revising process. As Kilmer explains it, "If you can't tolerate sentence fragments/run-ons/comma splices, say so and mark them. If subject-verb agreement (or pronoun-referent agreement) is no big deal, let it slide." Professors must make sure the entire class knows what the expectations are, and then stick to the terms the group has established.

Brown Bag Notes from “Grading Writing Across the Curriculum: Strategies for Responding to Error”

On October 13 and 14, 1999, faculty from across the disciplines gathered to discuss strategies they find useful when grading their students’ writing.

One strategy that was presented was doing lots of preparation work with students prior to their turning in papers, in order to preempt some anticipated errors. **Linda Miller** (Dance) and **Margaret Miklancie** (Nursing), for example, give extremely detailed assignments with explanations of what they look for when they grade. Their assignments also model the vocabulary and organizational structure students are expected to use.

Don Gallehr, **Dennis Young**, and **Claudia Kilmer** (English) all suggested that teachers delay dealing with surface-level errors (unless they seriously interfere with communication) in favor of more global concerns. Gallehr emphasized the importance of “building on what works” by pointing out to students what they are doing particularly well in their writing.

Patty Shields (Biology) and **Star Muir** (Communication) also presented some suggestions to the Brown Bag participants. Please see page one (“Online Assignments for Techno-Skeptics”) and page two (“Using Macros to Comment on Student Papers”) for more information from these two presenters.

Where is the Writing Center, Anyway?

It used to be that when students asked where the University Writing Center was located, the answer was simple: Robinson A114. And while we haven’t moved out of our home base in Robinson A, we have moved beyond it, bringing our services to members of the campus community where they live, work, and study.

The biggest news on this front is our new drop-in tutoring site in the **Johnson Center, room 311**. Students in need of writing assistance, but unable to schedule a regular appointment, can visit us in our new home away from home. Tutors are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

As if the news about our new double-residency weren’t enough, we also have travelling plans. This semester, our tutors have developed six workshops to take on the road into your classrooms. The six **travelling workshops** are: *Revision and Peer Review*; *Introductions/Conclusions/Flow*; *Editing and Proofreading Your Own Work*; *Answering Essay Exam Questions*; *Quoting, Summarizing, and Paraphrasing*; and *Taking Good Notes*.

While these workshops are targeted to writing-intensive courses, any class where writing is required can benefit from our tutors’ expertise. What’s more, we have developed a separate slate of workshops designed to specifically address the needs of teachers and students in literature classes. In addition to these travelling workshops, our ESL specialists will be presenting a series of **workshops for non-native speakers** of English on grammar and punctuation throughout the semester. Plus, our joint **workshops with the JC Library** on research and writing are still going strong.

If you are interested in inviting a UWC tutor to present one of these workshops to any of your classes, call us at 993-1200. Tutors will work with you to tailor the content of the workshop to suit your course. These workshops usually last between thirty and fifty minutes and are hands-on, so your students can start putting what they are learning to use right away.

Our virtual home base is going strong, too—our **Online Writing Lab** continues to help students whose schedules make coming into the UWC difficult. In addition to providing online tutoring, we also offer a Virtual Reference Desk and a series of writing-related links and information. Please visit our website at: www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter for more information.

—S.P.

New (and Old) Faces in the UWC

Graduate Tutors

Andy Brown
Bernie Cabral
Dennis Campbell
Molly Chesnut
Emily Clark
Sarah Dean
Margaret Emery
Ellen Gorman
Paul Gustafson
Andy LaRaia
Chris Perkowski
Emily Tuszynska
Karenne Wood

ESL Specialists

Jennifer Dateno
Claudia Kilmer
Bill Saffell

Peer Tutors

Nadia Averbach
Cindy Beauchemin
Kerry Hansknecht
Emily Kayser
Rachel Lindsey
Karen Van der Riet

Office Assistants

Tanya Bathiche
Beckie Clemens
Adam Grob

Office Manager

Scott Berg

GMU WAC News on the Web

WAC Newsletter online (including full-text articles)

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

University Writing Center Assessment Report:

[www.gmu.edu/
departments/writingcenter/
assess.html](http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/assess.html)

Provost's Reception Recognizes Excellence in Writing Across the Curriculum

Since its inception in 1978, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program has relied on the commitment of faculty to make it the visible and successful program it has become. Based on that visibility, it sometimes seems like the writing-intensive requirements have been around forever, yet it was only as recently as 1990 that the Faculty Senate voted to require one upper-level writing-intensive course in the major for all undergraduates. The W-I requirement is designed to ensure that faculty attend to student writers as well as to their written products, a process which takes time, effort, and dedication. These faculty members, singled out for recognition by **Interim-Provost Wood** and **President Merten**, have demonstrated their dedication over the years. The Provost's Reception on October 27, 1999 was a way to thank them for their exemplary work.

Special Recognition

College of Nursing & Health Science

Mary E. Silva
Jeanne L. Sorrell

Communication

Don Boileau
Anita Taylor

Computer Science

Eugene M. Norris

English

Ruth Fischer
Patrick Story

History and Art History

Sheila Ffolliott

Mathematical Sciences

Stanley M. Zoltek

New Century College

John O'Connor
Ashley Williams

Philosophy & Religious Studies

Debra B. Bergoffen

Psychology

James F. Sanford

Public and International Affairs

Bob Clark

School of Management

Michael Wasserman

Sociology and Anthropology

Victoria F. Rader

Theater

Rick Davis

Chris Thaiss, the originator and embodiment of WAC at GMU, was singled out by the provost for special recognition for his twenty-plus years of service. Although he has given up direction of the WAC program to become Chair of English, Chris remains active at the national level as coordinator of the National network of WAC Programs and as a consultant on developing programs at institutions across the country. Chris has also published widely on WAC, including a series of books on writing in the disciplines. He has coauthored books and articles with a number of the faculty who were also recognized at the Provost's Reception, most recently with **Rick Davis** from Theater and **Jim Sanford** from Psychology.

Also Recognized for Their Many Contributions:

Biology: Donald P. Kelso (PAGE), Larry L. Rockwood, Patricia A. Shields, Mark R. Walbridge; **Chemistry:** Suzanne Slayden; **College of Nursing & Health Science:** Rita Carty, Ann Cary, James A. Metcalf, Margaret Miklancie; **Communication:** Star Muir; **Computer Science:** Henry Hamburger (Chair); **Dance:** Linda G. Miller; **Electrical and Computer Engineering:** William Sutton; **English:** Zofia Burr, Mary Lou Crouch, Dulce Cruz, Mary De Nys, Joel Foreman, Cindy Fuchs, Don Gallehr, Jim Henry, Devon Hodges, Lorna Irvine, Mary Kruck, Teresa Michals, Coilin Owens, John Radner, Peggy Yocum, Dennis Young, Terry Zawacki; **Geography & Earth Sciences:** Sheryl Beach, Rick Diecchio, Hank Dillon; **History and Art History:** Larry Butler, Jack Censer, Marion Deshmukh, Robert Hawkes, Mack Holt, Carol Mattusch, Ellen Todd; **Institutional Assessment:** Karen M. Gentemann; **Modern & Classical Languages:** Jeff Chamberlain, Esther Elstun, Paula Gilbert, Lisa Rabin, Janine Ricouart; **Music:** Tom Brawley, Joe Shirk (Chair); **New Century College:** Kim Eby, Ginger Montecino, Miriam S. Raskin (Social Work); **Philosophy & Religious Studies:** Jim Fletcher, Emmett Holman; **Physics & Astronomy:** Robert Ellsworth, Bill Lankford (PAGE), Joe Lieb (Chair), James Trefil; **Psychology:** Linda Chrosniak, Robert Smith (Chair); **Public and International Affairs:** Hugh Hecllo, James Pffiffner, Pris Regan; **Russian Studies:** Julie Christensen; **School of Management:** Hun Lee; **Sociology and Anthropology:** Mark Jacobs, Aliza Kolker, Susan Trencher; **Systems Engineering:** Kathryn Laskey, Alexander Levis; **Theater:** Kristin Johnsen-Neshati.

Writing At Center Editors: Sarah Perrier and Terry Zawacki, Director WAC and UWC