

## Writing to Learn: Poster Presentations

Poster presentations, using a combination of visual (graphs, photos, illustrations) and textual information presented on a poster, are becoming more widely used at conferences in the Natural and Social Sciences as a substitute and/or complement to the traditional written research paper or oral presentation. They also provide a unique learning opportunity for students because of what they reveal about the structure of a research argument. The main components of a poster presentation are: title, abstract, introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, acknowledgments, and literature cited.

Dr. **Laura Adamkewicz**, in the Biology Department, uses posters in tandem with her term paper assignments. Instead of oral presentations, undergraduate students in her genetics classes present their research in the form of a poster. The writing and thinking skills required of students in preparing posters is extremely valuable; Adamkewicz compares composing a poster to the writing of Haiku poetry and says, "It requires students

to be very disciplined and concise. Anyone can write an 8000 word essay, but writing a good tight, disciplined poster is much more difficult." In order to write concise statements, students must understand the material completely, they must internalize their argument and data, and then be able to express it in a clear way to viewers.

For Adamkewicz, audience response is paramount. In fact, she doesn't grade the posters herself, but instead has students in her classes evaluate one another on five basic principles (visual attractiveness, quality of information, relevance, originality and the balance of text, graphics, and illustrations) and then she averages the grades of the evaluators.

Dr. **Jim Sanford**, professor of Psychology, instructs his students on poster presentations so that they will be prepared to present their research at conferences. Sanford illustrates how common this

*Continued on page 2*

### JOHN BARCLAY BURNS, RELIGIOUS STUDIES

All of my courses in Religious Studies, like those of my colleagues, are not only writing-intensive, but also "reading and interpretation-intensive" and I do not think these can be separated. Term-papers are required whose length varies depending on the course level. I believe very firmly that students ought to take responsibility for the final edition of their papers as an "end-product"; thus I don't require drafts. I do, however, vigorously encourage students to

submit drafts of their papers to me for review, discussion and direction. In smaller upper-level classes most, though not all, students take advantage of this: the research and writing process then becomes a cooperative engagement with the primary texts and secondary sources as the paper takes shape. The weakness of the non-compulsory approach, however, is more evident in large introductory classes where fewer students avail themselves of the offer to review drafts. The obvious answer is to make the submission of one draft

*Continued on page 2*

## News from the Center

The University Writing Center has had unprecedented success this semester. **As of October 1, 2000 we have had:**

- ✍ 250 clients
- ✍ 403 sessions
- ✍ 91 sessions in JC 311
- ✍ 56 OWL clients
- ✍ 140 Roadshows

We're pleased to announce that the **WAC Program** has received a **General Education Funding Award** to develop **web-based writing guides** to support writing-intensive courses across the disciplines. The departments of Psychology and Biology will receive funds from this award to develop guides for their WI courses as will two other departments yet to be identified.

Web-based writing guides have already been created in Public and International Affairs, New Century College, and School of Management with funding from former Provosts Potter and Wood. To see these guides, go to the departmental or college websites. If you are interested in developing a web-based guide for a WI course in your department, contact Terry Zawacki at [tzawacki@gmu.edu](mailto:tzawacki@gmu.edu).

## WRITING @ CENTER

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## Poster presentations

*Continued from page 1*

method is by showing the long list of poster presentations at a recent conference. He points out that posters “make it possible to hear from 46 people in two hours as opposed to just eight [as in a traditional oral presentation].” At conferences, posters are set up in a room and the audience browses through the room looking at the posters that interest them; people presenting findings stand by their posters and answer questions.

Biology professor **Chris Jones**, who also teaches students to do posters, describes the poster presentation as a good exercise in presenting visual and written data in complementary and non-redundant ways: “The idea,” he says, “is that you combine visual and written information in a way that can be absorbed by someone in five minutes.”

If you are interested in using poster presentations, all three professors recommend using complete instructions and examples of past “good” and “bad” poster presentations to illustrate what you are expecting. Also, visit (and have students visit)

the Writing Center site for instructions on poster presentations in the Natural Sciences <<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/natscienceposter/index.htm>> and Social Sciences <<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/socscienceposter/index.htm>>. ~SKJA

## Dr. John Burns on Drafting

*Continued from page 1*

compulsory in all my classes and this I have determined to do, beginning at the introductory level this semester.

At a recent department meeting, I listened to Terry Zawacki’s remarks about WAC and the importance of differentiating between **formative** and **summative** comments on papers and had one of those revelatory moments that I suppose Religious Studies faculty ought to have. Hitherto, I have spent a lot of energy writing formative comments on the final submission and, while these may help the student in a future class, they have not

**\* FORMATIVE EVALUATION OCCURS DURING A UNIT OF INSTRUCTION. ITS PURPOSE, IN THE CASE OF WRITING, IS TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK FOR REVISION/IMPROVEMENT, USUALLY BY REFERENCING CRITERIA STIPULATED IN ADVANCE.**

**\* SUMMATIVE EVALUATION OCCURS AT THE END OF SOME UNIT OF LEARNING. ITS PURPOSE IS TO SUM UP, IN THE CASE OF STUDENT WRITING, THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PAPER AND TO GIVE EVIDENCE FOR THE FINAL GRADE.**

addressed the writing of the particular paper in my class as a learning and development process, which it should be.

Thus the submission of drafts is the occasion for those formative comments that will help the composition of the paper. The final edition of the paper, for which the student still takes responsibility and is held to account, receives those **s u m m a t i v e** comments that address, among other matters, how

well the final paper has responded to the formative comments. In this response cycle, both instructor and students have been active participants in the process of composition.

## UWC workshop: Essay exams

The University Writing Center offers 30-minute workshops on answering in-class and take-home essay questions. The workshops focus on questions drawn from teachers’ actual exams. Tutors cover:

- How to decode the question by reading for key words and concepts.
- How to create a thesis, using the teacher’s question as a model and springboard for the development of arguments.
- How to use sources appropriately, including paraphrasing and quoting correctly.
- For in-class essays, how to allow enough time to draft, write, and proofread/revise.

The University Writing Center has also developed workshops on paraphrasing, quoting and summarizing, peer response, punctuation, and paper structure (introductions, conclusions and “flow”). Tutors usually try to individualize the workshop to fit the needs of your particular class. If you would like to schedule a workshop on a writing-related topic, please contact Claudia Kilmer at (703) 993-1773.

## Spinach & Proofreading



Have you ever tried to engage in an intelligent conversation with someone who has spinach in their teeth? Usually, you put all of your effort into taking

them seriously no matter how insightful they may be. The same is true of trying to read a smart paper with lots of mistakes. If your students ask you, “Does grammar count?” share this analogy. (By the way, most grammarians advise that “they,” “them,” and “their” can be used to refer back to “someone,” etc. to avoid awkward or gendered constructions.)

Encourage your students to submit papers to the **George Mason Review** for the 2000-2001 issue. We are interested in undergraduate writing from across the disciplines—particularly in work that blends two or more genres or disciplines.

Submissions may be left in the George Mason Review’s drop boxes in RobA487 or the University Writing Center (RobA114), or sent to: George Mason Review, MSN 2D6, GMU

To find out more, contact us at [gmureview@hotmail.com](mailto:gmureview@hotmail.com) or call 993.3625.