WRITING W@AC CENTER

Our Fall issue is focused on the intersections of writing and technology across the curriculum (WAC and TAC, so to speak) along with a few words on the history of our nationally-ranked writing in the disciplines program.

News from the Center

In Fall 2001 and Spring 2002, the Writing Center saw a total of

✐ **1741** clients in

✐ **3298** sessions, with

✐ **258** of these online.

Writing Center tutors also conducted **95 road shows** (in-class orientations to our services).

New Online Writing Guides: Tell Your Students!

History 100:
http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/ westernciv/writing/index.html
Thanks, Mills Kelly

School of Management:
http://classweb.gmu.edu/ dbeach/somguide
Thanks, David Beach

College of Nursing and Health Science:
http://cnhs.gmu.edu/writing
Thanks, Georgine Redmond

INSIDE . . .

Electronic Portfolios:
Dynamic Vehicles for Demonstrating Learning
by Lesley Smith and James Young, New Century College

What is an electronic portfolio? Is it a web site that amazes the reader when s/he clicks through the title page? Is it a multimedia CD-ROM which demands of the writer sophisticated knowledge of codes and softwares and art and film? Or is it a zip disk archive of essays, research projects and reflections on learning? More fundamentally, is it just the next 'next new thing'? Or does it offer to writers, whether students or faculty, a valuable multi-dimensional space for thinking and learning?

To explore these more fundamental questions, it's important first to separate the concept of an electronic portfolio from technical skills. The public dazzle of webfolios and interactive CD-ROMS tends, at the moment, to obscure the heart of the electronic portfolio, which still lies in the writer's ability to assess his/her learning, to reflect on that learning and to communicate the results of those processes to a specific audience. An e-portfolio is simply a non-linear, dynamic vehicle for the demonstration of learning. Thus anyone with access to a computer, use of a text-processing program such as Word, and a removable disk (the tools most writers use to produce conventional, print portfolios) can create an electronic portfolio. **

TEC Website Slated For May 2003 Debut
by Scott Berg and Jennifer Molnar, English

English department faculty Steven Weinberger and Chris Thaiss are currently overseeing the creation of the TEC (Technology in the English Concentrations) website, a resource for George Mason students inside and outside of the English major. The website, due to debut in May 2003, will contain a set of "modules" featuring multimedia tutorials in web design, image manipulation, archiving, and other technology skills.

The TEC website was made possible by a $50,000 Technology Across the Curriculum grant written by Weinberger, Thaiss, and former English department faculty Hans Bergmann. The modules are being developed by a number of faculty in the department. **

Good Writing from the Engineer's Perspective

by William Sutton, Information Technology & Engineering

While most people think of engineering as "calculate, compute and number crunch," that is only the beginning. Unless the engineer can communicate the calculation, computation or appropriateness of the "numbers," all that C,C & NC stuff is basically a waste of time! Successful writing is vital to the success of an engineer. Communication is so important that it is a major component of the ABET accreditation all engineering programs must "endure" periodically.

As part of both the engineering accreditation and the Mason Writing Assessment activities, faculty within IT&E are working on articulating what, precisely, we mean when we say we want our students to be "good writers." At the same time that we are creating the criteria of

a good engineering writer, we are realistic enough to realize that the criteria must be sufficiently simple, that is, easy to interpret and evaluate, so that most of the faculty will be willing to use the criteria toward evaluating and grading writing in their classes.

We believe that our students generally include good technical information in their technical writings, so our emphasis has been more toward criteria that will allow evaluating the form and format of writing. Consequently (with the assistance of Terry Zawacki) we created a set of suggested criteria, arranged in order of importance, to provide to the program faculty within IT&E for consideration and comment.

Here are the proposed criteria:

Organized
- Clearly and logically
- according to given format
- according to desired purpose
- appropriate sentence and paragraph length

Mechanics
- correct grammar, syntax, sentence structure
- evidence of proofreading for spelling and typos
- correct punctuation

Addresses audience successfully
- appropriate vocabulary and level of formality
- appropriate level of detail

Achieves purpose
- addresses requirements of assignment/report
- content is accurate, logical, and documented

Uses sufficient and appropriate evidence
- relevant data/ideas/arguments
- fact distinguished from opinion
- sufficient detail of evidence
- sources appropriately quoted or paraphrased and cited

Other Discipline-Specific Criteria

Basic IT Skills Expected in First Year Composition

by Ruth Fischer, English

English 100/101 teachers in the mid 1980's were—perhaps unwittingly—pioneers in developing the Information Technology Skills of Mason students. From the early days of floppy disks, PCWrite, and treks to the computer lab by the PE buildings, "early adopters" from the English Department were among those blazing the IT trail. (A brief history can be found in the "Computers and Writing" issue of the online journal *English Matters*.)

These days the set of IT skills has been expanded to include communicating by email and researching by database. Approved by the English Department in the fall semester of 2001, the following IT skills must be addressed in all sections of ENGL 100 and ENGL 101. By the end of the course, teachers are responsible for ensuring that students have demonstrated the ability to do each of the following tasks:

Email:
- Set up email account on gmu.edu
- Forward email from gmu.edu account to another email account, if applicable
- Send messages
- Reply to messages
- Send/receive and open attachments

Word Processing:
- Create, save, and retrieve a document
- Format document (to include page numbers and reference pages)
- Revise document (add/delete/reorder text)
- Print document

Research skills:
- Articulate an information need
- Set up researchable questions
- Determine keywords based on these questions

- Understand the basic structure of databases (records and fields)
- Search online databases Expanded Academic ASAP, Periodical Abstracts, and the Library Catalogue in the GMU Library system by using the Boolean operator AND, truncation, and phrase
- Retrieve electronically available sources from these databases
- Evaluate web sources and other databases for credibility and reliability

The Website for Information Technology Skills (*WITS*) has been developed to support ENGL 100/101 teachers in helping students become competent in these areas:
http://www.gmu.edu/depts/english/composition/wits/

The website for *English Matters*:
http:/chnm.gmu.edu/ematters/

Landmarks in History of Nationally-Ranked WAC Program

by Chris Thaiss, English

The ranking by U.S. News and World Report in its *Best Colleges* issue (Sept. 2002) of George Mason's WAC program as No. 1 among public colleges and universities (No. 4 overall*) recognizes the dedication and good will of hundreds of GMU faculty and administrators over the 25 years of the growth of the program. The ranking creates a good opportunity to recount here a few of the earlier landmarks in the development of "writing in the disciplines," in part to help those newer to the University see how we've come to where we are and in part to recognize a few of the many groups and individuals who have made signal contributions.

Beginnings

"Writing across the curriculum" (or "writing in the disciplines") began here as a self-conscious endeavor in 1977. In that year, the Faculty Senate, responding to what had been identified by the national media as a literacy crisis (this alarm epitomized by the *Newsweek* cover of Dec. 9, 1975, "Why Johnny Can't Write"), surveyed faculty as to their perceptions of student writing, its deficiencies, and the causes of those deficiencies. As a result of the survey, the Senate created in 1978 a Literacy Task Force to propose solutions to what faculty agreed was a critical problem. Among the proposals were two that were implemented:

(1) a "composition tutorial center" (CTC), to augment both the two-year old "Writing Lab" and the existing 6-hour English composition requirement for first-year students. The CTC would screen all incoming students using a standardized test of English grammar and assign some for weekly tutoring; **(2)** a series of small workshops for interested faculty from across the departments, the goal of these workshops to introduce faculty to emerging "best practices" in designing writing assignments and in making helpful responses to student writing.

This second idea had been suggested by Don Gallehr of the English Department, who had begun the "writing lab" in 1975 and who in 1978 would run the first summer institute of the Northern Virginia Writing Project (NVWP) for K-12 teachers. The NVWP, as part of the National Writing Project, was introducing to local teachers ground-breaking research in writing development and

teaching practice that had been occurring in Europe and the U.S. and was training teachers as facilitators in school districts.

With the encouragement of the Senate, Don and I (with now-retired GMU professor of education Bob Gilstrap) received funding from the deans for a two-day retreat and a series of follow-up workshops for up to 20 faculty. Sixteen faculty from nine departments came forward and took part over the 1978-79 school year in demonstration lessons, regular writing about teaching, and the presentations on "teaching with writing" that they gave to one another. The success of the first year's events led to funding by the deans
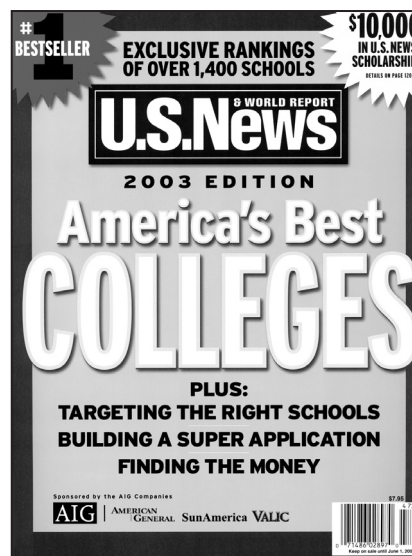
for a second year, for 20 different faculty, the entire program being named the Faculty Writing Program.

WAC Program Created

In 1980, the growing effort received a major funding boost when President George Johnson named the Faculty Writing Program GMU's entrant in the competition for the General Assembly's "Funds for Excellence," a new state program to support promising initiatives. With the funding, the WAC effort gained an office, a director (me) with a one-course release, the ability to pay stipends to faculty for more intensive development of new teaching practices, the ability to begin a newsletter for all faculty, and support for a state conference to encourage WAC program building in other Virginia colleges and universities.

Second Stage

Susan McLeod, in her research on WAC programs nationally, has identified the "second stage" of these programs as beginning at the point at which the principles of sound use of writing in teaching across disciplines become embedded in the formal curriculum (*College Composition and Communication*, 40 (1989), 337). Although the University's *"writing intensive" (WI) requirement*, implemented in 1995 and reaffirmed in the current general education requirements, has been the most emphatic statement of WAC's place in the curriculum, that "second stage" began here in 1982, when the Senate endorsed the *Plan for Alternative General Education (PAGE)*, a 12-course sequence for new students firmly founded on writing in all courses. (After 15 years as an alternative program for new students, PAGE was redefined and to some extent redesigned as the Honors Program in General Education, which maintains the WAC principle.)

Equally important for the building of WAC at GMU, in 1983 the Senate approved a change in the English composition requirement from six hours at the first-year level to three hours in the first year and three hours in the junior year. The new *English 302—"Advanced Composition"*—would be taught in three versions: for arts/humanities majors, for social science majors, and for science and technology majors (sections for business were added in 1986). The express rationale for the new course was to reinforce and support writing across the curriculum.

Thus, a concept that had been introduced at GMU, as it had in a few other pioneering schools, only a few years earlier, had become part of the required course structure. Although certainly the contributions of administrators and faculty in the first five years only begin to account for the many ways in which attention to student writing is part of the fabric of GMU today, they do bear recalling as an essential part of this most recent recognition.

* Others in the top five are: Harvard, Cornell, Princeton, and Yale

(For a chronology of landmarks in WAC up to the present, see our website, wac.gmu.edu.), under "History of WAC.")

Writing Assessment in Academic Units:
Results from the First Reporting Cycle
by Terry Myers Zawacki, Director, WAC

In the midst of difficult budget times, faculty have continued to demonstrate a high level of engagement in the process of assessing students' writing competencies, revealing, I think, our strong commitment to helping all of our students write effectively. First, then, I must extend a huge thank you from the Writing Assessment Group and the Office of the Provost to all of you who have been involved in the assessment effort thus far.

While the assessment effort has been mandated by the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), Mason's assessment plan is intended, first and foremost, to provide data that will be useful to us internally in designing writing-infused/intensive courses and assignments. To that end, not only have units gathered data on their students' writing competencies, they have also generated criteria for evaluating writing in their majors and developed advice on best practices for teaching with writing. As an example, you may want to look at the new web-based writing guides created for students in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences (**http://cnhs.gmu.edu/ writing**) and the School of Management (**http://classweb.gmu.edu/dbeach/ somguide/**), the first units to report in the three-year reporting cycle.

In June 2002, the Writing Assessment Group, comprised of representatives from all of the academic units, sent SCHEV a summary of data from reports prepared by CNHS and SOM. These initial reports are posted on SCHEV's "Reports of Institutional Effectiveness" (ROIE) website. The reports are intended to "provide meaningful information on the academic quality and operational efficiency of Virginia's public institutions of higher education."*

Here are excerpts from the GMU report on the **ROIE website** (**http://roie.schev.edu/**):

Standards for measuring competency: SOM and CNHS assessed student writing as "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" based on students' demonstrated ability to 1) achieve the purpose for the writing assignment, 2) organize a paper, 3) demonstrate critical thinking, 4) use proper grammar and mechanics, and 5) appropriately use academic content.

Methodology: Trained department-based faculty developed criteria for assessing writing, identified and collected appropriate student writing samples primarily from writing intensive courses, and scored a representative sample of student writing based on general and discipline-specific criteria. A total of 14 faculty and 5 staff participated in the writing assessment process for the two units. The writing of a total of 89 students and a total of 175 writing samples were assessed. The random sample represents 30% of graduating seniors in the nursing capstone course and 70% of the students enrolled in the SOM keystone course.

Results: The large majority of students (81% - 90%) were judged satisfactory or above in demonstrating each of the writing criteria. Nineteen percent of students were judged unsatisfactory in meeting the criterion of using proper grammar and mechanics. This finding may be influenced by the large percentage of ESL students (30% - 40%) in the sample population.

How Results Will Inform Pedagogy: 1) share with faculty the discipline-specific criteria for writing and the results of the writing assessment, 2) refine writing assignments using the identified writing criteria, 3) consider how writing criteria may be appropriately applied to students at different levels (first year to senior), 4) provide workshops for faculty on incorporating more writing into courses, 6) provide students information about writing, and 7) develop writing sessions for students that address identified weaknesses.

As you know, we are already enacting many of these recommendations, which is one of the major reasons our writing in the disciplines program was ranked so highly by our peers at other institutions for *U.S. News and World Report's* "College Issue." I'll close with another thank you to those faculty who have been doing such a wonderful job of teaching with writing over the years.

* According to the ROIE site, "SCHEV initiated and led in creating this new accountability tool. In 1999, SCHEV presented the concept of measures of institutional effectiveness. In 2000, the Governor and the General Assembly agreed that this SCHEV initiative was a good idea and mandated by law ROIE's creation through the 2000-2002 Appropriation Act (Item 162 #11c)."

E-Portfolios
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But the similarity between the basic tools doesn't mean a similarity in the final portfolios. New Century College's work on electronic portfolios (funded in part by a grant from the Technology Across the Curriculum initiative) suggests that electronic portfolios not only change the way in which learning is represented, but also change the learning that is represented.

First, electronic writing offers a *more complex relationship between thought and its expression in writing*. The medium itself is fluid, inviting an ongoing revisioning of ideas and conclusions. It encourages writers to be responsive to new ideas and the changes in perspective caused by the passage of time. The use of hyperlinking enhances interaction among ideas, actions, and people. It encourages exploration and experimentation, thinking across boundaries, and what Natalie Dehn, the AI researcher, calls "sensitivity to unforeseen opportunities." At the same time, electronic writing is also encyclopaedic. As long as a writer possesses sufficient storage space, nothing need ever be lost.

Electronic writing thus encourages the *building of a portfolio organically*, over a period of time potentially much longer than a semester. The flexibility of hyperlinking, allied to the traditional cut-and-paste, allows old pathways through the portfolio to be dismantled and new networks to be created. These networks of ideas (often much richer intellectually than tidy hierarchies of thesis, supporting points and supporting evidence) can emerge from the work, rather than being super-imposed upon it, and remain open to interpretation and re-interpretation as long as the portfolio is in process.

In addition, the electronic portfolio,

even if created in a basic tool like Word, *accommodates multiple learning styles*. In the process of portfolio creation, for example, the sense of space and depth offered in an electronic environment might allow writers who 'can't organize' their writing on a two-dimensional sheet of paper to use hyperlinks to create a three-dimensional organization.

And the *representation of learning can be richer*, too. Not only do print portfolios tend to eliminate anything that cannot be translated into text or two-dimensional images. They also privilege those literacies as more aca-

demically 'acceptable.' They thus accentuate the barriers between literacies, and create a hierarchy of value often at odds with that experienced by individuals or required in professional workplaces.

In an electronic space, those who perhaps struggle with words but excel with images might combine the two, and access a richness of perception previously denied both to them as writers and to their faculty members as assessors. A student whose degree is in the visual or performing arts, or in the theory or practice of film or video can begin to

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Grammar Corner:
"AWK" Sentence Constructions
by Megan Kelly, Linguistics TA

A comment such as "awkward," while descriptive of how a professor reads the sentence, provides little guidance to students, especially those who are beginning writers. Sentences marked "awkward" may be awkward for many reasons, but most often they are lacking the kind of coherence Martha Kolln, the author of *Rhetorical Grammar*, describes as the "known-new contract."

The "known-new contract" maintains that readers expect writers to provide old (known) information first, generally in the subject of the sentence, followed by new information. Since the end of the sentence typically receives the most stress, this technique enables writers to draw attention to the main focus of their sentence—the new information. In the following sentence, the main stress falls on the direct object—"essay": *Rachel wrote an essay on the impact of the Internet on society.* We assume that Rachel has already been referred to in the paragraph and that it's the essay that's new information.

The "known-new contract" exposes two

misconceptions about good writing: that students should avoid passive voice and "there" or "it" as sentence openers. Although the prevailing belief is that the passive voice weakens a sentence, it is an effective means of retaining the integrity of the "known-new contract" by fronting the known information to the subject position. For example, the following passive sentence demonstrates coherence with the previous sentence: *Her essay was submitted to the undergraduate magazine.*

The second misconception is the belief that the non-referential subjects "there" and "it" are overly wordy and, therefore, unnecessary. However, constructions with non-referential subjects also serve to shift the stress in the sentence to the new information. For example, in the following sentence, the stress falls on Rachel, emphasizing the person who wrote the essay: *It was Rachel who wrote the winning essay.*

While you may not get to this level of technicality in your students' writing, the "known-new contract" may help you understand why a student's writing does not cohere. Perhaps you'll find the concept useful for thinking about your own writing as well.

E-Portfolios

include samples of work in the media in which they were created, rather than 'translated' into words, or appended as 'extras' to a text portfolio.

Students can also display the integration of learning styles, and the multi-layered literacies that result, in ways impossible in print. Critical thinking, creative process or problem-solving often occur through an interaction between literacies (textual, visual, technical, oral, etc.) which only an electronic portfolio can fully represent, either through the inclusion of multiple media, or as an integrated multimedia presentation itself.

Finally, both the *form of the portfolio* and the *target audience remain, almost indefinitely, malleable.* A writer may begin a comprehensive electronic portfolio as a final assessment for a single class, then rework the material into a mini-portfolio of 'highlights' to send to a potential summer employer or internship site. Subsequently, several 'semester portfolios' might evolve, at the same time, into an extensive final graduation portfolio directed towards an academic reviewer and into a series of electronic resumes precisely targeted to specific employers.

E-portfolios also bring students and faculty into *new ethical, as well as intellectual, spaces* where answers depend on the nature of the portfolio being created. The ease of plagiarism and copyright violation in an electronic environment mean that both students and faculty embarking on e-portfolio assessment might need some background in computer ethics. Issues of privacy quickly arise, too, if students are asked to publish portfolios on the web which might contain personal information, or departments find programs or teaching mis-represented in published student portfolios. And it's all too easy, as a student creating an e-portfolio, or

faculty member assessing one, to fall under the spell of a 'glitzy' hi-tech presentation, and let content's importance diminish. Thus the introduction of electronic portfolios often requires the revisioning of the portfolio assignment itself, the creation of a new rhetorical context for both students and faculty, and careful decisions about the delivery medium (public v. private) for the e-portfolio.

In the end, the most important goal of any portfolio is not the object itself but the understanding and knowledge communicated through its creation. The electronic portfolio represents perhaps the most compelling way yet for communication between students and faculty to take place.

For more information, see:
http://classweb.gmu.edu/jyoung8/ eportfolio/

and also
http://aahe.ital.utexas.edu/ electronicportfolios/

Modules

Each module on the TEC web site will include a step-by-step tutorial on using relevant hardware and software. The modules will also contain assignments written by GMU faculty designed to encourage real-life applications of the technology skills taught in each of the tutorials. Current modules in development include:

- A **Web Development module** showing students how to create and upload web pages. Students will learn the basics of web page design, html coding and two web page authoring programs, Composer and Dreamweaver.

- An **Images module** containing

information about digital image manipulation.

- A **Sound for the Web module** taking students step-by-step through recording sounds, both on a PC or a Mac. Students will learn how to edit and compress their audio files and then deliver those files to the web.

- A **Digital Video module** offering tutorials for two digital video editing software programs, Premiere and iMovie, as well as for a program called PowerDVD, which captures video stills from DVD movies.

- A **Database Searching module** giving students a detailed tutorial in the use of scholarly databases. Using step-by-step examples, the module will guide students through the use different database search modes, such as keyword and subject searching.

- An **Archiving module** discussing why archiving is used and showing students how to archive information for public or personal use.