TIME TO WRITE

WRITING (ALMOST) EVERY DAY IN A LARGE UNDERGRADUATE CLASS

Professor Morton Gernsbacher
Department of Psychology

I have been teaching in higher education for nearly three-and-a-half decades. Over a decade ago, I volitionally moved all my UW–Madison courses online. First, I moved my 25-student senior capstone courses onto the Internet, followed by my small graduate seminars, and, eventually, my large 130-student lecture-style undergraduate course.

In all of my Internet-based courses, I require (almost) daily writing assignments (Foertsch & Gernsbacher, 2008; Gernsbacher, 2014). Why? Because, when carefully designed, online writing assignments can help enhance students' writing skills by multiplying opportunities for practice through short, frequent writing activities, and can extend the audience for student papers to include more readers than just the instructor.

The Importance of Daily Practice

A core principle of learning is that shorter, more frequent opportunities to practice lead to better mastery than longer, less frequent episodes. In psychological terms, when a student acquires skills through more frequent practice, it is considered distributed learning, whereas when a student acquires skills through less frequent practice, it is considered massed learning. Distributed learning almost always trumps massed learning in studies on performance, memory, and critical thinking skills (Benjamin, & Tullis, 2010).

Internet-based higher education enables more frequent engagement with the material than traditional face-to-face higher education. For example, most face-to-face undergraduate classes meet only twice a week, and many seminar-style courses, including graduate-level courses, meet only once a week.

While we as instructors would like to believe that our students continue to practice their skills when they are not in class, many students wait until the night before class meets to engage with the material. The students then attend class, but several days, if not a week, pass before the students engage with the material again.

Students in my online courses are required to log in almost daily and to complete five writing assignments each week. I explain to students that it is not in their best interest to amass their practice and attempt to do a week's worth of assignments in one sitting. Doing so would be akin to trying to do a week's worth of athletic workouts in one visit to the gym; trying to eat a week's worth of food in one sitting; trying to visit five European cities in one day. It simply would not be feasible.

The Importance of Writing to an Audience

Employers in every field consistently rank writing skills as a priority for professional success (Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013). Most college instructors see the need for students to gain more practice and improve as writers. Online education can help enhance students' writing skills by capitalizing on the Internet's inherently broad-based audience.

Writing to an audience that extends beyond the instructor improves technical aspects of student writing (Day, Raven, & Newman, 1998); encourages students to write longer and more often (Kaplan, Rupley, Sparks, & Holcomb, 2007); and increases students' mastery of appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos, as well as their treatment of opposing views (Gaddis, Napierkowski, Guzman, & Muth, 2000).

Professor
Morton Gernsbacher

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The following online writing assignments are taken from Morton Gernsbacher's online undergraduate course Psychology 532: Psychological Effects of the Internet. A complete catalogue of Gernsbacher's writing assignments for this course, as well as the course syllabus, can be found on the WAC website (writing.wisc.edu/wac).

Sample Online Writing Assignments

Expository – Jigsaw Writing Assignment

Read (and learn) the definition of meta-analysis; the advantages of performing a meta-analysis; the definition of random assignment. Then, read the Executive Summary of the U.S. Department of Education's (2010) report, "Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies." Of the 12 key findings reported in the U.S. Department of Education's report, select one key finding (that no one else in your section has selected).

Then, go to Unit 3: Assignment #2 Discussion Board and write a post of at least 200 words in which you state that key finding by providing the exact quotation from the report, and explain what you think that key finding means.

Persuasive Writing Assignment

Choose one of the following: Watch Daphne Koller's (2012) TED talk, "What We're Learning from Online Education" or read Alex Tabarrok's (2012) article, "Why Online Education Works." Then, imagine the following: One of your roommates or friends (who is not a Psychology major), one of your parents, aunts, uncles, or grandparents, or one of your instructors who teach only in-person classes has found out that you are taking a completely online course. This person asks you, "Does online education work? And, if it does work, why does it work?"

Go to Unit 3: Assignment #4 Discussion Board and write a post of at least 200 words post answering this person's questions (address the person by name or pseudonym). In the first 100 words, answer the question of "Does online education work?" by explaining to this person the results of the meta-analysis reported in the U.S. Department of Education's report. Be sure to explain, in terms that this person will understand, what a meta-analysis is, what random assignment means, what an effect size is, and why these are important features of the U.S. Department of Education's study.

In the second 100 words, answer the question of "Why does online education work?" by summarizing what you learned from either Daphne Koller's (2012) TED talk or Alex Tabarrok's (2012) article. You may write another 100 words, if you like, telling this person how and why online education works by referencing how and why you are learning in this course. But your first 200 words need to respond to this person's questions using the materials from the Department of Education meta-analysis and either the Koller TED talk or the Tabarrok article.

Descriptive Writing Assignment

Watch Professor Gernsbacher's [25-minute] "How Is the Internet Changing the Way We Communicate?" lecture video. Then go to Unit 4: Assignment #1 Discussion Board and write a post of at least 200 words. In the first 100 words, answer the question of whether the Internet is making our communication briefer, answer the question of whether the Internet is making our communication less formal, explain what it means to prefer intransience over transience, and explain what it means to prefer asynchrony over synchrony

In the second 100 words, identify and describe a specific situation, either from Professor Gernsbacher's video or from your own life, in which there was a preference to communicate asynchronously. You must identify and describe a specific situation that no one else in your section has yet identified or described.

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For example, over the course of one semester, each student in my 130-student online undergraduate course, Psych 532: Psychological Effects of the Internet, composes approximately 75 posts, with each post comprising two to three paragraphs. In essence, each student writes the equivalent of a five-page double-spaced paper over the course of 15 weeks.

Each week, I skim my students' posts and read a sample of posts closely. I grade using a simple three-point scale: 2 (on time well-constructed, fulfills requirements of the assignment); 1 (late OR poorly constructed OR doesn't fulfill all the requirements); or 0 (not submitted). I've been grading with this three-point system for over 15 years, and I really like it. Students understand it, and it keeps me from splitting hairs.

The primary readers of the students' posts are the other students in the class. Across the semester, students read and comment on hundreds of other students' posts. To make the peer response more manageable, I break the class into small groups. For instance, rather than have all 130 students interact with each other online, I divide the class into 14 sections of nine students each, so, over the course of the semester, the students can build up a rich community among their groups.

Samples of Daily Writing Assignments
(See assignment samples on previous page)

In my experience, the most successful online writing assignments are those that have students engage with course material critically and imaginatively. In the majority of my assignments, I ask students to answer a specific question or complete a specific task, and then post their answers to the course discussion board. To motivate students to read each other's writing, I typically require that students make a unique contribution to the discussion.

The (almost) daily writing assignments I use in my Internet-based courses mostly require expository writing; however, at least one assignment per week requires persuasive writing, and every couple of weeks, an assignment requires descriptive or first-person narrative writing.

For expository writing, if there is only one 'correct' answer, the prompt is phrased as a jigsaw. Named after social psychologist Elliot Aronson's jigsaw classroom, jigsaw prompts require each student to contribute information that hasn't been previously discussed (e.g., Find a ___ that no one else has found; Explain the ___ in a way that no one else has used; Identify a ___ that no one else has identified, and so forth). •

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WRITING TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT:
RESULTS FROM A LARGE-SCALE MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL STUDY

Can writing assignments really lead to deeper student learning in classes across the university? Where's the evidence? And what's one's role as an instructor? In a study published in the November 2015 issue of *Research in the Teaching of English,* collaborators from the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Council of Writing Program Administrators provide empirical evidence of the value of writing assignments in undergraduate courses, both across the curriculum and across the nation.

This evidence-based investigation marks one the few large-scale, multi-institutional studies that examines the relationship between writing and learning. However, unlike other similarly sized studies, which often are limited to prescriptions for the increased quantity of writing, this study explores questions of the quality of writing and writing assignments as they relate to increased student learning.

The study found that when writing assignments have these three characteristics, students actually learn more:

Interactive Writing Processes...	Meaning-Making Writing Tasks...	Clear Writing Expectations...
"...involve the student writers communicating orally or in writing with one or more persons at some point between receiving an assignment and submitting the final draft. [Examples include] conferencing with students, incorporating peer review in classes, and encouraging students to visit the writing center to discuss their drafts" (Anderson, et al. 206).	"...require students to engage in some form of integrative, critical, or original thinking. Examples include asking students to apply a concept learned in class to their past experience, relate knowledge learned in another class to knowledge presented in the current class, support a contestable claim with evidence, or evaluate a policy, practice, or position" (Anderson, et al. 207).	"...involve instructors providing students with an accurate understanding of what they are asking their students to show that they can do in an assignment and the criteria by which the instructors will evaluate the students' submissions... [Examples include] presenting assignments in writing...and creating, distributing, and discussing grading rubrics when assignments are first given to students" (Anderson, et al. 207).

Anderson, Paul, Chris M. Anson, Robert M. Gonyea, and Charles Paine. "The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results from a Large-Scale Multi-Institutional Study." *Research in the Teaching of English* 50.2 (2015): 199-235.

If you'd like to see examples of assignments from UW–Madison that have these characteristics or would like to see how you can incorporate these tools into your assignments, Brad Hughes (bthughes@wisc.edu) would be happy to meet with you! •

Kathleen Daly
L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

During her keynote presentation at the UW–Madison Teaching Academy's Summer Institute in June 2015, Associate Professor Erica Halverson from the department of Curriculum and Instruction made a deliberatively provocative statement to her colleagues. She claimed, "Any assignment that students can cheat on is a bad assignment." But Halverson wasn't discussing plagiarism—she was advocating that instructors design writing assignments that personalize students' learning.

Professor Erica Halverson
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

To Halverson, designing assignments that ask students to meld their personal interests with shared course material not only reduces the possibility of students cheating, but also enhances their learning. She explains: "If the assignment is about repeating known answers to questions as a measure of disciplinary knowledge, then what are we as instructors really measuring? This is not to say there isn't utility in memorizing core concepts in a discipline, but it is also important for students to be able to connect disciplinary ideas to something that is important to them in a unique and authentic way."

Starting with Goals

Before designing an assignment and developing evaluation criteria, Halverson considers the learning goals she has for her students, and asks herself, "What do I want my students to know and be able to do by the end of my course? How do I identify learning goals? Do the activities I assign actually help students meet those goals?"

In Halverson's courses, students have to be able to demonstrate not just that they understand course concepts, but that they're able to use them in some sort of representational way that matters to them and to the field. For example, in her FIG (First-Year Interest Group) course, "Representing Self Through Media," Halverson assigns a group project that asks students to create and produce a podcast based on NPR's *This American Life* program. In the syllabus, Halverson explains that the course is designed to help students develop "more sophisticated, interdisciplinary understandings of core concepts—identity, literacy, and representation."

After discussing and developing an understanding of these three concepts, students are asked to communicate their understanding of these course concepts to an outside audience through the podcast genre.

In the majority of her classes, Halverson assigns individual projects in which each student is working with audiences, goals, and processes that are unique to his or her project. In order to build the community of the classroom, Halverson makes sure that much of the course is structured around shared material. She explains, "it's important to use course readings and discussions to supplement their individual work while also making connections between student projects. When individual experiences feel connected to the class community, they are meaningful."

Authentic Audiences

Halverson suggests that instructors and/or students locate an outside audience for students' projects. Engaging with authentic audiences allows students an opportunity to share their work beyond just the course instructor, simultaneously raising the stakes of the project and making it more meaningful.

For her FIG course, Halverson gives students multiple options for selecting an audience for their projects: "Students pursue venues for sharing their work including a live public listening party they plan as a class, on-air opportunities with the student radio station and the city's community radio station, and on-campus opportunities including the campus' annual undergraduate research symposium."

However, for courses in which students are working individually, she helps them identify an appropriate audience for their project: "If I'm not the ideal audience for a student's project, I find the people who are." In the past, Halverson has also brought in outside experts and audience members to "judge" student projects and provide feedback.

Assignment Description: "*This American Life* Project"

There will be several project milestones you'll need to meet over the course of the semester. I will describe them briefly here, but we'll also talk about each milestone as it approaches:

What do you want your story to be about? – This will be the first chance you get to think through what you want your piece to be about. While I am not expecting a profound, finished piece of writing, the more in-depth you are able to describe your idea, the better feedback you'll get from me and the sooner you'll be able to see who is interested in similar ideas. Due 9/22.

Pitch – Everyone will be expected to "pitch" or sell his/her story idea to the class and to a small panel of experts. You will prepare a short oral presentation (you can use visual and/or aural aids if you choose). Due 10/12.

Interview questions & outline – You should draft a list of questions you will ask the people you are planning to interview. It may help at this point to create a basic outline of what you envision for the overall structure of the story. This should include ideas about music, whom you want to interview (and why), and what other sound might be included. Due 10/28.
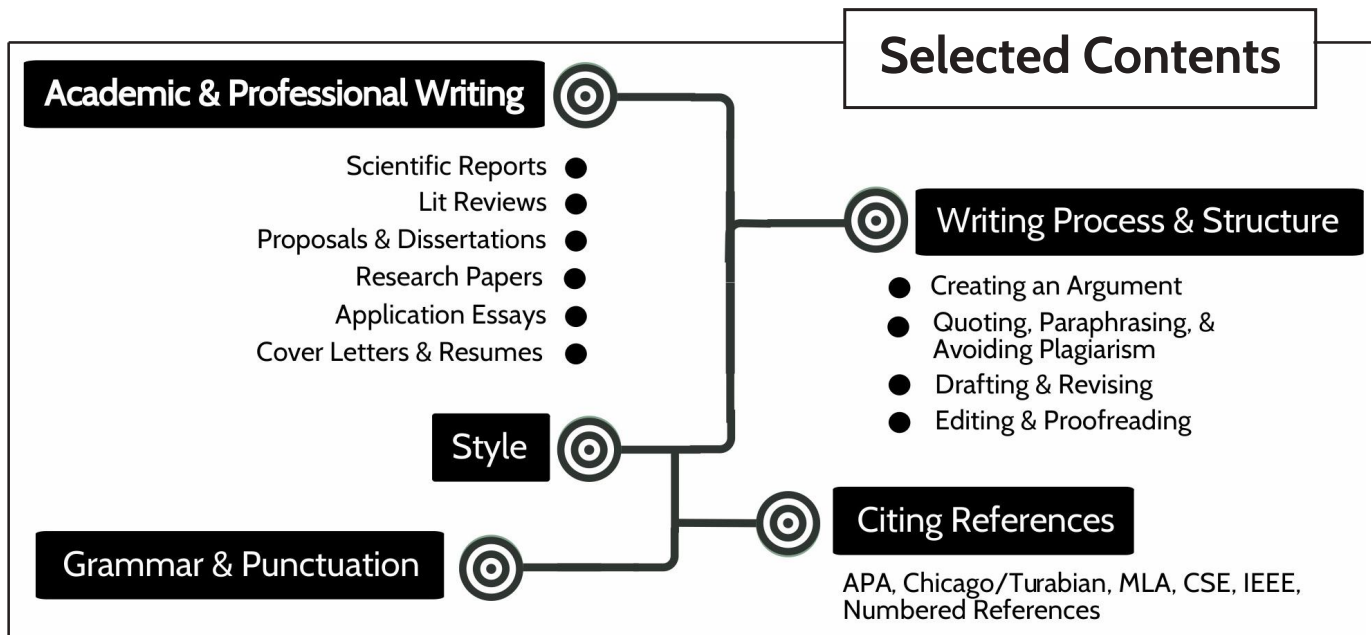
Final piece – Your final audio file will be due to me on the day of our scheduled "final exam": Due on 12/22. However, this will not be the end of our journey. I plan to create podcasts of your work and find outlets for sharing them, both via the web and on the radio. I would also like to host a few nights of listening parties for you to invite friends and family to hear and discuss your work. I think it would be best if we did this after the holidays so that we can pick days/nights and times that work for the most people. More on this as we get to know each other. You will not be "graded" on these public sharing opportunities, but it's my experience that the pride of creating a piece of work that people you know (and don't know) can appreciate and enjoy is worth more than a letter grade.

Available through the UW–Madison Writing Center's website, the UW–Madison Writer's Handbook is a reference guide designed for academic and professional writing. Drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors every month, the Writer's Handbook provides over 100 pages of high-quality instructional material for undergraduate and graduate students in all disciplines.

The Writing Center hopes that these materials can help you integrate writing instruction tailored to particular assignments in your courses. With information about a number of common genres of writing and expert advice for approaching various stages of the writing process, these resource materials offer writers at all levels general guidelines, sample papers, and recommended strategies for approaching the writing process.

If you have ideas or requests for new topics to add to the Writer's Handbook, please feel free to suggest those to the Director of the Writing Center, Brad Hughes, bthughes@wisc.edu. •

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HOW TO AVOID DESIGNING BAD WRITING ASSIGNMENTS, *CONT.*

Making It Manageable: Formative and Formal Checkpoints

But is this really manageable for instructors with limited time and resources? "Teaching with writing in smart ways always takes time, but there are limits to what an instructor can do. There has to be a balance and shared responsibility." To achieve this balance, Halverson assigns projects that have multiple steps and include multiple assessments—both formative checkpoints, for which students have the opportunity for reflection and revision, and formal checkpoints, for which students receive points toward their final grade.

> " When I have my students engage in extended production processes, they want to do something with it. The process itself motivates students to share. "

By breaking down assignments into multiple stages, Halverson explains, both the students' and the instructor's workloads are better distributed across a longer, more manageable period of time. This also creates possibilities for students to engage in substantial revision, which increases their investment. Halverson notes, "When I have my students engage in extended production processes, they want to do something with it. The process itself motivates students to share."

Many of these same principles apply to Halverson's graduate-level courses in which students are asked to write in more traditional academic genres. Regardless of her students' level of study, Halverson has found that using personalizable, application-based assignments helps motivate students to engage with course material and "take agency over their learning." •

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