

# TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
*Supporting faculty, staff, and teaching assistants as they teach with writing*

## ENGAGING WITH SCHOLARLY DEBATES: INFORMAL AND FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN A CHICAN@ AND LATIN@ STUDIES COURSE

Mike Haen

*Writing Across the Curriculum*

In his course “Whiteness and Racial Formation in the United States” (Chican@ and Latin@ Studies 330), Assistant Professor Revel Sims asks his students to explore the historical formation of white identity, or whiteness, and to engage with scholarly arguments about race. Students examine how economic, political, and other forces have contributed, and continue to contribute, to white supremacy. Sims’ scholarly work focuses on urban change and gentrification, and how race impacts those processes.

Offered through the Chican@ and Latin@ Studies Program, the course starts with a foundational unit on the origins of whiteness during European colonialism and throughout westward expansion in the 1800s. It then moves on to a unit that introduces scholarly theories like Critical Race Theory. Finally, students consider how racialization is implicated in contemporary issues like urbanization (e.g., gentrification) and citizenship (e.g., mass deportation). By the end of the semester, Sims wants his class of about 20 students to learn how to look critically—in a historically and theoretically informed way—at forms of racialization in everyday life.

However, this kind of learning does not occur spontaneously or magically. It happens incrementally through students’ repeated engagement with course materials. In the past



**Professor Revel Sims**  
Department of Planning and  
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two years, Sims has successfully promoted student engagement and learning through carefully designed formal and informal writing tasks.

### Using Writing to Promote Learning

For Sims, these writing assignments help students think critically about the course material. He assigns three formal papers (2-4 pages, double-spaced), which Sims acknowledges are difficult: “I admit that I have created somewhat impossible writing tasks for my students in this course. But I do this intentionally because these course topics are so complex

and do not have easy answers.” To help prepare for these formal papers, Sims requires students to write a total of 14 weekly informal reflections. In addition to these tasks, Sims guides his students’ learning through individual feedback and in-class discussions.

### Asking Students to Take a Position

A central learning goal for students in the course is to “foster critical racial thinking in order to unpack the historical, economic, and political forces behind the social construction and maintenance of whiteness.” To accomplish this goal, Sims requires that students read scholarship in the interdisciplinary area of whiteness studies. Students also review primary documents (e.g., Virginia Slave Laws).

*(continued on page 3)*

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### In this issue...

Writing Assignments in a Chican@  
and Latin@ Studies Course  
page 1

Doing More with Less:  
Streamlining Your  
Writing Curriculum  
page 2

Introducing the New  
WAC Assistant Director  
page 4

Announcing the Spring 2018  
WAC/Delta Expeditions  
in Learning Seminar  
page 5

Thanks to Our Fall 2017  
Communication-B TA Fellows  
page 6

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Many, many thanks to Elise Gold,  
Jen Fandel, and Kathleen Daly for their careful  
proofreading and editing of this issue.

# DOING MORE WITH LESS: STREAMLINING YOUR WRITING CURRICULUM

David Zimmerman  
Professor, English Department



I have designed many undergraduate literature courses in my eighteen years at UW-Madison on topics ranging from American Dream literature to “Imagining Apocalypse.” The same question has guided the planning of them all: what do I want my students to be able to do at the end of the course that they can’t do, or do as well, at the start? Despite the variety of course topics and formats, my answer has always been the same. Whether they’re reluctant readers and writers in large introductory lecture courses or English majors in more specialized upper-level courses, I want my students to learn how to write original, compelling, and consequential analytical arguments about the course literature and the cultural topics and concepts addressed by the literature.

At the start of my teaching career I would not have been able to articulate this answer as a goal of mine. I had only a vague notion of what writing skills I wanted my students to learn, and the weaknesses in my students’ essays showed this. It took me several years to identify these skills (for example, how to use textual data to support what I call a “staircase” argument) with any precision. However, once I could do this, I was able to design a sequence of writing activities and assignments built around these specific analytical and argumentative skills. I also reframed my lectures and discussion activities so that they self-consciously modeled and called attention to these skills. To make time for developing these skills in class, I’ve had to shelve some course content, but I’ve never regretted this.

The attention I give to writing instruction in class has directly benefitted my students by guiding and deepening their preparation for their major essays, on which much of their course grade is based. In my large lecture courses (over 200 students), the additional writing instruction has also provided a welcome foundation my TAs build on in planning their weekly sections. The attention to writing in class and in discussion sections has boosted my students’ interest in analytical writing—in making more nuanced arguments, for example—and their commitment to becoming more successful writers.

## Teaching a Streamlined Set of Writing Skills

Some instructors design a course to expose students to a broad range of analytical and creative writing tasks. I have had more success with the opposite approach, through which I teach a narrow but tightly streamlined set of writing skills that students practice and develop repeatedly throughout the semester. For this reason, I use the same prompt for all major writing assign-

ments. Indeed, this is the only formal prompt I use across all my undergraduate classes. I change only the texts that students write about, and the prompt reads as follows:

*Analyze the significance of a pair or sequence of details, passages, or moments in and for one of the following works: [book x, book y, book z]. Be sure to analyze and emphasize how it serves the text’s argument (i.e., what the text is saying or showing) about a particular keyword or intersection of keywords.*

The prompt may look easy, but it’s not. It requires students to combine three difficult analytical tasks, each of which students have practiced regularly in anticipatory writing assignments and class activities. First, the essay must offer an original, discerning, and persuasive analysis of a textual echo (i.e., a series of textual moments the text invites us to link), the importance of which may have escaped our notice on a first reading. The essay must also show how this echo serves to advance the text’s study of a particular “keyword” (i.e., an idea, problem, or question). And finally, the essay must show how the text, through the construction of this echo, advances our understanding of that keyword.

For me, this assignment has at least three payoffs. First, it gives students considerable freedom, ensuring that no two essays are alike. Every essay focuses on different textual moments, establishes fresh textual connections, and marshals an original thesis and argument. For this reason, I look forward to reading every essay. Second, the assignment demands that students think carefully and critically about new ideas and arguments, ensuring that students feel intellectually challenged. Finally, it focuses on the reading, critical thinking, and writing skills that are key to the course and to students’ success in the course. Early in my teaching career I made the common rookie mistake of penalizing student writers for not showcasing writing and analytical skills I had not taught. I realize now how unfair that was. I’m careful now to grade only the aspects of writing that I teach.

**“Early in my teaching career I made the common rookie mistake of penalizing student writers for not showcasing writing and analytical skills I had not taught.”**

## Crafting a Thesis: Helping Students Develop a Key Skill

Over the years I have designed handouts, mini-lectures, class activities, and assignments that anchor my writing curriculum. Because half the work of producing a successful essay in my classes involves coming up with an original, compelling, and consequential central claim, much of my writing instruction focuses on theses—what a thesis looks like, what a successful thesis is supposed to do, and how to craft one. Students identify one of my

*(continued on page 5)*

## ENGAGING WITH SCHOLARLY DEBATES: INFORMAL AND FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN A CHICAN@ AND LATIN@ STUDIES COURSE, CONTINUED

*(continued from page 1)*

With the first iteration of the course (in 2015), Sims gave one longer writing assignment—a traditional research paper. But he found drawbacks to that approach: “I soon realized I needed to break things down and help my students understand how to make an argument about things they cared about.” The shorter position papers Sims assigns help students construct more precise and manageable arguments about whiteness that are informed by careful consideration of the scholarship as well as their own experiences and interests.

For all the position papers, which account for a sizeable portion of the final grade (60%), Sims wants students to engage with scholarly arguments about whiteness, and he requires them to build their own arguments about forces contributing to white supremacy. For each paper, Sims expects students to include (1) an introduction containing a summary of the issue and relevant background information and a clear, concise statement of their argument/thesis and (2) supporting documentation or evidence of their position. Sims also believes that assigning several position papers allows for a fairer assessment of student growth and learning, by offering opportunities to intervene if a student is not demonstrating adequate progress in achieving the course’s learning objectives.

**“I soon realized I needed to break things down and help my students understand how to make arguments about things they cared about.”**

### Scaffolding the Position Papers

Early in his teaching of the course, Sims noticed that students often struggled to separate and appreciate the many nuances of racial formation and white supremacy. Instead, as Sims notes, “students sometimes see everything as relevant when talking about race, which can be unproductive if we want to get to a deeper understanding of the scholarly arguments about the historical development of white supremacy.”

With the first position paper assignment, Sims wants to help students “disaggregate some of the intersectional thinking that students cling to in our postmodern times.” So, for this position paper, students select one of three prominent scholarly arguments about how white supremacy developed or emerged, as articulated in the whiteness studies literature.

This first task evaluates students’ understanding of scholarly arguments about how white supremacist racism (1) developed to maintain ruling class domination, (2) formed to restrict sexual relationships, or (3) emerged from European culture and history itself, rather than due to class or gender reasons. By taking a position on one of these arguments, students demonstrate their developing understanding of scholarly discourse about whiteness.

The second and third position papers build from the first assignment. In the second paper, Sims wants students to “choose some topic that interests them, whether it be a current event or scenario, and apply theoretical thinking or literature to it.” As stated in

his syllabus, Sims asks students to choose one of five theories of race (e.g., ethnic assimilation, Critical Race Theory, etc.) and argue why that particular theory is useful for understanding some phenomenon that they find interesting or difficult to understand (this assignment is shown on page 4).

For example, for the second position paper, one of his students from a recent semester chose to focus on the phenomenon of body modification (e.g., tattoos and piercings) and its relationship to racialization and whiteness. This student analyzed how individuals’ body modifications are connected to racial formation and why different bodies might be perceived, or raced, differently by different communities because of certain modifications.

Sims recalls this successful paper: “I had one student who did a fantastic job of applying Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of borderlands, which posits how individuals negotiate various racial or cultural identities, to body modification and its relationship to racialization.” Through writing, the student demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of the theory and the topic he chose. In the final paper, Sims gives students the freedom to articulate an argument about whether or not whiteness should be abolished altogether. Ending with this paper forces students to define “the central tenets of whiteness” in their own words, which demonstrates their learning from a semester of reading, thinking, and discussing.

Overall, Sims sees two pedagogical benefits of the position papers: “First, I think these papers help students practice and build skills in argumentation, which can help them in their other courses in the social sciences. The other aspect is that these papers force students to analyze—in a scholarly and theoretical way—some aspect of race they genuinely care about or are struggling with.”

### Reflecting and Working Collaboratively

In addition to the formal writing tasks, Professor Sims helps his students learn through informal writing and speaking activities. First, for each class meeting, he asks students to write and submit a short reflection about at least one of the readings. The reflections ensure that students have engaged with the reading material, and, as Sims also explains, these shorter assignments “get them to practice writing out a feeling or response to claims made in a reading.”

These reflections, which are worth 15% of the final grade, help spark class discussion by bringing students’ concerns, and sometimes frustrated or dissenting responses, to the forefront. Before students complete the second position paper, Sims also requires them to form groups of three to five and develop a 15-30 minute presentation on one of the five theoretical approaches (e.g., Critical Race Theory) covered in the second unit.

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## ENGAGING WITH SCHOLARLY DEBATES: INFORMAL AND FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN A CHICAN@ AND LATIN@ STUDIES COURSE, CONTINUED

### Position Paper #2 for “Whiteness and Racial Formation”

Despite how it is often presented, theory is not an abstract exercise among academics within the “ivory tower.” On the contrary, theory is a popular practice that is crucial for not only understanding complex phenomena, but also engaging with and transforming phenomena.

The second position paper asks that students chose one of the five theories of race covered in this class—i.e., ethnic assimilationism, the inner colonial model, structuralist and Marxian approaches, Critical Race Theory, and Omi and Winant’s racial formation—and argue why that theory is useful/necessary for understanding a particular phenomenon of their choice that is relevant for whiteness. As clearly and succinctly as possible, the paper should summarize the theory and devote the majority of their paper toward describing how the approach explains the topic. Students are encouraged to select a topic that they are knowledgeable about or are interested in. For example, some broad areas that students might draw from are music, language, citizenship, social movements, education, etc. As a good, general rule of thumb, the more specific the issue, the easier it will be to dissect it theoretically.

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In these presentations, students need to provide the following: (1) a summary of the theoretical approach that describes key concepts and terms, (2) at least one example of how the theory could be applied to a current event or phenomenon, and (3) thoughts on the overall value of the theoretical approach for understanding whiteness. This group work helps students develop careful and thoughtful approaches for the second position paper (described earlier).

#### Teaching about Race

Although Sims has successfully promoted student learning by using writing in his course, teaching about race is still a challenging undertaking, and it was especially so during the 2016 presidential election when issues like immigration were much talked about.

Sims explained, “Teaching about race at that time was tricky because it was emotional and, to me, it made the most sense to give students a space to simply talk about what was happening around them and how all of it mattered in the context of our class.” Sims found it important to draw on his students’ own concerns and experiences in relation to everyday political events or issues.

In his teaching, Professor Sims values his students’ ability to bring their own knowledge and experiences to bear on the course material, and he advises, “in courses like this, or any that deal with issues surrounding race, instructors need to think about how they can tap into their students’ already existing knowledge.” His writing assignments, and the course itself, value students’ experiences, but also challenge their ideas by exposing them to debates about race and asking them to take a stance in those debates. •

## INTRODUCING THE NEW ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF WAC



**Mike Haen**  
Composition & Rhetoric

In May 2017, Mike Haen was invited to become the Assistant Director of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). Currently, he works with faculty, teaching assistants, and staff to help them integrate writing into their course designs and daily teaching practices. Mike is a PhD student in Composition and Rhetoric in the English Department. He holds a BA in Writing-Intensive English from Marquette University and an MA in English (emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition) from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he spent two years teaching introductory college writing.

At UW-Madison, he has taught introductory composition and Comm-B writing courses. For the past three semesters, he has tutored in the Writing Center. This semester, Mike has enjoyed working with faculty and TAs across the disciplines. Mike would love to talk with you about designing effective writing assignments, responding to and evaluating student writing, scaffolding writing assignments, developing peer review assignments, thinking through one-on-one writing conference strategies, and more! Please feel free to contact Mike at [mhaen@wisc.edu](mailto:mhaen@wisc.edu). •

## DOING MORE WITH LESS: STREAMLINING YOUR WRITING CURRICULUM, CONTINUED

(continued from page 2)

handouts, "Crafting a Thesis," as particularly helpful. It shows how a successful thesis is typically the result of a long process of trying out different claims, selecting a few to refine and elaborate, and choosing a promising one to perfect.

My thesis handout displays each of my halting attempts to produce an original and compelling thesis about a novel I teach, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. At first, my attempts constitute half sentences and aborted claims (for example, "**Benito Cereno, is a subversive work about how blind slaveholders are to slaves' imagination**"). However, each of my subsequent attempts gains in clarity and force until finally, after seventeen tries, a satisfactory thesis emerges: "**Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* studies how the racist beliefs and stereotypes that white slaveholders rely upon to justify slavery make them incapable of recognizing slaves' desire and capacity for revolution. The story exposes how this insensitivity not only incites, but also enables slave revolution.**" Discussing this handout, students see that no one—not even the professor—gives immaculate birth to a fully formed successful thesis. They see that early attempts at fashioning a thesis, inevitably stilted and unsatisfactory, are necessary first steps in producing a successful thesis. They also see that crafting a thesis is hard work.

Other writing handouts and lessons (each 10-20 minutes) focus on "Coming Up with an Essay Topic," "Introductory Paragraphs," "Keeping Your Reader's Attention on Your Argument," "Making Your Paragraphs Work," and "Constructing a 'Staircase' Argument." (I also lead an in-class grammar free-for-all that begins with a single question: "So what grammar questions do you

have?" All students, I have found, have long-simmering grammar questions that they've been afraid to ask.)

### Student Success in a Streamlined Writing Curriculum

Because students in my upper-level courses write several essays over the course of the semester and revise each essay two or three times, I am able to track their remarkable growth as writers. While the mean grade on these English majors' first essay typically hovers below a C (satisfactory), the mean grade on their final essay hovers close to an A (excellent). Students often celebrate this improvement and their new confidence as analytical writers in course evaluations. One student explained that the writing curriculum, together with sustained attention to writing in class, "without a doubt has made me a better writer and analytical thinker." And other students reported that it "creates excellent writers" and is "an incredibly useful resource."

Here is my summary advice for instructors who wish to give more attention to writing instruction: it's important to think carefully not just about what you want students to *know* at the end of the semester that they didn't know (or know as deeply) at the start, but also what you want students to be able to *do* at the end of the semester that they couldn't do (or do as well) at the start. You can reap enormous rewards by identifying as precisely as possible which writing skills students should be held accountable for learning, and then giving sustained attention to those skills in assignments, activities, and lectures across the whole semester. •

### Spring 2018 WAC/Delta Expeditions in Learning: Exploring How Students Learn with Writing Across the Curriculum!

Wednesdays, 3:00-4:30 (starting on 1/24) • Writing Center Commons • 6162 Helen C. White Hall

Join us this next semester for the 2018 WAC/Delta seminar! Engage in lively discussions and exciting expeditions (or mini field trips) across campus to discover strategies for the following:

- designing assignments that improve students' learning,
- saving time responding to and evaluating student writing,
- making the most of conferences with students about their papers.

Research shows that when students write, they actually learn course content more effectively. But this only works when assignments are well designed and engaging. Join the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program to learn how to use writing to improve student learning—while maximizing your own time! Through course observations across campus, practical readings, and lively discussion, you'll deepen your theoretical and practical foundation for helping students learn with writing.

You'll learn first hand by observing (1) writing workshops in biology, sociology, and other disciplines that interest you; (2) Writing Center tutoring sessions or workshops with student writers; and (3) student-instructor conferences about writing in-progress across multiple disciplines. WAC program staff will share successful sample teaching materials to help you design more effective, innovative assignments; make the most of your time responding to and evaluating student writing; refine methods for conferencing with students and running peer reviews—and much more! We'll share diverse, interdisciplinary teaching experiences as we explore how to use writing to promote student learning.

This seminar is free and open to all graduate students and faculty/instructional staff. Go to [delta.wisc.edu](http://delta.wisc.edu) and click "Courses and Programs" to learn more and register! Or contact Mike Haen, Assistant Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, by email at [mhaen@wisc.edu](mailto:mhaen@wisc.edu). The seminar counts toward the Learning Community requirement for a Delta Certificate in Teaching and Learning.

# THANKS TO OUR COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



**Frankie Frank**  
Sociology



**Lisa Mulcahy**  
Psychology



**In Memory of  
Ian Santino**  
Biology  
1986-2017



**Caelyn Randall**  
Communication Arts

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2017 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 60 new Communication-B TAs from across campus.

**Thanks for your incredible work!**

Our mailing labels reflect current personnel listings and therefore we cannot make changes or deletions. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.



**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S  
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