

# TIME TO WRITE

A NEWSLETTER FOR FACULTY FROM THE LETTERS & SCIENCE PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM  
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## STUDENTS TAKE ON EXPERT ROLE IN ANTHROPOLOGY CAPSTONE COURSE

Elisabeth Miller

*L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum*

In Fall 2014, Professor Claire Wendland “wanted to think of an assignment that gives students who have been studying anthropology for a number of years a chance to put theory into practice.” In Anthropology 490: Anthropology of Sexuality, a capstone seminar enrolling 15 senior anthropology majors, Wendland aimed for students to “understand themselves as inquirers, producers of new knowledge.”

While she had been assigning a term paper requiring secondary research related to a course topic, Wendland envisioned putting students into a position of expertise, generating knowledge through the methods of their field: observations and interviews. To give students that experience, Wendland transformed her term paper assignment into a ten-page fieldwork project. She built in opportunities for students to generate research questions and refine claims while receiving repeated, formative feedback from peers and the instructor. In return, Wendland received thoughtful papers with substantive analysis from students excited to revise and deepen their ideas.

### A Multi-Stage Assignment

“This was a multi-stage assignment that relied on group support,” Wendland says. Even though each student was writing an individual paper, the students “formed groups of three, came up with a research question, did some observations, and conducted interviews, in which they were paired—one was an interviewer, one was an observer of the interview.” Group



Professor Claire Wendland

*Departments of Anthropology,  
Obstetrics & Gynecology, &  
Medical History and Bioethics*

members kept one another accountable and served as a first line of peer review as they shared work and ideas throughout the term.

The project began with a class brainstorming session, putting “a bunch of topics on the board, coalescing those into four or five big topics, and then having people sort themselves by those topics,” Wendland describes. Working in groups to conduct interviews and observations enabled students to note “how other people would see things they didn’t. And that’s one of the lessons of cultural anthropology—that there are multiple ways of understanding the world, and that collectively we get a richer picture than we do individually,” she says.

Then students individually transcribed their interviews, wrote up fieldnotes from their observations, and composed a three-page analytical field report, summarizing findings and reflecting on what they learned. This preliminary report, says Wendland, gave students an opportunity to receive feedback on their in-progress research from both Wendland and their peers.

Students brought in printed copies of their preliminary reports for a peer review session with two other students outside of their research groups. Wendland directed peer groups to “mark anything they find confusing and discuss it with one another.” “I find that to be the most useful part of peer review,” Wendland notes. “Anything that two people find confusing really is confusing. You cannot blow that off.”

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# STUDENTS TAKE ON EXPERT ROLE IN ANTHROPOLOGY CAPSTONE COURSE *CONTINUED*

To prepare students for peer review sessions, Wendland often shares some of her own writing. "I'll bring in a paragraph of something that I'm writing, and I say, 'Help! This is in terrible shape,'" says Wendland. "They tell me what I need to do. And they are often shy, but then they tackle it, and they fix it, and I often go on to use the paragraph in something that I publish."

As students offer feedback to Wendland on her own writing, they develop skills and confidence to give useful feedback to one another. "If they can say that to me, then they can say that to each other," Wendland asserts.

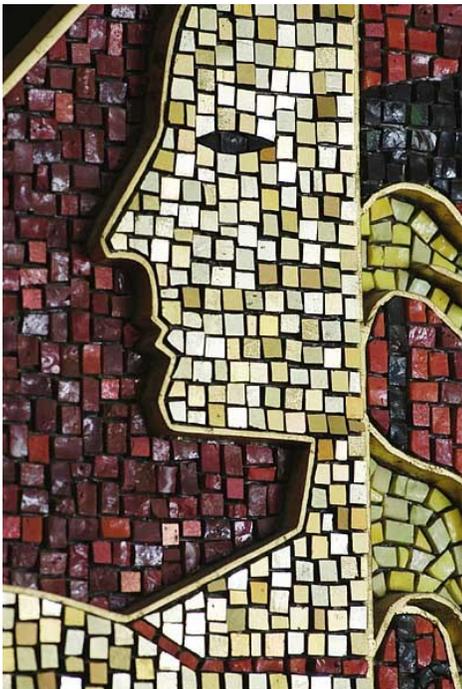
**“ I never want my eyes to be the first that have seen a paper. And I talk to students about that. Just like a journal editor's eyes shouldn't be the first ones to see my paper, right? That's not how we make strong writing. ”**

generative feedback, pushing groups to

## Efficient Feedback: Individual, Group, and Presentation

Wendland read students' reports, transcripts, and fieldnotes, offering her own written comments as they transformed their three-page preliminary analyses into ten-page analytical reports.

Wendland explains her commitment to giving feedback: "All of our writing needs work, right? Mine needs work. All of our students' needs work. And it's an exciting thing, but it can be a ton of work."



"Man: Creator of Order and Disorder," a mosaic tile piece by James Watrous. On display in UW-Madison Social Sciences Building. Photo by Jeff Miller, University Communications.

Considering both students' and her own time is important to Wendland. "I'm really interested in giving feedback, but I'm really interested in surviving as a writer and researcher in my own right, too," she explains. "So I've always given pretty considerable individual feedback. But as time has gone along, I've noticed patterns in what I'm seeing, that I may be giving the same feedback to six or seven students in a 15-student class. That seems inefficient."

Wendland responded to this inefficiency by providing limited individual feedback for

each student and creating a handout for all students covering general issues that have come up across multiple papers. In ad-

dition to saving time, this strategy "also lets students know they're not alone," Wendland explains.

Wendland also streamlined feedback by providing it in-person and alongside peer feedback as each research group gave 20-to-30 minute presentations of their key findings and analyses to the full class. Students presented on, for instance, how it appears that one's response to public displays of affection have a lot to do with age and gender. Classmates respond with

deepen their analyses, asking questions such as, "What does it mean that all of your observations were here in Madison? How would it be different if you were observing in other locations?"

## This Is Not a Draft

Finally, students took the comments from Wendland and their peers at multiple stages—on their preliminary reports and from their presentations—to write their ten-page final analysis papers. One week after their presentations, students turned in their final analysis papers. "I did not call these drafts," Wendland points out. "I hate reading drafty drafts. I say you've got to be sure your draft ready and that you are proud of it. So I graded it and gave it a final grade at that point, but then the deal was that they could re-write if they weren't happy with that final grade. And almost all of them did."

Wendland explains that she likes "to give students the opportunity to rewrite, but I never want my eyes to be the first other eyes that have seen a paper. And I talk to students about that. Just like a journal editor's eyes shouldn't be the first ones to see my paper, right? That's not how we make strong writing."

## Reacting to Revision

Students' reactions to revision were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. When students chose to revise an already strong paper, they loved the opportunity, Wendland shares.

While Wendland concedes that students most certainly "liked the chance for a better grade," she says there's more to their positive responses. "They liked the chance to make their own product better and to think it through again. A couple of students said that this was a great chance to produce a more meaningful final project." What's more, students felt free to take risks in their analysis and writing style, knowing they'd have a chance to receive feedback and revise accordingly.

Performing original ethnographic research, providing critical feedback, and rigorously revising their ideas put students in the role of expert—and that role paid off. •

# THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT STUDENT WRITING WITH JEREMY MORRIS

Elisabeth Miller

L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum



Professor Jeremy Morris

Department of  
Communication Arts

While Assistant Professor of Communication Arts Jeremy Morris says no neat narrative ties together his educational and career trajectory—from undergraduate biology major to a career in advertising and then in academia—one thing does motivate his teaching: writing.

Morris teaches courses from Critical Internet Studies to New Media and Society, supporting students as they produce podcasts, create blogs, annotate articles related to course topics

on Genius, create their own social media timelines on Storify, and write rigorously analytical essays.

Throughout, Morris's "sneaky course goal" is to make students better writers. And that commitment has earned him a reputation: one of Morris's favorite comments from a recent student evaluation called him the "Frank Kaminsky of feedback." The comparison to the much-loved power forward from the Badgers basketball team is kind, Morris demurs with an earnest grin.

Here are a few insights from Morris on the importance of writing for undergraduate and graduate students alike—and some ideas for giving feedback efficiently.

## Q: Why is writing so important for undergraduates?

**A:** My secret goal in all of my classes is, "Let's get you to be better readers and writers." And that's important even when I'm not teaching a writing intensive course.

I think that if you're here doing an undergraduate degree, regardless of what field you're doing it in, what discipline you're interested in, or where you're interested in going, critical writing and reading skills are going to be important wherever you go.

My classes are mostly about new technology, so trying to convince students that even if you're writing for the web or a new media field, you need to know the basics. All those skills are going to be important no matter what you do. That's how I justify having a lot of difficult, theory-based articles and having students write about them. For me, it's about—you're going to walk out of here and take maybe a few things in terms of concepts. So it's really about trying to focus on writing because that's the skill that's going to stick with you—reading and writing.

## Q: How do you support graduate students as writers?

**A:** My graduate courses are very writing intensive, designed to help people go on to be scholars. I want to give graduate stu-

dents opportunities to start writing like they will be for their careers. In my Fall 2014 graduate seminar, I wanted to go beyond the traditional reading response: "here's what this author is saying, and here's my problem with what the author is saying." I had students submit a piece of writing in the style of the author they were reading that week. So I got them to inhabit the voice, writing structure, or style of another author, forcing them to think about their own writing style in the process and why it was hard to write like Marx, Adorno, or whomever.

I explicitly said at the start of the term that I wanted the course to be a workshop. So mid-way through, some of the feedback I got was, "Oh, this is interesting, but it's kind of constraining because I'd like to work on my own writing problems."

So I started giving more targeted missions based on problem writing areas my students had identified. For writers who work at a slow pace, for instance, I'd give them a mission to try to write a response in 30 minutes. Then try it again with the timer in 15 minutes. See what the difference is—how hard is it? Where is your balance point? What gets lost?

Some people said they were wordy, so I'd have them write only sentences of 25 words or less, just an arbitrary constraint that they had to work their way around. Then we'd talk about this in class—what challenge did you have, was it hard, how did you react, what tactics did you use? I tried to make writing part of the conversation for that class.

## Q: Do you have suggestions for giving feedback efficiently?

**A:** I am learning that. It's very difficult for me to figure out what that balance is. I'm not somebody who sets timers. I know I have two weeks to get feedback to students, so I sort of have a big timer going, but I don't to set aside "x" amount of time.

When I'm really good about it, when an assignment comes in, I just start grading two assignments per day, I try to use blocks of time—like riding on the bus on the way home—when I would otherwise be doing other things like listening to music.

Commenting on weekly responses doesn't take long for me. I read them, and as I read them, I make comments, so about ten to 15 minutes. It's how I prepare for class, by grading them. It gets me thinking about what students want to discuss.

I have also started doing more feedback electronically. There are sometimes pieces of feedback applicable to multiple students. For those repeated comments, I'll do a copy-paste and then tailor them with specific examples from the student's work. I'll keep a file open, and any time I write a comment that I think I might want to use again, I'll add it to that list. So efficiency is just one of those things: the more you grade an assignment, the more you know what you're looking for, and the better and faster you can respond to it. •

# ACTIVITIES FOR FOCUSED PEER REVIEW



Dr. Noelle Crooks

Former TA, Psychology 225  
Professor, Broward College

**P**eer review—or having students provide feedback on one another’s writing—can be one of the most useful and efficient ways to help students refine their critical reading skills and get some great feedback in the process. But unstructured reviews can easily become unfocused and unhelpful.

In these materials, adapted from Psychology 225: Experimental Psychology, a Communication-B course with Dr. Becky Addington, former TA Noelle Crooks offers three options for peer review that focus on different concerns in students’ drafts: Activity 1, the reverse outline, allows readers to report on their understanding of the author’s writing; Activity 2, the conciseness review, enables the writer to focus in on the key writing challenge of getting across complex ideas succinctly; and Activity 3, the “Author’s Choice” review, requires writers to identify the weak areas of their own papers—and to let their readers know where they want feedback.

These peer-review activities can be completed separately, at different times of the semester, or they can all be conducted at different times during the drafting process for one paper.

See the *Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Sourcebook* for more information on setting up successful peer reviews. For a copy, please contact Elisabeth Miller at [elmiller5@wisc.edu](mailto:elmiller5@wisc.edu).

## Activity 1: Reverse Outline

Author’s Name \_\_\_\_\_ Reviewer’s Name \_\_\_\_\_

### **Instructions:**

Clear ideas and clear connections between ideas are critical for a successful paper. The structure of your paper might be clear to you, as the author, but unclear to readers. This activity provides the opportunity to see what the reader is getting out of the paper and whether the key ideas are being communicated effectively.

Create a reverse outline of the paper’s Introduction section. Begin by numbering the paragraphs. For each paragraph, write a one-sentence description of the main idea contained in that paragraph. Number each sentence according to the paragraph it’s describing.

As you are outlining, be sure to note the following:

- Paragraphs where the main idea is unclear
- Places where the connections between paragraphs are unclear

## Activity 2: Conciseness Review

Author’s Name \_\_\_\_\_ Reviewer’s Name \_\_\_\_\_

### **Instructions:**

Effective papers provide enough detail for the reader to understand what’s going on without including extraneous information or words. In this activity, you will evaluate the overall conciseness of the paper. In addition to providing feedback on the draft itself, use the space below to provide a written response for each item.

1. Does the author provide all the essential details while maintaining economy of expression? Are there important details that are missing?
2. Are there sections or sentences that are redundant? Are sentences wordy?
3. What could be cut to make the paper more concise?
4. Are all page and word limits met?

# ACTIVITIES FOR FOCUSED PEER REVIEW CONTINUED

## Activity 3: Author's Choice

Author's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Reviewer's Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Author Instructions:** Circle TWO items from the list below that you would like your reviewer to focus on.

**Reviewer Instructions:** Review in detail the two selected items from the list below. In addition to providing feedback on the draft itself, use the space below to provide a written response for each item. If time allows, feel free to comment on additional sections of the paper.

1. *Introductory Paragraph:* Does it engage the reader? Does the author use dictionary definitions or 'since the beginning of time' statements? If so, what might be an alternative way to engage the reader?
2. *Article 1 Review:* Does the overall review make sense? Does the author provide sufficient detail for you to understand the background experiments? Does the information flow well?
3. *Article 2 Review:* Does the overall review make sense? Does the author provide sufficient detail for you to understand the background experiments? Does the information flow well?
4. *Gap in the Literature:* Does the author explain why the current study was conducted? Does he/she talk about what's new about his/her study that earlier studies have not done? Why is this study important?
5. *Hypotheses:* Does the author lay out a specific prediction for each dependent variable? Do the predictions compare all levels of the independent variable?
6. *Methods:* Would you be able to replicate the study given the details in the materials and procedures? Are materials described in sufficient detail? Can you follow the chronology of the experiment? Is there any important information that seems to be missing? Are there extraneous details that could be removed?
7. *Transitions:* Does each paragraph flow logically from the previous paragraph, or do new paragraphs seem to come out of the blue?
8. *Overall Organization:* Can you easily follow the flow of the author's argument? Are there places where you get lost? Can you see where the argument is leading? •

## ***Announcing our Fall 2015 workshops for faculty, instructional staff, and TAs!***

- **Five Secrets for Designing Writing Assignments**
- **Short Writing Assignments for Large(r) Lecture Courses**
- **Strategies for Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing**
- **Writing Letters of Recommendation**
- **Office Hours and One-on-One Conferences: Helping Students Take Ownership of Their Writing**

For more information or to register, go to the Workshops page at [writing.wisc.edu](http://writing.wisc.edu) or email Elisabeth Miller at [elmiller5@wisc.edu](mailto:elmiller5@wisc.edu)

# THANKS TO OUR COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



**Staci Duros**  
History



**Ian Carroll**  
Psychology



**Jessica Price**  
Biology

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these three TAs helped plan and lead the January 2015 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 40 new Communication-B TAs from across campus.  
**Thanks for your incredible work!**

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**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S  
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