

# TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LETTERS & SCIENCE PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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## EXPANDED WRITING PROCESS YIELDS IMPRESSIVE PRODUCTS IN SOCIOLOGY

Stephanie White and Elisabeth Miller  
*L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum*

When Professor Christine Schwartz taught Sociology 640: Sociology of the Family in Spring 2012, she put an unusually strong focus on writing. While one of her goals for this upper-level undergraduate class is expected—to teach both the history and the current directions of research in family sociology—her other goal centered on writing.

Schwartz explains, "It's been my experience that writing is incredibly important for success. In sociology, you can have the same results published in a low-ranked journal or the top journals, and that depends entirely on how you write about them."

While Schwartz had long experimented with integrating writing into Sociology 640—using reflective journals, reading questions, and essay exams—she "felt frustrated" with how the previous writing genres she was using limited students' abilities to build on more complex ideas throughout the course. And though Schwartz "felt as if students were learning the material," she also wanted students to learn to "write like sociologists."

To achieve these goals, Schwartz integrated three better-targeted writing activities into the class: three or four short-answer quizzes, weekly reaction papers, and one long literature review paper—broken into several smaller tasks throughout the semester. To give her room to incorporate more drafting and feedback into the writing process, Schwartz turned Sociology 640 into a writing-intensive course, shifting from

about 40 students down to 20. Her new process and the students' products are impressive.

### Week by Week



Professor Christine Schwartz  
*Department of Sociology and  
Center for Demography and  
Ecology*

Drawing on her own experiences in graduate school, Schwartz had students write a weekly one-page essay addressing directed questions about the readings. By letting students choose which class day per week to submit a paper, Schwartz ensured that some students were well prepared each day and kept her feedback load under control.

In addition to giving students individual feedback on those papers, when Schwartz spotted common problems—such as writing *around*, rather than *about*, a point—she gave feedback to the whole class.

### It's a Process

In addition to the weekly papers, students worked on one eight- to ten-page literature review throughout the semester. This paper required students to answer a family-related, sociological research question, making some comparisons across groups, countries, or time. The papers reviewed only four articles, but much research went into narrowing the selection of these sources. Students summarized the articles and critically evaluated their arguments and evidence, tying the findings to their research questions and suggesting directions for future research.

To develop students' writing and thinking in sociology, Schwartz broke down the literature review into shorter assignments "peppered throughout the class," she says.

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# EXPANDED WRITING PROCESS YIELDS IMPRESSIVE PRODUCTS IN SOCIOLOGY *CONTINUED*

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## Step by Step

Students' literature reviews were broken down in a number of steps, including the following:

### 1. Research questions

As soon as the third week of class, students turned in drafts of research questions for their literature reviews, addressing difficult, compelling questions in sociology, such as:

- Is cohabitation bad for marriage?
- What are the effects of divorce on children once they grow up?
- Why has interracial marriage increased so much in the U.S.?

Schwartz got students started by discussing effective research questions in sociology and running a peer review session for drafts of students' questions. After peer review, students revised and resubmitted their questions to Schwartz for her feedback.

### 2. List of Sources

A couple of weeks later, students turned in a list of six to eight potential sources to use in their literature reviews. This assignment guided students in the choice of appropriate sources and allowed Schwartz to intervene early regarding not only proper citation formatting, but also credibility and appropriateness of students' sources.

### 3. Article Summaries

About halfway through the semester, students completed one-page summaries of two articles they considered central to their literature review. A week later, they submitted two more one-page summaries and received feedback from Schwartz. These short assignments ensured that students had at least four pages of their final reviews drafted. And, though they could change which four sources they ultimately relied on in their final reviews, they could use the feedback they received on the development and structure of their summaries to revise for their final review. Along the way, Schwartz also encouraged students to critique and question the articles they were reading in preparation for their final review.

### 4. Introductions

Next, during class, Schwartz and her students discussed introductions to literature reviews, analyzing the structure of published articles in sociology journals. At this point, Schwartz also invited Writing Center staff to her class to discuss writing

in sociology. Students "saw that there was a method to writing in sociology and that they can do this kind of high-level writing—it's not just taking a stab at what might be good."

Even with this support, Schwartz explains that students "balked a little" at drafting an introduction before they had written the rest of the paper. Yet she says that this challenge made it easier to talk as a class about the writing process. Finding they had to go back to revise their introductions emphasized, says Schwartz, how "writing is an iterative process, including getting ideas out on paper and then going back over them again and again."

### 5. Explanations and Evidence

Students next drafted a section Schwartz calls "explanations and evidence." She breaks it down this way: "I tell my students they should explain, 'Here is the research question and here's why it's important. Then here are some different explanations for why the process might work.' In other words, I want them to say what the answer might be and why."

Importantly, students built on the writing they had already done: "Basically, they're taking those summaries and fitting them into the final draft," Schwartz says. Once the students turned in these sections, around week 12 of the semester, they conducted peer reviews and received feedback from Schwartz—just as they did with every step.

### The Final Product

Because Schwartz's assignment was done in stages over the course of the semester, when students sat down to work on their final literature reviews, many were primarily revising, rather than drafting. Though some of this revision was substantive, the ultimate results were much stronger and more carefully constructed than they would have been without the many steps Schwartz built in along the way.

Schwartz saw exciting improvements in her students' work. Their final literature reviews were "much more targeted at the questions they were addressing," she says. Because they had knowledge of the structure and style of sociological literature, she adds, "their arguments were more streamlined, and there was less floundering." Ultimately, "students were much more conscious of the disciplinary models" they were working from.

For Schwartz and her students, the proof is in the product: students "really liked having the project broken into pieces and thought that they came up with much higher quality products than they would have if they had waited until the end." And Schwartz shares this high praise, saying that "Some of the papers were publication quality, and it was gratifying to see students really transform their papers over time." •

“ Some of the papers were publication quality, and it was gratifying to see students really transform their papers over time. ”

# NEW RESEARCH ABOUT WHAT MATTERS IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Elisabeth Miller

L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

In April 2013, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC+U), an influential consortium of universities including UW-Madison, published thought-provoking new research about what employers value in college graduates they hire. This research—conducted by Hart Research Associates in Washington, DC, and based on surveys of over 300 employers—contains lots of good news for Liberal Arts and Sciences departments. The report reveals that employers seek graduates prepared to “think flexibly and critically and to face problems without simple answers, just the kind of problems that L&S faculty know about,” says Elaine Klein, Assistant Dean for Academic Planning and Director of University General Education.

Indeed, AAC+U’s findings offer arguments for the power of a liberal education “not just from higher education,” says Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor, Professor and Chair of the German department, “but also from business leaders.” Vanderwal Taylor says that faculty may draw on employers’ responses to help students “understand why they’re doing the work we’re asking them to do” and how that work will help prepare them for job interviews and future professions.

In the Writing Across the Curriculum program, we couldn’t help but notice employers’ emphasis on communication skills in undergraduate education in all majors: roughly 80 percent of employers “want colleges to place more emphasis on helping students develop five key learning outcomes, including critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings” (1). As Klein explains, these learning outcomes are “proxies for higher-order thinking skills—if a student can do these things well, employers can bet that it’s likely students can do other things well (such as complex thinking), too.”

## Key Findings for Faculty

The following 11 “Key Findings” are excerpted with permission from *It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success*. (Copyright 2013 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.) The full report is available at [http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013\\_EmployerSurvey.pdf](http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf).

**1** “Employers are highly focused on innovation as critical to the success of their companies and they report that the challenges their employees face today are more complex and require a broader skill set than in the past. Notably, employers indicate that they prioritize critical thinking, communication, and complex problem-solving skills over a job candidate’s major field of study when making hiring decisions.”

**2** “While they may prioritize key skills over a job candidate’s field of study, the majority of employers agree that having BOTH field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge is most important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success.”

**3** “Employers’ evaluation of two-year and four-year colleges and universities for the job they are doing preparing graduates to succeed and contribute to today’s economy suggests that many see room for improvement. They register a greater sense of confidence in college graduates having the skills and knowledge to succeed in entry-level positions than to advance or be promoted within their companies/organizations.”

**4** “Employers point to a variety of types of knowledge and skills as important considerations when hiring, placing the greatest priority on ethics, intercultural skills, and capacity for professional development.”

**5** “Majorities of employers believe two-year and four-year colleges and universities should place more emphasis on a variety of key learning outcomes to increase graduates’ success in today’s global economy. Few say less emphasis should be placed on any of the learning outcomes tested, but employers overall are most likely to believe there is a need to increase the focus on active skills such as critical thinking,

**“** We couldn’t help but notice employers’ emphasis on the importance of communication skills in undergraduate education in all majors. **”**

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## Announcing our spring 2014 workshops for faculty, instructional staff, and TAs!

- Five Secrets for Designing Writing Assignments
- Strategies for Responding to and Evaluating Student Writing
- Writing Letters of Recommendation
- Making Peer Review Work in Any Class
- 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)

# FUTURE FACULTY TAKE A WRITING EXPEDITION: A WAC/DELTA COLLABORATION

## Stephanie White

L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum



TA Stephanie White

Former Assistant Director of Writing Across the Curriculum

In addition to working with faculty, one of the important goals of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program here at UW-Madison is supporting graduate students as they develop pedagogical practices they'll take into their faculty careers. To help reach this goal, in spring 2013, the WAC program teamed up with the university's Delta program, whose similar mission is to encourage graduate students' and faculty's development as teachers in STEM and Social and Behavioral Science fields.

The WAC program offered a new semester-long learning opportunity for

Delta participants to explore how writing assignments can help students learn in a range of disciplines. As the Assistant Director of our WAC program at the time, I had the privilege of designing and teaching this non-credit course. And as I got to know the thoughtful graduate students—from disciplines as diverse as astronomy, political science, biomedical engineering, second language acquisition, neuroscience, and curriculum and instruction—I watched these future faculty members make productive, and exciting, connections between teaching and writing.

### Theory Informs Our Practice

WAC theories see writing and course content as deeply inter-related. When we teach someone to *write* about a movement in history, or about a psychological experiment, or about an astronomical system, we're not just teaching paragraph structure, organization, or citation methods. We're also teaching students *about* that movement in history or psychological experiment or astronomical system because we're helping students put those ideas into their own words while taking on the conventions and epistemologies of that field of study.

### Starting the Expedition

Our first WAC/Delta collaboration allowed seven graduate students to see how these WAC theories play out in courses and venues where writing is integrated into curriculum in departments across the university. Delta structures many of its non-credit courses to include "expeditions" in which participants don't merely read about and discuss aspects of teaching in universities; they also observe these concepts in action to see how practices and theories work on the ground.

And so, in addition to reading scholarship on integrating writing into teaching across disciplines, participants in this course also went on expeditions across campus. They sat in on Communication-B TA meetings; observed Writing Center sessions at a number of locations; joined in on writing-intensive class

sessions in Biocore, history, journalism and mass communication, and engineering communication; and watched videotaped one-on-one conferences between faculty and students in sociology and experimental psychology.

### Learning from Our Journeys Across the Curriculum

While these expeditions didn't take us far geographically, they certainly got participants thinking. And through the learning community of our course, these graduate students were able to think through their observations in a collaborative environment.

For example, after observing a peer review session in a Biocore class, one graduate student from biomedical engineering reflected on how he had seen the instructors push their students to give each other feedback on the big-picture issues, instead of simply proofreading. He was impressed that this concept we had discussed in the abstract was really productive for the students in the class.

“ Our first WAC/Delta collaboration allowed seven graduate students to see how WAC theories play out in courses and venues where writing is integrated into curriculum in departments across the university. ”

Another graduate student found the excerpts we were reading from John Bean's wonderful *Engaging Ideas* so useful to her teaching that, after borrowing my copy for a week, she bought her own. While WAC scholars affectionately call this book the "WAC Bible" for its useful suggestions on designing writing assignments and giving feedback to students, it was a pleasure to see a TA so excited about Bean's ideas.

After reading much more of the book than I'd required for the class, and then implementing Bean's suggestions, this graduate student sent me an email with the subject line "It's working!" Her enthusiasm led to many more conversations between us about productively integrating writing activities into her teaching.

### Taking Stock of Our Travels

Of course, not all of the participants geeked out as she and I did. As we grappled with the complexities of never having enough time to teach writing the way we want to, or struggled with the fact that writing and content aren't always as intertwined as they can be, some graduate students walked away with more questions than answers.

Ultimately, though, I hope that the main takeaway for these participants was not that there are simple answers to integrating writing into teaching across disciplines, but that there will always be colleagues at their institutions with whom they can work through these issues. ●

## INTRODUCING THE NEW ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF WAC



Elisabeth Miller

Elisabeth Miller was thrilled to join the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum in May 2013. Already, she's had the pleasure of meeting faculty, instructional staff, and teaching assistants across campus and learning about Comm-B and writing intensive courses in a range of disciplines. Elisabeth is benefitting from, and hopes to continue, the excellent work of her predecessors, most recently Stephanie White, Rebecca Lorimer-Leonard, and Beth Godbee.

Elisabeth is a PhD candidate in the English department, specializing in composition and rhetoric. Her dissertation is a study of disability and literacy, exploring the reading and writing practices of persons with aphasia, or language disability caused by stroke or other brain injury. Elisabeth has taught for six years, including introductory composition and ESL courses at Winona State University in Minnesota and at the Hebei Institute of Technology in Tianjin, China, and for the past three years, introductory and Comm-B writing courses at UW-Madison.

She credits finding her love for talking about writing to her experiences working as an undergraduate writing center tutor, and she has worked as a writing instructor in academic writing centers ever since. In the UW-Madison Writing Center, Elisabeth served as an outreach instructor, taught several undergraduate writing workshops, and co-led writing groups for senior-thesis writers.

Elisabeth has also taught and served as a coordinator for the Madison Writing Assistance community writing program at several libraries and community centers across Madison. In addition, she has received two HEX (Humanities Exposed) grants from the UW-Madison Center for the Humanities to develop multimodal memoir and writing groups for persons with aphasia and is currently co-leading a digital storytelling group for youth in South Madison.

This fall, Elisabeth has enjoyed consulting with faculty and TAs in Biocore, the School of Pharmacy, Integrated Liberal Studies, Undergraduate Research Scholars, political science, human ecology, journalism, curriculum and instruction, Scandinavian Studies, and psychology.

Elisabeth is eager to talk with you about designing writing assignments that help students learn course content, responding to student writing, supporting multilingual writers, conferencing with writers, motivating students to succeed with assignments, or any other questions or concerns that you may have! Please feel free to contact Elisabeth at [elmiller5@wisc.edu](mailto:elmiller5@wisc.edu). •

## NEW RESEARCH ABOUT WHAT MATTERS IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION *CONTINUED*

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complex problem-solving, communication, and applying knowledge to real-world settings."

**6** "There is broad agreement among employers that all students, regardless of their chosen field of study, should have educational experiences that teach them about building civic capacity, broad knowledge about the liberal arts and sciences, and cultures outside the United States."

**7** Employers see value in several "existing and emerging educational practices," including developing field-related research questions and evidence-based analyses, completing projects with acquired knowledge and skills, taking on internships or community-based field projects, and researching collaboratively "to improve the education of today's college students and prepare graduates to succeed in the workplace."

**8** "In addition to a résumé and college transcript, a large majority of employers say an electronic portfolio demonstrating a student's work and key skill and knowledge areas would be useful in evaluating potential candidates for hire."

**9** "A notable proportion of employers say their company or organization currently partners with a nearby college or university to offer internships to college students. Smaller proportions of employers report partnering with higher education institutions in other ways" or "express interest in doing so in the future."

**10** "Across several areas tested, employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, effortful work—practices that involve such things as collaborative problem-solving, research, senior projects, community engagement, and internships."

**11** "Employers recognize the importance of today's colleges and universities providing a liberal education—one that focuses on both broad knowledge in a variety of areas and knowledge in a specific field of interest, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study and a sense of social responsibility. When given a description of the component elements of a liberal education, nearly all consider this kind of learning very or fairly important for colleges to provide, and the large majority would recommend this approach to young people they know." •

# THANKS TO OUR COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



**Tammy Mays**  
Library and Information  
Studies



**Julie Collins**  
Zoology



**Kate Rogers**  
Classics



**Heather Gordon**  
Community and Environmental  
Sociology

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2013 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 70 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 PROGRAM  
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