

TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM IN
WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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PREVISION: HAVING STUDENTS REVISE *BEFORE* THEY WRITE A DRAFT

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French and Italian



Writing Across the Curriculum programs encourage faculty to incorporate process into their writing assignments so that students work on a writing project over a longer period of time than they would with a single deadline. To incorporate process, most faculty require students to submit drafts, receive feedback from the course instructor, and then revise and submit final versions of their papers for grading.

We're deeply committed to incorporating process into our writing assignments, but we've developed an alternative—and in our case, more successful—way to do so, a process we call "prevision." We found that too often students write full drafts without having thought deeply and critically about what they're analyzing and without thinking critically about their central claim or thesis; and once students have written full drafts, they're often reluctant to make substantial changes in the focus, central argument, and organization of their papers.

Instead of having students write a complete draft before getting feedback from their course instructor, we have students engage in discussions, then write and revise draft thesis statements and outlines to get feedback on and develop

and strengthen those claims before writing full versions of their papers.

In this article, we indicate briefly each of the possible steps one or another instructor uses, before drawing some conclusions on the advantages of this approach for instructors and students alike.

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The Course Context

French 271 is a multi-section introduction to literary analysis course, which is a prerequisite for the French major. Since the course is designated as "writing-intensive," the instructors (a

mixture of faculty, long-term academic staff, and advanced graduate students) usually assign five or six papers and adhere steadfastly to the principle of process-oriented writing: that is, producing each paper through a series of steps rather than in one fell (and last-minute) swoop, as students are wont to do.

Unlike its companion course, French

228, an introduction to culture and grammar review course, which implements process writing through multiple revisions of three different types of paper, French 271 has chosen to focus on

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PREVISION: HAVING STUDENTS REVISE *BEFORE* THEY WRITE A DRAFT, CONTINUED

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"prewriting," which we call "prevision," based on the French term and on the notion that effective writing always entails a "vision" or conceptualization. Indeed, several of the steps in our prevision process do not involve writing, but group work.

The Process of Prevision

The French 271 syllabus is divided roughly into five three-week segments, each involving a specific genre. Generally, the first two weeks of each segment involve introducing certain principles of analysis relevant to a particular type of text, which are then applied in class discussions to a set of poems, short stories, or scenes from a play. During this time, students also read parallel texts that will not be explicitly discussed in class. At the end of the second week, each student chooses one of these parallel texts to write on, and the prevision process is set in motion.

Once students have chosen their texts, time is set aside in class for them to talk with other students who have chosen the same text, using the same analytical principles elucidated earlier during whole-class discussions. The idea is not to come up with a common interpretation (which we are careful to discourage), but to air ideas and to ask questions of the text and of each other.

During this week, instructors also provide, on the course website, guidelines for organizing the analysis and using the texts everyone has read. They discuss in class how a thesis differs from a theme and how one can problematize an argument by articulating not just a thesis, but also its antithesis or a plausible alternative (such as prevision/revision)—a dialectical process central to French analytical writing. At this point, each student is required to email a thesis statement (with its antithesis) to the instructor, who then engages in a written dialogue with the students to help them clarify or modify previsions of the paper.

After articulating an effective thesis statement (along with a complementary title), the students then submit a short outline, which the instructor annotates briefly. As students write the paper over the course of the next week, they are encouraged to maintain contact with the

instructor, either via email or during office hours if they have specific questions involving organization or usage.

Advantages of Prevision

The advantages to this system include the following:

1. it is student-centered since there is a choice of texts to analyze and individual interpretations of them;
2. it gives students both peer- and instructor-guided support without imposing a particular interpretation;
3. it emphasizes the value of coming up with good questions about complex texts and considering alternative claims, both skills that can be transferred to other areas of learning;
4. it extends the prewriting process so that students don't state and stake claims that they are later reluctant to modify;
5. it allots plenty of time for the process of conceiving, writing, and revising while allowing the course syllabus to move on to new content; and
6. it gives students less incentive to procrastinate since the thesis must be submitted before the paper is due.

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The success of the process can perhaps best be measured by the decreasing input required from the instructor over the course of the semester, as the students become more proficient in forging their interpretations and formulating their thesis statements, titles, outlines, and drafts. Students invariably rate the course highly as a "valuable learning experience," citing not only the knowledge gained but the acquisition of skill sets in writing and analysis. The success of the program was ratified, to a certain degree, by a 2007 survey of the Educational Policy Improvement Center, which ranked French 271 among the top ten French literature courses in the country, and, on those grounds, it was selected by Educational Testing Services as a model for the French Advanced Placement Program. ♦

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' PAPERS USING DIGITAL AUDIO FILES



Annette Vee
English

The feedback we give students on their papers is some of the most important teaching we do. Last year, as a teaching assistant in Library and Information Studies 201, "The Information Society," I discovered a new method for giving

this feedback: digitally recorded audio files, which allowed me to encourage students—more personally and comprehensively than I can in written comments—to do the hard work of revising their papers and improving their ideas.

With the support of the course director, Professor Greg Downey, and a warning to my 31 students that I was experimenting with an alternative way to respond to their writing, my digital voice recorder and I were ready to go. I read each student's paper, took notes, and then recorded my comments in three- to-six minute audio files. The friendly tone of my voice simultaneously softened and emphasized my critical suggestions for revision. Additionally, I was able to address many more strengths in students' papers along with aspects that needed improvement.

The recordings took just a bit longer to produce than written feedback, but I enjoyed the "conversation," so the stack of papers didn't seem as daunting as usual. All of these factors made my audio responses successful, by both my and my students' accounts.

My Method

To provide students with audio feedback on their papers, I began by reading their drafts carefully, just as I would do when giving written comments. As I read each essay, I wrote a list of issues I wanted to discuss, prioritizing major concerns such as under-developed arguments or inadequate use of sources. I also identified sections that were particularly strong,

phrasing I found marvelous, or evidence of marked improvement over previous papers.

I reviewed this list, and then I collected my thoughts and hit "record" on my digital voice recorder, creating an mp3 file (an easy format for saving and sending audio files to students). Editing the audio file to remove spoken stops and starts would have taken a lot of time and would have interrupted my conversational tone, so I recorded most responses in just one take.

As I recorded, I pretended the student was there with me in a conference. I began by offering a friendly greeting and a general comment of praise about the paper, such as "Hi, Betsy! I'm going to respond to your paper about X. First of all, I'm glad you chose this website for your analysis!"

In the middle section of the recording, I was able to talk through my reactions, offering more nuance through the tone of my voice and the natural efficiency of speech than I usually convey in written responses. When I referred to a specific section or sentence, I read the

student's writing out loud to direct him to the right place: "In your third paragraph, where you write X. . . ." The audio format allowed me to explain my concerns in much more detail than I could in my handwritten comments.

In closing, I said something like "Exploring the implications of X would be a really interesting place for you to take this, and I'd be happy to meet with you as your ideas develop for your next draft. I look forward to reading it!"

What Students Thought

Of the students who gave me feedback on the audio responses to their papers—what I dubbed their "personal podcasts"—all were very enthusiastic. Students confirmed my impressions that I

was able to be more personable and positive, while offering more detailed suggestions for improvement. They enjoyed listening to me talk about their papers and had listened to my feedback multiple times and taken notes to absorb everything I had said.

Of course, not every student followed every revision suggestion I made, but the audio comments helped them prioritize their revisions better than written feedback, so they followed many of the more essential suggestions I made. In the course blog, a few students wrote at length about my audio feedback with responses such as the following:

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- “I preferred the audio response to the email responses to my paper because I could actually hear the emotion behind the ideas presented. This way I knew that you felt more strongly about certain aspects than others.”
- “I liked the podcast draft feedback for the way it was more spontaneous, and the suggestions seemed more detailed and nuanced in this format. I didn’t really mind having to take notes too much because it allowed me put the suggestions in my own words. I now prefer the podcast over the typed feedback.”

Maybe students’ reviews were so positive because they could hear in my voice how I enjoyed talking “with” them. I felt less directive than in my written comments because I could address their papers more thoroughly and be forthright when I had conflicting feelings about their arguments or about my own suggestions.

Getting Started

So next semester, consider perhaps trading in a pen for a recorder to speak rather than write your feedback to students. As you begin the process, be sure to ask students if they need special accommodations to listen to your audio files, and consider the types of feedback you’ll be giving, as audio response works best for extended reactions to a draft and for advice about revision. I hope you and your students find audio commenting as rewarding as my students and I have. Good luck! ♦

For faculty, academic staff, and TAs

“Designing Effective Writing Assignments”

Friday, January 15th, 2:00—3:30pm
Helen C. White Hall, room 6176

Looking for creative assignment ideas? Spending too much time grading? Want to help your students to revise and learn more from writing?

This workshop will help instructors in all disciplines design and implement successful and enriching writing assignments. We will learn how good assignment design can enable students to engage more critically with course content. We will also talk about the ways that good assignments can cut back on time spent responding to student writing.

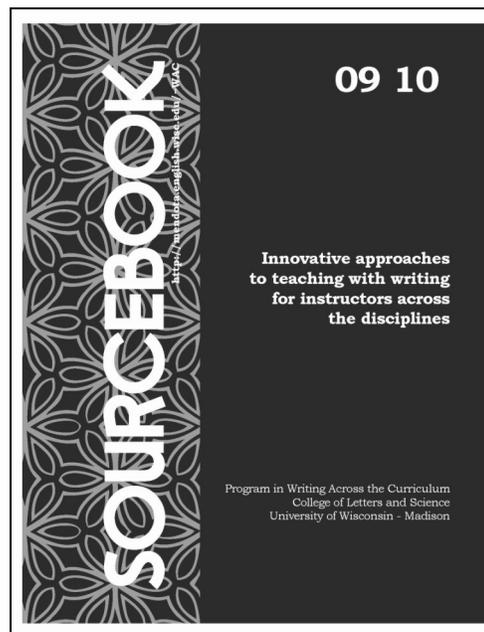
Email Beth Godbee at godbee@wisc.edu to let her know you’re planning to attend the workshop.

Time to Write

Beth Godbee, Writing Across the Curriculum

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Sourcebook, a resource for faculty, academic staff, and TAs, has been newly revised this fall. Updated every two years, the WAC Sourcebook highlights innovative ways to teach with writing in the disciplines. It includes advice, best practices, and sample teaching materials.

The 09-10 WAC Sourcebook features dozens of terrific assignments, samples of feedback on student papers, and materials for teaching with writing from departments A to Z—from Atmospheric and Oceanic Studies to Zoology!



Sections in the WAC Sourcebook include the following:

- Comm-B and Writing-Intensive Criteria and Offerings
- Principles for Teaching with Writing
- Assessing Your Course
- Sequencing Assignments
- Designing Effective Assignments
- Coaching Students to Succeed with Assignments
- Teaching Multilingual Writers
- Conferences and Student Peer Review
- Responding, Evaluating, Grading
- Teaching Information Literacy
- Teaching Oral Communication Skills
- Resources for Instructors and Students

Among many exciting new additions to the 09-10 sourcebook are the following pieces by colleagues across campus. →

WHAT'S NEW IN THE 09-10 WAC SOURCEBOOK

Title	Author
Call for innovative assignments in the Age of Web 2.0	Aaron Brower, Social Work & Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning
Hybrid in-person/on-line course syllabus for a new Comm-B course	Greg Downey, Library and Information Studies & Journalism and Mass Communication
Service-learning course syllabus	Katherine Cramer Walsh, Political Science
Section syllabus for a Comm-B course	Mytoan Nguyen, Sociology
Sequenced assignments in an introduction to the discipline	Louise Robbins and Michael Edmonds, Library and Information Studies
Reinventing the intermediate chemistry laboratory	Helen Blackwell, Chemistry
A course blog with student analyses of weather events	Steve Ackerman, Atmospheric and Oceanic Studies
Service-learning reflection journals	Michael C. Thornton, Afro-American Studies
Reflections on a writing assignment gone awry	Denise Oen, Curriculum and Instruction
Giving feedback on student papers using the comment function in Microsoft Word	Jim Raymo, Sociology
Collaborating with students to generate evaluation criteria	Beth Godbee, Writing Across the Curriculum
A primary source paper teaching literacy information	Mitra Sharafi, Legal Studies
Using citation management tools in writing assignments	Rebecca Payne and Emily Wixon, Citation Management Working Group
Rubric for evaluating oral presentations	Elise Gold, Engineering Professional Development
Technologies to enhance group work	John Thomson, DoIT
Resource guide for publishing undergraduate research	Beth Godbee, Writing Across the Curriculum
Supplemental texts on writing in the disciplines	Beth Godbee, Writing Across the Curriculum

We'd be very glad to send you a copy of the new WAC Sourcebook! For a copy of the 09-10 edition, contact us: Brad Hughes at bthughes@wisc.edu or 263-3823; Beth Godbee at godbee@wisc.edu.

Thanks to Comm-B TA Fellows!



Honored for their outstanding teaching in Comm-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2009 training for 80 new Comm-B TAs from across campus.

From left to right:
Manisha Shelat, Journalism and Mass Communication

John Anderson, African Languages and Literature

Annette Vee, English and Library and Information Studies

Beth Pfothauer, Bacteriology and Biocore

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