

# TIME TO WRITE

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

VOLUME 16, No. 2  
SPRING 2013

## AUTHENTIC AUDIENCES FOR STUDENTS IN RUSSIAN POLITICS AND CULTURE

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

**W**hen Professor Yoshiko Herrera wanted to give her Russian Politics and Culture undergraduates an audience beyond their own class for their final research projects, she was surprised by how simple it was to arrange. With the help of an outreach coordinator from the Center for Russia, East Europe and Central Asia (CREECA), her class was soon presenting on Russian politics to an AP History class at East High School here in Madison. And the event was a huge success. As Herrera puts it, "When I asked my students what they liked most about the class, about 15 out of 19 said, 'The presentations at East.'"

The genesis for this outreach idea came about when Herrera wanted to better integrate writing assignments with content in this First-Year Interest Group (FIG) course on the politics and culture of Russia. "I met with Brad Hughes before the class," she says. "He strategized with me about improving my assignments within my time constraints. He knows how busy we all are." Out of that conversation came an idea to shift the audience of her students' writing and give them a new, higher-stakes experience of sharing their research. "I wanted to make the students genuine experts—to introduce authenticity."

### Setting up the Projects

So Herrera took her basic final research paper and turned it into a group project requiring both writing and oral presentation. At the beginning of the semester, Herrera divided her class into groups of four or five

students with complementary strengths, "after students had turned in some work, to keep specific skills in mind." Next, her students determined their topics. Herrera knew this could be a challenge, so she offered options while remaining open to new suggestions from students. In the end, the topics ranged from the 1905 Russian Revolution, to environmental issues in Russia, to current political protests.



Professor Yoshiko Herrera  
*Department of Political Science;  
Center for Russia, East  
Europe and Central Asia;  
and the International Institute*

As the groups got down to work, Herrera required a series of short assignments about their topics, their sources, and the campus research resources they were using. She provided feedback for each of these assignments, to teach students about revision and to help them manage the workload. "They incorporated the feedback from each small assignment into the next. It all built to the final paper."

After completing their ten-page papers, the students prepared formal PowerPoint presentations. They presented these to the class as a dress rehearsal, getting feedback from their peers. Then they were off to an AP History class at East High School, where they presented not only on their topics, but also on their research processes. And they fielded questions from the high schoolers.

### A Win-Win Situation

Nancy Heingartner, the outreach coordinator for CREECA, was a great resource for planning the event. "She knows the AP World History teacher at East. And so many of these teachers are extremely interested in engaging with UW-Madison."

Herrera was also thrilled by how valuable this experience was for her students. "A lot

## In this issue...

**Authentic Audiences  
for Students in Russian  
Politics and Culture**

page 1

**Two Days in the Life of  
Writing Across the Curriculum  
at UW-Madison**

page 2

**Star Parties and Barn Door  
Trackers: Outreach Writing  
in Astronomy**

page 3

**Thanks to Our  
Communication-B  
TA Fellows**

page 6

*Time to Write* is the newsletter of the College of Letters & Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Correspondence should be addressed to:

*Time to Write*  
L&S Program  
in Writing Across the Curriculum,  
Department of English,  
UW-Madison,  
Helen C. White Hall,  
600 North Park Street,  
Madison, WI 53706.

We can also be reached  
via phone at 608-263-3823  
or via email:

**Bradley T. Hughes, Director**  
bthughes@wisc.edu

**Stephanie White,  
Editor and Assistant Director**  
smwhite2@wisc.edu

Many, many thanks to Elise Gold,  
Claire Parrott, and Andrew White for their  
careful proofreading and editing of this issue.

(Continued on page 4)

# TWO DAYS IN THE LIFE OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AT UW-MADISON

**Stephanie White**

*L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum*

**O**n the back of each issue of this newsletter, we always publish a thank you to our Communication-B TA Fellows for the incredible work they do planning and leading Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) training each semester. Yet rarely do we have a chance to go into detail about what exactly that work entails during this orientation for new Teaching Assistants in Communication-B courses in departments across campus.

With the research clearly showing that carefully designed writing instruction is a high-impact practice for engaging students in any discipline, many Comm-B courses are intentionally designed to integrate advanced communication instruction with disciplinary content. So it's vital that new TAs have guidance for accomplishing this worthwhile but complex goal.

That's why up to 75 new Comm-B Teaching Assistants trek to Helen C. White Hall for two mornings during Welcome Week each semester, where we

## Departments participating in Comm-B TA training include:

- African Languages and Literature
- Biology
- Botany
- Classics
- Communication Arts
- Consumer Science
- Counseling Psychology
- Curriculum and Instruction
- East Asian Languages and Literature
- Folklore
- Geography
- History
- Journalism
- Library and Information Sciences
- Music
- Neuroscience
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education
- Religious Studies
- Scandinavian Studies
- Slavic Languages and Literature
- Sociology
- Theatre and Drama
- Zoology

have the privilege of offering them theories and practical suggestions for teaching with writing. As the TA Assistant Director of UW-Madison's WAC Program, I'm always energized by the buzz of conversation over these two days. I love the "aha" moments as TAs consider—some for the first time—the challenges and opportunities that come with teaching writing in the disciplines.

Comm-B TAs also participate in professional development in their own departments, which often includes weekly meetings with staff. They discuss teaching the writing process, giving feedback, conferencing with students, and much more, in addition to the disciplinary concepts they're teaching. Since 1997, the WAC program has been privileged to complement this professional development with our training. Because participants come from such varying disciplines, levels of experience, and perspectives on writing, the training has developed

over the years to become chock-full of carefully designed components.

## Two Full Mornings and More

To begin, we ask participants to do a freewriting and discussion activity to get them articulating learning goals for their students. We also talk about what students might struggle with in a sample assignment and generate ideas for coaching students to succeed. Over the next two days, through discussions, plenary talks on key principles from composition research, and materials from the Writing Across the Curriculum Sourcebook, we think together about writing in specific disciplines and using writing as a powerful pedagogical approach. And we begin conversations that often continue throughout the semester as we build relationships with many TAs.

“ I love the 'aha' moments as TAs consider—some for the first time—the challenges and opportunities that come with teaching writing in the disciplines. ”

In the final component of Comm-B training, participants return to Helen C. White for a 90-minute workshop on responding to and evaluating student writing. In addition to practicing different modes of feedback with a student writing sample, we use examples of comments and rubrics from faculty at UW-Madison to talk about providing students with effective written feedback on their papers. By holding this session a few weeks into the semester, we're able to continue conversations we started during Welcome Week, checking in with the TAs and addressing any issues they've encountered in their writing instruction.

## Partners Across Campus

Partnerships with faculty and staff across campus are the driving force of any WAC program, and we're thankful for the incredible partners we have at UW-Madison. During the initial two days of Comm-B training, library instructional staff join us to talk about how TAs can collaborate with them to integrate research resources into their courses. And course coordinators from Introductory Biology or the Biocore program join us to offer a breakout session on teaching scientific writing, since a large percentage of new TAs will be teaching Comm-B courses in the life sciences.

Participants also attend breakout sessions facilitated by our TA Fellows—the experienced TAs who have demonstrated innovation and success in their Comm-B courses in departments including History, Biology, Slavic Languages and Literature, Communication Arts, Psychology, and Classics. Each semester, three to four TA Fellows work with us to design and lead breakout sessions on in-class activities to teach writing, conferencing with students about writing in progress, using peer review, helping students get back to basics in scientific writing, and more. And they answer questions on a panel about their TA experiences in Comm-B courses.

*(Continued on page 4)*

# STAR PARTIES AND BARN DOOR TRACKERS: OUTREACH WRITING IN ASTRONOMY

Eric Hooper

Department of Physics and Department of Astronomy



Dr. Eric Hooper

Department of Physics  
and Department of Astronomy

The *Badger Herald* accepted our students' project!" My TA and I delighted in the news, because it marked the first time that a group from Astronomy 104: Exploration of the Solar System had managed to publish their final project. Four of our students had worked together to build a barn door tracker—a contraption designed to eliminate star trails when taking photos of the night sky—and the article they'd written about their work, along with the photos they'd taken with the tracker, was going to be published. Expecting a

postage-stamp article in the back under the Chancellor's cheese preference, we gasped when the first entry on the front page led us to a full-page color spread.

Even better, this project was only one of over 30 high-quality educational group projects created and written by the 150 students in the course that semester. YouTube videos, an interactive activity at the local children's museum, children's books, an outing with Boy Scouts, and a residence hall star party are just a further sampling of group projects planned and executed by students that semester in this introductory astronomy course geared toward non-science majors.

## A Golden Opportunity

I came back to teaching introductory astronomy in 2006 after teaching at other levels and learning a great deal from education innovators in the process. This return was a golden opportunity to build the course afresh with a broader perspective, new insights, and clearer goals. One of the most rewarding and fascinating elements of the new course proved to be group projects. Rather than have students write a traditional term paper, I decided to have groups of students plan, write, and disseminate astronomy-related outreach products targeted at a non-specialist audience.

These projects would serve several purposes. First, students could experience the complexities of scientific communication firsthand by actually practicing it, thereby becoming more astute consumers of scientific information. Second, they could tailor part of the course to their own interests and skills. They could also gain experience in group management and peer review. And they could set learning goals and devise evaluation methods, which, I hoped, would lead to a greater awareness of their own learning needs and accomplishments.

I was amazed the first time I tried these outreach projects. Many of my students became deeply invested in their projects and went to great lengths to see them through. In the years since, I've been delighted by how enthusiastically

students jump into a wide diversity of projects. In addition to newspaper articles, groups have:

- written and produced a video for middle school students about black holes in other galaxies,
- worked with the program administrator at the Madison Children's Museum to lead an interactive activity with an accurate scale model of the solar system (in terms of both size and distance—can you picture that?),
- created a Facebook page analyzing the treatment of astronomical topics in science fiction movies,
- given a presentation at the Space Place, the Astronomy Department's outreach center,
- written and produced YouTube videos explaining complex astronomical topics,
- organized a residence hall star party, where people come together for night-sky observations—a common event for amateur astronomers, but new for the students,
- and much more.

“ I've been delighted by how enthusiastically students jump into a wide diversity of projects. ”

## The Course Structure

Every time I've taught the course since, I've fiddled with it here and there, but I've kept the basic structure the same.

From the beginning of the semester, students start brainstorming for their final projects. Meanwhile, they're getting a necessary foundation in the field through homework assignments like problem sets and online research, which challenge their understandings of how astronomers work and augment what they're learning from the textbook and class lectures. We also do night-sky observations—this is astronomy, after all! Then, in addition to a midterm and a final exam, the second half of the semester is devoted to the final group projects. For these, students go through the following steps:

### 1. Brainstorming

Early in the semester, each student submits three possible astronomy topics for a group project, along with a method or medium for presenting that topic. The topics can be historical, philosophical—anything that's related to astronomy. My grader and I categorize the hundreds of ideas into 10 to 20 main topic headings and a similar number of media categories, each of which becomes a separate thread on the course website's discussion board.

### 2. Group Formation

The students then self-organize around common interests into groups of two to eight people. Many use the web discussion board to do so, while others find neighbors in class or in discussion sections.

(Continued on page 5)

## AUTHENTIC AUDIENCES FOR STUDENTS IN RUSSIAN POLITICS AND CULTURE *continued*

(Continued from page 1)

of us in academia take presenting for granted. But many of my students had never given a formal presentation or fielded questions before." Further, by synthesizing the research process itself for their audience, the undergraduates were able to reflect on the work they'd done. "It made them more aware of how they'd used the research resources on campus," Herrera explains.

Of course the high school students benefited, too, from hearing about Russian culture and politics from undergraduates they could relate to. "The high schoolers have this interest in what it means to be an undergraduate. Since the presenters were first-years, they were only one year beyond high school," Herrera says. "And they're UW-Madison students, so that's kind of prestigious."

### Behind the Scenes

Whether her FIG course features outreach or not, Herrera's other requirements are standard for her. First, she has her students write 1000- to 1500-word "critical reviews" five times over the semester.

"Students have to cover every article, every reading for class that day—kind of like they're discussants at a panel." They also include one explicit focus paragraph. "They can say, 'I didn't like this in the reading, because...' or, 'This made me think of this from this week...' It's specifically their thoughts that go beyond the main arguments of the readings." In addition, they write two discussion questions for the class, which gives them ownership of the class discussions.

But Herrera adds an unusual component to these critical reviews: she divides up the paper writing so that only a few

“ Because they've written something, they're better able to participate. ”

students write a paper each week. This makes giving feedback and grading easier on her, since the papers are spread out, but it also makes class discussions richer. "About half the class comes to seminar not only having read but also having written about the readings. Because they've written something, they're better able to participate. They get really invested in the discussion."

### Further Opportunities for Students

Beyond the required writing, students also write optional extra-credit responses to FIG-sponsored events—an assignment that has proven deeply compelling. "When students write about their impressions of events, they reveal things they might not have otherwise," Herrera says. "For example, some students had never been to the symphony, and their responses to that experience have been really powerful. They've actually moved me to tears." Further, what these responses reveal can demonstrate students' engagement in ways that class discussion may not, offering vital insight into how students are understanding the course material.

By combining her final paper and presentation project with different kinds of assignments throughout the semester, Herrera helps her students grapple fully with the material they're covering. Through these powerful response papers, discussion questions, critical responses to readings, and the thrill of presenting their final group projects to high school students, Herrera's first-year undergraduates are able to experience the multifaceted, authentic learning that FIG courses have become known for. ●

## TWO DAYS IN THE LIFE OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM *continued*

(Continued from page 2)



TA Stephanie White

L&S Program in  
Writing Across the Curriculum

These talented and thoughtful TA Fellows also lead discussions about topics like teaching with technology, writing about controversial issues, plagiarism, and teaching multilingual writers. Through these Fellows' contributions, participants walk away from Comm-B training with specific, proven strategies for coaching their students to succeed with writing in their disciplines. They're also motivated by the enthusiasm our Fellows have for teaching with writing.

### Survey Says...

Representative comments from participant evaluations tell us that TAs come away from this orientation with "examples of solutions to challenges" they may face, in addition to "theory about what good writing is." Feedback from faculty and course coordinators shows us that this training pays off in their view, too. As Dr. Michelle Harris, Biocore Course Coordinator, puts it, "For many years now, Comm-B workshops have been an excellent way for our Biocore TAs to begin reflecting on their role as evaluators of scientific writing. As our semesters progress, we often hear our TAs referring back to ideas, concepts, and approaches they first heard about at the workshop. How cool is that?"

We in the WAC program always benefit, too, from the compelling conversations we have with these TAs, who are so committed to teaching. And we're thrilled to do our part in forwarding UW-Madison's mission to train and develop future faculty members across the curriculum. ●

## STAR PARTIES AND BARN DOOR TRACKERS *continued*

(Continued from page 3)

### 3. Progress Reports

Around the middle of the semester, each group reports its progress. Since the bulk of the work on the group project happens in the second half of the semester, most groups don't have a draft at this point. Rather, they list resources gathered to date, discuss the group management plan, address the feasibility of the project, establish preliminary learning goals for their intended audience, and describe how they plan to evaluate the success of those learning goals. These reports serve to nudge students along so they don't get stuck in an unfinished mess at the end of the semester. And I provide feedback to each group to ensure that the medium and topic they're working with are still the best fit for the audience they've chosen.

### 4. Peer Discussions

Once students have submitted progress reports, one week of the discussion section is devoted to informal chats among students from different groups, facilitated by the TA. Students share current plans for the projects and receive feedback from outside perspectives. Since members of each group are scattered across different discussion sections, the groups benefit from several sets of feedback.

### 5. First Drafts

About ten weeks into the semester, the groups submit their first drafts to me. I require these to be at least half complete, though not fully polished, and request an outline for any missing portions. Students also update their progress reports on management, learning goals, and evaluation plans. And they report on the peer discussions, including new ideas and suggestions gleaned from others. I, in turn, provide feedback on the content and delivery of the projects. Sometimes, I need to push students to add more meat to their work. More often, I encourage them to scale down their plans. I also help them accomplish the exciting challenges they've set for themselves by suggesting contacts for setting up events.

### 6. Peer Review

Each group also shares its first draft with a different, randomly selected group. This peer review is itself a graded assignment,

consisting of several guidelines and questions to apply to a project draft. Students provide copies of their reviews to the original group as well as submitting them for a grade.

### 7. Meeting with Instructors

Once the groups have had a chance to incorporate feedback on their first drafts, they meet with their TA. The TA devotes all office hours during one week near the end of the semester to scheduled ten-minute discussions with each group to check on progress and iron out last-minute snags. I also meet with groups as needed or requested.

### 8. Final Submission

The final draft consists of either the product itself, if it's written or visual, or a description of the event. In addition, the students assess how well they met the learning goals, describe how they

incorporated feedback from peer reviews and from discussions with the instructors, and provide a final management report on the relative effort expended by the group members.

### The Pay Off

As I talk with students along the way each semester, I hear about the challenging projects and goals they've set for themselves. Their work shows me how much they're learning about astronomy as they strive to communicate about it effectively to others. And when I see their final projects in action—especially when my schedule allows me to attend their events—my students' pride is palpable when they watch their audiences learn something new about astronomy.

Since this course fulfills a general education science requirement, I want students to be able to morph their work to their own interests as much as possible. This is a pretty tough class. I'm asking a lot, so I want students to be really engaged. Through these outreach projects, they convey their engagement in creative, smart ways.

I'm so impressed with the work my students do. And if you take a look at the *Badger Herald* archives or check out the handmade children's book displayed in the Astronomy Department office, I think you will be too. ●

© 2010 Astronomical Society of the Pacific. Adapted by Stephanie White.

“ This is a pretty tough class. I'm asking a lot, so I want students to be really engaged. ”

## Announcing our fall 2013 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 Stephanie White at [smwhite2@wisc.edu](mailto:smwhite2@wisc.edu).

# THANKS TO OUR COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



**Tawnya Cary**  
Department of Forest and  
Wildlife Ecology



**Sara Brinegar**  
Department of History



**Larisa Puslenghea**  
School of Journalism and  
Mass Communication

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these three TAs helped plan and lead the January 2013 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for over 40 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  
IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Department of English

University of Wisconsin-Madison

6187 Helen C. White Hall

600 North Park Street

Madison, WI 53706

<http://mendoza.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>