

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

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT WRITING: FOUR LESSONS FOR INTENTIONAL AND SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

By John Zumbrunnen

John Zumbrunnen is a professor in the Political Science Department. He specializes in the history of political thought and democratic theory and is also the faculty director of Chadbourne Residential College.

It only took me 15 years to get serious about teaching writing. Don't get me wrong. I've always cared a lot about writing, and I've always asked my students to write a fair amount for my classes.

But my eyes were opened only recently by some excellent professional development programs at UW (Blended Learning Fellows, TeachOnline@UW) that taught me the basics of backward instructional design. Since then, I've been much more intentional with writing assignments, particularly with my favorite students: first year undergraduates. Let me, then, share four things I've learned.



**Professor
John Zumbrunnen**

Formulate Clear Learning Goals and Assessment Approaches

A first lesson simply reinforces a key principle of instructional design: establish clear goals for writing assignments. Good instructional design begins with figuring out what you'd like students to know or be able to do when they finish your course. Taking this need for clarity in goal-setting to its logical conclusion, I now start every writing assignment by identifying for students the specific course-learning outcomes it engages.

This simple step helps my students understand what I'm asking them to write and why, something that is particularly important for first-year students with little or no experience with college-level writing. It also helps me avoid straying inadvertently from the course path that I'd plotted before the term began.

The second lesson follows closely from the first: every writer wants to know how

their work will be judged. For students, we like to use the word "assessed" (or, if we must, "graded") rather than "judged," but the same principle holds. For assessment in my courses, I've been using grading rubrics for some time.

Now, though, I have greater appreciation for the role rubrics can play in scaffolding the writing process for students. Beyond setting expectations and guiding the writing process for novice writers, there's also something to be said for the way rubrics promote fairness and transparency. I suppose that when I share the grading rubric with students in advance, I am in a sense asking them to write to the rubric, to tell me what I want to hear. On the other hand, I head off the frustration that follows when the assessment criteria remain mysterious and students fail to read my mind.

Keep It Manageable and Interactive

Lesson three: get to the point. In my teaching career I've always leaned toward short writing assignments. Now, with newfound conviction about the value of brevity (which for me follows from a laser-like focus on achieving well-defined goals), I am a bit ruthless in this regard.

I've been asking students to write about impossibly broad questions (an example from my first-year interest group seminar: "What role does equality play in shaping the possibilities and limitations of democracy?") and to submit three versions of their answers (250, 100, 50-word versions). My hope is that students have the actual experience of saying just as much, or even more, with fewer words.

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STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' QUANTITATIVE LITERACY WITH WRITING IN PHYSICS 115

By Mike Haen

Writing Across the Curriculum

In a course on the physics of energy, Professor Vandembroucke is convinced that assigning short, low-stakes writing activities (called 'article responses') helps students demonstrate their understanding of course concepts and apply that understanding to interrogate problems regarding energy use in society. These writing activities, along with two midterm exams, a final exam, and weekly problem sets, strengthen students' understandings of scientific concepts related to energy, and help students develop quantitative reasoning and analytical skills that they can use to make well-informed decisions about energy sources now and into the future.



Professor Justin Vandembroucke
Department of Physics

Led by Professor Vandembroucke and a graduate student teaching assistant, Physics 115 is an interdisciplinary course that attracts 50-100 students. Reflecting on the course, Professor Vandembroucke explains, "One challenge of teaching this class is that students all have varying levels of education in physics and mathematics. The writing assigned in the course gives students the chance to explore what interests them about the physics of energy from varied perspectives."

For the writing assignment featured below, Vandembroucke asks students to respond to a popular press article about an energy related issue. He sees the assignment as a way for all Physics 115 students to demonstrate and improve "their quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills as well as their writing skills." Though some students are initially surprised by and resistant to the assignments in the class, Vandembroucke has found that they quickly warm up to these assignments, since they start to see the relevance of course concepts in current public debates about energy use and the environment.

Recently, after working with the Director of WAC Brad Hughes through the Madison Teaching and Learning Excellence Program, Vandembroucke reconsidered the frequency of the assignment (originally every week) and he added a detailed grading rubric. While he used to have students complete a response every week and did not provide a rubric, he now assigns article responses six times during the semester. He thinks these changes help students do better work on each assignment.

The Article Response Assignment Students Receive

Find an article of your choice (published within the past few months) related to energy and write a response. Your response should critically discuss what was in the article rather than simply summarize it. Please start your response with a link to the article and a quick summary. Then move on to analysis of/response to the article. You can explain the physics behind the article, relate it to something we learned in class, point out a mistake, explain why you disagree with something written, describe something you didn't understand, point out that there was important information missing, or do a simple calculation regarding the article.

One of the main course goals is for you to become a numerate (in addition to literate) citizen. By the end of this course you should be comfortable reading and judging quantitative information in news articles, and when important quantitative information is incorrect or missing, you should be able to recognize this and request the correct information or find it for yourself. Article responses are opportunities to develop this skill. Your response should be short (one or two paragraphs, between 100 and 400 words total).

Article sources

Be careful to use a reputable source for the article you respond to. Good national and international sources include *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The LA Times*, *The Economist*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Science*, *Nature*, *BBC News*, *Discover*, *Scientific American*, *Popular Science*, *Science News*, and *New Scientist*. *The Wisconsin State Journal*, *the Capital Times*, and *the Isthmus* are also good sources for energy-related issues on a local scale. Avoid blogs unless you know they are high quality.

Grading scale

0: not submitted or not submitted on time
8 or lower: submitted on time but poorly done

9: submitted on time and well done
10: submitted on time and outstandingly well done

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STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' QUANTITATIVE LITERACY WITH WRITING IN PHYSICS 115 (CONTINUED)

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Detailed Grading Criteria (rubric) for the Article Response Assignment

What distinguishes a 9 from an 8?

The answer to every question below should be yes, in order to receive a 9 rather than an 8.

- Did you provide a link or reference to the original article?
- Did you choose the article from a reputable source?
- Does the subject of the article relate clearly to energy?
- Did you include a brief (two to three sentence), clear summary of the article?
- Did your analysis of the article include a connection to the physics of energy (rather than focusing exclusively on e.g., economics or public policy)?
- Is the response well written, without spelling or grammar errors?
- Did you provide your own analysis rather than taking analysis from the article?

What distinguishes a 10 from a 9?

The answer to one or more question below should be yes, in order to receive a 10 rather than a 9.

- Is your response particularly interesting and engaging?
- Did your discussion connect the article directly to concepts we have discussed in class?
- Did you include a quantitative discussion/analysis?
- Did you perform a calculation with numbers from the article or numbers related to the article that you researched yourself?
- Did you find an error (e.g., confusing energy and power, or using incorrect units) in the article?
- Did you discuss a quantitative aspect of the article that should have been included and was not?

One Student's Successful Article Response in Physics 115

By Rebekah Ottoway

Article Response 3

Link to Chosen Article: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/02/180215180313.htm>

In this article from *Science Daily*, a research team at Virginia Tech is finding new ways to melt the stubborn piles of snow left in parking lots, ditches, and driveways after a snowstorm. The team members have invented a thermal absorptive blanket equipped with artificial sunlight to speed up the melting process. Their "Melt Mat" received a journal publication and a patent for this technology. The team took a year to get a perfect design that is not only affordable but also durable. The Melt Mat is environmentally safe and can be used repeatedly compared to other methods of snow removal which are one-time use. With the patent on the Melt Mat, the team could possibly have a very profitable future off of its invention.

The fundamental problem the team is addressing is the reflection of light off the snow, rather than absorption to aid melting. Because the snow doesn't absorb sunlight well, it doesn't increase its kinetic energy, and therefore stays close to the same temperature even when the temperature increases outside. Structurally, the Melt Mat is made of an aluminum sheet with a coating of black paint. The black color's role in heat absorption is to increase the amount of sunlight absorbed to help make up for the lack of sunlight absorbed of the white snow. The energy absorbed by the black mat will then be transferred to the snow through conduction, resulting in a melting time of the snow that is decreased to one-third the time without any use of energy. To measure the amount of energy needed to melt 20 kilograms of snow, you would calculate Q using this equation: $Q = m \cdot \text{heat of fusion (of water)}$. So, $Q = 20\text{kg} \cdot 4.184 \text{ J / kg} = 83.68 \text{ J}$ of energy used to melt 20 kg of snow at a constant temperature. To calculate the rate of heat conduction from the Melt Mat to the snow can be measured by the equation: $H = A \Delta T / R$. Since we already know how to solve Q from the previous equation, we can find H , but we need to know the resistance of the aluminum in order to solve it. The Melt Mat should have a low resistance in order to transfer heat to the snow efficiently.

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT WRITING: FOUR LESSONS FOR INTENTIONAL AND SUCCESSFUL TEACHING (CONTINUED)

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Along the way, they also learn the kernel of truth in that old saw, attributed to many, which says something like, “if I had had more time, I would have written less.” And, because I’m reading fewer words but reading more closely, they get better feedback from me.

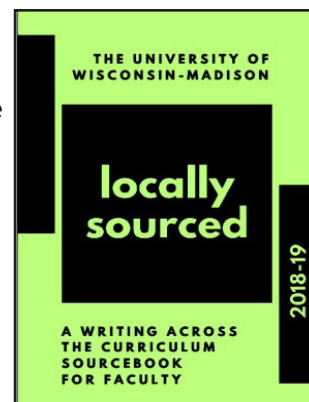
My final lesson is no more original than the first three: everyone needs help, and (most) people are willing to be helpful. We all know that many students—perhaps especially early in their college career—are hesitant to ask their instructors for help as they tackle something as unfamiliar as college-level writing. With this in mind, while I do encourage my students to come to talk to me about their writing, I also require them to talk with each other. I regularly use the Canvas learning management system’s peer-review tool, which randomly assigns students to read one another’s work. When I’m doing it right, I provide students with peer review guidelines—ideally a rubric like the one I’ll use for grading. I secretly suspect, though, that the most valuable thing about peer review isn’t always the feedback the writers get but the combination of solace and inspiration the readers enjoy. Writing is a pain and a joy; commiserating tilts the balance toward the latter.

Putting these lessons into practice more intentionally as a writer-department chair has made me a better teacher of writing. I feel more empathy for novice writers and, hence, try to develop for them assignments that approximate writing from professional workplaces. Like my students, I prefer having clear writing goals and knowing how my work will be judged. For instance, I appreciate well-crafted calls for, say, funding proposals for which I seek approval (fingers crossed!), and believe the more I know about the criteria of the audience (often a single campus decision-maker or a committee of colleagues), the better. Needing as much help to be persuasive as my students do, I’ve worn a path across Bascom Hill from my North Hall office to the Associate Dean’s South Hall office for patient advice on my next memo. Most especially, I know that readers appreciate brevity. As chair, I don’t write more words per day, but more “manuscripts”—proposals, requests, reports, staff evaluations, meeting agendas, and e-mails. All need to be short to ensure they actually will be read. So when students just grumbled about those 250-100-50 word writing assignments, I legitimately retorted, having recently written for a campus committee, that students are likely to encounter the same challenge in almost any job. Admittedly, I love academic writing enough to harbor some doubt, especially when short writing assignments crowd longer papers out of a syllabus. I trust, however, other classes (including ones I teach) will require longer term papers in which students, having been first forced to write these short memos, will say what they have to all the more clearly, concisely, and persuasively. •

A LOOK AT THE NEW 2018-2019 WAC FACULTY SOURCEBOOK

Every other summer the Writing Across the Curriculum program revises our 330-page faculty Sourcebook called *Locally Sourced*. We distribute between 200-300 copies each year in WAC workshops, faculty learning communities, and individual consultations. The Sourcebook includes advice for disciplinary faculty about teaching with writing, principles for aligning writing assignments with learning goals, advice about peer review and conferencing, and advice for responding to and evaluating student writing and oral communication. At the heart of the Sourcebook are successful writing and oral-communication assignments created by faculty, instructional staff, and teaching assistants in departments across our university.

In the new edition, we’ve added 40 new assignments from courses across the curriculum. For access to the entire Sourcebook, head to our WAC program website, writing.wisc.edu/wac. The following list offers a sample of what’s new in the 2018-2019 edition. •



Some Examples of What’s New in the Sourcebook

Discipline	Instructor	Assignment
Psychology	Professor Joe Austerweil	For a course on cognition and society—a final project (analysis of societal or health issue) and recommendation to government officials in a paper, brochure, poster, website, or video.
Public Policy	Professor Emilia Tjernström	For a graduate course, an annotated bibliography assignment as part of a cost-benefit analysis paper.
Classics	Professor Nandini Pandey	For a course on the Romans, a final paper about life for a particular marginalized group without Roman citizenship.
Integrative Biology	Professor Prashant Sharma	For an advanced course on evolutionary developmental biology of animals, peer-review guidelines, revision, and rebuttal.

For Faculty, Instructional Staff, and TAs: A Course in Spring 2019

The Ultimate Active Learning: Using Writing to Teach in Any Discipline

Mondays, 3:00-4:30 (starting on 1/28) • The Writing Center Commons • 6171 Helen C. White Hall

Join us in Spring 2019 for a course that can help you improve your teaching and your students' learning! In this course co-sponsored by the WAC and Delta programs, you'll engage in lively discussions with faculty, instructional staff, post-docs, and graduate students, and take part in exciting expeditions (or mini field trips) across campus to discover strategies for (1) designing writing assignments that improve students' learning, (2) saving time responding to and evaluating student writing, and (3) making the most of conferences with students about their papers, and more!

Research shows that when students write, they actually learn course content more effectively. But this only works when assignments are well designed and engaging. In this course, you'll learn how to use writing to promote students' active learning—while maximizing your own time! Through a few course observations across campus, practical readings, and discussions, you'll deepen your theoretical and practical foundation for helping students learn with writing. Participants in the course use what they learn to design a final writing assignment (see example below) for a current course they are teaching or one they hope to teach in the future. If you'd like to learn more, contact Assistant Director Mike Haen (mhaen@wisc.edu).

From the Spring 2018 Course: A Course Participant's Assignment

*Note: Due to space limitations, this abbreviated form of the final assignment excludes evaluation criteria.

Eric Luckey, PhD Candidate, Department of Educational Policy Studies

Course: Educational Policy Studies/History 412: History of American Education

Assignment Summary: This assignment is designed for intermediate level students in a history/educational studies class on the history of American education, though it could be adapted for a course on the history of childhood, for upper-level seminar-style courses on the history of education, or even for an educational studies course focusing on contemporary issues of school and society.

American Girl Doll Pitch

Context/Audience The American Girl Doll company was launched in 1986 with the intention of telling the story of American history through the imagined lives and narratives of its 16 original doll characters. You have recently been hired by the company's product development team and your boss has asked each team member to pitch an idea for a new doll. This pitch will be read by your supervisor, and if promising, it will be sent up the ladder, potentially all the way to the CEO. Consequently, your prose has to be clear, concise, and compelling. Your pitch will also be read by a professional historian with expertise in the history of childhood and the history of education who will check your pitch for historical accuracy.

Description of Task: Your thesis-driven "pitch" should be 1500-2000 words. You must make an argument that the doll you're pitching is an important addition to the American Girl historical characters line. How or why it's an important addition is for you to decide—and argue. The character's story must discuss her schooling. That is, the narrative of the character (and perhaps some of her accessories) must discuss what her education looked like in form and content. Where did she go to school (if she had a building)? What was the style of instruction? Who was her teacher? What did the classroom look like? What types of learning aids did they use? Regardless of the character you pitch, her education should be an important part of her character and narrative.

Your pitch should be an argument-driven piece with a clear thesis statement and supporting arguments. In the introduction, you should describe not only who your character is, but why this particular character is an important addition to the American Girl Doll line. Your pitch should also describe the relevant historical context that your character is situated in, the unique (but historically accurate) narrative of her life and her outfits and accessories. You should articulate how the historical context you've chosen, the doll's narrative, even their clothes and accessories contribute to your argument. You are expected to reference at least three historical resources (books, articles, and/or primary sources), not including readings we've covered in class.

Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to...

1. identify relevant historiographical sources to accurately describe the historical past.
2. articulate how historical context (e.g., social, economic) influences individuals' lived experience.
3. appraise significance of different historical characters and defend the particular historical choices they make in their own narrative.
4. make a clear, concise, and compelling written argument with a clear thesis statement and strong supporting evidence.

THANKS TO OUR FALL 2018 COMMUNICATION-B TA FELLOWS!



Kayci Harris
History



Micah Kloppenburg
Biology



Harvey Long
The Information School



Angela Serrano
Sociology

Honored for their outstanding teaching in Communication-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the August 2018 training in Writing Across the Curriculum for more than 60 new Communication-B TAs from across campus.

Thanks for your commitment to this important work!

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



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