Time to Write

The Complexity of Writing Assignments:
Some Implications for Teaching

Stuart Greene, English

Have you ever been surprised by the papers your students turned in as a response to what you thought was a clear assignment?

To understand why this happens, it is important to recognize that students make sense of and give meaning to academic work through the lens of years of prior experiences of reading and writing in and out of school.

From their experiences in primary and secondary school, students are accustomed to writing summaries and reports in order to demonstrate to teachers that they've done the assigned reading. Therefore, even when we ask them to analyze or to use sources to advance an argument, they may very well fall back upon previously successful strategies for summarizing.

In fact, when we examine students' processes of composing--the thinking that goes on behind the texts they compose--we find that the task they give themselves is a better predictor of what they will do than is the task we have given them. For example, an assignment may

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ask a student to take a position and argue for it, but the student interprets that task as "show that I've done the reading and attended lecture," which leads to a paper that only summarizes.

We may assume that students' interpretations of assignments are fixed, but it is important to recognize that their interpretations often change throughout the process of composing. One student

whom I studied began writing a position paper assignment with the goal of arguing for a single position. However, as this student began reading sources to back up his position, he found that the sources didn't always agree with him. He then reinterpreted his goal as summarizing what each source said because that task was easier than trying to negotiate opposing viewpoints.

This example suggests that students are thinking carefully about what they're being asked to write, and that they are energetic and thoughtful in their attempts to fulfill their own purposes as writers and to meet our expectations.

The problem that preoccupies me is that our

The Director's Chair

Welcome to the second issue of *Time to Write*, a newsletter from the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum.

This issue features articles by Stuart Greene of the English Department and Sheena Rogers of Psychology. Greene helps us understand what's involved when students interpret our writing assignments, and he offers advice, based on his research, to help us guide our students through the writing process.

Rogers explains how the faculty and TAs in a large writing-intensive course worked together to improve their assignments and to develop grading criteria.

I appreciated your enthusiastic response to the first issue. Many of you wrote to say that you enjoyed it and to ask for extra copies to share with your colleagues. We're glad to expand our mailing list! Let us know how we can help you by writing to us at one of the addresses below.

--Brad Hughes, Director
L&S WAC Program

Complexity of Writing Assignments...

students don't always know what our expectations for papers are, even when we try to design seemingly clear and cogent assignments. As I mentioned above, prior experiences powerfully shape how students read our assignments. This is compounded by the fact that our expectations are often merely tacit, even when we think we have articulated them.

To articulate our expectations more clearly, we first need to reflect upon the kind of learning we want the assignment to foster. Are we asking our students to summarize, to analyze, or to synthesize information? Have we stated this clearly in the assignment?

Second, we need to focus on what students bring to the tasks we design, including their prior knowledge, goals, and skills. How comfortable are they with the concepts presented in class and in the readings? Are they aware of different rhetorical strategies, such as how to use a comparison to establish an argument?

When we give students a writing assignment, we can offer guidance throughout the entire process of composing, first asking students how they interpret a task and then discussing possible options for writing.

By exploring students' assumptions about writing, we can begin to develop practices that build upon the students' emerging abilities to use language in different contexts.

Once students have written drafts, we can analyze a couple students' drafts in class, examining how the writers interpreted the task, discussing the consequences of taking such approaches, and considering alternatives.

We can also provide opportunities for students to share their work and to collaborate with other students in peer groups. Collaboration can promote a play of differences, enabling students to hear a range of options beyond the confines of their own experiences.

In offering these suggestions, I want to urge us to re-examine our assumptions about learning, to give voice to those assumptions that remain tacit, and to become students of our students.✗

Teaching Writing, Teaching Teaching

Sheena Rogers, Psychology

College teaching may be the only profession that requires no formal training, but there is no question that even a little training helps.

In Fall of 1995, with the assistance of Rocco Marinaccio from the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program, I ran a pilot series of workshops for TAs in Psychology's core research methods class (Psych 225). The workshop had a substantial impact on TA confidence and effectiveness, and we hope that it will become a standard part of the TA workload for the course.

Psych 225 is a writing-intensive course, and it may become a Bascom course under the new Letters and Science communications requirements. TAs, like faculty, often doubt their ability and qualifications to teach writing. In our workshop series, we worked collaboratively to build a shared sense of what constitutes good writing in a psychology research report.

Before the workshop, TAs' lack of confidence in their ability as teachers of writing expressed itself in a rigid grading scheme in which points were deducted for errors, but in which there was no mechanism for rewarding especially good analyses or tightly organized arguments.

Students complained that TAs were "picky," and that comments in the margins were often unhelpful. Ironically, the TAs' bid for objectivity with the point-deduction system was perceived by students to be highly subjective and inconsistent.

The explicit goal of the workshop was to produce a set of evaluation tools: documents that could be used both to guide our assessment of student writing and to provide effective feedback to the writers about the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

Together, we produced a set of documents describing the conventional structure and content of each of the standard subsections of an APA-style experimental research report. For each section of the report, we then generated a list of criteria by which writing in that section should be evaluated, and we tried to articulate what kind of writing would constitute "outstanding" work by those criteria, and what would constitute "poor," "ok," "good," or "very good" work.

The resulting evaluation forms included a scale for each item that could be marked anywhere on a continuum from "poor" to "outstanding."

The form gives students and TAs a qualitative profile of the students' work which can be translated into a letter grade, and which also provides detailed and focused feedback to the writer. Marginal comments are provided by the TA on the paper itself, and there is space on the evaluation form for further explanation by the TA.

In course evaluations, students praised the evaluation forms and reported that they found them useful in revising their writing. We are now collecting data more formally to assess our two principal goals: Does our evaluation method actually work to improve student writing? And does the method improve the reliability and effectiveness of the TAs' grading and teaching?

Follow-up workshops and preliminary data suggest that both goals were met. At the very least, the workshop series gave the participants a better sense of what is meant by good scientific writing and it raised our confidence in our ability to teach it.

An important strength of the workshop as a training device was that the TAs were active participants in their training. The documents we produced are genuine collaborations, and the insights of the beginning TAs were as valuable as the experience of the old hands.✘

For Your Information...

Do you want to know more about the new writing requirements in the College of Letters and Science? Are you looking for new ideas for incorporating writing in your courses?

The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program (WAC) is eager to help you and your department develop effective writing-intensive and Bascom courses. To help meet the needs of a diverse community of L&S faculty, WAC staff can offer both brief workshops for specific departments and consultation with individual faculty members.

To arrange a departmental workshop or an individual consultation, please contact Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, by campus mail in the English Dept., by telephone at 263-3823, or by e-mail at bhughes@macc.wisc.edu.

Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum
University of Wisconsin - Madison
6185 Helen C. White Hall
600 N. Park Street
Madison, WI 53706

If you'd like us to add a colleague's name to our mailing list or to remove yours, just complete this sheet and send it to Kirsten Jamsen in the English Dept., Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St.

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