

# Time to Write

The Newsletter of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

Vol. 4, No. 1 November 1999



## In This Issue

Computer-Guided  
Peer Review  
page 2

Writing Fellows Are  
Right For You  
page 2

Helping Comm-B Students  
Use the Library Effectively  
page 3

Upcoming Changes in WI  
(or Comm-C) Courses  
page 4

Verbal Assessment  
Project Update  
page 4

*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, Dept. of English, UW-Madison, Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706. We can also be reached via phone at 608-263-3823 or via e-mail:

Director, Brad Hughes  
bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu

Assistant Director and Editor,  
Rebecca Nowacek  
rcschoen@facstaff.wisc.edu



## Responding to Students' Drafts Online: Tips for Making the Most of Email

*Julie E. Fromer, Department of English*

Increasingly, instructors who assign writing in their classes find students seeking guidance on their drafts via email. Coaching students over email has a number of concrete benefits. Unlike in a face-to-face conference, over email we can think about how to phrase (and rephrase) our responses, and we can do so at any time of day or night. Some students who might never seek us out in person feel comfortable approaching us through the more anonymous medium of email. And we can also use email to follow up face-to-face conferences: offering new suggestions, clarifying points, asking additional questions to help guide students' writing processes, or asking to see a copy of a further revision.

For the past two semesters, I have worked as the coordinator for UW-Madison's Online Writing Center. At the Online Writing Center, we receive about 100 requests for comments on drafts each semester, and my experiences have shown me that while email offers a number of benefits to teachers and students, there are also many challenges in learning how to negotiate this new method of communicating. Over the past year, I have learned to adapt my commenting strategies to the medium of email and have developed a number of new strategies to make responding via email as efficient and as effective as possible.

### Reading Drafts Online

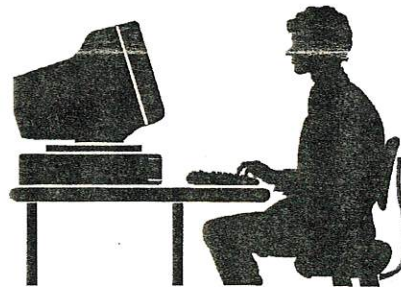
We encounter emailed documents in a very different way than traditional student papers. Rather than seeing the familiar 8 1/2- by 11- inch sheaf of paper, we simply see the words on a

screen. As readers of student papers and as writers ourselves, we've grown accustomed to recognizing how information should look on a page, how paragraphs should look within the constraints of margins—and we're used to having those margins available to us, as teachers, to jot down notes, questions, and comments for students. In an email message, all of these cues and spaces are missing.

When I began commenting on student writing over email, I found it helpful to print out a draft before responding to it. Seeing the draft on paper helped me recognize its length, depth, and focus. As I gained experience, however, I began to find it more efficient to scan the paper on my computer screen, creating a holistic image of it in my mind.

Just as it can be difficult for us as teachers to learn to read students' writing on the screen, it can be difficult for students to read our comments online. I encourage my students to print out my comments, so that they can read them over, take notes on them, and refer back to them as they're revising.

To ensure that I suggest this to all my students, I have a standard brief paragraph urging students to print out my comments and explaining why I feel that's important. I paste this paragraph into the beginning of every email response I write. Using Eudora's "stationery" feature, you can easily create a form-letter email, beginning with a greeting, a space for the student's name, and a brief paragraph suggesting that students print out your email for future reference.



*continued on page 5*



# Using Computer-Guided Practice to Improve Peer Review

Cathy Middlecamp, Department of Chemistry

Calibrated Peer Review (CPR)—a software package under development at UCLA—makes an eye-catching set of claims:

"[CPR] enables frequent writing assignments without any increase in instructor work ..."

"[CPR is] discipline independent and level independent ..."

"[CPR] can reduce the time an instructor now spends reading and assessing student writing ..."

—<http://server2.nslc.ucla.edu/cpr/>

But does CPR deliver what it promises?

Last spring, Professor Orville Chapman—who has won wide recognition for his accomplishments as an organic chemist at UCLA—visited the UW campus and presented evidence compelling enough to convince many of the skeptics. His lecture, "Calibrated Peer Review of Student Writing Assign-

ments in Chemistry," was funded as part of an ongoing series of talks in Chemical Education.

In his talk, Chapman reviewed a typical scenario for using CPR. First, students are given a short writing assignment on a particular topic. For example, when learning about radioactive decay, they might be asked to assume an identity of their choice (e.g., a nurse) and to prepare a handout on radioactivity for a particular audience (a patient). Students then submit their essays online, using a computer equipped with CPR software. Nothing unusual so far!

Next, however, the CPR software *calibrates* each student's ability to review essays. To do this, students are required to *evaluate* a set of essays on the same topic as the one they just wrote. These essays are either written by the instructor or drawn from a database provided with the CPR software. Students

evaluate these essays according to a variety of criteria, determined by the instructor. The instructor can write specific discipline-based criteria or can draw from a list of more general criteria related to style and usage provided by the software.

Based on the criteria the instructor chooses, the CPR software generates a series of questions about the essays—questions that can be answered by providing a rating from 1 to 10. Students then rate the essays by answering those questions. The CPR software then compares the student's reviews to expert reviews of the same text, and the student is assigned a "competency rating." If a student's competency rating is too low, he or she will be required to repeat the exercise.

Once students have completed this process and are "calibrated" as reviewers, students use the software to *review* 2 to 4 essays written by *their peers*. Finally, each student is required to re-read *his or her own essay*—that is, the one that he or she submitted at the start of the process—and evaluate it using the same questions.

After all this calibrating and reviewing is complete, students receive reviews of their own essays from their classmates, to use as they revise. Thus, students improve their peer review skills as they learn to spot shortcomings first in sample essays, next in the work of others, and finally in their own work. The instructor monitors the entire process and receives reports of student work.

The CPR software, now in test version, has been used in classrooms from grade school to graduate school. To take a tour of the learning process with CPR and to see examples of the calibration process, visit the Web site cited above. For more information, write to [cpr@nslc.ucla.edu](mailto:cpr@nslc.ucla.edu).

*NOTE: Cathy Middlecamp taught Chemistry 108, a 5-credit course that applies chemistry to "real world" issues, as a Communications-B course last spring. She did not use CPR, but is hoping to give it a try in the future.*

## Attention L&S Faculty: Writing Fellows Are Right for You

Emily Hall, Associate Director of the Writing Fellows Program

Would you like stronger papers from your students? Would you like to read and comment on drafts of student papers—but you just don't have the time? Would you like to foster intellectual exchanges among undergraduates? If so, you may want to take advantage of the **Undergraduate Writing Fellows Program!**

Now in its third year at UW-Madison, the Writing Fellows Program trains carefully selected undergraduates to serve as peer writing tutors, called Writing Fellows. Fellows write comments on drafts of assigned papers and hold conferences with all students in a course, offering suggestions for revision *before* the papers are turned in to the professor to be graded.

All Fellows enroll in a special seminar on tutoring writing across the curriculum. At the same time, each is paired with a faculty member teaching a writing-intensive or Communications-B course. So far, Fellows have worked in

a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, English, geography, psychology, zoology, and women's studies.

The program has received enthusiastic reviews from faculty, students, and from the Fellows themselves. Professor Neil Richardson of the Political Science Department is typical in reporting, "I have been delighted by my first experience with the Writing Fellows Program. My Fellows have been very effective in assisting my seminar students in shaping their papers and in focusing on the particulars of the assigned topics. It's very gratifying (and efficient!) to be marking papers that, thanks to the Writing Fellows' efforts, are well constructed and therefore easier to grade."

To learn more about the Program or to apply to work with a Writing Fellow, please contact Emily Hall, Associate Director of the Writing Fellows Program ([ebhall@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:ebhall@facstaff.wisc.edu) / 263-3754.)



---

# Helping Comm-B Students Use the Library Effectively

*An Interview with Abbie Loomis—Head of Library User Education*

**The library has a different look to its catalog and web page. Can you tell us what's new?**

The new Web interface for MadCat offers users a number of new features. There are now links within catalog records that will take users directly to other parts of the catalog. For instance, when you are reading the record for an individual book, you can click on the author's name; you will be taken directly to the record for the author of that book, a record that lists all the other books by that author available through our libraries. The new interface also enables users to access their own library records and to renew items online.

In addition to redesigning the Madcat interface, we also totally redesigned our campus libraries' Web site this summer. It's our hope that the redesigned site offers users a more welcoming and easy-to-use gateway to our campus libraries and their resources.

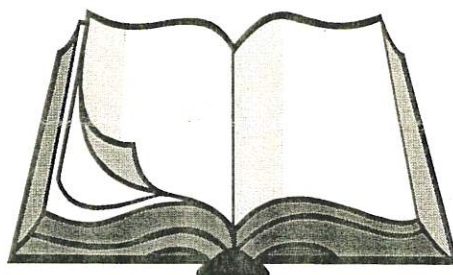
**How can instructors help their students benefit from these changes?**

Instructors should bring the changes to their students' attention. Students who have gone through a library orientation in Comm-A (consisting of a multimedia tutorial module called CLUE and a class visit to the library) may simply need a heads-up that the system will not be quite the same as it was last semester. Those students who have not taken a Comm-A course should complete CLUE; instructors can get CLUE handouts by contacting me.

The library also offers drop-in workshops on a variety of electronic information resources for students and instructors at all levels. For a complete listing of our offerings see our website at <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/Instruction/calendar.htm>>.

**Do librarians ever work directly with Comm-B instructors?**

Absolutely! Although we cannot offer the same kind of small-group hands-on instruction in all Comm-B courses that we do in Comm-A courses, librarians can assist Comm-B instructors in a number of ways: helping instructors to prepare bibliographies, consulting with instructors about library lesson plans and assignments, providing handouts, and coordinating occasional in-library work sessions.



In fact, during the 1996-7 academic year we reached 2097 students in 28 Comm-B courses; during the 1998-99 academic year we reached over 5917 students in 76 classes!

**Are there principles for successful library assignments instructors can follow?**

Yes, there are. To help faculty plan effective library assignments, our instructional staff has developed a set of guidelines for instructors. Those guides are available at <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/Instruction/effective.htm>>. Campus teaching librarians will be happy to work with faculty on designing library assignments.

**What obstacles do Comm-B students most frequently face when they do library research?**

If Comm-B students have completed Comm-A and its library module, they sometimes assume that they now "know everything" there is to know about using our libraries. They assume that any Comm-B library component will be "just a repeat" of what they learned in Comm-A; they may, therefore, be less than enthusiastic about completing another library module.

Instructors can help their students by assuring them that Comm-B library instruction tries to *build on*—not *repeat*—what students learn about library resources in Comm-A. Comm-A just covers the tip of the iceberg in terms of our libraries' resources; the library component of Comm-B offers students an opportunity to discover other resources (including disciplinary-specific resources) and to learn the strategies and skills needed to use them efficiently.

**What "hidden" resource would you like instructors to be aware of?**

Librarians! We're not "hidden" but students often neglect to ask us for help when they're stuck on a library assignment. Students need to be reminded that one of the main reasons we're here is to make sure they find what they need in our incredibly rich and diverse collections. We can't do this unless they ask us for help. The best place to get help with library assignments is at the reference desk in any campus library.

**Other questions about incorporating the library into your course? Contact Abbie Loomis at 262-4308 or [loomis@doit.wisc.edu](mailto:loomis@doit.wisc.edu).**



# Upcoming Changes in Writing Intensive (or Communication-C) Courses

By Richard A. Brualdi,  
Department of Mathematics  
and Chair of the 1998-99 L&S  
Curriculum Committee

Over the past ten years, writing-intensive courses have become an important part of the Letters & Science curriculum. During the Fall 1999 semester, 94 writing-intensive courses are being offered in 34 departments. In the coming months, though, there will be some important changes in the requirements for these courses.

In 1994, the Letters & Science Faculty Senate approved a requirement that L&S students take two writing-intensive courses at either the intermediate or advanced level (in addition to the campus-wide Communications-A and -B requirements), with at least one of these courses in the student's major. This requirement, sometimes referred to as "Comm-C<sup>2</sup>," was to apply to students entering UW-Madison in the fall of 1998.

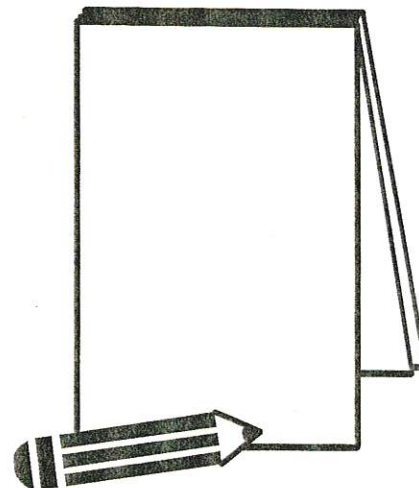
This requirement has not been easy to implement—in large part because the great majority of the effort needed to teach Comm-B courses rests with the College of Letters & Science. The Curriculum Committee continues to believe strongly that the writing skills learned and developed in Comm-A and Comm-B should be further developed in subsequent, more advanced courses, especially within students' majors. However, the Committee has concluded that it would be impractical to implement the original Comm-C<sup>2</sup> legislation. Unwilling to ask the Letters & Science Faculty Senate to repeal the legislation, the Committee decided to *strongly encourage* departments to take responsibility for the Comm-C goal for their majors and to give students instruction and practice in writing in the style and conventions of their disciplines.

At the Letters & Science Faculty Senate meeting this October, the Curriculum Committee will make the following recommendations:

1. That faculty should be strongly encouraged to continue to teach writing-intensive courses in which students will learn to write in the style and conventions of their chosen disciplines.

2. That the Comm-C requirement be revised to become a goal that all departments should strive to attain.

When departments require students to take writing-intensive courses, they send a strong message that writing is very important in their discipline—both to promote learning and to prepare students for careers. And in return, we expect that as departments assess their majors, students will affirm the value of these writing-intensive courses within the major.



## Verbal Assessment Project Update

Denise Solomon, Department of Communication Arts  
and Chair of the Verbal Assessment Committee

In the March 1999 *Time to Write* newsletter, I provided an overview of the Verbal Assessment Project's history and goals. I'm pleased now to offer a brief update on our recent activities.

The mission of the Verbal Assessment Project is to provide insight into the general education communication courses. In the last year, we have focused on assessing students' writing, speaking, and library skills—and their attitudes about these skills—as they finish their Comm-B courses. While examining the central objectives of the Comm-B requirements, we've tried to be sensitive to the great diversity of the courses that meet these requirements.

Because our goal was to study the Comm-B course in general, we sampled classes from 25 departments across campus. We were able to visit a total of 70 classes to solicit participation from students. At the end of the semester, we asked a subset of those students to com-

plete a survey about their Comm-B course; instructors also provided final papers written by some of those students. In total, 369 students completed the survey, and paper samples were collected for 385 students.

At this point, our agenda includes evaluating writing performance in the student papers. Student surveys also provide information about students' perceptions of Comm-B courses and their attitudes about writing, speaking, and library research. Our hope is that the performance and attitudinal data will provide complementary information about the Comm-B experience and suggest directions for improving the implementation of these courses.

The results of this study will be summarized in a future issue of *The Verbal Assessment Bulletin*; comments, questions, and requests for copies of *The Verbal Assessment Bulletin* should be sent to dsolomon@facstaff.wisc.edu.



---

# Responding to Drafts Online (cont'd from page 1)

## Your Email Persona

From the hundreds of emails we receive in the Online Writing Center, I've learned the importance of establishing rapport with student writers and providing a context for my comments. Email messages can often look surprisingly stark, lacking a greeting or small talk to ease the reader into the content of the message. We all know how difficult tone can be in email—and criticisms can often sound harsher in an email, without the comforting smile or words of encouragement that can accompany drafts we hand back in person. Particularly in the context of an email message, it's amazing how far a few words of praise go towards encouraging students to continue working and thinking and writing; consequently, I always try to start an emailed response with specific praise of a few elements of the draft.

## The Holistic Approach: The Endnote

One approach to commenting on a student's writing online is to write only an endnote that addresses the student's paper as a whole. An endnote responds primarily to larger-order concerns, such as the overall purpose of the draft, the focus, the student's use of evidence and his or her analysis of that evidence, and so on.

By providing a response to the student's paper as a whole, an endnote encourages the student to revise the whole paper, rather than focusing upon discrete lines of text that can be edited in isolation. In response to early drafts, a holistic approach can be more efficient, allowing both instructor and student to focus on important global concerns, rather than on sentence-level details that may not even appear in future drafts.

Because I have found that students often benefit from having clear tasks to work on as they revise their drafts, I limit myself to suggesting three priorities for revision. To ensure that I comment on the three most important concerns, before writing an endnote I read the whole

draft over, jotting down my key concerns.

After my initial praise, I'll raise an overall concern that I have—the issue that I feel most needs attention in revising. I then place a bulleted list under this main concern. In the first bullet, I explain that initial concern in more detail; the next two bullets of my endnote indicate additional concerns.

---

*We all know how difficult tone can be in email—and criticisms can often sound harsher in an email, without the comforting smile or words of encouragement that can accompany drafts we hand back in person.*

---

Within each bulleted suggestion, I include the paragraph number(s) where the problem seems to be most clearly evident and ask detailed questions to help students brainstorm and take their thinking further. I also paste in whole sentences from the draft to show a student where I see the problem occurring and why I see it as problematic in the draft. Pasting in sentences is quick and simple when the whole draft is already typed out in the email, and looking at their own sentences out of context can help students see their writing with more critical distance.

## The Local Approach: Interwoven Comments

An alternative approach is to interweave comments within the text of an emailed paper, matching more closely the interaction between text and comment that we can produce in the margins of printed papers. In your reply, you can begin with a brief note offering praise and summing up general concerns. But rather than detailing these concerns in the note, you can add comments within the draft, at the points where you, as the reader, had questions.

It's important to set off your comments from the student's own writing in a clear way—say with bold print, capital letters, or italics—so that the student can find your comments easily. Consider also including a note early in your email explaining how you've differentiated your comments from the student's text. You might also wish to differentiate various types of problems in the student's work, perhaps by using the different colors which are now available through newer email programs. In this case, you might include a headnote that identifies how you have used the different colors. For example, you could insert questions about a paper's focus in green and comments suggesting more thorough analysis of evidence in blue.

One of the benefits of interwoven comments is that they encourage students to read over their drafts. As students read through their drafts and see your questions and suggestions, they may gain a more critical perspective on their own writing. Interweaving your questions and comments, in a sense, models the critical reading process for students, showing them precisely where their readers were confused or why readers might have had particular questions at certain places in the draft.

## Final Thoughts

Whether to choose endnotes or interwoven comments depends upon your particular pedagogical goals with specific students or at certain stages of writing. Some instructors vary their approach, using a holistic endnote with very early rough drafts and switching to more local comments with later, more polished drafts. Other instructors tend to use a single basic strategy.

Overall, responding to drafts via email is a new option which may sometimes require us to adapt our tried-and-true commenting strategies. However, we can also find ways to make this new technology help us achieve some of our already defined pedagogical goals.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

*The Letters & Science Program in  
Writing Across the Curriculum*

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

**What do we do?**

- Publish *Time to Write*, a newsletter distributed to all faculty and instructional staff in L&S
- Consult individually with instructors about incorporating writing into their courses
- Consult with lecturers and TAs in course staff meetings
- Conduct a two-day orientation for TAs in Comm-B courses during Welcome Week
- Sponsor faculty brown bags on subjects related to teaching writing
- Compile and distribute a sourcebook of teaching resources for Comm-B and WI instructors
- Help instructors plan and teach class sessions devoted to writing
- Maintain a library of sample assignments, syllabi, and other discipline-specific resources

**Back issues of *Time to Write* are available on the following subjects**

- “Writing Like Scientists: A Writing-Intensive Course in Zoology/Botany” and “Resources for WAC Teachers” (Vol. 1, No. 1)
- “The Complexity of Writing Assignments: Some Implications for Our Teaching” and “Teaching Writing, Teaching Teaching” (Vol. 1, No. 2)
- “Writing Lots of Philosophy in a Large Lecture (Without Killing the Lecturer)” and “On the Front Lines of History 101: A TA Perspective” (Vol. 2, No. 1)
- “How *Do* You Make Peer Review Work?” and “John Bean on Microthemes” (Vol. 2, No. 2)
- “The Undergraduate Writing Fellows: Teaching Writing and So Much More” and “Redesigning *Survey of Sociology* as a Comm-B Course” (Vol. 3, No. 1)
- “The Verbal Assessment Project: Working With Teachers to Assure Quality Instruction” and “Four Ways You Can Support Your Comm-B and Writing-Intensive Course TAs” (Vol. 3, No. 2)

To receive back issues, contact Rebecca Nowacek at [rcschoen@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:rcschoen@facstaff.wisc.edu) with a message that includes your name, your campus address, and the issue numbers you would like to receive. Or send a request through campus mail to *Time to Write*, care of Rebecca Nowacek, Department of English, Helen C. White Hall.

Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum  
Department of English  
University of Wisconsin - Madison  
6187 Helen C. White Hall  
600 N. Park Street  
Madison, WI 53706

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