

Time to Write

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

Vol. 4, No. 2 April 2000



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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 608-263-2732 or via e-mail:

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Added Value: The Large Lecture as a Comm-B Course

James L. Hoyt, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

The assignment seemed simple enough—turn the introductory course in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication into a Communications-B course. After all, I had taught the course, Introduction to Mass Communication, for some 25 years. In addition, I had taught virtually all of the newswriting courses in the journalism curriculum a number of times during my Madison faculty career. I seemed to have the combination of experiences that should make short work of this project.

I soon discovered that my assignment would be more challenging than I had anticipated.

Prior to this year the course had been taught in a traditional lecture format (two 75-minute lectures a week), with primarily objective exams. I used no Teaching Assistants and just one survey textbook. Now I would have nine TAs teaching 27 discussion sections.

Further, the newswriting courses I taught were intended to teach and develop basic journalistic skills rather than more general writing skills. So although I felt confident that I was up to my task, it turned out to be more complex than just merging two different types of courses I had been teaching.

I first needed to develop a logical sequence of writing assignments related to, but not redundant with, the course content. I structured the course to include four writing assignments, plus a term paper. I required all assignments—except the first, which was written in discussion section—to be revised. Because the course was about the mass media, the first out-of-class writing assignment asked students to describe their experiences as



lifetime mass media consumers. It gave them an opportunity not only to write about first-person experiences, but also to place those experiences within the context of the course. That is, I wanted them to understand their experiences within the framework of the media as discussed in the course. It was an appropriate first exercise involving primarily descriptive

writing.

The remaining writing assignments were more closely connected to lecture and reading content. Each one became progressively more analytical. I decided to follow this progression so the students would systematically integrate more and more of the course content—and less and less of their own first-person stories—into each subsequent assignment. I wanted them to become more critical media consumers and observers throughout the semester.

To achieve this objective, one assignment asked them to analyze mass media effects. But it was more complex than that. Rather than simply repeat the literature on media effects, I asked them to “advise a local television station in your market” based on their knowledge of the literature, and—importantly—within the limits of the First Amendment. The students enjoyed putting the assignment into this context and the strategy enabled me not only to assess their understanding of the course content, but also to critique their writing as it integrated more complex analyses.

Another assignment required the students to discuss the degree to which various media have become more specialized in their audience appeals over the years.

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Why Teach a Writing-Intensive Course? Thoughts from William Zinsser, Author of *On Writing Well*

Renowned writer, editor, and teacher William Zinsser visited the UW-Madison campus last November. His book *On Writing Well* has sold nearly a million copies and grows out of his experiences teaching writing at Yale and the New School in New York City as well as his work as a journalist for such publications as *Life*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The following thoughts are excerpted from his book *Writing to Learn*, published by Harper & Row in 1988.

One spring day in 1985, I got a telephone call from a professor named Thomas Gover at Gustavus Adolphus College, a small liberal arts college of Lutheran origins in St. Peter, Minnesota. He wanted to tell me about a new program at his college that he thought would interest me.

He said that in the fall term Gustavus Adolphus would launch a curriculum in which seventy-five courses, covering the entire spectrum of a baccalaureate education, would be listed with a "W," meaning that writing would be a required part of the course, that it would be a factor in the student's grade, and that the teachers would work with the students on the process of organizing, writing and rewriting their papers and reports. Three "W" courses would be required for graduation.

The call crystallized an idea I realized I felt strongly about: that the teaching of writing should no longer be left just to English teachers but should be made an organic part of every subject. The idea, which goes by the name of "writing across the curriculum," has been very much in the air among educators for at least a decade. But I had never heard of any school or college actually trying it. (I've since heard of many.) That's why the call from Minnesota excited me. It was a chance to see the idea in action and to find out whether it was as important a trend as I thought it was.

Professor Gover asked if I would like to come out to Gustavus Adolphus and talk to the students about writing. I said I would like to come out and talk to the professors; they were the real heroes of the mission. How were they going to undertake a kind of teaching they had never tried before? How were they going to adapt writing to their discipline? How did they think writing would help their students to learn?

As baggage I would be taking along a number of strong opinions on why so many Americans don't learn to write and why they live in so much fear of trying.

One of them has to do with English teachers. Under the American system, they are the people who teach our children to write. . . . But there are all kinds of reasons why English

. . . the writing teacher's ministry is not just to the words but to the person who wrote the words.

teachers ought to get some relief. One is that they shouldn't have to assume the whole responsibility for imparting a skill that's basic to every area of life. That should be everybody's job. That's citizenship. . . .

Another powerful element in learning to write is motivation. Motivation is crucial to writing—students will write far more willingly if they write about subjects that interest them and that they have an aptitude for. But they don't often get that chance; writing tends to be assigned only in subjects like English or history that are identified with writing. . . .

Eagerness to read and correct student writing, however, is not a

commodity that grows on trees; it's far easier to just check right and wrong answers. Unfortunately, there's no quick and easy way to teach writing. When I first did it I assumed that a good part of the job could be accomplished by explaining in class the elements that constitute good writing.

Surely if I assailed my students with my sacred principles of clarity and simplicity and brevity, if I exhorted them to use active verbs and short words and short sentences, if I pointed out the pitfalls that await the writer of a travel piece or a sports piece or an interview, they would go and do what I had told them to do.

No such transfer takes place. . . . The bad habits are just too habitual. They can be cured only by that most painful of surgical procedures: operating on what the writer has actually written. Only there, where a writer is at his most vulnerable, having put some part of himself on paper, does he make the connection between principle and practice. . . .

Why, then, would anyone in his right mind want to be a writing teacher? The answer is that writing teachers aren't altogether in their right mind. They are in one of the caring professions, no more sane in the allotment of their time and energy than the social worker or the day care worker or the nurse. Whenever I hear them talk about their work, I feel that few forms of teaching are so sacramental; the writing teacher's ministry is not just to the words but to the person who wrote the words.

One of my hopes for writing across the curriculum is that teachers in many fields will discover this transaction. Through the writing of our students we are reminded of their individuality. We are reminded, whatever subject we are charged with teaching, that our ultimate charge is to produce broadly educated men and women with a sense of stewardship for the world they live in.

Tell Us What You Want!

Survey for the Letters and Science Program in Writing Across the Curriculum

The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) Program wants to help faculty, TAs, and staff members who incorporate writing in their classes. If you do, please help us provide the kinds of resources that you will find most helpful.

1. Which kinds of information would you like to see in future issues of the WAC newsletter? (Please check all that apply.)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> descriptions of Comm-B and Writing-Intensive (WI) courses | <input type="checkbox"/> theories of teaching writing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> descriptions of in-class writing activities | <input type="checkbox"/> reviews of recent publications on writing in particular academic fields / disciplines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sample writing assignments | <input type="checkbox"/> point-counterpoint on how to teach writing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> discussions of how to respond to and evaluate student writing | <input type="checkbox"/> other ideas: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> practical advice about teaching writing | |

2. The WAC Program generally sponsors two or three faculty brown-bag sessions each semester on issues related to teaching with writing. Which topics would be most useful to you? (Please check all that apply.)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> designing a Comm-B or Writing Intensive course | <input type="checkbox"/> making peer review successful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> understanding the relationship between Comm-A and -B courses | <input type="checkbox"/> strategies for helping students improve |
| <input type="checkbox"/> designing and sequencing writing assignments | <input type="checkbox"/> advice from experienced teachers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> responding to and grading student writing | <input type="checkbox"/> other ideas: |

3. Which times of day and days of the week are generally most convenient for you to attend these 60-90-minute brown-bag sessions?

4. Usually these sessions are held in Helen C. White Hall. How does that location affect your attendance?

- That location has little or no bearing on my coming That location discourages me from coming

5. We are currently developing a website for all instructors who assign writing in their courses. On this website, which materials would be most useful to you? (Please check all that apply.)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> sample syllabi from Comm-B and WI courses | <input type="checkbox"/> links to websites for Comm-B / WI courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sample writing assignments | <input type="checkbox"/> a forum for UW instructors teaching writing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> handouts for students on specific topics | <input type="checkbox"/> online consulting and advice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other teaching materials from previous courses | <input type="checkbox"/> other ideas: |

6. Some universities offer faculty workshops that stretch over several days—sometimes even a weekend retreat—so that there is time to talk about writing-related issues in more depth. How likely would you be to participate in a faculty workshop that runs for more than one day?

very likely perhaps probably not not at all

7. Your department:

8. How many times have you taught a Comm-B or a Writing-Intensive course?

never once twice three times four or more times

9. We are always looking for ways to serve faculty members more effectively and to get them involved in the WAC Program. Please check all the following that apply. I would be willing to . . .

- share my teaching materials for the WAC sourcebook or for the WAC website
- write an article for a future issue of *Time to Write*, the newsletter of the UW-Madison WAC Program
- speak at a faculty brown-bag session
- meet with the WAC Website Development Committee to discuss the content and layout of the website
- serve as a WAC liaison to my department
- other:

If you checked any boxes in question 9, please list your name, email, phone number, and campus address. Thank you!

.....

Please return to

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CAMPUS MAIL

The Large Lecture as a Comm-B Course (cont'd from page 1)

Again, the assignment was based on specific course content, but also integrated the students' own experiences as media consumers. This gave them an opportunity to more fully place their own mass media experiences and observations into the context of the course content.

The assignments generally achieved my objectives. Not surprisingly, the students struggled with the transition from writing about themselves to using the content of the course to guide their papers. Some found that change to be difficult; however, at this point those who struggled the most seemed to be the most grateful for the policy requiring revisions.

I found that a key to each writing assignment was a component on the assignment handout that I headed, "What we're looking for...." In this section, I tried to help the students understand what our aims were in the assignment and how we were going to evaluate their writing. For example, these sections included statements such as "This assignment...is designed to make you think seriously about the mass media and to articulate the role the media have played in your lives." Or, "Your paper should be analytical and evaluative.... It will be graded on your thought, use of language, organization, as well as your understanding of the content." I found that this strategy helped both the students (to write) and the TAs (to grade). In future semesters, I plan to make this guidance even more specific.

The term paper assignment required students to analyze a current mass media issue. I followed through on the "current" issue requirement by specifying that they had to use at least two sources from within the past four months. In truth, this was a way for us to be sure that the students were using primary sources and were developing fresh topics. We found we had to compromise occasionally on the requirement, but we would do so

only when we were convinced that the student had, in fact, made a meaningful effort to locate sources that were as current as possible.

I discovered early in the semester that it was necessary to explain to the students exactly what a "revision" is. So I prepared a handout that proved to be one of the more helpful instructions for the semester. It included warnings such as, "A revision is not simply an exercise in following instructions." And, "A revision is a newly written version of the original paper" (in which you integrate) "the instructor's suggestions into a new version." I also required all revisions to contain a

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cover sheet in the form of a memo to the instructor explaining, "exactly what changes you have made since the original paper." We considered "raising the bar" for the revisions and developing new grading criteria, but in the end we could not come up with a justifiable rationale for varying our standards. I was happy that we decided to use the same criteria to grade the revisions that we had used for the original papers.

I found that teaching this course as a Comm-B course was more like being responsible for two courses. In one I was teaching more than 400 undergraduates. In the other I worked closely with nine highly professional Teaching Assistants. Fortunately, the majority of the TAs had previous experience teaching a Comm-B course, and I was able to

rely on their feedback throughout the course as I developed assignments and grading criteria. They were able to anticipate writing issues that were new to me (for example, the need to specify whether students were permitted to write in the first person). Their professional assistance helped considerably as I made the transition to the Comm-B format.

I retained the lecture portion of the course much as it had been prior to the switch to Comm-B. However, I added regular references in lecture to writing problems or issues that had come up in our grading of the various assignments. I met weekly, on Mondays, with the TAs to go over the assignments for that week and to discuss how the discussion sections would be conducted. These meetings proved to be essential to the smooth functioning of the class and they alerted me to writing issues that needed to be emphasized in lecture. All of the TAs also shared their grade distributions with me for each assignment so I could monitor the range and frequency of grades to assure that each TA was using relatively similar grading criteria and standards.

Final student grades were determined very simply: 50% based on performance on the exams in lecture and 50% based on the writing assignments in the discussion sections. Ties were resolved in favor of the writing grades.

In the end, teaching a Comm-B course was more similar to teaching a newswriting course than I had anticipated. Rather than teaching a professional skill, I was merely teaching writing in a broader context. In both cases the emphasis is on what is written as well as how clearly it is written. I have always contended that the essential ingredient of a journalism education is clear, cogent expression. To me, that remains the primary measure of successful writing regardless of the context.

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-bag sessions 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)
- “Responding to Students’ Drafts Online,” “Computer-Guided Peer Review,” “Helping Students Use the Library Effectively,” “Upcoming Changes in WI Courses,” “Writing Fellows,” “Verbal Assessment Project Update” (Vol. 4, No. 1)

To receive back issues, contact Rebecca Nowacek at 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.

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