



# Time to Write

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

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## Surveying Worlds of Writing With Geography TAs

*Bonnie Smith, Assistant Director of  
Writing Across the Curriculum*

For Geography TA John Isom, it all started when students in his cartography class insisted they were taking classes in his field because they didn't like writing. "They liked maps," Isom said. "They liked geography. But they shied away from the writing assignments I was trying to add to the course." And what writing the students turned in struck him as "dull and formulaic."

So Isom, an advanced doctoral student studying people-environment relations, thought back to the four years he spent as a writing teacher and writing center tutor at New York's LaGuardia Community College and organized WinG (Writing in Geography), an intra-disciplinary, TA-run training series focused on key principles for teaching writing in geography.

In the spring semester of 2000, Isom emailed Professor Bob Ostergren, who was then chair, to suggest the department offer training on teaching to all TAs in Geography writing as a process. Because funding was available, Ostergren was open to expanding department-specific training in this way to supplement that provided by the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum.

Isom recruited four other advanced doctoral students in Geography - Kim Coulter, Joy Fritschle Mason, Blake Harrison, and Beth Schlemper - to organize a series of brown bags for the fall semester. The brown bags were on creating effective writing assignments across the geography curriculum, using "getting started" techniques such as brainstorming and outlining, and responding to Geography students' writing. In accordance with TAA requirement regarding training hours, TAs only had to attend two of the



*Geography doctoral students Blake Harrison (l) and John Isom (r) are two of WinG's five TA organizers.*

three sessions, but many attended the optional brown bag anyway.

### Session 1: Designing Effective Writing Assignments

The first WinG brown bag addressed ways in which geographers use narrative, argumentation, description, analysis, and explanation in writing assignments. As a full group, participants discussed recurring themes that define geography and brainstormed about common features that defined writing assignments in the discipline.

Then, participants split up in groups to critique writing assignments — both shorter papers with titles such as "Timber Harvesting Debate" or "Migration and Cultural Identity" and longer, end-of-the-semester research papers — from the points of view of TAs and students. After a plenary discussion of the lessons learned from the small group critiques, the group suggested ways in which an organization like WinG could provide support for TAs planning writing assignments.

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## Geography TAs (continued)

### Session 2: Helping Students Get Started

Session 2 trained TAs to help student writers begin framing and elaborating their topics (or coming up with topic ideas to begin with) by using techniques such as brainstorming, clustering, and outlining, in that order. Brainstorming begins with writing a broad topic, such as "national forests," on the board and then prodding students to do a "brain dump" of information based on the topic. A "brain dump" consists of letting students list *anything* remotely related to the topic; when simulating the "brain dump," brown-bag participants came up with everything from "lack of government funding" to "lack of clean toilets." With brainstorming, TAs were urged not to edit or judge the contents or length of the list.

TAs were then shown how to teach students to "cluster" or put the mass of information into groups. Clustering allows the writer to look for connections and chunks of information s/he considers important or worth elaborating. Finally, outlining was modeled as a way to put the clustered information into some sort of order. In addition to furnishing students with a sense of a topic or argument that might be surfacing, outlining gives stu-

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dents opportunities to see where gaps (i.e., opportunities for research) might occur.

### Session 3: Responding to Student Writing

Issues surrounding revision and commenting on students' papers were the topic of the third WinG brown bag. At this point in the semester, TAs had

received at least their second batch of papers and were more than eager to share situations, thoughts, ideas, and problems surrounding the provocative topics of commenting, revising, and grading. Several new TAs lamented the enormous chunk of time responding takes, and the more-experienced TAs were able to suggest tried-and-true tactics such as timing yourself or frontloading your efforts by requiring peer-review or conferences. TAs also discussed ways to encourage substantive revision. (For more advice on this topic, please see Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek's article on p. 4.)

### Practical Reflections on a Program Like WinG

Professor and current department chair Jim Burt sees WinG as an important way to professionalize TAs: "As we offer more Comm B and writing-intensive courses, increasing numbers of teaching assistants face the (sometimes abrupt) transition from writer to writing consultant. The Writing-in-Geography workshops have been very successful, both as a jump-start for new TAs, and in providing experienced TAs a chance to reflect on lessons learned and share ideas with others. These sessions have certainly proved their worth for improving our teaching in some key courses."

"Moreover," Burt points out, "[the WinG sessions] are highly valued by the TAs, as shown by strong attendance for the [third] optional meeting. Attendance at that meeting was 10, compared with 14 for the previous required meeting. So you could say more than 70% stayed with the program beyond what was required."

Workshop organizer Harrison believes what was most beneficial about the WinG brown bags was seeing just how much TAs can teach each other. TA participants in WinG brown bags often commented that the sessions gave them an idea of what lay in store for them as they assigned and responded to writing. Master's student Dan Mensher agreed: "Perhaps the best part the WinG seminars was just interacting with other geography grad students. Not only did this help me,

a newcomer to the field, get a feeling for how geographers approach the task of writing, it gave me a real sense of confidence. I was part of a group of experienced teachers who were there to share their experiences and offer hints along the way." And doctoral student Mike

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Yochim believed "[The WinG sessions] boosted my confidence."

Isom and Harrison hope they will be able to get a faculty member to be some sort of anchor for the program, even if s/he is only the "keeper of the binder" the TA organizers are putting together for their successors. "Because grad students come and go, programs like WinG will only thrive if they're institutionalized," Harrison said.

The WinG TAs encourage other departments seeking to implement training like WinG to use the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program as a resource for both pedagogical and moral support. As a result of WAC presence at the brown bags, several TAs in Geography consulted the WAC Director and Assistant Director on issues that ranged from learning how to deal with the time stresses involved in grading stacks of papers to coaching students on how to understand their assignments.

Beyond the obvious pedagogical pay-back TAs get from being part of a program such as WinG lie benefits that come from thinking of the ways one's own discipline organizes information thematically. "As a discipline," Isom argues, "we're a well-kept secret in the academy. In geography, we contain within our department climatologists, language geographers, demographers, and people who study the aesthetics of place, so because

# John Kutzbach: A Medal-Winning Comm-B Professor

*Bonnie Smith, Assistant Director of Writing Across the Curriculum*

Lately, the most dazzling thing one hears about John Kutzbach, Professor of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences and Environmental Studies and Director of UW's Center for Climatic Research, is that the European Geophysical Society just awarded him the prestigious Milankovitch Medal for his contributions to understanding the causes of climate change. But after talking with Kutzbach about his course "Global Change: Atmospheric Issues and Problems," in which students may elect to do more writing assignments and make the course satisfy their Comm-B requirement, it's evident that he's also made considerable contributions to understanding how to get students motivated about writing in his discipline.

Long before UW's Comm-B requirement existed, Kutzbach recognized his students were coming to his course with less-than-sophisticated research skills, so he incorporated a research unit and long paper into his courses. All students in his "Global Change" course plan and write extended research projects, and the Comm-B students write short papers critiquing media treatments of environmental issues in addition to a proposal for the research project and several drafts of the final paper. Students get to choose their audience for the research paper; some write to their professor or classmates, and some opt to write for a K-12 audience.

Kutzbach has found that with the Comm-B students who are required to critique their peers' research project as the semester goes along, it takes awhile



*Professor John Kutzbach: international medal winner and writing teacher.*

for peer review to catch on, but when it does, students are so excited that it's hard to end review sessions.

"When students get to know each other, become a community, and feel comfortable with each other, peer review works. As the semester goes on, I have to grab stuff away from some students because they want to talk so much."

Aside from the pesky task of dealing with over-exuberant peer reviewers, Kutzbach finds that helping students narrow their initial research idea into a doable project is his biggest chore as a writing teacher. But it's a chore he does cheerfully and well. Kutzbach and his students leave a long email trail of questions and ideas about their project, and he encourages them to do something hands-on like designing and conducting a survey of students in dorms and apartments and how their electricity usage differs.

Students often get carried away with their projects and spend what Kutzbach deems "too much" time on them.

"I've had to say, 'Oh, you've done

enough. You must have some other classes."

Kutzbach maintains it's hard for him to put his finger on the problems and challenges of teaching writing.

"I see the value [in integrating writing into a course] so much that it's a privilege to work with people and have them be better writers and communicators. The hardest thing is finding a student who doesn't see value in putting blood, sweat and tears into improving communication skills, but that doesn't happen very often."

"It doesn't bother me," Kutzbach

**"I've had to say, 'Oh, you've done enough. You must have some other classes.'"**

goes on, "if they don't know about how to use sources or how to write topic sentences. I can teach them how to do those things. I find that if you go through things with a student carefully, they'll understand."

As for advice for faculty thinking of teaching their course as Comm-B or writing-intensive? Kutzbach recommends faculty "start small. Arrange a section and put a limit on it, then decide how many students you can deal with. If we could have a large section of the faculty willing to work with a small number of students, we'd see a big difference."

You can find Kutzbach's writing assignments on the new Writing-Across-the-Curriculum website, which will debut early this fall.

## Geography TAs (continued)

of this diversity, the writing we want to introduce our students to ranges from the classic scientific experiment to very philosophical essays on the meaning of place. Just in our department at UW, some geographers use poetry; some are writing computer codes and algorithms for a climate model of the Great Lakes. So we're like a university in miniature, and we have many opportunities to accli-

mate students to different types of academic writing."

Acclimating students into a discipline like Geography — or any discipline, for that matter — means exposing them to many different kinds of writing. And the organizing TAs Isom, Coulter, Fritschle Mason, Harrison, and Schlemper represent the range of sub-disciplinary focuses in Geography. The key to the success of

a program like WinG is reflecting on what kinds of writing take place in your discipline and then communicating with colleagues and students about those kinds of writing. Doing so not only serves to share pedagogical goals but helps to get everyone (at least close) to the same page.

# The Art of Not Merely Requiring But *Teaching* Students to Write Meaningful Revisions

Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek, Department of English

Revision, revision, revision: the term is nearly a mantra in Comm-B and writing-intensive (WI) courses. Indeed, the university criteria for Comm-B and Writing-Intensive courses *mandate* that instructors build the revision process into their courses—and for good reason. Research has consistently shown that the best, most experienced writers regularly revise their writing in substantive ways.

Almost all the Comm-B and WI instructors we talk with actively and enthusiastically encourage their students to revise. Nevertheless, one of the most common laments we hear from Comm-B and WI instructors is that they can't get their students to undertake substantial revisions from one draft to the next. It is surely true that some students choose not to revise because it is *demanding work*. But there may be other reasons as well.

Some students may not meet our expectations for revision because they *understand the term very differently* than we do. When Nancy Sommers, a researcher at Harvard, asked student writers and professional authors what "revision" meant to them, they gave her wildly divergent answers:

- "... just using better words and eliminating words that are not needed. I go over and change words around."
- "... cleaning up the paper and crossing out. It is looking at something and saying, no that has to go, or no, that is not right."
- "... on one level, finding the argument, and on another level, language changes to make the argument more effective."
- "... a matter of looking at the kernel of what I have written, the content, and then thinking about it, responding to it, making decisions, and actually restructuring it."\*

Whereas the students described revision as a process of making adjustments at a more superficial level ("just using better words" and "cleaning up"), the professional authors described revision as a process of making fundamental changes to a paper ("finding the argument" and "actually restructuring"). Instructors, no doubt, have the latter definitions in mind. But when students and instructors understand the term revision so differently, it is no surprise that students don't undertake the kinds of revisions instructors have in mind.

Some students may be willing to revise and may comprehend the kinds of revision that their instructors have in mind, but still make only superficial corrections to their drafts because they *lack specific strategies* to help them successfully under-

take more fundamental revisions.

With these possible explanations in mind, we offer the following suggestions—based on our own experiences and our conversations with instructors across the campus—for encouraging and teaching students to revise.

- **Make clear what you mean by "revision."** Model for students what you have in mind by sharing a before-and-after example of a revised paper; some instructors give examples from previous students, others share examples of revisions undertaken by famous authors (the *Declaration of Independence* is one common example). Consider sharing a piece of your own drafts and revised writing!
- **Address the common belief that good writing comes naturally and does not need to be revised.** Consider having your class read the chapter "Shitty First Drafts" from Annie LaMott's *Bird by Bird*; in it LaMott speaks as a professional author about the value of extremely rough drafts.
- **Focus your comments on the revisions that will be most beneficial.** Faced with lots of commentary on a draft, some students miss the big points or are simply overwhelmed. In your conferences or written comments, set priorities. Although a paper could be improved in many ways, you might set one or two "main goals" for revision. In addition to setting priorities in your final comments, try to make sure your marginal comments reflect those priorities. If 70% of the marks students see on a page are grammar-related and they find only one comment in the endnote advising them to restructure the organization, they may well assume that grammatical revisions are the most pressing revisions. In short, be honest about how much and what kind of work needs to be done.
- **Avoid abstract terms when giving feedback.** Just as you need to establish with your students a common understanding of the term "revision," you will need to establish common understandings of other terms you use—including "flow," "analysis," and "thesis." Some students who are willing to undertake substantial revision are stymied by a misguided understanding of what instructors mean when they use these terms.
- **Provide your students with specific strategies and models.** "Reverse outlining" is one strategy for helping students see why and how to undertake major revisions in

## Meaningful Revisions, cont.

organization or focus. You can also help students begin to revise by being concrete about how to revise: model a topic sentence, explain exactly what is "awkward" about a sentence, or write out a more effective transition and explain what makes it so. Often such explanations are more easily and efficiently conveyed in one-on-one conferences.

- **Motivate students to revise.** When commenting on drafts, point out what is good in students' work, so that students can learn not only from other people's successful writing, but also from what they themselves have already successfully done. For example, if a student regularly neglects to analyze his evidence, praise the one instance where he does and point out how it strengthens the paper. Then urge the student to revise other sections of the paper based on that positive example.
- **Make sure there is adequate time for the hard work of revision.** Build the revision process into your syllabus.
- **Encourage / require students to get feedback on drafts from multiple sources.** Sometimes hearing similar re-

sponses from various sources can confirm for students the need to revise. Other times, one respondent can explain a point of confusion in a way that suddenly makes sense. There are many possible sources of feedback: student-teacher conferences, peer groups, the Writing Center, a Writing Fellow, and even student-writers themselves. You may, however, want to talk with your students about what to do if they get contradictory advice about revising.

*\*these quotations are taken from Nancy Sommers (1980) "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" in College Composition and Communication, 31, 378-388.*

*Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek, former Assistant Director of Writing Across the Curriculum and a dissertator in the English Department at UW, has just been hired as an assistant professor of Composition and Rhetoric at Marquette University in Milwaukee.*

*Mark your calendars. . .  
Fall training for new Comm-B TAs  
will be held on  
August 27 & 28 2001  
from 9 AM - 12:15 PM!  
Registration is required.*

*For more information or to register, contact  
Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum,  
at [bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu)*



# Teaching Tips

"I made a significant improvement the second time I used peer feedback - I required the students to write an outline of the draft they were providing feedback on. In the process of writing the outline, the peer finds the logical glitches in the flow of the argument, and then is able to provide useful feedback. It worked really well."

Colleen Moore, Professor, Psychology

*Teaching Tips* is a new feature of *Time to Write* in which we highlight tricks of the writing-teacher trade. If you have a tip you've found particularly successful and would like to share, please email Bonnie Smith ([bonniesmith@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:bonniesmith@facstaff.wisc.edu)).

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