

TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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WRITING ABOUT POP CULTURE TO DEEPEN SCIENTIFIC UNDERSTANDING

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Plant Pathology and Women's Studies

Annoyance can effectively goad a writer into action. "I'm going to write a letter to the paper!" was my father's ultimate response to outrages ranging from inaccuracy to injustice. I've attempted to harness this drive in the assignments for my writing-intensive class, Biology and Gender (Women's Studies 530).

This course, which examines biological theories about cognitive and behavioral differences between the sexes, enrolls around 40 upper-level students, mostly non-science majors. A primary goal of the course is to empower students to read and critically analyze the primary science literature. After about six weeks during which students write short, guided summaries of scientific journal articles, they are energetically and confidently plowing through articles from journals such as *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. Class discussions sparkle with comments like, "Their positive controls are elegant"; "But this experiment didn't even test their hypothesis!"; and even, "Why was this research funded?" The time is ripe for the Pop Media Paper—a complex, sequenced assignment that aims to deepen students' understanding of science through library research and sophisticated analysis of different media for scientific writing.

This assignment requires each student to find an article or story about biological sex differences that was published in the popular media and trace it back to its source, the original peer-reviewed scientific research article. Students must then write a paper assessing the quality of both the original research and its translation for the general public.

Most citizens get their scientific information from the popular press—but is it reliable? There's a lot of popular writing on sex differences, perhaps because the topic is perennially fascinating to editors of every publication from *Business Week* to *Good Housekeeping*. Years of exposure to the soup of pop culture have left us with a conviction that female intuition and the male sense of direction are

proven scientific facts—to say nothing of men's superior math ability and women's weaker sex drive.

This assignment forces students to go back to the original scientific data and determine whether press coverage of such research is accurate, objective, and complete. Are results accepted uncritically? Are conflicting opinions or interpretations of the data discussed? Like my father

writing to the editor, students get a chance to express their reactions to the oversimplifications or inaccuracies that can occur in pop media science writing.

"As readers and writers throughout their work on the Pop Media Paper and their own 'pop' article, students become better aware of scientific methods, the standards for proofs and claims in science as compared to those in the popular media, and the ways that different genres and different audiences shape writing content as well as style."

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NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM: WHAT A UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTOR SHOULD KNOW ABOUT "IM"

Matthew Pearson
Writing Across the Curriculum

This fall, the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation reported that 53 million American adults are using "Instant messaging" programs. A recent DoIT survey of UW-Madison students, in fact, found that 70 percent "reported using some type of instant messaging," and that the rate of usage has increased from previous years. Faculty at UW-Madison, unlike their students though, are not likely to be among the 53 million American adults "IMing." A DoIT survey of faculty and staff found that only 11 percent of faculty use an IM program (though 30 percent of staff report doing so).

Given how ubiquitous IM has become, particularly for our students and increasingly in the workplace, where IM programs allow for immediate communication between colleagues who may be on different floors of a building or even in different time zones, it's important for instructors to know how this new technology works, what impacts it may have on our students' writing and on their expectations for communicating with their course instructors, and what kinds of applications it has in our teaching. It seems clear from DoIT's survey that not many faculty, at present, see IM as a technology worth using. We hope this article helps you decide whether you are missing out on a useful technology or wisely ignoring a communication medium that facilitates the use of smiley faces.

Instant messaging (IM): What is it?

Instant messaging or "IMing" allows a user to interact with others who are also online at the same time. With email you can't be sure if and when someone will receive and read your message; an IM program (a separate, distinct program from your email client or Internet browser), in contrast, lets you know if a person you've defined as a "contact" or "buddy" is online and available for immediate interaction. As long as anyone on your list is online and listed as "available" (you can set your availability so that you can be online but *not* available to IM with anyone), you can send a message. You begin your message in a small window that pops up on your computer screen. Your contact, upon receiving your message, also sees a small window on her or his computer screen, and the two of you can type in messages, back and forth, that both of you can see. By using an IM program, users not only can chat but also can share active website links, images, and files such as

word-processed documents. Increasingly, IM programs allow users to talk over the Internet, or to video-conference using high-speed connections and small, computer-ready cameras.

Many free IM programs exist, including the first IM program, ICQ, along with popular platforms affiliated with major technology companies, such as AOL, Yahoo, and MSN. Here at UW-Madison, anyone with a Net ID can use WiscChat Messenger, an IM program similar to widely-available commercial versions, but with significant security advantages for users IMing with others within UW's campus Internet (WiscChat uses a secure SSL connection, just as WiscMail does). DoIT's Help Desk website offers detailed instructions for using WiscChat with others who are using AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) or ICQ (as of June of 2004, WiscChat does not officially work with Yahoo or MSN's IM programs).

What are its implications for writers?

Though little research exists concerning the "genre," if you will, of IMing, researchers have begun to understand more about similar modes of what are often called "synchronous" or "real-time" communication tools similar to IM. Many instructors worry that the brevity of writing in IM, the putative lack of attention to sentence syntax, and the use of abbreviations and "emoticons" such as smiley faces, have negative impacts on the current generation of students and their ability to express themselves in formal and detailed writing. These worries may prove true, or it may be that students implicitly understand the difference between IMing their friends about their plans for the Badger game and writing a prospectus for a semester-long biology research project.

Until we know more about writing using IM in the specific ways that many of our students are likely use it—to chat with friends, make plans, and flirt—and how this affects their other writing tasks, it is worth noting recent and potentially compelling findings on the use of synchronous Computer-Assisted Classroom Discussion (CACD, which, unlike most IMing, happens in a shared computer-classroom space where all participants are actually in the same classroom). Warschauer (2004) summarized conclusions from a range of studies showing that that CACD increased student participation in class discussion, both in terms of the number of students who participated and in terms of the frequency and length of their participation.

(Continued on page 3)

Announcing a New *Time to Write* Series: Instant Messaging, blogs (weblogs), WIKI (an online information resource users can contribute to and edit), and web portfolios all raise questions for university-level instructors about both (a) the impacts that these new media for written communication have on our students' writing and (b) the potential applications, if any, these news modes of writing have in our teaching. To get at these issues—from the nuts and bolts of new technologies to their impacts on our students' writing—each issue of *Time To Write* in Volume 8 will focus on emerging technologies and their intersections with teaching and writing. This newsletter's feature on Instant Messaging is the first in this new series.

WHAT A UNIVERSITY INSTRUCTOR SHOULD KNOW ABOUT "IM"

(continued from page 2)

What are its potential applications in the college classroom?

IMing can be a great way to hold "virtual" office hours—to offer students a distinct window of time when you are available to IM with them about course content and assignments. Online office hours can allow students who might avoid face-to-face office hours or who are busy with other classes or work to have valuable, synchronous access to a course instructor. Many instructors are concerned that some of the students who most need their help are often the most reluctant to come to them for help, and IM can help overcome some of these potential hurdles. Online office hours are also great for students whose preferred method of communication is

Want to try IM out? IM with me!

I'll have virtual office hours via IM: Thursday, Dec. 9 and Monday, Dec. 13.

I'll be "available" from 10AM to Noon each day.

Beginners

My JabberID is: mdpearson@wiscchat.wisc.edu

Welcome!

Email me at mdpearson@wisc.edu if you have questions!

computer mediated or who are hearing impaired.

SOME SPECIFIC IDEAS FOR USING IM:

1. Require students to sign up for a 10-minute IM conference to discuss their ideas and/or thesis for a paper early in the process of writing.

Because IM is a written medium and the interactions can easily be saved (in most programs under the File menu>Save As), it is easy for both instructors and students to keep a record of discussions. A student can, for example, save a brief chat with you about focusing a topic or clarifying an assignment and later refer to the saved chat again and again as the student drafts and revises.

2. If you are concerned that the writing style used in instant messaging may also show up in students' writing for the course, address the difference between the kind of writing used in an IM and that used in the formal writing for your course.

You could, for example, show the same content communicated in an IM and in a research paper proposal, and even have a little fun at the expense of IM by using smiley faces or the kinds of abbreviations common to IM language that would not be appropriate in formal scholarly prose (LOL for laughing out loud, or IMHO for in my humble opinion).

3. Require students to use IM as part of a collaborative project.

Although requiring students to work together on writing tasks is often a great way to have them learn from one another and engage in the kinds of collaboration common in scientific disciplines and many workplaces, sometimes group work is difficult to manage and assess. Perhaps the most common problem is that some students do not pull their weight and leave one or

two students doing all the work. By asking students to do their work via IM—which they might be doing already!—we can also ask them to print out a transcript of their online discussions. This transcript can serve as a useful artifact when we are evaluating group progress and individual contributions.

SOME MORE GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR IM:

4. Manage student expectations of your online availability.

This is a concern when you are using email simply to correspond with students, but it is perhaps even more of an issue when you use instant messaging to hold office hours. By having a distinct "buddy" name for your role as a course instructor, such as "SOC210 Professor," you can make yourself available to students only when you choose to do so. In addition, nearly all IM software, including WiscChat, allows users to set their "availability" status, so one can easily make oneself unavailable. Of course, you can put your virtual office hours on your syllabus or course website and tell students that you will happily be available only during those designated hours.

5. Limit IM discussions about writing assignments in time and scope.

Given the brevity of the writing in most IM chats—due to its interface—it is appropriate to limit IM interactions to directed, focused discussions about a topic for a research project or, for example, revision of a thesis statement. It might prove overwhelming or unwieldy to hold a conference about an entire draft over IM, and it may be more effective or efficient to use the "comment" feature in a word processor (note: a future subject of this *Time to Write* series) or to schedule a face-to-face meeting.

6. Ask students to use IM to communicate comfortably with you about course content using informal language.

In contrast to suggestion #5 above, you may decide it is worthwhile to capitalize on your students' comfort with Instant messaging. Research on using writing as a mode of learning has consistently shown that ungraded, informal writing can offer an effective way for students to grapple with and think through course content. Too often our students attempt to use language or ideas that they do not fully comprehend, and this lack of clarity can come through in their formal written work. Consider telling your students to use language that is simple, direct, and comfortable for them when they are IMing with you.

WiscChat info <http://www.doit.wisc.edu/wiscchat>

WiscChat Messenger <http://wiscchat.wisc.edu/messenger/wiscchat.exe>

DoIT's Help Desk <http://helpdesk.doit.wisc.edu>

DoIT's surveys <http://www.doit.wisc.edu/about/research.htm>

The Pew Report http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/133/report_display.asp

WAC OFFERS SPRING TRAINING FOR COMM-B INSTRUCTORS

In January 2005, on Monday the 10th and Tuesday the 11th, the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Program again will offer training for instructors new to teaching with writing.

Training will take place from 9AM-12:15PM each day, in Room 7191 of Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park Street (just across Park Street from Memorial Union).

These interactive workshops, which have been offered every semester since January 1997, are designed to complement the course-specific training departments and programs may already provide for TAs in Comm-B courses.

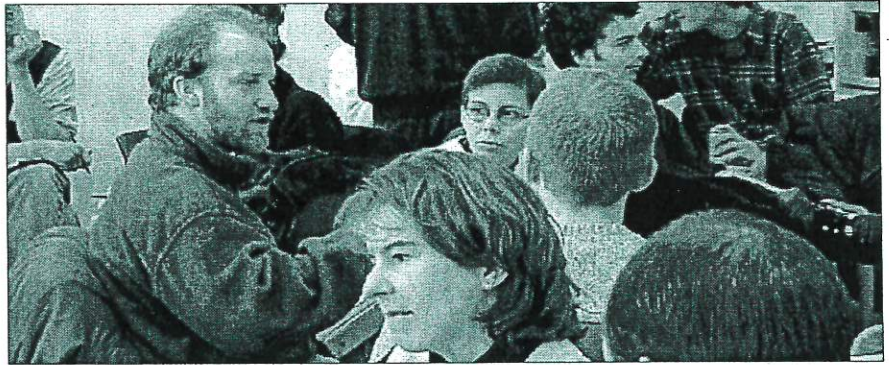
Sessions will feature presentations by Comm-B Teaching Fellows—outstanding TAs who have recently taught Communication-B courses.

Attendees finish the training having learned to think carefully about their own methods for teaching with writing and how best to incorporate the writing pedagogies they have learned.

All Comm-B TAs and faculty are welcome, but registration is required.

Please register at <http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>
Click on "WAC Events and News" and then on "Spring Training for Comm-B TAs"

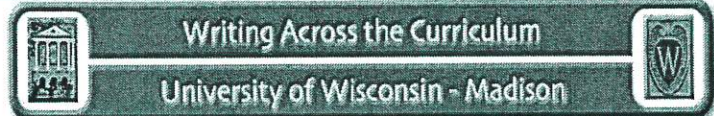
For more information on the training, contact Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum. Brad can be reached at 608-263-3823 or bthughes@wisc.edu.



VISIT THE WAC WEBSITE!

- Get discipline-specific pedagogical advice for teaching with writing.
- View and adapt sample writing assignments.
- Arrange for individual consultations with Writing-Across-the-Curriculum staff.
- Find out about training for Communication-B instructors.
- Read advice about responding to student writing.
- And much more!

<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC>

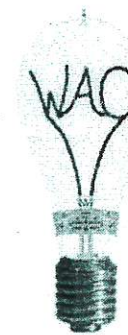


Helping faculty and teaching assistants in all disciplines teach with writing

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

As they work through the Pop Media Paper, students must demonstrate good library skills (to explore the general interest and the bioscience databases), higher-order analytical skills (to summarize the original research cogently and then compare it with the journalists' presentation), and a thorough understanding of the specific subject matter of the research in question. To discourage use of biology jargon that may obscure gaps in comprehension, students are asked to write their papers at the general public level, addressing an imaginary audience of interested art history and engineering majors.

In the weeks that students are working through stages of the Pop Media Paper, we discuss it in class a few times. Students exchange preliminary findings and successful search strategies at the beginning, and talk about their analytical challenges as the due date approaches. These conversations generate an encouraging sense of collective effort, teach valuable library research and critical reading strategies, and, together with the interactions with Writing Fellows, help to reduce the loneliness that is a part of most writing projects.

Working with Writing Fellows

Most students find this assignment difficult enough that they are very grateful for the help of peer writing tutors from the Writing Center's Writing Fellows program. Students submit a polished draft of this eight-page paper, which I note that they've turned in but do not grade before handing it over to an undergraduate Writing Fellow. Writing Fellows are carefully chosen and extensively trained students who work with Writing Intensive or Comm-B courses, reading and critiquing drafts of two formal papers. The Fellows do not grade papers (that's the job of the course professor), but they are trained to respond critically and constructively to student writing. In addition to writing comments on the draft, Fellows also meet individually with each student to discuss the draft and its revision, engaging in peer-to-peer collaborative learning. The discussions Fellows have with students, focusing on revision and not on evaluation, help develop a trusting relationship between students and their Fellow. Students take their Fellow's comments into account when they revise their drafts; they submit both the original draft and a final version to me for grading. I do not grade the original draft, but I do read it (and the Fellow's comments) with great interest.

Every revised paper is improved significantly, some dramatically. Since I began building revision into this assignment and working with Writing Fellows about 5 years ago, the average grade on this assignment went from a low B to a low A. Naturally, this results in higher student satisfaction; students know they suc-

ceeded at a difficult task, and they are proud of their insightful and authoritative papers. My satisfaction has also increased, as I can see explicitly each student's learning curve over the course of the assignment. In addition, grading polished and thoughtful papers is far easier and more gratifying than grading mediocre, disappointing ones.

As an antidote to the smugness that can afflict critics, students later are required to write a popular-level article about another peer-reviewed research publication on human sex differences. They are given a short deadline and a very strict word limit, and they are told their article must be lively and interesting to the general public. This counter-assignment not only reinforces the primary course content presented in the research paper, but also gives students some insight into the challenges facing popular science writers.

"[Students] are proud of their insightful and authoritative papers. My satisfaction has also increased, as I can see explicitly each student's learning curve over the course of the assignment."

Oxytocin, The Love Hormone

I've used this assignment for almost ten years, and the students' ability to discover sex-difference articles in the pop media still surprises me. One "prizewinning" article covered a responsible and careful piece of research, originally published in the respected *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, exploring the role of the hormone oxytocin in the monogamous behavior of small rodents called voles. I doubt the authors themselves would have recognized their work when it was described in *Glamour* under the headline, "Oxytocin, The Love Hormone: It's Why You Keep the Creep You Sleep With!" Some of the more interesting papers have compared complete and accurate stories from *Discover* or *The New York Times* with coverage of the same scientific finding in supermarket tabloids like *The Weekly World News* that draws utterly different conclusions or leaps from a preliminary observation in mice to unsubstantiated conclusions about human behavior.

Overall, this assignment, which is really a sequence of smaller assignments, asks students to become critical readers of the popular media as well as of primary science literature. As readers and writers throughout their work on the Pop Media Paper and their own "pop" article, students become better aware of scientific methods, the standards for proofs and claims in science as compared to those in the popular media, and the ways that different genres and different audiences shape writing content as well as style.

Professor Allen's syllabus and this assignment are available online
<http://www.plantpath.wisc.edu/fac/cza.htm>
Click on "Women's Studies 530, Biology and Gender"

For more information on the Writing Fellows Program
<http://www.wisc.edu/writing>
Click on "Writing Fellows Program"

WAC WELCOMES ITS NEWEST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Just over two years after meeting Brad Hughes for the first time in March of 2002 at a conference in Chicago, Matthew Pearson enthusiastically accepted an offer to become the assistant director of the L&S Program in Writing Across the Curriculum this past spring. That initial conversation in Chicago and the potential opportunity to work closely with Brad in the Writing Center and then with WAC were key factors in Matthew's choosing UW-Madison for graduate school. After he arrived here, Matthew politely hounded the outgoing WAC assistant director, Alice Robison, about her job, particularly when he noticed how Alice always spoke so authoritatively and articulately about teaching writing. "Will I learn all that stuff you know if I become WAC assistant director?" he asked Alice. Alice said, "Yes."

Matthew joined UW's Rhetoric & Composition Studies Program in 2002 after working as a high school teacher and education researcher in Philadelphia, PA, and Greensboro, NC. Prior to research and teaching, Matthew completed his M.Ed. in English at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

As assistant director of WAC, Matthew hopes to build on his predecessors' work on the program's website, continuing to provide excellent resources for instructors using writing to teach course content.

Only a few months into the job, Matthew already loves the kind of work he does as WAC assistant director: "Whatever I've done this far—for example, consulting with faculty and TAs about assignment design or evaluating student writing, learning about the rigorous research writing in BIO 152, or working with academic staff to think about ways that writing can help with the retention of students at UW-Madison—I enjoy it all." He looks forward to "IMing" with instructors (see page 3) about using writing in their courses, or, alternatively, emailing, talking on the phone, and meeting in person, too. Feel free to contact him at mdpearson@wisc.edu or 263-2732 if you have any questions or ideas about writing.



Matthew Pearson
Assistant Director, WAC

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM IN WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN- MADISON

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