

focus

on university teaching and learning

Writing Across the Curriculum

The short pieces in this newsletter present key points from the seminars on writing that were held throughout the year. Of course, much of the material here comes from the symposium led by Barbara Walvoord. Walvoord's central presupposition is that thinking, writing, and learning are inseparable, and that useful instruction in them is necessarily bound to specific disciplines, not confined to a "composition" class. Those of you who were at her presentation realize that Walvoord's "Basic Theories and Assumptions about Writing" actually have many practical applications. For instance, this newsletter presents ideas that show various types of writing that might be done, and how major assignments can usefully be broken down into manageable tasks, each task with its own possibilities for writing, and each requiring students to be very self-aware of their purposes -- unlike traditional one-final-product assignments, in which students can putter along to the very end with alarmingly unexamined principles. Further, while the pieces presented here by colleagues from Math and English are directed to individual disciplines, it is instructive to see how transferable are those discipline-specific assignments -- a point implicit in the summaries presented by Fran Nowakowski and Terry Gordon, who show how departments and libraries within the university might cooperate in teaching research skills.

Len Diepeveen, Chair
Writing Across the Curriculum Committee



Basic Theories and Assumptions about Writing

By Barbara E. Walvoord, Director of the University of Cincinnati Writing Across the Curriculum Centre

- ① Writing, thinking, reading, investigating, and oral communication cannot be separated.
- ② People do not think then write; rather, they often discover their thoughts through writing.
- ③ Verbalization, both oral and written, is one of the best ways to think, discover, and learn.
- ④ The ability to write well develops slowly over years; students need constant, frequent practice.
- ⑤ Each discipline has its own modes of posing questions, making and supporting claims, investigating the world, and communicating with others. Students need help learning to do the thinking, researching, speaking, and writing required in each discipline.
- ⑥ As teachers, we are socializing our students into the written and oral "conversations" of our disciplines and, more broadly, into the conversation of educated people in our society.

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Developing a Formal Written Paper

Barbara Walvoord explains that, although it is perfectly legitimate to pay little attention to the conventions of Edited Standard Written English (ESWE) in informal writing or drafts where the writer needs to concentrate fully on the structure and content, finished, final, formal papers must conform to those conventions. The following points - which include self-evaluation for the student, peer editing, and instructor feedback - will be useful for teachers to help students develop and revise formal written papers.

Developing the Paper

- ✓ **Getting ideas**
 - Write 20 questions about your topic
 - Use a two- or three-column worksheet
- ✓ **Envisioning the task**
 - Develop a statement of audience and goals
 - Describe the task
 - Ask "When am I done?"
- ✓ **Planning a work schedule**
 - Peers interview each other:
 - What is your project?
 - What have you done so far?
 - What is your greatest difficulty?
 - Flow chart
 - Calendar schedule
- ✓ **Conducting inquiry and research**
- ✓ **Using and documenting sources**
 - Peer checks of each other's sources
- ✓ **Making notes**
- ✓ **Drafting**

Revising the Paper

- ✓ **Revising**
 - Self-check
 - Peer conferences
 - Instructor conferences
 - Checksheet
 - Instructor comment
- ✓ **Editing for grammar, spelling, and punctuation**
 - Peer editors
 - Self-check
 - Instructor check
- ✓ **Learning and Reflecting**
 - "If I were to write this paper again ..."
 - Write a guide for students in the next semester

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Calculus, Writing, and a Sick Friend

Having first year Calculus students write about Mathematics has proved to be an extremely useful tool. It both allows students to clarify their understanding of the subject and gives the instructor a better idea of where students are having problems. We have used three types of writing assignments in our classes.

1. Letter to a Sick Friend

We asked students to write a one- or two-page letter to a sick classmate explaining what s/he missed in class that day. This assignment gives students an opportunity to think about the topic discussed in the lecture and to see if they have really understood it.

2. Letter to a History Major

About half way through the first term, when students are well into the Differential Calculus, we ask them to write to a friend who is currently a History major but is contemplating switching to Science. The students are asked to explain to their friend what Calculus is all about and why s/he should (or should not) consider studying it. While the usual weekly questions force students to become immersed in specific topics, this assignment allows them to stand back and look at the subject as a whole.

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Focus on university teaching and learning is the bulletin of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology of Dalhousie University. The following people contributed to this issue: Eileen Herteis, Len Diepeveen, Fran Nowakowski, Terry Gordon, Richard Nowakowski, Ken Dunn, Marjorie Stone and Barbara Walvoord. Special thanks to Janice MacInnis for design of this issue.

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3. Major Essay

Once each term we ask students to write a more extensive, 5- to 10-page essay. For example:

- * Explain what a derivative function is, how it can be found, and what information can be obtained from it.
- * Describe the definite and indefinite integral and explain how they are related to each other.

These essays are designed to force students to put together a unified picture of a subject that has been discussed over a number of classes.

Ken Dunn & Richard Nowakowski
Department of Mathematics, Statistics,
and Computing Science



Students Respond to Readings

Brief focussed informal reading responses in which students register their response to assigned reading can be useful in courses at a variety of levels. Instructions for such responses can be tailored to the class or material concerned, but generally requiring students to produce a few general comments, some questions, and a close analysis of a particular point works well. Since students are told that they don't have to worry about grammar and organization in these responses, the prose is often lively and unconstrained; and for the same reason, they do not take long to grade; a comment ranging from "Excellent" to "Satisfactory" and one or two specific observations are often sufficient.

Such responses ensure that students do the reading; they allow students to raise questions, alerting the professor to particular areas of interest or difficulty. If students are

asked to submit these responses, single-spaced, anonymous excerpts from them can be easily used to generate class discussion, to demonstrate the diversity of possible perspectives, or to show how students often zero in on questions or issues that are central to published treatments of the reading material concerned. Reading responses encourage dialectical thinking and stimulate students with weak reading and analytical skills to learn from stronger students. They allow shy students to contribute significantly to class debate. They can also provide students with an opportunity of testing out ideas before developing them in formal papers, and are a study aid when reviewing the course material for examinations.

Marjorie Stone
Department of English

Types of Writing Assignments: A Blizzard of Ideas

This inventory of different types of writing assignments, excerpted from Barbara Walvoord's "Blizzard of Ideas," contains writing tasks which are applicable to most disciplines.

Contemplative essay

Memo

Abstract

Briefing or "white" paper

Survey of literature

Chart, graph, visual aid

Word problem

Definition

Notes on reading

Cognitive map, web, or diagram

Flow chart

Proposal

Instructional manual

Case analysis

Brochure or poster

News or feature story

Annotated bibliography

Dialogue

Timed freewrite

Journal

Letter to editor

Poem

Columns: pros/cons,
strengths/weaknesses, etc.

Question (students devise an
exam or essay question)

Diary of a fictional or real
historical character

"I Search" (first-person narrative
account of an inquiry)

Microtheme (focussed theme
written on a 5 x 8 card)



Responding to Student Writers -- Some Guidelines

"The basic relationship is not between the teacher and the errors in the paper, but between the teacher and the learner," says Barbara Walvoord. The following guidelines will assist teachers to respond to student writing appropriately, giving only the level of direction which is needed.

A teacher's response should:

- ✓ Be clear to the student.
- ✓ Be friendly in tone.

- ✓ Be positive as well as negative.
- ✓ Be respectful of the student's culture, dialect, ideas.
- ✓ Set priorities, e.g., "There are a number of editing problems here; I'd suggest that you work first on using apostrophes."
- ✓ Suggest specific actions. If you offer specific remedies, give more than one option to allow the writer maximum

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control, e.g. "You could either put a semicolon here or use a comma with and."

✓ Be appropriate to the following:

- announced criteria (Set high standards and impose strict penalties for inadequate editing of finished, formal work. Give a failing grade to a poorly edited paper or draw a line where you finished reading and hand the paper back to the writer. "Poorly edited papers," says Barbara Walvoord, "need take very little teacher time.")

- announced audience and purpose.

- the stage of the writing process, e.g. *In drafts, in-class writing, or informal writing whose main purpose is to learn or explore, the teacher and student may not pay as much attention to the mechanics.*

- the student's stage of development as a writer.

- the student's ability to use the advice.

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Faculty-Librarian Cooperation

Can closer cooperation with librarians benefit teaching professors as they try to incorporate more writing into their classes and look for alternative writing tasks to assign? Fran Nowakowski, a reference librarian at Dalhousie's Killam Library, and Terry Gordon, from the Department of French, believe it can.

In a survey of Dalhousie faculty last year, 84% agreed that students should know how to do library research. Since most students do not arrive at university with those research skills, students must acquire them in their courses. The faculty member can ensure the development and application of library research skills by designing assignments that require library research and by seeing that students receive instruction in library use. It is important that a student's initial experience of the library be a positive one. This can be achieved by providing instruction in library research, making the assignment relevant to the course, and ensuring the required resources are available. If the assignments are not thoroughly developed and researched, students can end up frustrated and angry because of what appears to be a deliberate waste of their time.

Designing assignments which are directed toward specific goals can be time-consuming and problematic. Librarians can help and advise faculty in the process of designing successful assignments and in the teaching of library research skills. Most librarians are familiar with a range of subject disciplines and know how information in these disciplines can be found. It is this knowledge, and the skills that go with it, that the librarian can contribute to the educational process. Librarians have long viewed themselves as full partners in this process and, according to last year's survey, 88% of Dalhousie faculty agree.

Fran Nowakowski

W. Terry Gordon

The Earlham College model for bibliographic instruction brings faculty and librarians together in a close cooperative effort that yields far-reaching results. All bibliographic instruction at Earlham is course-integrated and assignment-related, with the objective of enabling students to become researchers as quickly as possible. Alternatives to standard term papers are designed by faculty in collaboration with library staff, on the assumption that developing skill in a subject should be integrated with developing skill in accessing the literature on the subject. Emphasis is placed on the evaluation of information as well as its use, and students are challenged to assimilate ideas directly from primary sources. Quite independently of realizing pedagogical goals, this approach has the immediate, practical benefit of eliminating problems which are all too familiar, such as assignments that do not demand effective use of library resources. Here are a few sample applications: In a course on **psychology of women**, students select a topic applicable to women, such as achievement motivation, and examine the psychological literature from the 1950s and '60s, to determine how the topic was treated. Then they turn to literature from the late '70s and '80s to determine shifts in approach to the subject. In a **class on Shakespeare**, students follow up on their study of the plays by identifying a critical problem and using bibliography to find twenty articles, books, and essays which discuss it. From these twenty, they select six which best cover the full range of the problem and present their own annotated bibliography as an assignment. For a **history course**, students are required to evaluate a historian or particular historical work through the use of book reviews and by judging biographical information about the author and the reviewers.