If I were to be entirely honest, I’d have to say that during my undergraduate years at the University of Texas what I learned about writing was spurred more by fear than by a desire to excel. We freshmen arrived on campus a few days before classes began. During that time the talk in our dormitory (today, for unfathomable reasons, referred to as a “residence hall”) included horrific tales about English 601, its heavy flunk-out rate, heartless graders, and impossibly lofty standards. My instructor in that course, as it turned out, was a Fulbright Scholar from England, a Cambridge graduate pursuing a Ph.D. Tact was not his long suit. He was not nurturing. I liked him.

Our first theme was written entirely in class on one of two or three topics we had not seen beforehand. It had to be at least five hundred words (he counted), and it had to include a separate outline and thesis statement—all to be completed in fifty minutes. A week later our acerbic instructor handed back our graded papers, then lambasted us with loaded rhetorical questions. Whatever did we Americans do in our public schools? Did we ever write there? In English? His sister was in the fourth grade. Her essays were better than ours. Did we have a fourth grade in our schools? Had any of us passed it? How?

The remarks he had written on our themes were every bit as scorching as his classroom diatribe. Many of them abide with me these many years later, branded in my brain. In the closing sentence of my essay I had urged a certain course of action “for the sake of posterior.” “That,” he had scribbled in the margin, “is precisely where you ought to be kicked for writing this.” My intention, of course, had been to appeal to an altruistic concern for future generations. Unaffected, my instructor had shot straight past my noble sentiment and struck at the malapropism, my mere slip of the pen. A fellow student had begun his essay, “I guess the happiest times I ever had were when my faithful dog Skipper and I used to go hunting in the woods.” Below, in red ink was the instructor’s caustic query: “Who was the better shot, you or the hound?” I must say, my
desire to avoid the humiliation of lacerating commentary was a far more forceful incentive to proofread than a pedagogically sensitive “Do you think you could possibly phrase this better?”

Later in the semester, having grown a bit less error-prone, I was given back a theme with a decent grade and even a little praise: “What this essay lacks in imagination, it makes up for in logic and organization. You will probably make a good scientist.” I was a chemistry major then, but even so, sensitive enough to know a left-handed compliment when I read one. So what did he mean, “lacks imagination”? What the deuce did he want? Ernest Hemingway? Despite my vexation, I was led for the first time to entertain the possibility that good writing really is more than organization, coherence, and mechanical correctness. I was becoming aware of the more elusive qualities of style.

Beyond that breakthrough in understanding, I still faced the considerable problem of knowing how to achieve style in my own writing. There are few definite rules, and these are infinitely more elusive than those governing a chemical formula. Some years ago a Supreme Court justice expressed his frustration at being unable to frame a workable legal definition of pornography: “All I can say,” he concluded, “is that I know it when I see it.” By the beginning of my junior year, I had read enough good literature at least to perceive that Stephen Crane’s style was less pedestrian than Theodore Dreiser’s. And I could recognize an opaque sentence or a plodding phrase when I saw one. To be sure, that recognition alone did not mean that I could write fine prose any more than appreciating the athletic prowess of Pete Sampras guarantees a trophy at Wimbledon. But it was a start.

Later on in my junior year, I liked English so much that I was taking advanced literature courses as electives. In two classes I had scientists who had “gone over” to English. One worked at the Balcones Research Center in Austin and taught early American literature part-time; the other held one Ph.D. in physics, another in modern American literature. Largely as a result of their convert’s enthusiasm for their subject and their encouragement of my efforts to write passably about literature, I changed my major for the first—and last—time. Once again, an instructor’s marginal comment on a written assignment comes back to me. I had labored for a couple of days over an essay on Puritan poetry trying to make the topic sound interesting. In his comments at the end of my paper, the Balcones researcher wrote, “You have a highly readable style.” Readable wasn’t exactly Ernest Hemingway, but it would do. A readable style would at least ensure that if I ever did publish anything, posterity could understand it.

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14th ANNUAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE FESTIVAL

The Sam Houston State University Department of Library Science is hosting its 14th Annual Children’s Literature Festival for librarians and educators on Saturday, March 16, 1996, from 8:00 a.m.—5:00 p.m. Participants will attend such activities as workshops, autographing sessions, and book exhibits, as well as hear these authors speak: Tomie dePaola, Angela Shelf Medearis, and Jerry Stanley. The cost is $50. For additional information and registration forms contact:

Dr. Mary Berry, Festival Coordinator
Department of Library Science
SHSU, P.O. Box 2236, Huntsville, Texas 77341-2236
Phone (409) 294-1150 or Fax (409) 294-1153
USING THE INTERNET TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING

Dr. Gerald Kohers
Assistant Professor
Department of Management & Marketing

How can the Internet (the Information Superhighway, Infobahn, Information Turnpike) improve the writing ability of students? To answer this question, one needs a basic understanding of the Internet. Essentially, the Internet is a collection of thousands of computer networks and millions of computers which are capable of transferring data among one another. The Internet was developed primarily to meet the need of researchers and scientists for a new, more efficient medium of communication. This basic, yet critical, need to communicate has opened up several new avenues and brought about numerous different Internet tools, all of which, in one way or another, deal with the transmission of information.

I teach an introductory Management Information Systems class in which we use a number of these Internet tools. For example, the student's primary means of receiving and turning in assignments is via e-mail with attachments, including their PowerPoint presentations, Word files, and Excel assignments. One advantage of using attachments is the elimination of the "paper shuffle" typically associated with handing in homework. Also, there is much more accountability when students turn in their assignments, so there is no need for the dubious policy of “Just slide it under my door by five o'clock.”

Another benefit of having the assignments e-mailed to me is portability. When I choose to grade the assignments at home, all I do is save the students' assignments on a single disk rather than taking home a box full of papers.

An Internet tool that is especially beneficial to the students is the World Wide Web (WWW), the graphical portion of the Internet. Anyone who has "surfed" the Internet agrees that one of the most difficult activities is being able to find specific materials. The use of a WWW browser such as Netscape greatly facilitates students in exploring the Internet and discovering the almost limitless amount of information available. Also, there are several search engines accessible with Netscape that allow students to locate particular subjects. These resources can be especially valuable to students who may be reluctant to go the library and wander around the various floors looking for something related to their topic. Therefore, the WWW can improve students' writing in that they now have an exciting new resource for gathering the most relevant and useful information. Clearly, this approach optimizes both the efficiency and effectiveness of research and writing.

All in all, the Internet gives students a valuable and expansive set of new tools for gathering research. With a basic understanding of the Internet and what it has to offer, students have a better chance of becoming more efficient and productive writers. While ultimately the actual writing and creativity must come from the students themselves, the Internet can help students develop and improve these talents.
COMPUTERS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE CLASSROOM

Dr. Laura B. Myers
Assistant Professor
College of Criminal Justice

At a time when computers are used extensively in the criminal justice field, criminal justice educators have an obligation to help students acquire computer skills they will need beyond college. In the classroom, I pursue this obligation in two ways. One method is for students to use computers in the completion of course requirements whenever possible. Students are encouraged to use word processing packages on take-home exams and on written assignments. I tell students it will be easier to complete assignments if they use computers because their writing will be more concise and clear. My students can submit drafts of their work for my feedback and revise their writings. Later in the semester, I require students to either word process or type all of their work. I have found a majority of students will use computers rather than typewriters. Requiring word processing or typing later in the semester gives students a chance to develop computer skills they may not have initially possessed. In addition, my teaching assistants are available to help with computer skills throughout the semester.

Another method is to model computer use in the classroom which tends to reduce the students’ fear of computers. I use word processing and graphics packages to create course handouts, assignments, and exams. Furthermore, I use computer packages such as Microsoft PowerPoint and SPSS to supplement my lectures. PowerPoint can be used to develop overhead slides. When used in conjunction with liquid crystal display equipment, PowerPoint creates a professional presentation of course material. SPSS can be used with the same LCD equipment to illustrate complicated research information students may have found boring or uninformative in the past and to save time when writing out complicated procedures on the board. My goal is to prepare students for a technologically complex world. Relying on students to take computer courses in addition to their required major courses is not enough. They should apply computer skills in the criminal justice classroom and gain the experience needed in the field. At a time when employers complain graduates can neither read, write, nor think, educators should teach more than these three skills. Good computer skills not only will make students more marketable, but also will enhance their reading, writing, and thinking abilities as well.

FISH IN THE NET: UTILIZING THE INTERNET IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

Dr. Bill Fleming
Professor
Department of English and Foreign Languages

No more agonizing over topics for composition! Content problems are solved by putting the students on the Internet, which caters to the users’ diverse backgrounds and skills. In the freshman composition course, utilizing the Internet in conjunction with writing divides into five phases.

Phase one—accessing the Internet, which takes no more than forty-five minutes, and discovering vast amounts of information—initially appears chaotic. To accustom students to the Internet and to accommodate their diversities, information is gathered in general categories, such as interests, hobbies, news items, musical groups, and movies. For each topic students locate at least three sources, print and save them in a binder, and choose from this
information a topic for their first essay.

The first writing assignment allows for vastly different topics leading to a discussion of various approaches and formats for essay organization. Paraphrasing and documentation are emphasized. Copies of sources are included with the final draft; errors in writing as well as anticipated problems with grammar and mechanics are addressed in student conferences. By this time, students spend one class period in the labs for “controlled searching” and two in the classroom writing and sharing their discoveries.

Phase two of using the Internet limits topics. Students access stories and general information on mythology, which are discussed in class. The specific assignment focuses on scrutinizing information on one mythological figure and modern derivatives of that name. In addition to Internet sources, students reference dictionaries and access the library for additional, more detailed information. The essay synthesizes the relevant mythological story of the figure then links it with modern usage.

The third phase is a critical analysis of a story and written material associated with it. Stories are found on the Internet and handed out in class. After students compare opinions, several critical articles are analyzed to show the variance of ideas on a single work. Then, other relevant information is accessed on the Internet. The written assignments are the students’ opinions of the stories’ purposes and themes, based on their interpretations utilizing support of critics.

Phase four includes a short, controlled research paper on a historical event. Information is obtained from several sources to produce an intelligent research report; this is the first important collaboration of the Internet and the library. Phase five is a longer, controlled research project on a topic selected from the students’ journals.

The Internet is an effective source of topics for composition; it is easily accessible; there are data to satisfy everyone. Additionally, most of the students are reading more than they ever have and are developing computer skills while improving writing skills.

AUTHORING THE WEB: GETTING STUDENTS STARTED

Scott Slough
Lecturer
Department of Chemistry

One of the most daunting tasks of any writing-enhanced instructor is to provide writing assignments that require students to learn as they write rather than using writing to demonstrate knowledge. One such task is constructing or adding to a World Wide Web home page. Access to the “information highway” is available to every SHSU faculty member and student through the World Wide Web. The unique feature of the World Wide Web is the ability to “surf the net” with little or no instruction by pointing a mouse at a desired location and clicking. These desired locations are called “links” and are the key to increasing access to the Internet.
It is possible with a click of the mouse to go to a site in Australia or to download a three hundred page document from NASA complete with graphics. The World Wide Web is a collection of these “links” on individual pages interconnected, yet separate in their individual construction. This is all accomplished by using a very simple programming language called HTML, Hyper-Text Markup Language. In a matter of hours, students can become proficient enough at the mechanics of HTML to construct their own home page.

An individual’s home page is constructed one piece at a time. One or two ideas quickly become “linked” to others to create elaborate networks that demonstrate the relationships and patterns the author finds when new information confronts old. One of the most popular images on the Web is a small yellow sign, “Area under Construction,” followed by an author’s apology for the “construction” mess. Home pages, as is the case with learning, are by nature incomplete—they are works in progress. Therefore, a home page represents knowledge “Under Constructivism”—the construction of knowledge by an individual in response to the social and physical interaction with the environment. As the author of the home page learns, knowledge can be reflected and demonstrated immediately in the home page by the schema that develops and the “links” that are added. This continuous and thoughtful evolution is a demonstration of learning and understanding—the goal of any writing assignment. See you on the World Wide Web at http://www.shsu.edu/~chm_sws.

**STUDENT WRITING**

**MIXING POETRY AND MULTI-MEDIA**

Pat Ledyard  
Graduate Student  
Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling

“My Dog Just Had Kittens, But You Just Yelled,” a poem written to introduce a workshop on filial therapy for a graduate counseling class, came alive with animation. Dr. John Swartz assisted me in selecting clip art, and I found the laser disc, “Incredible Animation Collection,” especially helpful. With the aid of two thirty-five inch televisions, a portable Power Macintosh, and three overhead projectors, this poem became more than mere words on paper.

"My Dog Just Had Kittens,  
But You Just Yelled"

Why is it that you can’t hear what I say?

The computer turned into a monster last night when you turned out the lights.  
It marched around the room eating everything in sight.  
When it came close to me, I crawled under my bed!  
But, it ate my brother.  
He screamed and screamed, but you didn’t hear.  
I woke up shaking all over, wanting to be close to you.  
But you said, “Go back to your room.  And now!  
You woke me up.  I have to go to work tomorrow!”
Why can't you hear what I say!
Don't you know I have feelings too?

Snuggles, my cat, curled close when I was afraid,
but you yelled, “Get that cat out of the house.
Look what it did on your floor!”
Snuggles knows when I hurt.
Why don’t you?

Why is it that you can’t hear what I feel?

At school today, a kid teased me about the way my hair looked.
I felt really angry, and I hit him hard.
The teacher was so mad at me.
She took me right to the principal’s office.
Never once did she ask me why I was so mad.

Why is it she can’t hear what I feel either?

My brother told me to get out of his way.
He never says anything nice to me.
I hate him!
Why does he make me so angry?

Doesn't anyone care what I feel?

The cops came and took Daddy away when I was only three.
He never listened to me.
He only yelled, “Get away from the front of the TV.
Can’t you see I’m watching the football game?”
Now he is gone, but I don't care.
I don’t like him anyway.

I went to a new place today
to see a person my mother called a play therapist.
A room full of toys just for me.
“You can do most anything you want to do in here,” she said.
She sat in a chair and watched everything I did.
When I knocked the toys off the shelf, she said, “You feel really angry.”
When I jumped rope really fast, she said, “You seem pleased about that.”
I asked, “Can I play in the sand?” She said, “In here, you can decide.”

Wow, finally someone does hear what I feel!
I wish everyone knew how to talk like that!

This poem, first published in *Kaleidoscope of Play Therapy*, is reprinted with permission by Jason Aronson, Incorporated.
As valuable as writing may be as an occasion for learning and as a heuristic for coming to know an academic discipline, dealing with the demands of student writing is undeniably a challenge for instructors. Providing feedback to student writers can be very time consuming. However, there are some things that can ease the task somewhat. Following is a compilation of “tips” for handling the paper load.

Don’t feel compelled to grade everything that students write. Though your feedback is crucial to the writing process, students learn a great deal in the very process of writing and in becoming increasingly responsible for doing their own revisions. Students need to learn that all writers write and rewrite and rewrite before they are satisfied with a written product. Nancy Downs, Assistant Director of the University of Chicago at Illinois Composition Program, suggests a system that works well in her writing classes. She requires students to produce several short texts within the semester, but then instructs them to select only two for the midterm and two for the final grade evaluation. Students are responsible for selecting the ones they wish to revise. Nancy reads the drafts along the way offering some comments. Yet, she closely evaluates only those selected by the students themselves as representative of their best efforts. This gives the students a significant personal responsibility for the advancement of their own learning process. After all, we certainly don’t use every first attempt as a final product. Why not allow our students the same luxury?

Distinguish between a “summative” and “formative” approach to evaluation, as David Jolliffe suggests, and then decide when to use each one. Essentially, a formative approach provides comments from the perspective that this piece of writing is evolving; it is “in the works,” not finished, seeking reaction to one or more features such as the fulfillment of assignment stipulations, effectiveness and appropriateness of tone, accuracy of technical content, depth of argumentation, and so forth. On the other hand, the summative approach offers a final evaluation usually providing a grade and marking errors. Essentially, it comments on a given assignment judged as a task completed. Over the course of the semester you may use a combination of these approaches, but it is extremely time consuming to attempt to “do it all” for any single assignment.

Provide feedback in student conferences, either individually or in small groups. These can be scheduled during office hours or some can be accomplished during class time while students participate in a writing workshop or some similar activity. Often just a few minutes in a face-to-face conference can allow you to determine if the students are understanding the goals of an assignment or to provide feedback on mechanical issues to prevent recurrent inaccuracies.
Encourage students to use peer writing partners to help with their revision process. Often the key to successful peer revision is careful structuring. Initially, give the students a list of specific questions to ask.

- Does the work meet the specified goals of the assignment?
- Is it written in the prescribed format?
- If no specific format is required, is there a reasonable plan that another reader can readily follow?
- Is there a clear focus?
- Are there succinct claims, carefully developed and supported?
- Are there points where the text seems flat? Unclear?
- Are there adequate transitions between sections?
- Is the piece appropriate for its intended audience?
- If documentation is required, does it conform to some conventional standard?
- Do the grammar, spelling, and mechanics meet the standards of academic prose?

Require the student peer reviewers to answer, in writing, the guide questions, sign their review, and then discuss it with the author of the text. You might also require the authors to hand in the drafts and review sheets with their final text, not to grade them, but merely to see if the students worked at serious revision and to motivate the reviewers to evaluate carefully. Allowing students ample time to revise should provide you with a much improved text to consider for final evaluation.

Don’t feel compelled to serve as your students’ copy editor or proofreader. If you find some recurrent mechanical error, note it once and refer the students to a grammar handbook, insisting they correct their error in future assignments. Share proofreading tips like reading the draft aloud, reading a text sentence by sentence from the bottom up, using available computer checks, and so forth.

If you want to provide more than global comments, but don’t want to copy edit, try placing an “X” in the margin of any line, while reading along, where you note any inaccuracy. Whether the weakness is inadequate phrasing, faulty argumentation, or incorrect punctuation, you are signaling the writer to the fact that special attention is needed during revision without taking the time to make corrections or to write lengthy explanations.

Adhering to precise deadlines can allow you to provide some productive oral, group feedback soon after an assignment is complete, knowing that all students have already completed it. In addition, remembering to stagger your deadlines so that long papers from various courses don’t come in during exam week usually simplifies things. Why not create an earlier final paper deadline and finish the course with a few sessions of students sharing their newly authored knowledge via oral reports to the class?


The Writers’ Forum was organized to help creative writers across the university and community. This group strives to meet the individual needs of writers, whether by answering specific questions or giving feedback. Members provide honest criticism without platitudes. For more information about meetings please contact:

Jennifer Krall (409) 294-3265
or
Dr. Paul Child (409) 294-1412
In my Science in the Elementary School course, I decided to help students form their philosophies based on ideas fostered by their public school supervising teachers and their SHSU education courses, especially during our methods block. Reality really does change many trial balloons and sometimes rather abruptly. To start my effort, I show a video of Meliane Morgan, 1985 Texas Teacher of the Year, and the movie, Stand and Deliver, after which we discuss these teachers’ beliefs. I then assign ten questions to challenge the class into thinking about their personal teaching base.

The result is quite remarkable and I feel that other faculty members may be able to pose similar questions to help students analyze their philosophies. The questions are as follows:

• What beliefs do you deem important for your classroom and your students?
• What image or ideal do you want to project to your students? How do you plan to achieve this goal?
• How do you plan to create a cooperative classroom atmosphere?
• Why will you try to use several modes of learning in your lessons?
• How do you plan to generate enthusiasm for the subject and make the study problems real to each child?
• What possible ways will you use to keep communication between the school and the home at a high level?
• How will you plan to use cooperative learning and hands-on activities in your classroom?
• What changes do you plan to make in your planning and teaching because of your work in the public schools?
• What classroom management techniques will you use in your classroom?
• How do you plan to foster self-confidence and the spirit of risking oneself in exploration and discovery learning?

These "springboard" questions are used to help the methods students develop personal teaching philosophies. I was surprised that the trial philosophies, to quite an extent, mirrored the value systems of the University's teachers. These philosophies have yet to be tested and revised by time and further experience, yet I feel we have achieved a great beginning. It truly pays to challenge students to think, reason, and express themselves in writing.

The English language stays on the move. Those who speak and write it see to that. They turn nouns into verbs, verbs into gerunds, add suffixes that make adjectives, and sometimes combine two old words into a brand new one. That's part of the territory that the word journal, its roots firmly resting in the 16th century, has made over the past few years. Its most startling form, to the conservative language user, is journaling, a word that sounds as if it should refer to a long, well-planned trip or perhaps denote water flowing through a pipe. It doesn't. Instead, it refers to the act of writing in a journal, which may have some similarities to a long trip or the
Journal activities are as many as there are imaginative teachers and students, but some of the more frequently used ones include noting observations, asking questions (personal, academic, and a mixture of the two), making speculations, recording stages of self-awareness, synthesizing information, revising earlier entries, and recording information. Any one of these activities thoughtfully applied to a class assignment will take a writer through a rigorous cognitive workout, resulting, one hopes, in a broader, deeper grasp of the material.

Of course, the more often students “journal,” the greater chance they have to find and register solutions, ideas, and opinions. The longer the account, the greater the chance of developing them. If entries are carefully documented with the time and date, later on they can provide valuable insights into the growth and development of the evolving musician, physicist, or historian.

How do these general suggestions translate into practice? You can undoubtedly think of more than enough possibilities, but here are a few to get you started. The music student can be asked to write notes about concerts attended, recordings listened to, readings covered (biographies, essays, reviews, instructional texts). She can be asked to compose definitions, register her responses to a new work or a new performance of a well-known one, or compare her feelings about a composer over a period of time.

At the beginning of a class, the history student can complete a short journal entry based on a question drawn from the reading assignment or write out-of-class responses to the readings. In either case, he is more likely to be an active participant than the student who is simply asked to read. With time, comparisons of previous readings or personal opinions are natural topics for journal discussion.

Physics students, too, pay closer attention when they are asked to answer their own questions in a journal. They can also write notes to themselves, raise questions about things they don’t understand, or even include explanations of how to do something. From there, it is a short step to keeping a learning log, a record of what they are discovering in and out of physics class.

The good news is that writing about any discipline, whether it is music, history, or physics, helps students to make sense out of new concepts by connecting them with experiences from their own lives. Whether we call it “journaling” or simply “keeping a journal,” the act of writing about what we want to learn, understand, and use is a powerful means to those ends.
The Across-the-University Writing Program Newsletter is an official publication of Sam Houston State University. Addressed to university faculty, the newsletter seeks to further the understanding of current practices used to incorporate writing in courses. Please send articles concerning writing assignments or evaluation techniques that you use in your classroom to the following address: Patricia Williams, Editor, Teacher Education Center, SHSU, Huntsville, Texas 77341.

Design & Production Editor: Robert Garrett
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