

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

A Member of The Texas State University System

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COCURRICULAR WRITING-LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

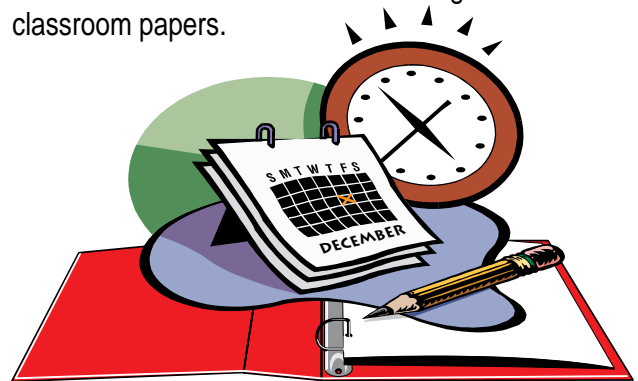
Dr. John Delaney
Associate Vice President for Student Services

For educators who work with students primarily outside the formal classroom setting, interactions with students on writing projects are most often very focused and clearly defined. Rather than evaluating the finished piece for the purpose of assigning a grade, cocurricular writing assignments typically are communication vehicles with a stated emphasis and goal. A student can learn much from this one-on-one model of tutoring, and communication skills can be polished through the process of gaining experience with cocurricular writing assignments. Examples of such writing projects include program proposals for funding and/or requests to host a particular event, letters of invitation to speakers or guests for a function, thank you letters to those who participated in hosting a program, and a myriad of letters to vendors, students, and others involved. This lengthy list of "real" forms of communication demands certain styles from the writer.

In addition to the overall planning which must

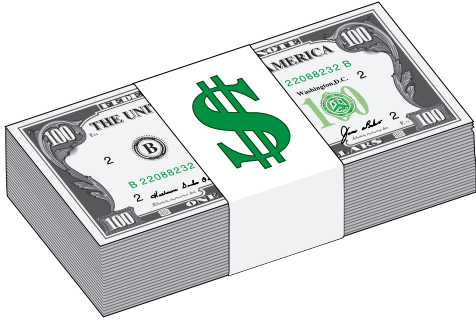
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accompany this package of communication, basic elements of good writing such as correct spelling, noun-tense agreement, and sentence structure form the foundation upon which a well-crafted letter is constructed. By focusing on the distinct ideas of the document (purpose, audience, details, and so forth), the student can write with clarity, succinctness, and a directness which is all too often lacking in formal classroom papers.



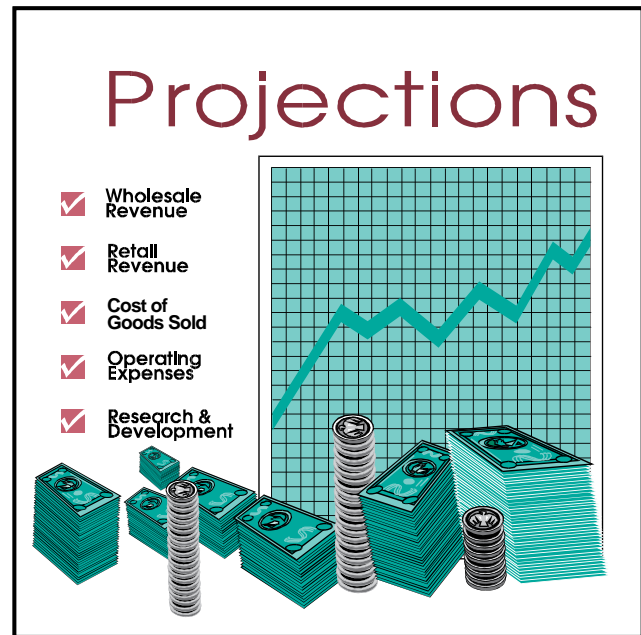
Helping the writer understand the clear distinctions between a formal letter of invitation and a funding proposal also provides the student with an invaluable hands-on learning experience; every type of communication must possess the style and structure appropriate for its specific intent, and these skills can be learned. Once a student grasps this basic concept, much of the "mystery" surrounding the art of writing can be reduced or eliminated, even for those students who shake at the thought of putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard).

By assisting students to develop a cogent, correct, and articulate style of communication through their cocurricular writing experiences, we can greatly enhance their academic performances across the curriculum, and, just as importantly, help them communicate with clarity and style as they move on to graduate or professional schools or begin their respective career paths.



THE STUDENT WRITING INCENTIVE: BETTER EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Dr. James B. Bexley
Chair
Smith-Hutson Endowed Chair of Banking
College of Business Administration



Have you noticed that the average students in your class grumble and scowl when reading the syllabus and discovering that a required research paper represents a substantial portion of the course grade? As faculty members, we are afforded several options. First, we can take the course of least resistance and tell the students that the research paper is required and there is no alternative. Second, we can sympathize with the students which provides temporary relief. However, it is my firm belief that the third option is the best and only option to pursue—telling students that the employment opportunities for college graduates are greatly enhanced by possessing good communication skills.

Having seen this issue from both the educator's and the employer's perspective, I have a greater appreciation for written and oral communication skills. While serving as a bank president, I found that the most critical element in the hiring process was the ability of college graduates to sell themselves through oral and written communication. They had to explain what contributions they could make to the organization that would justify our placing confidence in them. If the potential employees were successful in convincing the managers that they could make valuable contributions, we hired them. Communication played a major role in determining how successful these college graduates became.

In most organizations, communication skills play a major role in helping individuals advance to positions of greater responsibility. They will be asked to do the following:

- * Write business proposals and make oral presentations.
- * Write position papers and make oral presentations.
- * Respond in writing and in person to customer requests.
- * Evaluate products and services both in writing and orally.
- * Write technical papers and make oral presentations within the industry.

Most people do not realize how much excellent staff work tends to accelerate advancement opportunities and completed staff study is valued. This type of study includes evaluation of data and recommendations of possible courses of action to management. The difference between success and failure will often be determined by the preparer's ability to communicate ideas effectively in writing and orally.

Next time your students appear to be indifferent about writing research papers, answering essay examinations, or making oral presentations, remind them that they are "writing for dollars" and "speaking for dollars."

Techno-Writing

DISTANT DISCUSSIONS IN THE HIGH-TECH CLASSROOM

Dr. Steven Cuvelier
Associate Professor
College of Criminal Justice

Computer competency is rapidly increasing among our students, but a wide range of skill levels still exists. A learning-centered course format is often an effective method of addressing diverse competency levels, but with independent study comes the risk of isolation and the lost value of a shared learning experience. A lack of technical skills among students can further add to the sense of frustration and alienation whether the course is conducted in a traditional, distant, or virtual classroom.

The need to be separate but together underscores the irony of today's "reinvented" government, or "reengineered" corporation. People are expected to work independently but function as a team; teams focus on specific tasks but must cooperate to support the goals of the larger organization.

One communication link for the high-tech classroom is a discussion group created on the World Wide Web. This group reinforces a sense of community by providing a forum for students to ask questions, supply answers, and announce interesting discoveries made during their learning experiences. All messages are available to all students, who in turn have the ability to post replies to specific messages or start new lines of discussion known as

"threads." Breaking the habit of silence among students in the virtual classroom has not been easy, but I find these groups generate more participation from more students than traditional face-to-face class discussions, especially when credit is assigned.

I base class participation credit on the number of postings and number of words. One point is assigned for each message posted, and an additional point is assigned for each fifty words written. Averaging sixty words per message, a student who contributed three times per week (about forty-five messages during the semester), would score ninety-nine class participation points. A letter grade is computed as a percentage of the maximum of one hundred points for the course. For example, a student posting forty messages (40 points) averaging sixty words (1.2 points each), would score $40 + (40 \times 1.2)$ or eighty-eight points. Eighty-eight points translate into eighty-eight percent of one hundred points, a high B.

Counting entries and words need not be tedious.

Technology enables most assessment processes to be automated. The Microsoft FrontPage software, for example, saves entries in a single text file. The instructor can download the file from the server and import it into a data manager, such as Microsoft Access, where the writer's name, the message, and time/date stamp can be captured in appropriate fields. With a little programming, duplicate entries can be eliminated, and the number of entries and words counted. A quick scan of a writer's contributions can usually screen messages inconsistent with course objectives so relatively little time is required to assess this material. Grading may be further simplified by not



distinguishing among questions, answers, or observations. Questions tend to be shorter than either answers or observations, so responding to a question or making an observation has a built-in bonus.

This assignment has certain advantages in encouraging students to get involved. We often include class participation as part of the course grade; however, students may not know exactly how much they must contribute to score well. The explicit nature of the course credit accumulated from discussion lists brings a tangible reality to class participation. Even the more timid students feel compelled to participate when they know they must earn course credit. Students can get hooked on the interactive element of Web communication, frequently moving far beyond course requirements. One student stated, "Start for the credit; stay for the fun."

While time for discussions on the Web is limitless, class time is not. Not all students may have the opportunity to participate in class, but not so on the Web. Also, many students report feeling less self-conscious "speaking" on the Web, so voices we may not hear in class may be "heard" through this technique.

Web discussions are not a panacea, however, as they address only one mode of written communication and tend to lapse into short bursts of non-edited, poorly composed, chatty, write-as-you-talk expressions. Instructors need to be quite explicit as to what is expected in an acceptable message. Establishing a rubric that is simple, clear, and easily applied by students as well as the instructor will help maintain acceptable course standards. Grading Web entries can become an overwhelming task if there is too much detail or complexity in the evaluation system.

When properly structured, Web discussions can provide an inviting writing experience for students while maintaining a manageable workload for instructors. Students can keep writing, thinking, and forming communal bonds, whether they are on campus or around the world.



**The Department of Library Science
Sam Houston State University**

**16th Annual
Children's Literature Festival
for Librarians and Educators**

Saturday, March 14, 1998
8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Attend activities such as workshops on a variety of topics, autographing sessions, and book exhibits, as well as hear these authors speak:

**Berthe Amoss
Tony Johnston
Steven Kellogg
Peggy Rathmann**

The cost is \$60. For additional information and registration forms contact:

Dr. Mary Berry
Festival Coordinator
Department of Library Science
Sam Houston State University
PO Box 2236
Huntsville, Texas 77341-2236
phone (409) 294-1150
fax (409) 294-1153

Idea Exchange

GIVING THE GIFT OF WRITING: A STICKY SUBJECT

Dr. James W. Gibson
Students' Legal Advisor
Adjunct Professor of Law

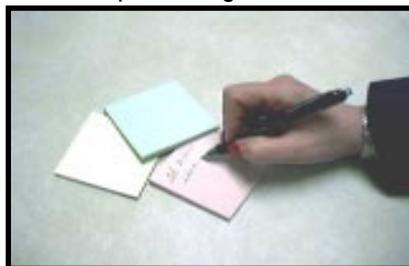
Do your holiday shopping early and give the gift of writing to your students. There is no better gift for their future. President Marks was asked in an interview for the *Houstonian* on June 23, 1997 what he felt was the most valuable trait an individual could possess. His answer was not surprising. He said, "If I had to pick one single trait, probably good communication skills because if you are not good at communicating verbally and in written form, it will certainly hold you back professionally. If you can't communicate well, and I am



talking about both the sending and receiving end . . . it lowers your quality of life." The ability to communicate in the written form is a gift which will increase a student's self-esteem, enhance the quality of all our lives, and lives past a lifetime. Encouraging students to write in our classes is planting the seed for their future

prosperity. An awareness of one's ability to capture ideas and concepts, shape these into words and phrases, then see the results on paper is awesome to students. Usually such awareness will conquer a student's fear of writing. However, students need our help and encouragement along with a written assignment.

Many of my students initially enter class with tremendous fears about their writing ability. I feel this is harbored and perpetuated by a lack of knowledge concerning some simple writing tools or



mechanics. In addition, students are embarrassed to admit these fears, and will hide their inability at all costs. The most serious long-term cost is electing not to take a writing-enhanced course. In my view, we must resolve this problem or at a minimum we must try. Our main job as educators is to prepare students for success in an ever-increasing, fast-paced, new information age. A premium will be paid for the assembly and distribution of information which is put together in new ways. We do our job well when we allow students the opportunity to think, process, and form ideas into

concepts. No longer can we wait until the masters level to begin this process in earnest.

In order to accomplish our task, we must make a conscious effort to shift out of the "scantronization" paradigm and into what I call the "stickynization" paradigm. Making



this shift is not as hard as it may appear at first glance. The modern technology which brought us scantrons also brought us sticky pads. This marvelous, accidental invention can be the key to activating student writing and learning. Simply ask students to summarize what they read in a paragraph on a sticky pad and stick it on the paragraph. This exercise helps students focus on actually reading, analyzing, and understanding instead of just assuming that they have comprehended the paragraph's essence. This technique can be a form of behavior modification too. Writing on the sticky pad initiates the new action to be taken, and attaching the sticky pad to the text provides instant feedback for success. These new actions also demand that the student actively participate in learning. Soon students are transferring

information from their brain to the sticky pads. Once the sticky pads are completed, they can be organized into a logical order for class or the first draft of a written assignment. Sticky pad notes can also be placed alongside class notes and integrated for exam purposes.

The beauty of using the sticky pads is getting back to the “old days” when students only had 3x5 cards to use in their research and writing. However, the sticky pads have an advantage because they are already color coded and come in various sizes which better fit textbooks, periodicals, or other reading materials. Students find the “stickynization” method a novel and interesting way to write papers or prepare essay tests. Additionally, it saves students time and effort because they do not need to refer back to highlighted text material. I suggest this method to all my students, and I find the majority feel relieved to know this simple tool for making writing easier. Most of us have used a similar procedure for years, but we might think it is too simplistic for our students. On the contrary, the KISS method, or “Keep It Simple for Students” method, is a real winner. Give a lasting gift to students. Give them sticky pads and you will be giving them a true tool for writing. They will thank you for years to come, or until they accidentally come up with a better tool.

PEOPLE BUILDERS EXTRAORDINAIRE

Dr. Art Hughes
Associate Professor
Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

We seek
to embolden,
yes, empower,
dynamic,
quest enticing
teachers
talented with
consecrated insight
and eloquence
to make
each available
moment
of every day
exciting,
alive, and fruitful
for each student
in their charge.

Truly,
we strive
to be
people builders
'extraordinaire.'



CHOOSING THE BEST: WAC IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Dr. Frieda Koeninger
Assistant Professor
Department of English and Foreign Languages

During the twentieth century, faculty members who teach foreign languages have adopted various innovative methodologies. Each strategy has advantages and drawbacks, and teachers must choose, analyzing the insights of others and adapting techniques for their particular classrooms. As a “chooser,” I enjoy learning about creative pedagogical approaches and incorporating them into my methods repertoire for the Spanish classroom. Therefore, I have gleaned many useful approaches from our Across-the-University Writing Program workshops and retreats.

Angela Williams and Barbara Walvoord, retreat speakers, have urged participants to involve students in the learning process. Writing is a useful tool to promote involvement because it uses eye, mind and hand, and both the right and left sides of the brain. With this in mind, I use writing in the beginning course to make learning more active, to allow students to apply what they have learned after they have practiced orally. Also, I evaluate their progress. For instance, students might complete a simple writing exercise about a concept that I have just begun to explain.

As they progress, I use more open-ended written exercises. In my basic classes, major evaluations always included a writing component. I usually base questions on a drawing which creates a context and encourages the student to use the language for a certain function. Plus, I alternate written and oral communication activities by using a

pair arrangement. Oral practice helps students develop confidence and fluidity. The drawback is that it is not always possible or desirable to correct their errors while they are speaking because it can be intimidating and frustrating. Writing is useful at all stages to monitor students' progress closely. For example, I have students write down answers that they have just practiced orally with a partner and have them check each others' written version to detect misunderstanding before errors are "fossilized."

In my more advanced courses, I strive for a balance between written and oral exercises. In order to stimulate discussion in conversation classes or about readings in the literature classes, I ask students to write their thoughts first. Next, they read each others' comments, trying to grasp the main ideas without correcting any mistakes. Finally the discussion begins. I find that this method helps involve people who would otherwise not dare to speak.

Within the Spanish composition classes, I use speaking activities that parallel the various compositions that we are developing. For example, in class a student practices telling several classmates about an incident from last summer, and listens to the versions of others. Each pair spends about five minutes together. Then everyone begins writing a rough draft of the narration while still in class. Outside the classroom, they elaborate more on the chosen incident. We begin by working on stimulation of ideas and general organization. In later drafts, we focus on details, detecting specific areas that need to be studied and relearned in order to enhance accuracy in the language.

With more advanced students, I try to stimulate the use of more sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical constructions. I often marvel at my students' papers and attribute much of their accomplishments to my improvement in designing writing assignments because of the writing workshops. I hope that my students will realize from their experience in my Spanish classroom that writing is an important and interesting part of their lives, not just a subject taught in English classes.



THE "IS RUSH RIGHT" HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

**Dr. Frank Fair
Professor**

Department of Psychology and Philosophy

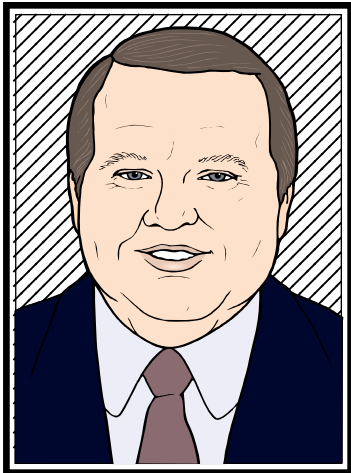
I teach Philosophy 262, Critical Thinking, a course designed to encourage critical thinking in a variety of areas, including analyzing the media. In this connection, I have had fun with a homework assignment involving that "round mound of conservative sound," Rush Limbaugh. The assignment was prompted by my receiving a copy of *The Way Things Aren't: Rush Limbaugh's Reign of Error*, from a group called Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). The critics from FAIR contrasted Rush's version of the truth point-by-point with "reality"—or at least their version of it. I wondered if I could devise an assignment for reading the book which would encourage a critical attitude both toward the deliverances of media personalities and also toward their critics.

The way I structure homework assignments is to reward consistent, good faith effort. Each assignment done on time earns two points credit, and an equal number of points is subtracted for late or unacceptable assignments. During the semester, there will be between fifteen to twenty-five assignments, so the credit can become a significant part of the student's final grade—even though any one assignment does not count that much. However, because the Rush Limbaugh assignment would take

more time and effort, it had to be worth more and the students had to have a long lead time for it.

Therefore, I explained the assignment the first class day and gave students the following instructions:

- a) Read the Rendall et al. book, *The Way Things Aren't: Rush Limbaugh's Reign of Error*.
- b) Pick one of Limbaugh's assertions and the corresponding critique as the focus of your work. You will be critically evaluating both the assertion and the critique.
- c) Before beginning the body of the assignment, tell me which assertion you have selected since I wish to avoid overlap among the class members' assignments.
- d) Check the quotation's accuracy—did Limbaugh really say it and mean it seriously—and check the critique's accuracy. Describe the process you used to check both in enough detail so that someone else could do the same.



- e) Assuming that the authors are correct about the bulk of the inaccuracies they cite and taking account of what you have found from other sources you wish to consult, write two arguments: one which concludes that Limbaugh's inaccuracies are a serious matter and another which concludes that they are not serious. Make these arguments strong, while not departing from the facts as you understand them. You do not have to believe either of these arguments yourself. The point is to explore whether there might be two sides to this question.
- f) Finally, make your own argument about Limbaugh's accuracy and its importance or unimportance. Note that you could argue for example 1) that he is generally accurate and that his being so is important,

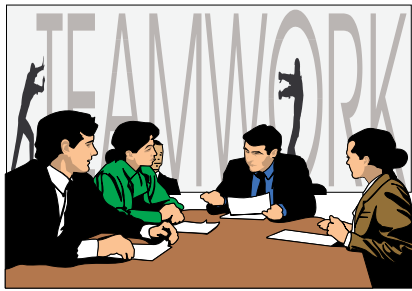
2) that he is generally accurate, but his being so is not important, 3) that he has promulgated a large number of inaccuracies and that this is serious, or 4) that he has promulgated some inaccuracies, but it is not a serious matter.

g) The point of this assignment is to evaluate critically an influential media source and his critics. There is no predetermined outcome to this inquiry; the focus is on the process of checking for accuracy and evaluating the relative importance of the assertions in a larger scheme.

The assignment results were better than I had expected. The majority of the students took it seriously, and some made strenuous efforts to verify the Limbaugh quote and to find out what "reality" was. They also thoughtfully explained their stance on whether the inaccuracies they confirmed were important or trivial. Some students noted that Rush had a considerable influence on their family members; others were happy to have "ammunition" to reply to "ditto heads" of their acquaintance. While most criticized Limbaugh's cavalier treatment of facts, several defended him as an entertainer for whom to err is, after all, only part of show business.

I liked this assignment because of the critical thinking tasks it presented and for the attitude that it encouraged. Fact checking, presenting pro and con arguments, and, in general, actively evaluating an information source are tasks which are obviously relevant to critical thinking. The fact that the students were to scrutinize the critic's comments, as well as Limbaugh's, helped encourage the attitude that anyone can be mistaken and all sources need to be evaluated.

This assignment can be adapted for use in any area where there are controversies—at least when those controversies are based in part on some differences of opinion about what the facts are. Students can identify a "factual" claim about which the two parties disagree, describe their research which corroborates or challenges the claim, and argue about how significant the claim's accuracy is in relation to the controversy. Give students enough incentive and enough lead time, and my experience shows that you are likely to be pleased with the results.



COOPERATIVE LEARNING GROUPS: HOW DO YOU USE THEM?

Ms. Vickie Mitchell
Lecturer
Department of Language,
Literacy, and Special
Populations

Cooperative groups enhance learning through the interactive participation of students. The groups are utilized to introduce content material, critique written and oral work, and assist in formative and summative evaluations. Each student has the responsibility to learn the information and to support other team members' learning. That fact, alone, empowers the student to take more responsibility in facilitating learning in the classroom and changing the traditional role of the "college lecturer."

To incorporate grouping for instruction, the first decision to make concerns the size and makeup of the group. According to Johnson and Johnson (1994), groups can be organized according to size, mixed abilities, age, experience, and student needs. The older and more mature the group of students, the more members the group may have.

Typically, groups range in size from two to six students, commonly referred to as teams. Although teams should not keep the same membership indefinitely, cooperative learning experts recommend a minimum of two to three weeks so that team members learn to work together effectively. College instructors may want to use designated exam periods within the semester as change points.

One weakness of using learning groups is the failure to provide students with a structure of how to operate effectively and efficiently. Johnson and Johnson (1994) and Slavin (1994) recommend team roles. The "leader" gets the team started and facilitates the progress. The "recorder" writes the minutes of the meetings, while the "monitor" watches the clock, and the "encourager" makes sure everyone participates. It is useful to have team members rotate roles in order to utilize the strengths of the team. Grading time can be reduced by quizzing members during the process or upon completion of the work. The minutes of the "recorder" can be used as the group report, and the teams can score each other by using a rubric with grading criteria.

If you would like more information about using groups as a learning tool, see the research of Johnson and Johnson and Slavin on cooperative learning. *Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines*, by Andrew Moss and Carol Holder, provides tips on the use of group work with writing assignments.

Johnson, D. W. and R. T. Johnson. *Learning Together and Alone*. 4th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994.

Moss, Andrew and Carol Holder. *Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1988.

Slavin, R. E. *Cooperative Learning*. 2d ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994.



**Fiction Writers, Poets,
Playwrights, Essayists,
Students, Faculty, Huntsville
Community Members**

**The Sam Houston State University
Writers' Forum Invites Your
Participation!**

The Writers' Forum discusses, engages, and celebrates all forms of writing. In weekly workshop sessions, authors of fiction, poetry, drama, and essays can share finished pieces and works-in-progress with other writers and exchange constructive criticism, encouragement, and suggestions about publication possibilities.

The group also features lectures, readings, and an annual review, *Third Story Presents*.

For further information, contact:

**Megan Thompson at 295-5694
or Dr. Paul Child at 294-1412.**

RESEARCH PROJECT: WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN AGRICULTURE

Dr. Barbara J. Ward and Dr. Sudeep Vyapari
Assistant Professors
Department of Agricultural Sciences

In fall 1997, we proposed a research study to evaluate and chronicle student and faculty attitudes regarding writing across the curriculum (WAC) in agriculture. Thirteen faculty members in the Sam Houston State Department of Agricultural Sciences instruct our five hundred majors in the following areas: animal science, agricultural business, horticulture and crop science, general agriculture, and agricultural mechanization. Due to the diversity in emphasis areas, the faculty use a variety of practical writing assignments that bridge the gap between academic experiences and the outside world. We prepare our students for highly diverse career opportunities in teaching, industry, university extension, business management, entrepreneurship, and production agriculture. To meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, our graduates need to communicate effectively to laypersons and agricultural professionals alike. These two audiences require very different writing styles and we, as faculty, are challenged to provide appropriate training for our students.

To develop an effective WAC program in agricultural-based curricula, many researchers believe that greater emphasis should be placed on expressive writing rather than formal, transactional writing (Britton, 1975, 11-18). Expressive writing is defined as “thinking on paper” as opposed to the “reader-based” transactional writing which is intended for peers and colleagues. Unlike the standard, formal English of transactional writing that often follows a specific format, expressive writing is “workday” writing. Examples of this type of informal and conventional writing include journals, diaries, drafts, newsletters, and letters (Tchudi, 1986).

The objectives of our study are to conduct attitudinal surveys of students and faculty regarding writing assignments and to assess the current skills of our agriculture majors by evaluating their writing samples. The first objective will be accomplished through conducting both student and faculty attitudinal surveys in fall 1997 and again at the end of the spring 1998 semester. Survey responses will be recorded on a Likert-type scale. In addition to questionnaires, a random sample of students and faculty will be selected for personal interviews to provide detailed responses and to answer open-ended questions. Responses will help measure perceptions of changes in behavior, aspirations to improve writing ability, and attitudes about the techniques used in their courses.

A volunteer faculty team will holistically evaluate the students' writing samples. Data to be correlated with survey results will include pre and post-test scores, type of writing assignments completed in a semester, and course enrollment data. Level of improvement will be quantified and related to type and intensity of writing assignments completed during the testing period. Type of assignments and intensity will be identified through faculty interviews and course syllabi.

Based on the data obtained in this study, guidelines for writing assignments that improve students' abilities can be made to all agriculture programs. We, in the Department of Agricultural Sciences, are interested in assuming an active role in improving our students' writing skills and their comprehension of agricultural subject matter. As a member of the Agricultural Consortium of Texas, our department will serve as a role model for agricultural programs across the state. In addition, we will aid other Sam Houston State departments interested in incorporating writing skills.

Britton, J. *The Development of Writing Abilities*. London: Macmillian Education Press, 1975.

Tchudi, S. *Teaching Writing in the Content Areas: College Level*. Washington D.C.: National Education Association, 1986.

FACULTY RESEARCH INITIATIVES

Patricia Williams

Director

Across-the-University Writing Program

Are you interested in conducting research in your classes? Do you want to know more about your students' writing abilities and assignments that work? Are you seeking avenues for publishing and presenting your research? If so, you might want to join the Assessment Strategies Committee, an informal group open to all faculty. The Across-the-University Writing Program Committee and other colleagues in the four colleges have had monthly meetings to discuss research issues. Anyone interested in giving and receiving feedback concerning projects may join. We intend to publish our findings in a monograph which will be sent to the Sam Houston State University faculty and writing center directors across the nation. In addition, we hope to present papers at the Fourth Writing Across the Curriculum Conference to be held at Cornell University on June 2-5, 1999.

Various colleagues have already written proposals, and several studies will begin this semester. For instance, Dr. Barbara Ward and Dr. Sudeep Vyapari will distribute an attitudinal survey and collect writing samples from students who are majoring in agriculture. They will then have colleagues analyze the samples to ascertain whether or not students' writing has improved. Vickie Mitchell will send questionnaires to practitioners in the special education field to discover the types of writing these individuals do on a daily basis. Afterwards, she will compare these results with the types of assignments that students complete. And, Dr. Art Hughes will invite principals and personnel directors to evaluate portfolios created in teacher education classes. He wants to know what potential employers expect in these documents. Other valuable projects include Dr. Steven Cuvelier's study concerning writing, distance learning, and criminal justice classes and Dr. Diane Dowdey's questionnaire about the types of writing that are occurring in SHSU classes.

If you are interested in joining this committee, please

contact Patricia Williams at (409) 294-1143. Our next meeting will be held in the Teacher Education Center, room 319L, at 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, January 29.

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES COMMITTEE

WHO: Open to all interested faculty, graduate students, and community members

WHAT: Informal meetings to discuss research projects dealing with writing
Group members give and receive feedback about research projects, proposals, and plans.

WHEN: Monthly, one-hour meetings
The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 29, at 3:00 p.m.

WHERE: Teacher Education Center, room 319L

WHY: To develop worthwhile research projects that help us assess our classes and the Across-the-University Writing Program

For more information, please contact:

Patricia Williams

Director

Across-the-University Writing Program

Frels, Room 213

Sam Houston State University

Huntsville, Texas 77341

(409) 294-1143

Student Writing

A+

EFFECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION TECHNIQUES

Hunter Hauk
Honors Program Student
Journalism Major

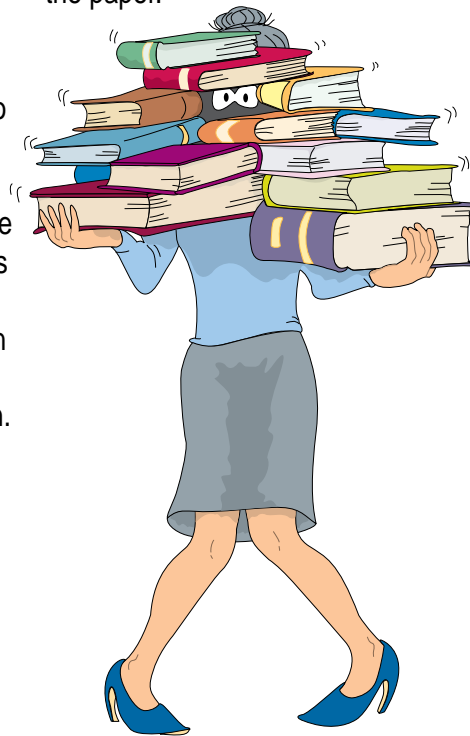
When students begin taking core curriculum courses, certain skills become important in determining their level of success. The ability to write effectively is at the top of that list, and it is just as much the responsibility of the professor as the students to make sure that students become proficient writers. A professor can help students grow in their writing skills through the types of assignments and feedback given. During a recent Across-the-University Writing Program workshop, a panel of honors students met with faculty members to discuss assignments that have been most helpful.

Eve Stephens, a senior criminal justice major, addressed the subject of research papers and projects. She stated that most students dread working on research papers because there are so many strict requirements. To eliminate this problem, Stephens recommended a step-by-step strategy for assigning and grading research projects so that students are not so overwhelmed.

Her steps to making an assignment

effective are as follows:

- Once the paper is assigned, schedule a time to talk with individuals. Students find verbal communication helpful, and this discussion often leads to a brainstorming session about more ideas to incorporate. It also gives the teacher an understanding of what the student is focusing on in the paper.



The professor might then give suggestions for reorganizing or thinking about a subject in a different way.

- Always have students write rough drafts and turn them in before the final is due. Then, review the papers and make written comments. To avoid general or broad comments that tell students nothing, type comments as you read through the draft and number the comments to

correspond with numbers that you write in the paper. This way students can actually read each section and turn to the comment page to see how to improve.

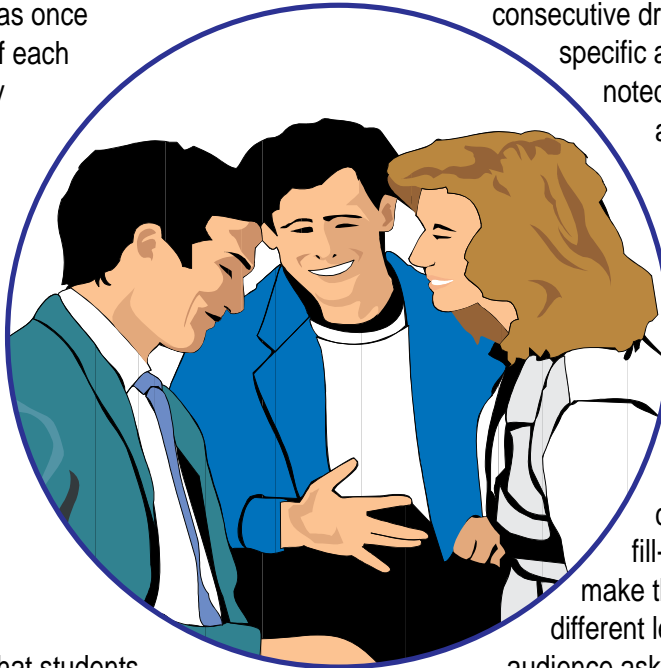
- After giving students time to revise the drafts, collect the final papers, and grade them based on requirements explained at the beginning of the process. Make sure that students know the difference in an "A" and a "B" paper, based on the assignment's criteria. When students understand the grading system, they will accept their grades.

Stephens added that her best research projects have been in smaller classes where professors have met with her periodically and followed her through the writing process. Junior journalism major Hunter Hauk added that the biggest problem most students face in writing research papers is not having enough guidance.

Hauk then expressed ideas to make writing more fun and less stressful. For instance, he commented that a series of formal essays can help students develop writing skills as much as any one research paper. To aid students, he suggested that professors require students to write three-to-four page essays related to class discussions. Inviting students to research the topic, form their own opinions, and use real-life examples makes these assignments interesting. With

each essay, professors can give detailed comments as to how students can better state and support points. With this method, professors will see students' writing improve with each assignment. The primary goal is for students to learn more, so having a series of assignments rather than just one large one works well.

Along with formal essays, Hauk encouraged using journals to help students gain confidence and receive constant feedback. Entries can be one-to-two pages and due frequently, such as once every week. At the end of each class, teachers can briefly discuss the next journal assignment. An example of a worthwhile journal assignment might be to pretend to be a character in any story the class has read, and explain how your presence would change the outcome. These assignments help students be creative and enjoy writing.



Next, Hauk emphasized that students can turn in assignments by electronic mail. He noted that a large number of students cannot and do not use computer technology. To introduce this communication form, he stated that professors might require students to do e-mail and Internet searches in completing journal entries or formal essays. Hauk ended by stating that a student can produce a much better research paper by combining formal and informal essays that were written on a particular topic.

Sophomore academic studies major Constance Plant introduced the idea of using group writing assignments. She said that often students become confident about their skills when they divide the work and plan together. Also, she mentioned grading suggestions that a professor may consider when evaluating a student's performance.

- The grade should be written on the final

page of the paper or project. Many students will then read the comments first, so that they have an understanding of how the professor determined the particular point value. Along with the grade, Plant recommended that a few final comments be made about the overall paper. A breakdown of the grade is helpful to indicate where points were lost. If students only receive a number at the top of the page, they do not know how to interpret the evaluation.

- Comments at the end of papers may consist of thoughts about progress, praise for improving the consecutive drafts, and ways to enhance specific areas in the future. She noted, and the other panelist agreed, that students want to hear what they did right, as well as suggestions concerning how to change their work.

Near the end of the panel presentation, Plant discussed how tests can be generated by combining multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essays to make them more balanced for different learning styles. The audience asked many questions and stated that the points provided insight into student wants and needs. Professors need feedback as much as students do, particularly in the way they give assignments. They can help students hone their skills and make writing assignments worthwhile learning experiences.

(Hunter Hauk, a junior journalism major, Eve Stephens, a senior criminal justice major, and Constance Plant, a sophomore academic studies major, are members of the Sam Houston State University Honors Program and Orange Keys, the official hosts and hostesses for the school. Hunter is also the former editor of the *Houstonian*, and he has written numerous articles for the newspaper this semester. The Across-the-University Writing Program Committee sponsored the November 12 panel discussion.)

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