

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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"Pull Over, Buddy. It's the Grammar Police": Dispelling Myths about Grammar in the Writing Intensive Curriculum by Vicki Collins

Pre/Views by Vicki Collins

You're Invited

This issue of *Teaching With Writing* is about invitations. The first invitation is to alums of the WIC faculty seminar. If you are interested in expanding your knowledge of issues related to teaching with writing, look on page 4 for the announcement of the first Advanced WIC Seminar, to be offered during Winter term. Department chairs are invited to nominate faculty starting immediately.

The feature article in this issue, "Pull Over, Buddy. It's the Grammar Police," invites teachers to update their view of grammar and correctness in student writing: to trade in their red pens for a pencil and to shorten their grading time by putting the responsibility for correctness back where it belongs--on the students.

"Student Evaluators Suggest Ways to Improve Writing Assignments," on page 3, describes how Cheryl Jordan and Leslie Burns (AIHM) invited students to evaluate their department's WIC writing assignments and suggest ways to improve them. This student feedback serves as an invitation for all of us to rethink and clarify our writing assignments.

Indeed each writing assignment we make can be an invitation to our students to become better writers and to join the community of those who make and discover meaning through writing.

Years ago a colleague sent me a satiric article (whose title I have co-opted above) suggesting the formation of a band of rogue grammarians whose task is to go around the community issuing citations to perpetrators of annoying grammatical errors in the public domain, like the peculiarly possessive doormat at the residence of Mr. Smith which reads "The Smith's" or that unsettling irony on the restaurant menu: Our fish is "fresh." (So it's not fresh?). Or the pizza truck that proclaims "We Deliver" (if they feel like it?). Or even the sign in the produce section of the grocery store for Brussel (rather than Brussels) Sprouts.

It seems that many OSU faculty members believe that agreeing to teach a writing intensive course places them immediately in the ranks of the Grammar Police. In fact, in the WIC faculty seminar I call grammar "the hairy monster under the table" because faculty feelings about grammar are so strong that the "hairy monster" will dominate our discussions until we deal with grammar's place in the teaching of writing.

Faculty may have this obsession because many of us remember teachers who returned our papers with only two kinds of marks: the grade and the red marks to indicate errors. So we formed the unspoken assumption that what writing teachers do is assign grades and mark mechanical errors, and further, that anyone who teaches writing must be an expert in grammar, an undertaking which seems particularly overwhelming in light of the

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error-filled writing of our students.

One of my tasks as WIC director is to persuade faculty that student writing can improve without the teacher becoming Conan the Grammarian.

First, there is more to good writing than correctness. Please note: I am not saying correctness does not matter. We all know that it does, both in the academy and in what our students like to call "the real world." When I teach engineering writing, for example, I tell students that they can be the most technically brilliant engineers in America, but if they present their ideas to a prospective client in writing that is full of errors, people will think they don't know what they are doing.

Nevertheless, editing for correctness should come fairly late in the writing process. Good writing first requires that students analyze the situation and audience for whom they are writing, generate interesting ideas, organize their ideas coherently, support their points with proof that will be convincing to the audience, select the most effective format for presenting their ideas, and generate drafts. **Then** they can worry about grammar. Content precedes correctness.

The second thing I say to WIC teachers about spending countless hours laboriously correcting every grammatical error in student papers is that they are wasting their time. Research in composition shows that students do not eliminate errors in their writing in response to teachers marking and labeling every error. So am I saying ignore errors? Not at all.

Composition scholar Richard Haswell suggests that minimally marking mistakes with just a check in the right hand margin by each line that contains an error is more effective than correcting every error. The check mark places the responsibility for correcting the error where it belongs: on

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the student. Haswell's research showed that even college freshmen were able to correct between 60 and 70 per cent of their own errors when he just puts a check in the margin. Of course they must be required to make corrections, or the checks are likely to be ignored. (Students may need to purchase a grammar handbook to assist them.) Haswell says, "The ultimate value of this method for me is that it relegates what I consider a minor aspect of the course to a minor role in time spent on marking and in class, while at least maintaining and probably increasing the rate of improvement... Crudely put, less work for the teacher, more gain for the student."

A third suggestion is to abandon the red pen for responding to student writing. I have made a philosophical decision to respond to student writing in pencil. Pencilled comments do not seem to take over the student's text. I want students to own their own writing. Pencil is the least intrusive medium possible for teacher response. I tell students that they are welcome to erase my marks if they want to. The text belongs to them. Pencil also offers me the chance to revise or erase marks or comments on student papers.

In *Writing For Teachers* (WR 411, 511), students write narratives of their early experiences as writers. We cannot underestimate the damage that has been done to student writers by well-meaning teachers with overly active red pens. Furthermore, we all know that not all owners of red pens are well-meaning: some are angry and vindictive. To students, a paper full of red marks says "Loser." Students become better writers when they want to write. Students who feel like losers often stop trying.

A final point I want to make about overemphasis on correctness is what I will call correctness' double-edged sword. A professor of business

Latest WIC Grant Results

Student Evaluators Suggest Ways to Improve Writing Assignments

Funded by a WIC Grant, two undergraduate students and one graduate student were hired by the Department of Apparel, Interiors, Housing, and Merchandising to assess the effectiveness of WAC assignments in four "core" merchandising courses. The following feedback comes from a presentation by Cheryl Jordan and Leslie Davis Burns at the 1994 annual meeting of the International Textile and Apparel Association.

General Feedback from Student Evaluators:

How we, as faculty, might assist students in overcoming procrastination in starting a formal writing assignment:

- use in-class activities early in the term that relate to the assignment
- have a small part of the assignment due early in the term or parts due throughout the term
- in classes requiring group projects, require a contract outlining the responsibilities of each group member which is due early in the term
- emphasize in class the importance of following the timetable provided in the guidelines; remind students what they should have accomplished by certain dates
- have students write short a short paragraph about their progress on the formal writing assignment and their goals for the coming week regarding the assignment

How the directions for completing a project could be made more meaningful for students:

- the format of the directions should be concise and easy to grasp
- use bullets to outline the parts of the assignment or specific expectations are helpful
- a general or week-by-week timetable for completing the assignment is very helpful

What types of evaluation sheets are helpful:

- grading criteria and instructor expectations should be included in the guidelines
- some students prefer expectations for A-C-or-F papers whereas other students prefer outlines general expectations without reference to grades

Suggestions for obtaining constructive criticism from other students regarding course presentation and assignments:

- at the end of the term, have students write a hypothetical letter to future students with advice on how to successfully complete this project. This provides valuable feedback, not only to students in future classes, but also to you, the instructor, in gaining the student's perspective on the course or project
- have small groups of students (almost in a focus group type format) respond to 2 or 3 questions about the course or project

IDEAS FOR WRITING-TO-LEARN

The following strategies are suggestions for group and collaborative learning adapted from The Learning Professor 8:5 May 1994.

Think-Pair Share: Students, after being given at least a minute to develop a response to a question (time can also be spent writing), share re-

sponse with a partner. They can then join two others in a "four-person learning team," a larger group, and finally the class for further discussion. **Roundtable:** Students take turns writing on a pad of paper, sharing their ideas outloud as they write. The pad circulates as more information is added and the topic discussed.

Winter Term Advanced WIC Faculty Seminar

January 18, 25 and February 8, 15, 22

Topics to include:

More Writing-to-Learn; Collaborative Writing Projects; ESL Students in WIC Courses; Student Writers as Professionals-in-Training.

Prerequisite:

Faculty enrolling in the Advanced Seminar must have completed the introductory WIC Seminar and have some experience using WIC approaches in the classroom.

Department Chairs and heads are asked to nominate a maximum of one faculty member during pre-registration. If space remains, one additional nomination can be made during open registration.

Honorarium upon completion of seminar.

Seminar is limited to 18 participants

Pre-Registration Nov. 17 - Dec. 3

Open Registration Jan. 2 - 10

Nominations to Sandra Mills 125 Waldo or
MillsS@CLA.ORST.EDU

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management at another university said that his faculty had come to realize that a fixation on grammar and correctness creates a perceptual barrier to seeing student papers as they are. On the one hand, he said, when he reads a paper that is full of grammatical errors, it makes him so angry that he almost can't see any positive content in the answer. The flip side of that is what he calls the halo effect of the grammatically correct paper. When he gets to an essay that is free of mechanical errors and flows well, a sort of halo effect persuades him that the student also knows the content. Recent training

in evaluating student writing has shown him that some of these papers he previously saw as outstanding really had serious content problems despite the "flow" of the writing.

So to summarize my response to the charge that a WIC teacher must become the grammar police: remember that grammatical correctness is not the only attribute of good writing, that minimal marking of errors may be more effective than massive marking, that the over-active red pen can do more harm than good, and that fixation on correctness can cause us to mis-evaluate the content of student writing.

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