

# TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER  
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## Pre/Views by Vicki Collins

### WIC and the Baccalaureate Core

One purpose of August Baunach's featured interview with OSU Director of Undergraduate Academic Programs Bruce Shepard was to clarify the role of writing intensive courses in the Baccalaureate Core. Shepard told Baunach: "Whether or not we can actually provide an upper division, integrative experience with a significant writing component within the major will determine whether we really have a noteworthy baccalaureate core or just another mundane set of general education requirements."

Shepard is right. But I believe that the OSU program is significant not only because there is an integrative writing component, but also because the writing component is far more than a product-centered technical writing assignment. WIC courses offer students not only formal graded writing assignments,  
**PRE/VEWS**—continued on page 2

### WIC and the Baccalaureate Core

## An Interview with Bruce Shepard

by August Baunach—HstS doctoral student

*As Director of Undergraduate Academic Programs at OSU, Dr. Bruce Shepard and his office staff are responsible for implementing changes in OSU's baccalaureate core requirements—changes mandated by the OSU Faculty Senate and the Senate's Baccalaureate Core Committee (BCC). Shepard's office works with administrators, academic departments, and deans to insure that the appropriate courses are available for students to take to graduate. Recently Shepard spoke with us about gauging the success of changes in OSU's baccalaureate core and the importance of writing intensive curriculum (WIC).*

**WIC:** The baccalaureate core—or the general education requirements necessary to obtain a baccalaureate degree from OSU—underwent a fundamental change beginning in 1987, and the changes continue to this day. What were the reasons for beginning this process?

**Shepard:** Prior to 1987, OSU had a general education requirement that set certain hours in broad areas, like the humanities, social sciences and sciences. Colleges decided independently which of their courses satisfied  
**SHEPARD**—continued on page 5

but also ungraded or minimally graded experiences in which they are writing to learn course content.

Another distinctive aspect of any WIC course is that the students are able to experience the writing process from within their major and receive support from peers and professors engaged in similar writing projects. Faculty members proposing WIC courses must demonstrate that students will receive feedback on drafts of formal assignments from peers and/or the instructor and have opportunities to re-think and revise their writing.

Also, the *amount* of writing students do in WIC courses is impressive. To qualify for WIC, a course must require of each student at least 5,000 words of writing (including ungraded writing and drafts). In fact, in some WIC courses student assignments far exceed the 5,000 word requirement. Recently I asked a science professor teaching a WIC course if his students would write at least 5,000 words. He replied, "It's more like 10,000."

WIC faculty often wonder how—beyond reading drafts of writing assignments—a teacher can actively support students in the writing process without unreasonably increasing the teaching workload. One way is for the teacher to analyze the skills necessary for a successful major project and then use informal, ungraded writing assignments to help students practice those skills (*see sidebar below*).

These informal writing assignments are based on the notion that students become better at things they practice. In Baunach's interview with three science editors, Sea Grant editor Sandy Ridlington makes the point that with practice her graduate students in MMR 525A become better at responding to one another's writing. Students learn that few writers in the real world function alone. Real world writers learn to collaborate with other writers to improve their texts—a lesson students can also learn from an OSU Writing Center appointment with retired CBS/CNN producer and current Writing Assistant Sam Zelman, who is profiled in this issue.

### Ungraded Assignments to Support the Writing Process

- **Skill needed: Writing an abstract of the major project.**
- **Ungraded assignment:** Students receive three abstracts chosen by the instructor from professional journals. In groups of four or five, students examine these sample abstracts, identify the important elements, collaboratively write a working definition for abstracts in their field, and then collaboratively write an abstract for a reading assignment given to the entire class. The instructor copies each group's definition and abstract, and the class discusses which is most effective and why. Many issues related to critical thinking and conventions of writing in a particular field can emerge during such an exercise.
- **Skill needed: Documenting borrowed information according to the accepted format of the field.**
- **Ungraded assignment:** Students practice by writing a brief response to a reading assignment in which they include both paraphrased and quoted information from the article; they correctly document the source using the format appropriate to their field.

Speaking of joining with other writers, I want to close by recognizing and expressing my appreciation to the teachers/writers in the Winter WIC Faculty Seminar. As one faculty member wrote on the seminar evaluation, "Sitting in a room full of people who are interested in improving education at OSU was uplifting." Amen.

Here are the names and departments of those who attended. Ask them about teaching with writing: Berk Chappell—Art; Barbara Cusimano—Ex-

ercise and Sport Science; Terry Gerros—Veterinary Medicine; Kathleen Heath—Exercise and Sport Science; Jim Herzog—Electrical Engineering; Don Holtan—Animal Sciences; Patrick Hundley—Pharmacy; Elaine Ingham—Botany and Plant Pathology; Duncan Koller—Air Force ROTC; Rita Leahy—Civil Engineering; Sally Malueg—Liberal Arts; Bob Mason—Zoology; Eldon Olsen—Forestry Engineering; Susan Prows—Public Health; Marge Reed—Psychology; David Ward—Navy ROTC; Benno Warkentin—Crop and Soil Science; and Jeff Zautner—Air Force ROTC.

## Three Science Editors on the Art of Writing

by August Baunach

The other day I put down my copy of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and wondered to myself whether or not science editors might have some special insight into the writing process.

Science itself is logical, so perhaps science writers—who report their findings in a standard format that typically proceeds from Introduction, to Methods and Materials, to Results and Discussion—just perhaps, I thought, these writers have an “expert system” that they’ve

adapted to the writing process. Maybe for scientists writing is not an art but a science. And who would know more about science writers than their editors!

Hoping to begin ground-breaking research, I interviewed three local science editors, who among them have 67+ years of experience editing reports and journal articles compiled by Ph.D. scientists. But to my surprise, I found that even among scientists, writing is primarily an art of process—there are no expert systems.

Martha Brookes, Technical Publications Editor with the USDA Forest Service - OSU Labs and an active member of the Council of Biology Editors (CBE)—thirty years experience as a science editor, and a teacher of graduate writing/editing courses for fifteen years. I first asked Martha Brookes to comment on the traditional methods for training science writers—from lab reports to Ph.D. dissertations.

“Training as writers has always been a good idea in any discipline,” Brookes said. “Writing biology lab reports, for example, has traditionally helped to pave the way for scientists to become science writers. The problem is that a lot of the undergraduate classes that used to be lab classes aren’t anymore; and it amazes me anyone can teach biological science without labs.

“I have a wonderful quote that I tell the students in my graduate writing courses,” Brookes said. “It comes from Eli Chernin, who was an editor at Harvard Medical School. He said that writing the conventional Ph.D. dissertation is the worst possible form of instruction for a science writer.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because dissertation writers are allowed to run on for 300 or 400 pages—and then we expect them

to condense it to a dozen pages for a professional journal.”

What about reading science books—wouldn’t that be good training?

“The usual advice given to an aspiring writer is to ‘read, read, read,’” Brookes said. “But, because so much science writing is poor quality, following that advice can be dangerous for a science writer—you have to be careful to look only at the journals where the better writers are

published—and even then you’ll find lemons.”

Very much in favor of WIC courses, Brookes qualified her position, however, by stating that teachers of writing, like teachers in any other field, should be both competent and enthusiastic: “If a person teaches something as a chore, it shows.

“WIC instructors should understand how exciting it is to see students become better writers and contribute to their discipline,” Brookes said. “I’d be inclined to offer present and future WIC instructors the chance to attend a retreat—someplace like Menucha, up near Crown Point on the Columbia River. While there, the writing instructors could share their secrets, and those who are good at teaching writing could encourage and advise those who aren’t. There is a great sense of joy that comes from interacting with other writers, editors, and teachers of writing, as well as with writing students. That excitement could be shared.”

Sandy Ridlington, Ph.D., Managing Editor, Sea Grant Communications—six years experience as a high school, undergraduate and graduate teacher of writing, English literature and science writing—twelve years experience as a science editor. In addition to her editing duties, Sandy Ridlington teaches a graduate writing class for the College of Oceanography and Atmospheric Sciences in Marine Resource Management—MRM 525A. When asked to teach this graduate writing course, she went looking for a new approach.

“Before becoming an editor with Sea Grant,” Ridlington said, “I taught English at OSU for five years. I came out of that experience thinking that the older people get, the less likely they are to improve their

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. . . [E]ven among scientists, writing is primarily an art of process—there are no expert systems.

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writing—students who took freshman and then junior-level courses from me tended to slip back into the same bad writing habits two years later!

"I was completely demoralized and shocked by this and began to think that people really don't get any better at writing after the age of 14—unless they want to be a novelist or something and study madly.

"When I was asked to teach the MRM class to graduate students, I thought maybe I could get new ideas from the WIC staff. The WIC director at that time was Lex Runciman; he and others I talked to emphasized collaborative learning—and after doing some library research on the topic, as well as talking with potential employers of these MRM students, I decided to use that technique for this class."

"The employers told you that graduates of the MRM program would be doing collaborative writing?" I asked.

"Almost exclusively. Whether writing environmental impact statements, proposals or reports, they would be required to work collaboratively. So in class, I try to reproduce the writing demands that their job will place on them," Ridlington said. "We work with lengthy projects from other classes and with translating technical material for a lay audience; and the students extensively edit one another's papers.

"I've taught this class twice now, and I've been amazed at how good the students become at editing. Their improvement during the term is considerable," Ridlington said. "What makes all the difference, I think, is that I'm not their only audience.

"It may be that what they really learn is confidence—enough confidence to be both self-effacing and able to work collaboratively. They also learn to quit blaming themselves when they can't understand material that is poorly written.

"Often, you know, when you read science you say, 'Oh my God, what is wrong with me? There isn't a word here that is hard—why can't I understand this!' I teach them that usually it's because the piece hasn't been well written. You can't be an ignorant reader—but you can't make excuses for the writer, either."

Ralph McNees—a forest science editor for twenty-five years and Director of Publications for the OSU Forest Research Laboratory (FRL). Ralph McNees explained that OSU's College of Forestry was unique among forestry schools in that it made an editorial "shop," located at the FRL, available to its writers: "Fortunately," McNees said, "I work for an outfit that

makes the tacit admission at the outset that a lot of its writers need editorial help—most of the other departments on campus don't provide this service."

If all scientists had editors, I asked, would the quality of science be any different—would professional journal articles be any easier to read?

"This is a generalization," McNees said, "but atrocious style is quite common for published scientific journal articles, which are usually so jargon-laden that few people outside the field have the patience to read them.

"What the education process—as well as the editing process—is all about is learning to be intelligible to other scientists in other fields. If the information is valuable, the writer should strive to communicate with other members of the scientific community outside his or her discipline."

"Would you say, then," I asked, "that it makes sense for

would-be professionals to begin writing practice early—say, as undergraduates in a WIC program?"

"Not having done much teaching," McNees said, "I can't answer that. I can say from experience that grad students are more receptive to learning from the editing process than Ph.D.s are. Editing for the College of Forestry, I would rather work with grad students than any other kind of a writer, because they see how editing can be helpful to them. They don't have so many preconceived notions, nor are they so imbued with the jargon in their field. I feel like I get somewhere when I work with them."

"Can you describe how the writers that you work with change over time—how they go about improving as writers?" I asked.

"I think they begin to get interested in topics other than forestry," McNees said. "They broaden their horizons and quit focusing on the bad writing examples that are found in forestry journals. I'm not saying that they read *Antigone* and *Medea* immediately—if ever. But they investigate areas not covered by the *Journal of Forestry*. They become aware of a broader audience and of other ways to express their ideas."

As the interview came to a close, something I had always been curious about came to mind—I asked whether professional editors ever edited one another.

McNees began to laugh: "I have to write biennial reports to the legislature about research activities at the College of Forestry. After I write the reports, I get another editor from our shop to go over them. And yes, the changes my peers suggest are sobering! Hah, they have no mercy! I'm glad for their comments, but they sting!"

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**SHEPARD**—*continued from page 1* requirements in these broad areas. The net effect was that every course a student might take in the liberal arts and sciences counted for something—for example, you could satisfy humanities requirements by taking “Pep Band” credit hours.

Led by President Byrne, several concerned faculty and administrators began to urge that the core requirements be re-examined, and, consequently, an ad hoc body was appointed called the Curriculum Review Commission. The Commission was composed of some very broad-thinking faculty, folks well-known for their interdisciplinary interests—people like Paul Farber, who was in general science at that time, and Frank Schaumburg in civil engineering. The Commission also had two very active student members—a graduate student and an undergraduate as well.

The Commission looked at core requirements at universities from around the country and proposed three fundamental changes in OSU’s core; after much debate about criteria, the faculty senate adopted the proposed changes.

A Faculty Senate committee was then appointed—called the Baccalaureate Core Committee or BCC—and charged with oversight of all course changes. Periodically the BCC membership rotates, but the Committee is still very active today and is chaired by Janet Nishihara.

**WIC:** So all changes in the baccalaureate core, as well as current course criteria, have been mandated by the Faculty Senate?

**Shepard:** Exactly. These aren’t administrative require-

ments—we just implement the changes mandated by the Faculty Senate.

**WIC:** What were the three fundamental changes adopted by the faculty senate?

**Shepard:** Well, the first was that there were specific criteria established for area requirements

whether we really have a noteworthy baccalaureate core or just another mundane set of general education requirements.

The third innovative element in our core is in the area of cultural diversity. We’re developing courses that—within an academic setting—expose students to

issues of difference, power and discrimination.

Review of these courses is an important part of the responsibilities of BCC, and they are currently looking at mechanisms—including the use of student evaluations—to assess the extent to which these innovative courses are fulfilling their purposes.

**WIC:** Why is it so important that undergraduates be exposed to writing intensive courses within

“A CLA dean from a large Southern university told Bill [Wilkins] that, personally, he thought there were two basic approaches to the study of general education in the United States—the Harvard model and the Oregon State University model. And the dean said that of the two models he preferred OSU’s integrative approach.”

their major? Second, individual disciplines at the university no longer decide what courses meet the criteria—since 1987, such decisions are made by a university-level committee—the BCC. The third change is that the core has been opened-up to the professional schools, some of which offer synthesis courses and contribute significantly to the education of our undergraduates.

**WIC:** Have changes to the baccalaureate core generally been regarded as successful?

**Shepard:** The success or failure of the current baccalaureate core depends, I think, on three innovative elements. One is the synthesis courses, or upper division integrative courses without prerequisites. The second is the writing intensive curriculum, or WIC—whether or not we can actually provide an upper division, integrative experience with a significant writing component within the major will determine

their major?

**Shepard:** Criteria for the core have been established so that those with baccalaureate degrees are prepared to face the world. It’s logical to assume that faculty within the major know the subject matter best, regularly communicate with others in their field, and can best provide an integrative experience for students.

Soon after the new core was adopted, however, it became evident that we needed to support our faculty in a number of ways as these integrative courses were being developed. We aren’t able to go out and hire new faculty to teach new courses. So the WIC Program Director’s position, for example, was created as a means of reaching out to help faculty develop the techniques and skills necessary to offer WIC courses. The same is true for the director of the recently created Difference, Power and Discrimina-

**SHEPARD**—*continued on page 6*

From CNN to the Writing Center—

## Writing Assistant Profile: Sam Zelman

by August Baunach

People who make use of the advising services provided by OSU's Writing Center come from every academic background and all skill levels—it should be no surprise that the staff at the Center also have varied backgrounds.

Among the members of the current staff, however, volunteer Sam Zelman is probably unique.

Students who share their writing with Sam during the course of a half-hour appointment at the Center might not notice anything unusual about his comments on their work—except that he has a keen sense of respect for the English language.

But Sam—an older, retired gentleman now living in Corvallis with his wife, OSU assistant professor Sally Davenport—was formerly vice president and executive producer for the Cable News Network (CNN) in Atlanta, also formerly an executive and news bureau chief with CBS, as well as a former producer for the news weekly "60 Minutes."

Three days a week Sam Zelman volunteers as a writing assistant at the Writing Center. He

feels he has something to contribute—based on his experiences as a journalist. Recently, he summed-up the philosophy he brings to his volunteer position:

... Sam—an older, retired gentleman now living in Corvallis with his wife, OSU assistant professor Sally Davenport—was formerly vice president and executive producer for the Cable News Network (CNN) in Atlanta, also formerly an executive and news bureau chief with CBS, as well as a former producer for the news weekly "60 Minutes."

"Writing can't be reduced to simple rules," Sam explained, "but it is fairly easy to teach respect for the language—to say what you have to say as tightly and directly as you can. Because that promotes understanding.

"When I work with a student I first ask them at what level they are studying writing. I then ask them what the assignment was, and I look at the paper to see if I can be helpful—not to edit the paper, but to suggest how they might strengthen sentences. I discuss with them that the point of paper should be made clear at the beginning, and should be wrapped-up at the end, summarizing points that have been made.

"In other words, I try to

teach them the simple logic involved in writing and encourage them to express themselves clearly. We discuss the importance of nouns and verbs over the often unnecessary use of adjectives and adverbs—also we discuss transitions, how one paragraph should flow out of another. And I try to make points about spelling.

"Some students feel, you know, why is it important to spell ac-

curately as long as people know what you are trying to say?

"The fact is, writing is a form of discipline. If you are sloppy with spelling or these other aspects, you lose the respect of your reader. If you did everything in life by approximation—instead of precisely—you'd gain no credibility, and really couldn't accomplish much. Discipline in writing is just as important as discipline in a thousand other pursuits."

When asked about the rewards of volunteering at the Writing Center, Sam replied that he feels quite rewarded when he sees the light of understanding in a student's eyes: "Sometimes," said Sam, with a grin, "they even tell me that the session has been useful!"

**SHEPARD**—continued from page 5  
tion Program—both directors are there to help with faculty development.

Getting back to your question about the success of changes to the core: a while back, Bill Wilkins [Dean of OSU's College of Liberal Arts] returned from a national meeting with a quote that I enjoyed. A

CLA dean from a large Southern university told Bill that, personally, he thought there were two basic approaches to the study of general education in the United States—the Harvard model and the Oregon State University model. And the dean said that of the two models he preferred OSU's integrative approach.

I've repeated that comment

several times because I think it demonstrates that we have the potential for success.

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