

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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Pre/Views

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director
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At a recent university event Provost Roy Arnold raised the question of whether we are teaching students to compose and use e-mail in effective ways. In a roomful of program directors ranging from head of plant services to director of the student health center, I seemed the most likely to field the question.

Yes and No are my honest answers. Some faculty are aware of the problems of email communication and discuss them with students. Others may not have focused on e-mail-related issues. Some of us are learning these things the hard way, such as when we press Reply on a message, unintentionally sending our answer to all five hundred people who received the original message. The Provost's concern, which he said is based on e-mail from professionals as well as students, was addressed by our recent WIC lecturer, Andrea Lundsford of Ohio State University, in her talk "When Student Writers Use

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Teaching Students to Revise: Mark Edwards' Paper Load Strategy

By Heather White (MAT--English)

When professors of WIC courses give writing assignments, they know that they will be facing hundreds of pages of student work. But this does not have to be the case. Mark Edwards, a sociology professor, noticed patterns of error in his students' work, and found that he wasted time and energy laboriously addressing the same errors on many students' paper. The answer to the paperload "clicked," for him, he said, after attending the introductory WIC seminar.

Mark developed a simple class web site (he does not claim to be a technology wizard) that is used as a sort of group "bulletin board" for feedback on students' writing. An excerpt from the web-site reads, "For all students, the methods section should be more developed with regard to the issues of measurement. Why do you create your dichotomies as you do? It may be that you can provide not only theoretical rationale, but also empirical support for your ideas once you start working with the data." Mark is able to teach writing conventions that are standard in his discipline to all of his students at once, thus saving valuable time. Mark created the site in Microsoft Word; he says it is surprising how little you need to know to develop a web site. The web URL is <http://osu.orst.edu/instruct/soc416>. Mark invites WIC instructors who are interested in developing such resources to check out the site.

In addition to the pragmatic benefits of this response format, there is also an affective philosophy behind this approach. The group response helps students see that they are not alone when they make errors. Mark believes the site has helped develop a

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the Internet: Problems and Issues." A summary of her talk is included in this issue, and an audio tape can be borrowed from the WIC office through smills@orst.edu. Andrea Lundsford is the author of twelve books on writing, including the *St. Martin's Handbook*, one of the most widely used writing guides in the country.

WIC teachers are often sources of great ideas on how to teach writing. In this issue you can read Mark Edwards' approach to responding to student drafts using online memos to the class and Alexis Walker's adaptation of Ramage and Bean's microtheme for student writers in Human Development and Family Studies. Mark and Alexis were both participants in the fall introductory WIC seminar. Like many seminar participants, they were quick to see how WIC principles might be adapted to help their students become better writers. I am grateful to Mark and Alexis for sharing their assignments.

Participants in the Winter WIC Advanced Seminar were Carlton Carroll (Foreign Languages), Mary Kelsey (Nutrition and Food Science), Chris Southers (HDFS), and Eva Payne (English, LBCC). Topics included technology in WIC classes, collaborative writing, ESL students in writing intensive courses, and responding to student writing.

I would also like to introduce readers of *Teaching with Writing* to my assistant editors for this year. Heather White is in the MAT/English program and is currently doing her internship at Sheldon High School in Eugene. Heather is a graduate of OSU and was the winner of the Bernard Malamud scholarship, the most prestigious scholarship in English studies at this university. Peter Caster graduated with a major in English from University of California at Berkeley and has a background in engineering and education. Peter has worked as a professional rock-climbing guide and heads for the cliffs when he can get time away from his graduate studies in English and the challenges of teaching Writing 121 and 214. Both have written articles for this issue and are responsible for layout and design.

Get online answers

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About Teaching With Writing

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Teaching With Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper division writing intensive course in their major.

The content of the WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf courses design (a Horticulture option). While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

*Informal, ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.

*Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline, including the use of borrowed information.

*Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.

*Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Collins by email at vcollins@orst.edu or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.

Variation on a Theme: The Microtheme as a Multi-Purpose Writing Assignment

By Peter Caster (MA--English)

The following is an interview with Professor Alexis Walker, who regularly employs short writing assignments called "microthemes" in her classes.

What is a microtheme? I see a microtheme as a focused essay, no more than 3-5 pages in length. This is MY definition. I wonder what Ramage and Bean would say?

In what courses do you use it as an assignment? I use it in HDFS 548 Advanced Family Development. This is the writing-intensive course required of all first-year graduate students in human development and family studies.

What do you see as its primary function in your classes? The primary function is to prepare students to integrate the literature in a thesis or dissertation proposal.

What are student reactions to it? I have been using microthemes in this course for four years in a row, and students seem to find them very helpful in helping them focus their thinking and learn about writing in this social science discipline.

Do you see it more as "writing to learn" or "writing in the discipline"? I instituted this requirement before I took the WIC seminar. Until I completed the seminar, I saw it more as writing in the discipline. Now I see it more as writing to learn because I have a better understanding of what that means. I think it's writing to learn because from these specific microtheme assignments they learn how to focus on what's important in what they read, how to integrate different things they read, and how to bring things together to support or refute a particular issue/position. Through this process they learn about thinking scientifically and critically, which is what writing to learn is about.

I have been using microthemes in this course for four years in a row, and students seem to find them very helpful in helping them focus their thinking and learn about writing in this social science discipline.

How much time does it take you to respond to and grade a typical batch of microthemes? It varies by how well-written they are. Generally, papers that are less well-written take longer to grade. This would be no surprise to anyone. I read each paper three times at a minimum. They're only 3-5 pages, mostly 5, so it doesn't take forever--probably about one hour per paper on average. These papers have already been reviewed in draft form twice by their peers. I'm certain it would take me longer if they didn't go through this peer review process. Also, because this is a graduate

course, it's quite small, usually between 8-14 students or so. I don't see it as a problem to require three microthemes during the quarter. By the way, although students usually show improvement in

writing over the quarter, the microthemes are increasingly difficult to write, by design, so they still take as long to grade at the end as at the beginning.

Do you recommend its use to other teachers? Without hesitation.

What limits do you see in its use? There are lots of different types of microthemes, so it's hard to think of it as limited in any way. The microtheme can be adapted for lots of different purposes. The key is to choose a microtheme assignment that fits the skills and abilities you want to help the student develop. This includes the ability to respond to the work of their peers.

How do student microthemes generally evolve over the quarter? I touched on this a bit above. If I had them write the same type of microtheme, I'm sure they would improve tremendously, but they improve even though each one is different. I use three different types: (A) a summary microtheme that helps them focus on how to review the literature fairly, accurately, and thoroughly; (B) an "against-the-grain" microtheme that helps them generate a reasoned, coherent, and supported (with

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Teach the Library Research Process via the Web!

By Jeanne Davidson
Jeanne.Davidson@orst.edu

Shed some light on library research with a new Web-based tutorial developed by Jean Caspers and Jeanne Davidson of the Valley Library. This tutorial divides the library research process into five steps with important decision-making points clearly identified. It includes exercises to assess student learning, especially for the first three steps in the process. Link to the tutorial from the Valley Library Homepage at the following URL:

<http://osu.orst.edu/dept/library>

"Teach yourself to Use the Library"

The five steps included in the process are: 1) Identifying the Information Needed; 2) Preparing for the Search; 3) Performing the Search; 4) Obtaining Materials Cited in the Search Results, and 5) Evaluating the Results. A final section discusses proper citing of references. The tutorial provides links to other Valley Library self-instructional materials and direct links to the electronic resources covered.

Exercises in the first section ask students to define their research question, gather background information and identify key ideas related to their question. In the second step they create concept lists with synonyms for the ideas in Step One and determine where to perform their search. The third step provides general instruction on finding different types of information and requires searching in Oasis and Academic Index to identify books and articles on their topic. The final section provides questions focusing on the decision-making and evaluative aspects of the library research process. Where decisions are "unsatisfactory," the tutorial provides links to methods of refining and rethinking the topic and search.

As part of *your* Valley Library web, consider assigning the tutorial to your classes as needed.

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community of writers who are working toward mastery of their discipline. Students can take risks and feel supported. "I see myself as more of a collaborator and coach than a corrector," Mark says."

Student Terry Wright has found Mark Edwards' web feedback page to be "positive and encouraging while it gives concrete suggestions for improvement."

Mark's barrier breaking approach is working for Terry Wright, a student in the class, who says, "my attention is engaged, my emotions are engaged, and I participate in discussion without thinking twice about it." Terry sounds like a student who feels she is a part of a community.

I asked Mark if this approach saved time. His answer was a definite yes. Rather than creating endless handouts, Mark sends e-mail messages to his class which alert them to new postings on the class web page. The initial set-up for this kind of system requires some attention to logistics, but Mark did not seem overwhelmed by these details. He explained that early in the term the class met in the computer lab classroom in Milne Computer Center where they oriented themselves to the web-page and adjusted to the new and exciting procedures.

Group response has not eliminated personal response to individual students. Mark still writes brief endnotes to students with individual feedback to supplement the discipline focused feedback of the website. Terry has found the web feedback to be "positive and encouraging while it gives concrete suggestions for improvement." A further advantage of Mark's web page is that it allows him to clarify questions that students have

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Andrea Lunsford Delivers WIC Winter Lecture: When Student Writers Go Online

By Vicki Collins

Andrea Lunsford, Distinguished Professor of English at Ohio State University and noted scholar in composition studies, told the WIC Lecture Series audience on February 20, 1998, that working online has exploded the categories and changed the answers to questions like, "What is writing?" and "What is reading?" In electronic media it is difficult to separate writers from readers.

To understand more about how students are using word processing and online media, Lunsford surveyed 2500 college students across the country. In her talk, Lunsford expanded on the meaning of the 1250 responses she received. Some of her findings were:

- 95% of students do all or nearly all of their college work on a computer.

- Most students reported persistent problems with access to computers and with functions like saving, retrieving, printing, transferring, and designing documents. Students do not want to take the time to learn a new system, nor do they save documents frequently or print copies of different drafts. Lunsford discussed how difficult it is to edit on screen.

- Students love design features like bullets but have trouble learning how to use these features and make them work.

- Students reported that they do not use spell check all the time. Lunsford cited a study of spelling in 300 student papers, 100 written by hand or on typewriter, 100 on word processor with spell check, and 100 on word processor without spell check. Handwritten or typed papers had the same number of spelling errors as those using spell check. Papers written without spell check had 200% more errors.

- Students report that grammar checkers give

"bad advice." Lunsford said this is because the grammar checker does not know what the writer intended. Students are also cautious about using the thesaurus feature, reporting that they have to already know what the words mean in order to use words suggested by the thesaurus.

- 71% of students reported using the internet and the web. Those not using it wanted to learn.

- Most frequent school-related uses of the web were for exploring a paper topic, limiting a topic, locating research studies related to an assignment, and locating people sources to interview on a topic.

- Non-school uses included banking, sport team information, shopping, product information, scholarships, genealogical research, band and music group information, job searches, travel, maps, weather, meeting new people, and tracking stocks. Only 25% reported using it for online games.

- Students do not seem familiar with the syntax peculiar to each search engine, information which is available on individual help menus. Nor are they aware of metasearch engines like [www.dogpile](http://www.dogpile.com), which would enable them to search 25 engines at the same time.

Lunsford emphasized that faculty have a lot of work ahead in educating students on how to evaluate what they find online. How do we know what sources to trust? How do we evaluate what we find? How do we cite online sources? Lunsford is also interested in issues of electronic ownership: who owns what is online? Some universities claim to own everything posted on the university computer system, including student writing.

Three issues for future work which emerged from the student survey are questions of conventions and levels of formality, questions of privacy, and questions of style. Regarding conventions, everyone is confused about what language is appropriate online. Lunsford says that presentation of self will affect the response one gets. Lunsford's advice to students on privacy is if you don't want something to be public, don't put it online.

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theory and empirical evidence) response to what they read; and (C), a thesis-support microtheme that helps them bring their understanding of the related literature together to argue for a particular way of thinking, of approaching a problem, or of interpreting what's out there. These are skills essential in preparing to conduct independent research. I see the three different types as working together to help the student build these skills, and, more specifically, scientific reasoning. I don't allow time for them to go to the library (horror of horrors) because they know how to use the library. I want them to learn how to work with the limited information on any specific idea or point. In preparing for a thesis proposal, they need to identify problems or gaps as a rationale for why their particular research is needed. Working only with the literature available to them in the class helps them focus on structure, on generating ideas, and on communicating those ideas well. It has the added advantage of putting everyone in the class in the same position because their peers know if they're being accurate, balanced, and so on in reviewing the literature available to them. They also know of things they could but haven't incorporated into their work.

The more specific you can be in drawing up the assignment, the more likely they are to be successful.

What else might other teachers want to know about using microthemes in their courses? I have learned that it helps to be really specific about what you want, particularly with microthemes that aren't summary microthemes. The more specific you can be in drawing up the assignment, the more likely they are to be successful. I also like to think that using more than one type of microtheme over the quarter is helpful to students. It gives them a feeling of building on something they now know how to do. It also lets me help them work on some new things (e.g.,

how to add headings to help structure their ideas and to help the reader). I often won't write any comments on the revised papers that are related to headings until the second or third microthemes. Typically, they don't include them in a summary microtheme, and they are very useful. Recently, I began asking students to turn in their microthemes one more time after I've returned them, graded, to the students. I ask them to revise them based on my comments, and to turn in my comments. I tell them to include a paragraph--even handwritten--in which they say whether they think the [revised] microtheme is better. Students agree fairly consistently that this is a good exercise.

Before I started [requiring revision], I found that I was making similar comments to the same student from one microtheme to the next.

Before I started doing this, I found that I was making similar comments to the same student from one microtheme to the next. Unless they carry the changes through, it's hard for them to see the value in working on some particular aspect of their writing. I also always point out some of my own writing problems--underwriting, for example, and how much it helped me to learn that I had this problem. Now I can tell my peer reviewers to look for it and I can look for it myself. I also encourage my students--weekly--to read good fiction. I'm sure that reading good writing has improved my writing and it will theirs. Too often, the scientific writing they read isn't fun to read. I give them examples of scientific writing that is fun and try to make sure they know that good writing is helpful no matter what the content.

Note: While "microtheme" has become a generic term for relatively short, structured writing assignments, Professor Walker adapted hers from *Allyn and Bacon's Guide to Writing* by John Bean and John Ramage. Microthemes are also assignments common to Writing 121 courses at Oregon State University.

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Please contact the Subject Librarian for your discipline; they are listed by discipline at:

<http://osu.orst.edu/dept/library/bulletins/sublist.htm>

The Library Research Process Tutorial is available at:

<http://osu.orst.edu/dept/library/tutorial/library.htm>

Or, click on "Teach Yourself to Use the Library" on the Valley Library Homepage:

<http://osu.orst.edu/dept/library>

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about writing assignments. He can give both verbal and written instructions without photocopying or dealing with unneeded paper shuffling. Terry comments that "the instructions for the writing assignment and the mid-term have been very clear. I hope this style of teaching spreads throughout the campus. It works for me."

For copies of Andrea Lunsford's lecture handouts, OSU faculty can contact the WIC office. Email smills@orst.edu.

Helpful Internet Sites Concerning College Writing

Listed below are some Internet sites that could help students with various parts of the writing process, from finding a topic and sources to research to online writing labs.

Online Webster's Dictionary

http://www.ork.ucsd.edu:5141/cgi-bin/http_webster prompts the user with "Enter word here." The application will provide possible matches to the word entered and their definitions. Words in the definitions themselves are linked and can easily be searched for as well, so familiar (and annoying) definitions like "**Subjectivity: The quality or state of being subjective**" can immediately link to all of the words in bold. Science or technical terms can be looked up at another site, <http://www.onelook.com/>

Resources for Writers

<http://departments.colgate.edu/diw/NWCA/Resources.html> is one directory of the larger site, "the National Writing Centers Association," sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English Assembly. This page, "Resources for Writers," includes a particularly useful link, "Handouts." It is an invaluable index of information ranging from how to cite electronic sources in Modern Language Association style to noun-pronoun agreement. The sites are indexed under the many universities that sponsor them, so those looking for particular information may need to spend a minute locating it. This is an incredibly rich source of information concerning all aspects of writing.

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As for style, Lunsford predicts that new forms of punctuation will evolve as a result of online limitations and needs. In concluding her talk, Andrea Lunsford raised the question of where value will lie in the future. She agrees with Ester Dyson, author of *Release 1.0*, that value will lie in the process through which texts are circulated.

Ahead for Spring Term

WIC Lunch Conversations: Fridays Noon to One

All faculty interested in teaching with writing are invited to gather at noon for pizza six Fridays during Spring Term. Feel free to enter late or leave early as your schedule dictates. All lunches will be in Waldo 121. There is a Coke machine nearby, so drinks are available.

Friday, April 10	What shall we teach students about evaluating internet sources?
Friday, April 17	What shall we teach students about e-mail and discipline-related online discussions?
Friday, April 24	How should WIC courses be evaluated and by whom?
Friday, May 1	How can we use peer review effectively in WIC courses?
Friday, May 8	Beyond WIC: What's a department to do about writing skills of majors?
Friday, May 15	What do teachers need to know about the changing Valley Library?

Oregon State University Writing Center

<http://www.orst.edu/dept/writing-center/faq.html> is the web page of OSU's own Writing Center, describing its hours, how to make an appointment, and links to other sites of interest to college writers.

Carnegie Mellon English Server

<http://english-server.hss.cmu.edu/> is an index of research in the humanities. It also has published research online since 1990 and features over 18,000 works "covering a wide range of interests."

A Sample Bibliography Page

<http://osfl.gmu.edu/~wcenter/handouts/mla.html> offers examples of MLA citations for most print sources. For the most detailed information concerning citing electronic publications, check out <http://www.usca.sc.edu/uscaonlinewr/hos/elect.html#elect> from the University of Florida.

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.idbsu.edu/english/cguilfor/paradigm/> functions as an online writing handbook. It features sections on "Discovering What to Write," "Organizing Your Writing," "Revising Your Writing," "Documenting Sources," as well as descriptions of thesis/support, exploratory, and argumentative essays. This site could serve as an important tool for courses that require extensive writing but do not *teach* writing per se. Its well-organized, interactive form makes it very easy to use.