

# TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

Published in the WIC Office, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, (541) 737-2930

Vol. 8 #2, Winter '99

## Inside This Issue

The 20 Most Common Errors ..... 3

Announcements ..... 4

Early WIC Professors' Views ..... 5

High School Writing Conventions ... 7

Spring Schedule of Seminars ..... 8

## PRE/VIEWS

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director

This issue of *Teaching With Writing* offers articles on both writing in the disciplines and writing-to-learn. In what I hope does not sound like an apologia for the bad old days of grammar as king and meaning as handmaiden, I suggest in the lead article that the faculty of Oregon State University let students know that we want them to pay attention to correctness in their writing. This is not to say that the error-free paper is the perfect A, for our students know that we care about content, organization, and more. I am simply advocating that we dispel the strange belief circulating on our campus that the conventions of Standard Written English only matter in English classes.

For ideas on writing-to-learn, read the interviews with several faculty who were among the earliest participants in the WIC seminar, embarking on this journey in 1990-91 when the program was new. To learn what has endured for these early adopters, see "WIC at Ten" on page 5.

## A Modest Proposal, In Which the WIC Director Argues for University-Wide Attention to the Conventions of Written English

By Vicki Collins

Teachers across the curriculum, including those at Oregon State, understand and believe that there is considerably more to good writing than correct use of conventions, but the conventions are certainly part of what constitutes good writing. In her ground-breaking book *Errors and Expectations* Mina Shaughnessy called errors "unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader. . . . They demand energy without giving back any return in meaning" (12).

Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors agree, suggesting, "The world judges a writer by her mastery of conventions, and we all know it. Students, parents, university colleagues, and administrators expect us to deal somehow with those unmet rhetorical expectations, and, like it or not, pointing out errors seems to most of us part of what we do" (431).

The Writing Scoring Guide for Oregon High School Students (Certificate of Initial Mastery) defines "Conventions" as the use of "correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, paragraph structure and sentence construction appropriate to grade level." The guide describes the highest level of achievement in conventions (tenth grade level) as having characteristics (see box, p.7) that many university faculty would be happy to see in drafts of graduate theses, much less in the writing of undergraduates.

The OSU Writing 121 Scoring Guide evaluates writing on four standards, Quality of Thinking, Organization and Coherence, Style and Technique, and Use of Conventions. The Scoring Guide states that a student who meets the conventions standard "rarely makes er-

continued on page 2

*Collins continued from page 1*

rors in finished drafts" and "errors do not impede readability." So our students are familiar with the concept of using the conventions of Standard Written English.

OSU faculty frequently mention their concern that many OSU students ignore the conventions when they write in class, prepare homework assignments, take essay exams, and even when they write papers. When faculty critique students for failure to write in complete and coherent sentences or failure to check spelling, some students reply, "I didn't think it mattered in here. This isn't an English class." One student told me, "None of the other teachers at OSU care about grammar errors in our writing." I don't believe this student's claim. But I do believe this is a common misconception among students. Somehow they have come to believe that conventions don't matter—to themselves, to their professors, or to the world at large.

Even students who have successfully completed required writing courses may not transfer what they have learned about writing to everyday writing tasks in other areas, submitting muddled, sometimes incoherent, assignments full of fragments, comma splices, and spellings that range from near misses to unrecognizable stabs in the lexical dark.

If we want this situation to change, we need to work together as a faculty to be clear at the beginning and throughout every course at the university that language matters, writing matters, complete sentences matter, punctuation matters, and spelling matters. My experience indicates that the simple act of telling students to pay more attention to conventions produces some immediate improvement in their writing.

Faculty can also include a statement on the syllabus regarding conventions. For example: "All written work in this course should follow the conventions of Standard Written English, which include correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, paragraph structure and sentence construction."

Requiring revision also gives students opportunities to improve conventions as they work on other writing problems. This does not mean that faculty have to exhaust themselves minutely marking every error as a journal editor might do; a check in the margin indicating the presence of an error can cue the student to look for a problem in that line.

Many students are insecure about their command of grammar and punctuation, saying that they were never taught grammar and thus don't know comma rules, for example. This may well be the case, for research in the teaching of writing has indicated that old fashioned drill on grammar rules does not improve student writing, a finding which may have looked to many secondary teachers like an invitation to jettison grammar instruction altogether. (Other students tell of high schools where thirty-three students must share thirteen grammar books, severely limiting teachers' instructional options.)

What the research actually shows is that improvement in use of conventions occurs when essential grammar instruction is given in the context of student writing rather than in drill and practice. This argues for asking students to have and use a writing handbook as a reference when they are unsure about punctuation or usage. At OSU several departments have adopted Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* as a recommended text for students. All students in Writing 121 this year are required to purchase Lunsford and Connors's *Easy Writer*.

***"What the research actually shows is that improvement in use of conventions occurs when essential grammar instruction is given in the context of student writing rather than in drill and practice."***

Students can also seek help in the Writing Center in Waldo Hall. Writing assistants do not focus primarily on correctness but rather on helping students with the whole writing process, particularly on developing and supporting ideas. But they will help students who need assistance with mechanical problems, not as editors but as tutors.

As Rei Noguchi has noted, grammar does not supply content, and sentence structure does not improve the organization of a written piece. However, style and coherence of thought are connected to grammar. Writers can make grammatical choices that clarify ideas: Are two ideas parallel, or is one subordinate to the other? What grammatical structure best conveys cause and effect? Comparison? Contrast? (These fragments indi-

**continued on page 7**

## WIC Class Develops Discipline-Specific Handouts on Twenty Most Common Errors

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director

Students in Writing for Teachers, a WIC course in English, have undertaken a service learning project to develop handouts on the twenty writing errors made most frequently by college students. The errors were identified by Andrea Lunsford of Ohio State University and Robert Connors of the University of New Hampshire in a study of over 10,000 student essays. OSU WIC students worked with teachers in ten disciplines to develop handouts that not only explain how to avoid the most frequent errors but also draw content for the sample sentences from the specific discipline.

The idea for the disciplinary handouts originated when Lunsford visited OSU in 1998 and suggested that students might be more motivated to correct errors if the language of instruction were that of their own field. The handouts are in final revision now and will be available to faculty by the end of spring term.

Lunsford and Connors identified "Missing comma after an introductory element" as the most frequent error made by college students. Examples developed by WIC students for this error include:

### Political Science:

*Incorrect:* On the other hand it is a common mistake to think of autocratic governments simply as raw examples of power at work.

*Correct:* On the other hand, it is a common mistake to think of autocratic governments simply as raw examples of power at work.

### Microbiology:

*Incorrect:* Although they carry out the same overall functions prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells differ in their structural organization.

*Correct:* Although they carry out the same overall functions, prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells differ in their structural organization.

### Public Health

*Incorrect:* Because of serious dissent among partici-

pants and various other public health bodies the board became effectively defunct at the end of the mandated four years and officially ceased to exist in 1893.

*Correct:* Because of serious dissent among participants and various other public health bodies, the board became effectively defunct at the end of the mandated four years and officially ceased to exist in 1893.

The other most common errors are: vague pronoun reference, missing comma in a compound sentence, wrong word choice, missing comma(s) with a nonrestrictive element, wrong or missing verb ending, wrong or missing preposition, comma splice, missing or misplaced possessive apostrophe, unnecessary shift in tense, unnecessary shift in pronoun, sentence fragment, wrong tense or verb form, lack of agreement between subject and verb, missing comma in a series, lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent, unnecessary comma(s) with a restrictive element, fused or run-on sentence, misplaced or dangling modifier, and its/it's confusion.

Faculty participating in the project include Leonard Friedman (Public Health), Charlotte Headrick (Theatre), Fred Rickson (Botany and Plant Pathology), Kimberly Dunn (Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering), Mary Alice Seville (Business), Lani Roberts (Philosophy), Kate Field (Microbiology), Howard Meyer (Animal Science), Sheila Cordray (Sociology), Marcella Becker (Political Science), James Van Vechten (Electrical and Computer Engineering), and Kate Lajtha (Biology).

"Service learning" is a term describing a broad range of experiences that take students out of their own classrooms and into the institution or community in order to provide a specific service or produce a product needed by the assigned agency or individual. Students in the Writing for Teachers course expressed surprise at how difficult it was to construct discipline specific examples. They interviewed the participating faculty member and also drew content information from an introductory textbook in the field.

Students also were surprised and frustrated with how challenging it is to produce a document that is of publishable quality and contains no errors.

## Announcements

### Sixteen Faculty Complete Winter WIC Seminar

Faculty from eleven departments completed the five week Writing Intensive Curriculum Seminar during Winter term. Those participating were: Bill Boggess, Agricultural and Resource Economics; Bill Bogley, Mathematics; Jon Dorbolo, Information Services; Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, Ethnic Studies; Eric Hanson, Forest Science; Judy Li, Fisheries and Wildlife; Setsuko Nakajima, Foreign Languages and Literatures; Leslie Richards, Human Development and Family Sciences; Jay Schindler, Public Health; Tom Schmidt, Mathematics; Dick Schmitz, Fisheries & Wildlife; Nan Scott, Crop and Soil Science; Barbara Shields, Fisheries and Wildlife; Kathy Staley, Fisheries and Wildlife; Robert Thompson, Ethnic Studies; and Terry Wood, Health and Human Performance.

### Editor of *College Composition and Communication to Speak*

On April 15th at 4PM (MU Council Room) Professor Joe Harris from the University of Pittsburgh will present a talk titled "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Comp Droids and Boss Compositionists."

When asked to send a few words about his talk, he replied with the following: "In this talk I try to think through what seems to me to be the ambivalent class-identity of people working in our field in order to propose a more critical and activist role for comp scholars and administrators. Along the way, I look at the work of undergraduates, cultural critics like Barbara Ehrenreich, E. P. Thompson, and Pierre Boudrieu, compositionists like James Sledd and Richard Miller, and the novelist Henry James." As this capsule summary suggests, though Harris will focus his remarks on the scholarly, administrative, and pedagogical work of teaching writing, his comments should be of broad general interest.

Harris is an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. He currently serves as the editor of *College Composition and Communication*, which is

### About *Teaching With Writing*

Editor: Vicki Collins

Assistant Editor: Autumn Klinikowski

*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, and 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](mailto:VCollins@orst.edu) or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.

recognized as the premier journal in composition studies. Harris is the author of *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* and of *Media Journal: Reading and Writing About Popular Culture*.

*WIC at Ten:***Views on Writing from the First WIC Seminar Participants**

The first Writing Intensive Curriculum Seminars were offered during the 1990-91 school year with the goal of introducing faculty to principles and techniques of teaching with writing. It was hoped that the seminar participants would then propose WIC courses in their departments and develop the WIC program that had been approved by the Faculty Senate in 1989. Lex Runciman conducted the first WIC seminars.

As part of the tenth anniversary of the WIC program, participants in the first WIC seminars were asked to reflect on the impact WIC has had on their teaching and on what improves student writing. Responses provide a wide range of ideas on teaching with writing.

**Michael Mix, Biology**

Michael Mix, Chair of the Department of Biology, has taught a WIC course at least one term a year since the program began. He said, "The last two years I have taught two sections of BI 333 during Winter term to accommodate student demand and limit enrollments to 25 students." Mix uses WIC approaches to writing-to-learn and writing in the discipline not only in his WIC courses but also in large lectures. He said, "Until 1997-98 when I 'retired' as a lecturer, I routinely used WIC approaches in large (huge, actually,  $n=250-353$  students) Biology lectures."

Mix commented, "WIC stimulated me to think very carefully about the type (and volume) of science 'content' in my course. Like many teachers of science, before WIC programs and seminars, I (too) held to the cherished tradition that "information transfer" of a certain body of content was necessary and important. It did not take long for me to conclude that the real value for students of using WIC techniques and approaches—to enhance critical thinking skills, to acquire deeper levels of understanding in analyzing problems and issues, to develop various writing skills, and so on—required much more time spent on in-class discussion, individual and group analyses of articles and problems, and various types of hands-on activities. So starting [early], I transformed the way I teach by reducing the volume of

content and increasing the use of WIC techniques and approaches to achieve the goals of my course. Parenthetically, I have never had a student complain about a lack of content in my WIC course."

"In terms of writing-to-learn," Mix continued, "one approach consistently produces good results for me. If I have assigned a reading (e.g. a journal article) for class, then I open the class period by having them write answers to one or two questions, based on the reading. This helps accomplish two goals: it stimulates them to do the reading (occasionally they ARE graded); and their answers provide a framework for discussions to follow."

Mix believes that the thing that helps improve student writing most is having students revise papers. "I often encourage students to visit the Writing Center to seek help in doing revisions—this allows them to receive input from two different individuals." Mix believes that WIC expands students' ability to learn, think, and communicate. He concluded his comments saying, "WIC, and all that goes along with that—courses, WIC people, seminar, grants, etc.—is one of the best, most important additions to OSU in the 29 years I have been here."

**Michael Scanlan, Philosophy**

Michael Scanlan of the Department of Philosophy has been using WIC techniques for years in non-WIC courses but is just about to teach his first WIC seminar. Scanlan said, "In some ways, I use what I think of as WIC approaches in all my courses in that I often have students spend some of the class time writing material in some form and then do various things with that, exchange it, discuss it, etc. I think I learned a lot about teaching from the WIC seminar. I think it showed me that there were a lot of options a teacher can use to get feedback to gauge what students were getting in the class. I also learned that written work could take all sorts of forms and was appropriate in all sorts of situations as a feedback device, to solidify student learning, as a valuable experience in itself for the student."

As for what helps most in improving student

**continued on page 6**

*Continued from page 5*

writing, Scanlan stated, "It think it is both being directive, in the sense of correcting mistakes, showing how to reword, and emphasizing the need for good writing in the course AND also giving students writing assignments, simply having them write things."

Scanlan believes that WIC does add value to a student's OSU education, stating, "[WIC] is clearly essential, in my humble opinion, since as I tell my students, written material is what makes the world go around. That is, for the sorts of jobs/careers that we presumably are preparing the students for. They will be producing written reports, memos, etc., as a central aspect of the job."

### **Don Zobel, Botany and Plant Pathology**

Don Zobel regularly teaches WIC courses in Botany and Plant Pathology and says he uses WIC techniques in all of his courses, not just those designated as writing intensive. His teaching has been influenced by WIC approaches in a number of ways. Zobel said, "I have used WIC assignments to replace graded writing and to some extent to replace the formal lab report. I have used the definition of the audience idea in all assignments. I also have broken a large paper into sequential shorter assignments developing the end product." Zobel uses informal, ungraded writing-to-learn assignments to support other activities, for example as notes for recording field trip information or for study aids for examinations.

Zobel believes that the two things that most improve student writing are "practice...and interest in doing a good job." The value that WIC adds to an OSU education, he believes, is, "Students have a better idea of the types of writing done in the profession, and have practice in doing several of them. They should have confidence in their ability to write and to help others."

### **Flo Leibowitz, Philosophy**

Flo Leibowitz (Philosophy) has taught several WIC courses since first taking the WIC seminar. Leibowitz uses WIC techniques in a variety of non-WIC courses. She commented, "Most classes are too big to use the 'collect the paper parts and comment' system. However, in Introduction to Philosophy, I use a variety of minimally-graded writing. For example, each student has to bring in a question for the class to break down and discuss in small groups.

Students jot down answers, and these are collected and given credit on a pass/no pass basis. The questions themselves are graded, however. Students are assigned "their day" at the beginning of the term... A sample question written by a student from the lesson on Plato's allegory of the cave: 'In this story, the prisoners are prevented from seeing more than shadows and illusions, because there are chains that hold them in place. Suppose you were to apply this allegory to modern life. What do you think would correspond to the chains?' That one got a lot of discussion, you can be sure!"

Leibowitz likes to break up long lectures with in-class writing. She sees improvement in student writing when she comments on papers and gives students a chance to revise during the term. As to the value added by WIC, she said, "At their best, writing assignments allow the student to make the material his or her own by working with it in an active way. A student can go away thinking, 'Oh, that's what the concept really means.' If you don't go away with that, I don't know how you can say you have really learned it."

### **Charles Langford, Sociology**

Charles Langford has not taught a WIC course, but he does use writing in his courses. He said, "I have used lecture summaries in some of my courses, though I am not doing so now. When I have graduate students write term papers, I have them re-write the material for a better grade."

Langford uses only graded writing, which includes essays on examinations. His concern with ungraded work is that students will "write down irrelevant material thinking I will only record a check on the written work, so I grade all written work that is handed in." He believes that re-writing is the most effective way of improving student writing. "The errors they are correcting are topics they need to strengthen. Rewriting gives them practice."

Langford says, "I wish I could get myself to assign more writing, but the work of grading that material is already very tiring." On the value of writing, he commented, "I think writing is important. It is a skill students need to have in order to do well in most careers now available. Students will need to write in a way that is clear to others in nearly any job they have."

*Continued from page 2*

cate my grammatical choice to ignore convention in order to make a point.)

Although native speakers have an underlying syntactic knowledge of English, Noguchi further suggests, they may write with fragments, run-ons, and comma splices first, because "they do not fully understand the conventions unique to writing (as opposed to speech)," and second, "for the same reasons they make other kinds of writing errors: that is, from inattention, carelessness, laziness, etc." (116-17). Students who seem quite eager to master technical knowledge may be careless about the language in which they express the knowledge.

To summarize my action items for OSU faculty: Tell students that correctness matters in university work and in the world; state this on the syllabus; give students feedback on writing and some opportunities not only to improve larger problems in organization and content but also to use a handbook to improve conventions; recommend that students get help with writing in the OSU Writing Center.

In the end, our students will graduate. They will have to take responsibility for their own writing, including use of conventions, in the workplace or in graduate or professional schools. We can help them by asking them to begin taking responsibility for their writing now, not just in their WIC courses, but in every course in the university.

### Works Cited

Connors, Robert J. and Andrea A. Lunsford. "Frequency of Formal Errors in Current College Writing, or Ma and Pa Kettle Do Research." *College Composition and Communication* 44 (May 1993): 200-24.

Noguchi, Rei R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*. Urbana: NCTE, 1991.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

"Writing. Common Curriculum Goals." Salem, Oregon: Oregon Department of Education, 1996.

"Writing 121 Scoring Guide." Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University, 1998.

### Writing Scoring Guide for Oregon High School Students: Conventions

Characteristics of writing by a tenth grader receiving a score of six (highest score):

The writing demonstrates exceptionally strong control of writing conventions (e.g., punctuation, spelling, capitalization, paragraph breaks, grammar and usage) and uses them effectively to enhance communication. Errors are so few and so minor that the reader can easily skim right over them unless specifically searching for them. The writing is characterized by:

- Strong control of conventions; manipulations of conventions may occur for stylistic effect.
- Strong, effective use of punctuation that guides the reader through the text.
- Correct spelling, even of more difficult words.
- Paragraph breaks that reinforce the organizational structure.
- Correct grammar and usage that contribute to clarity and style.
- Skill in using a wide range of conventions in a sufficiently long and complex piece.
- Little or no need for editing.

Characteristics of writing by a tenth grader receiving a minimum passing grade of four:

- Minor errors in grammar and usage.
- Logical use of paragraph breaks that reinforce structure.
- Correct end-of-sentence punctuation; minor confusion with commas, semicolons, colons, or apostrophes.
- Spelling usually correct, especially on common words.
- Correct capitalization; errors, if any, on uncommon words.
- Occasional lapses in conventions, but problems not severe enough to distort meaning or confuse readers.
- Need for minor editing.

(In addition to Conventions, the Scoring Guide suggests standards for evaluating writing in six other categories: Ideas/Content, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Citing Sources.)

### SPRING SCHEDULE OF WIC LUNCH SEMINARS

Lunch seminars are from noon to one. Come and leave as your schedule permits. All are in Waldo 121, except April 23, which is in the new seminar room of the Valley Library. Reservation to VCollins@orst.edu by 10 am on the day of the lunch. All faculty are welcome.

- Friday, April 2**      **Student Research on the Value of WIC Courses.** Senior Patricia Simpson shares results of a team project investigating student and faculty views of the WIC program. Over one hundred students across the curriculum were surveyed.
- Friday, April 9**      **Clarifying Writing Expectations.** Alexis Walker and Alan Suguwara (Human Development and Family Sciences) share a series of three matrices their department developed to help articulate writing expectations to students for academic writing, professional writing, and reflective writing. The discussion includes ideas of how other departments might use the matrix.
- Friday, April 16**      **OSU Departments Design Their Own Writing Guides.** Writing Guide developers from five disciplines discuss the goals and processes their departments used or are using to develop a writing guide for students.
- Friday, April 23**      **Doing It In the Library: WIC faculty lunch in the new Willamette Seminar Room on the 3rd floor of the Valley Library.** We will eat pizza and then use library internet access to look at web resources that can help students evaluate internet sources. Jean Caspers, WIC Librarian, will lead the discussion.
- Friday, April 30**      **Cut the Fat: Helping Students Reduce Wordiness.** Vicki Collins leads a discussion of techniques teachers can use to teach students to write more concisely and clearly.
- Friday, May 7**      **From Peavy to the Coast: Department Retreats Focus on Writing.** Faculty from three departments share departmental experiences with writing retreats.
- Friday, May 14**      **Teaching Students to Avoid Sexist, Racist, and Age-ist Language in Writing.** Steve Kunert (English) shares his approaches to teaching students to avoid discriminatory language in their writing.
- Friday, May 21**      **What is Polished Writing and How Do We Get There?** Vicki Collins discusses techniques for helping students move from a mediocre draft to a polished final product suitable for a job portfolio or graduate school application.