

## THE LETTER AS GENRE

### A Proposal for a Faculty Development Award

In Response to a Call for Proposals for New Writing Intensive Courses

By the MU Campus Writing Program

Submitted February 3, 2014, by

Dr. Martha A. Townsend, Associate Professor  
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Amount Requested: \$10,000

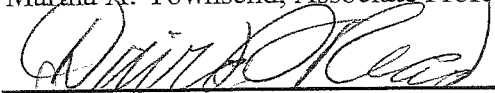
#### Abstract

Laments appear frequently in the popular press decrying the demise of letter writing (e.g., "The Death of Letter-Writing," *New York Times*, 11/10/13), and the proposer's informal queries suggest that contemporary students' knowledge about letters is slim. They rarely write or receive letters, nor have they had an opportunity to study the impact of letters and letter writing in our culture or over time. This new WI course would seek to fill that gap for students from across the curriculum by taking a *rhetorical genre* approach to answer such questions as: What makes letters different from other forms of communication? Who writes letters and why? Who reads them, and for what purpose? What is the impact of digital technology on letter writing? Is letter writing dead, as many journalists and critics suggest, or has the practice taken another form? And finally, why should we care?



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Martha A. Townsend, Associate Professor



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David Read, Chair, English



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Nancy West, Director, Honors College



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Michael J. O'Brien, Dean

# UNIVERSITY *of* MISSOURI

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

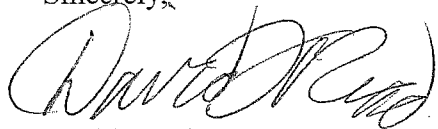
February 3, 2014

Campus Writing Program  
Conley House

To whom it may concern:

I am writing in support of Dr. Martha Townsend's application for a Faculty Development Award to support the development of an upper-level writing-intensive course entitled "The Letter as Genre." The course as Dr. Townsend envisions it should have multiple benefits for the English Department and the campus.

Sincerely,



David Read  
Professor and Chair

readd@missouri.edu  
573-882-6066





The Honors College  
University of Missouri-Columbia

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Columbia, MO 65211

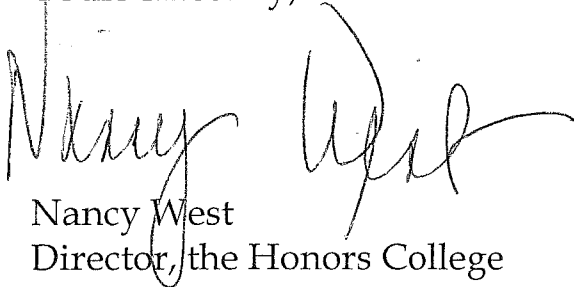
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February 3 2014

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing to support Dr. Marty Townsend's course development proposal for English Honors 4070/Gen Hon 4070. Her subject for the course—The Letter as Genre—is a timely and exciting topic, one sure to appeal to the high number of honors students we have in English and Journalism. As a course that also draws attention to the varied history and cultural significance of written communication, it speaks to our new emphasis in the honors curriculum on developing four key characteristics in all our honors students: 1. Critical thinking 2. Creativity 3. Collaboration and 4. Communication.

Yours sincerely,



Nancy West  
Director, the Honors College

*please note:  
the English course  
# above s/b  
4/00*

### III. Goals, Objectives, Purpose(s) of Project

#### Purpose

To develop a new WI course on letters and letter writing, to be taught in Spring 2015, in experimental form to a cohort of upper-division students enrolled in a 3-credit topics class, most likely cross listed as ENGL 4100 *Genre* and General Honors 4070 *Senior Seminar*. These students will pilot both informal writing-to-learn and formal learning-to-write assignments, with the intent that the course becomes a regular offering that will attract a wide range of students and could potentially be taught at the lower-division as well.

Honors students from diverse disciplines will find the course noteworthy in terms of exploring the open-ended question of whether letter writing is, in fact, dead or even dying. Their collective thinking about how to posit an answer to that question will likely result in original research, such as a survey or interviews with interested persons within or beyond the academy, research that could be presented in venues beyond our classroom. The same foci will be of interest to upper-division English majors whose love of letters (in the liberal arts sense of that term) is a given.

#### Project Goals / Objectives

1. For students to acquire an awareness and understanding of the importance of letters and letter writing in our culture and over time:
  - Students will study letters across a range of subject areas: literary and cultural, political and civil rights, classical and historical, and by contemporary writers from the worlds of music, the culinary arts, and sports, among other areas. We will examine historical collections as well as recent critical treatment of letters and letter writers, such as Schuster's *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters: From Ancient Days to Our Own Time* (1940) and Usher's *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience* (2014). We might dip into tangential, but related topics such as the tradition of pen pals and the controversy over whether schools should teach penmanship. We might try our hand at writing with a fountain pen or a quill (if not chisel and stone) and explore the technical and tactile elements of ink making and handwriting.
  - Informal writing-to-learn assignments could include short papers based on interviews with students' parents and grandparents about letter writing in their lives, letters written by students to real or imagined audiences (including to/from the instructor and GTA), and brief book reports on the many books of letters by/on an array of authors.
  - A formal learning-to-write assignment could be a multi-stage research paper on letters by one or more authors in the student's discipline (see examples in #4 below). Scores of websites are devoted to letters of various kinds, and Ellis Library's holdings related to letters are vast—all of which allow for rich research opportunities. Ellis Library's Special Collections may offer revealing opportunities, as well.
  - Another alternative for a learning-to-write assignment might be either a whole-class or a small group survey of student and/or public perceptions about letter writing.
  - Under the leadership of the GTA, students will create a wiki archive that preserves their work for interested readers and to which students taking further iterations of the course would continue to contribute.

2. For students to reason critically

- Students will apply five basic elements of the “rhetorical situation” to letters and letter writers—text, author, audience, purpose, and setting—to answer such questions as:
  - What makes letters different from other forms of communication?
  - Who writes letters and why?
  - Who read/s them, and for what purpose?
  - How has letter writing changed over time?

3. For students to solve—or address—complex problems

- Although students will likely find no “right” answers, they will address such questions as:
  - What differences have letters and letter writing made at certain points in time and in various contexts?
  - What is the impact of digital technology on letter writing?
  - *Is* letter writing dead, as many journalists and critics suggest? If so, should it be revived? If it isn’t, why do so many think it is?
  - Why should we care?

4. For students to communicate with clear, effective language in discipline-specific ways:

- Because both the pilot and future offerings will hopefully enroll students from multiple disciplines, students will research and write papers appropriate to their respective majors:
  - English majors could analyze letters by their favorite author
  - Religious Studies majors could write about the Biblical letters of Paul
  - Music majors might wish to report on such books as *Chopin’s Letters* (1931) or *The Letters of Leonard Bernstein* (2013)
  - Sociology or Black Studies students could elect to write about Hill Harper’s tripartite collection of *Letters to...* (2006, 2008, 2013)
  - Education majors might explore ways to incorporate letter writing into school curricula
  - Technology, Computer Science, or engineering students could report on changes in writing technology from ancient to digital times.

5. For students to understand their work as scholarship, worthy of an audience beyond the classroom:

- students will know that one of them will be selected to present his or her work, with the GTA and the instructor, at a major national scholarly conference for college writing teachers (assuming a proposal is accepted; see #7 below and budget page)
- students will also know that their work is being archived, so that future students in classes on letter writing have their work to draw on

6. For the GTA who helps prepare and teach the course, to acquire professional development in both teaching and research:

- to acquire new knowledge in letters and letter writing, writing-across-the-curriculum, and writing-in-the-disciplines
- to gain interdisciplinary teaching experience
- to prepare (what would likely be) his or her first national-level professional presentation
- to co-author a publication for a scholarly journal in the field

7. For the teacher of record (proposer):

- to acquire new knowledge about letters and letter writing
- to mentor a new graduate student in the arts of research and teaching
- to co-author with the GTA a publication for a scholarly journal in our field
- to contribute to the roster of WI courses while also teaching undergraduates
- to enhance CWP's reputation, via a national conference presentation and (hopefully) a scholarly publication in a venue like *Across the Disciplines* or *College Composition and Communication*

#### IV. Time Line

May 2014	submit CCCC proposal for March 2015 panel recruit GTA to assist with project
Summer 2014	continue collection of resources (already in progress) GTA and instructor read and assemble materials create syllabus; design assignments
Fall semester 2014	offer course, crosslisted as English 4100 and Honors 4070
Jan and Feb 2015	course assessment by CWP, English, and Honors personnel
March 2015	CCCC panel presentation in Tampa, FL
Summer 2015	draft and submit collaborative article for publication
Fall semester 2015	offer second iteration of course, w/adjustments based on pilot

#### V. Budget (see below, entered last for spacing purposes)

#### VI. Benefits to CWP, MU, Faculty, Students, Academic and Wider Community

CWP, the English Department, the Honors College, and MU will benefit by having an innovative new WI course added to CWP's roster, by publicity accrued through a national conference panel presentation, and (hopefully) by a scholarly publication.

Students will benefit by learning about letters and letter writing (content that is presently unavailable in the current curriculum) and by satisfying the critical reasoning, problem-solving, and communication objectives of WI courses. Ideally, the student selected to present at CCCC will also co-author the planned article with the GTA, CWP director, and instructor.

The instructor and GTA will benefit by learning new content and from the professional development that attends new ways of thinking within their disciplines.

The academic and public communities will benefit from the new knowledge that comes from what students and instructors learn about letters and letter writing. Given the public interest in letter writing's demise, the potential for an MU News Bureau release about the course is good.

NB: Inasmuch as the instructor will be hosting three international faculty in Fall 2014 (two from China, one from Russia), the course can gain international exposure as well. All three scholars are coming to study WAC theory and practice with the instructor, so as to implement WAC principles at their home institutions. The instructor will ensure that the visiting scholars sit in on the class, which will be an example for them of how WAC works in the classroom

## VII. CWP Involvement

Amy Lannin has consulted on the project's development, and the proposal was completed during CWP's Faculty Writing Retreat on January 31, 2014. CWP personnel, along with Honors College and English Department personnel if they wish, will assess the course and students' writing to ascertain whether primary objectives were met. Lannin will chair the CCCC panel at which results are presented and will co-author the article-to-come with the GTA, student, and instructor.

## V. Budget (none of these expenses is covered by department and all are critical to the project)

GTA course-development support	\$3200 <sup>1</sup>
GTA semester of teaching support	3200
Honoraria for three local guest speakers @ \$100/ea	300 <sup>2</sup>
Materials, books, class field trip to Churchill Museum in Fulton	300 <sup>3</sup>
Travel to 2015 CCCC in Tampa, FL for GTA, student, and self	<u>3000<sup>4</sup></u>
(Total	\$10,000)

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<sup>1</sup> Assumes a second-year Master's Degree student in English, although a student from another discipline may be appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> Local experts could add much to our discussion; possible guest speakers include Prof. Mel George, who regularly incorporates letters from J. R. R. Tolkien into his Honors class on *Lord of the Rings*; an MU history professor familiar with Winston Churchill's work; and artists Mary Gainey or Professor Lampo Leong, who could speak about the making of quills, ink, and paper.

<sup>3</sup> The field trip presumes a unit of two or three classes in the course on the letters of Winston Churchill, enhanced by a class visit to the Fulton Museum, a nearby but under-utilized resource for most MU students, designed to help the history behind letters become more vivid.

<sup>4</sup> CCCC = Conference on College Composition & Communication, the annual national professional conference for college writing teachers. My proposal, due in May 2014 for the March 2015 conference, will be for a panel about the course, featuring the GTA who helps develop and teach it, a high-performing undergraduate who takes the course, and myself. (cont.) Director Amy Lannin, who normally attends this conference, will be invited to chair the panel, thus giving CWP additional emphasis. I have a nearly 100% proposal success rate for this conference. Since proposers are allowed only one speaking role on the program, I will commit my 2015 proposal to the *Letter as Genre* panel. It costs me approximately \$1300/year to attend this meeting; the \$3000 amount will ensure that a good portion of our expenses are paid; I will assist the GTA and undergraduate student in applying for supplemental funding, and I will supplement my own cost from my Departmental E&E funds.

# MARTHA A. TOWNSEND

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## EDUCATION

<i>Arizona State University</i>	Ph.D., English, 1991
<i>Bryn Mawr College</i>	Fellow, Institute for Women in Higher Ed Administration, 1991
<i>University of Utah</i>	M.A., English, 1985
	B.A., English, <i>Magna Cum Laude</i> , 1983

## ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

<i>University of Missouri</i>	Associate Professor, Department of English, 2003-present Director, Campus Writing Program, 1991-2006 Assistant Professor, Department of English, 1991-2003
<i>Arizona State University</i>	Assistant Director, Writing Across the Curriculum, 1990-91 WAC Graduate Research Assistant, Dean's Office, 1987-90
<i>University of Utah</i>	Graduate Teaching Assistant, English, 1983-85

## REFEREED ARTICLES (SELECTED)

- "Uncommon Conversations: How Nearly Three Decades of Paying Attention Allows One WAC/WID Program to Thrive," with Martha Patton and Jo Ann Vogt. *WPA Writing Program Administration*, 35.2 (Spring 2012), 127-159.
- "WAC Program Vulnerability and What To Do About It: An Update and Brief Bibliographic Essay," *The WAC Journal* 19 (August 2008), 45-61. Reprinted in *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook*. Eds. Terry Myers Zawacki and Paul M. Rogers. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's (2012), 543-556.
- "Dealing with Resistance to WAC in the Natural and Applied Sciences," *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* Vol. 3 No. 1 (October 1998), 64-76. With Martha D. Patton, Aaron Krawitz, Kay Libbus, and Mark Ryan.
- "The University of Missouri's WAC/WID Program," *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* Vol. 2 No. 1 (April 1997), 100-105.

## REFEREED BOOK CHAPTERS (SELECTED)

- "What Are Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines?" in *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*. Ed. Rita Malenczyk. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press. (2013), 77-90.
- "Automated Essay Grading in the Sociology Classroom: Finding Common Ground," with Edward Brent, in *Machine Scoring of Student Essays: Truth and Consequences*. Eds. Patricia Freitag Ericsson and Richard Haswell. Logan: Utah State University Press (2006), 177-198.
- "To Teach or Not To Teach? That Is the Dilemma," in *The WAC Casebook: Scenes for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*. Ed. Chris M. Anson. New York: Oxford University Press (2002), 223-226.

## NUMEROUS CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS & WAC WORKSHOPS

Presentations primarily at Conference on College Composition and Communication; Writing Program Administrators; International WAC Conference. Workshops for >90 colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad.