



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI CAMPUS WRITING PROGRAM

# e-WAC

## Fall 2013

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## What I Wish I Had Known Before Teaching a WI Course

By Jonathan Cisco

Teaching a writing-intensive (WI) course is a humbling journey, one that forces us to reevaluate our own writing and come to grips with the difficulties of assessing our students' writing.

Fortunately, Mizzou's WI culture provides a generous pool of veteran instructors anxious to share their experiences. Below is a compilation of reflections from WI instructors on what they've learned and what they wish they had known prior to teaching writing-intensive courses.

### Question 1: Looking back on your WI experience, what do you wish you had known before teaching your first class?

*"I was well-prepared for my first class due to the extensive training I received during the WI-instructor workshop. Students' writing abilities turned out to be just average. I was also surprised that some students (non-majors) took my class because of the WI designation. Previously, I thought that only majors would take it."*

*"I wish I had known more about how to be efficient with grading. Slow grading practices can zap everything I love about teaching WI courses. By putting my emphasis on becoming efficient (through the use of low stake assignments; certain markup practices, etc.), I can get back to helping my students write well in our discipline."*

### Question 2: What are/were your greatest struggles in the WI classroom?

*"To effectively grade writing it takes finding large enough blocks of time to read the papers, but separate enough that the papers do not all run together."*

*"Other than personal experience, I did not have a writing (academic) background. I thought this might be a problem, but it was not. Today's students are not reading enough. Better readers = better writers. A love for written expression is something I find missing in most students. They tend to rely on oral communication almost exclusively."*

Things  
I Wish I Had  
Known

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"Concentration to details is another problem, which is complicated by the use of technology in the classroom – cell phones and laptops. It's a major source of distraction. "Getting over my own fear of writing. That's gotta happen quickly. We're all learning here."

### Question 3: What tips do you have for new faculty?

"First, be enthusiastic, reflect on why writing matters to students in your major, have them write accordingly. Second, students glaze over if you start talking about subjunctive participles and other jargon; part of the reason WI courses are taught by instructors in the majors is so the focus is on how they need to write as graduates of your department. Whether they know the terminology of English may not be relevant, as long as they can effectively communicate. Third, make expectations clear and be consistent."

"Show your interest and enthusiasm."

"Appreciate that writing is a scary thing, something that gives us all trouble. Remember that students can make dramatic strides in their writing in a very short period of time, given the proper guidance. Show your students that you care, and everything else will work out fine."

### Question 4: What resources, if any, do you use for your WI courses?

"Ask students to reflect on their audience before they start writing. Writing assignments are varied, in part to force them to practice communicating to multiple audiences, and in part b/c it helps keep it fresh for them and me."

"Share your own process of writing. Be honest about it. How do you begin researching for a paper? How do you create your plan? Do you write linearly? How do you draft? Sharing your own process gives students direct answers to what it means to be a writer."



### Question 5: Why do you continue to teach WI courses?

"I love to write. It's a form of communication that can be carefully planned and I enjoy paying close attention to details. Writing is a portrait, a mosaic, a word-picture, a river of information. It's something I can get excited about. If I only spoke as good as I can write! I also like to help students learn how to write better."

"I teach WI courses because writing is superior to any other form of assessment. Multiple choice tests? Give me a break. If a student can take agency in his or her ideas and synthesize disparate research, that's a success. Multiple choice tests tell me nothing of student experience and learning."

Teaching a WI courses is an experience like none other. Both students and instructors leave the course changed. Fortunately, many of the issues new instructors face while teaching their WI courses can be remedied by both attending training workshops (held at the beginning of each semester) and learning from our impressive WI instructors across the disciplines.

## New Members Appointed To Campus Writing Board

By Stephanie Hiquiana

The [Campus Writing Board](#) has been named for the 2013-14 academic year and includes seven new members. The campus-wide faculty committee is

authorized to set Campus Writing Program policy and approve courses as Writing Intensive (WI).

Members of the board ensure the integrity of Mizzou's [Writing Intensive courses](#) at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

New board members for 2013-14 include Bill Horner (political science), Deanna Sharpe (personal financial planning), Nicole Monnier (German and Russian studies), Judith Mabary (music), Rainer Glaser (chemistry), Louise Miller (nursing), Bill Lamberson (animal science) and Marty Townsend (English).

"It is important for students not only to be able to write clearly and concisely, but also to be able to transfer that ability to their chosen fields," Horner says. "I am happy for the opportunity to help continue Mizzou's strong tradition of encouraging student excellence in written communication through the innovative Campus Writing Program."



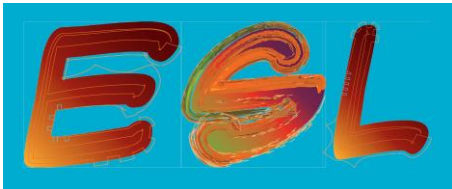
As means of communication become quicker and more advanced, writing remains an imperative skill for students to finely tune throughout their education and into their future careers. Writing Intensive courses at Mizzou are designed to challenge students of all writing levels and encourage the constant improvement of these skills.

"Writing in the discipline helps students see that good writing goes beyond earning an A grade on an English essay, as important as that is," Sharpe says. "The act of writing challenges us to make invisible thought visible, to articulate the vague and to create order and sequence from disjointed ideas."

Headed by Chairman Bob Bauer, the Board's approval process is designed to guarantee WI courses meet the standards of the [Guidelines for Writing Intensive Courses](#), the foundational document of the Campus Writing Program.

"The discipline-specific instruction in writing that students learn from their WI courses is critical to their career success," says Bauer. "The Board's ultimate mission is to support student's chances for this success."

The appointed faculty board members work to review writing courses in three areas: Education and Social Science, Humanities and Arts, and Natural and Applied Sciences.



## 4 Things to Keep in Mind When Assessing ESL Writing

By Jonathan Cisco

International student enrollment growth is at an all-time high, particularly with students from Asian countries. Paired with difficult budgetary realities, resources to assist both English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students and faculty are limited.

Reviewing writing that suffers from a number of lower-level errors (grammar, syntax, etc.) can be trying for even the most patient instructors. The question naturally becomes: How can we help these writers? The Campus Writing Program encourages faculty to keep the following in mind:

### 1. What are the students' *actual* English abilities?

In our experience, ESL students sometimes hit a brick wall with writing, even though their *speaking* ability in the second language is sufficient. With writing, many students are under the impression that they need to "sound smart" first and foremost, rather than be understood. The result is a paper with long sentences, weird subject-verb placement, etc. etc. We encourage faculty to say some version of the following to their ESL students: *Write how you would speak to someone you respect.* This isn't perfect, of course, but it does help struggling ESL students get over the "I must sound smart" and gets them more focused on clarity.

### 2. Are there error patterns in the paper?

Most ESL writers make a few mistakes several times (articles, subject-verb agreements, etc.). Pattern recognition is generally more helpful to the writer (and the person making comments) than trying to mark every error. One of the things we suggest is to first read the paper only for meaning and ignore the massive mechanical issues. That may seem impossible (and sometimes is), but the results can be surprising. As the student writers get more comfortable with the topic, then it is more likely they will start catching many of those errors. Thus, putting the grading emphasis on pattern-recognition can both save faculty time and be a more effective pedagogical tool.

### 3. Most language learners will require years (well over 7 years) to achieve written fluency.

The practice these students get from their writing intensive courses will provide them important experiences toward improved fluency, but likely the instructor will not see much of that development in one semester. It is helpful to remember that we are providing instruction that down the road will lead to improvement. Some patterns of errors, like article usage, are a function of basic tenants of the student's mother language. Asian

languages, for example, have no words that equate to English's use of articles (a, an, the). To expect students to learn such a dramatic change in language is unrealistic.

### 4. The best recommendation we have would be to have these students go to the writing tutors in the library.

Dr. Rachel Harper, Director of the Writing Center, trains all tutors in ESL tutoring. Furthermore, writing tutors in the library (see the Writing Center's Website for semester hours) commonly assist ESL writers. There are not enough tutors to meet ESL demands on campus (not even close, unfortunately), but it the best option at the moment. These tutors give ESL students the opportunity work one-on-one with writing experts.

Assessing any form of writing is difficult; assessing ESL writing can seem impossible. This struggle is shared with faculty across the disciplines as enrollment of international students increases. Keeping the above items in mind, however, can help to mediate the stress of assessing ESL writing while maintaining our goal of helping all students flourish as writers.

**MU Writing Center**

[writingcenter.missouri.edu](http://writingcenter.missouri.edu)

882-2496

909 Lowry Mall



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CALENDAR!

## Fall 2013 & Spring 2014 Events and Workshops

For Registration and More Information about CWP Events:

<https://etapps.missouri.edu/cwp/event>

- 10/11/13 ½ Day Writing Retreat
- 10/23/13 Tiger Writing Tips
- 11/7/13 ½ Day Writing Retreat
- 11/13/13 WI Refresher and Recap
- 11/22/13 Mindful Writing Workshop 3 “Fluency”
- 12/5/13 ½ Day Writing Retreat
- 1/8-10/14 3 Day Writing Retreat
- 1/13-14/14 56<sup>th</sup> Faculty Writing Intensive Workshop
- 1/16/14 Spring 2014 TA Workshop
- 1/29/14 Mentoring Teaching Assistants in WI Courses
- 2/12/14 ½ Day Writing Retreat
- 2/19/14 Faculty Writing Toward Publication: From Library Resources to Computer Applications
- 3/6/14 ½ Day Writing Retreat
- 3/12/14 Read To Sort. Read To Know. Read To Write
- 4/9/14 Faculty Innovations in Teaching WI
- 4/11/13 ½ Day Writing Retreat

## CONTACT US

University of Missouri-Columbia  
602 Sanford St.  
Conley House  
Columbia, MO 65211  
Cwp.missouri.edu

Amy Lannin, Director  
882-1798  
[lannina@missouri.edu](mailto:lannina@missouri.edu)

Jonathan Cisco, Coordinator  
884-6221  
[ciscojo@missouri.edu](mailto:ciscojo@missouri.edu)

Bonnie Selting, Coordinator  
882-1797  
[seltingb@missouri.edu](mailto:seltingb@missouri.edu)

Jackie Thomas, Administrative  
Assistant  
882-4881  
[thomasjm@missouri.edu](mailto:thomasjm@missouri.edu)



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