



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI CAMPUS WRITING PROGRAM

# e-WAC

## Winter 2013

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## Strategies for Feedback You and Your Students Will Love

By Jonathan Cisco

I tell my students that writing is the most intimate form of communication. Only through writing are we virtually stripped naked, revealing ourselves to the world, hoping that we won't be criticized too much. Thus, giving useful feedback without destroying our students' psychology is essential.

As a CWP Coordinator and Writing-Intensive Tutor, the most common complaint I receive from students concerns the feedback on their papers. Angry and frustrated, some students complain that their graders give them no context, no guidance, as they try to write their revisions. The worst, of course, is a paper with nothing more than a letter grade scribbled on the last page. On the other side of the extreme is excessive feedback or critique. Students refer to this as a "bleeding paper" or a "paper dipped in red ink." Here, students feel defeated, and only the most determined student will take the time to meticulously weed out useful feedback.

### The Bean Method of Giving Feedback

John Bean, in CWP's favorite writing-instructor guide *Engaging Ideas*, has an intricate system of giving feedback that some instructors may find useful. Bean gives two provisional grades on every paper: a "right brain" and a "left brain" grade. A right-brain grade is a gut-feeling, an impulsive score given immediately after a paper is read. A left-brain grade is a function of the assignment's rubric. Bean then compares both grades to other student papers. He argues that this method, though time-consuming, ensures normality among the grades. Such a method, however, may be difficult to transfer to teaching-assistant (TA) graders.

### Column Feedback

There are, I think, more efficient methods that balance the need for meaningful feedback, student guidance, and efficiency for instructors and TAs. One such method is the straightforward "Column Feedback". On the left-hand column, critique and give guidance, such as how to restructure a paragraph or topic sentence.

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In the right-hand column, give praise, such as identifying the strengths of a paper (e.g., paragraph's argument). On the final page of the paper, the instructor quickly summarizes both columns for the students' review and adds any final thoughts more general to the paper.

This method accomplishes a few things. First, it helps the student identify suggestions and praise with little trouble. No longer is the student drowning in feedback, trying to decipher what's what. Second, this method gives the instructor a visual reference for the strength of a paper. Instructors can quickly review a previously graded paper, either looking for critiques or strengths. Finally, the method is simple. Column feedback lends itself to efficient TA training.

### Feedback via Dictation

Another method I've used in the past is dictation, either dragon dictation or built-in dictation via Mac, which enables the user to have speech immediately converted into text. Often used as a means of writing quickly, I find that dictation software can cut my grading-time in half, while also allowing me to give in-depth feedback. Dictation has come a long way, offering up to 99% accuracy with a bit of training. As an added bonus, dictation can help lend an instructor's writing-voice to grading, something my students have always appreciated.

In sum, instructors can give useful feedback without going overboard. I encourage instructors to think of feedback as an investment. A sound investment reaps significant reward. The above methods can help instructors and TAs balance the needs of the students with the need for efficiency, creating a win-win situation in the classroom. And who wouldn't want that?



## Meaningful Learning Through Assignment Design

By Bonnie Selting

Through years of research, educators have concluded that writing does, indeed, promote the type of learning that we want to see in students. Rather than memorizing content and spitting it back out in bubbles, students are asked to actively and skillfully "conceptualize," "analyze," "synthesize," "reason," "evaluate," and "problematize" the disciplinary content they are learning. These high level thinking tasks cannot be achieved without writing. And we must remember that this type of learning, in its exemplary form, is not "discipline specific." No matter the discipline, meaningful learning is based on universal intellectual values that *transcend disciplinary subject divisions*, such as the ability to clarify, to be accurate and precise, and to be consistent with relevant information that is supported with sound evidence, solid reasoning, depth, breadth, and fairness.

To be specific, let's compare two disparate disciplines—History and Biology:

### Writing In History

History is a way of thinking about the world. It becomes most exciting when we study a collection of primary sources . . . to make sense [of the world] . . . to satisfy curiosity, [to] enrich our minds. . . . How did things get to be the way they are?" (Richard Marius)

#### To Write Skillfully in History

- Make careful observations
- Ask specific questions
- Design ways to address questions
- Manipulate historical data thoroughly and thoughtfully
- Ask new questions and redefine older ones

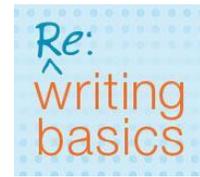
### Writing In Biology

"Biology is a way of thinking about the world. . . . Careful thinking cannot be separated from effective writing" (Jan A. Penchenik, Tufts University).

#### To Write Skillfully In Biology

- Make careful observations.
- Ask specific questions.
- Design ways to address questions.
- Manipulate data thoroughly and thoughtfully.
- Ask new questions and redefine older ones.

All of these theories on the value of writing relate directly to *writing assignment design* because good assignment design asks students to work toward higher levels of critical thinking. In a well-planned writing assignment, instructors ask that student writers attend to *audience, purpose, and context* as they work with complex, even chaotic tasks like problem/solution, persuasion, interpretation, reflection, and analysis of their information. In other words, skillfully designed writing assignments help learners give meaning to content by expecting them to think critically and abstractly.



*But*, good assignment design *also* needs to attend to the basics:

- Clear explanation of writing task
- Clear explanation of what the student is to produce.
- Designated, characterized Audience that should be *other* than the instructor if possible.
- Designated Writer's Role—writer should be encouraged to "get into the head of the audience."
- Clearly Designated Format
- Transparent evaluation criteria—students should know what is expected of them and how assessment will be carried, i.e., if there is to be rubric, they should have access to the rubric.
- Expectations about writing process—students should know instructor's thoughts in designing this assignment, *including goals and objectives*.
- Map of pertinent times and dates
- Example of an "A" essay on a related topic if possible

Furthermore, a skillfully designed writing assignment does NOT overload student writers with too many tasks for one paper. For instance, instructors can ask students to "synthesize" the literature, "analyze," "describe," "summarize," "compare/contrast," "define," etc., *but not all at once*.

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An instructor would do well to avoid throwing out these thinking and doing words without defining what they mean in the context of his/her writing assignment. For example, “analyze” can be seen as a catch-all word for any thinking/writing task and should really be defined in detail according to how an instructor is using it. In other words, instructors should tell students exactly what they mean when using words with elusive definitions.

And last but not least, instructors need to know how student are understanding the assignment. Instead of asking “Do you understand?” or “Are there any questions?” instructors can ask students to reiterate out-loud what they think is being asked of them. It is surprising how often students believe they know what an assignment is all about but are way off-base when they tell it back to the instructor.

## Perspectives on ENG1000: What It Can Do and What It Can't Do

By Naomi Clark

Recently MU faculty have been discussing whether the successful completion of English 1000 is or should be required before students enroll in a Writing Intensive (WI) course. To clear up any confusion, according to the Registrar's office, myZou does not prevent students from enrolling in WI courses before completing English 1000. However, ordinarily most students do follow this pattern simply by virtue of enrolling in English 1000 during their first semester at MU.

Sequencing English 1000 before WI courses is consistent with prevailing composition and writing across the curriculum (WAC) theory because it acknowledges the developmental nature of writing. Students cannot possibly learn all there is to know about academic writing in one semester prompting the need for writing instruction to continue in subsequent semesters. Furthermore, English 1000 can help students prepare for the assignments they are likely to find in WI courses which tend to be clustered in the upper-level range.

But while myZou does not universally prohibit pre-English 1000 students from enrolling in WI courses, if individual faculty members wish to make English 1000 a

requirement, they can work in conjunction with their departments to request that their course be flagged as such in myZou.



While English 1000 can introduce students to many of the conventions of scholarly analysis, research, and writing, it is also important to remember what it cannot do. One semester of composition usually is not enough time to magically transform students from high school writers to sophisticated academicians. It cannot erase all grammatical problems and punctuation errors from students' usage. It cannot single-handedly bring unprepared writers up to speed.

Not that this should surprise us, of course. It was for this very reason that a task force was formed at MU in 1984 in order to address the writing skills that lie beyond the scope of English 1000. As we know, the Campus Writing Program and MU's WI requirements for graduation are the results of this task force's efforts.

Hopefully this information will help WI faculty in designing courses and determining their courses' relationships to the broader curriculum. In keeping with the faculty-centered philosophy of the Campus Writing Program, the choice to enforce the English 1000 prerequisite remains with individual faculty and their departments.



## Meet The Campus Writing Program Staff

The members of the Campus Writing Program wish you a very Happy New Year! As you prepare for the new 2013 Spring Semester, we welcome opportunities to visit with you about your course, ideas for a new course, planning and revising a syllabus for an existing course, assignment design, assessment, and revision. We also provide help in ways to involve teaching assistants and grade norming sessions.

**Dr. Amy Lannin** is the Director of the Campus Writing Program and also serves as a faculty member in the College of Education. Dr. Lannin's background in English education provides a natural fit for writing across the curriculum.

**Dr. Bonnie Selting** has served as a coordinator in the Campus Writing Program since 2007. Bonnie's work in rhetoric and composition strengthens the theoretical base of the CWP. She has had extensive work in writing across the curriculum. As a coordinator, she works with faculty in the Natural and Applied Sciences and in the Humanities and Arts to prepare courses for the Campus Writing Board to review.

**Jonathan Cisco** joined CWP in Fall 2012. Jonathan's extensive tutoring experience, paired with his background in political science, business, and education, provides another rich layer of experience to MU's writing across the curriculum work. Jonathan coordinates the Education and Social Sciences division. He is working on a Ph.D. in Literacy Education.

**Jackie Thomas** has served the longest with CWP. Starting her work as the Administrative Assistant for CWP in 2006, she has kept the program organized, coordinates events and maintains ongoing contact with faculty. Jackie is also a writer and a regular blogger.

**Naomi Clark** started work with Campus Writing Program in 2011 as she helped reinstate the student online publication of *Artifacts*. As Managing Editor, Naomi has continued to lead these publication efforts. Naomi has served as a Graduate Research Assistant to the program for 2012-2013. She is finishing her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition.



## Spring 2013 Events and Workshops

For Registration and More Information about CWP Events:

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

January 14/15, 2013	54 <sup>th</sup> Faculty Writing Intensive Workshop
January 18, 2013	TA Workshop
January 25, 2013	Faculty Workshop Refresher
February 1, 2013	Faculty Writing Retreat
February 13, 2013	CWP Seminar: When Expectations Are Not Met; Support For Developing Writers
March 8, 2013	Faculty Writing Retreat
March 20, 2013	CWP Seminar: Plagiarism
April 5, 2013	Faculty Writing Retreat
April 10, 2013	CWP Seminar: Faculty Innovations in Teaching WI
April 26, 2013	CWP Awards Recognition Ceremony and Reception
May 3, 2013	Faculty Writing Retreat

### THANK YOU

A Special Thank You to [Brian Johnson](#) for allowing CWP to use his beautiful photo of Jesse Hall as our cover photo for this issue of e-WAC. Brian is a graduate of the University Of Missouri School Of Journalism and is currently a Reporter and Weekend [Anchor at WILX 10](#) in Lansing, Michigan.

*CWP events fill up quickly!*

*Register early to ensure your spot at one*

*of our many offerings this year.*

*We look forward to seeing you!*

## CONTACT US

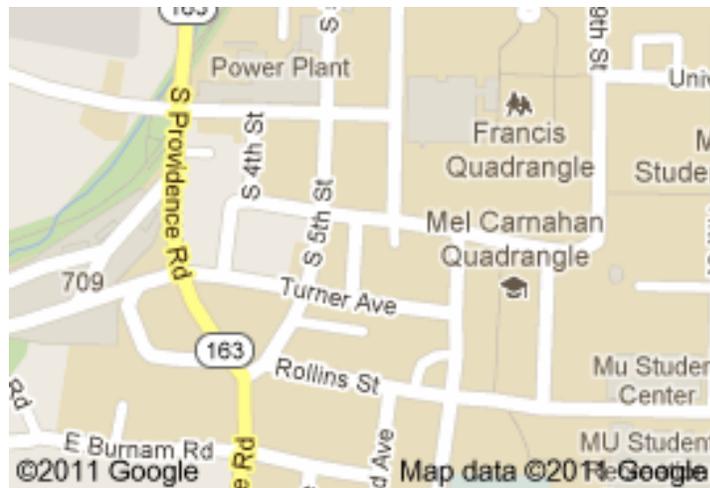
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## Need to Finish Some of Your Own Writing?

Join the Campus Writing Program for Faculty Writing Retreats held in the Historic Conley House. We will provide you with a light breakfast and lunch and a quiet space to work on your project.

Scheduled Writing Retreats For Spring Semester 2013:



February 1, 2013  
March 8, 2013  
April 5, 2013  
May 3, 2013

To register:

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