

Fall 2011 - Print Version

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## Teaching With Writing: The WIC Newsletter

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### [Pre/Views: Fall 2011](#)

#### **Pre/Views: Ethics and Outcomes**

By Vicki Tolar Burton, WIC Director



Whether you teach in the STEM fields, the liberal arts, the health sciences, or elsewhere in the university, you're probably thinking about how your students have done this term and what changes you might make in the future to improve your teaching and their learning. This is the process of assessment, and we hope *Teaching with Writing* will give you some ideas that will help in a number of ways.

This issue features an interview with Janet Tate, Professor of Physics, and includes her ideas about integrating [training in ethical research practices](#) into the WIC thesis writing of physics undergraduates. Professor Tate's list of ethical concerns in physics can motivate us all to develop a similar list for our own discipline and to share these ethical principles with our students.

Another useful resource in this issue is the WIC seminar participants' [top ten characteristics of strong student writing](#). Check out their list and compare it to your own. Would your students right now, at end of term, be able to say what writing traits are valued most in their major? As Michael Shum reports, "Content and clarity remain king," with both ranking again in the top five writing values.

Clarity is also the goal in requiring that each syllabus for a Bacc Core course include the learning outcomes for the category. Check out our website for the new [WIC learning outcomes](#). (Yes, we need to include the exact outcome language, in addition to our other course learning outcomes. And we need to be clear as well about how students will demonstrate learning.) For all Bacc Core category outcomes, [click here](#).

Do you ever start a term wishing you knew more about your students as writers, their past experiences in writing and their goals for the future? The WIC program offers the [Writer's Personal Profile](#) (WPP), a survey tool used at start of term that can give you important information about your students and help them not only set individual goals as writers but also understand what a Writing Intensive course is. By the way, we have learned that the WPP, designed by OSU's Tracy Ann Robinson (School of MIME), has been adapted for use at MIT, as well as at several other institutions.

Would you like to [administer the WPP in Blackboard](#)? See our new instructions in this issue. Find best practices for using the WPP on the WIC website link.

In addition to the WIC website, we are beginning [a resource group within Blackboard for WIC](#) teachers. The Blackboard version of the WPP is there for you to pilot test and import to your own Blackboard course site. If you've participated in the WIC Faculty Seminar since 2010, you will already be a member of the site. Otherwise, please contact Michael Shum if you want to be added to the resource page ([shumm@onid.orst.edu](mailto:shumm@onid.orst.edu)).

Our goal is to help you do your work better and with more ease. We hope this issue will do that.

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### [Teaching Ethics in Physics: An Interview with Janet Tate](#)

#### **WIC Faculty Profile: Janet Tate**

by Zachary Pajak



*WIC Seminar Alum, '09*

*WIC Courses Taught ~ Physics 403: Thesis WIC Class*

*Some favorite writers ~ David Mermin, Lewis Carroll, and Charles Dickens*

When asked why she volunteered to teach Physics 403, a WIC course that helps students prepare their thesis projects, Professor of Physics Janet Tate did not hesitate: "I love reading, I love writing, I love listening to stories, and I love things that are presented clearly. I love being able to read something or listen to something

and just suddenly have that flash of insight. I think everybody ought to be able to do that, to be able to present what they've done in a way that makes everybody nod and say, 'Ah, yes yes yes.'"

As both an undergraduate at the University of Natal, South Africa, and a graduate student at Stanford University, Professor Tate internalized her understanding and process of science writing by means of "on-the-job" paper and thesis writing rather than any formal training. These writing experiences, says Professor Tate, were "never put forth as, 'this is a writing experience.' It was just sort of expected that you do the right thing. The expectation of writing, of course, is that people somehow intuitively absorb how to do it, but not all people do." Describing the sheer importance and value of students' needing to learn writing in their respective disciplines, Professor Tate affirms, "It is important that everybody has specific training and that one has the opportunity to specifically talk about writing in your discipline. So I try to make up for all the things that I would have liked to experience myself but never did."

Among the ways in which Professor Tate creates such writing experiences for her students is by making effective use of peer review. "Almost always I'm writing and coauthoring," says Professor Tate, "so peer review is built into our profession. Sometimes the structure that you've put your heart and soul into for the last 5 hours actually doesn't work, and you throw it out. And that kind of discipline is hard to come by. But maybe you acquire it if you have your peers listen." She further acknowledges, "I don't know that [such discipline] even comes from the instructor. There may be too much 'Well, she said I have to change this, so I'll go and change it.' But if your *peers* read something and *they* don't understand, then clearly there's this impetus to change. And that's who you write for. You write for your peers."

Physics 403 students learn to make a point of writing for their peers every day. They often spend 10 minutes writing at the beginning of class and then 10 minutes reviewing what they've written, or even devoting the entire class time to reviewing each other's thesis work. "I like [peer review] to be in-class as much as possible," explains Professor Tate, "because outside of class, the time students spend working on the thesis should be spent on their own work, not editing other people's work. But it is helpful to have them peer review in class to then hope that this influences their practices outside the classroom." Professor Tate further helps students outside of class in how she responds to their drafts, keeping in mind the large investment of time they must devote to the revision process: "I have a tendency to pick up something and to immediately start editing, line-by-line editing. And restraining myself from doing that is hard, even though it takes too much time. So, being given 'permission' by [the WIC Seminar] to *not* do that was good. I think it's probably more helpful .... The student is able to devote more time to thoughts and content. It makes life better for both you and the student."

The way in which students learn as a community of writers carries with it the need for students to understand the ethics of writing. Notably, Physics 403's curriculum works to deepen students' knowledge of the ethics of writing in the discipline. When Department Chair Professor Henri Jansen first created the course, he structured it so that an ethics component could be implemented. As Professor Tate continually and creatively expands upon this structure, she observes students collectively learning several important ethical points:

**"The implications of things like proper storage of data, proper recording of results, acknowledging sources, being open about where funding comes from, their responsibility of co-authorship, the need to peer review—all of those are things students haven't usually thought about before on their own, and they're just very interested, because it's not something that is taught in other physics classes."**

When students collaboratively learn the ethics of the discipline, they also learn how a community of researchers responds to and works to resolve violations of ethics. In fact, according to Professor Tate, the most important aspect of ethics for students to understand is "not so much the astonishing violation of ethics that happen once in a while, but how the community deals with [such violations] ... We as researchers have to make sure that we don't even have tendencies in that direction. Most of us would never flagrantly make up data, and so there's this tendency to think, 'Oh well I would never do that,' but I think there are lessons for all of us in [the serious fraud cases]."

Asked to describe her own writing process, Professor Tate explains that a striking and very key component of writing in her discipline is the use of visuals: "In the kind of work that I do, or almost any kind of science writing, figures and graphical and non-textual illustrations are very important. And so I think it's important to put those in first. 'This is what I'm going to be describing,' I'll say, [in regards to] three or four key figures. And then I try to structure the paper around those important figures. It also builds your focus." Professor Tate emphasizes that visuals "impose constraints and discipline, as well. You find yourself asking about what things you can't put graphs in that you would like to. Visuals must be clear, uncluttered, and tell a story, just like prose. I tend to cram in more than I should, and then I have to take things out. That also requires discipline that I sometimes don't have."

Among Professor Tate's favorite writers in the realm of physics is N. David Mermin, the Horace White Professor of Physics Emeritus at Cornell University. Professor Mermin writes with a comic slant, which Professor Tate enjoys, she says, "because there's this imagery evoked in comedy at the right moment and there's a clarity about it that I wish we could achieve in science writing, too. So he manages to be clear and elegant about his writing. He chooses words well, he is economical with his prose, and it's fun." Professor Tate also loves Lewis Carroll, whom she appreciates in great part because "a certain logic is built into the writing that always appeals, that always comes out. Even though he's apparently writing nonsense, there's a structure underneath it."

Another writer Professor Tate admires is Charles Dickens, whose writing, she observes, demonstrates how "style has definitely evolved over the years, and shows that writing is very different now. If you look at physics papers from even 50 years ago, the style is quite different now than it was then. Style evolves." Connecting such evolution of style to writing-to-learn practices, Professor Tate comments that when you as a writer look at writing over time, "You see things that other people do that you then can incorporate or not as you see fit in your own work. Things to avoid, things to emulate." Professor Tate's instruction of Physics 403 provides a means by which students learn to help their own writing evolve, and also provides many rich insights and practices for writing instructors across the disciplines.

When discussing Professor Mermin's work, Professor Tate recommended his homepage, which provides links to insightful pieces he has written on writing:

<http://people.ccmr.cornell.edu/~mermin/homepage/ndm.html>

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## **Faculty Seminar Recap: Content and Clarity Remain King**

by Michael Shum

The Fall 2011 WIC Faculty Seminar was another resounding success.

Every year, we ask our seminar participants to rank order the values they look for when evaluating writing in their disciplines. This year, the four values that were listed by over half our participants include:



- » Writing that is appropriate for the audience;
- » Effective organization;
- » Ideas fully developed; and
- » Strong, accurate content.

Overall, if we combine both this year's results and last year's, **strong, accurate content** and **clarity** consistently remain the top two writing characteristics that WIC faculty value. The table below shows the top ten values mentioned in the last two years by seminar participants:

- » Strong, accurate content (mentioned by 61% of participants)
- » Clarity (54%)
- » Depth of insight (50%)
- » Effective organization (46%)
- » Ideas fully developed (46%)
- » Appropriate for audience (39%)
- » Purpose is clear (32%)
- » Appropriate to the assignment (25%)
- » Creativity (21%)
- » Few errors of grammar and usage (18%)

Finally, we would like to recognize and thank all of the 2011-12 WIC Faculty Seminar participants for their enthusiasm and investment in promoting writing across the disciplines:

- » Shahnaz Badiie (Human Development and Family Sciences)
- » Byrne Brewerton (INTO OSU)
- » Norma Cardenas (Ethnic Studies)
- » Mark Fermanich (Education)
- » Greg Friedman (INTO OSU)
- » Sally Hacker (Zoology)
- » Sarah Henkel (Zoology, Hatfield MSC)
- » Jennifer Maguire (HDFS)
- » James Males (Animal Sciences)
- » Kathleen McDonnell (HDFS)
- » Camille Nelson (Economics)
- » Miranda Paton (Center for Humanities)
- » Mary Pilgrim (Mathematics)
- » Michele Rutherford (INTO OSU)
- » Carmen Steggell (Design and Human Environment)
- » Lisa Udem (AFROTC)

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## **Quick WIC Reminders: The WIC Resource Page on Blackboard**

### **The WIC Resource Page on Blackboard**

We are proud to introduce the **WIC Resource Page**, an organizational site on Blackboard that contains materials to help support the teaching of your WIC Class. Because the site is on Blackboard, much of the material will be directly importable to your own Blackboard class site, including the Writer's Personal Profile (WPP) survey that is usually administered to students during the first week of class.



If you participated in the WIC Faculty Seminar since 2010, you have been automatically added as a member of the WIC Resource Page. Simply login to your Blackboard account, and you should see the page listed as **WIC (Writing Intensive Curriculum) Resources (org\_273806\_YEAR2999)**. Otherwise, to join the site, please send an e-mail to [shumm@onid.orst.edu](mailto:shumm@onid.orst.edu) and we will add you manually.

We will be adding resources to the page every month, so please let us know what you would like to see on there.

### 2011-12 Culture of Writing Awards

Don't forget that each spring the Writing Intensive Curriculum program offers the WIC Culture of Writing Awards in the Disciplines, with \$50 matching funds from WIC to any department that wishes to offer an undergraduate writing prize. So start saving those papers now! Keep in mind that the winning papers don't have to be from a WIC class.

The awards are administered and awarded within each participating department, with the department selecting the best student paper written in their undergraduate courses.

### WIC Learning Outcomes

Every WIC course at OSU is required to include these learning outcomes on the syllabus and indicate how students will demonstrate that the outcomes are achieved.

1. Develop and articulate content knowledge and critical thinking in the discipline through frequent practice of informal and formal writing.
2. Demonstrate knowledge/understanding of audience expectations, genres, and conventions appropriate to communicating in the discipline.
3. Demonstrate the ability to compose a document of at least 2000 words through multiple aspects of writing, including brainstorming, drafting, using sources appropriately, and revising comprehensively after receiving feedback on a draft.

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### **WIC Lesson: Deploying the Writer's Personal Profile (WPP) on Blackboard Deploying the Writer's Personal Profile (WPP) Survey on Blackboard**

by Team WIC



The implementation of assessment practices has become a major initiative at many universities in the past several years, and—as you may have noticed in your own department or college—Oregon State is strongly situating itself to be part of that movement.

Assessment at the programmatic level begins with assessment in the classroom, typically entailing a survey that is administered both pre- and post-class to ascertain self-perceived improvement throughout the duration of the course.

WIC has now made it easy for you to conduct a pre-class assessment of your students' writing ability in your WIC class, by leveraging the Writer's Personal Profile (WPP) survey, originally designed by Tracy Ann Robinson to measure students' perception of their writing ability as they entered their Mechanical Engineering WIC course. The questions, however, are general enough to be useful for any class where a culture of writing is promoted.

How to Deploy the WPP in Your WIC Class Using Blackboard:

1. If you have participated in the WIC Faculty Seminar since 2010, you will already be a member of the recently created [WIC Resources Organization on Blackboard](#). If you do not have access to this resource site, please e-mail us [shumm@oregonstate.edu](mailto:shumm@oregonstate.edu) and we will grant you access within twenty-four hours.
2. Enter the resource site and pilot test the WPP to familiarize yourself with the survey you will be administering to your students. The survey takes less than fifteen minutes.
3. Go to the Blackboard site for your class and under the Control Panel, click on "Course Tools" -> "Tests, Surveys, and Pools" -> "Surveys" -> "Import Survey" -> "Browse Content Collection."
4. In the left-hand menu, click on "Organization Content" and open up "orgs" to reveal all the Blackboard Organization sites of which you are a member. Find and click on the WIC Resource Organization (org\_273806\_YEAR2999) to open up our shared content. Select the WPP (SurveyExportFile\_org\_273806\_YEAR2999\_Writers Personal Profile (WPP) for OSU Writing Intensive Students.zip) and click "Submit." Then click "Submit" again.
5. Now go to the Blackboard site for your class and enter the Content Area where you want the survey to be found by your students. For example, you can place the survey under "Course Documents."
6. Click on "Create Assessment" and "Survey." You will see the imported survey "Writer's Personal Profile (WPP) for OSU Writing Intensive Students." Select and "Submit."
7. Scroll down to the second section entitled "Survey Availability," and click "Yes" to make the survey available, and "Yes" if you want an automatic announcement of the survey sent out to all the users in your class. Leave everything else as its default, and "Submit."
8. The survey is now up and running and ready for administration. To see the aggregated responses of your students, go to the Grade Center and find the column for the WPP (which you can hide from your students),

and click "Attempts Statistics." Alternatively, you can "Download Results" to see the individual responses from each user.

The survey should be administered during the first week of class. An effective way to assess their improvement through the course is to conduct a post-class assessment that asks students to reflect on their self-defined weaknesses in the WPP, and whether or not they believe the WIC course has strengthened them in these regards.

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#### **CONTACT INFO**

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