# Bringing writing to art and design

**Andrea Marks**
**Associate Professor, Art**

There is no question that there is value in writing. But to what extent should writing play a role in a graphic design curriculum, and what is its educational value?

Several years ago my colleagues and I created a writing intensive course in our graphic design curriculum, as part of a university mandate for the new Baccalaureate Core. It was at this time that I began to think about the relationship between writing and design and to see this relationship in new ways.

Perhaps a first step in developing an effective writing intensive course can be for faculty in a given discipline to discuss the many ways writing can and should be part of a student's experience within that area. In this discussion, writing can be looked at as both a tool for understanding a topic and clarifying thoughts, and also how it is pragmatically part of the discipline—for example, in writing up project briefs and lab reports. Next, it can be very helpful to examine courses offered and discuss how writing is currently used in the class. I have found students are writing a lot these days, but unfortunately, it is mostly in the form of instant messages and e-mails. Writing with ease and confidence takes practice, much like playing an instrument, and instant messaging does not offer the right practice method. I think it is our responsibility as educators to help students see the importance of writing in the 21st century.

As faculty are aware, the premise of a writing intensive course is that students engage more actively in writing and learning when they are passion-



Photo courtesy of Andrea Marks
**Andrea Marks helped develop a WIC course in graphic design.**

ate and interested in a given topic. In addition, addressing writing outside of English classes forces students to see how writing is integral to their discipline. For graphic design students who are studying letterforms and typography, a writing intensive

# Pre/Views: Writing for visual thinkers

**Lisa Ede**
**Acting WIC Director**

Before commenting on this issue of *Teaching with Writing*, I want to encourage you to make time for a talk on Tuesday, May 12 by WIC's special guest speaker for this year, David Russell. David Russell is Professor of Rhetoric and Professional Communication at Iowa State University.

Russell is the author of *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History*. He is the coeditor of *Writing Selves/Writing Society, Writing and Learning in Cross-National Perspective: Transitions from Secondary to Higher Education*, and *Landmark Essays in Writing Across the Curriculum*. Recently, Russell has been creating and researching online multimedia case studies as environments for writing to learn.

Professor Russell is making two presentations on May 12th. At noon he will speak about "My Involvement with WIC/WAC/WID and What I've Learned Over the Years." This event will take place in Waldo 121. Please e-mail Lisa Ede if you would like to participate—we need an accurate count for pizza.

Later that day at 4 p.m. Professor Russell will make a more formal presentation, "Creating Writing Assignments that Work for Your Course—AND Your Curriculum." This event will be from 4-5 in the Memorial Union, Room 211. No RSVP is necessary: all are welcome.

# Bringing writing to art and design

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course brings another level of awareness to words, meanings, and narrative structures.

When the graphic design faculty redesigned the curriculum in 2001, we had one designated WIC course, Contemporary Issues in Design, but we also agreed that writing should not be brought into that course only. We discussed ways that writing could be brought into the process of problem-solving, ways writing could be brought into critiques, and ways that writing could be used for students to access and reflect on their learning experiences in all their classes. As a result, I think our students are very comfortable with using writing as part of their design process toolbox.

Contemporary Issues in Design is a 400-level course required for all graphic design majors. This 3-credit seminar style course explores contemporary culture and issues that affect designers. These topics are examined through reading, writing, discussions and projects. While a ten-week course can only touch the surface of many of these issues, it is nonetheless of value for students to realize that graphic designers are influenced by culture and vice versa. The class also questions and discusses ethics and social responsibilities of graphic designers within our society.

I also think it is important to read good writing from both within the student's discipline and outside of it. For example, a combination of readings—scholarly researched articles, narrative essays, opinion pieces (blogs and editorials) and articles from a publication like *The New Yorker*—can provide a diverse range of writing styles as examples.

My colleagues and I purposely set up this course in a fairly broad manner; that is, whoever teaches the class can decide which topics to explore and how to explore them, as well as which reading material to assign.

One aspect of writing that I have focused on when I have taught the course is the parallels between the writing and design process. It seems that the majority of design students, and possibly undergraduate students in general, are not very confident with their writing skills. I discuss aspects of a writing process much the same way I would a design process. Conceptual skills are developed in both writing and design through various exercises that enable a student to see a myriad of solutions.

One requirement of the class is that students develop at least one lengthy, formal writing assignment, which translates into a senior thesis paper about a contemporary design topic. An interesting aspect of this written thesis is that each student uses it as the basis for a visual thesis the following term. After researching and writing on the topic for ten weeks, each student is very familiar with her or his topic and can develop an interesting set of visual experiments based on the topic.

Again, we are not trying to make professional writers out of design students; we are simply emphasizing writing as another way to think and learn.

In the end, what began as a challenging task—integrating writing into a graphic design curriculum—had transformed into an opportunity to strengthen our students' writing and critical thinking skills while opening them, and the instructors who teach them, to new avenues for growth within our field.

## Fall 2009 WIC Faculty Seminar
## Call for Participants

Faculty interested in the Fall 2009 Introductory WIC Faculty Seminar should ask their department chair to send an e-mail nomination to WIC Program Director Vicki Tolar Burton at vicki.tolarbuton@oregonstate.edu.

The seminar, designed both for faculty who plan to teach WIC courses and for those who want to learn to use writing in non-WIC courses, will meet five Wednesday afternoons from 3-5 p.m. An honorarium of $250 is awarded to each participant upon completion of the seminar.

# A venture into publishing: the e-book

**Travis Margoni**
**WIC GTA**

When Andrea Marks was awarded a Writing Intensive Curriculum grant in 2001, she didn't necessarily foresee it serving as the foundation for an e-book eight years later. Marks, an associate professor in the art department, said "the WIC grant got the ball rolling in terms of thinking about what form a writing guide for design students could take."

That grant led to the eventual publication of *Writing for Visual Thinkers*.

With the WIC grant, Marks created a writing guide for graphic design students. This guide was used primarily in ART 412, Contemporary Issues in Design, which is required for all graphic design majors and explores current design issue through reading and writing. Marks explained that "The aim of this self-published 80-page black and white book was to introduce graphic design students to the many ways writing can be used within their creative process, as well as in their professional practice as a designer." This goal is, of course, congruent with one of the WIC criteria, that a course will introduce students to writing in the profession or the discipline.

Writing guides like the one Marks began in 2001 have been created by many departments at OSU, several of which were assisted by WIC grant funds. Some of the writing guides provide a brief overview of the discipline's standards and formats, while others are far more extensive. The OSU Department of Sociology writing guide is a 91-page document.

A meeting with an acquisitions editor at the 2005 American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA) Design Conference in Boston led to developing the book. Marks said the publisher, AIGA/New Riders, showed interest in her project but wanted to specifically develop an e-book. Her initial excitement over the opportunity to publish the book waned. As a lover of physical books, she was hesitant to develop an e-book.

Some of the resistance Marks first felt toward the e-book, she said, came from her previous experiences with the format. Many of the early e-books were clunky, resembling a scanned book, without much interactivity. Marks wondered if this was a consolation prize in the publishing world. "But," she said, "I decided to see where this would take me."

Eventually, Marks began to realize what the "e" in e-book could stand for besides "electronic."

• An expandable book—with the addition of links and other media.

• An educational book—encouraging learning through interactivity.

• An economical book—costing nothing to print and publish.

• An environmental book—no paper, no waste.

• An ear-friendly book—one that could be heard by the vision impaired, thanks to Read Out Loud software capabilities.

• An exciting book—not only fun to create but also enjoyable to read and experience.

*Electronic*

*Expandable*

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*Ear-friendly*

*Exciting*

Marks said that the more she thought about her target audience, 18 to 24-year-old students, it became clear that an e-book was an ideal medium to talk about writing. The book does not cover traditional writing and grammar conventions, but rather opens a dialogue with undergraduate art and design students about the ways that writing can and should be incorporated into their creative lives, according to Marks.

The book begins with a chapter on "The Writer's Toolbox," which guides students in using writing tools like mind maps, concept maps, reflective writing, and freewriting. Other chapters include "Thinking in Words and Pictures," "Verbal and Visual Connections," and "Writing and Editing in the 21st Century." In the preface, Marks explains that "the goal of this book is to explore the potential of written communication as a way to better understand the process of visual communication."

The book contains over 550 links that take the reader beyond its pages, which Marks said puts the student at an advantage, exploring the content non-linearly. For example, she said, "instead of just talking about Jack Kerouac's scroll, a student can go to a YouTube video and watch it being unrolled at a museum."

Of course, Marks ran into some unique challenges when it came time to create the e-book. The very nature of the e-book, with its many links, takes the reader away from the original pages, but ultimately Marks decided that this is an effective way to allow the reader freedom to explore the subject in multiple ways.

Marks tried not to let the e-book grow into "a 500-page tome," and worked to keep the PDF at no more than 120 pages, allowing the links to add detail and depth to the content—something that would, of course, not be possible in a traditional, printed book.

Deciding on which linked sites would be best was another daunting task, but Marks was able to sort through sites by searching for pages that were of high quality both visually and verbally, avoiding pages with too many colors or typefaces, and those with unclear navigation and poor content.

Adding various media is fairly easy with an e-book, and Marks added audio podcast interviews to her e-book; these allow readers to hear artists, designers, educators, and writers discuss thoughts on writing, reading, editing, and making.

Marks is now developing a teachers' guide to help educators make the best use of the e-book, and she intends to distribute a questionnaire to her students who have downloaded her text to solicit feedback. This guide will be available on the *Writing for Visual Thinkers* Web site that Marks is currently developing, which she envisions as a continuation of the book.

In the end, as much as she loves print, Marks said she cannot imagine *Writing for Visual Thinkers* in any other format.

*Writing for Visual Thinkers* is available for $17.99 at www.peachpit.com, and additional information about the e-book is available at www.aiga.org/content.cfm/writing-for-visual-thinkers.

# David Russell speaks on writing across the curriculum

Travis Margoni
WIC GTA

Guest speaker David Russell, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Iowa State University, will be presenting at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, May 12, in the Memorial Union, Room 211. The title of the talk is "Creating Writing Assignments that Work for Your course—And Your Curriculum."

In addition, Professor Russell will speak at the WIC lunch at noon, Tuesday, May 12, in Waldo Hall 121.

As an introduction to his talks, we've asked Professor Russell a few questions about his experiences with and his research on developing student writers across the disciplines.

**Could you describe your involvement with WAC as a scholar, teacher, and writing program administrator?**

I've been teaching communication—mostly writing—and developing writing programs for 30 years now. WAC, CAC (communication across the curriculum), writing centers, ESL, composition. And 25 years ago I got very interested in the history of how higher education has dealt with writing. So I wrote a history and then got more interested in researching how students learn to write and learn through writing in various disciplines and professions.

**We know that you've worked extensively with faculty at Iowa State. What are two or three of the most important things that you have learned as a result of these collaborative efforts?**

Let me say, different disciplines and professions use writing so much in so many different ways that sometimes writing seems to disappear. I talked to a colleague of mine in engineering and asked him, "Do your students do any writing in your courses?" He said, "Oh no."

But after knowing him for a period of time and seeing what he did in his courses, it turned out that his students were doing very sophisticated computer modeling simulations and writing collaborative reports, which they presented to each other in class and then later to other faculty and people outside the university in industry. I asked him one day, "I thought you said your students weren't doing any writing?" And he said to me, "Oh. They're not. They're not writing. They're just writing it up."

So there's a big difference between writing—writing it down and writing it up. He was thinking of writing as something that happened in English courses. The writing was so embedded in the work of his discipline, in his system of activity, that he kind of took it for granted.

Writing is really much like the activity of playing the piano. It's not a single generalizable skill learned once and for all, but it's a developing accomplishment, and it takes a lot of practice. Like playing the piano, you can write in many styles. So when we say we want our students to learn to write, I think some people imagine that we want them to learn to write for anyone at any time talking about anything. Instead, we have jazz writing, classical writing, ragtime writing—all kinds of things, and although a person might be able to play in several styles, you have to learn to play in those styles one at a time.

**Is there anything you'd like to say to faculty at OSU who are interested in supporting the development of student writers?**

One of the things I'm finding is that WAC is not only motivated by an interest in writing for other specialists, but also an interest in presenting one's discipline and one's profession to wider publics.

Professionals increasingly need to make the case for what they do. Not each and every professional each and every day, but certainly students who come through a degree program looking to go out into the world will be much more comfortable if they can explain what they're about and the value of what they're about to others.

## Pre/Views

If you'd like to get a sense of Professor Russell's interests and experiences, be sure to check the Q&A in this issue.

This winter/spring issue of *Teaching With Writing* calls attention to the value of bringing writing to such visual areas as graphic design. In her cover story, Andrea Marks, a faculty member in the Art Department, discusses the development of a new capstone WIC course and its role in the graphic design curriculum. Professor Marks' discussion emphasizes that a successful WIC class helps "students to see how writing is integral to their discipline."

In addition to co-developing a 400-level WIC class, Contemporary Issues in Design, Professor Marks also used a 2001 WIC grant to write a WIC writing guide, *Writing for Visual Thinkers*. In "A venture into publishing: the e-book," WIC GTA Travis Margoni narrates the fascinating story of how Andrea Marks turned her self-published WIC writing guide into a powerful e-book.

In closing, I just want to say how much I have valued working with and learning from faculty across campus this year. Your commitment to student learning and writing is inspiring, so thank you for all that you do.

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