

Spring 2012 - Print Version

## Teaching With Writing: The WIC Newsletter

### Pre/Views: Assessing Writing at OSU

by Vicki Tolar Burton



This issue of *Teaching with Writing* brings you updates on the status of writing at OSU from a number of perspectives. **Mike Shum's** article "[Challenge Your Students on Writing Assignments: Reviews of Writing at OSU](#)" brings together writing assessment data from a number of sources: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), and the soon-to-be-released report of the Review of Writing in the Baccalaureate Core. Mike traces some common threads in these reports: a need for OSU students to do more writing across their courses and beyond writing courses, and a need for more challenging writing assignments.

Did you know that the WIC website has [links to twelve writing guides](#) developed by OSU departments for their students? Because many of these guides were developed more than ten years ago, the WIC team has taken on a project to assess the status and update needs of these guides by interviewing point-people for each. Read **Zach Pajak's** article "[Writing Guidance: Writing Guide Assessment](#)" to find out what we learned and what's next for the departmental writing guides. .

There is also change afoot in the way the Baccalaureate Core Committee (BCC) of the Faculty Senate plans to conduct category review of WIC courses beginning next year. The BCC will review about 25 to 30 WIC courses a year, by college. First on deck are WIC courses in the colleges of Agricultural Sciences, Business, and Public Health and Human Sciences. Units in these three colleges will be collecting data for WIC category review during the 2012-13 school year, reflecting on that data, and submitting their results through Category Review forms in June, 2013. In the fall of 2013, the BCC will review the reports submitted by the units and decide on re-certification of the courses as WIC courses for the next seven years. We will share the full seven-year schedule of WIC category reviews in the fall issue of this newsletter.

With the school year ending, I want to recognize and thank my great WIC team for 2011-12. Working with them has been a joy. Assistant WIC Coordinator Mike Shum, a fiction writer with a PhD in Psychology, has been an amazing force for good in the WIC program, helping us to use data to understand writing and recognizing patterns in the work we do each day and the problems writing teachers face. Mike is leaving us to enter a PhD program in Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee. Thanks also to Zach Pajak, the WIC GTA, who has a wealth of energy for working with faculty on writing issues. Zach is scheduled to assume the Assistant Coordinator position in the fall. **Matt Roth**, a grad student in the College Student Services Administration program, has been my Bacc Core and WIC intern for more than a year. His steady dependability and great ideas on all things digital have improved both programs. Matt graduates this month and is heading for Chicago and a job in the corporate world. **Allen Sprague**, a graduate student in Rhetoric and Writing, served as a WIC intern this term and will become the WIC GTA in the fall. Allen gets up early, and he gets things done. He is already an invaluable member of the WIC team. Thanks, guys. You have made this one of WIC's best years ever.

Happy summer, everyone!

### Challenge Your Students on Writing Assignments: Reviews of Writing at OSU

by Michael Shum

A good writing assignment not only improves students' writing ability, but also fosters growth and expansion of intellectual skills above and beyond writing. Importantly, it is this set of skills that employers feel recent college graduates most lack: a survey of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in 2007 revealed that the four qualities on which entry-level employees are most unprepared are, in order of mention, global knowledge, self-direction, writing, and critical thinking. Improvement in all of these areas can be engendered through well thought out writing assignments, but are these the kinds of assignments that we are assigning our students?



The 2010 results from the annual National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which surveyed OSU freshmen and seniors from the 2009-10 academic year, indicate that often, our students are assigned many multiple-choice exams and few challenging writing assignments, potentially leading to a reduced academic experience as compared to other similar land-granted, research-based universities around the country. For example, 73% of first-year students and 78% of seniors at peer institutions feel that their experience at their respective universities contributed strongly to helping

---

them write clearly and effectively; however, the percentages at OSU are only 60% for first-years and 66% for seniors.

This data is borne out when we examine the kinds of writing assignments used at other universities compared to OSU. Our seniors report significantly less time devoted to important aspects of the writing process such as brainstorming, receiving feedback from the instructor on a draft before turning in the final assignment, analyzing or evaluating something they had read, researched, or observed, and arguing a position using evidence and reasoning. Additionally, although each step of the writing process is strongly emphasized in WR 121, since over 40% of freshmen enter OSU with WR 121 already completed, many of our freshmen respondents may have had *no* writing assigned during their first year.

Overall, these results suggest that the writing assignments deployed at OSU throughout the curriculum may be less challenging and less engaging than those of our peer universities, and may lead to a less enriching educational experience for our students as a whole. In some way, our students may arrive at the faulty conclusion that their expectations as to their academic development should be lowered, especially when we compare their responses on the NSSE with their expectations as expressed on the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), which is administered during Orientation Week, prior to their having taken any classes at the university. For example, more than half of our freshmen enter expecting to study more than twenty hours a week during their first year in college, but only 27% report that they actually do. Similarly, 39% expect to interact with faculty often outside of the classroom, but only 14% report that they do. This attenuation in expectation seeps into the relatively easy grading freshmen report they receive: only 15% enter feeling they will get “mostly A’s” during their first year, but almost twice as many say that they actually do.

So what is the upshot? At a recent WIC Lunch, Director of Composition **Susan Meyers** presented results from a year-long review of writing in the Bacc Core that included findings from a faculty survey and focus groups. Writing in the Bacc Core includes WR 121, Writing II courses, Synthesis courses, and WIC courses. The review identified five main areas that need to be addressed:

1. Curriculum and writing expectations need to be more uniform across sections of the same course
2. Information about expectations and results needs to be better communicated
3. There are not enough extended writing assignments (i.e., over four pages)
4. Low-achieving students need more support
5. Students overall need more practice with writing

In other words, the goal of fostering a culture of writing across the disciplines at OSU has not yet been achieved. To address these concerns, the Writing Review Committee has recommended the following suggestions to Bac Core faculty:

1. Make sure that curriculum is uniform across sections and give advisors more information about courses
2. Establish clearer expectations for writing
3. Introduce a model of Faculty Writing Advocates (i.e., a person in each discipline who is well-versed in the best practices for writing within that discipline)
4. Offer training on writing pedagogies to departmental units
5. Pilot a “stretch model” 100-level writing class for students with additional needs
6. Add an Information Literacy course to the Bacc Core

It is the Review Committee’s hope that implementing these suggestions will result in a clearer, more uniform curriculum, improve students’ written communication skills (and subsequent success as graduates), and maintain and build ongoing awareness of the importance of writing across the disciplines. The change, however, starts in all our classrooms, regardless of level, department, program, or school: Our students expect to be challenged in their classes, and assigning them writing that fosters critical thinking and enriches their perspective will go a long way toward doing that.

---

### Writing Guidance: Departmental Writing Guide Assessment

by Zachary Pajak

*The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas...*

—Linus Pauling

During spring term, the WIC team sat down with faculty across the curriculum to gather information about the [twelve departmental writing guides currently supported on the WIC website](#). Most of the guides were created in the '90s and early 2000s, and the majority were funded by WIC department development grants. The “point persons” we spoke with for each guide were very generous with their time, energy, and insights, and provided a treasure trove of ideas about the writing guides going forward.



With each point person, we discussed the current state of the guides and their potential future applications, exploring many different facets and raising a number of questions:

- » How widely is the guide being used, if at all?
  - » Does the guide need to be updated or revised? What would make it more useful?
  - » If your guide is no longer being used, why?
-

- » Are there any parts of it that might still be useful to have available for faculty and students?
- » What can WIC do to assist in promoting and/or updating the guide?

Several departments place a strong emphasis on their guides, making them required texts for particular courses and/or cultivating awareness and visibility of the guides among faculty and students. In fact, some writing guides have become published instructional texts. Sociology professors **Mark Edwards** and **Dwaine Plaza** created their department's writing guide in 1998, and in 2011, Edwards revised the guide into the book *Writing in Sociology* for Sage Publishing.

Also, **Andrea Marks**, program coordinator and associate professor in the Graphic Design Program, wrote and designed a well-utilized guide in the late '90s, funded by a WIC development grant. The guide was the impetus for her e-book and print book, *Writing for Visual Thinkers*, published by PeachPit Press in 2008 and 2011, respectively.

Chemistry Professor **Michael Lerner** proposed a number of helpful ideas for deepening and enriching professional development in students through departmental writing guides. For instance, Lerner noted that additional sections highlighting the professional need for writing in and beyond academia may work to increase students' incentive to hone writing abilities and practice. According to Lerner, students today seem unwilling to generate the page lengths and word counts necessary to fully develop their ideas. Indeed, a writing guide section on fully developing writing may help students break away from the kind of communication often practiced in social media websites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and thereby practice more professional communication when engaging in academic discourse.

Ideas for updating the guides include:

- » Provide sections emphasizing the professional necessity to write
- » Foster encouragement and psychological motivation in an opening section of the guide
- » Add sections on how to use electronic sources and incorporate figures and visuals
- » Convert the guide from a linear text into a web-based document, or into an interactive webpage where students may instantly access what they need (for example, how to write an opening paragraph, how to use APA formatting, etc.)
- » Make the guide more user-friendly and visually attractive

**Philip Harding** in the School of Chemical, Biological, and Environmental Engineering suggested that a class visit by someone who hires students in their given discipline may be beneficial, as s/he could emphasize the professional importance of writing and thereby encourage students to more professionally and seriously engage in writing. A number of other writing guide correspondents also suggested promoting the guides in 100-level orientation classes, increasing usage and awareness among GTAs to pass along to their students, and making departmental writing guide copies available at the Writing Center.

Multiple faculty—both those interested and not interested in revamping their departmental writing guides—also proposed the idea of setting up a lunch in which instructors may share with other departments ideas for revising and re-launching the guides. The WIC team is presently working to schedule and host this re-launch meeting. As part of the re-launch, Graphic Design professor Andrea Marks has offered to provide some pointers on how to make the guides more visually appealing. We will keep faculty posted on the exact date, time, and location of the re-launch meeting.

### Culture of Writing Award Winners

by Allen Sprague

Through the annual Culture of Writing Awards, WIC and participating departments and schools foster a commitment to excellence in undergraduate student writing and recognize the value of writing across the disciplines. Participation in the Culture of Writing Awards has increased from 6 departments in 2006 to 15 departments in 2011. In that time span, 99 students have earned recognition and cash awards through either individual or team writing projects. This year, participation continues to be strong with early results showing 15 participating departments. Continued departmental participation communicates to OSU students the importance and value of quality writing. WIC would like to thank all participating departments for their continued desire to recognize and reward outstanding student writing. Congratulations to this year's award winners!



Department	Student	Nominating Professor
Human Development and Family Sciences	Charlene Grossnicklaus	Candace Scott
Graphic Design	Courtney Schild	Andrea Marks
Public Health	Claire Ranit	Nancy Seifert
Sociology	Julie VanBlokland ( <i>pictured above</i> )	Mark Edwards
Biochemistry and Biophysics	Lisa Kirkemo	Indira Rajagopal
University Honors College	Margaret-Rose W. Leung	Vrushali Bokil

Psychology	Michael Brydone-Jack	Sarina Saturn
Animal Science	Michelle Janik	Claudia Ingham
Civil Engineering	Deanna Amneus, Jessica Grace Cawley, Christina Raeanne Garrett, Rachel Odonna Hanna, Amanda Lynne Nelson	Franklin Sherkow
English	Kayla Harr	Neil Davison
Liberal Studies (Cascades Campus)	Suzie Gumm	Neil Browne
BioResource Research	Chris Hedstrom	Kate Field
Math	Thomas Pitts	Tevian Dray
Industrial Engineering	Alex Steven Brown, Jordan Richard Mussche Reed, Eric James Chase Wellington	Robert Stone
Fisheries & Wildlife	TBA	

## Wisdom from Award Winners

“Start early on the writing project. Pick a topic in the first two weeks of the term and then complete research in the following two weeks. Once a majority of the research is gathered, write the first rough draft and see if the assigning professor is willing to look over it and give feedback. Make any necessary adjustments and then have the final draft complete about one to two weeks prior to the due date.” –**Claire Ranit, Public Health**

“Take pride in everything you write and respect yourself as a writer. Every time I write, I find out a little more about myself. Writing is truly a journey, so enjoy it.” –**Courtney Schild, Graphic Design**

“The most useful advice I can offer is about using outlines and writing multiple drafts. Starting with an outline will save you a lot of time overall. It's getting into the habit of making one that is the hard part. Also, don't expect a first draft to be perfect. Knowing that helps take away a little bit of the pressure that comes with writing papers and manuscripts.” –**Chris Hedstrom, BioResource Research**

“For students taking a WIC course, pick a topic you are excited about. Find something that relates to your career or something that you have wanted to learn more about, but have never had the time to research. Also, challenge yourself to look critically at the topic from all angles even if you are very familiar with it, you may find that your views are challenged and reshaped.” –**Michelle Janik, Animal Sciences**

“Learning to use LaTeX is crucial to writing in math. LaTeX makes typesetting complex equations and long papers easy and is designed to produce very professional results. It's also well worth learning BibTeX for bibliographies.” –**Rosie Leung, University Honors College**

“My advice to future writers in WIC classes is to find something you are passionately interested in to write about. Then the paper will practically write itself. And don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone and try something new, in regards to writing. You will be surprised at what you will learn.” –**Suzie Gumm, Liberal Studies (Cascades Campus)**

“Be as concise and exact as possible.” –**Lisa Kirkemo, Biochemistry and Biophysics**

---

### Library Resources to Share With Your Students

by Stefanie Buck

If you have students who don't have a lot of experience doing academic library research or who might need a little refresher, the OSU Libraries' has some great tools and resources for you to share with your students.

[The OSU Libraries' How to Guide](#) is a self-paced online guide and tutorial on all aspects of doing library research. The guide is divided into sections about finding journal articles, finding books, citing sources and tips for more advanced users such as cited reference searching. In each section, we have included guides on how to locate resources such as books or journal articles, suggestions for how to improve online searches, and step by step tutorials. Students can go through each section of the guide for an overview of doing online research or they can select the module or tutorial that is most helpful to them in their research process. We have listed all of the tutorials that are part of the guide in the section for instructors. You can copy the link to the tutorial and embed it in your course Blackboard for more direct access. For example, if your students have questions about the peer-review process, you can provide them with a link to the “Is it peer-reviewed?” or the “What is a scholarly article?” tutorial.



---

If your students need or want more guided help, we also offer the [Undergraduate Research Skills Workshop](#) series. The workshops are taught by librarians and emphasize undergraduate research skills such as improving search strategies, selecting appropriate library resources, discovering new research tools, and managing/using citations. To accommodate busy student schedules, each workshop is offered multiple days and times over the course of the term. Three of the workshops have either been video recorded or made available as a tutorial so students who cannot attend the in-person workshop have access to the same learning opportunities (use the Online Workshops & Tutorials tab from the link below). Here is how three students describe their workshop experiences:

"I was writing a scientific paper for BI 212H, I needed to keep track of my bibliography and continue finding good resources. I used Zotero, and some of the tips for peer reviewed/book reviewed articles. It was very helpful and I had a kick ass works cited." **[Bibliographies in a Snap workshop]**

"For my WR121 Unit 3 essay, I broadly searched and used the information from scholar[y] articles provided from OSU Library to support my ideas in the essay." **[Move Your Research Beyond Good Enough workshop]**

"The Work Smarter Not Harder [workshop] has helped me on pretty much every research paper I've written for any class since then. Mostly I've used it as I work on my senior research project of land use change in the Eastern Oregon." **[Work Smarter Not Harder workshop]**

---

The OSU Libraries How to Guide is at <http://ica.library.oregonstate.edu/subject-guide/1271-OSU-Libraries-How-To-Guide>.

For more information about the Undergraduate Research Skills workshop and the fall 2012 schedule (forthcoming), please go to <http://ica.library.oregonstate.edu/subject-guide/1481-Research-Skills-for-Undergraduates>.

Feel free to share these resources with your students or contact the library if you have questions.

**Stefanie Buck** is the Ecampus/Instructional Design Librarian at the OSU Valley Library. Please contact her via e-mail at [Stefanie.buck@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Stefanie.buck@oregonstate.edu) or by phone at (541) 737-7273.

---

#### **Fall 2012 WIC Faculty Seminar Call for Participants**

Faculty interested in the Fall 2012 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](mailto:vicki.tolarbuton@oregonstate.edu).

The seminar, designed both for faculty who plan to teach WIC courses and for those who want to use writing in non-WIC courses, will meet five Tuesday afternoons from 3-5 p.m. A modest honorarium is awarded to each participant upon completion of the seminar. Space is limited, so please register as soon as possible.

---

#### **CONTACT INFO**

Copyright © 2012  
Oregon State  
University  
Disclaimer