

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER
Published in the WIC Office, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, (541) 737-2930
Volume 13, no. 1, Winter 2004



OREGON STATE
UNIVERSITY

Inside This Issue

Pre/Views	1
Sequenced Writing Assignments	2
GEO 463 Term Writing Project	3
AREc 461 Term Writing Project	4

Call for WIC Grant Proposals

This year, the WIC Program again will fund several Department Development Grants of up to \$2500 each. To learn more about these grants and find out how to apply for one, we invite you to do any or all of the following:

- ☐☐☐ **Visit the WIC grant Web page**, at <<http://wic.oregonstate.edu/wic_grants.html>>. You can also check out the listing of past grant projects at <<http://wic.oregonstate.edu/wic_grants_awarded.html>>.
- ☐☐☐ **Drop in on February's Friday-the-Thirteenth WIC Pizza lunch** (Waldo 121) for conversation and information about WIC grants in general as well as any specific project ideas you may have. Join us anytime between 12 and 1 for this open-house-style gathering.
- ☐☐☐ **Keep an eye out for the forthcoming WIC grant mailing** with information about this call for proposals. Jot down your project idea(s) on the statement-of-interest form enclosed with the mailing, and send the form back to us at the WIC office. We're interested in hearing about your ideas and will be happy to work with you in developing your proposal.

*Proposals are due in the WIC office (125 Waldo)
by February 23rd, 2004.*

Pre/Views

by Vicki Tolar Burton, WIC Director

The ten-week term is often blamed for the lack of depth in much student writing. In this issue of *Teaching With Writing*, two OSU WIC professors, Bob Lillie (GEO) and Penny Diebel (AREc), share their answers to the challenge of improving the quality of student writing and thinking in a ten-week timeframe: the sequenced writing assignment.

Bob Lillie's sequenced writing assignment for GEO 463, Geophysics and Tectonics, has changed the way I think about major writing projects. Unlike the usual model in which students write a first draft, receive feedback from teacher or peers, and then revise, in Lillie's model students take their papers through multiple iterations, starting small and revising and expanding content with each new version. By the end of the term, students have rewritten all parts of their papers, from abstract to conclusions, three or four times.

I think of Lillie's assignment as the geological model of writing, not only because of its disciplinary origins but also because of the layering of content and revision.

I have adapted the geological model to both of my WIC courses. For example, in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, students choose a concept that is fundamental to rhetoric across time. The first paper addresses the concept in Platonic and Aristotelian rhetoric; the second paper revises the Greeks and adds the concept's place in the works of Cicero and Quintilian. The third paper revises the Greek and Roman approaches and adds that of a later period or figure.

I have seen students develop expertise in their topics over the term in ways that never happened with earlier approaches. One senior commented as she turned in her final paper on *ethos*, "This is the first time during college that I have understood a topic in enough depth to be confident of my views. I am confident about this paper."

AREc professor Penny Diebel's sequenced assignment achieves much the same outcome by asking students to write on one topic for different audiences and purposes across the term. Students also do an oral presentation on their topic, thereby cultivating another important communication skill.

This issue of *TWW* invites you to re-think your writing assignments by borrowing—or discovering—a model that both invites and requires students to think deeply over time about their chosen topic and their writing. The learning outcomes associated with this type of assignment include not only better quality and clarity of writing but also better critical thinking, better organization, and better mastery of content.

The SEQUENCED WRITING ASSIGNMENT: A Brief Introduction

by Tracy Ann Robinson

In our data-driven, Internetworked, media-blitzed, and globally minded society, the abilities to locate and interpret relevant information, consider multiple perspectives, weigh difficult alternatives, evaluate complex problems and solutions, make reasoned and reasonable decisions quickly, and effectively communicate the results of all of the above both orally and in writing, are huge assets in the workplace. At OSU, writing-intensive courses in the disciplines constitute a forum in which students can work on developing these abilities prior to entering the job market. One type of project that cultivates these skills both effectively and time-efficiently is the *sequenced writing assignment*.

Sequenced writing assignments comprise a series of related and increasingly complex papers that students complete over the course of an entire term. The course instructor evaluates and comments on each round of papers, then returns them to students for revision and/or expansion. Often, peer review activities are also part of paper development. Each round of revisions builds toward the students' final papers. Typically, sequenced writing projects constitute a significant portion of students' course grades.

Sequenced writing assignments lend themselves particularly well to OSU WIC classes because the assignments are pedagogically effective and time-efficient not only in developing writing skills but also in handling advanced course content. As upper-division and sometimes also capstone courses, WIC classes address complex issues at an in-depth level. Sequenced writing assignments are well suited to developing the requisite critical thinking skills for engaging this type of course material.



This issue of *TWW* spotlights two different types of sequenced writing assignments. In the first, developed by Dr. Robert Lillie, OSU Department of Geosciences, geology students generate increasingly comprehensive versions of their term papers concurrently with the instructor's presentation of related topics via in-class lecture.

As Lillie explains in his course textbook that features this assignment, the assignment evolved from Lillie's recognition of students' difficulties with collecting and processing all of the information related to a complex scientific topic at a single go. As Lillie observes, term papers produced in this scenario are typically "a composite of facts and assorted opinions, with poor organization, insight, and comprehension."

Furthermore, the comments and suggestions instructors inscribe on these end-of-term papers are often pointless (even for those students who actually bother to pick up their papers after the term is over), because without the opportunity to incorporate this feedback in a revision cycle, the quality of students' writing typically does not change. What Lillie realized is that "the incorporation of information *a little at a time*, accompanied by *critique* and *revision*, allows students to remain organized and focused" on their study of a complex topic.

Thus, he has students start small and build on each iteration, revising as they go.

FIVE ADVANTAGES of Using Sequenced Writing Assignments in WIC Courses

by Robert Lillie, Geosciences

1. Sequenced assignments both model and teach writing as a process.
2. On large projects, students feel less overwhelmed because they are incorporating information a little at a time.
3. Sequenced writing assignments nip plagiarism in the bud.
4. Papers typically improve as they expand.
5. Grading is done in small increments; and students derive maximum benefit from instructor feedback.

Lillie regularly presents this assignment in OSU Introductory WIC Seminars, pointing out its transferability to any other college course in which students research and incorporate new content into their papers simultaneously with that content being treated in class. A number of OSU faculty, including WIC Director Vicki Tolar Burton (see this issue's "Pre/Views"), have indeed successfully adapted the assignment in their classes.

The second sequenced writing assignment featured in this issue of *TWW* was developed by Dr. Penny Diebel of the OSU Department of Agricultural Resource Economics (LaGrande campus). Rather than incrementally adding new content to a

single paper, Diebel's assignment comprises a series of short "developmental papers" that engage a single controversial topic from a variety of perspectives. The knowledge gained from these intellectual engagements is then integrated into both a briefing paper and oral presentation on the topic, targeted to the student's home constituency. For helping students learn to evaluate a multi-layered, multi-sided issues in any field and to communicate their analyses persuasively, Diebel's sequenced assignment is ideal.

Term Writing Project: Geophysics and Tectonics (GEO 463)

by Robert Lillie, *Geosciences*

Project Description

In this writing project, upper-level geology undergraduates employ multiple types of data in order to interpret and describe the crustal structure and tectonic evolution of a given geophysical region.

The project's writing sequence, designed for a 10-week term and dove-tailing with the course content-coverage sequence, comprises four increasingly comprehensive drafts, or iterations, of the final paper, with each iteration including a revision of the text included in the previous iteration, along with new text.

First Iteration (due 4th week of term; 5% of course grade):

Write an overview of 1–3 pages that discusses the *crustal structure* of your assigned region based on *seismic refraction* observations. The paper should be typed double-spaced and should include a *Title, Abstract, Main Body, Reference List, and Figures*. The *Main Body* of the paper should be about 2 pages long at this stage.

Second Iteration (due 6th week; 8% of course grade):

Rewrite the *entire* paper, considering the instructor's comments and adding information based on papers about *earthquake seismic* observations. (Main body is now 3–4 pages.)

Third Iteration (due 8th week; 10% of course grade):

Revise the entire paper, adding a part based on *gravity* interpretation. (Main body is now 5–7 pages.)

Fourth Iteration (due 10th week; 12% of course grade):

Revise and add material on *magnetics and/or heat flow*. At this stage, the main body's Discussion section should include many of the student's own interpretations and ideas on the crustal structure and tectonic evolution of the region, based on integration of many types of data. The main body is now 8–10 pages long.

Grading Strategy

The percentage grades for each iteration reflect the overall value of the paper as 35% of the course grade. A value of 5% for the first iteration acknowledges that papers initially may be poorly researched, organized, and written. The instructor can send a message with grades of 1 to 3 out of the 5%, while still leaving the student opportunity to achieve a decent overall score for the assignment. By the last iteration, many papers are of professional quality, earning scores of 11–12 out of the possible 12%.

Sequenced Assignment Rationale

The idea for a sequenced writing assignment for my Geophysics and Tectonics course came about partly through frustration. I initially assigned a traditional term paper, due at the end of the quarter. The results were mostly disastrous. Students are a lot like faculty—they wait until very near a deadline before getting serious. The results were papers that were poorly researched, poorly organized, and poorly written. A common problem was information overload. Students would gather bits and pieces and throw them together in time to meet the deadline. I then had to deal with these “papers from Hell.” Honest evaluation would yield very low grades for most of the students. And comments I might write on the papers would go absolutely nowhere, because students were not required to revise.

The sequenced writing assignment developed as a result of this frustration addressed the major problems inherent in the traditional term-paper assignment. Information overload was addressed by having students incorporate content a little at a time. The “papers from Hell” still arrived, but with a limited amount of information and early in the term. Students could benefit from critique and address it during revision. I could analyze organization and make suggestions made for improvement. At the initial stage honest, low marks could be assigned to papers, but with ample opportunity for students to improve their grades during the later iterations. The net result of the sequence of assignments was that students' writing and organization improved as the amount of information they incorporated expanded. The assignment is similar to the process we as faculty are accustomed to when we submit papers or books for publication. Although we may not like our work to be criticized, we know that, with the opportunity to revise, our work is far better because of it.

The Geophysics and Tectonics class lends itself to such a sequenced writing assignment. A specific kind of geophysical observation is incorporated into the students' papers during each iteration. The writing assignment complements lectures, in that specific types of geophysical observations are discussed at the same time they are incorporated into student papers. The assignment should be transferable to other courses where students can research and incorporate certain content into their papers while the same type of content is presented in lectures.

Term Writing Project: Agricultural and Food Policy Issues (AREc 461)

by Penny Diebel, AREc

Ed note: What follows is an adaptation of Dr. Diebel's "assignment overview" text.

Assignment

Completion of this assignment will require time spent out of class on research and on writing. Your objective should be to develop a professional writing style that is succinct, informative, and readable.

You will submit a draft of each of three developmental papers. These drafts are either complete or incomplete (all or nothing) but otherwise not graded. Your drafts will be reviewed for content and structure and returned with general revision suggestions. The final version is due 1 week after the draft is returned to you. NO late papers will be accepted.

1. Select an issue that is important to you: The issue should be one that has, or could have, more than local significance and that has well-developed arguments and proposals on both sides of the controversy. Your issue should relate to agriculture in the broadest sense.

2. Write three developmental papers exploring the issue:

- * *Personal interest/inquiry.* Define the issue based on your personal experience and knowledge. Why is this issue important to you and what do you hope/expect to discover?
- * *History/Parties of interest.* How did this issue develop? Have there been previous proposals for solution? If so, why is it still an issue? How did we get to where we are today? Identify all current and past parties involved in the issue. Define their goals, their methods, and their progress in influencing this issue. Present all points of view impartially.
- * *Economic and analytical arguments.* Economically, what will happen if each party or proposal succeeds? If we vigorously advocate every party's interest, what compromise or synthesis can we reach? What are the policy and economic ramifications of these proposals? Explain and defend your viewpoint on the issue, using graphic, verbal, and mathematical arguments.

3. Summarize and present your findings in writing according to the following scenario:

You are on the staff for an Oregon Legislator and are preparing a 1-2 page briefing paper on the issue you have been studying. You are about to discuss the issue in an appearance before your home legislator's constituency. A press conference will follow the appearance. You must explain the problem, brief the public and the press on what is being said about the issue, and give possible solutions and consequences.

The format should include bulleted key points and brief descriptions that will get the attention of the audience and be usable by the media. These briefs must be concise, factual, and quotable. Prepare these briefs by reviewing articles and getting statistics from state and federal agencies, newspapers, jour-

nals, and magazines. The briefs will be made available to the press group and citizens before your presentation. Therefore, your brief is due the class period before your presentation.

4. Present your findings to the class: You must now present to your constituency a position on the issue using the brief you have prepared. You have 10 minutes to make your presentation, following which the press and public (the class) will be allowed to ask questions for 10 minutes.

Expectations

- * Papers should be well written and typed double-spaced. A grammatically poor paper will be returned for editing.
- * There is no minimum or maximum length for the developmental papers. The only requirement is that you cover the topic in "sufficient" depth.
- * The papers you write should reflect your own thinking and research. Whenever you use other sources, data, opinions, or interpretations to document or support your position, you must fully cite and reference the work.
- * List references cited at the end of the text, using *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* bibliographic style.
- * Pick an issue that is interesting to you. If you do, you should have more fun doing the project even though it will require work on your part.
- * Grading will be based on writing structure and content (50% ea.), equally weighted because if you have nothing to say, even the most eloquent writing will not help.
- * Remember that cheating and plagiarism are major violations of this university's student conduct policy.

About Teaching With Writing

Editor: Vicki Tolar Burton

Assistant Editor: Tracy Ann Robinson

Teaching With Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper-division writing-intensive course in their major.

The content of WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf courses design (a Horticulture option). While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

- Informal, ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.
- Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline and use of borrowed information.
- Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.
- Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Tolar Burton by email at vicki.tolarburton@oregonstate.edu, visit the WIC web site at <http://wic.oregonstate.edu>, or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.