

# Writing Across the Curriculum

## WAC News

**W**elcome to the Spring 2014 semester from the WAC office! We're excited that training sessions have begun for a new group of faculty members and that the faculty trained last semester have begun teaching their first WI courses.

There will be a WAC refresher workshop on "Managing the Paper Load" in March.

## Why write?

**A**t their first training session of the spring semester, BMCC faculty members starting the process of becoming certified to teach WI courses discussed the reasons they thought writing was necessary, not only in the classroom but beyond:

Writing is a way to start. It allows you to discover order where you thought there was none.

Writing forces you to explore the limits of your knowledge and find areas where you can explore further.

Writing assignments allow students to demonstrate their understanding of concepts, their evaluation of ideas, and their responses to material.

Writing improves the retention of information.

Writing is a way for a student to make a personal connection to the material in any discipline.

Writing lets students explore their creativity and practice imperfection – it doesn't always have to be "perfect" in order to be beautiful or valuable.

If you are interested, keep an eye out for an email to sign up for this one-afternoon course.

Are you new to WAC, have you never thought about integrating writing into your pedagogy, or just need a reminder about effectively integrating writing into your classroom? Look to the "Teaching Tips" box on page 4.

Writing comes hand in hand with reading. In order to read better, students should have to write more.

We operate in a system that requires writing for advancement, so it is a necessary skill. Every field requires one to explain oneself: to peers, to outsiders and laypeople, to bosses. The ability to express oneself coherently isn't a skill you can just turn on and off – it needs to be automatic, fluid, and constant, and this comes with practice.

Writing can be therapy. Students can unpack their traumatic events through writing and gain confidence.

Language is an amazing invention. It would be a shame not to use it.

Writing is a form of communication.

Writing can be a more comfortable form of communication for quieter students.

Because it forces you to make your thoughts coherent and recorded on paper, writing affirms the fact that you have something to say. It can be empowering.

Writing can be enjoyable.

**Borough of  
Manhattan  
Community  
College**

February, 2014

### Upcoming important dates:

- *March 20, 2:30-4pm — refresher workshop for WI faculty: "Managing the Paper Load"*
- *May — Faculty interested in signing up for Spring 2014 WAC training should do so this month*
- *June — WAC faculty portfolios are due at the end of the spring semester*

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## Using writing in a science classroom: Adolfin Koroch, Science Department (Biology)



Dr. Koroch

### How long have you been a BMCC faculty member?

I have been a BMCC faculty member since January 2010

### What spurred your decision to sign up for the WAC training program?

I wanted to teach my classes in an engaging way, to stimulate students and to make my classes more dynamic. During my first semester a faculty suggested me to take the WAC training.

### How has WAC training affected your pedagogy?

I learned how to motivate students, engage them in class discussions while creating a relaxing and learning environment. You have the opportunity to better know your students. I teach Biology and I use writing to explore, learn and reinforce concepts in general biology. I learned that writing is an important and powerful tool to engage

students in different topics, to integrate biological knowledge and to understand and appreciate the world that we are living in. I ask the students to write as a way of learning (WAC principle: writing to learn) and to apply new concepts or concepts presented in lecture to everyday problems using critical thinking (WAC principle: Writing is a unique tool for engaging students in learning).

In addition I also use low stake assign-

ments using scientific writing. After each lab report students receive my feedback on things they can work on in order to improve it. Lab reports are graded based on a rubric and I also give the students the opportunity to revise them (WAC principle: Student writing—and confidence in writing—improves with practice, especially when assignments build in process and allow opportunities for revision). They learn without the pressure of being graded.

### Why would you recommend the WAC training program to your BMCC faculty colleagues?

Complex topics are just easier to teach using the WAC pedagogy. Not only is it easier for the students to understand the complex topics in biology, but it is easier for the faculty to step in a class that is highly motivated class and is ready for the next challenge. Writing intensive classes are time consuming but are highly rewarding.

### What effect does writing in the classroom have on your students?

I have been teaching writing intensive classes since 2011. During all these semesters I have been receiving the same positive feedback. At the beginning of the semester, students are shy and reluctant to get involved in writing or in class discussions. But as they start writing, they start interacting with each other, they get engaged in interesting discussions and they enjoy it.

*“Complex topics are just easier to teach using the WAC pedagogy.”*

ments such as a critical thinking question at the beginning of the lecture class to engage students with a specific topic in preparation to the lecture, to review previous knowledge and/or generate interest with specific topics (WAC principle: Students learn more when they are engaged with the subject). Students are either allowed to write their ideas or are allowed to discuss their ideas with their partners (WAC principle: Collaborative learning can help students learn from each other).

In the labs students write lab reports to communicate the results of their exper-

## Using writing in a science classroom: Brahamdeo Dewprashad, Science Department (Chemistry)

I use writing to uncover and remedy students' misconceptions and this has resulted in improvement in learning. I also use writing to relate course concepts to its applications in everyday life and this has resulted in improved student engagement.

Writing requires more work from students and many students do complain about this in the beginning. However, by the end of the semester, the majori-

ty of students usually indicate that they benefit from the writing exercises.

I recommend the WAC training to my colleagues because I have seen that students benefit from a deeper understanding of concepts acquired from having to reflect on concepts as they write and re-write on topics pertaining to course concepts.



Dr. Dewprashad and a student

## Student profile: Mariajose Angueta

**H**ow long have you been a BMCC student?  
I started at BMCC the fall of 2012.

**What is your major?**  
Business Administration

**What did you think about writing before you took a WI class?**  
English being my second language, writing down my thoughts wasn't as simple as speaking. Although I enjoy reading, I only practiced my writing when I had to for a class.

Before taking a WI class, I definitely did not think of myself as a strong writer. I always felt I had room for improvement. Writing is still a skill I continue to work on. During the WI class, the detailed feedback that my professor gave to me made me realize the errors and ways I could improve my writing.

**What WI classes have you taken?**  
I took Sociology of the Family last fall.

**What were your favorite kind of assignments that you had to do in your WI class?**  
The assignments that I enjoyed the most were analyzing the readings

from various authors that shared the same topic with different perspectives. I found it interesting to see the different writing styles and arguments of each, and creating my own views.

**What surprised you most about your WI class?**

From day one, my professor in my WI class was very clear and engaging to the class. I was able to receive feedback on my writing twice a week which helped me understand what I needed to improve on. It was just as simple to pass than to fail, if I was not on track each class. For me, the WI class helped me improve more than any English class I've ever taken.

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*“The WI class improved my writing more than any English class I've ever taken.”*

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**How has your WI experience affected you outside of this class?**

I am able to express my ideas more clearly, by using my time more effectively when organizing my writing.

**What are your plans after BMCC?**

After BMCC, I would like to transfer to a four-year university and continue working. WAC will benefit me by being able to communicate through writing not only in college but also at work.

**Anything else you'd like to add?**

To enjoy and benefit from a WI class the most important factor to make sure you are taking a subject you have a strong interest for. Since you will be doing a lot of reading and writing on the subject. WI classes are more challenging than regular classes but definitely worth taking!

## Fixing errors in student writing: balancing immediate issues and long-term goals

**S**tudents aren't a problem to be fixed. The reason to assign written work is to engage them. Try not to think of yourself as a proofreader or try to fix every error that appears. Your feedback will guide them in the right direction.

Also keep in mind that while there are accepted standards of good writing, there are not universal standards of good writing. Your standards may be different from those of your colleagues, and the standards of American academic writing are not universal — the form and clarity preferred here are not shared by all countries and cultures.

Lingo and shorthand can sometimes be confusing for students. Phrases such as

“develop your idea” or copy editing shorthand (e.g. “sp”) may be unfamiliar (and unhelpful) to your students. You can clarify this by providing a key (i.e. on a rubric) or by using complete words (and complete sentences wherever possible).

Try to identify patterns of error in a student's paper. This will be a manageable task for the student to focus on in order to take a step in the right direction. Common patterns of error in writing include **surface-level grammatical issues** (a long list including subject-verb agreement, inconsistencies or issues with verb tenses, prepositions...), **structure** (flow of ideas, avoiding jumping around from topic to

topic), and **clarity** (thesis statement, word choice).

The revision process of each paper might only tackle one or two of these patterns at a time. Consider only responding to deeper-level issues (coherence, understandability) in a first draft. If a student has to restructure a paper, the grammar will inevitably change — all that red ink spilled on commas will be moot!

You can also use peer review activities to cut down on your grading load (see examples on the WAC website). Training your students to find and fix patterns of error in their colleagues' work will make them more attuned to them in their own writing.

WAC office: S424

For questions about the newsletter, to publicize something through the newsletter, or to pose a question you'd like to see answered, email Xhuliana (xagolli@gc.cuny.edu) or Alice (ajones1@gc.cuny.edu).

**Visit us online at  
[socrates.bmcc.cuny.edu/  
WAC](http://socrates.bmcc.cuny.edu/WAC)**

*Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at BMCC is a resource for faculty members in all departments who are interested in promoting student learning through writing.*

*Visit our website for FAQs, to sign up for training sessions, to see sample WI assignments, and to view current WI faculty bios.*

*If you have questions about WAC, you can email coordinator Rifat Salam at [rsalam@bmcc.cuny.edu](mailto:rsalam@bmcc.cuny.edu).*

## Teaching tips: Grading and responding to student work

**B**efore you start to grade, put down that red pen! You cannot mark every mistake in a piece of student writing: it will take too much time and will be overwhelming for the student — so much so that she may put the paper away and never look at it again.

Instead of commenting or marking everything that jumps out at you, keep your priorities in mind:

- What is the most important task or skill that you want students to take away from this assignment? Is it learning to write error-free grammatically or something more intellectually profound (structuring an argument, providing convincing supporting details, using impeccable grammar and structure but effectively saying nothing of substance, etc.)
- What skill is the individual student having the most difficulty with? Is there a pattern of error (a global issue, not just a local one) that can be corrected once as a model for the student so she can learn to identify this problem in the rest of the paper?
- Ask yourself what format of comments will be the most helpful for this particular kind of assignment: markings in the margins, written comments, a rubric, office hours conferences (one-on-one or in small

groups), in-class discussion or readings.

- Where in the revision process will the student read your comments? Comments guide students to improve; they are constructive and can reshape a weak rough draft into a stronger final version. However, lengthy comments on a “final” draft might never be read (and therefore never applied) by the student.

**T**hink of comments on a student's paper as part of an ongoing dialogue:

- Begin with a salutation using the student's name.
- Mention something specific from the student's own words — it can be a good strategy to open with praise or a compliment about something the student has done well. This shouldn't be a platitude or a lie, but rather something the student should recognize that she has, in fact, done well and that she should build on in the future. For example, “I appreciate your enthusiasm for this subject,” or “You've done a good job getting started with this idea,” or “This sentence is very clear.”
- But don't stop with compliments (for any student, including a strong one). Be honest regarding

the things the student needs to keep in mind as she revises. Make non-judgmental, descriptive observations about the student's writing. Also keep in mind that written words can come across more harshly than we might intend.

- Refer to specific passages in the student's paper. This will demonstrate to the student that you have read her words closely.
- You may also find it fruitful to think of all student work as “a work in progress.” As you read a paper, strive not to correct errors but to guide the student towards writing better. Offer suggestions that will push the student in that direction.
- Write legibly or type your comments.
- A closing statement inviting the student to office hours or expressing interest in the student's next draft can underscore the fact that your comments are part of an ongoing dialogue between you and the student.

Before the grading process starts, you can help your students (and yourself!) by being as clear as possible with your expectations — provide a written prompt and rubric (see the November, 2013, WAC newsletter).