

Writing Across the Curriculum

Borough of
Manhattan
Community
College

WAC News

Welcome to the 2013-2014 school year! Best wishes from the WAC office for a productive, engaging, and writing-filled fall!

This year, in addition to still having Jin Chang on staff, we've been joined by six new Writing Fellows from the Graduate Center: Xhuliana Agolli, Sean Griffin, Benjamin Haber, Alice Jones, Shangyu Sheng, and Joanna Tice.

A new crop of faculty have begun their

WAC training.

Keep an eye out here for future news and announcements from the WAC community!

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 3.

November, 2013

Upcoming important dates:

- *December 2 — Faculty interested in signing up for Spring 2014 WAC training must do so by this date*
- *January 5 — WAC faculty portfolios are due*

Writing — what it's all about

Writing is a social process. It connects your students to others' ideas (even across continents and centuries) and should force students to be aware of whom they are writing for. You can achieve this by situating a writing prompt as being directed to, for example, uninformed audiences, a peer colleague, or a skeptical expert.

Writing is an avenue to knowledge in any and all disciplines. It forces clarity and organization of ideas, which themselves rely on true understanding of the material at hand. Even a writing assignment that asks students to articulate what they find confusing or difficult about a topic can be a necessary first step in the process towards deeper understanding.

When a student complains, "When will I

ever use this?", you can remind them (and show them!) that effective writing is needed in all professional emails, memos, resumes... not just in the classroom!

Writing is not an easy process. The pressure, deadlines, self-doubt, drafts, editing, and scrutiny of others' eyes -- that's just what you feel in your own work. It may seem like more work for you to break their final project into chunks, but isn't that what you do with your own work, too?

Not all writing has to be good. Woah, what?! Bad writing can be productive because it can help students find their footing on an issue. A draft is exactly that—don't let the process stop there. Guide students to do the next step(s) of revision: getting feedback, improving clarity, strengthening arguments, etc.

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Faculty profile: Deborah Gambs, Sociology department



Dr. Gambs at "Teach CUNY," February, 2013.
Photo by Pat Arrow

How long have you been a BMCC faculty member?

I started at BMCC in August 2008 --- this is my 6th year.

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

I actually had been a Writing Fellow at BMCC while I was at the Graduate Center. After doing that fellowship, I then worked for 3 years as a Communication Fellow at Baruch College. After my first year at BMCC, I was given permission to teach WI classes by doing a portfolio rather than the full training. I always recommend it to new faculty though.

How has WAC training affected your pedagogy?

The WAC approach has developed in me a strong sense that writing is a necessary practice that I want students to have the opportunity to improve on. It taught me that there are multiple ways to attend to students' writing in addition to formal essays, which can help keep grading more manageable. Through it I read scholarly work on pedagogy and writing that gave me a theoretical foundation for the choices I make in my teaching.

I experienced in my own K-12 education teachers who encouraged writing (some attended workshops at the Iowa Writer's Workshop) and so including in-class activities that emphasize writing-to-learn was fairly natural for me. In my early teaching as a graduate student and my first couple of years teaching at BMCC, I emphasized writing more than other academic practices.

Over time I have actually come to see writing/reading/thinking/speaking as interconnected. I took the Reading Across the Curriculum workshop two years ago and include one assignment that focuses on reading as well. I see them as working in tandem with one another.

"I often found that the WAC approach reinforced ideas I had about good instruction, and gave me a more formal understanding of why those practices were good."

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

Who would not want the chance to read and discuss with colleagues scholarly articles on pedagogy and writing, time to develop better writing assignments that will produce better student work, new strategies for classroom teaching? I often found that the WAC approach reinforced ideas I had about good instruction, and gave me a more formal understanding of why those practices were good.

Did you have any qualms about

integrating writing into your class(es)?

Grading essays or papers takes longer than using the scantron machine, there is no doubt about that. As an idealistic graduate student and new full-time professor, I eschewed multiple-choice exams. Over time I started to think that a combination of the two was not a bad thing, because multiple-choice exams, if carefully worded, can help assess reading comprehension and knowledge of content.

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

The two things I am sure that writing in the classroom shows students is that one, they learn it is a priority and two, if it is low-stakes, that they can develop more freedom around writing. Taking time during the class period for students to write shows that the professor is not just interested in lecturing, or other more direct forms of classroom instruction, but that we think writing is important enough to devote time to it. I often use in-class writing as a way for students to clarify their opinions on an issue, or to give the entire class a chance to think about a question so that many people can share their thoughts instead of just the two or three students who often have a ready reply. If students have not had the experience of writing steadily and regularly over a number of years, they will have more anxiety about it, and will be less proficient. Semi-structured in-class writing gives them boundaries and a time limit. I sometimes find that students are surprised by how much they can write in a short period of time, when they are not paying attention to their inner critic, or a perceived external critic!

Work smarter, not harder!

Don't assume that the requirement of writing in your course means simply adding writing assignments on top of your course content. This will make assignments feel like a burden to both you and your students. The goals and

methods of teaching writing aren't distinct from the real substance of your course.

Writing and other communication skills are essential for performance in every field of study and career that your students will enter.

The language and learning skills developed in your class will be an important, lasting dimension of their education.

Adapted from Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, *The Elements of Teaching Writing*, 2004: 15-17.

A note from Igwe Williams, interim head of the Writing Center

According to Igwe Williams, interim director of the BMCC Writing Center, "The most challenging element of our relationship with faculty is getting them to understand what we actually do here, which is to develop the students' ability to handle the assignments they give them, and through those assignments, develop writing skills that will carry into the students' academic and creative writing futures. Many professors mistakenly think of the Writing Center as a place that corrects grammar, but that is actually the least of what we do, and the least of what we are compelled to do."

The Writing Center Philosophy:

Our goal is to help you become a better and more confident writer. We support our students throughout their academic journey as writers, and provide guidance at any stage of the writing process.

Our tutors tailor each session to focus on your specific weakness, and work with you to strengthen it. This means we don't function as editors of your paper, but work with you to help identi-

fy your errors and give you tools to improve on your own. We will help you

- Understand your assignment
- Develop your ideas
- Organize your thoughts
- Identify and cite reliable sources
- Find focus in your writing
- Guide you through the revision process
- Provide other tools you can use to succeed.

"Many professors mistakenly think of the Writing Center as a place that corrects grammar, but that is actually the least of what we do."



Important things to keep in mind:

- Tutoring sessions are 30 minutes long.
- A student cannot work on an assignment labeled "quiz," "test," "final," or "midterm" unless the professor has given specific permission for us to do so.
- A student can only sign up for an appointment with a Writing Center tutor up to three times in one week.
- Students can show up for a "walk-in" appointment at any time.
- The Learning Resource Center has specialized tutors for students in remedial English classes (below 300 level).

Problems with student writing: where do they begin? (And what can you do to help?)

What is wrong with student writing?

For some students, poor writing results from a weak grasp of written English in general, resulting from inadequate instruction or the use of English as a foreign language. On the whole, however, disappointment with the quality of student writing results from two other factors that teachers can address in their courses:

- Unfamiliarity with the assigned task
- Inappropriate methods (or lack of time) for completing the task successfully

In the majority of their assignments, in other words, undergraduates are trying to do a particular kind of writing for the

first time, often without models or adequate guidance. Learning to write well is therefore a continual process of trial and error in which rules and expectations unpredictably change. Close deadlines, congested schedules, procrastination, and previous habits can lead the great majority of these students to try to complete an assignment in a single draft, often the night before it is due. We shouldn't be surprised, then, if writers who are trying to do something unfamiliar, without much preparation or revision, don't get it right...

Who is responsible for improving student writing?

All of us, including student writers themselves. Like other writ-

ers, college students are ultimately responsible for the work they produce even under difficult circumstances, and we cannot improve student writing by placing this burden entirely on the shoulders of teachers.

But teachers are always implicated in the writing their students produce. In our assignments we construct occasions for writing, purposes, time frames, and guidelines... Because student writers are trying to do what we ask them to do, the quality of their work results in part from the contexts we create and the guidance we provide.

Adapted from Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, *The Elements of Teaching Writing*, 2004: 4-5.

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 Christa Baiada at cbaiada@bmcc.cuny.edu.

Teaching tips: Rubrics and Prompts

There is a trend in all levels of education towards the use of quantifiable rubrics. Although they may seem constrictive at first, think of them as an enhancement and partner to your writing prompt.

When crafting a writing prompt, ask yourself the following questions:

- What intellectual work do you want students to accomplish this semester (i.e. course learning goals or outcomes)? Does this assignment contribute towards these goals?
- What does the student need to know in order to be able to respond to this prompt? Have we adequately covered, modeled, and practiced these necessary conceptual ideas or constructions in class? Or, are my students ready to perform this task?
- What are the ways of learning in your field? What is the method of inquiry or formats used by professionals in your field? Use your assignments to build towards these professional-level kinds of writing, by scaffolding smaller assignments. Examples of such assignments could include producing an annotated bibliography, crafting a thesis statement, learning citation style, or writing one section of a lab report.

For both the assignment prompt and

the rubric, you can work backwards from the kind of work you want to see. Imagine the ideal student paper and let that guide the categories of assessment contained in your rubric. These categories can also help you clarify the specificity of language in your prompt to make sure you get a greater portion of successful papers.

Include a rubric with all writing assignment handouts. This will clarify your expectations for your students and for yourself. A clear rubric allows for transparency in grading and saves you time in the long run.

“The right rubric is the one that aligns with your teaching philosophy and allows you to grade most efficiently.”

It's probably not a good idea to use someone else's rubric — it was designed for their assignment, not yours. Instead, look to another person's rubric as a place to start when honing the details of your own rubric. Many are available online or simply by asking your colleagues to share theirs.

Rubrics can be either holistic or more quantifiable. The right rubric is the one that aligns with your teaching phi-

losophy and allows you to grade the most efficiently.

A holistic rubric describes the characteristics of a strong paper, an acceptable paper, and a weak paper (or any other levels of distinction you want to use).

A more quantifiable rubric will allot point values for specific tasks, possibly weighting some tasks heavier than others, depending on the learning outcomes focus of the assignment. You may choose to grade a paper holistically and then use a quantifiable rubric to double-check your initial reaction. This can help keep your grading consistent.

When crafting either kind of rubric, you can also start from the minimum level of work you would expect for the assignment (the lowest tier of a holistic rubric or the lowest possible point values in a quantifiable rubric) and work up from there.

Leave a small amount of space (approximately 1 inch) for individualized comments — just enough to be personal but not so much that you become verbose. This can be at the top of the rubric or within particular sections of a more quantified rubric.

You can scan your graded rubrics for your records. This can speed up your grading on future assignments, allowing you to refer back to the feedback you've already given.