

Writing Across the Curriculum

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

FALL 2015

WAC Teaching Tip: Scaffolding Assignments

According to John C. Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, an effective strategy for improving students' writing skills is to introduce the concept of writing as a process working toward a final product rather than addressing writing solely in terms of product. This approach tends to "combat last-minute writing, to promote exploratory writing and talking, and to encourage substantive revision" (10). One way to work the process of writing into the requirements of a course is by scaffolding, or sequencing, assignments. What follows below are some examples of scaffolding these assignments in stages. They are taken from DePaul University's website "Office for Teaching, Learning and Assessment."

Scaffolding assignments involves structuring parts of a single assignment or designing a sequence of assignments so that they gradually increase in cognitive complexity. For example, the first part of an assignment might ask students to summarize an argument; the second might ask students to identify assumptions anchoring the argument; and the third might ask them to compare and evaluate several arguments on the same topic.

Examples:

Breaking up an assignment into several parts.

For example, rather than handing in one research project at the term's end, students are asked to write three short papers. In the first they define a problem and identify two or more

positions on the problem; the second asks them to evaluate the evidence and assumptions behind each position; the third asks them to draft an argument endorsing an existing position or creating a new one.

Keeping assignment constant but increasing the difficulty of material (readings, arguments, problems, etc.). For example, students are asked to summarize articles for each week's readings, but the readings themselves increase in complexity and abstraction.

Creating a scaffold within a single assignment.

An art history professor teaching a freshman class assigns a paper asking students to 1) Describe DeKooning's painting *Woman, I*; 2) Explain how it is that the painting represents a woman (or all women); 3) Connect specific formal properties of the painting to ideas about women; and 4) Reflect on their own arguments in numbers 2 and 3 and identify some assumptions about art or creativity.

Works Cited

John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

"Office for Teaching, Learning and Assessment," last modified January 2008 <https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/assignment-design/Documents/scaffolding-assignments.pdf>. ■

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means."

—"Why I Write,"
Joan Didion

Profiles in Writing: *Franklin Winslow, Director of the Writing Center*



In June 2014, Franklin Winslow began serving as director of BMCC's Writing Center. It is familiar ground for Franklin, who worked at writing centers as an undergraduate at the University of Arkansas and as a graduate student at Columbia University, where he attained a Masters of Fine Arts in 2010. In recent years, he worked in Baruch College's English department as Director of the Writing Program and also as a substitute lecturer.

Q: From reviewing students' work, what are some suggestions you have for professors?

A: Designing a great assignment is one of the keys to guiding students to great results. That's one centerpiece in motivating students to more precise and detailed academic focus. For interested faculty, here are snippets of advice for designing tremendous assignments:

Logistics: Always include a title, point value, specific requirements for length, and due date.

Start with "Why?": Communicate the goal of the assignment toward the top of the page in one concise sentence. Imagine this as the assignment's "elevator pitch." Bullet points also work, but one should be concise and keep it to three or five key words or concepts, much like a "list of ingredients."

Quickly get to "What?": Write a brief description for the assignment. Consider incorporating important concepts and phrases from classroom discussions, lectures, and course texts. However, this isn't the place to catalogue or to overload an assignment with disciplinary jargon. A professor can use the description as a means for capturing a student's imagination and for motivating writerly ambitions.

The half-page rule: In many cases, our students haven't developed all of the skills needed to fully comprehend an assignment longer than a half-page. Be concise and direct. Please use discretion when making suggestions, too many of them can overwhelm even the most ambitious and prepared students. Many of the students I have taught and tutored don't read assignments as a group of best practices for intellectual development. Students read their assignments as literal road maps. To engage and complicate this expectation, I think the best assignments provide a "palette" for students to rely on and play with while also providing clear guidelines or principles for shaping that play.

I led a CETLS workshop in preceding semesters that expands on these concepts, and with any luck, I'll lead one in fall 2016 as well.

Q: What would you like faculty to know about the Writing Center that you think they might not already know?

A: Our staff are all writing professionals of one stripe or another, in the academy and outside it, and we offer a variety of services that help students make their professional and personal writing more clear, concise, imaginative, and reflective.

Profiles in Writing *continued*

Q: How have faculty used the Writing Center well for students? How might they use it better?

A: Students' first impressions of the Center's services are shaped by how professors describe us in class and write about us on syllabi. The Center is best used as a collaborator, as opposed to an editor. The Center's mission is to support student writers' growth and to support faculty pedagogy. Requesting the Center "grammar check" or "fix" student work undermines our purpose on campus and function as educators. Many students visit the Writing Center and expect to walk away with a final draft ready to hand in after one session. This expectation isn't realistic. Students who work with their instructors and tutors to focus on specific writing goals build better drafts, revisit the center more often, and leave with more consistent progress. In addition, these learners attach less stress to their projects.

Q: What made you want to work at a Writing Center?

A: Nice people. I was a loony undergrad English major with a creative writing emphasis at the University of Arkansas, and the co-directors of the Writing Center took interest in me. They were caring and supportive beyond reason while I helmed their front desk as an administrative assistant.

I floundered after graduation, coming to NYC by dint of the AmeriCorps VISTA to join the non-profit organization Common Ground Community, where I worked to house the street homeless for two years. I don't want to romanticize a serious social epidemic, but I had a fantastic time roaming Penn Station late at night chatting with true American originals over their never-ending games of cards and dominoes. My passion for writing, and ambition to take words seriously, led me to Columbia University's M.F.A. program in creative writing.

My primary career focus has always been the university, and my paying gigs in grad school reflected as much. I started as a writing consultant in several writing centers across CUNY—tallying over seven years of experience to date—and developed into an adjunct lecturer of composition, which led to more responsibilities later on as a substitute lecturer teaching composition and literature accompanied by administrative and committee duties as the Writing Program Manager in the Department of English at Baruch College. These opportunities brought me to BMCC, a college that I find vibrant and exciting, where I serve as the Director of the Writing Center and am fortunate enough to talk about writing, pedagogy, mistakes, hopes, and dreams, all the livelong day. ■

What is 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.

Basic WAC Principles

1. Writing is not simply a form of assessment but an essential part of the learning process.
2. Frequent and well-designed assignments, formal and informal, promote the kind of active, critical learning essential to genuine mastery of course material.
3. Good writing assignments should be an integral part of course design, devised to accomplish the learning aims of particular courses.
4. Surface correctness (freedom from error) is only one characteristic of effective writing. Equally if not more important are conscious purpose, clear structure, cogent reasoning, and adequate development of ideas.

Basic WAC Principles *continued*

5. Writing is discipline- or context-specific, involving questions of audience, purpose, tone, structure, and format. Discipline teachers are able to provide the most relevant instruction in writing for their own disciplines.
6. Writing is a process, from the generation of ideas through drafting, revision, and editing—the same kind of process faculty use. Assignments should be designed to encourage students to make use of the writing process.
7. Some writing is informal or “low-stakes” – done to gather and sort ideas, to respond to reading, to reflect upon work done: in short, writing done to learn rather than to demonstrate learning.
8. Teachers need not grade, comment on, or even read every piece of low-stakes writing they ask students to do.
9. Student writing—and confidence in writing—improves with practice, especially when assignments build in process and allow opportunities for revision.

WAC Resources Online

BMCC WAC Site

<http://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/wac/>

The WAC Clearinghouse

wac.colostate.edu/intro/

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)

owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

WAC at BMCC

WAC Co-coordinators:

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Holly Messitt, Associate Professor of English

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WAC Newsletter Committee:

Shane Breaux, Layout Editor

Leslie Synn, Text Editor

David Bahr, Editor

Spring dates for Faculty-

WAC Trainings:

Mondays 2-5pm

Feb. 22

March 7

March 21

April 18

May 9

WAC Fellows:



PICTURED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
 Rachel Brown (Political Science),
 Berglind Ragnarsdóttir (Sociology),
 David Bahr (BMCC Faculty Adviser),
 Drew Bucilla (Art History), Devon Roller
 (Business), Leslie Synn (English),
FRONT ROW: Shane Breaux (Theatre),
 Sissi Liu (Theatre), and Alana Murphy
 (Music); **NOT PICTURED:**
 Peter Yu (Psychology).