

Writing Across the Curriculum

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fall 2016

Greetings from the BMCC WAC program! We hope you have had a great Fall 2016 semester, filled with productive and engaging writing assignments. This semester we welcomed five new Fellows to the program and two returning Fellows, some of whom have shared their WAC experiences in this newsletter. Ten faculty members have taken part in WAC faculty training workshops this Fall to prepare for their Writing Intensive courses next semester, and ten faculty members have taught their first Writing Intensive courses. We wish everyone the best of luck in their endeavors.



2016-2017 WAC Fellows (From Left to Right): Vanessa Troiano, Shinae Lee, Alana Murphy, Sant Mukh Khalsa, Kelsey Pugh, Genevieve Waite, Drew Bucilla

Writing to Read: Creating Writing Assignments that require Students to Interact with Readings

by *Vanessa Troiano*

In and of itself writing is a critical skill. But did you know that emphasizing writing in your classes is also beneficial to developing reading skills? Studies suggest that incorporating writing assignments into reading assignments significantly improves students' overall comprehension of texts (e.g. Graham and Herbet,

2010). Clearly defining and suggesting approaches to critical reading that incorporate writing will not only make students better readers, but will also make them better writers while helping them to succeed both in college and their professional afterlives (Horning, 2007).

Mistakes teachers make

When assigning readings, some teachers rely on quizzes to assess student comprehension of the material. However, John C. Bean (2011) contends that quizzes tend to promote surface rather than deep reading because they encourage students to extract the “right” answers from texts rather than actually engaging with the authors’ ideas. Teachers might also fall into the habit of “Lecturing Over Readings,” such that the teacher explains the readings to students in class, which creates ineffective readers, as students no longer feel the need to understand or interpret the text for themselves.

What teachers should do instead

By establishing an environment that empowers students, teachers could encourage and guide students in their critical reading of texts. A first step may be simply acknowledging that some texts are indeed difficult to read, reassuring students that comprehension trouble may not be entirely personal. As an educator, who has indubitably spent many hours agonizing over some texts, you may wish to share with students your own processes for reading, so that they understand how they should approach certain texts. Do not hesitate to show them how you might mark-up texts with marginal notes and highlighting, or why you underline specific passages, and the kind of comments you make. With the internet at nearly everyone’s fingertips, all students should be reminded that if they encounter any unfamiliar terms or names, they should look them up.

Since students are often trained early in their lives to read to gather information, many do not realize that most texts are constructed statements with agendas. Helping students to understand the rhetorical nature of a text will make them more attuned to the purpose of the reading. Defining what it means to read critically, and overtly guiding students to do so with writing prompts and

assignments, will better enable students to garner deeper meanings from texts.

Designing writing assignments for reading purposes

Here are some writing assignment suggestions that will help your students become more effective readers:



Create Reading Guides: guides that ask critical questions of students are intended to steer students through reading passages by helping them define key terms and explain the rhetorical context of the reading.

Encourage Marginal Note-Taking: Students who simply highlight passages will tend not to grasp the more significant meanings of texts. Insist that students write in the margins of their texts, stating why certain passages are important.

Reading Logs: Similar to a journal, a reading log will encourage students to write about what they have read, pushing them toward putting their thoughts down in words and thinking about the reading. ■

Sources:

Bean, John C. (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Graham, S., and Hebert, M. A. (2010). Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Horning, Alice S. (2007, May 14). Reading across the curriculum as the key to student success. Across the Disciplines, 4. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/horning2007.cfm>

Teaching Revision with ARMS:

Encouraging students to revise their written work rather than simply edit it can be challenging, especially when students believe that their writing is good, and they cannot possibly imagine changing what they have written. However, teaching students the ARMS revision strategy, and perhaps making it an in-class activity, will prompt them to critically reflect on their work and incite them to make changes.

A is for Add: add words, sentences, details.

R is for Remove: remove words, sentences, unnecessary details.

M is for Move: Move sentences to improve flow, move paragraphs for coherence, move content to improve overall structure and organization.

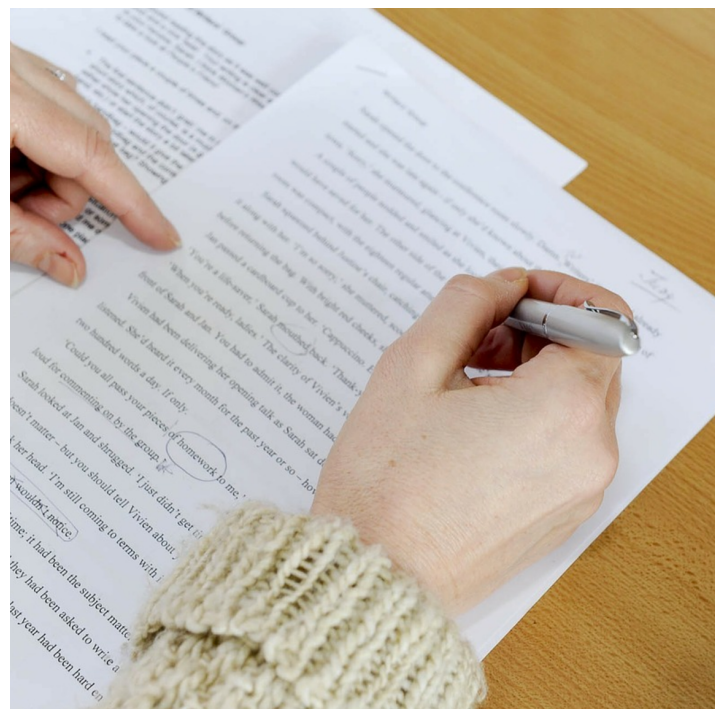
S is for Substitute: substitute overused words, use course-specific vocabulary, compose more detailed sentences for general or simple sentences. ■

Meta-Meta-Assessment: Collecting Self-Reported Student Data in the Writing Center

By *Alana Murphy*

BMCC hosts a busy and well-maintained Writing Center where students may sign up for tutoring appointments in advance or just stop in spontaneously. As part of our service, the WAC fellows work as tutors for the walk-in students once a week, and many of us agree that it's one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of the job. Last year, former fellow Rachel Brown remarked that the Writing Center sessions were “almost like flash-therapy appointments-- you have to work fast to figure out where the student is coming from, what they need, how to help the most. No two are really alike.”

Despite the very subjective nature of individual tutoring, Writing Center director Franklin Winslow



has been steadily collecting data on every student session. In previous years, he distributed a session-report form that was mostly to be filled out by the tutors; students only had to complete a prompt that said “Before my next session, I will...” As I was tutoring, I noticed that my students’ answers tended to the cursory or the tautological (“I will make the changes we talked about today,” or “I will fix my mistakes”). It seemed that they were missing an opportunity to sum up and reinforce what they had just learned.

However, this year Franklin has altered the assessment forms significantly: they are to be almost entirely student-completed, and somewhat more quantitative in nature. First, students rate their self-confidence on a scale of 1 to 4. How confident were they that they would be able to complete the assignment before they came in for tutoring? And how is their confidence after the fact? Then they fill out a field detailing what they did during the session, and how-- this can be anything from “I corrected my misuse of the

semicolon” to “I learned how to argue a position that is the opposite of what I believe.” Finally, they answer a prompt about the further steps they will take on their own.

Franklin’s new method of assessment has benefits that are twofold. First, students are asked to “refract” and “reflect”-- that is, they reiterate what they have learned, and then think about it on a deeper level. The process of writing it all down only helps to assimilate and solidify new information. In addition to serving the students on an individual basis, the assessment forms are also providing a wealth of data on a difficult-to-quantify subject. Franklin, taking cues from social and cognitive sciences as well as various theories of education, is at work on an algorithm to analyze the student-provided information from the forms. “I’m hoping that patterns will emerge,” he says, “and that we’ll be able to provide targeted workshops based on apparent needs. We want to continually be improving the resources available to students.” ■

Surveying WAC

By Kelsey Pugh

In the Spring 2016 semester, the WAC Program administered a survey of BMCC faculty that had previously completed WAC training. 131 people responded, weighing in on all things WAC, including their experiences as WAC trainees and WI instructors. Many expressed interest in and a need for continued support in accomplishing their teaching goals and achieving success in their WI courses after the WAC training period was complete. Several forums for this continued support were identified, and about half of respondents said that additional workshops would help them to continue to be successful in their WI courses. Grading and workload management were identified as ongoing concerns for many teaching

WI courses, as more than half of the WAC faculty that responded said they spend more time grading for WI courses than for their regular courses.

To address this need, the WAC program is organizing a number of refresher workshops in various departments for the upcoming Spring 2017 semester. Currently, there are workshops planned for Social Sciences, Media Arts, and Math. While dates have not yet been set, please reach out to your departmental faculty coordinators (below) for more information about these workshops, and about how you can sign up to attend.

Andres Colapinto (Social Science)

Marci Littlefield (Social Science)

Anastassios (Tassos) Rigopoulos (Media Arts)

Chris McCarthy (Math) ■

The Benefits of Writing Intensive Courses from Students' Perspectives



Rose Ortiz, Online BMCC Student, Class of 2017, Major: Writing and Literature



Lauren Fennell-Silva, Online BMCC Student, Class of 2016, Major: Writing and Literature

How has your experience taking *Writing Intensive courses* transformed your performance in other classes?

Rose: Writing Intensive courses help me in my other classes by helping me think in a more organized way. It allows me to read a question or essay topic and understand what is being asked and then it also helps me know how I'm going to answer the question. I think the extensive reading provides conditioning that in turn makes you a more focused student. Whether it's a discussion board post or an essay, I've learned not to discuss ten different things at once. Writing intensive courses have allowed me to be a better editor of my own writing as well. Through each professor's grade and comments you learn what you should and shouldn't do and how to get your point across in the most impactful way.

What was your writing process like before and after taking a WI course?

Lauren: Prior to taking a WI course, I found myself just kind of throwing together points and not really taking the time to string my thoughts together in a succinct manner. Slowly I feel that has improved thanks to my Asian American literature course in particular. Our professor really

pushes us to analyze the works we read. In turn, we're able to develop and express our ideas in a more developed way

What to you is the importance and value in learning how to be a better writer?

Rose: I believe that becoming a better writer allows you to connect with a reader in a meaningful way. If people find it easy to read your writing then you know you've done a good job. Writing intensive courses fulfill that necessity in everyone's lives. People don't realize how important it is to not only express yourself verbally, but also to be able to write a strong paper. Writing is involved in all aspects of your life each day. I write an extensive amount of emails at work everyday and I make sure I proof read them and get to my point in the clearest way possible.

Lauren: As a Writing and Literature major, becoming a better writer is huge for me. It's been something that I thought came easily to me because I enjoy it. I realized in taking my WI courses this semester that there's always room for improvement. Writing is so much more than using fancy vocabulary or making decent points. It's interpretation and expression and a lot goes into doing those two things well. ■

Writing Assignments for Students of Art History

By *Vanessa Troiano*

I am a fifth year doctoral student in the Art History department at the Graduate Center, CUNY, and have taught at Brooklyn College and Sotheby's Institute of Art in New York. As a new WAC Fellow at BMCC this semester, I have been, for the first time in my academic career, formally exposed to writing pedagogy, which I have found not only very interesting, but also highly practical and beneficial, and have since incorporated many of the lessons learned into my current teaching practices. In this section, I would like to share some tips on creating writing assignments for students of Art History, the basics of which could be adapted to other disciplines.

The Formal Analysis Essay

One of the most fundamental writing assignments given to new students of Art History is the Formal Analysis essay, which requires students to develop an argument based on visual evidence about the forms used to create a work of art. Students, who have never taken an Art History class before, usually find this assignment challenging, as they need to rely on their own observations and thoughts to support their essay, rather than conducting research. As a result, a scaffolded writing assignment, which guides students through the process of a visual analysis along with the development of an argument based on their findings, can be most beneficial.

Writing Prompts for a Visual Analysis

Instead of simply assigning an entire essay in one go, break it down into steps that are easy for the students to follow and understand. Start off by



Photograph Credit: Spencer Means @ Flickr

guiding students through a visual analysis of the work of art with prompts and questions about materials, composition and forms. This will help students engage with the artwork and record their observations in writing.

The Thesis Proposal

Ask students to prepare a thesis proposal by constructing a strong yet concise thesis statement about the work of art they are analyzing, along with specific evidence to back up their argument. Suggest some themes that the students might be able to base their thesis statements on, and provide examples for them to look at. Then ask them to give you three or four potential subtopics with supporting evidence. Such a proposal will not only help the students in formulating their thoughts for the final essay, but it will also help you, the teacher, in ensuring that they are on the right track to begin with.

Writing the Essay

Make explicit your expectations for the essay, and suggest how students should approach the introduction, body and conclusion. Recommend that they begin with an engaging opening paragraph with information specific to their work of art, that leads readers to the presentation of their thesis statement. Then advise students to construct supporting paragraphs based on the subtopics they submitted in their Thesis Proposals, along with

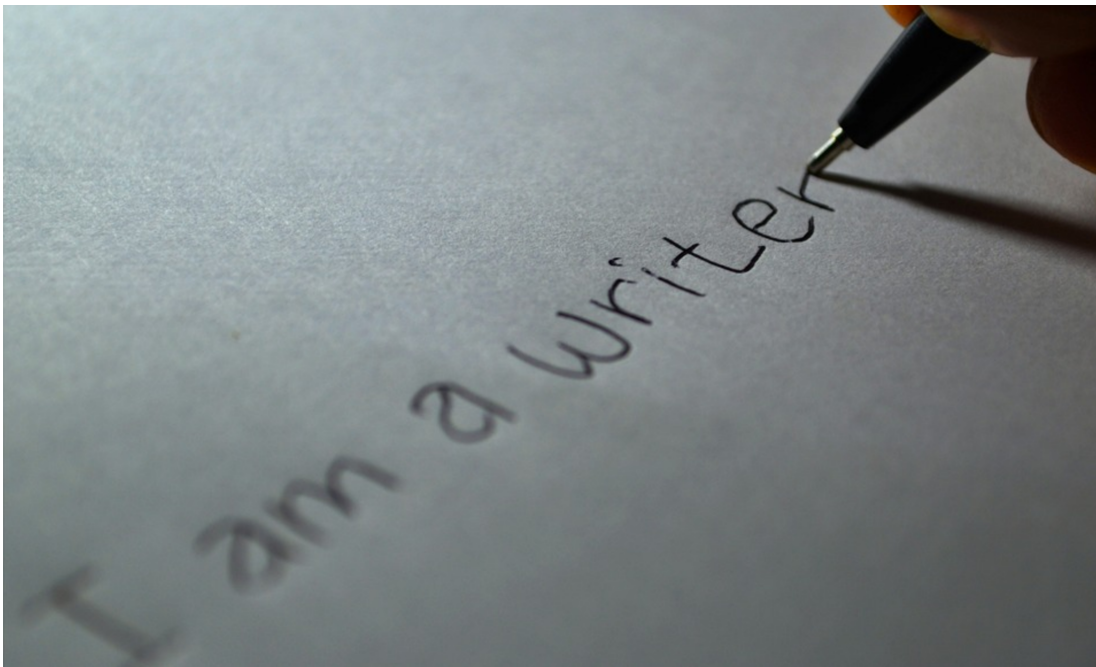
visual evidence and details to bolster their arguments.

Guiding Revisions

If you wish to have students write drafts of their essays before a final submission, an in-class peer-editing activity or a guided self-review could be beneficial. Otherwise, when grading the essays, be sure to use rubrics that give you the opportunity to provide each student with detailed feedback about their writing. ■

Back to WAC: Reflections from Second-Year Fellows

by Alana Murphy



This year, three members of our WAC cohort are second-year fellows: Genevieve Waite, who served at Queens College for 2015-2016, and Drew Bucilla and I, both coming back to the BMCC program for a second time. While we are not necessarily Jedi Masters of writing pedagogy (yet), we're privileged to have already familiarized ourselves with the main tenets of WAC, and thus can further refine our

understanding and employment of these principles while gaining fresh perspectives from new fellows and faculty partners.

Rifat Salam, one of our program directors, told me last spring that the WAC Fellowship was originally designed to be a two-year position; only recently was it integrated into the Enhanced Chancellor's Fellowship for Graduate Center students and streamlined to a single year.

As we were wrapping up the spring semester-- which, at the time, I thought would be the end of my official WAC experience-- I felt like I was just starting to settle into a rhythm, working effectively with faculty members on their course materials after months of theoretical “scaffolding,” and also feeling exponentially more comfortable and capable as a Writing Center tutor than when I’d first started. When an “at-large” fellowship position unexpectedly opened up at BMCC for the following year, I saw an opportunity to continue to engage with these practices.

Drew and I, as second-time BMCCers, have been able to foster ongoing relationships with our program directors and with continuing faculty partners. Genevieve comes to us as a seasoned WACer but from a different CUNY campus, and writes that, “at Queens, we focused on editing Revisions (a campus-published magazine about writing), doing Writing Intensive syllabi assessments, and leading workshops... Here at BMCC it’s a bit different, and I’m learning a lot of practical ways to improve my own Writing Intensive courses at Queens College (where I also teach). I enjoy having the opportunity to work

closely with BMCC WAC Fellows and faculty members.”

All of us agree that, in addition to the rewarding cross-disciplinary and service-oriented aspects of the fellowship program, WAC-immersion has been invaluable for our own individual writing lives. As late-stage humanities Ph.D. students embarking on the daunting journey of dissertating, we can always benefit from some cogent foregrounding of the writing process. I’ve actually found myself cracking open John C. Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* (our seminal WAC text) for my own purposes; Bean’s tactics are at once pragmatic and creative, a toolbox for circumventing and troubleshooting the natural human resistance to sustained deep thinking.

Writing may never be a painless endeavor, especially at the professional research level. But the more we think about writing, and read about writing, and talk about writing, and teach about writing, and write about writing, the better our writing and thinking will ultimately be. Even if our WAC careers only span a year or two, we’ll continue to internalize the concepts and carry them into our futures as scholars and educators. ■

WAC at BMCC

WAC Co-Coordinators:

Rifat Salam, Associate Professor of Sociology

Holly Messit, Associate Professor of English

Christa Baiada, Associate Professor of English

WAC Newsletter Committee:

Vanessa Troiano, Text Editor

Alana Murphy, Text Editor

Sant Mukh Khalsa, Layout Editor

Kelsey Pugh, Contributor

WAC Resources Online

BMCC WAC Site

bmcc.cuny.edu/wac/

The WAC Clearing House

wac.colostate.edu/intro

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)

owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

