

Writing Across the Curriculum

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

FALL 2017/WINTER 2018



From left to right, front Row: Kelsey Pugh, Dana Liljegren, Ilana Abramovitch. Middle row: Cara Frissell, Jennifer Thompson, Natalie Oshukany, Heather James, Saniye Deniz Gokcora, Shalva Tsiklauri, Andrea Garraway, Rifat Salam, Holly Messitt. Back row: Samuel Sloves, Tom Marks, James Sayegh, Sara D'Andrea, Margaret Carson, Christopher Moss, Ali Syed (not pictured).

WAC Faculty @ BMCC: A New Digital Resource for BMCC's Writing-Intensive Instructors

By Tom Marks

At BMCC, two semesters of Writing Across the Curriculum training is required for those interested in teaching writing-intensive courses. Instructors are exposed to a variety of valuable pedagogical resources and teaching strategies that they can implement in their WI courses. But what happens when the educator's final WAC training semester comes to a close? BMCC has hosted the WAC website and offered periodic "refresher" courses for some time. But at the beginning of the Spring 2018

semester, BMCC's instructors will have access to an online site that will provide a number of invaluable resources exclusively to the College's WAC community. WAC Faculty @ BMCC—the new site hosted through the CUNY Academic Commons—will offer a private digital space exclusively for educators at BMCC who wish to continue developing their WAC skills during and even well after their time in the training seminars has ended.

(“WAC Faculty @ BMCC” *cont.*)

Building an Online Community.

WAC coordinator Rifat Salam writes that one of the primary purposes of the new Commons site is to continue to build a community of educators committed to WAC pedagogy at BMCC. “While we feel that such a community already exists,” Salam notes, “the Commons site will help facilitate interactions among faculty who may not have the opportunity to engage with each other or the WAC coordinators in person... By providing a virtual community for the BMCC WAC Program, faculty will be able to engage and interact with us freed from scheduling challenges. We envision the BMCC WAC Commons site to be a practical tool and resource for faculty but also as a virtual complement to our engaged and active BMCC WAC community.”

“Ask a Fellow.”

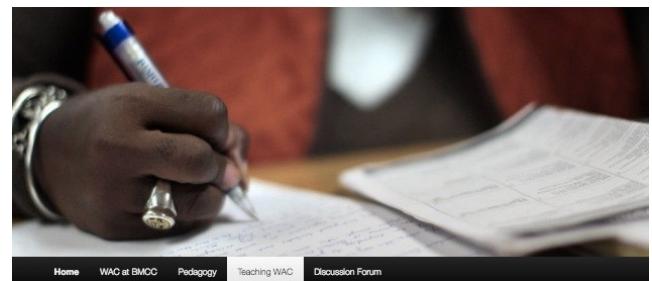
To build an online WAC community, the Commons site will feature a running discussion board where educators will be able to “Ask A Fellow” specific questions regarding WAC related teaching. BMCC’s team of Writing Fellows will field questions from professors about WAC pedagogy, suggest strategies for teaching writing or reading exercises, and give feedback on syllabi or assignment prompts. The “Ask A Fellow” feature promotes, in other words, all of the same in-person conversations that might occur between WAC trainees and Writing Fellows. This discussion board, furthermore, promotes continued interactions between instructors and Writing Fellows after the conclusion of the two-semester training sequence.

Training and Teaching Resources.

The new Commons site will also provide a central location where all documents related to the WAC training workshops can be housed. In each workshop, WAC coordinators offer trainees a number of useful handouts and informative PowerPoint slides. Rather than emailing digital

copies of these documents to individual trainees, the teaching materials will be uploaded onto the WAC Commons for easy access. This also allows WAC trainees who have completed the training in previous semesters to have access to the most up-to-date materials. The Commons site will also house articles in pedagogical journals on themes specific to teaching writing, suggested assignments that educators can use to promote critical thinking, and discipline-specific assignments tailored to particular subjects. Furthermore, the Commons site will feature a number of teaching videos that will present BMCC’s refresher courses in a new format. Workshops will be filmed and uploaded so that professors at BMCC will be able to access the materials at their convenience. The videos will be accompanied by discussion boards where educators can comment on and ask questions about the specific content presented in the video.

To enjoy all of these fantastic resources in BMCC’s online WAC community, look for an email invitation to join WAC Faculty @ BMCC from your WAC coordinators in the near future. Please note that, in order to receive an invitation to the closed Commons site, instructors will first need a CUNY Academic Commons profile. To do this, simply click “create account” on the Commons homepage (<http://commons.gc.cuny.edu>) and follow the instructions.



Grading Rubrics: Controversies, Benefits, and Strategies

By Dana Liljegren

For many professors, the use of rubrics for grading and student feedback is a divisive issue. Those opposed to the practice or wary of its benefits often caution against the risks of formulaic student writing, problematic grade standardization, or assessment modes that fail to sufficiently promote improvement. Those in favor, however, are quick to point out that rubrics are merely tools used in grading, not substitutes for individualized feedback. A discussion of how to effectively use them is therefore arguably more productive than a debate about their intrinsic costs and benefits.

According to Michael Livingston, English professor at the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, “Rubrics are no more to blame...than the hammer is to blame for me striking my thumb” (Livingston, 109). A well-designed grading rubric offers the potential for greater ease and clarity of communication with students, as well as maintenance of teacher impartiality in grading, and saved time for students and teachers alike. Below are just a few of the primary pros of a carefully crafted rubric.

A rubric can clarify goals & expectations for students.

When professors create a grading rubric to accompany a writing assignment, allowing students to view beforehand the specific criteria by which their assignment will be evaluated, students have in hand a checklist for their own work during and after the writing process. This notion of a “checklist” may prompt objections on the grounds that students will then write towards a limited, standardized structure; however, there is reason to believe that formulaic student responses are often the result of equally formulaic rubrics. As Heidi Goodrich Andrade notes, “Even a fabulous rubric does not change the fact that students need models,

feedback, and opportunities to ask questions, think, revise, and so on. Anyone can download a rubric from the Web, but using it to support good instruction is another matter” (Andrade, 29). Livingston echoes Andrade’s perspective: “[A] rubric is, and must be, a reflection of...personal interests in the classroom: I want students to take stances, to take chances, and to make strong rhetorical arguments based on evidence, all conveyed within the bounds of proper practice. This is how I define good writing to them” (Livingston, 110).

A rubric can help maintain impartiality during the grading process.

Virtually all professors can relate to the feelings of stress and exhaustion that may arise during the process of reviewing a seemingly endless stack of student assignments. In the same way that a rubric provides a writing checklist for students, it offers a grading checklist for teachers, one that may mitigate the impact of fluctuating moods, classroom dynamics, or student interactions on the perspective of the grader. Furthermore, depending on the grading criteria of a given assignment, a well-devised rubric may help reviewers avoid the urge to score highly a beautifully written essay that nevertheless does not fulfill the assignment effectively, or give unnecessarily low marks to a well-argued paper with grammatical errors.

“We use [rubrics] to clarify our learning goals,...communicate the goals to students, guide our feedback on students' progress toward the goals, and judge final products in terms of the degree to which the goals were met.”

Heidi Goodrich Andrade, “Teaching with Rubrics: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” 2005

(“Grading Rubrics” *cont.*)

Grading rubrics save time spent on addressing common writing issues.

One of the most straightforward timesaving aspects of a grading rubric is the ability to utilize a list of frequent comments or observations in student feedback. As soon as a reader finds herself writing, “Be sure to state your thesis in your introduction” repeatedly, it could be time to make use of a rubric that addresses thesis placement and formulation. One implementable suggestion, therefore, is to include a checkable box next to the grading rubric’s “Thesis” section, and to allow a small space for additional notes, if needed. Through such strategies, teachers can make the most of a time-efficient template without sacrificing the opportunity to customize comments and give personalized guidance.

Below is Livingston’s basic rubric:

- **Thesis.** Is my thesis arguable? Is it original? Does it make sense? Is it clear?
- **Argument.** Do my paragraphs relate to my thesis? Do I cover counterarguments? Do I support my claims with evidence? Do I make connections?
- **Grammar.** Do I have spelling problems? Syntax faults? Punctuation errors? If I broke a rule, do I have a good reason?
- **Formatting.** Is my paper the correct length? What about margins, font, spacing, and style? Did I cite evidence correctly?
- **Style/Misc.** Did I stretch my abilities? Did I write with “style”?

Addressing Plagiarism in the WAC Classroom

By Tom Marks

It’s 10:00 p.m. on a Thursday night at the end of a long semester. You’ve been grading a pile of papers sitting on the nearby coffee table when, noticing something out of the ordinary in a student’s written work, you suspect the worst. Googling a few phrases from the paper, you begin to realize that much of it is lifted directly from a recent newspaper article without citation—a most heinous offense, plagiarism, has been committed. You sigh deeply to yourself, mark the paper with a zero, and wonder where things went wrong. “Why did my student do this?” We have all encountered situations similar to this one. What, in these delicate circumstances, does Writing Across the Curriculum pedagogy have to offer for the writing instructor? This brief article provides some strategies for formulating written assignments in ways that discourage plagiarism in the writing-intensive classroom.

What is Plagiarism?

Variations in the ways that both professors and students understand plagiarism produce much of the confusion about what exactly it is and when it has been clearly committed. In his article “Plagiarism Across the Curriculum,” Jonathan Hall understands plagiarism as a failure to participate in the discourse of an academic community. One of the goals of Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing In the Discipline is to give students the competency to communicate fully within their particular academic communities. Plagiarism, however, marks the failure of a student to perform this very task. It demonstrates that a student is, in fact, not ready to participate in disciplinary discourse and must therefore rely on the words of others for advancement in the field (Hall).

(“Addressing Plagiarism” *cont.*)

Discourage Data-Dump Writing.

One point to consider when crafting a writing assignment is the type of writing the assignment actually promotes. John Bean encourages educators in his book *Engaging Ideas* to creating assignments that discourage “data dump” writing. In this form of written work, the student “patches together quotes, statistics, and other raw information without a thesis or a coherent organizational plan. It [data-dump writing] takes all the data the writer gathered about topic X and dumps it, as it were, on the reader’s desk” (Bean 27). Assignments that (unintentionally) encourage data-dump writing poise students to plagiarize; overwhelmed with the data they have researched, students simply regurgitate the material onto the page, copying and pasting it directly from the words of another author without citation.

Frame Knowledge as “Dialogic” Rather than “Informational.”

One of the ways that educators can dissuade students from engaging data-dump work is by first framing knowledge as “dialogic” rather than “informational” (Bean 30). On the informational side of the spectrum, the student understands knowledge to be a set of discrete facts that exist within an oppositional right/wrong binary. But the student can be taught to recognize knowledge as dialogic—that is, discursively constructed through critical discourse and argumentation. By training students to recognize the dialogic nature of knowledge, they are more apt to view the sources with which they engage as arguments put forward by individual people that are open to criticism and discussion rather than collections of discrete facts to be memorized and regurgitated in written work.

Consider the Genre of the Assignment.

Another means by which to discourage data-dump writing, and therefore reduce the possibility of plagiarism, is to experiment with assignments in different genres. If as John Bean asserts that traditional research papers promote copy-paste mentalities, then asking students to write in a format such as a personal letter or a historical journal entry might reduce the pressure students feel to provide the “right” answers to the assignment prompt. In a history course, for example, professors might ask students to imagine themselves as a famous historical figure writing a letter to a contemporary. The students might need to argue a point about a particular topic, first conducting researching on that topic and the viewpoints of the hypothetical audience to whom the letter might be addressed. While research and a clear thesis are required for this form of writing, the formalities of the research-paper genre are disguised and the pressures to plagiarize subsequently reduced.

Scaffold and Intervene.

A well-designed WAC assignment offers the professor multiple opportunities to intervene in the writing process, allowing him or her to correct a student’s improper citation or question the legitimacy of their paraphrases when necessary. Again, Jonathan Hall notes that “[t]he basic principles of the WAC classroom—integrating writing with the learning of course material, nourishing the feedback/revision loop, intervening in incremental stages in the research and composition process—are precisely those best suited to head off plagiarism by engaging students in the specific language of a particular course” (Hall). By requiring early drafts and scaffolded portions of an assignment, Hall

(“Addressing Plagiarism” *cont.*) recognizes that professors are able to avoid “the plagiarism of desperation,” a concept coined by Dorothy Wells. When faced with an impending deadline, students who have not finished the written assignment might, in a moment of desperation, copy and paste the words of another author in order to submit something rather than nothing on time (Wells 61). Early deadlines and drafts, however, help students recognize that writing is a process comprised of many steps that require time and continued revision—a task that cannot be completed overnight.

Ask Students to Submit Ancillary Materials.

Professors might consider asking students to submit along with each scaffolded portion of the assignment all ancillary materials used in conjunction with the project. John Bean recommends, for example, that professors ask students to submit materials such as all handwritten

notes, early drafts, and annotated readings along with the assignment itself in order to assess the methods by which a student produced their written work (Bean 37).

While plagiarism probably won’t disappear entirely from the WAC classroom, the strategies explored in this article offer just a few ways to minimize it where possible. By framing knowledge as a conversation rather than a collection of discrete truths, avoiding assignments that promote data-dump writing, reconsidering the genre of written work, and constructing a scaffolded WAC assignment, professors can create a classroom culture that inherently impedes plagiarism while simultaneously encourages students to find their own unique voices in and across academic disciplines.

Task-Based Pedagogy

By Howard Meltzer, Professor of Music & Art, BMCC

Prof. Meltzer's Task-based Grading Statement for Students:

"Your grade is not my estimate of your value as an individual, nor is it a summation of your musical knowledge. Your grade registers how well you completed a specific task at a specific time and nothing more. My responsibility is to give you clear and complete directions on how to perform the task; your responsibility is to follow those directions to the best of your ability and complete the task by the due date."



Professor Meltzer outlines goals and strategies for creating and evaluating assignments as tasks, and provides students with a statement to reinforce that grading assesses completed tasks, not people.

Task-based pedagogy frames assignments, both in class and outside of class, as a series of steps. In creating assignments, we ask:

- Can we set tasks that can be successfully accomplished?
- Is each task worthwhile?
- Can we prepare students to successfully complete the task?
- Can we reinforce that we evaluate the *completed task*, not the *student*?

In my MUS103 Music in Western Civilization, students write a literary analysis of Langston Hughes' "The Blues I'm Playing." Rather than hand out an omnibus assignment, I break the project into three stages – each of which can be assessed on its own, and demonstrates a degree of progress.

- Task 1 – Read the story. I give students the option of creating a written summary for their own use, but assess this stage of the assignment through class discussion. If a student can read carefully and critically, that is a success.
- Task 2 – Create a thesis. I ask the students to draft a first paragraph without writing the paper until we meet for discussion. This part of the assignment emphasizes four "tasks" that lead to the formulation of a thesis (naming a topic, asking a question, motivating the question, determining its significance). If a student can formulate a thesis, that is a success.
- Task 3 – Write the final paper. Ideally, the final paper will be a success as well, but if it falls a bit short, I encourage the student to reflect on individual strengths and accomplishments.

Thinking of the assignment as a series of tasks allows me to treat each of the three large goals as worthwhile and open to graded evaluation.

Works Cited

All referenced articles in this Newsletter can be found at the new WAC Commons site.

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WAC at BMCC

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Wac.colostate.edu/intro

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)
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