

WRITE FREE OR DIE

Volume 5, Issue 1

The Newsletter of the UNH Writing Programs

Fall 2018

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Student Perceptions and Process

Ed Mueller, Director, University Writing Programs

Cassandra Phillips and Greg Ahrenhoerster, professors of English at the Waukesha campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee College of General Studies, conducted a study of class size in first-year writing courses across the 13 campuses of the University of Wisconsin Colleges system (two-year liberal arts transfer institutions, since dissolved and restructured in 2018). Although narrow in scope, this research presents some points of general interest beyond the two-year college, first-year writing community.

A detailed recounting of the study is beyond the scope of this newsletter. Broadly summarized, in the wake of an increase in class size caps in first-year writing (and other courses), they conducted a two-year study to answer the question, "Is student learning affected by increased class sizes in first-year writing, and if so, how?"

(continued on page 2)

Future Tense: Upcoming Writing Across the Curriculum Events, Fall 2018

January 17 Workshop: Writing Rubrics--Promises and Practices (9:00-12:00, Location TBA) In this workshop, we'll deal with the central tension between the holistic nature of writing and the essential mechanic of rubrics to parse a text into multiple, quantifiable criteria. Although we may not be able to completely bridge this gap, we will examine definitions, models, and practices for using rubrics in connection with student writing, both formative and summative. A faculty panel will share their experiences and participants will have time to work on their own rubrics during the workshop. Offered through CEITL; please watch for their announcement for details and registration.

April 4 or 11: Effective Feedback Workshop: Guest Presenter Nancy Sommers (12:45-2:00, Location TBA) This year's guest presenter will be [Nancy Sommers](#), a prominent researcher and educator in the field of student writing specializing in feedback. She led Harvard's Expository Writing Program for 20 years, established and directed the Harvard Writing Project, a cross-disciplinary writing program, and conducted a series of studies on the culture of undergraduate writing. At UNH, she will be leading a faculty workshop on managing and giving feedback to student writers. April 4th or 11th (12:45-2:00). All workshop attendees will be given a copy of Nancy's [Responding to Student Writers](#), a foundational text in the field.

June 3-5, 2019: Writing-Invested (WI) Faculty Retreat, Mount Washington Hotel: The UNH Writing Program will reprise the WI (Writing-Invested) Faculty retreat experience. Priority will go to faculty teaching or planning to teach WI courses, but all faculty who are invested in writing in pedagogy are welcome to apply. The experience consists of a three-day offsite at the Mount Washington Hotel followed by three sessions at UNH in the following year. The salient goals of the retreat are to give faculty a more full awareness of the principles underlying writing in pedagogy and WI courses, equip them with practices to enhance their work with student writing, and to promote connections among writing-invested faculty. Watch for an announcement in early spring. Contact Ed Mueller: edward.mueller@unh.edu

If you find your own writing boring, so will somebody else.

—Michael Dirda

WAC(ky) People

UNH Writing Program

Ed Mueller, Director

Lauren Short, Associate Director

Danielle Lavendier, Associate Director

Writing Committee:

College Representatives Term End

Paul-- Huimin Li **2022**
(Finance)

COLSA -- Davida **2022**
Margolin (MCBS)

CEPS -- John LaCourse **2020**
(Engineering)

COLA 1 -- Marcos **2019**
Del Hierro (English)

COLA 2 -- Soo Hyon Kim **2020**
(English)

CHHS -- Robert Barcelona **2019**
(Recreation Management
and Policy)

UNHM -- Gail Fensom* **2020**
(English, Director of First-
Year Writing Program)

*Faculty Chair

Permanent Representatives:

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Ed Mueller (Academic Affairs)

Writing Center Director:

Meaghan Dittrich (Academic
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Cris Beemer (English)

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Discovery Committee:

Kathrine Aydelott
(Diamond Library)

Ex officio (non-voting):

Committee Secretary:

Elizabeth Smith (Registrar)

(continued from page 1)

They examined both faculty and students. Concerning faculty, their findings reinforced already-substantiated knowledge on the impact of larger class size on writing in pedagogy: faculty tended to assign fewer papers, give less feedback, have less peer review, conduct fewer conferences, and alter assignments to accommodate increased workload. Common understanding would indicate that these findings for composition faculty would extend to practice “in the disciplines” as well.

When looking at the other side of the issue, they found that students in larger classes were more likely to come away with a less nuanced understanding of how texts were constructed, equating writing to a mechanical transaction defined by spelling, punctuation, and formatting requirements as opposed to higher level concepts. Extending from this model, when asked to speculate on future writing practice, students in larger classes were more likely to indicate that their writing practice would be limited to turning in first drafts for other classes. Understanding that correlation is not causation (a handy phrase I’ve learned from colleagues in the sciences here at UNH), the authors acknowledge that there could be variables beyond their first-year writing experiences that are influencing these self-reported student expectations. The general thrust of these findings are not unfamiliar, however, and thus still of interest. A different study, “The Writing Transfer Project” (reported on in the Fall 2014 Newsletter), examined student writing practice after first-year writing and found that in the absence of other guidance student writing practice did, indeed, tend to revert to simplistic approaches and K-12 transactional models.

In both studies, we can see how a simplistic concept of how texts come into being--reinforced by limited practice--can work against student writing progress. This suggests several general lessons for faculty. The first is an affirmation that even in large enrollment classes it is not a waste of time to cue students on writing habits and expectations, even those that they might have heard before. The “Writing Transfer Project” found that cueing students in this way is helpful (even necessary) to promote the transfer of previously learned writing practice to new contexts. The second would be that there is value in constructing write-to-learn assignments linked to course goals. This kind of practice promotes a more mature concept of writing as inquiry, which in turn suggests process (both writing and learning). This kind of practice also helps to work against the tendency of students to perceive of writing as a series of isolated mechanical transactions.

Phillips, Cassandra, and Greg Ahrenhoerster. “Class Size and First-Year Writing: Exploring the Effects on Pedagogy and Students’ Perception of Writing Process.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 46, no. 1, Sept. 2018, pp. 9–29., www2.ncte.org/.

Ask Spence:

Your teaching concerns addressed by our very own Spence Lavendier

As Transposed from Purrs to Person by Lauren Short, UNH Writing Programs

How do I create writing prompts that my students understand? –Puzzled by Prompts

Dear Puzzled by Prompts,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Spence, and I am a distinguished 10-year-old gray tuxedo cat. I'm an MA, PhD, and CAT specializing in being present when a can of food is being opened. In my spare time, I answer questions about teaching and writing.

Thanks for your question. While mousing in the Connors Writing Center, I've heard many students seeking help interpreting their assignments. So, I've put on my investigative mortar board to find some tips and tricks to keep in mind the next time you're drafting a writing assignment or revising an existing one.

The Name Matters

The most effective writing prompts use language students are familiar with or have experience with (perhaps as used in your class). Assignment language can serve as a tool to define the kinds of critical thinking and disciplinary knowledge expected in the assignment. Also, think about simplifying terminology so that meanings are unmistakable. Taken a step further, define what is intended by the verbs in your instructions. For instance, what does "examine," "investigate," "summarize," or "analyze" mean or require in the context of your assignment?

Scaffolding

It can be easy to assume that *how* to accomplish an assignment may be clear to students because it is clear to us. But we must keep in mind that students may still be learning not only disciplinary knowledge but also how to communicate in an unfamiliar genre. Scaffolding larger writing projects into cumulative, smaller prompts allows students to see the end goal while offering them interim, lower stakes opportunities to get there. Thus, students can "fail safely" along the way and still succeed in the overall assignment. Allison Rank and Heather Pool also recommend incorporating multiple types of writing with multiple objectives so that students can learn, step-

by-step, what writing in an unfamiliar discipline or genre looks like. In turn, instructors can see the writing develop and troubleshoot issues before the end product.

Keep it Concise

According to a 2016 information literacy study, students tended to score higher on assignments whose prompts included fewer instructions than those with lengthier instructions (Lowe et al.). Easier said than done, but streamlining assignment prompts can eliminate space for confusion and also help students identify key instructions.

Give Students Options

The Lowe information literacy study suggests that "students who had their own choice of topic, within the confines of the course, performed much better than students who had to write on a proscribed topic." If students need to demonstrate understanding of a particular concept in an assignment, for instance, giving them 2-3 prompts to choose from could be beneficial. This is another plug for scaffolding—having students test options in lower stakes writing assignments can allow them to discover an effective approach for the whole.

If you find yourself looking for more on assignment prompts, I suggest chatting with your colleagues. Welcome feedback; be open to change, and listen to what your students have to say. Well, folks, now that I've talked so much about writing assignments, I feel I need a cat nap.

Sources

- Lowe, Sara M., Sean M. Stone, Char Booth, and Natalie Tagge. "Impact of Assignment Prompt on Information Literacy Performance in First-Year Student Writing." *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 42, no. 2, March 2016, pp. 127-134. DOI: 10.1016/j.acalib.2016.01.002
- Rank, Allison and Heather Pool. "Writing Better Writing Assignments." *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 675-681.
- Shaver, Lisa. "Eliminating the Shell Game: Using Writing-Assignment Names to Integrate Disciplinary Learning." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 2007, pp. 74-90. DOI: 10.1177/1050651906293532

For more information, please email Spence at dml2002@wildcats.unh.edu or ls2010@wildcats.unh.edu



Facilitators and Participants in the fourth Annual WI Faculty Retreat at the Mount Washington Hotel, June 2018



Rear Row, left to right: Lauren Short, Richard Kilbride, Charlie Valdez, Janet Anderson. Front Row, left to right: Ed Mueller, Tyler Jamison, Stephan Shipe, Cecille Desmond, Sara Withers, Lauren Ferguson, Naomi Crystal, Patricia Halpin, Denise Desrosiers

The Grammar Box: Split Infinitives

Lauren Short, Associate Director, UNH Writing Programs

"Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, **to boldly go** where no one has gone before." This opener to *Star Trek*, narrated by American treasure William Shatner, contains perhaps the most popular example of a split infinitive (shown in bold above).



A split infinitive is when a word or phrase comes between the "to" and the bare infinitive form of the infinitive verb. In the above example, "to explore" and "to seek" are non-split infinitives. Here is another split infinitive:

William Shatner likes to totally overact.

In the above case, the infinitive form of the verb "to overact" is split by the word "totally." To correct the split infinitive, one might say:

William Shatner totally likes to overact.

A search on Google reveals that grammarians have been up in arms for years over whether or not a split infinitive is grammatically incorrect (and many have been wondering if it even matters). Historically speaking, we're still talking about split infinitives because of an adherence to Latin and Old English. In Latin and Old English, infinitives couldn't be split because they were one word. As Old English morphed into Middle English, it became easier to insert adverbs in between split infinitives with multiple words.

And here we are now. Some linguists argue that we aren't splitting infinitives in English because *to* is not part of the infinitive, but an appurtenance, or an accessory object. Authors have been splitting infinitives for years. So when might you make the case that a split infinitive is appropriate? Most modern usage guides suggest splitting infinitives when clarity is at stake. Or, if you're really feeling boisterous, you might just make it a stylistic choice to boldly go--or to go boldly--wherever you want to go with your infinitive.

For more information, contact ls2010@wildcats.unh.edu



You can be a little ungrammatical if you come from the right part of the country.

—Robert Frost

Dangling Modifier: Rubrics Redux

Danielle Lavendier, Associate Director, University Writing Programs

Rubrics are a topic of debate among my colleagues in the composition community, and for good reason. For something so concrete, rubrics can feel very nebulous. Let's take a look at why faculty use them, as well as some pitfalls and best practices.

Why do faculty use rubrics? The apparent subjectiveness of applying a letter grade to writing, as opposed to other material, can feel uncomfortable. Rubrics are one tool many instructors use to help objectivize their grading process. The other side of this coin is that rubrics can be restrictive; scoring discrete elements of student writing that seem the most easily quantified, such as grammar and usage, can leave out more complex elements, like style.

In "the Infamy of Grading Rubrics," Michael Livingston addresses the knee-jerk reaction many educators have when they hear the word *rubric*. Livingston points out that the use of rubrics as a writing "checklist" can serve to streamline grading at the expense of the quality of writing. Furthermore, in "Teaching with Rubrics: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," Heidi Goodrich points out some other potential pitfalls: 1. Rubrics aren't inherently clear and need contextual explaining; 2. They can wind up replacing teaching; and, 3. Rubrics can still be unfair and unreliable (29-30).

In order to examine ways we can productively use rubrics with writing, let's differentiate a few kinds: the grading rubric, the instructional rubric, and the holistic rubric.

An **analytical grading rubric** does just that: it provides a checklist of attributes that a student's writing should or should not have. Items are marked in accordance with their strength, perhaps on a scale of 1-5 or with each criterion weighing a particular value out of 100. For example, *organization* might be worth 20 points, while citation might be worth up to 10. After all attributes are scored, the sum translates into the final grade. The main focus tends to be on parts rather than the whole, and on what the paper is lacking rather than on ways to improve writing.

An **instructional rubric** usually describes varying levels of quality, from excellent to poor, in key criteria for the assignment (like "use of evidence"). It gives students feedback about their writing, either formative or summative. This type of rubric, as explained by Andrade, is especially strong when it is the product of collaboration between faculty and students. When students have a say in how they are evaluated, their concerns about context lessen. Since students are also familiarized with the

assignment and given a hand in shaping assessment, they know what the intended outcomes are. By extension, this can mean reduced grading time since students will have a clearer grasp of what is expected.

Livingston suggests that "one of the great powers of the rubric [is to] bring us closer to explaining the inherently inexplicable notion of what makes a piece of writing work." He adds, "The rubric [forces] those involved in the process, both student and teacher, into a dialogue about the specifics of language and communication" (112). These sorts of conversations are most likely when instructors are invested in using rubrics beyond recording where papers fell short.

Finally, **holistic rubrics** can soothe concerns over the problematics of attempting to make writing assessment purely quantifiable. A holistic rubric, "rather than breaking down the various elements of a paper, describes the qualities of an A paper, then a B paper, and so forth" (Hedengren 110). Students still see the important grading criteria, but not as free-standing columns. The benefits of holistic rubrics are three-fold: students still receive guidance on expectations and feedback embedded in the rubric; instructors save time by not having to write repetitive feedback; and students feel that there is less subjectivity in the grading process.

It's no surprise that students see the value in rubrics. Denise Krane, a lecturer at Santa Clara University, conducted a quantitative study to gauge student opinions of rubrics. Almost 70% thought that writing assignments should be graded with rubrics, and 86% said rubrics helped clarify the instructor's expectations (2).

Rubrics aren't perfect but, they can help to accurately represent the learning objectives for an assignment, provide structure for a meaningful discussion of expectations, and save a bit of time grading.

Andrade, Heidi Goodrich. "Teaching with Rubrics: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly." *College Teaching*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 27-30.

Hedengren, Beth Finch. *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*. Bedford, 2004.

Krane, Denise. "Guest Post: What Students see in Rubrics." *Inside Higher Ed*. Insidehighered.com 30 August, 2018.

Livingston, Michael. "The Infamy of Grading Rubrics." *English Journal*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2012, pp. 108-113

For more information, contact dml2002@wildcats.unh.edu



Never use a long word when a diminutive one will do. –William Safire (Rule #37)

Can You See Yourself Here?

**The Fifth Annual WI
(Writing-Invested)
Faculty Retreat at
the Mount
Washington Hotel**



June 3-5, 2019

**See “Future Tense”
for Details**

Grading Has Always Made Writing Better

*Excerpted From **Bad Ideas About Writing***

textbooks.lib.wvu.edu/badideas/badideasabouwritingbook.pdf (Open Source Text)

Assessment and grading are not synonymous. Grading is a silent, one-way evaluation, where a teacher assigns a letter, rife with a set of socio-cultural significances, to a piece of student writing. Assessment, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for two kinds of evaluation—formative and summative.

Formative evaluation—done typically by responding to in-process student writing several times during the semester—replaces the punishment or praise of student learning, typically demonstrated through grading a final product or test, with a process that encourages communication as a part of learning. When using formative evaluation, teachers and students speak with one another often. In addition, formative evaluation creates safe spaces for student learning because students are not focused on trying to avoid failure but, instead, are searching for insight and growth. As grades lose their power, the desire to evade punishment or failure can dissolve into the desire to seek knowledge and learn something new. Finally, because of the communicative nature of formative evaluation, students develop the capacity to talk about and, in some instances, even teach the material themselves as they work with their peers to explain what they know.

Summative evaluation follows extensive formative evaluation. Summative evaluation is superior to grading because it assesses a student’s ability to meet a priori criteria without the use of a letter grade. Summative evaluation methods such as student self-reflection on the learning process, ungraded portfolio assessment, and contract grading all provide the opportunity for teachers to assess and respond to student learning free of the socio-political, socio-economic letter grade.

Unfortunately, like most teachers, I have to provide grades in the summative sense. If I don’t submit a letter grade at the end of a semester, I will not have a job. But providing end-of-semester grades doesn’t preclude providing formative assessment that can help students revise a text or project so they will better understand why they might receive an 85% as a final grade. If I had a choice by my institution whether to provide summative grades, however, I wouldn’t do it again. In short, the enterprise of grading student writing should be replaced by a combination of formative and summative evaluation.

Mitchell R. James. “Grading Has Always Made Writing Better.” *Bad Ideas About Writing*. Edited by Cheryl E Ball and Drew M Lowe. West Virginia University Libraries. 2017, pp 255-258.



Faculty Profile: Dev Dutta, Paul College

Whether his courses are designated writing-intensive or not, Professor Dev Dutta expects students to engage in the process of writing. For him, integrating writing into his teaching means that not only will students write frequently, but they'll also submit drafts and receive feedback throughout the term. Dutta's emphasis on writing is traceable to two particular experiences. As an industry professional for 15 years before pursuing a PhD and entering the academy, Dutta found that the most successful individuals had strong written and verbal communication skills, a fact he emphasizes in classes. He also took a Teaching with Writing course in the UNH Graduate School's Cognate in College Teaching. There, Dutta came to see that writing needed to be blended into teaching as a whole. Through the integrated use of writing, he saw that he could teach and help students succeed.

An Associate Professor of Strategic Management and Entrepreneurship, Dutta has taken his teaching seriously from the start. His move into academia, even though carefully designed, entailed a lot of change. Moving across countries and careers meant he had little chance of going back. Since he knew academia was going to be his future, he wished to give it his best in research as well as teaching. Thus, Dutta has sought opportunities to hone his teaching skills and stay on the cutting edge through courses, workshops, and certifications in pedagogy and curriculum design. Beyond his other faculty responsibilities, he has acquired teacher certifications from MIT and Stanford, as well as an MS in Teaching from UNH. Diving into subjects outside his own expertise, including humanities and the liberal arts, has made him more understanding of students who come into courses unfamiliar with a discipline. He has therefore tried to make material more accessible and to be more explicit about writing in his courses.

That explicitness takes multiple forms. He offers clear guidelines and expectations to students, laying out steps to follow. He also encourages students to make mistakes and show him the messiness of work in progress. In the event that students don't follow this advice, Dutta requires students to submit drafts, on which he provides feedback. Dutta also tells students he's

available to help beyond this structure, whether through written feedback or in-person conferences. He is willing to spend as much time as is necessary; however, he expects high-quality work in return--"I personally feel that if a student is graduating from a university," Dutta says, "he or she has to be not only well-versed in the domain knowledge but also in written and oral communication."



Dutta identifies three qualities of an effective communicator in his field. One, domain knowledge—whether in writing or speaking, one needs to know the subject matter. Two, good communicators can relate concepts to practice. Abstract understanding has value, especially in academia, but theory must be translated into application. And three, the big picture must be addressed. According to Dutta, people can get so lost in the details that they fail to explain what is important and/or why. This ability to articulate where one is coming from, why the writer

has made a decision, or how the team reached a conclusion is, Dutta admits, very difficult, but it is a key skill for success. Leading the reader through material can be crucial in business. Clear rationales and explicit connections are necessary to make the writing intelligible to a variety of audiences.

In management, Dutta recognizes how much other disciplines enrich the field. In teaching, he has benefited from opportunities to learn from colleagues and to contribute in kind. In his service to the university, he has been a part of committees and initiatives that owe no allegiance to any one college. He related that he could not imagine deciding on a single topic for his PhD dissertation by his third year. It's no surprise, then, that Prof. Dutta values integrating multiple perspectives. At UNH, he feels that this kind of boundary-crossing is almost natural. "While there are a lot of opportunities and possibilities for making a difference in [an individual's] field by working within its boundaries, I think as an institution UNH offers many other novel opportunities, some of which can remain hidden unless you look outside of your college. Step into another college." Too much divergence, he warns, can make focusing on your own specialty difficult, but ultimately he believes exploration yields a payoff in better research, thinking, and teaching.

Matt Switliski, Former Assoc Dir UNH Writing Programs



It is impossible to disassociate language from science...to call forth a concept, a word is needed.
–Antoine Lavoisier

The screenshot shows the University of New Hampshire Writing Programs website. The header includes the UNH logo and navigation links: Apply, Contact, Maps & Directions, Storm, MyCourses, Give, A-Z, and Social UNH. A search bar is located in the top right. The main navigation bar includes Home, For Faculty, For Students, Connors Writing Center, Online Writing Lab, Resources, and Contact Us. The 'Resources' section is highlighted. On the left, a sidebar titled 'WRITING CENTER' provides information about making appointments, location (329 Diamond Library), hours (Monday-Thursday 10:00am-6:00pm, Friday 10:00am-2:00pm, Evenings: Mondays & Wednesdays 6:00-8:00pm, and Sundays 5:00-8:00pm), and the Online Writing Lab (OWL). The main content area is titled 'Resources' and lists several categories: Connors Writing Center Handouts, Helpful Links For Writers, Helpful Campus Resources, Newsletters, Oral Presentation Advice, Connors Writing Center Videos, Open Educational Writing Resources, and Faculty Resources. The footer contains copyright information and links to privacy policies and terms of use.

Past Perfect: *Director's Notes*

Ed Mueller, Director, University Writing Programs

We have added a “Faculty Resources” section to our web page. This new area has a robust set of offerings grouped into five areas: *Teaching Resource Compilations*, *Teaching Tools and Guides*, *Rubrics and Feedback*, *Collaborative/Group Writing*, and *Mechanics & Correctness*. These materials, combined with the texts and virtual texts in the “Open Educational Writing Resources” area, will provide a full range of support to faculty engaged with student writers. The URL is: <https://www.unh.edu/writing/resources>

Speaking of faculty engaged with student writing, we have renamed the Writing Intensive (WI) Faculty Retreat to the Writing-Invested (WI) Faculty Retreat. What this clever cosmetic change means, in substance, is that all faculty who are invested in employing writing in their pedagogy are welcome to apply. Priority would still go to faculty designing or teaching WI courses, but attendance would not be limited on this basis (and we have had room for non-WI faculty in the past). Please see the “Future Tense” section for details.

As we are writing this newsletter, the Faculty Senate is reviewing a motion to lift the moratorium on WI designations in the online curriculum. Although it is premature to discuss implementation, concerned faculty should understand that the motion, as currently written, includes important stipulations on class size (capped at 24), course management, and minimum course duration (eight weeks--thus, online WI courses would be limited to the spring and fall semesters and the 8 and 10 week summer sessions). As far as course management, all online WI course designations would require WI proposals, to include current online courses and face-to-face and hybrid WI courses migrating to fully online. Regular WI proposal processes would apply (albeit with a revised form): we are currently in the WI designation window for fall 2019 (and Summer Sessions 2 and 3).

Last Word

Vague forms of speech have so long passed for mysteries of science, and hard words mistaken for deep learning, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them that they are but a hindrance to true knowledge.
–John Locke