

WAC Notes

Writing Across the Curriculum



Ideas for improving writing and thinking in any course

This newsletter provides a forum for Union faculty to share ideas about integrating writing into their courses to improve student learning. What works for you? Any questions? Contact Mary Mar at marm@union.edu.

Audience: The missing link in most academic writing

The most basic elements of rhetoric are purpose, writer, and reader or audience. Yet academic writing for students traditionally fails to specify an audience other than the instructor. The problem with students always writing to instructors is that the purpose of writing is reduced to a test: a novice convincing the expert of his/her knowledge. Real communication rarely involves this dynamic. Normally we communicate to inform or persuade someone who doesn't know or believe what we do. Most academic writing provides little practice in such communication.

Even when assignments do not specify an audience, students must "invent" one in their minds, which they sometimes do inappropriately. The student who writes an elegant and nuanced introduction for an engineering report will not likely be praised for the writing style, nor will the student who concisely explains a poem in a single paragraph for a literature essay.

Although writing for an authentic audience is not always practical for college courses, some instructors have found ways

to incorporate audience into assignments in ways that help students consolidate and extend their understanding of ideas as they grapple with the needs of readers.

SCENARIOS or CASE STUDIES

Some instructors create a situation that defines the role of the writer and reader. For example, students might be told that they have been hired as research assistants to a politician or company and then given a specific problem or question to address. Students must take on the role of expert when they write—and must take responsibility for that role. This means they need to write with authority while carefully considering audience needs.

NAÏVE READERS

Even in an introductory course, you can ask students to address their writing to those who have not yet studied that topic or who are unfamiliar with the ideas or text that they are discussing. Placing students in a writing situation where they are in a position of power relative to their readers

in terms of level of knowledge can be an effective option. It is also, of course, the normal stance of writers other than students.

READERS WHO DISAGREE

To encourage powerful argumentation and writing, you can ask students to write to a reader who holds a belief contrary to what they are asserting. This audience demands that writers use persuasion but also tact, a challenging task.

LAB MEMOS

In Mechanical Engineering, Ann Anderson and other instructors sometimes assign a lab memo to replace the traditional lab report. The lab is introduced as a request from a client for information (which instrument is the better one for a given purpose, for example). After completing the lab and analyzing the results, students write a memo to the Project Manager (the instructor) making a reasoned recommendation to the client. Such a memo will be shorter than the traditional lab report but requires the same kinds of thinking and information in addition to meeting the demands of a critical reader. Will the memo be effective without adequate evidence? Will it be credible with grammatical errors? Does it meet the needs of a reader with limited technical background?

Consider adding a specific audience to your assignments this term.

Want more good ideas? The first three instructors who contact me (marm@union.edu) will receive a copy of John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2001). It's a WAC classic.

Exploratory Writing (informal writing that need not be graded whose purpose is to help students generate, extend, deepen, and clarify **thinking**).

1. Ask students to probe a subject through in-class writing at the beginning of class. You might use a question that reviews previous material or that stimulates them to think about a new topic. Ask a few students to read their responses aloud or collect a random sampling to read after class.

2. Use in-class writing during class. When discussion lags or when the material is particularly difficult, stop and ask students to take a few minutes to write their thoughts or questions.

encouraging informal writing encourage poor writing habits? No. All writers use inelegant language at times when they are trying to sort out their ideas. Exploratory writing is a useful way to engage students and stimulate their thinking. Better thinking usually leads to better writing on more formal written assignments.

Angelo, T.A., and Cross, K.P. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993.

Bean, J. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001.

Tobias, S. "Writing to Learn Science and Mathematics." In P. Conolly and T. Vilardi (eds.), *Writing to Learn Mathematics and Science*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1989.

