



Richmond Writing Across the Curriculum Newsletter

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Program Announcements

Welcome New & Returning Faculty

This semester several faculty new to WAC will join the program and several veterans return to our ranks. We'd like to welcome Myra Daleng, Rebecca Hodal, Dorothy Holland, Elizabeth Turner, and Anne Van Gelder from Theatre & Dance, Lee Carleton and Ron Hugar from English, Sean Gilsdorf from History, Mavis Brown & Leslie Kieler from Education to WAC this semester.

WAC at Richmond Turns 10!

This issue of Spider Writing comes at an auspicious time: the 10th anniversary of WAC at Richmond. Our first Writing Fellows were assigned

in 1993, and we've reached an appropriate milestone this semester: the largest assignment of Fellows yet: 50 tutors and Fellows assisting 22 faculty members. We all owe a big debt to:

Dr. Dona Hickey, first director of the program, for drawing up the proposal for an enhanced Writing Center and WAC program and for leading this effort through its first half-dozen years.

Dr. Zeddie Bowen, who, as UR Provost, was instrumental in getting the WAC proposal approved.

Drs. Ray Hilliard and Barbara Griffin, who as chairs of the English Department have supported the work of the Writing Center and WAC.

And most of all approximately 85 faculty, 220 Writing Fellows & Writing Center Tutors who have made the program such a success since 1993.

First Sentences

by Cheryl Pallant

One of the things that students and writers agree upon is the difficulty in starting writing... After all phone calls and emails have been made and you can find no further excuse to stay away from the page... Why is starting to write so difficult?

Whether you've been writing for one year or twenty, what many writers agree upon is the difficulty of writing the first sentence. The empty space beckons, awaiting definition and form, evidence of committing a point. Those initial words mar the otherwise pristine white space of the computer screen or, if using older technologies, the notepad. It's a moment when insecurities poke their heads up, the

inner critic waving its judgmental finger commanding we better write coherently, brilliantly, eruditely, or suffer consequences. The written word stills time, recording who we've been, capturing thought usually fleeting, now permanent, documented, surviving beyond our turning off the computer or laying our pen to rest. The commitment can be daunting.

No surprise then that we avoid the first sentence as best as possible. Many writers go to any extent to dodge the act: cleaning the house, phoning friends, taking the dog for a walk, fantasizing about a weekend getaway. Even once the initial hurdle of sitting at the desk is accomplished, the emptiness of the page lurks like an ex-lover returned with ambiguous intentions. I've written over 200 articles for deadline, yet that first sentence still generates a pang of anxiety.

I know that drafts are roughly hewed, but that doesn't stop me from wanting perfection. The solution I've found is to attempt several trial runs. Deciding ahead of time upon their impermanence, considering them a warm-up to the real thing, takes the heat off. Typically, I write several first sentences *intended* as false starts, some developed into entire paragraphs, a process that helps launch me into the body of the text. The approach relieves the tension of my desire for perfection and fear of failure. Rarely do my initial thoughts capture the idea, much of which gets discovered upon the writing. What's more important is tapping into the flow of writing and generating enough material for consequent drafts to be substantive.

On the Personal Essay

by Lee Carleton

Although Montaigne developed the form in the sixteenth century, the personal essay has long been the subject of academic debate, especially in recent composition studies.

While there is a whole spectrum of opinion on this matter, a few general observations might be useful. The more traditional approach to writing views the personal essay with some suspicion, concerned that it is not really “academic” and is somehow an inferior form of writing. The focus of this concern is primarily twofold: fears that this kind of writing is somehow “therapy” that should be private, and concerns that the thinking that goes into a personal narrative is insufficiently rigorous.

Supporters of the personal essay point to the ease with which beginning writers can tackle an assignment – there is no research to be done, we are each experts on our own lives. Additionally, the reflective aspect of a personal narrative encourages the writer to become aware of her perspectives, how they were formed and where they are going. When it comes to critical thinking, few things are more important than sufficient self-awareness and the personal narrative can help facilitate this. A lack of this awareness skews all thinking from the start and allows us to hide behind the fiction of objectivity.

The personal reflective essay encourages students to dig deeply to discover the significance of the events in their lives and to participate in the process of making meaning rather than merely accepting a meaning given to them. An accurate awareness of our thinking process, priorities, biases and underlying beliefs is an important part of critical thinking and the personal essay is a useful tool for achieving this.

Wednesday WAC Faculty

Lunches & Other Events

To join us, contact Pat Schoknecht (pschokne@richmond.edu) to request a box lunch. Co-sponsored by the Program for Enhancing Teaching Effectiveness and WAC.

Feb 12 Writing in the Humanities- Thesis Statements:

12:30-1:30 in Commons 201.

In this workshop we will focus on the concept of, and alternatives to, the thesis statement. Join a panel of faculty who will discuss how they encourage writers to make a main point and focus their work.

Mar 19 Writing in the Sciences

12:30-1:30 in Commons 331.

Paula Lessem of Biology and Joe Essid of the Writing Center will discuss what makes discussion sections of lab reports effective. They will also cover the most common errors student writers make and how to address them.

Apr 2 Ungraded Writing Assignments:

12:30-1:30 in Commons 331. Faculty can encourage better writing by giving students more “risk free” opportunities to explore ideas and practice tasks later employed in formal assignments. Joe Essid will discuss various “write to learn” strategies that contribute to better formal writing, short “participation” assignments given in class, and ways to build this type of work into longer occasions for writing.

News from Fellows & Tutors

I arrived to Ukraine a little over a year ago to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program. I teach English conversation and American country studies to students from grades 5-11 in a secondary school in a village named Balaclava, located on the Black Sea in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

My job, as a PCV, is to help facili-

tate and encourage this process of change, by teaching English with new approaches and a learner-centered orientation, and through teacher methodology training. Not having any experience as a TEFL teacher prior to my arrival in Ukraine, I was understandably nervous about teaching. However, without even realizing it, I began to implement in Ukraine some of the skills I had learned while preparing to be a Writing Fellow.

Probably the most useful skill I took away from my experience as a Fellow is the process of asking questions in order to prompt the student to think for himself. When editing a peer’s work at UR, I learned how to correct a recurring mistake once as an example, then to allow my peer to make the remaining corrections following my lead. The goal of a Writing Fellow, however, is broader than merely correcting and editing papers. I learned how to prompt students to learn from mistakes, focus on ideas, and actively engage in the revision process.

Similarly, as a TEFL teacher, I try to prompt my students to think on their own. It is also important not to be overzealous in error correction. I prefer that students speak with mistakes than not at all because they are too timid. Just as I did as a Writing Fellow, as a TEFL teacher I try to make suggestions as opposed to critical remarks. In Ukraine, the physical structure of a student’s written work is overemphasized, while logic of thought is often neglected. Thus, I try to direct my students to focus on their ideas. My goal, as a PCV/TEFL teacher in Ukraine is much more than teaching my students conversational English. I strive to encourage students to think outside the proverbial box and to help cultivate their individuality and creativity.

My experience thus far has certainly proved to be one of the most challenging I’ve ever undertaken, but this makes the successes I witness that much more fulfilling.

Kimberly Baker

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