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UNH Writing Program

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WRITE FREE OR DIE

The Newsletter of the UNH Writing Program

Volume 1, Issue 1

Fall 2014

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Research on Student Writing: From First Year College Writing to Disciplinary Writing

Ed Mueller
Director, University Writing Program

Although preliminary, the findings of "The Writing Transfer Project" are worth noting. In a longitudinal study of student writing across four universities, researchers evaluated student writing samples taken from K-12, the end of year-one college Gen Ed writing courses (like EN401), and year-two college courses. They found that student writing improved from K-12 to the end of year-one Gen Ed college writing courses, but they also found that student writing often then regressed in year-two of college.

Even more interesting, they found that

students in year two were reverting to formulaic K-12 writing habits as opposed to bringing forward habits they had practiced in their first-year college writing courses.

These preliminary findings would seem to have implications for writing in the disciplines. In general, the findings would seem to reinforce the concept that writing progression may be more recursive than linear, requiring iterative practice. More specifically, the study found that cueing students to transfer their Gen Ed writing experiences to subsequent (year-two) college writing was a

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Future Tense:

Upcoming Writing Across the Curriculum Events

- **January 7 (MUB, Room 156, 9-12:00): Workshop on Technology, Teaching, and Writing.** Come join us for a morning of information and application in this panel/workshop. Panelists from UNH Instructional Development, Dimond Library Reference, the Writing Program, and Faculty will discuss the overlapping issues of digital learning, information literacy, and student writing, and will also talk about platforms, practices, and tools for integrating technology into courses and assignments. Attendees will then have time to workshop their own assignments or courses. Please bring a writing assignment or a course that you'd like to develop or refine and a laptop if you'd like to experiment with technology during the course of the workshop. Lunch will be provided. Contact CETL to sign up.
- **March 31: WI Course Proposals:** Fall 2015 Semester proposals are due by March 31. See: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/uwr/faculty/WIproposal/>
- **April 9: Guest Speaker, Dr. Les Perelman (MUB, Strafford Room, 12:45-2:00)** Former Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at MIT, Dr. Perelman has received national attention in both the scholarly and popular press for his critique of automated essay scoring. An engaging speaker, his talk will have an interactive component (bring a laptop) and be entitled, "Artificial Unintelligence: Why and How Automated Essay Scoring Doesn't Work (most of the time)."
- **Student Exit Interviews, Spring 2015:** In the Spring, The Writing Committee conducts exit interviews with a panel of graduating seniors on their writing histories at UNH. All faculty are invited to join in this event. Please contact the Director of the Writing Program or a member of the Writing Committee if interested in participating and/or if you have students whom you would like to nominate to participate. Reports from past sessions can be found on the Writing Program Website: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/assessment/>

WAC(ky) People

UNH Writing Program

Ed Mueller, Director
 Molly Tetreault, Assistant Director
 Sarah B. Franco, Associate Director
 Wendy VanDellon, Associate Director
 Patty Wilde, Associate Director

Writing Committee

College Representatives:	Term End
PCBE - Tevfik Aktekin (Decision Sciences)	2016
COLSA - Iago Hale (Biological Sciences)	2015
CEPS - Nivedita (Niva) Gupta (Chemical Engineering)	2015
COLA-1 - Nicoletta Gullace (History)	2016
COLA-2 - Petar Ramadanovic (English)	2017
CHHS - Marc Hiller (Health Management and Policy)	2014*
UNHM - Gail Fensom (English, Director of First Year Writing Program)	2017

* Faculty Chair

Permanent Representatives:

Writing Program Director
 Ed Mueller
Director of Composition
 Christina Ortmeier-Hooper
Center for Teaching Excellence
 Michael Lee
Academic Standards
 Judy Spiller
Discovery Committee
 Dan Beller-Mckenna

Ex officio (non voting):

Mark Rubinstein
 (VP, Student and Academic Services)
 Andy Colby
 (Registrar), Committee Secretary

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useful counter to regression. In other words, it helps if students hear from different faculty, in different contexts, how citation, thesis statements, revision, and organizing principles (for instance) still matter.

Another lesson does not come from the study but is related. Writing (particularly student writing) can regress when dealing with an unfamiliar genre. Given that students in their second year of college are often negotiating new disciplines, faculty can help guide

them towards more progressive application by being more explicit about disciplinary expectations and forms of writing appropriate for their assignments.

We'll be following along with this project as researchers work to expand the sample and validate findings for publication.

For further information, or to talk more about how any of the above might be implemented in a course, feel free to get in touch: edward.mueller@unh.edu. ▲

"Style is the image of character; and the habits of correct writing may produce, without labour or design, the appearance of art and study."

- Edward Gibbon

Memoirs of My Life and Writings

Writing Requirement Plus: The Goals for Student Writing and Learning at UNH

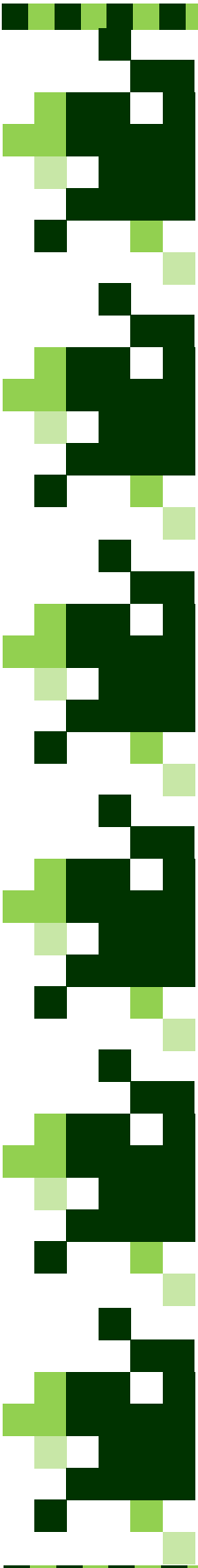
Ed Mueller

Director, University Writing Program

When thinking about writing across the curriculum, the writing-intensive course requirement naturally comes to mind: EN401 plus three other courses. However, perhaps not as well known are the more broadly stated goals for undergraduate writing and learning at UNH. A major guiding idea behind them is that "students [should] attend to writing throughout the undergraduate career." This idea is supported by several related principles in the rationale:

1. "writing is a long term developmental process;"
2. "literacy is the concern of the entire faculty and the whole university curriculum;"
3. "writing assignments which support course and curricular objectives are strongly encouraged in all courses, whether they are designated Writing Intensive or not."

This larger vision recognizes that continuity over time is needed to develop writing habits, and that for best results student writing experience really needs to extend beyond the WI course structure. In fact, one of the potential pitfalls of a WI course system is that student writing practice may actually shrink in the curriculum to only the WI courses; if this happens, it can reinforce a narrow student perception of writing as a series of unconnected course requirements, inhibiting the transfer of skills. In this light, faculty who employ or assign writing (in any number of ways) in non-WI courses may not conventionally think of themselves as being part of the "program," but they are doing important work in support of the goals for student writing and learning at UNH as well. ▲



Ask Patty:

*Your writing concerns addressed
by our very own Patty Wilde*

Dear Patty:

My students just submitted their essays, and their grammar is atrocious! It seems that with each passing year, the students' language skills get worse. Do you have any suggestions about how I can help them improve this facet of their writing? Help!

—Mired in Mechanical Mistakes

Dear Mired in Mechanical Mistakes:

Yours is a common concern! As Stephen Pinker points out in his recently published book *The Sense of Style*, "Complaints about the decline of language go at least as far back as the invention of the printing press" (5). Interestingly, several studies (Connors and Lunsford; Lunsford and Lunsford) have shown that there actually hasn't been a drastic increase in students' formal writing errors. Regardless, problems with student writing remain vexing, but there are ways that you can help students improve their attention to these kinds of mechanical issues.

Many of the mistakes that creep up in students' work are a result of ineffective (or absent) proofreading. Offering students proofreading strategies, then, may help to reduce these kinds of errors. You might, for example, encourage students to read their papers out loud, or read their writing from the end of the document to the beginning. In order to structure proofreading into the process, consider embedding some sort of guided peer work into your curriculum, either in class or outside of it, so that students may help each other catch these kinds of errors. As a final measure, on the day that papers are turned in you may give students a few minutes to exchange papers and proofread for obvious errors, announcing that you will accept pencil corrections (you could provide a guide with the kinds of things that they should be looking for--spelling errors, missing words, end punctuation, citation format issues, etc.). The Writing Center web page has several handouts on proofreading and editing that may be useful.

Requiring students to work through several drafts of a writing assignment may also help re-

duce the occurrence of grammatical and mechanical mistakes. According to a study conducted by David Schwalm, the frequency of error tends to increase when students write more cognitively challenging pieces. Working through various drafts of writing, therefore, can help them to become better acquainted with unfamiliar subject matter and genres. As students move from draft to draft, they decrease the number of errors they make.

If you do continue to receive papers with obvious proofreading/surface errors, rather than becoming a copy editor, you could place a mark in the margin indicating that a mechanical issue exists in the line (or paragraph), and make it the responsibility of the student to identify and correct it. Before doing this, you'll need to have explained what your mark means (it could be linked to a list of very clear "usual suspects" to look for, such as missing words). Students who simply failed to proofread adequately will be able to determine what is amiss. In selected cases, you could defer closure on the assignment and require that students resubmit inadequately proofread papers (perhaps with handwritten corrections so that you can quickly scan to see if they have been addressed). Invite students to see you if they genuinely can't identify the error.

If a student makes a repeated error—one that is more than a proofreading mistake—you could help him/her remedy it in future writing tasks. Try identifying a few examples of one or two frequent mistakes rather than overwhelming the student by correcting all the instances of error that you may see. Then, return the work to the student and have him/her find the other instances of the issue and correct them. By helping students identify their own pattern of errors and giving them the opportunity to work through them, you better help facilitate improvement in student writing.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of suggestions, I hope that they give you some ideas about how you can help your students address mechanical errors in their writing.

Best,

Patty

Associate Director, University Writing Program

*If you have a writing-related question that you would like Patty to address, please send your inquiry to:
paa44@unh.edu. ▲*

The Dangling Modifier:

Tips and Advice

Wendy VanDellon
Associate Director, University Writing Program

Sometimes, we receive student essays that are so short of our expectations that they make us wonder what happened after we presented the assignment. There's no doubt that many factors could be at play in these cases – student habits being among them – but such moments also present an opportunity for us to think about our own practice as well. Sometimes it can be productive to revisit the assignment and review the language in the prompt.

According to *The Elements of Teaching Writing*, we look for rhetorical clarity in our own research by asking several questions: (1) What am I, the author, writing about? (2) For whom? (3) For what purpose? (4) In what form? Applying this same rhetorical framework to our own writing prompts can provide similar clarity of purpose to students and can help shape their writing to better meet expectations.

Here is a quick list of tips for creating effective assignments compiled from several writing handbooks:

- Be specific about the topic, or choice of topics, that students will be writing about.
- Be mindful of the knowledge level necessary for students to complete the assignment.
- Be careful about posing too many questions.
- Be careful about the form and number of helpful lists, clarifications, or suggestions; students will often interpret examples as prescriptions, taking what you intended as "might" to mean "should" and produce a more limited response as a result.
- Define the target audience. If there are multiple audiences, beware that they are not contradictory.
- Use language students understand or have been introduced to when crafting the assignment.
- Define key terms. For example, "analyze," "argue," "persuade," and "explore" may need to be defined in the context of the discipline.

For a more complete discussion of assignment design, or if you have tips that you would like to share in a future newsletter, feel free to get in touch with Wendy: wja26@wildcats.unh.edu. ▲

The Grammar Box:

The Oxford Comma

Patty Wilde
Associate Director, University Writing Program

The Oxford comma, or the serial comma, is placed before the coordinating conjunction in a list of three or more items. It is used to clarify meaning. Consider the following sentence:

She dedicated her book to her parents, John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

Without the comma, the reader may read the sentence as though the writer's parents are John Lennon and Yoko Ono. With the comma, however, it becomes clear that her parents, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono are all recipients of the writer's dedication:

She dedicated this book to her parents, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono.

In the United States, major language institutions, such as MLA and the *Chicago Manual of Style*, recommend the use of the Oxford Comma, but the *APA Stylebook* does not. Use the comma if the sentence is confusing without it, and be consistent in your approach.

If you have ideas for future topics for *The Grammar Box* please contact Patty: paa44@unh.edu. ▲

Nancie Atwell, Literacy Educator, Visits

Sarah B. Franco

Associate Director, University Writing Program

On September 18, nationally renowned literacy educator, Nancie Atwell, stood in front of an audience of English and Composition instructors and said coming to visit UNH “feels like coming home.” Although Atwell did not receive a degree here, she attributes her successes in the classroom, at least in part, to the pedagogical contributions of the late Donald Murray and Donald Graves, and her professional friendship with Professor Thomas Newkirk. It was an honor, she shared, to be invited by the English Department, to present her work in the place where the writing process movement first took root.

Atwell is perhaps best known for integrating reading and writing workshops into her classrooms. These workshops, designed around the premise that reading and writing are processes to be broken down and skills to be practiced, involve her entire class and allow her to check in with each student individually while others engage in reading or writing. Atwell’s strategies offer a practical way to support students in any discipline.

While Atwell’s work was implemented at the middle-



school level, many of her strategies emphasize lifelong practice and can be applied to students of any age. Here are two takeaways to help integrate write-to-learn strategies:

1. Writing off the page – This is a pre-writing exercise intended to help students explore ideas using lists, maps, webs, or other nontraditional (informal) forms of writing. Such writing exercises not only allow students the freedom to explore their thoughts, but can also then be used to organize and narrow ideas relevant to the topic at the center of the assignment.

2. Mini Conferences – these take place during class and last 30 seconds to 3 minutes – just long enough to check in with the student about his/her writing, make suggestions to deepen thought or help overcome a writing obstacle, and take note of the student’s plan – what will he/she do next? These quick check-ins hold students accountable, help familiarize the instructor with students’ strengths and weaknesses, and provide a gauge of what points the instructor may wish to emphasize to the class regarding the assignment.

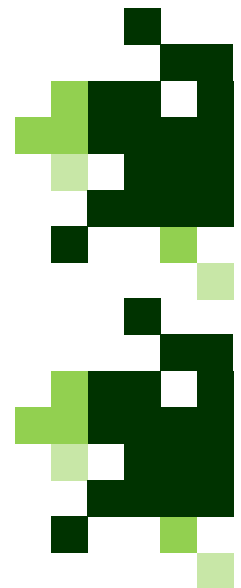
wish to emphasize to the class regarding the assignment.

For additional resources describing Atwell’s approaches to integrating writing in the classroom, please contact Sarah at sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu. ▲

“Real writing instruction has always occurred in other fields, contexts and forms...wherever teachers take active measures to help their students write effectively. In this respect, writing instruction is just a kind of thoughtful attention to uses of language, in your course and field of study and in the written work you assign. Real writing instruction can and should be integral to your own goals for teaching and learning.”

- Gottschalk, Hjortshoj

Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines





Past Perfect: *Director's Notes*


Ed Mueller,
Director, University Writing Program

Thank you for taking the time to read this, our first writing program newsletter; we hope to produce at least one per semester, the next being in the March/April timeframe. Although deliberately slanted in style towards "newsletter" and away from "journal" in the interest of readability, we hope that *Write Free or Die* will still be informative and of some practical use to faculty engaged with student writing. We invite anyone who would like more substantial information on

any of the topics covered to get in touch for further references.

In addition to providing relevant "one way" writing across the curriculum (WAC) program information, we hope to integrate faculty viewpoints as well: feel free to get in touch with an "Ask Patty" question, a point of grammar that you'd like to see addressed in the "Grammar Box," or with a topic about teaching with writing that you'd like to see covered in a future "Dangling Modifier." As the newsletter develops, we would like to regularly include faculty submissions as well. Please let us know if you have any ideas or suggestions along those lines.

Please feel free to share with colleagues and get in touch with any feedback. ▲
edward.mueller@unh.edu



"If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledy-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style writing if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood."

- Kurt Vonnegut
How to Write with Style



WAC(ky) Resources *Tools for Faculty*

•**Pdf Handouts:** The Writing Program website has a range of pdf handouts that faculty may find useful to assist with managing writing in their classes: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/handouts/>

•**Writing Center Videos:** The Connors Writing Center has informational videos as well as a video on peer review on its website: <http://www.unh.edu/writing/cwc/videos/>

•**Other:** Feel free to contact the Director of the Writing Program for consultation on managing writing in a course, department, or program: edward.mueller@unh.edu