



WAC NEWS AND EVENTS

SEEKING FACULTY READERS

The success of the Writing Proficiency Examination program in evaluating the writing of about 12,000 students each year as part of the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement relies on the participation of faculty from all departments in the university as paid Readers. We're inviting all interested faculty to work with us scoring the WPE. Readers earn a minimum of \$210 for a full day of reading; full training is provided.

For further information, or to sign up for training, please contact Fiona Glade, acting GEAR Coordinator, at fiona.glade@csus.edu or (916) 278-3696.

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Monday, August 28
8:30–4:00
Sacramento State Alumni Center

The 2006 Writing Across the Curriculum

Faculty Development Retreat

Assigning, Responding, and Grading: Writing as a Tool for Learning in any Discipline

Writing Across the Curriculum invites all full and part-time instructors to attend a free workshop focused on improving student writing and learning. Join colleagues from across disciplines for a day of sharing ideas and assignments in an interactive workshop based on Barbara Walvoord's *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*.

Topics

- Designing successful reading and writing assignments
- Integrating reading and writing throughout a course
- Responding effectively and efficiently to student writing
- Fostering motivation in the grading process

Facilitators

- Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator
- Amy Heckathorn, English Department Writing Programs Director
- Cheryl Smith, Writing Center Coordinator
- Cathy Gabor, Professor of Composition and Rhetoric
- Fiona Glade, Professor of Composition and Rhetoric

All participants will receive a copy of *Effective Grading*. Breakfast and lunch will be served.

To register for the retreat, contact Dan Melzer at melzer@csus.edu or (916) 278-6925.

Space is limited: **please respond by June 1.**

To find out more about the WAC program or to schedule a consultation, contact Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator, at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925.





Writing in College: What the Research Shows

By Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator

We all teach students what it means to read, write, and think critically in our discipline, and we all try to stay current with research in our field and use it to inform our teaching. However, many college professors are unaware that the study of student literacy is itself a discipline, with its own books, journals, and professional organizations and over thirty years of extensive research into how students learn to write in college. The following article presents a brief overview of the research on college student writing, with a focus on four of the major findings of composition researchers that can help instructors in any discipline teach writing more effectively.

All students can learn to write.

It's easy to get frustrated when our students turn in essays that don't meet our expectations for college writing. The impulse is throw our hands in the air in frustration and blame it on the high schools (and somewhere out there in the workplace they are throwing their hands in the air and blaming us). It's also easy to fall into the trap that researchers in developmental writing call the "deficit model" point of view. The deficit model turns the focus of blame away from the educational system and implies that there's something inherently wrong with students who struggle to write: they have a deficit and are in need of "remediation." But research has shown that there are multiple and complicated factors that cause students to be underprepared for college writing: factors such as access to quality schools and instruction, economic class, language diversity, standardized testing driving curriculum, etc. (Heath 1983; Rose 1983; Shaughnessy 1977). Perhaps the most important factor in literacy is experience: many of our students simply haven't had enough experience writing and receiving helpful feedback during the writing

process. Longitudinal studies of students writing in college have shown that what students need the most is practice and feedback (Carroll 2002; Herrington & Curtis 2000; Sternglass 1997). The research shows that students need to read and write and receive feedback from peers and instructors throughout their college careers, from freshman composition to General Education to upper division courses in their major.



Writing is a process.

I think it's helpful for us to think of our own writing process when we consider how students learn (or fail to learn) to write in our discipline. Let's say you are working on an article to submit for a journal in your field. Most of us will write many drafts, revising the content and organization of our article, developing some ideas and discarding others.

After we submit it to a journal, we might get feedback from peers in our field and revise the article further, often changing the content and organization in significant ways. As experienced writers, we all know the importance of thinking of writing as a process, and the value of feedback from peers. Studies of the ways that novice student compose tell a different story. The research reveals that many students write only a single draft, and equate revising with merely editing for typos or changing a few sentences here and there (Sommers 1980; Emig 1971). If we just assign an essay and collect it a few weeks later, we can't expect that students will engage in a writing process on their own. It's critical that we find ways to encourage students to revise and not just edit: by conducting peer response, responding to a draft, encouraging students to visit the Writing Center, giving students a rewrite option, etc.



Writing and thinking is discipline-specific.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking of writing as a discrete set of skills that students can master. A common concern I hear when I work with faculty across the curriculum goes something like this: "My students took English 1A and English 20, so how come they still can't write?" Ethnographic studies of students writing across disciplines have shown that even the best student writers regress when faced with the specialized discourse of our specific field (Walvoord & McCarthy 1991; McCarthy 1987; Herrington 1985). Most of us would agree that it's important for students to write clearly and support their arguments, but what this actually means is different for every discipline. Clear business writing is quite different from clear history writing, and what counts as evidence in engineering is much different from what counts as evidence in criminology. Students also struggle when faced with new genres: we can all think of times when we had to write in a genre we were unfamiliar with and found that our writing skills regressed until we had more practice with that particular kind of writing (for example, the first time we had to write a dissertation or a grant or a job application letter). Scholars in the field of genre studies argue that genres of writing are more than just ways to format essays: they are also a primary means of socializing students to the way we make meaning in our discipline (Prior 1998; Freedman & Medway 1994). Don't be surprised if your students' literacy abilities take a step back before they take a step forward as you socialize them to the specialized discourse of your field. English 1A and English 20 can help introduce students to academic writing, but only you can teach them what it means to write and think like a sociologist, a chemist, a literary scholar, etc.

Students learn to read and write by reading and writing often.

The longitudinal studies of student writing in college that I mentioned previously have shown that students' writing skills atrophy if they do not get significant practice in writing each

semester. Composition courses in freshman and sophomore year are helpful, but students also need to write regularly in their GE courses and their major if they are going to be successful writers when they graduate from Sacramento State. Of course, we all know the challenges we as instructors face, no matter what our discipline: increasing class sizes, heavy workloads, a significant number of underprepared students. But there are ways to integrate more writing into our classes without burdening us as instructors, and resources such as the Writing Center can help share the load of responding to student writing. We all agree that student literacy is an important goal, no matter what our discipline. What the research tells us is that we must also come to the understanding that student literacy is also a shared responsibility.

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A PAGE FROM THE WRITING CENTER

The Sac State Writing Center— Helping Writers Across The Curriculum

by Shana Strassburg and Allison Himelright

Often teachers complain about the state of their students' writing and wonder what the world is coming to when the average college student can't write a decent sentence, let alone a paper. While it's true that a large number of students could stand to improve their writing, it's very difficult to make that happen on your own. That's where the Writing Center can help. The goal of the Writing Center is to help students become better writers by providing individual attention in one-to-one tutorials. The knowledgeable tutors at the Writing Center can help writers

with term papers, essays, short writing assignments, W.P.E. preparation, and almost any writing needs. The Writing Center is available to all students free of charge, and helps writers from any discipline and at all stages of the writing process.

The Writing Center can help writers with prewriting, brainstorming, drafting, focus and clarity, building strong arguments, using evidence and citations, and editing and revising. In addition to one-to-one tutoring sessions we offer group workshops on a variety of writing topics throughout the semester.

HOW TO USE THE WRITING CENTER:

Hours: Monday-Thursday: 10-6
Friday: 9-1

Scheduling an Appointment

To schedule an appointment, students must come into the Writing Center in person. Appointments are available in 30-minute sessions, with students allowed up to one hour each week for a writing tutorial. In addition, drop-in appointments are available on a first come, first serve basis.

Writing as a Process

The Writing Center promotes the idea that the discussion and revision of writing is a normal part of the writing process, not something only "inexperienced" writers need to do. By encouraging all levels of writers at any stage of the writing process to visit the Writing Center—from the freshman writer composing a first essay to the graduate student working on a thesis—you just might help a student not only learn effective methods by which to improve his or her writing, but in the process, students may even learn to look forward to and enjoy writing!

If you have any questions about the Writing Center you can contact Cheryl Smith, Writing Center Director, at smithc@csus.edu.