

## WAC News and Events

### Writers' Conference

#### California State University, Sacramento Summer Writers' Conference

The College of Continuing Education announces its first Writers' Conference to take place August 5-7 at Napa Hall. The highlight of the event features a keynote speech by Dorothy Allison.

This three-day conference features workshops, public reading events, and one-on-one consultation with nationally acclaimed writers. Participants will also experience professional-level writing instruction, individualized feedback, networking opportunities, and the chance to learn how to publish their work.

Workshop leaders include Al Young, David Bianculli, Kristen Iversen, Joshua McKinney, Richard Hellesen, and Sandy Holman.

For further information, contact Manuela McClary at [Manuela@csus.edu](mailto:Manuela@csus.edu) or visit [www.cce.csus.edu/writersconference](http://www.cce.csus.edu/writersconference).

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Monday, August 22 and Tuesday, August 23  
9:00-3:30 Alumni Center

#### The 2005 Writing Across the Curriculum

### Faculty Development Retreat

#### Writing, Reading, and Critical Thinking: Improving Student Learning in Any Discipline

The Writing Across the Curriculum Program invites Sacramento State full and part-time faculty to attend a free, two-day workshop focused on improving student reading, writing, and critical thinking. Join colleagues from across disciplines for two days of sharing ideas and assignments in interactive workshops based on John Bean's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*.

### Topics

The retreat will cover topics such as:

- Designing successful reading and writing assignments
- Integrating reading, writing, and critical thinking throughout a course
- Responding effectively and efficiently to student writing
- Designing active learning tasks to engage students

### Facilitators

Retreat facilitators:

- Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator
- Amy Heckathorn, English Department Writing Programs Director
- Cherryl 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 *Engaging Ideas* and a certificate of attendance.

Breakfast and lunch will be served on both days.

To register for the retreat, contact Dan Melzer at [melzer@csus.edu](mailto:melzer@csus.edu) or 278-6925. Space is limited: **please respond by May 15.**



# When Students Write in Groups

By Virginia Kidd, Professor of Communication Studies

One common process for dealing with the ever-burgeoning number of students in our classes is assignments that require students to collaborate, often by writing in groups (or teams). This both limits the number of papers to grade and encourages students to learn from one another. However, faculty should be aware that working in groups can impose its own

problems. Obviously, the instructor often does not know who has done the actual writing or if weak writers have learned to write better. This article discusses four recurring classroom problems with collaborative learning: the ways initial social interactions can hamper the task, students getting off task, non-workers in the group, and group conflict.

**PROBLEM: Group members seem uncomfortable with each other and don't freely participate in discussion.**

**SUGGESTIONS:**

- Start new groups with short ice-breaking activities. Give them quick, silly topics to talk about that help them to bond and break the silence. Give them ways to know a little about each other.
- Whenever possible, try to arrange for groups to be small, ideally no larger than five to seven. A large group is much more difficult to work in.
- Expect some casual chit-chat, discussion of campus events, and sharing of experiences as normal and even helpful.
- If you have time, let the groups meet on their own outside the classroom, with something due by the end of the time period. Groups interact differently in the Union or out on the lawn than in the classroom, and often strengthen their ties.

**PROBLEM: Students spend too much time off task.**

**SUGGESTION:**

- Set deadlines so that a task must be completed and turned in by the end of the time period. This holds students accountable and gives leverage to nudge the socializers into work mode.

**PROBLEM: Groups are plagued by social loafers, slugs, and hitchhikers.**

**SUGGESTION:**

- Allow the group members to give points to one another.
- Have the students keep a log of who attended what meeting, what each contributed, and perhaps fill out a rating sheet on each group member.
- Keep groups small. The larger the group, the less dedication students have to it and the easier it is to avoid work.
- Allow groups to officially "fire" group members who do not show up for meetings and do not do their share of the work.

**PROBLEM: Groups have conflicts.**

- Understand that groups go through phases, and conflict is a normal phase of decision-making.
- Stress the importance of differences of opinion in group work, even over wording of documents and arrangement of material.
- Point out the dangers of group-think, when individuals do not voice opinions contrary to the group. Disagreements over issues leads to stronger decisions and well-thought-out conclusions.

*The article above is from a presentation at the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Reading and Writing across the Curriculum Conference held on February 18, 2005.*

# A Page from the Writing Center

## Use Freewriting to Generate Student Ideas and Discussion

By Bob Stanley, Writing Center Staff Tutor

It's late afternoon, Spring semester sunshine pours in the window. You're leading a class discussion, but for some reason things have slowed down a little. You exhort the students to speak up and respond to the issues, but silence's pull is strong. Finally you look to one of your "dependable" in-class talkers. In a class of thirty, why is it that you have a dialog with the same student every week?

Or maybe today's discussion is really starting to heat up when the class hits a snag. You've asked a question that is a little too edgy. Students look down, they don't want to talk. This could be Philosophy, Sociology, Criminal Justice—all over campus, the issue is the same. Teachers are looking for ways to get students engaged, or better yet, to get students to *engage each other*.

When they hit that slow point, when resistance sets in, try assigning an in-class *freewrite*. It's about as simple as a class exercise could be. Here's what you might say:

*"Tough question, huh? OK, everybody take out your pencils and write for 2 minutes about this. Just write whatever comes to your mind, and keep writing the entire time."*

Watch what happens. Ideas have moved from "in the mind" to "on paper." When you restart the discussion after the two minutes, students will engage. In fact, students who don't often talk *will* talk, because they have written – thought – more than they usually do in class. Freewriting, which can take many forms, is a valuable tool

for energizing class discussions.

Composition teachers, in particular, *teachers of writing teachers*, use free-writes in a number of ways, for many purposes. Sometimes they will assign two or three freewriting exercises in a single class, because each time the exercise moves students' understanding forward. It's a way of giving some authority to the class—every student gets to respond in his or her own way. And in most cases it's a no-risk situation—they don't have to turn it in, they don't have to talk. But they will. Because having written they have taken a step forward.

Freewriting is also a stepping-stone in the endless process of learning to write. Peter Elbow, a compositionist who is one of the original proponents of the process, tells us that "Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper, and the best all-around practice in writing that I know." In his book *Writing With Power*, he describes a number of variations of the process. Elbow believes that writers "write to learn," and if teachers give students time to *just write* (he recommends both



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**Watch what happens.**

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short and long freewrites) then they will better discover what they want to write about, and how to go about it.<sup>1</sup>

When I tutor in the Writing Center, I often assign short freewriting to writers who come in with an undeveloped or repetitive paper. Sometimes students seem puzzled at first,

when I ask *them* to write for a while. But they are often pleased with what they come up with—every once in a while a student will come up with a thoughtful paragraph in only a few short minutes. An introduction, perhaps, that could engage the

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that requires repetition.**

subject, or even the professor.

No, it's not a miracle. Learning to write in the academy takes time and effort.

But what we forget is that we need time to practice. Like playing musical scales, like working out, writing

is a skill that requires repetition. Writing takes time, not just in our writing classes. If you give your

students a little time to write in class they'll have a chance to go a little deeper into the subject you are teaching, and find out what their thoughts might look like on the page.

<sup>1</sup>Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power*. Oxford UP, New York: 1981.

**A few extended free-writing techniques:**

Instant Version

Great for getting unstuck, to start students on papers. Ask students, in class to “suspend disbelief” and create a rapid sketch of their final paper—an instant projected version. Elbow tells the writer: “Pretend you know things you don't know.”

Dialogue

If a writer has conflicting opinions, suggest writing a dialogue. “Give each of the feelings a voice and start them talking to each other.”

