



SACRAMENTO STATE
Leadership begins here.

WAC NEWS AND EVENTS

CAMPUS-WIDE WORKSHOP:

Designing Successful Reading Assignments

When: Wednesday, October 17, 12:00–1:15

Where: Lobby Suite, University Union

- *Getting students to read*
- *Improving students' reading comprehension*
- *Using writing to improve reading*
- *Techniques for encouraging critical reading*

To RSVP, please contact **Dan Melzer** at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925.

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Letters to the Editor: How Important are the Mechanics of Writing?

The following letters to the editor are in response to Writing Center tutor Jeremy Trimble's article in WAC Newsletter #14, "Tutoring vs. Proofreading." Jeremy's article can be found by following the WAC newsletter archives link from the WAC Web site at www.csus.edu/wac.

To the editor,

I read with growing Irritation! The article from the; Writing Sender asserts 'writing mechanics our a Matter of obedience. To prescriptive patterns and rules. Being its the same as memorizing the bones of the body and does not even regognize! Oh and he goes off on drills are a study of machanics.

My point is this: Misusing mechanics of writing can lead to both confusion about the writer's meaning and doubt about the author's credibility.

Using correct writing mechanics is not just "obedience to prescriptive patterns and rules," as if the rules were prescribed by Miss Manners. Mechanics are guidelines a writer follows to help the reader decipher meaning from words. When a writer violates spelling and grammar conventions, the subsequent work is confusing, even if the author has consistent arguments and ideas. Mechanics of writing are the script version of the nonverbal code of speech, implying the pauses, shouts and whispers, ironic tone, change of volume, and so on usually indicated by the voice. If you prefer, they are traffic signs in the flow of words that tell the reader when to pause, when to rush ahead, when we have come to a cross-road. They are not signs of arbitrary oppression, prescribed by some despotic junior high teacher with control issues. They are cues inherent in constructing meaning.

Jeremy Trimble argues that students need to worry about clarity, focus, and so on before they worry about editing. Certainly. I also realize that though I teach critical thinking directly in class, having it reinforced through tutors is helpful. But after several drafts, students also need to consider writing mechanics. They write drafts, possibly generating gems such as these, taken from student papers (as Dave Barry says, I am not making these up):

- What one sees then should be seen with a critical eye and not just glance over because they might have further implications to what its just showing.
- This visual message accomplishes the thought of concern for the soldier's that are trying to bring peace to a country that is in reckons.
- He later added that direct aid to the poor which is \$600 per family and where is the remaining overhead.
- This text is primarily exploring the news element and how violence among people who watch the news tends to associate a race with a certain problem.

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» Letters to the Editor continued from page 1

These students need help, not on the subject matter of the class, but on expressing their ideas in writing. They have passed the WPE before they come to me. They still need help in the mechanics of clear writing. If the Writing Center will not help them, who will?

— Virginia Kidd, *Communication Studies*

To the editor,

In “Tutoring vs. Proofreading,” Jeremy Trimble begins with a false dichotomy. His argument reveals a gap between theory and experience as he claims that grammar and editing are subservient to the “articulation of ideas” and to “clarity, focus, structure, coherence, and consistency, the issues affect[ing] a paper on a global level.”

Many years of instruction in the trenches of composition classes have shown me that Trimble’s either/or argument is essentially the same as the process/product debate raging when I (like Trimble) was a Teaching Associate. When I was a TA, “process” was regarded as feminist, egalitarian, and caring while product “product” was teacher-centered, authoritarian, and the province of those deluded souls grasping red pens in their predatory hands.

I knew the instruction I received as a graduate student was flawed because my experience in a grammar class as an undergraduate had already revealed the silliness of this pernicious dichotomy. I enrolled as a published and award-winning writer, yet I still had much to learn, for the now-discredited practice of diagramming sentences taught me how sentences are created. I discovered the elegance and intellectual power of a well-crafted sentence. More to the point, this new-found understanding led to a better control of ideas in my writing, and beyond mastery of language, I discovered style, which, largely, is the gift of such proletarian concerns as grammar and punctuation.

— Steve Cook, *English*

To the editor,

Proofreaders help writers by correcting their papers; they find and correct lower-order concerns only without any

concern for the overall success of the paper. Proofreaders don’t even look at tone; they simply look at grammatical correctness. They look at the grammar on the sentence level and only on the sentence level. In my article, I argue that tutors should work with students on higher order concerns like coherence, consistency, and audience awareness. The roles of proofreader and tutor are mutually exclusive; a proofreader, by definition, cannot be a tutor. Some might see an either/or fallacy in this distinction, but there isn’t one. Proofreaders can focus solely on the microcosm of the sentence while tutors can help a writer focus on every aspect of the paper. Grammar is an issue tutors can discuss, but it’s not the first issue, and it can only be a top priority when all other issues have been successfully dealt with.

I wrote “Tutoring vs. Proofreading” because some instructors who encourage their students to visit tutors in their department or at the Writing Center don’t see the distinction between tutoring and proofreading. This isn’t to say that tutors can’t look at any question of grammar; as others have pointed out, grammar plays an important role when it comes to issues like tone, but it’s important to remember that tone is a higher-order concern. Tone is a very important aspect of the paper’s consistency and overall coherence. More than that, some instructors tell their students to see tutors for proofreading and only proofreading even though real issues of overall consistency, coherence and comprehension almost always arise. Using proofreaders doesn’t enhance critical thinking, meta-cognitive awareness, or collaboration; nor does it give the writers a chance to reflect upon their writing and actively make choices. I’m not interested in the ideals of feminism, Marxism, egalitarianism or any other “ism”; I’m interested in working with students to make them more effective writers. Telling students to go to tutors in the hopes that they’ll correct the students’ papers without talking about higher order concerns ultimately hurts the students because the tutors then have to give up their extremely limited time to make these arguments to the students themselves. Long term, the best writers are those who have learned to talk about their writing, to ask questions and seek any kind of help they think they might need. Proofreaders simply cannot help with that kind of development.

— Jeremy Trimble, *Writing Center Tutor*



Responding vs. Proofreading: Roles for Responding to Student Writing

One way to help frame the letters to the editor on page 1, and to help us think about the role we play when we respond to our students' writing, is to define our roles as responders. Here are some possible roles we as teachers can play when we respond to our students' writing:

Examiner: The "teacher as examiner" is looking for a correct answer—a specific answer that the teacher already knows. Often in quizzes or short answer exams the teacher plays the role of examiner. The examiner role can be limiting for both the student and the teacher because there is no dialogue between the writer and responder. The student is writing to display what she knows to an examiner, not to communicate to a reader.

Proofreader: A teacher playing the role of proofreader focuses on sentence-level correctness in her response. All experienced writers proofread their text, but merely proofreading student writing gives them the impression that surface correctness is more important than critical thinking or developing and supporting ideas. Most writers would be frustrated by readers who only respond to grammar and mechanics and don't respond to their ideas, unless they are turning in a final draft of a manuscript to an editor.

Interested Reader: An "interested reader" is the role we play when we read texts for pleasure and for our own purposes, and the kind of readers we most often imagine when we write. Interested readers are not focused on just criticizing and judging writers or marking errors in grammar, but interested readers do evaluate what they're reading and think about where they agree or disagree with the author. Interested readers are looking for what is working well in a piece of writing, and not just what isn't working. A text that

has repeated errors in grammar and mechanics that interfere with communication will certainly bother even the most interested reader, but grammar won't be the focus of an interested reader's response to a text unless surface errors are so overwhelming that the text isn't comprehensible.

Representative of a Discourse Community: As college teachers we are helping initiate students to the ways of thinking and making meaning in our discipline, and one stance we can take when we respond is as representatives of our "discourse communities"—the rhetorical communities of readers and writers in our discipline. In this role our primary responsibility as responders is to help student learn to make and support arguments in ways that are appropriate for our field, to conduct discipline-specific inquiry and research, and to integrate and synthesize other scholars' ideas and research. Correct citation of sources or the correct use of edited English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a part of communicating in our disciplines, but most of us would agree that the quality of our thinking and research is more important in our own work as scholars than the surface correctness of our prose.

Wider Audience: One way to get out of the "teacher as examiner" rut is to ask students to write for a hypothetical wider audience, and to role-play that wider audience when you respond. For example, students could write reports to government organizations or a company's Board of Directors, feature articles for magazines or newspapers, book reviews for journals or Amazon.com, manuals or brochures aimed at the wider public, or Web sites with resources for future students. In each of these scenarios, the teacher can respond as the intended audience, and create a rhetorical situation that's much more engaging than the student writing to the "teacher as examiner."

Dan Melzer

University Reading and Writing Coordinator



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 (916) 278-6925.



Please announce to graduate students:

THESIS WRITING WORKSHOP

Writing Across the Curriculum and Graduate Studies present a thesis writing workshop for graduate students across disciplines.

When: Friday, September 28, 4:00–5:15

Where: Delta Suite, University Union

RSVP by sending an email to wac@csus.edu or contacting Dan Melzer at 278-6925.

call for proposals



3rd Biannual Sacramento State

Reading & Writing Across the Curriculum Conference

Writing Across the Curriculum invites all full-time and part-time teachers to propose an individual presentation or panel for a half-day conference on successful approaches to reading and writing across disciplines.

When:

Friday, February 29, 2008
10:00–3:00

Where:

University Union Orchard
and Forest Suites

How to submit a proposal for the conference:

To submit a proposal, send a 150–200 word abstract with presentation or panel title to wac@csus.edu. Please include your name and department (and names of other presenters for panel proposals).

The deadline to submit a proposal is December 1, 2007

Questions about the conference? Send an e-mail to wac@csus.edu.

Proposal topics could include:

- Effective writing assignments or approaches to student reading and writing
- Departmental initiatives and projects that have been successful at improving student reading and writing
- Using technology to improve reading and writing
- Research or theory relevant to reading and writing across the curriculum
- Any other topics relevant to improving student literacy (including oral, visual, and information literacy)

Individual presenters will be given 15 minutes, and panel presentations will be given 45 minutes.

A conference program will be available in January at <http://www.csus.edu/wac/conference>.