Please announce to graduate students:

**Thesis Writing Groups**

The Writing Across the Curriculum Program, in cooperation with Graduate Studies, is now organizing thesis/project writing groups. These are groups of 3-5 graduate students in the same department or college who meet regularly over the course of a semester to give each other feedback on theses or written projects. The Writing Across the Curriculum Program organizes and assists the groups. Please ask interested graduate students to contact Dan Melzer, the University Reading and Writing Coordinator, at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925.

### Successful Writing in Large Classes

In a 2002 faculty writing survey conducted by the University Reading and Writing Subcommittee, 58.3% of CSUS faculty said that large class enrollment was a primary challenge they face in incorporating writing assignments in their classes. Research on teaching and writing shows that as class sizes increase, students do less writing, and therefore less critical thinking about course content. Assigning and responding to writing can be labor-intensive, and in these times of budget cuts and increasing class sizes at CSUS, it’s understandable that instructors will assign less writing when their class sizes increase. However, there are strategies that can be deployed in large classes to include a significant amount of writing and responding without overburdening the instructor. In this issue of the Writing Across the Curriculum Newsletter, the focus is on techniques for assigning and responding to writing in large classes, with information from the campus-wide WAC workshop “Successful Writing in Large Classes,” presented on February 25.

#### Advice for Assigning and Responding to Writing in Large Classes

- **Incorporate informal, “writing to learn” assignments.** Informal writing such as journals, microthemes, quick writes, and WebCT bulletin board posts are a great way to incorporate more writing without creating an overwhelming paper load. See page 2 of this newsletter for an explanation of informal writing.

- **Break down longer essays into smaller steps.** Rather than assigning a research paper at the beginning of the semester and then collecting it at the end of the semester, break down the research paper into a process of smaller papers. For example, a bibliography, a literature review, a research proposal, and a smaller position paper. This will stagger the assignment and give both you and your students more time to engage in the research and responding process.

- **Incorporate collaborative writing.** When students write collaborative essays, there are fewer final drafts to respond to, but collaboration has other advantages: it helps prepare students for the collaborative nature of the workplace, and it creates built-in peer response.

- **Use peer response.** Many students struggle with writing because they don’t understand that writing is a process that requires intense revision. Asking students to respond to each other’s drafts in peer response groups is an effective way to provide feedback to students without overburdening the instructor. See page 4 of this newsletter for an explanation of peer response.

- **Use response rubrics.** In large classes, pouring over each student essay can be overwhelming, and the research in composition studies has shown that students can actually take in only three or four global comments about their writing before they also become overwhelmed. Response rubrics, with a small space for comments and a list of absolute criteria for the essay and spaces to check off “excellent,” “above average,” average,” etc. are one way to respond to essays in large classes. See the WAC Newsletter, Issue #1 at http://www.csus.edu/wac/newsletters.htm for an example response rubric.
Subcommittee for Writing and Reading
Position Statement on Class Size

In times of decreased operating budgets and limited resources, the Subcommittee for Writing and Reading urges administrators and department chairs to resist seeing increases in class size as an easy fix to budget problems. Research has shown that increases in class size have serious negative consequences for student literacy and learning (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; McKeachie, 1980). In a 2002 faculty writing survey conducted by the Subcommittee for Writing and Reading, 58.3% of CSUS faculty said that large class enrollment was a primary challenge they face in incorporating writing assignments in their classes. According to the National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement on Class Size, “all students have the right to ample opportunities to engage in writing activities and frequent opportunities for meaningful oral interaction in the classroom.” Instructors at CSUS have significant teaching loads, and class size increases will mean less writing, less reading, less critical thinking, and less time for interaction with students. Class size affects more than just reading and writing: as class size increases, there is less opportunity for active learning activities, meaningful discussion, and personalized attention from instructors. Increases in class size also have a negative effect on student retention and student satisfaction.

According the University Policy Manual, “CSUS is committed to the development of sound reading and writing skills.” Improving student writing skills is also listed among the top objectives for academic departments by the Council for University Planning, and the Faculty Senate, in its Advisory Writing Standard, states that “writing and reading skills, both in general and appropriate to the discipline of major, are key learning outcomes for all CSUS graduates.” According to the CSUS Strategic Plan, improving writing skills is a top priority for the students, for the institution, and for the community: the Strategic Plan states that employers have indicated “CSUS graduates lack the writing skills to perform effectively in their jobs.” Increases in class size—especially if they become permanent—may undermine CSUS’ strong commitment to reading and writing, and have long-term negative effects for both the students and the community. Class size increases may also undermine the State Legislature’s Supplemental Report Language, which mandates the preservation of instruction as the highest priority when implementing cuts.

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When class size increases are inevitable due to budget cuts, administrators and department chairs should give special consideration and protection to writing intensive classes and classes in which reading, writing, and discussion are the primary focus. The Subcommittee for Writing and Reading recommends that when class sizes are increased due to budget cuts, these increases should be temporary and not permanent changes.

References


“Writing To Learn”:
A Technique for Incorporating Writing in Large Classes

What is “Writing to Learn”?

“Writing to learn” assignments include journals, microthemes, quick writes, WebCT bulletin board posts, and other forms of informal, “low stakes” writing. Writing to learn assignments can be ungraded (for example, when an instructor pauses during a lecture to ask students to do a “quick write” of questions they have about the material) or given a “low stakes” assessment (for example, an instructor assigns weekly reading logs and evaluates them holistically as a percentage of the final course grade). Because of the exploratory nature of writing to learn assignments, the instructor saves time in responding (there’s no need to mark errors) and the students are more likely to take risks and explore course content more deeply. Instructors who combine writing to learn assignments and formal writing assignments give students a chance to write for a variety of purposes.

Types of Writing to Learn Assignments

Quick writes. Quick writes include any brief in-class writing, and are usually not evaluated. Since writing is thinking, quick writes are a way to get students thinking about course content. Instructors can ask students to do a quick write about a reading to spark a discussion, stop a lecture and ask students to do a quick write to formulate their thoughts on a provocative question, or have students get into small groups and do a quick write list of questions for a class discussion.

Journals and Reading Logs. Asking students to write informal, daily or weekly journals is an effective way to get them to engage critically in the reading, lectures, and other course content. In journals students can take risks, reflect on what they’ve learned, and relate course content to personal experience. Journals can be incorporated into class discussion in a number of ways: students can share journals in small groups, the instructor can photocopy a student’s journal entry and use it to spark class discussion, or the instructor can use journals as a place for students to develop ideas for more formal essays. Because journals are exploratory, correct grammar is less important than thoughtful engagement, and instructors don’t need to spend time marking grammar or responding to the student’s organization and sentence structure.

Microthemes. Microthemes are “mini-essays” on a focused topic. In a microtheme students might define a key term, summarize a research article, or respond to a debate. Like journals, microthemes can be evaluated quickly and holistically (for example, the instructor could make a few brief comments and assign a “check plus” or “check”).

WebCT Discussion Boards and Chat Room Posts. WebCT can be an excellent tool to get students writing without burdening the instructor. Students can write brief, informal responses to readings, and even responses to each other’s posts. Instructors can also use the chat room or discussion board to have students post drafts of their essays and ask other students to respond to their peers’ drafts. Again, this kind of informal electronic writing can be evaluated holistically, and requires less labor in responding than formal essays.

Uses of Writing to Learn Assignments

- Starting class discussions
- Summarizing or asking questions about a lecture
- Responding to class readings
- Responding to peers
- Trying out ideas to incorporate in a formal essay
- Reflecting on course content
- Taking risks

Want to Learn More About Writing to Learn?

For help with incorporating writing to learn assignments in your courses, contact Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator, at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925. Dan can talk to you one-on-one or provide you with articles about designing writing to learn assignments.
Peer Response: A Technique for Encouraging Revision in Large Classes

What is Peer Response?
In peer response students respond to drafts of each other’s writing, usually with some guiding questions from the instructor. Typically peer response groups involve 3-5 students sharing drafts and giving written and/or verbal feedback on “global” issues such as development, organization, purpose, etc. Instructors can have students perform peer editing, with a focus on the surface features of their peers’ writing, although this technique is more helpful for a final draft than a rough draft (which is still in flux). Peer response can be done in class or outside of class through a WebCT discussion board or via email.

Advantages of Peer Response
- Encourages students to see writing as a process that involves revising content, and not just editing the surface features of an essay.
- Provides feedback for students during the writing process without overburdening the instructor.
- Creates a sense of classroom community and an opportunity for students to see what their peers are writing.
- Teaches students to become better readers of their own writing.

Advice for Using Peer Response
- Scaffold peer response by discussing a students’ draft as a class or creating your own example draft to respond to as a class.
- Break students into small groups of 3-5.
- Provide 4-6 guiding questions for students to address in each others’ writing, based on the criteria of the assignment. For example, “What did you think were the strengths of the essay?” “Where were you confused or wanted to know more?” “How well does the writer integrate outside sources?”
- Build in some measure of accountability. You could collect responses and give them a holistic score (check, check plus, etc.) or ask students to evaluate their peers’ as responders and make this part of the class participation grade.
- Ask students to focus on global issues like development, organization, and purpose when they respond to rough drafts to teach them that most experienced writers save editing for the final draft.
- If you don’t want to use class time for peer response, ask students to share drafts and respond to each other’s writing using a WebCT discussion board or through email.

Want to Learn More About Peer Response?
For help with incorporating peer response in your courses, contact Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator, at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925. Dan can talk to you one-on-one or provide you with articles about peer response.