Designing Successful Writing Assignments

Join us and get a head start on designing your writing assignments for next semester. Writing Across the Curriculum invites you to attend a free, campus-wide workshop on writing assignment design. The workshop will include strategies for creating successful writing assignments, sequencing assignments effectively, and "write-to-learn" and other creative alternatives to formal assignments.

The workshop will take place on Thursday, November 20, noon-1:15 p.m., in the Forest Suite of the University Union. Appetizers and refreshments will be served.

To RSVP, contact Dan Melzer, University Reading and Writing Coordinator, at melzer@csus.edu or 278-6925.

Writing Across the Curriculum Mission Statement

As stated in 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." In a 2002 survey, 77.8% of faculty reported that the quality of student writing is "extremely important" to student learning outcomes, and another 19.8% reported that it was "important." Improving student reading and writing ability is clearly a priority for both administrators and faculty members at CSUS.

The goal of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is to help CSUS administrators, departments, and individual faculty members meet these goals they have for improving their students' reading and writing, the University Reading and Writing Coordinator provides the following support:

- **Campus-wide and departmental workshops** on topics such as assigning and responding to student writing, handling the paper load, integrating writing into large classes, etc.
- **Consultations** for both departments and individual faculty members on writing and reading design and assessment.
- **Publication** of a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) newsletter each semester.
- **Faculty resources** for reading and writing (a WAC library of books and articles, grading rubrics and other handouts, a WAC website).

To find out more about WAC at CSUS or to schedule a workshop or consultation, contact:

**DAN MELZER**, University Reading and Writing Coordinator
151 Calaveras
Email: melzer@csus.edu
Phone: 916-278-6925
Advice for Responding to Student Writing

Providing written response to student writing is one of the most important things teachers can do to help students learn, but most teachers have had little instruction in how to respond effectively. On October 15th, Writing Across the Curriculum presented a campus-wide workshop on responding to student writing. At the workshop, teachers from across disciplines discussed effective responding. For those of you who couldn’t attend the workshop but are interested in tips for responding to student writing more effectively, the following is a list of advice from the workshop.

- **Respond to both strengths and weaknesses.** Students can become disheartened if they only receive criticism. Constructive criticism is important, but consider beginning your comments by noting the strengths of the paper. This gives students confidence.

- **Avoid being overly directive.** Sometimes we have a tendency to just rewrite the student’s paper for her in our response. Consider posing comments as questions, or soften comments by using language such as “Consider” or “You might” instead of “You need to.”

- **Don’t try to respond to every issue you see in the essay.** Research in composition studies has shown that students become overwhelmed and confused if instructors respond to more than three or four of the most important aspects of an essay. Applying this technique is a way to handle the paper load and respond more effectively at the same time.

- **Avoid vague or generic comments.** We ask our students to be specific in their writing, so we should be specific in our comments. Generic or vague comments such as “awk” or “not developed” often leave students confused and frustrated. Consider the difference between “awk” and “I’m confused by your argument about performance art in this sentence. Are you agreeing or disagreeing with the author’s view?”

- **Reinforce your learning objectives in your responses.** If your objectives for student writing are “critical thinking” or “initiation to the writing in my discipline,” reinforce those objectives in your response. For example, if your objective is for students to use writing to think critically, but the focus of your response is sentence-level concerns like grammar and punctuation, students will receive mixed signals.

For more advice about reinforcing learning objectives in your response to writing, see “Using Grading Rubrics” on page 3.
Using Grading Rubrics

Grading rubrics are one of the most effective ways to reinforce your writing criteria and provide students with a clear sense of what you value when you respond to and evaluate their writing. You can include grading rubrics with syllabi or assignment descriptions to provide students a sense of what you value in their writing even before you respond to what they’ve written, and rubrics can also be used as a kind of “checklist” when you respond.

What is a Grading Rubric?
There are a variety of types of grading rubrics, and rubrics can serve different purposes. For example, a grading rubric could be a list of the “absolute criteria” for a particular essay, or an explanation of what qualities an “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “F” essay will have for your class. The one quality that grading rubrics share is that they provide students with a list of the teacher’s writing objectives.

Using Rubrics to Respond
Response and evaluation rubrics are a great way to save time when responding to student writing without sacrificing quality. Rubrics are a checklist you can use to give feedback to students, whether on rough drafts or final products. An example of a response rubric appears at the bottom of this page.

Response rubrics reinforce writing criteria and save time by providing the teacher with a checklist. At the same time, there is space for brief comments where the teacher can summarize the essay’s main strengths and weaknesses. Response rubrics are especially useful in large classes, where the paper load can be overwhelming if teachers give detailed written comments to each student’s essay.

Other Uses of Rubrics
Rubrics can also be useful as a way to make your learning objectives clear to students before you respond to and evaluate them. Providing students with a general writing rubric along with your syllabi or writing assignment descriptions can help give students a clear sense of what you will value in their writing before they even begin to write. On page 4 is an example of this kind of grading rubric. This rubric was created by the University Reading and Writing Subcommittee for the use of any CSUS instructor. The rubric is not an absolute guideline for all instructors, and each instructor and each discipline will emphasize different aspects of student writing. But the rubric is a good starting point for teachers who want to give students a clear sense of their writing criteria.

Example Response Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Below Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of outside sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of examples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Example Grading Rubric**

The following rubric was created by the University Reading and Writing Subcommittee. It is meant as a useful guide but not an absolute standard for writing in the university; writing criteria will vary from instructor to instructor and discipline to discipline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **A EXCELLENT** | A paper in this category:  
- Addresses the assignment thoughtfully and analytically, setting a challenging task.  
- Displays awareness of and purpose in communicating to an audience.  
- Establishes a clearly focused controlling idea.  
- Demonstrates clear and coherent organization.  
- Provides clear generalizations and effective support and analysis.  
- Cites relevant sources, effectively integrating them into text when appropriate.  
- Displays consistent control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English.  

ESL/Dialect Guideline: Some grammatical errors may occur throughout the paper but do not interfere with overall effectiveness; occasional inappropriate word choice or incorrect usage may occur. |
| **B STRONG** | A paper in this category:  
- Addresses the assignment clearly and analytically, setting a meaningful task.  
- Addresses audience needs and expectations.  
- Establishes a clearly focused controlling idea.  
- Demonstrates clear and coherent organization.  
- Provides clear generalizations and effective support and analysis.  
- Cites relevant sources, effectively integrating them into text when appropriate.  
- Displays consistent control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English.  

ESL/Dialect Guideline: Some grammatical errors may occur throughout the paper but do not interfere with overall effectiveness; occasional inappropriate word choice or incorrect usage may occur. |
| **C ADEQUATE** | A paper in this category:  
- Addresses the assignment with some analysis.  
- Addresses most audience needs and expectations.  
- Establishes a controlling idea.  
- Demonstrates adequate organization.  
- Provides support for and some analysis of generalizations.  
- Cites appropriate sources, adequately integrating them into text.  
- Displays adequate control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English; errors do not slow the reader, impede understanding, or seriously undermine the authority of the writer.  

ESL/Dialect Guideline: Grammatical errors are rare and do not interfere with overall effectiveness of paper; occasional imprecision in word choice and usage may occur. |
| **D SERIOUSLY FLAWED** | A paper in this category:  
- Addresses the assignment inadequately.  
- Shows insufficient audience awareness.  
- Strays from the controlling idea, or the idea is unclear.  
- Displays formulaic, random, or confusing organization.  
- Lacks generalizations, or provides generalizations with inadequate support or analysis.  
- Fails to cite sources or cites and/or integrates them inappropriately.  
- Shows deficient control of syntax, word choice, and convention of Standard English; errors impede understanding.  

ESL/Dialect Guideline: Some grammatical errors may occur throughout the paper but do not interfere with overall effectiveness; occasional inappropriate word choice or incorrect usage may occur. |
| **F FUNDAMENTALLY DEFICIENT** | A paper in this category:  
- Fails to address assignment.  
- Demonstrates a lack of audience awareness.  
- Lacks a controlling idea.  
- Lacks organization or organizes illogically.  
- Displays inability to generalize, analyze, or support ideas.  
- Fails to use outside sources or misuses the texts of others.  
- Shows inadequate control of syntax, word choice, and convention of Standard English.  

ESL/Dialect Guideline: Grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice, or incorrect word choice, or usage hinder communication. |

Guidelines for Evaluating the Writing of ESL students: The writing of ESL students should be held to native speaker standards for content and addressing the assignment. However, because certain types of errors persist in ESL writing even at an advanced level, some accommodation for ESL features is appropriate.
Results of the 2002 Faculty Writing Survey

In the spring of 2002, the University Reading and Writing Subcommittee sent a survey to faculty concerning writing in their classes. 252 faculty members responded, and the results of the survey, which are summarized on page 6, reveal that faculty feel that writing is an important part of their classes. 77.8% of teachers said that quality of student writing is “extremely important” and another 19.8% said it was “important.” 69% of faculty said that the quality of writing of their majors is an item of discussion and programmatic concern in their department.

Here are some of the statements about writing that faculty made in the survey:

“Our students are trained to solve complex problems for public projects. It is critically important that they be able to communicate these solutions effectively.”

“Writing assignments are an important way to assess learning outcomes.”

“Writing is an essential learning tool and being able to articulate ideas clearly is vital to any field.”

Faculty members are trying to make writing a central part of their courses, but the survey revealed some common concerns. One concern faculty have is that they don’t always have time to handle the paper load, especially if they’re teaching large classes (watch for a WAC workshop in the spring on “Teaching Writing in Large Classes”). Another concern some faculty expressed is that students were not prepared for writing in their major. One faculty member said:

“Many students arrive unprepared to write effectively, despite passing Freshman Composition and the WPE.”

One important thing to keep in mind in any discussion of student writing in college is that no single course (like Freshman Composition) or essay exam (like the WPE) can insure that students will be able to write effectively across all of the varied disciplines. Freshman Composition classes can help students improve their writing process, but it’s a biology teacher who is best equipped to teach students the genre of the lab report, and a business teacher who can guide students in the specific demands of the executive summary. Longitudinal studies of college students and their writing have shown that initiation to academic writing, and especially the writing of specific majors, is a long process, and requires intensive writing in both Freshman Composition courses and courses in the major. Through workshops and individual consultations, Writing across the Curriculum is here to support faculty who see writing as an important way to teach the ways of thinking expected in their discipline.

No single course (like Freshman Composition) or essay exam (like the WPE) can insure that students will be able to write effectively across all of the varied disciplines.
2002 Faculty Writing Survey Results

In your opinion, how important is the quality of student writing related to other learning outcomes?

- Extremely important: 196 (77.8%)
- Important: 50 (19.8%)
- Somewhat important: 4 (1.6%)
- Unimportant: 0 (0.0%)
- No answer: 2 (0.8%)

Is the quality of writing in your majors an item of discussion and programmatic concern in your department?

- Yes: 174 (69%)
- Occasionally: 58 (23%)
- No: 11 (4.4%)
- Not applicable/no answer: 9 (3.6%)

Over the years I have taught here, the quality of students writing has:

- Improved: 22 (8.7%)
- Stayed about the same: 112 (44.4%)
- Gotten worse: 78 (30.9%)
- No data for an opinion: 38 (15.1%)
- No answer: 2 (0.8%)

Do you make writing assignments in your course?

- Yes, in every course: 207 (82.1%)
- Yes, in some courses: 34 (13.5%)
- Not at all: 10 (4.0%)
- No answer: 1 (0.4%)

What challenges do you face in incorporating writing assignments in your classes?

- Poor quality of student writing: 158 (62.7%)
- Large class enrollment: 147 (58.3%)
- Helping students to improve: 142 (56.3%)
- Grading and evaluation: 115 (45.6%)
- Working with ESL students: 101 (40.1%)
- Student resistance: 73 (29.0%)
- Integrating assignments into course objectives: 35 (13.9%)
- Assignment design: 29 (11.5%)
- Other—plagiarism: 2 (0.8%)
- Other—time: 1 (0.4%)

Total Surveys Returned: 252

Departments Responding:
The CSUS Writing Center

Writing Across the Curriculum and the CSUS Writing Center play complementary roles in promoting reading and writing on campus. While the WAC program focuses on faculty development and support, the Writing Center offers students assistance with writing in any course. By encouraging your students to visit the Writing Center and get one-on-one assistance from a trained tutor, you can help students see the importance of writing as a process.

Location

The Writing Center is located in Room 128 of Calaveras Hall, situated between Douglas and Alpine Halls.

Hours

Monday – Thursday: 10:00 AM - 6:00 PM
Friday: 10:00 AM - 1:00 PM

The Writing Center is closed on Saturday, Sunday, and holidays including university scheduled recesses. Students may sign up for tutoring once a week. Appointments must be scheduled in person.

Contact Information

Phone: 278-6356
E-mail: writingcenter@csus.edu
Website: http://www.asn.csus.edu/writing

Tutorial Services

All registered CSUS students may schedule appointments with The Writing Center tutors free of charge. Students may seek assistance with papers for any class in any department, or for preparation for writing exams.

The goal of The Writing Center is to help students become better writers through individual attention. The Writing Center offers techniques for planning and organizing papers, as well as tools for revision and editing.

The Writing Center Administration

CSUS Writing Center Director:
Cherryl Smith, Ph.D. Professor of English
Office Location: Calaveras Hall 162
Telephone: 916-278-4835
E-mail: smithc@csus.edu
What is WAC?

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is a nationwide educational movement that was initiated by faculty in the 1970s. The aim of WAC is to improve teaching and learning by helping both students and faculty see writing as a central part of not only English courses but courses across the curriculum. WAC also aims to create a sense of community among faculty who teach in diverse disciplines but share the common goal of improving student learning through writing. Although WAC programs may go by different titles (Writing Across the Curriculum, Communication Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines), they share certain basic premises:

- **Writing is thinking.** Writing is one of the most effective ways to engage students in critical thinking about a subject or discipline.

- **Teachers within a discipline** are best prepared to teach the writing required by their discipline. It is impossible for English composition teachers to prepare students for all the varied types of writing they will be assigned in college.

- **Students learn to write by writing often.** If students write extensively only in English composition courses, their writing skills will atrophy.

- **Writing is a process.** Students will write more effectively if given a chance to revise and to receive feedback from peers and teachers throughout the writing process.

To help encourage teachers across disciplines to make writing a central element of their courses, WAC at CSUS provides faculty with a variety of types of academic support. The University Reading and Writing Coordinator can act as a consultant to both departments and individual faculty on issues of curriculum design and assessment. The Coordinator is also available to present departmental workshops on topics such as “Handling the Paper Load,” “Designing Effective Writing Assignments,” “Responding to Student Writing,” etc. Each semester the Coordinator presents free campus-wide workshops on a variety of topics related to reading and writing and publishes a WAC newsletter that is distributed to all CSUS teachers.

To schedule a workshop or consultation, or to find out more about Writing Across the Curriculum, contact:

**DAN MELZER**
University Reading and Writing Coordinator
151 Calaveras
Email: melzer@csus.edu
Phone: 916-278-6925

**WORKSHOP TOPICS INCLUDE:**
- Handling the Paper Load
- Designing Effective Writing Assignments
- Responding to Student Writing

Join us for the next Writing Across the Curriculum campus-wide workshop
**Designing Successful Writing Assignments, November 20, 2003**