Please announce to graduate students

Thesis Writing Workshop
Writing Across the Curriculum and Graduate Studies present a thesis-writing workshop for Sacramento State graduate students across disciplines. The workshop will cover issues such as:

- time and stress management
- the thesis writing process
- campus thesis writing resources
- library research

WHEN:
Friday, March 3, 4:00-5:15
WHERE:
Delta Suite, University Union

Students can RSVP by contacting Dan Melzer at melzer@csus.edu or (916) 278-6925.

2nd Annual Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum Conference

Writing Across the Curriculum invites teachers and administrators at Sacramento State and the Sacramento region to attend a free half-day conference featuring a variety of panel presentations focusing on successful approaches to reading and writing across disciplines.

Conference Program

10:00 Welcome and Introduction, Hinde Auditorium

10:30-11:30 Concurrent Session 1
Creating Personal Interest through Writing: Passion, Reflection, and Growth (Orchard I)
“Brevity is the Soul of Wit:” Writing to Learn in the Content Areas (Orchard II)
Letter from Your College Friend: Integrating a Manageable Service-Learning Project into a Writing-Intensive Course (Forest Suite, Oak)

11:45-12:45 Concurrent Session 2
Group Writing Assignments (Orchard I)

1:00-2:00 Concurrent Session 3
How Important is it to Become a Good Writer? Raising Student Awareness (Forest Suite, Oak)

“But I was born here—I can’t be ESL:” Generation 1.5 Students in College Classrooms (Orchard I)
Approaches to Teaching Language and Literacy (Orchard II)
Strategies for Teaching Reading and Writing: Critical Thinking and Textual Knowledge (Forest Suite, Oak)

Refreshments and snacks available in the Walnut Room throughout the conference.

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.
Considered the Value of Peer Response

By Fiona Glade (English), Lisa Hammersley (Geology), and Patricia Clark-Ellis (Associate Dean, College of Health and Human Services)

What is peer response?

Faculty at Sac State have been using peer response groups effectively in the classroom for some time, having found that peer response provides students with excellent preparation for writing in a variety of academic, workplace, and community settings. Peer response groups resemble our own scholarly work as researchers and writers, allowing participants opportunities to see work-in-process, to understand more closely the expectations of a given discipline, and to participate actively in the conversations that comprise our fields.

Although they take a little time to set up, peer response groups can encourage writers to learn the course materials. Rather than focusing simply on editing mechanics at the final stages of the writing process, response groups are most useful when they take place earlier in the process, when writers are creating drafts and organizing their ideas. Allowing writers some classroom time to discuss their ideas at this stage encourages learning through writing. WAC programs often refer to this process as “writing to learn”: discussions about drafts-in-process encourage conversation about course content. Moreover, the discussions that take place in workshops foster collaboration—another staple of our own academic lives as well as a common requirement in most workplaces. Finally, peer response workshops widen the audience for the texts that our students produce.

Why engage in peer response?

As you consider ways peer response workshops could help you reach your teaching goals, think about not only the purpose of using peer response, but also about the ways it might be suitable for your course and for a particular writing assignment by reflecting upon the following questions:

- What are the advantages of your students using peer response in this writing assignment?
- How might peer response result in better papers?
- How could peer response help students learn something new about the subject?
- How could the peer response experience help students become more self-reflective about their own writing and learning?

For peer response to be successful, students need to have a clear understanding of what it is and why they are being asked to do it. If you can articulate why you are asking students to engage in peer response, you are ready for the next step: the mechanics of peer response.

Preparing for a peer response exercise in your classroom

In preparation for peer response, students should understand not only the goals of the assignment and of the workshop, but also the timetable for the writing assignment. It often helps if peer review is used as part of the process of writing a term paper or other challenging assignment where a review stage will be particularly useful. It’s useful to tell students that they will be sharing their work at the drafting stage, so they realize that they will be expected to make changes after getting feedback from their peers. In order to ensure that the work is...
ready for a peer review and that students participate, it may help to assign points to these stages of the process. Another way to do this is to deduct points from the final assignment grade if students don’t participate by either bringing a draft or responding to a peer’s draft.

When using peer response, it’s critical to create a worksheet or guide—sometimes referred to as a script—to help writers review their classmates’ papers; requiring written responses to your script builds in accountability for students’ comments about other students’ work. A script also encourages responders to offer constructive advice rather than offering only criticism. The workshop script should focus on the writing assignment, including questions for responders to answer about specific criteria required of the assignment, such as organization, format, disciplinary terminology, citation style, etc. Providing a copy of the grading rubric for the paper can also be very useful for reviewers. The most effective script will likely include a series of questions for responders to consider while reading a classmate’s draft. Here are a few examples to consider adapting for your own courses:

- Read the paper through once without stopping. In one minute write a quick summary of the main points of the paper.
- Where in the introduction did you find the main points of the paper set out? Are the main concepts introduced in such a way that readers will be able to follow the arguments in the paper?
- Which parts of the paper are well organized and easy to follow? Which parts are unclear?
- Where do you find important details to support each main point? Which parts of the essay need more details?
- Name two things that you particularly liked about this paper.
- Explain one or two ways in which you think this paper could be improved.

Well-constructed guiding questions can help students write respectful and helpful reviews by encouraging them to make suggestions for fixing the problems they have identified.

Peer response groups resemble our own scholarly work as researchers and writers, allowing participants opportunities to see work-in-process, to understand more closely the expectations of a given discipline, and to participate actively in the conversations that comprise our fields.

Organization of peer response exercises

There are a number of effective ways to organize and facilitate peer response. The first is during class time, when writers bring their drafts to class and form into groups—chosen by the teacher or the students—to discuss their work. For a set period of time, each member of the group focuses on reading the draft of one peer; after all group members have read the same draft, they spend time discussing their responses as a group. A second way to organize peer response is through at-home written responses, in which reviewers produce an individual written response to a peer’s work. Papers can be exchanged in class on a given day, or you can assign a paper to each student after looking over the first drafts to ensure that each paper is at a sufficiently advanced stage for review.

Just like any other teaching tool, peer response groups should be designed to fit in with a teacher’s stated course goals. For example, if one of the writing goals for a course is that students understand the format of written research articles, then a series of mini-workshops discussing drafts of each section of a paper—such as hypothesis, methods, or findings—would work well. While these group conversations will be about writing, it is highly likely that a simultaneous conversation about course content will emerge. Just as faculty participate in the social construction of knowledge in their own fields, so, too, can our students.
A Writer is a Writer is a Writer: Responding to ESL Students

By Elizabeth Young, Writing Center Tutor

I wrote this as part of my contribution to the Tutor Book, an ever-growing collection of essays written by former members of the Writing Center’s tutoring class. My very first semester in the Writing Center was more unusual than I expected, because every scheduled writer I had the whole semester was ESL of some flavor: Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Farsi, Laotian, Bangladeshi, and Thai: a regular international smorgasbord of “issues.” But none of the things I struggled with were really related to language issues. The issues were the same ones my fellow tutors struggled through with their native writers. Ilona Leki in *Understanding ESL Writers* states, “techniques developed to help native English-speaking students consciously focus on how their ideas are organized usually work for non-native speakers as well” (127). In other words, treat ESL writers just as you would fluent native writers: first focus on things like structure, organization, and development (higher order concerns). Leave grammar and spelling (lower order concerns) for the very last. Believe me. It really works. A conference bogged down in endless rounds of “no, no – look – you’ve misspelled that word AGAIN!” is, quite frankly, useless. So you fixed some spelling errors; are the ideas presented in the paper any better? Probably not.

A writer is a writer is a writer. It just takes a little longer to do a given amount of work with an ESL student than a native speaker. But, oh, the wonderful writing you will see! The sheer pleasure of finding, buried in constructions such as “self-sting” for “self-esteem” and “constipation” for “conspiracy” (not kidding), some subtle and complex ideas. The joy of being in a position to tell the writer what a cool/complex/wonderful idea that is. Sweating it out with them, keeping your pen to yourself, leaving the writer to write her own words. Ain’t nothing like it in the world!

“…treat ESL writers just as you would fluent native writers: first focus on things like structure, organization, and development (higher order concerns). Leave grammar and spelling (lower order concerns) for the very last.”