



## Writing Across the Curriculum Program

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### Writing Across the Curriculum Community of Practice (WAC-CoP)

#### *Using Writing in Large Classes*

December 8, 2015

Guest Speakers: Dr. Robin Young, Department of Botany; Dr. Neil Armitage, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

**Objectives of the WAC-CoP:** 1) To connect people across the university that are involved in teaching writing in the sciences; 2) To facilitate sharing of experiences, challenges, ideas and best practices in the teaching and learning of writing in the sciences in an informal, risk-free environment.

- WAC-CoP participants are encouraged to share their ideas for future sessions (e.g. peer review of writing assignment design, techniques for peer review, etc.)

#### **Overview of this month's Lunch and Learn:**

At this month's Lunch and Learn, Robin and Neil shared the engaging ways they handle incorporating writing into their large classes (Biology 200; Sociology 200). Both emphasized their decision to shift from long papers to a focus on shorter assignments (between 450-750 words) that challenge students to be concise and focused in their writing, which also reduces TA hours. This forces students to plan their writing, find the connections, and creates better writing.

For example, in Robin's Biology 200 class, students write a short press release on a scientific article; this requires students to produce clear, jargon-free writing. To support their writing process, students in Biology 200 participate in a science communication workshop and a read press release/scientific article pairing before beginning the assignment. In addition, the Biology 200 TAs choose the scientific article used for the press release assignment, which increases TA engagement in the assignment.

Similarly, in Neil's Sociology of the Family class, students are required to complete a short critical writing piece (450-550 words) at the end of each module, which together are worth 45% of the final grade. Neil links in-class exercises and student presentations to their critical writing. His approach focuses on progressive improvement from instructor feedback (TAs focus on exams and quizzes). If a student improves over the series of assignments, they receive the higher percentage as their final mark; this motivates students to use the feedback to improve their writing.



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### **Discussion of large class writing:**

How do you handle the challenge of time when dealing with writing in large classes?

- Even very short in-class writing exercises can be useful teaching tools and don't require a lot of time. For example, Robin has students write 1-2 sentence answers to questions and randomly gathers five answers into a clicker question. Deciding on the "best" answer, or improving the writing of the example answers, leads to deeper discussions of course content, shows students how to improve their writing and
- Neil suggested that less can be more. Shorter written assignments challenge students to pare down the material, focus on content connections and they take less time to mark.
- Research suggests that students can only take in so much information. Sometimes losing some content in order to teach skills may result in a better long-term payoff.

How do you handle marking the assignments (i.e., your rubric)?

- Suggestions included creating a more general rubric that focuses on evaluating content and structure, and thinking about what a rubric can facilitate in the writing and what it can constrain.
- Neil has students write an assignment, and then use the rubric to mark an example assignment that he has written. This leads to a discussion of why they gave his writing a particular grade, which helps students to dig into the rubric.
- In Robin's class, the large number of TAs (52 tutorial sections) means having to calibrate their marking. TAs co-mark to help with this process.

How do you help students to engage in the writing process (i.e., scaffolding for the assignments)?

- Robin has students hand in an outline of their press release (Biology 200). TAs give feedback on the outlines and students are required to show how they responded to this feedback in the final version. Incorporating the feedback is included in their grade.
- Suggestions including involving students in the grading process, providing a workshop or dedicating a class to group feedback. Also explicitly telling student they can use plain language, and showing them examples, can help them cut down on jargon.

**For an example of using writing in a large lecture course see:** Boyd, J. 2010. The best of both worlds: the large lecture, writing-intensive course. *Communication Teacher*, 24(4): 229-237.

**Have questions? Email the WAC Coordinator, [wac.coordinator@ubc.ca](mailto:wac.coordinator@ubc.ca)**