

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER

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PRE/VIEWS

By Vicki Collins, WIC Director

In this issue readers can learn about the process which led two departments, Political Science and Nuclear Engineering, to produce a discipline-specific writing guide for students in their department. These projects, both supported by WIC Department Development Grants, demonstrate the growing awareness at Oregon State that faculty need to articulate their expectations of student writers in their discipline.

OSU faculty who are interested in initiating such projects in their own departments are invited to apply for 1999 WIC Department Development Grants. The WIC Program will fund from five to fifteen Department Development Grants this year. The maximum award per grant will be \$2500.00. Requests which include options for matching funds are preferred, and requests for less-than-maximum amounts may be given preference. Departments which involve WIC seminar alumni in the proposed grant activity will have a competitive advantage for receiving funds, as will proposals that involve curriculum planning for including writing throughout the major. Proposals are due in the WIC office by February 22, 1999.

Student Writing at OSU: Accounting

An interview with Dr. Mary Alice Seville

By Michelle Abbott (MAIS)

Students enrolled in Intermediate Accounting may be expecting to use their calculators more than their pens. They probably assume that learning to calculate profitability ratios and amortize liabilities won't require a descriptive essay. But Dr. Mary Alice Seville has a broader agenda for her students. "Some aspects of this field are pure numbers," she says, "But that's not all there is to accounting. No matter where you work, you have to be able to analyze information and clearly communicate results."

Dr. Seville considers writing an important part of her instruction in the junior-level accounting course she teaches at O.S.U. Most of her students, she assumes, have only fulfilled basic required writing courses and need help applying their skills to the field of accounting. "Business students tend to carry over a writing style that may have been appropriate in a different context. They're used to bringing in other information—painting a picture—or using big words that they don't really understand." She feels her job is to teach them to write with the precision they'll need for professional work.

In accordance with the guidance of the WIC training courses Dr. Seville has attended, she gives her students frequent opportunities to write. Her curriculum includes several in-class short-essay assignments. Students are also required to complete three memos, in professional format, which are graded in part on grammar and writing quality. To reinforce the importance of writing skills, Dr. Seville provides a "Writing Feedback Form" along with the assignment. The form lists seven

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aspects of a well-written paper, including appropriateness for the audience, coherent organization, clarity and conciseness, and correct use of mechanics. Students are encouraged to complete an evaluation of their own paper, and submit it with their assignment. Dr. Seville then provides her own input, and if the student wishes to discuss the critique, they can visit her during office hours. While she wishes she had more time to dedicate to writing instruction, Dr. Seville has had to satisfy herself with this effort.

Why go through all this trouble for a group of students who aspire to be number-crunchers? Dr. Seville says the feedback she gets from professionals indicates that employers are looking for graduates with good oral and written communication skills. Some companies require writing samples from applicants, even for accounting positions. She passes the advice along to her students: "If you can't communicate well in writing, you may not even be able to keep an entry-level position, and you certainly won't progress in a company."

Dr. Seville's students will certainly experience a big return on the time and effort that she invests in the development of writing skills. At times she finds it difficult to balance this objective with her role as a teacher of accounting. But the *integration* of her instruction is precisely what makes it so valuable. Learning to write in the context of their own discipline will help students transfer their skills effectively to the professional realm. If the university is a training ground for the "real world," writing instruction clearly has an important place in the curriculum.

**Mary Alice Seville's
Criteria for Evaluating Writing**

- **responsiveness to the assignment**
- **appropriateness for audience**
- **coherent organization**
- **supporting material**
- **clarity and conciseness**
- **correct use of mechanics**
- **citations and documentation**

*Adapted from an
accounting education newsletter*

**Political Science Department Develops
Writing Guide**

By Marcella Becker (Political Science)

Students in the Department of Political Science began fall term with new support for their writing in the form of a Writing Guide designed by the faculty of their department. A WIC grant awarded to Marcella Becker and Jim Foster funded development of the writing guide.

The goals of the Political Science faculty in creating the writing guide were:

- to have a department-wide conversation about the importance and variety of writing in political science;
- to achieve consensus about department writing expectations;
- to provide Political Science students with a better understanding of writing in the discipline;
- to provide Political Science students an overview of the different forms of writing they are likely to encounter in their student career in the department;
- to provide Political Science students with enough tools to improve their writing and successfully negotiate the demands put on them in the discipline.

The guidebook is structured to demonstrate to students, initially, the importance of being able to write well and to communicate to them an appreciation of writing as a cognitive process. They are then familiarized with categories of writing from descriptive to analytical to argumentative, along with writing tasks of increasing difficulty. The main body of the booklet is a collection of types of writing used as assignments in Political Science classes. Students are provided a description of each type of assignment, a short statement of purpose, and a section which explains how to do the assignment step by step. Students are given evaluation criteria used by their professors, which is intended to demystify the grading process. Lastly, examples of good assignments are provided. One of the chapters in the final section provides students with guidelines for citing web sources.

We started the process with a "mini" on-campus department faculty retreat. Becker and Foster presented a proposal to the faculty detailing the content of the writing guide. The discussion that commenced at this first

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A Writing Guide for the Department of Nuclear Engineering

By Kathryn Higley (Nuclear Engineering)

Jack Higginbotham and Kathryn Higley received a WIC grant to develop a writing guide for the Department of Nuclear Engineering. The impetus for the guide was a WIC survey asking faculty and students in four colleges to define "good" and "excellent" writing. After the survey results were published, the Department invited WIC director Vicki Collins to host a discussion with students and faculty in Nuclear Engineering and Radiation Health Physics (NE/RHP) to examine the survey results. The results of that meeting made it very obvious that the students wanted more guidance on faculty's expectations for writing within the Department. Consequently we applied for, and received, a WIC grant to develop a writing guide for NE/RHP students.

Following a brief discussion with faculty as to the general direction of the writing guide, Kathryn Higley and graduate student Craig Marianno assembled examples of technical writing from journals frequently used by faculty in the Department. Their goal was to assemble a packet of these articles with instructions to authors, to be provided to the students, along with Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*. In the process of assembling the document, NE/RHP faculty became aware of electronic publishing capabilities through the Adobe Acrobat software family. This software allowed the writing guide to be presented to students either via the world-wide web or on the Department's computer network (which is available to all students in the department).

Prototype versions of the document were presented to the faculty for their review and comment during the fall 1997 and winter 1998 quarters, and the first version was offered to the freshmen class during the Spring 1998 quarter. Additional revisions occurred during the summer, with a more robust version available fall 1998 for use with the incoming freshmen class.

The writing guide is meant to be a "living" document that can be accessed via the world-wide web, easily updated, and easily printed. The document is structured much like a hyper-linked web page. Students can jump to any section that is of interest to them using electronic bookmarks which have been inserted into the document.

The writing guide includes sections on how to use the guide, a brief essay on the philosophy of "What is Good Writing," and general expectations for writing within the department (for example, at what grade level should laboratory reports be typewritten). More importantly, the guide includes examples of graded papers from several classes, so that students can view work from a class in which they are enrolled. The guide also includes examples of business documents, including reports, and resumes. A section on professional articles includes the photocopied "instructions to authors" which are present in technical journals relevant to our discipline. Each of these sections contains links to one or more documents which provide additional explanatory material or examples relevant to that section.

We have also included a section on presentations. In that section are found examples of slide and overhead presentations. Audio and video clips are also included, so that students may observe some of the options available to them with multimedia software. It is our intent, in the long term, to include small video (movie) clips to illustrate "good presentations" and "bad presentations."

The advantage of putting this document together in Adobe Acrobat is that it can be written in any number of word processing formats (at the same time) and chapters can easily be updated and replaced. The software is cheap (~\$60.00 to purchase) and the software needed to view the document is free. The software also lets the reader see the same format whether they are viewing the document with a PC or Mac or Unix system.

We are hoping the multi-media format of this guide catches the "tekkie" interest of our students, and provides them with greater understanding of our expectations for writing in the department. To date the response has been encouraging, both from students and faculty.

**The writing guide for
Nuclear Engineering
can be viewed
using Adobe Acrobat at
www.engr.orst.edu/classes/ne/Writing_Guide/.**

Announcements

WIC Expert Sue McLeod to Speak on Writing in the Disciplines

Sue McLeod, one of the pioneers and premier scholars in Writing Across the Curriculum, will visit OSU on January 21, 1998. McLeod will talk informally with WIC faculty at a noon pizza lunch and then will deliver a formal lecture at 4 p.m. in the MU 206. McLeod is Chair of the Department of English and former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Washington State University. Her lecture is open to the public.

WIC Faculty Seminar for Winter Term: Call for Nominations

A few spaces remain in the Introductory WIC Faculty Seminar scheduled for Winter term. Teaching faculty who are interested in incorporating more writing into their courses are eligible for the seminar, which meets five Wednesday afternoons from three to five o'clock, beginning on January 20, 1999. The seminar introduces faculty to the concepts of teaching with writing, including using writing as a mode of learning, designing good writing assignments, responding to student writing, and assessment of writing. Faculty wishing to participate should ask their chair to send an email nomination to vcollins@orst.edu.

Fall Seminar Participants

Faculty from six colleges completed the Introductory WIC Seminar in November. Those participating include Audrey Bach (Political Science), Luana Beeson and Anthony Veltri (Public Health), Dan Edge (Fisheries and Wildlife), Barbara Edwards (Math), Wayne Fanno (Agricultural Education), Jack Higginbotham (Nuclear Engineering), Lynne Houck (Zoology), Larry Lev (Ag and Resource Economics), Alexis McKenna (Speech Communication), Juan Trujillo (Foreign Languages and Literatures), Tony Wilcox and Ben Young (Exercise and Sport Science), and Anisa Zvonkovic (Human Development and Family Sciences).

meeting often spilled over into the usual PS department hallway conversations.

The writing guide as a departmental project facilitated the ongoing conversation and exchange of ideas about improving student writing in the department. It also made us aware of the variety of writing assignments that are in use in the department. Becker and Foster collaborated on a first draft of the guidebook. We then held a faculty retreat at a colleague's house at the coast. The retreat's purpose was to revise and expand the general outline of the guidebook and to rewrite individual parts detailing specific forms of writing. Departmental colleague Pat Corcoran found just the right tone and exercises to facilitate the activities. He moved us along at a comfortable but productive pace.

We began using the guidebook in Fall term 1998 and plan to meet to evaluate the guidebook's first edition. *The Guide to Writing in Political Science* can be purchased in the textbook section of the OSU Bookstore.

About *Teaching With Writing*

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Teaching With Writing is the newsletter of the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. As part of the Baccalaureate Core, all OSU students are required to take an upper division writing intensive course in their major.

The content of the WIC courses ranges from radiation safety (for Nuclear Engineering majors) to golf courses design (a Horticulture option). While subject matter differs by department, all WIC courses share certain commonalities defined by the Faculty Senate:

- *Informal, ungraded or minimally graded writing is used as a mode of learning the content material.
- *Students are introduced to conventions and practices of writing in their discipline, and the use of borrowed information.
- *Students complete at least 5000 words of writing, of which at least 2000 words are in polished, formal assignments.
- *Students are guided through the whole writing process, receive feedback on drafts, and have opportunities to revise.

For complete information on WIC guidelines, contact Vicki Collins by email at VCollins@orst.edu or consult the OSU Curricular Procedures Handbook.