

## Writing across the Disciplines

In the one-room school houses of our country's early educational system, the "Three R's," reading, writing, and arithmetic, was deemed to be the most important skills to learn. Nothing has changed. Today, all learning that occurs in all fields of science and art are based upon having these basic skills in a learner's tool kit. First we must learn to read, and then we start learning to count and use basic mathematics and writing skills. But as we learn higher levels of reading and math, we often neglect learning how to write better. This is true even though most will agree that being able to communicate is essential for success in nearly all careers.

A "writing across the disciplines" (aka: "writing across the curriculum") regimen will help students 1) improve the quality of writing projects; 2) develop important research skills; 3) develop the practice of using writing as a mode of learning; and 4) expand use of new educational technologies. As college level instructors, we all know that it does not matter how much you know until you are able to communicate it. Although our students are reluctant to write out anything (and prefer "multiple guess" examinations), it is imperative that they develop good writing habits.

### Basics of Writing across the Disciplines

We use different kinds of language (genres) when we speak to different people. For example, we speak differently to a child than we would to our supervisor, colleague, instructor, or our student. If you had to explain the importance of education to a young child or had to explain the same thing to an 18-year old, you would use different choices of words and phrases. An explanation of the importance of education to a person who has a Ph.D. with huge amounts of debt and a resentful attitude towards their personal experience would require a different way of telling him/her. In each situation, the tone of the conversation (or genre) changes.

Writing falls into four categories: 1] personal writing; 2] creative writing; 3] academic writing; and 4] professional writing. These four genres are used at different times depending upon the purpose and intended audience.

### Personal Writing

Personal writing occurs when students and other writers are generating new ideas. This is an emotional and personal account of the subject matter. There is an informal use of grammar (or lack thereof) and dialects (including slang and colloquial expres-

sions). This method of writing uses very few definitions or explanations, are written in first person, and may use sentence fragments. It will usually read as if one is speaking in person-to-person conversation. Journals are one way students learn by writing, and they are encouraged to be reflective in their writing. Journals should only be graded on the basis of having been written with sufficient care and focus upon content rather than structure

A recent example might have occurred when a manufacturer might have said: "Light bulbs need to be replaced – permanently! They break easily, burn out too often – and, often at the worst possible time. Also, they use too much energy to produce enough light. Maybe a new product like LED's can produce lighting better at less cost to consumers and taxpayers. They should sell like hotcakes!"

### Popular or Creative Writing

This kind of writing invites students to be creative and attempts to entertain readers. It can be used in many ways and in various courses. It calls on students' imagination and on their perceptions of both the hypothetical writer and the potential reader. This genre is one that is clearly understood by those outside of the field. There is a limited use of technical terms and they are well-defined when used. It reads fluently and does not use slang, first person, or colloquial expressions.

A possibility is that students might assume the personality of one writer writing to another person in a different time period in response to having read something from a third time period. An example may include Benjamin Franklin taking on the personality of Thomas Edison during the present time while LED's are replacing the light bulb.

### Academic Writing

Almost all writing assignments in colleges and universities fall into the category of academic writing, which is writing that asks students to assume the role of students writing to the instructor. The information flow is reversed from typical communication in which the writer is instructing the reader; the students are displaying their knowledge and are being scrutinized by someone who is more knowledgeable on the subject. Technical terms are used frequently but often explained, when more advanced, and are sometimes illustrated through examples. Terminology is used extensively, and terms standard to the discipline, are neither defined nor explained. When writing in this genre, the author assumes that his audience is educated in the field.

Examples are students who write term papers about: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, the invention of the light bulb, or how LED lighting is replacing the light bulb. In each case, the student is attempting to prove that he/she is knowledgeable about the topic and is able to communicate that knowledge. For instance: "An accidental discovery announced in October, 2005, has taken LED lighting to a new level, suggesting it could soon offer a cheaper, longer-lasting alternative to the traditional light bulb. The breakthrough may eventually make Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb obsolete. LED's are already used in traffic lights, flashlights, and architectural lighting. They are flexible and are less expensive to operate than traditional lighting."

### **Pseudo or Real Professional Writing**

Professional writing is written in the format that professionals in the field write. Professional writing assignments may be appropriate in upper division courses and usually involve "real-life" situations. Assignments need to include the kinds of writing a professional will encounter while on the job. Sometimes, familiar topics are abbreviated in a sort of scholarly 'slang'. Often assignments are given in the form of a memo from a supervisor to an employee.

An example may include an employee's memo to his/her supervisor explaining about how the LED might save the company money by replacing light bulbs in certain applications. For instance, the employee might write: The company might save about \$4,354 per year by switching all incandescent lighting in each company manufacturing facility to LED lighting. Since there are 12 facilities, the total savings are estimated to be over \$50,000.

College instructors who want their students to turn in better written papers might ask that the academic style in their classes for all assignments unless otherwise requested. Further explanation might include: 1] Using the personal style would demonstrate that the student may not know anything about the topic that you are writing about. 2] Using the popular style would demonstrate that the student does not know all the details and that he/she may not have studied enough. 3] Using the academic style would demonstrate that the student has studied and understands the material. 4] Using the professional / technical style would demonstrate that the student not only has studied and understands the material well but also has organized his/or her thoughts using the professional style common for that field of study and has therefore moved to a higher level of organization.

### **How to Set up a Writing Assignment**

An effective writing assignment consists of the following: 1] a suitable assignment sheet; 2] a schedule that asks students to write a first draft, to have it critiqued, and to revise it; 3] materials to help

students complete the assignment; and 4] an explicit scoring rubric or description of expectations.

Students often complain that they don't know what the teacher wants. Even though we may be quite explicit in describing the writing assignment, students will tend to forget details unless the assignment is in print. If it is a creative writing assignment or an academic writing assignment, then the assignment sheet should spell out:

1. the kind of writing expected (including examples)
2. the scope of acceptable subject matter or research questions
3. the length requirements
4. the source or citation requirements (if appropriate)
5. the documentation form expected (if appropriate)
6. the formatting requirements
7. target dates for completion of drafts or sections, for critiques, and for final draft submission
8. penalties for failing to meet basic requirements and deadlines.

If the assignment is a professional document, then the assignment sheet should be in the form of a memo that establishes the teacher's persona as supervisor and the student's persona as employee. The sheet should contain the same kind of information as that listed above, but it should be phrased as it would be in a memo instead of in an assignment sheet.

Write down the subdivisions of an assignment sheet for an assignment you want to give and make brief notes reminding yourself of what you want to put in each section.

### **Support Materials**

Students may still claim that they don't know what the teacher wants. Although it is not always necessary to do so, it is a good idea to give students one or more of the following kinds of support materials:

1. an outline of the paper
2. an example of a successful paper to serve as a model
3. editing and style requirement specifications
4. a series of questions that might help guide students' thinking or research
5. a peer critique guideline.

Sketch out an outline of a paper you want students to write or jot down a series of questions for them to consider.

### **A Scoring Rubric**

Students should know what the characteristics of a good paper are. Sometimes these rubrics can be created by the whole class in response to a fifteen

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minute discussion based on the question, "What makes one paper better than another?" Generally, papers can be judged on quality of these aspects of the whole:

1. the depth of content and development of ideas
2. the organization of the whole and the coherence of the parts of the paper
3. the readability of the writing style
4. the mechanical and grammatical correctness of the text (students need to quit relying on spell-checker and grammar checker in MS-Word®).

If a table is used, a complementary sheet describing the qualities of each of these characteristics can be supplied.

When preparing a course involved with "Writing across the Disciplines," remember to teach students that writing is a learning process. It is important that our students learn these concepts in order to be successful in both upper level courses and study and in their careers.

### Resources for Writing Across the Disciplines

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Colorado State's WAC Clearinghouse. This is a site for all things WAC, from creating writing assignments to tips on handling the grading. <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/>

Hacker, Diana. *A Writer's Reference*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.

Manhattan College's Writing Across the Curriculum web pages provide written guidelines for developing writing assignments in all disciplines and it has a narrative guide for responding to student writing. <http://www.manhattan.edu/services/wac>

Purdue University's Online Writing Lab. *Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines*. <http://www.owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/WAC>

University of Hawaii Manoa Writing Program's website explores, in illustrative detail, writing assignment design, assessment and teaching field-specific forms of writing. <http://mwp01.mwp.hawaii.edu/wm1.htm>

University of Maryland University College's Characteristics of Effective Writing Assignment. <http://www.umuc.edu/ugp/ewp/characteristics.html>

University of Toronto's website gives examples of writing assignment sheets and guidance on grading student writing. <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/comm.html>

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