

# Journal Writing for Technical Courses In Writing-Across-the-Curriculum

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## Introduction

The importance and need of well-developed communication skills to the success of college graduates has received considerable attention in *NACTA Journal* articles in recent years as part of overall efforts addressing curriculum modernization and change. Schaefer (1984) listed "above average verbal and written communication skills" as one of the requirements for a graduate to have maximum marketability. Riesenberg (1988), in discussing results of a survey of graduates' recommendations for curriculum emphasis, included "written communications, and oral communications and public speaking" as one of four major areas cited. Broder and Houston (1986), in discussing implications of a survey of employer needs and perceptions concerning graduates, concluded that "colleges of agriculture need to critically assess the level of communications skills requirements in their degree programs". Cobia (1986) stated that "the single factor that hinders performance of our graduates on the job more than any other is the inability to communicate". Coorts (1987), in writing about updating college curriculum, included "to continue improving communication skills of our students (both verbal and written)" as one of seven curricula needs.

Many college campuses are responding to the need to improve the communication and thinking skills of graduates by implementing a "writing-across-the-curriculum" program. This program is based on the concept that: *all teachers*

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*should both require students to use a variety of writing techniques and help teach writing.*

The program emphasizes writing as a process and puts it at the center of the curriculum. Sources of additional information about the writing-across-the-curriculum concept and techniques include Fulwiler (1984 and 1985), Fulwiler and Young (1982), Gray (1988), and Bean and Ramage (1986).

Previous *NACTA Journal* issues have contained articles by instructors describing the application of various writing-across-the-curriculum concepts in technical courses to improve the communication skills of graduates. Cobia (1986) discussed the whys, hows, and fears associated with incorporating more writing in courses. Gamon (1988) described the use of class presentations to teach communication skills. Smith, Poling, and Van Tilburg (1989) detailed an extensive "Learning Through Writing" pilot program involving several faculty/courses in the Ohio State University's College of Agriculture. Tudor (1989) provided examples and samples of various writing assignments actually used in a course. Koch and Houston (1989) presented techniques for including more writing in coursework.

One type of writing often included in writing-across-the-curriculum programs which was not highlighted in the articles cited above is the use of journals. This article discusses the concept of journal writing and the use of journals in three different technical courses.

## Journals and Journal Writing

What are journals and journal writing? Britton et al. (1975) placed journal writing in the category of expressive

positions will be filled from both the poultry area as well as other areas. Universities will likely need to increase their recruiting efforts if student numbers are to meet industry demands for qualified students. Recruiting should perhaps focus on students with farm backgrounds, but should not be limited to that.

Cooperation between industry and university in identifying, attracting and recruiting students can benefit university, industry and the individual students.

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students, particularly in areas such as personnel management; providing more short courses; offer more specialized 1 or 2 day seminars; develop correspondence programs so interested individuals can take courses without being away from home.

Of the 112 companies responding, only 31 (27.6%) indicated they were actively recruiting at universities. Most of the yes responses (19/31) were from the southern region and they indicated their preferences as to the university at which they recruit. North Carolina State received six votes from that region and three from other regions. University of Georgia received five votes from the southern region and two from other regions. Auburn received all six of their votes from the southern region, and VPI had 4 out of 5 votes from that region as well.

Based on information gained from the survey, it appears there will indeed be a demand for well-trained college graduates to fill industry positions in the future. These

(free) writing with the purpose of finding out what the writer thinks, feels, and knows. As such it is characterized as informal, writer-based, exploratory, digressive, searching, speculative, resembling speech (talky), and uncorrected. Fulwiler (1987) stated that a journal is "a place to record observations, speculate, raise questions, and figure things out--" and "both a place and tool for thinking". He compared it to a diary which is private and personal and a course notebook which is a record of public thoughts and presentations as follows:

Diary ("I", subjective) -- Journal ("It") -- class notebook ("it, objective")

Hedlund, Furst, and Foley (1989) defined a journal as "a written dialogue with self, a very personal document, and a valuable learning tool" which differs from both a diary which is continuous, spontaneous, and intimate in nature and a log which is an objective record of specific events.

Obviously journal writing is quite different from the formal writing typically required in technical courses. Britton et al. (1975) referred to the latter as transactional writing, undertaking for the purpose of communicating to a selected audience. This type of writing is characterized as clear, focused, organized, documented, concise, correct, and conventional.

Clearly, students need to master formal writing as applicable to a particular course and subject area. The intent of journal writing is not to replace formal writing; in fact, one important use of journals is to provide a mechanism for exploring, focusing, clarifying, and revising ideas in the early stages of the formal composing process.

However, journal writing is a powerful learning mechanism in its own right and can be an important part of the "mix" of writing techniques used to enhance communication skills in any course. As Fulwiler (1982) stated, journal writing is "an interdisciplinary learning tool with a place in every academic classroom" and journals can be "both a formal rigorous assignment and, at the same time, a place for students to practice imaginative and speculative thinking". Fulwiler (1987) also argued that the need and value of informal language in the learning process is too important to be ignored and that the journal is one of the handiest places for making use of it.

### Using Journals in the Classroom

The thought of integrating journal writing into class activities, assignments and grading criteria can be intimidating for instructors, especially those with no prior experience or training in the use of journals or other types of informal writing. Attending a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop in which participants not only learn about journal writing but also keep and write frequently in their own journals provides an excellent preparation and background for instructors who want to use journals in class. (I had the opportunity to attend one such two-day workshop in 1986 and a two-day advanced writing conference in 1987, both held at the University of Vermont under the leadership of Toby Fulwiler.)

Many excellent references also exist; often these include

examples of journal use by instructors in a wide variety of disciplines. The Journal Book, edited by Toby Fulwiler (1987), is a major contribution. Several of the references already cited contain valuable information about using journals. Additional articles by instructors using journals include Browning (1986), Simmons (1989), and Sullivan (1989).

I include journals as an important part of three of the courses that I teach at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute, a two-year technical college: Personal and Career Orientation, Technical Internship, and Problem Solving Using Systems Approaches. Specific applications of journal writing in these courses are discussed below.

### Personal and Career Orientation

This required campus-wide course was extensively revised prior to the start of the 1988/89 academic year. Although patterned after the University 101, Freshman Year Experience concept of retention based orientation (Gardner and Jewell, 1989), the revised course was structured to meet the specific needs of students at a two-year technical college.

Students attend two one-hour sessions each week for this two-credit course. For one of these weekly class sessions, students from the same major or Department meet with their respective major advisors or faculty. In these sessions, information about careers, curriculum, internship, job-seeking skills, the industry, and employment is presented.

The second weekly session is conducted by a "facilitator", a member of the faculty who volunteers to serve as the instructor. Each class section is composed of about 25 randomly assigned students representing a cross-section of the freshman student body. During these discussion and small group-oriented sessions, topics such as the transition to college, learning and study skills, time management, academic and personal goal setting, academic and cultural diversity, stress management, critical thinking, and communication skills are addressed. Although a common syllabus and "lesson plan" is provided for the sessions, facilitators are encouraged to modify these as they deem appropriate.

As a facilitator, I choose to make journal writing a major part of the course activities. In my orientation sections, the journal is counted as 35% of the final course grade. During the first class meeting of the quarter, I explore with students the concept and purpose of the journal and journal (free) writing using overheads which either highlight the principles or contain samples of student entries and a handout (See Appendix) which states specific guidelines and requirements. Students are required to make two types of journal entries, in-class with assigned topics and out-of-class with topics of their choice.

In-class journal entries may be assigned at the start of class to orient the students to the topic to be discussed, at the end of class to help students summarize and personalize concepts and principles explored during class, and/or during the class to provide material for students to use in follow-up small group discussion and activities. Not assigning specific topics for out-of-class entries allows students to individualize their journals and free write according to their interests and needs.

At the conclusion of each class meeting, I ask students to turn in one journal entry. Occasionally I specify a particular in-class assignment, but most of the time I let students select an out-of-class entry. I then read the collected journal entries, handwrite a dialogue-oriented response on each, and return them to the students at the next class meeting. If a serious problem or concern was expressed in the entry, I indicate my willingness to meet with the student individually and also list other sources of assistance.

I record whether or not the students have handed in the required journal entries and factor this into the participation part of the course grade; however, the individual journal entries are not graded. At the end of the quarter, I collect the journals, check the number of entries, and read the introduction, many of the entries, and the evaluation of the journal's worth (conclusion). I then assign a grade based on criteria listed on the handout (Appendix). I return the journals to the students during an individual meeting and discussion session in my office.

As is typical at other two-year colleges, many of the students arriving on campus have done only limited writing in high school, do not have strong writing skills, and lack confidence in their writing abilities. The use of journals and free writing in the orientation course provides an excellent opportunity for these students to practice writing and to get into the habit of writing in a non-threatening environment. Since it is required, it also provides a definite mechanism for all students to explore and express their feelings, concerns, and thoughts as experienced during this important period of transition and change in their lives.

Overall I have been pleased with the students' use of journals. Most students do embrace the concept of free writing and produce entries which truly are "thinking on paper" and "dialogues with self". In reading through the journals in chronological order, one can, in many cases, clearly see a transition from writing to simply fill a page to deep and thoughtful self-discussions of issues of concern.

Most students write with honesty, feeling, and seriousness about the academic and personal topics of importance to them during this transitional period of their lives. However, some students do consistently limit their writing to brief log type entries. Excerpts from actual journal entries are listed below (It should be noted that some of the power, impact, and meaning of journal entries is lost in the process of reproducing in print the handwritten material.):

#### From Out-Of-Class Entries

"Had an Econ exam... The essay question was about the philips curve where as unemployment decreases then the price level goes up (inflation) and as unemployment increases the price level goes down."

"Today I'm going back to school. I don't feel well enough yet but I can't afford to miss any more school when it's so close to finals week."

"Here at OSU/ATI, so far my teachers, I see no one certain way they like to teach, other than, well I guess now that I think about it. They like to show us how things work and then the why things work that way."

"I can't decide what to do. I want to stay in school but I

also want to join the Air Force. I'm just going to have to make up my mind one way or the other, do it and get on with life."

"I will be very glad when classes are over for the holidays. I can't keep my mind on school because of family problems and it's hurting my grades."

"Writing to a friend is about the easiest audience because it is easier to talk to someone your own age."

"Over the weekend I got into some trouble because of drinking. So I've decided to quit or at least cut down on how much I drink."

How do students view the journals? Perhaps the best way to answer this is to list excerpts from the introduction and evaluation of the journal's worth (conclusion) sections of various journals:

#### From Introductions

"Journals. What are they? They are ways to express yourself in a positive way. They are your slightest thoughts as well as your deepest thoughts. Journals are basically whatever you have on your mind."

"This journals main purpose is to get my thoughts and ideas onto paper."

"It's nice to be able to write once in a while without worrying about spelling or sentence structure."

"Everything is kind of a mess in my journal. I really didn't like writing in it, but I can see how it is or can be important in learning."

"This journal is not just documents, but a valuable tool in working out everyday problems by writing them down and realizing both frustrations and problems."

#### From Evaluations of the Journal's Worth

"It has given me a reason to write down my thoughts. It has given me a reason to think and write at the same time. It has made me have to write."

"I've learned a lot about myself from these journals. I didn't like doing them but looking back they weren't so bad."

"I feel after writing some of these journals it helped release some pressures and feelings trapped inside."

"The journal is a way of expressing yourself on paper and in this process become clearer and more concise in your written thoughts. This journal is also a way to express how you feel and not have to worry about having to write in any set manner."

"I would like to say that I went through a change as I wrote this journal. At first my attitude was negative, but as the quarter progressed my attitude toward the journal changed."

"After writing journal entries for a few weeks, I find that it something that I don't really like at this time."

"I have to admit that I didn't like the idea of keeping a journal at first. I really like it now."

"I like the journal a lot. I will try to keep it up whenever I have one of my "brilliant" ideas. Thanks for the inspiration."

"Very time consuming"

"I think it is a good idea that you can express your feelings about different matters on paper. The journal was fun."

"I enjoyed writing the journal and I'm going to try to write continual journal entries throughout my college days."

## Technical Internship

The Technical Internship course is required of all students in the Engineering Technologies Division and is designed to provide students with a variety of practical, on-the-job occupational experiences under the supervision of the industry employer and coordinated by technology faculty. This work experience is one of the most important parts of the academic program because it enables students to put into practice the different skills, techniques, and knowledge that are so important for success in the "real world". Technical Internship is normally scheduled between the first and second year.

In addition to other written assignments including a final term paper, students in my sections of Technical Internship must keep a journal. Prior to starting their internships, students are given a handout similar to that shown in Figure 1 but with minor modifications so as to fit the specific format of the internship course. For example, they are required to make a minimum of one work related entry each workday. Likewise, I review and discuss the journal with the students when I visit them at their place of employment. As in the Orientation course, the journals are collected and graded at the end of the course. Journals are counted as 20% of the final grade in the internship course.

Excerpts from workday entries and evaluations of the journal's worth (conclusions) are included below as examples of the use of the journal during the internship and how it is viewed by the students:

### From Workday Entries

"Made a drawing of pole layout for new garage. Had copies of it and cross-section and truss spec. sheet (supplied by lumber yard). Took copies to building dept. along with zoning permit obtained the night before. This being my first experience with the building dept. I was a bit anxious as to whether or not the plans I had drawn would be approved. No reason for anxiety, plans received red approval stamp. I had to go back to Tax Map Office to get the Parcel I.D. number. Permit cost \$33.64. Wow!"

"What a day. I swear everyone in the world was in a bad mood today. People come in and act like I made them buy stuff. Then they use their credit card and I have to wait for their card to be approved... they get mad at me because it takes so long. I didn't tell them to pay by credit. Its not my fault. I guess I shouldn't take things so personal. And not everyone is like that. A lot of people are really nice and understanding."

"Fridays were not meant for shingling! We continued our roof today by finishing everything that didn't need cut or flashing. That part went quick. Once we finished that we began going up the sides which needed to be cut. This of course took longer. One person would cut the shingles and another would nail them. It was so hot that everything was sealing the second they were nailed."

"Today we set the trusses on a garage. When setting the trusses one person has a ladder on one wall and another on the other wall. I have the fun job of standing the trusses up with what we call a pigs foot. See Fig. 1. What's nice about a pigs

foot is that you can put the V part up in the top of the truss and it wouldn't come out as long as you have pressure against it. Once you have the truss standing straight up you can rest the edge of the pig foot against the bottom web of the truss. This helps a lot when you are trying to hold it still while the others are pulling and pushing trying to get the truss in the right place."

### From Evaluations of the Journal's Worth (Conclusions)

"Now that my internship is over and I don't have to write these anymore I am relieved. But I also think I might keep writing just for myself."

"I feel the benefits to writing a journal could be endless. It helped me associate important jobs with dates and it put my work experience for the term in order... Any personal notes about jobs could be very important in the development of future jobs."

"I believe that this journal write each day was a major part of our internship. I think that it helped me to look back on what I did, it helped me remember how we did it. So that I can do it again if I had to do it by myself."

"My journal has helped me to write better and to put down new things that I acquired each day."

## Problem Solving Using Systems Approaches

This unique capstone problem solving course was initiated in 1990 and is required for all Engineering Technologies Division students. Course topics include the hierarchy of four problem solving approaches (scientific method, application of technology, hard systems, and soft systems), creative and critical thinking, communication skills, learning styles, personality types, and decision making. As is apparent from the topics covered, the course integrates concepts of problem solving with material from a number of non-technical subject areas to provide students with reinforced skills and abilities needed to be successful in the current business and industry environment. As a capstone course, it also plays an important role in the students' transition from college to the "real world".

The teaching/learning format used (informal, small group, discussion and activity oriented class sessions coupled with independent outside-of-class assignments and projects) which is so appropriate for this type of course also makes the use of journals an excellent choice. The use of journals and free writing is similar to that described earlier for the orientation course, with the exception that students were asked to concentrate on problems and problem solving for their four weekly out-of-class entries. Journals are counted as 25% of the final grade.

Excerpts from an introduction, out-of-class entries, and an evaluation of the journal's worth (conclusion) are included below as examples of the use of the journal during the problem solving/systems course and how it is viewed by the students:

### From an Introduction

"This is my journal which in it contains personal problems, decisions, and confusions. As you read my entries you

will realize that most of the problems I encounter would be classified as soft systems problems. Problems with people are an every day reality of life and can't be avoided. Hopefully these entries have helped me to minimize my problems with other people. However, when the problems do arise I will know how to handle them."

#### From Out-Of-Class Entries

"As I have attempted these puzzles this week, I have started to realize how each problem is different and how many aspects become involved in solving it. This applies so much to everyday life - both personally and in business - that you should use careful consideration of all known facts before making a decision on it... I guess looking back on how I approached solving these problems, I used more of an operations (management) - showing more of my previous training. I will have to look into the other approaches more, so I can get a fuller grasp on situations and not limit myself."

"I wonder if anybody else's business, especially in small contracting is run the way mine is. The constant worry about money (payments, cash flow, disbursements, etc.), subcontractors (scheduling? if they are going to show up?) It always seems like one problem after another, as if you have to do all the worrying with little reward for your efforts."

"Over the next five days I need to find the time to... After some juggling, this is my tentative week's schedule:..."

"I was helping my sister and her family move today. A problem arose when we tried moving an upright freezer to a room in the basement. Our best approach was to take it down the steps... We were able to navigate it to the bottom step. Now we have to figure out two things... Then with the freezer suspended by the ropes we rotated it where it would fit through the doorway."

"I don't know about soft systems yet. Seems kind of foreign. I grasp the idea, but not the technique in accomplishing it. The project could be a tough one. There are plenty of problems in the area this could apply to. A couple in mind:..."

"After visiting our customer with the start up problem, I have a clearer picture of what needs done but a new problem to figure out. The propel part of the unit is working fine but the fan drive is not up to snuff. They would like to see... The only useful solution to this would be to swap the positions of the pumps..."

"Another problem that I have to deal with in the unloading system of the combine is having to operate a mechanical system and a hydraulic system at the same time and in a specific sequence... I devised a system in which..."

"On Saturday I had a problem to solve on a tractor. The tractor would not move in reverse and it would only gain speed gradually in the forward speeds..." I then obtained a service manual and gathered all the information I could about the power shift unit and how to test it... Conclusion. I had problems with the low and intermediate circuits. After studying the hydraulic circuit further, the only possible way to obtain these readings is..."

#### From an Evaluation of the Journal's Worth

"I never knew that I had so many problems until I started writing it down. I guess I always just made quick decisions

without really thinking about the problems and I didn't always consider all of the possible solutions. After writing down a few problems and thinking about those problems I came up with better solutions. I guess what this journal has taught me to do is think through my problems more carefully and to be open minded when it comes to finding a solution."

## Conclusion

As highlighted by the excerpts from student journals for the three courses, journals can be effective tools for improving writing and thinking in a variety of technical courses. Students are able to understand the purpose of journals, recognize the value of journal writing in their educational process, and develop their expressive (free) writing abilities. It is also apparent, however, that success in the use of journals requires considerable and long term dedication and commitment on the part of both the instructor and students.

It is also important to recognize that the use of journals has considerable value for teachers in addition to strictly academic objectives. Journals provide the opportunity to gain fresh insights about college and classroom learning experiences and processes from the perspectives of students. In addition to classroom and office conference interactions, journals provide another avenue to enhance the rapport between students and instructors. Since journals require that students take a major and active role in the learning process, they also are an excellent choice for instructors who want to go beyond the "teacher as information presenter/student as passive learner" model.

It should be obvious that using journals may not be appropriate for every course and instructor combination. For example, I do not use journals in my other technical courses, feeling that other combinations of writing assignments better fit the needs of the learning process. (This is not to say that journals could not be effectively used in these courses). It should also be noted that journals can be used in a wide variety of ways to best meet the needs of the students, course, and instructor; there is no one correct method. In fact, journal writing by its very nature invites modification and experimentation in its use in coursework.

I will continue to assign journals in some of the classes that I teach. Overall, the use of journal writing in coursework has been a positive experience for students and for me both as an instructor and personally.

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## Appendix

### Suggestions for Using Journals (Student Handout)

#### What is a journal?

A place to explore personal expressive (free) writing; to practice writing and thinking; to record your educational experience, including this class, other classes, and the whole college experience.

A journal differs from a diary in that it should not be merely a personal recording of the day's events. It differs from your class notebook in that it should not be merely an objective recording of academic data.

Diary (“I” subjective)	Journal (“I/it”)	Class Notebook (“it” objective)
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#### What to write

- personal reactions to class, students, teachers, friends, and others
- informal notes, jottings, clippings, scraps of information
- explorations of ideas, theories, concepts, problems, paper topics
- discussions of problem situations encountered and problem solving processes and techniques used
- reviews of articles, movies, books, T.V., recordings
- descriptions of events, places, people, objects
- records of thought, feelings, moods, experiences
- whatever you want to explore or remember

#### When to write

Write in your journal at least four times a week in addition to any classroom related entries. (Note: This is the minimum requirement.) It is important to develop the habit of using your journal even when you are not in an academic environment. Good ideas, questions, etc., don't always wait for convenient times for you to record them. Write:

- when you have problems to solve, decisions to make, confusions to clarify,
- and, when you need to practice or try something out

#### How to write

You should write however you feel like writing. The point is to think on paper without worrying about spelling, punctuation, or grammar. The quantity of what you write is as important as the quality. Use language that expresses your personal voice--language that comes natural to you. Take risks, write freely, "talk about it".

#### Specific suggestions

1. Purchase a small 5" x 8" looseleaf notebook.
2. Divide your notebook into two sections: ACADEMIC (Required: all classroom related entries plus at least four weekly entries on topics of your choice) and PERSONAL (Optional: private reflections that you do not have to hand in)
3. Title and date each entry (also include time and location).
4. Write long entries as often as possible to help develop ideas fully.
5. Make lots of entries; quantity is the best measure of a good journal.
6. Use a pen (pencils smear)
7. Write original entries only on the right page side. Use the left page side to record later reflections on or additions to the right page original entry. (Left-handers may want to use the reverse of this procedure.)

#### Interaction

I shall ask to see one or more of your academic journal entries each class session (to be handed in at the end of class). I will read these entries and make written comments. Entries from the personal section (if you have one) do not have to be handed in; however, feel free to share entries from this section with me at any time you desire. All information contained in the journal entries is kept confidential.

None of my dialogue with you will affect how much your journal is "worth". A good journal will be full of lots of long entries and reflect active, regular use. It will show your willingness to cooperate in the "spirit" of the journal activity.

#### Final Evaluation

At the end of the course, please 1) put page numbers in your journal, 2) make a table of contents for the entries, 3) write an introduction to the journal, and 4) an evaluation of its worth to you at the end.

Hand in the journal (remove the personal section if you so desire) for the final evaluation. All information contained in the journal is confidential. Journals will be returned after evaluation (during an individual meeting and discussion session in my office).

[Worksheet adapted from materials provided by Toby Fulwiler during a writing workshop held at the University of Vermont in 1986.]

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## NACTA Full Peer Review, Supports Publication Credit for Media Creations

As teachers in colleges of agriculture in the United States and Canada, we are all aware of the tremendous effort required to develop excellent quality instructional materials. As members of NACTA we have the opportunity to have many of these media reviewed by our peers similar to research or book reviews. As goal of NACTA is to obtain "Publication Parity" for instructional media of merit.

Only media developed in the last 24 months can be reviewed. Media includes computer software, videotapes, 16mm films, transparencies, audio cassette or tape, slides, filmstrips or models. Send the completed coupon below for the forms needed to accompany your submission of media. The rest is easy.

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