



# WRite Away!

The University of Louisville's Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Newsletter

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## The Writing Intensive Course: What's In It For Faculty? What's In It For Students?

By Jack Ramey, WR Assistant Coordinator

Numerous studies have shown that writing promotes cognitive activity, develops critical thinking skills, and is, in effect, an act of learning. Drawing on the work of Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and John Dewey, Janet Emig notes that "learning is the re-organization or confirmation of a cognitive scheme in light of an experience" (92). For many learners, that re-organizational experience takes the form of *writing*, a process that involves the hand, the eye, and the brain simultaneously to reinforce cognition. As Charles Bazerman (see interview this issue) points out, students "not only learn to write but write to learn" (xiv).

Through writing, students can make connections between their personal experiences and a discipline's concepts. In the process, they become more deeply engaged in their disciplinary conversation. For the student, then, the benefits of writing-to-learn can be enormous, and since the goal of many courses is the students' assimilation and communication of thoughts, ideas and concepts, the professor also benefits in the dialogue spurred on by writing.

### Windows on Students' Worlds

Faculty who teach WR courses—or who require a lot of writing but have not as yet sought WR status—often say that they gain a deeper understanding of their students' thoughts and struggles by reading and responding to their writings. So-called "workaday writing," loosely-structured, informal writing like journal entries or reflective memos, are a great way to see if what you have taught has been learned and to gauge

the effect your teaching has had on your students. Workaday writing:

- is generally short and impromptu, not requiring large amounts of student or class time.
- is written primarily for the benefit of the writer as an aid to clarifying experience; thus,
- does not require extensive instructor commentary and response (Tchudi 20).

Ungraded workaday writing assignments can be valuable tools for teachers as well as for students. They "can give students almost daily writing practice" and "may serve several purposes: to summarize the main points of class discussion, to react to a reading assignment, to work out possibilities for future papers" (Lindemann 222). The workaday writings of many students—especially those who are writing their way into a discipline—are often the tangible and living proof of your effectiveness as an educator and can become a great source of personal pride and professional satisfaction.

### Engaged Teaching

Of course, teaching a WR course can be more time-intensive than teaching without a writing component. Reading and responding to student texts is hard work, but because you are engaged through writing on a much more personal level with your students, teaching a WR course can be more rewarding, more stimulating, and even more fun. Writing can often reinvigorate your teaching, and, through the process of engaging students through their writing, you can have a profound impact on your student's lives and have the possibility of changing and reshaping their cognitive processes.

### Student Growth, Research

The writing-intensive course often can encourage students to delve deeper into their

disciplines and can aid in the development of undergraduate research assistants. The College of Arts and Sciences offers grants of up to \$3000 for undergraduates who qualify as research assistants. These students can benefit faculty members by freeing up some of their valuable time, allowing them to increase the scope of their research projects.

Writing-intensive courses can greatly benefit students through developing their critical thinking and other professional skills, and can benefit teachers as well through increasing the level of their students' engagement with course themes, goals, and content. It's a win-win proposition. The WR program encourages you to propose a WR course in your discipline, and through the benefits of writing, improve the quality of student work in your field. **WR**

### Works Cited

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### According to U of L guidelines, a WR course should:

- Use writing suited to the discipline.
- Make writing assignments integral to the course.
- Include a minimum of 2,400 words of graded writing.
- Give assignments in writing.
- Allow class time for discussing assignments.
- Provide comments on graded papers, including recommendations for improvement.
- Include research as a significant part of at least one graded assignment.
- Limit enrollment to 24 students (A&S).

For more information call the WR Office at 852-0985 or E-mail Melinda Kreth at mlkreth01@homer.louisville.edu



Charles Bazerman, Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is this year's Thomas R. Watson Visiting Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric and Composition. He is the winner of the 1994 National Council of Teachers of English Award for Excellence in Scientific and Technical Writing, and a renowned scholar of disciplinary writing.

Recently, Dr. Bazerman discussed ways in which WR can be helpful to University of Louisville faculty. An excerpt of our interview is reprinted here.

**Q. What do you think are the benefits of using writing in your classes?**

In most classes the primary method students have for communicating is writing. When you have lectures, class discussions are necessarily limited. But students have much more chance to develop thoughts over the term if there is any writing in the course at all. They will communicate much more of what they're learning, and they will develop their thinking about the material, develop a familiarity with the material as they articulate it.

This is why teaching writing is not doing somebody else's business. Even formally teaching the writing of your field is simply supporting them in participating in the learning of your course.

**Q: So accomplishing those student-oriented goals also benefits the teacher as well?**

Yes, in the direct sense that you'll be getting more interesting things from your students. But it also [accomplishes] the teacher's goals in having the students learn the material, articulate the subject matter, think within the modes of expression appropriate to the field. Even if the students are not majors or going on to graduate school within that field, still, to be able to think with and about that material for whatever purposes they will be using that material for.

# Internalizing the Field: Charles Bazerman on Teaching Writing in Disciplinary Classes

by Jack Ramey & Mike Jackman, WR Assistant Coordinators

It very much benefits the teacher, both in the sense of getting more pleasant reading from the students but even more in helping them fulfill their teaching goals to the various groups of students that they have.

**Q: I was wondering if you felt that the explicit teaching of genre could aid students.**

When students are motivated and attentive to certain genres, it is useful to help them see a little bit more about what is going on—to provide them ways to produce the kinds of things that they're trying to produce.

It's called "teaching at the point of need." To me, that is the whole art of teaching, to identify points of need and teach to that and perhaps to help it along by creating points of need or needs that the students will actually want to take on.

One of the great advantages of writing-across-the-curriculum is that students are identifying discourses they want to enter into, conversations they want to be a part of, so the need is there. These are also discourses that they recognize to some extent.

You can say specific things to them that will help them, give them guidelines; for example, you can create a good assignment which excites the students' imagination, makes them think new things. You can help them find a shape to put those thoughts in. You can structure the assignment so as to help their thinking along and help them produce a better paper. So I very much do believe in a kind of explicit teaching to the task at hand.

**Q. What is the value of teaching a writing process?**

The recognition that, "oh yes, we do have a process, the white page doesn't fill up all of the sudden by itself, and there's something inadequate about you

unless you can fill it up with stuff right away." What it [teaching writing process] also has done is opened up conversations between teachers and students or between students about what they're doing. So a lot of very specific local information and problem solving gets shared because, we say, "Oh we are in the process of writing, we can talk about it now."

**Q. Are there disciplinary factors in the writing process?**

Certainly disciplines help organize the tasks and activities and forms one writes in. I wouldn't say it's simply disciplinarily determined, or that there are sharp boundaries necessarily between disciplines, but disciplines are important organizing factors. Sometimes though there are surprising conjunctions.

For example, talking about artifacts from the past actually makes archeology and literature sort of comparable, and using observation makes astronomy and psychology sort of comparable. You see, it cuts in different ways. In terms of using contemporary data, journalism is a lot like astronomy - you've got this thing which is out of your control and you're having to find ways to tell stories about it and capture your data as it's

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happened based around the kind of story you want to tell. That doesn't mean that they're all exactly alike, but there are surprising cross-disciplinary conjunctions.

### ***Q: What about critical thinking skills? Writing as a mode of learning?***

People who are knowledgeable in disciplines do a lot of work in their head. Some kids in school can do math problems in their heads. However, when they're doing this, they're using the literate tools, the symbolic tools of mathematics. Whether or not they are seeing the plus sign in their head, they are using skills that only were developed historically as symbolic tools like the invention of the zero. And they couldn't do it in their heads unless somewhere they'd seen it represented visually or symbolically. People who are professionals in their fields often love to do lots of stuff in their head and get very quick at it. They know how to think about their field, and they in a sense can forget the

processes of articulation and the symbolic processes by which they learn to think in their field.

Beginners in the field, no matter how quick they are, need at least once or twice to run through the actual symbolic manipulations. To get a sense of what that thinking is all about. To internalize the thinking processes of the field. Writing across the curriculum can be viewed as a way of helping people to learn how to think through the specific methods of the field. That's a benefit for the student. Now for the teacher—even if the students know and are fairly successful at or have already internalized a lot of thinking methods of the field, you can't intervene or comment on it unless their thinking is made visible to you in some way.

If you really want to see where it goes wrong or if there's a more efficient way, they have to display their thinking to you in some form. And again, that's where writing is very useful—to explain what they are thinking, how they come to an answer, or if there is a concept, what they think the concept means. Now that doesn't mean they can articulate everything the concept means to them. However, in that very struggle to try and articulate it they will be refining what that concept is and what it is they think about it. And if they can't articulate what this concept is they will come up with the wrong words that betray something that needs to be refined in their thinking about this process. So the process of writing out what they are thinking is once again very important. (WR)

#### **Editor's Note:**

Bazerman has authored and edited many important books and articles on Writing Across the Curriculum, including *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*; *Landmark Essays in Writing Across the Curriculum* (with David Russell); and *Textual Dynamics of the Professions* (with James Paradis). Forthcoming from MIT is his *The Languages of Edison's Light*.



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