

From the Writing Desk

Writing Across the Curriculum @ Hostos Community College

The Hostos Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) Initiative is now in its second year. As part of this University-wide endeavor, six Writing Fellows, representing a variety of disciplines, have been brought to our campus from the CUNY Graduate Center. Together with Hostos faculty, they collaborate on ways to integrate writing across the curriculum and to help students improve their writing and cognitive proficiencies.

Below is just a small sampling of the extensive work being done by faculty and fellows on our campus to strengthen student writing skills. We hope it will encourage others who would like to get involved in this Initiative and help us continue the dialogue on the role of writing in the learning process.

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Learning about Biology by Writing about Science: From Low Stakes to High Stakes

Professor Bernal-Carlo and I met to discuss ways to help PII students better grasp the concepts covered in the course. Past experiences and practices had shown her the value of using science journal articles to help expand the student's understanding of biology concepts. We decided we would assign two of the articles she had used in the past. We provided a series of workshops that gave the students techniques for discerning the main points, for analyzing quotes, for comparing the information in the article with the information they had received in the lecture and textbook, and for understanding how the form and style of writing relates to the intended audience. These workshops gave the students opportunity to increase their understanding of the article by discussing it and sharing with classmates their understandings as expressed in their short summaries and analyses of quotes. This writing was not graded but was a means for them to develop and improve their summarizing skills and also increase their ability to analyze quotes. After the students had these opportunities to read, write and discuss the articles, they were given a formal writing assignment.

This assignment was based on "The Neurobiology of Depression" by Charles B. Nemeroff published in the June 1998 issue of *Scientific American* (42-9). This article explores the relationship between depression and both neurotransmitters and the endocrine system. Professor Bernal-Carlo and I wanted a question that would require students to explain aspects of the article in their own words and that would have an application not only to the biology class, but also to their everyday life. We therefore gave them the following instructions for an in-class essay:

You have received a letter from your cousin commenting that she is in a depressed mood most of the day and has a markedly diminished interest

in the activities that she used to enjoy. She is also experiencing insomnia, restlessness and fatigue. She went to her family doctor and he referred her to both a neurologist and an endocrinologist. She wants you to explain to her the biological aspects of her depression and explain why she was referred to these two specialists.

Low Stakes Writing:

"frequent, informal assignments that make students spend time regularly reflecting on written language on what they are learning from discussions, readings, lectures, and their own thinking. These informal pieces of writing are sometimes done in class and sometimes for homework. These pieces are low stakes because individually they don't have much effect on the final grade. . . . The goal of low stakes assignments is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to get students to think, learn and understand more of the course material."

*Peter Elbow
"High Stakes and Low Stakes..." (5,7) in
New Directions for Teaching & Learning
Vol. 69. Spring 1997*

The second article assigned was "How the Blind Draw" by John M. Kennedy published in the January 1997 issue of *Scientific American* (76-81). This article explored the similarities and differences between sighted and blind people and their artistic representation of edges, surfaces, perspective, abstract messages and motion. It related this to the link between vision and touch. After reading and discussing this article in class, students were assigned a take home essay. They were asked to write the text for a talk. We discussed in class that this talk was to be written from the point of view of an expert and that they could choose whether they wanted to play the role of a scientist, a professional who works with the blind, or an artist. We also let them choose to whom they were presenting the talk:

You are invited to give a talk explaining how the blind draw. Write your talk using your own words and the main ideas from the assigned article.

The students seemed to have fun with these assignments and in both cases were able to not only explain main ideas from the article in their own words, but also to apply those ideas to the setting of the assignment, i.e. a letter to a non-scientist or an imaginary audience.

—Nancy Benignus



The ACT in Our ESL Classrooms

For many students at CUNY, the ACT, not the Proficiency ("CPE") Exam, represents the first high-stakes, standardized test that they must take. As a prerequisite for admittance into English Composition courses, all students in E.S.L. and developmental English classes confront this hurdle. Like all standardized tests, success depends not only on the acquisition of certain skills supposedly being tested, but also on familiarity with the test format and test-taking strategies.

As part of my work as a writing fellow in the Language and Cognition Department, I was asked to create a series of assignments that mirror the ACT exam. The purpose was to create sufficient curriculum material from which E.S.L. professors could choose so that at each of these levels, students would have at least one opportunity during the semester to practice and gain familiarity with the test.

I designed the practice assignments to mirror the writing sample part of the ACT exam in several ways. As in the ACT, students are prompted to write their essay in the form of a letter; and as in the ACT, they are required to make a choice between two proposals, arguing why their choice is better vis-a-vis a given goal. Paralleling the ACT, the vast majority of the situations used relate to the school and community environment. In designing the assignments I tried to provide situations and options that might be relevant to Hostos's student body and that would promote critical, creative and engaged thinking. My hope was that they might have greater educational merit than simply developing test-taking skills. While initially conceived of as prompts for post-ESL

students, these prompts have equal value for native speakers of English.

Two sample assignments:

1. A community health clinic in your neighborhood has recently received money for a full day of training for the clinic's staff. There are two proposals of what to focus on in the training session: a) technological advances in treating heart disease; and b) popular household remedies that neighborhood families use. As an active member of your community, you want to ensure that the health clinic provides the best quality services. You are to write a letter to the director of the clinic. State which of the two training topics you favor and why you think training in that topic will help clinic staff to provide better services in your community.

2. The Parent Association of the local elementary school has just completed its fund-raising drive. There are two proposals on how to spend the money. The first proposal is to purchase computers for each of the classrooms from kindergarten through fifth grade. The second proposal is to hire additional teaching assistants to help in the classroom. As a parent, write a letter to the Parent Association stating whether you would prefer them to buy computers or to hire additional teaching staff and explain why it would be more beneficial to your child's education.



--Carol J. Meyers

Focused Free-Writes Across the Curriculum

Students often have a lot anxiety about *beginning* their writing. They seem to have that same old "blank paper" syndrome that every writer experiences. "Low stakes" writing (defined on page one) may help them with this fear. This type of writing is informal and not graded:

Using a type of low stakes writing during class in the form of a "focused free-write" will provide students with a technique that can be used either in class or at home. The importance of this exercise (in general) is to get students thinking freely without editing or judging their own work and to get out of that anxiety about the act of writing itself

Step 1: Have students take out a blank sheet of paper and their books (if necessary);

Step 2: Explain that the writing they're about to do is for them, but that you will expect everyone to share when they're done -- *it's important to let them know that this won't be graded or judged by you before they begin to write;*

Step 3: Give them a very focused question. (See below.)

Step 4: The students should write on this question for 5-10 minutes (depending on how much time you've got) without stopping. Pencils/pens should never leave the page. If they run out of things to say, they should write, "I have nothing to say" until something comes to them.

Step 5: Then, have them read their writing out loud instead of "talking through" their responses. (This forces students to value their own written words.)

The following are some specific examples of how to use the focused free-write to explore a class reading:

- Select a sentence/paragraph and write about how that passage directly influences the meaning of the entire essay; OR
- Write about the general topic of the reading. [This sparks students' interest in the topic.] [After 3 minutes of writing:] Turn to the essay and write about *how* the author conveys his opinion. Do you see any similarities between your own opinions and the author's? [This prompt asks students to compare/contrast opinions without using those terms]; OR
- Any specific question will serve as a focused free-write. You provide a direction for them through the question, but not to the point that they can't explore that question themselves.

An Optional Continuation of the Process:

- 1) After a few people share with the class, ask them to go back and underline the words/phrases/sentences in their responses which interest them;
- 2) Have students write these words/phrases/sentences at the top of a blank page;
- 3) This time, the students should write what interested them about these words/phrases/sentences and what more they need (or want) to know. (This is a good writing technique to explore topics for a research-oriented paper.)



-Kathy Harris

Spring 2001 Newsletter

Hostos Writing Fellows: Julie Anderson • Nancy Benignus • Kathy Harris • Dora loveva • Carol J. Meyers • Betsy Wissinger • WAC Coordinator Dr. Linda Hirsch

Using the Triple Entry Journal Assignment in Psychology

This "low stakes" technique helps students see the difference between a quote, a paraphrase, and their own analysis. Students who did this assignment found that it helped them get to know the material, helped them think about it, and helped them prepare text that they might use in their written work. This technique also helps students see that they are not expected to understand everything they read right away, and, when everyone is working from the same text, that different people get different things from the same text. The skills of accurate reading, summarization, and analysis are skills needed not only for persuasive writing, but are crucial for success on the CUNY Proficiency exam.

Professor Linda Anderson and I worked together to implement this assignment in class: The students were asked to bring in the materials they had been collecting for their research papers. This exercise was given as an example of how to read those sources in preparation for writing a research paper, especially in terms of figuring out which sections to quote, how to put the ideas into their own words, and analyzing what the quotations are about. What follows is a step by step description that can be adapted to various class settings and goals, followed by examples of students' responses.

Step 1. Explain that you are going to give them an assignment that will help them prepare to write a paper based on evidence and argumentation. Have them pick a reading source to quote from, or assign one. This assignment works especially well when students have been gathering data for a research paper, and they are in the process of extracting ideas from primary sources and trying to work them into their own argument.

Step 2. Using the board, demonstrate by creating three columns. Title the first column "Quotes," the second "Paraphrase," and the third "Analysis."

Step 3. Explain that they will have to pick a certain number of quotes from their documents (you should specify how many) and write the quote verbatim in the first column. In the second column, they should paraphrase the quote (it helps to do an example to model what they should do). In the third column, have them write the reason why they selected this quote, the questions they have about the ideas in the quote, other ideas this quote relates to, or how this quote is related to other readings on the same topic. Emphasize to them that the analysis section is the only column where they should put their own connections, comparisons, questions, or comments.

Step 4. Assign the triple entry journal as either a homework assignment or an exercise in class. If you do it in class, it is helpful to use the same document for everyone. After their entries are done, it is interesting to break the students up into groups so they can see the different quotes picked by different people and why.

Text from all three columns could serve as preliminary writing for parts of a research paper, argumentative essay, or book report.



—Betsy Wissinger

Writing Assignments for Business Geared Toward Passing the CPE

As a Writing Fellow seeking ways to incorporate more writing into the curriculum, and cognizant of the fact that students need to familiarize themselves with the format of the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE) in order to enhance their prospects of passing it successfully, I designed a set of four writing assignments for Professor Sandy Figueroa's Introduction to Data Processing students. The grade for this work constitutes a very small portion of their final grade, yet the students understand the great value of the assignment and the benefits they can gain from completing all parts of it. The assignments reflect the CPE in that they require the student to summarize articles, draw relationships between the issues discussed in them, convey their own relevant experience and observations, and quote from the article using proper citation methods.

Here are the assignments' instructions:

For Assignments One and Two:

Step 1. Write a summary of the article.

Step 2. Describe your own experience or observations regarding the idea or technology discussed in the article.

Step 3. Did your experience or observations differ from that of the article's author? Explain, making references to the article.

You may address these points in any order, but be careful to respond to all parts of the assignment and to connect your thoughts into a single,

clearly-organized essay. Make specific references to the readings to support your ideas, citing them appropriately.

For Assignment Three:

Referring to the two articles in Assignments One and Two, write an essay in which you **draw a relationship** between the ideas/technology discussed in each. In light of the information in these two articles, describe your own experience or observations. Discuss the degree to which your experience does or does not reflect that noted by the two articles' authors. You may address these points in any order, but be careful to respond to all parts of the assignment and to connect your thoughts into a single, clearly-organized essay. Make specific references to the readings using citations to support your ideas.

For Assignment Four:

(In this assignment, students are given an article that includes charts and graphs and are asked to perform the analytical skills required in Section II of the CPE.) Write an essay summarizing the information in these two charts/graphs. Finally, use the information to make comparisons between the charts/graphs and draw conclusions as to what the data indicates.



—Julie Anderson

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How to Formulate a Thesis

Inexperienced writers often forget that the research paper involves addressing a particular issue or question. In addition to having difficulty writing a thesis statement, which reflects their position, they also have problems presenting their argument and the evidence used to support it. Here are some questions to assist students in creating an argument:

1. Did you understand what you read?

- Summarize a portion of the text
- Define key-terms as used in the texts you've chosen

2. What is the relevance of what you already know?

- Connect prior experience through comparing and contrasting your experience and a text
- Connect earlier reading or knowledge, by incorporating relevant information and/or through comparing/and or contrasting it with a text

3. Can you establish connections?

- Identify similarities, differences, or other connections between the three texts through analyzing and categorizing contrasting

4. What is your argument?

- Distinguish between your point of view or interpretation and the view expressed in a text.
- Argue in support of your position or point of view
- Write clearly and correctly
- After reading the different texts, and considering your own experience, do you agree/disagree with the positions presented

--Dora loveva 

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