Greetings from the WAC Coordinators

Welcome to this latest edition of From the Writing Desk. We are pleased to share with you some of the many activities the Hostos WAC/RAC initiative has undertaken this year and their impact on fostering creative and inclusive writing pedagogy. In these pages, the Writing Fellows reflect on the work they have done with faculty to incorporate meaningful and innovative opportunities for reading and writing across disciplines. Many of the Fellows reflect on the impact of their time at Hostos on their own teaching practices. We hope that their experiences collaborating with Hostos faculty and undertaking research into anti-racist pedagogies and new approaches to WAC will provide you with inspiration for your own work. The WAC/RAC Initiative remains committed to furthering those pedagogical practices that allow all students to feel heard and supported.
As part of this responsibility, our WAC PD on May 25th will examine the impact of grading on student success and those grading practices that can promote inclusivity.

Join us in thanking our dedicated group of Writing Fellows who have done so much to further the implementation of WAC at Hostos this year: Carlos Espinal, Maggie Fife, Pamela Franciotti, Tamara Maatouk, Casandra Murray and Teófilo Reis. Their diligence, innovation and collegiality have enriched the Hostos WAC Initiative, and we wish them all the best in their future endeavors. We look forward to seeing you in the fall. Have a restful and restorative summer.

Linda Hirsch and Sean Gerrity, WAC Co-Coordinators.

Collaborative Teaching: Reflections on a Personal Experience

By Casandra Murray

My WAC fellowship at Hostos couldn’t have begun at a more perfect time. With the arrival of Covid, I, like many of us, experienced a deep sense of isolation specific to a historical moment unlike any I had lived through before. Teaching, too, became a much more solitary experience than it had ever been for me. But during my two years as a WAC fellow at Hostos, I was fortunate to have a professional outlet that was also deeply social. I was lucky to collaborate with brilliant fellow teachers and scholars, some that have the same years of experience as me and others with vast expertise built over decades developing inspired curricula and engaging students in the classroom. I’ve learned firsthand over and over that teaching writing is a social and emotional vocation. Perhaps this is part of the reason I’ve always been drawn to it. We work to develop our students’ voices so that they will leave us with the confidence and skills to contribute to the progress of society. To succeed, we must be willing to constantly learn not only from our students but also from each other. And to learn, we must be open to collaborations that bring a variety of backgrounds, ideas, and expertises to the table. This is exactly the type of synergistic environment that the Hostos WAC program has created for me as a student and teacher, and one that I hope to carry into my academic career.

I participated in several different categories of collaborative projects over the course of my fellowship including collective assessment, joint assignment design, one-on-one interviews with scholars, and collaborative writing. Through each project,
The collaborative work led to more creative, open-minded, and coherent work. I supported Professor William Casari’s writing curriculum for _Bronx is Beautiful_, a capstone course, and together we completed a round of collective assessment of student essays to examine our own subjectivities. By reading and responding to students individually and then comparing notes, we found what differed in the ways we graded, what common ground we had in our approaches, and that we could learn from each other how to best celebrate students’ knowledge and help them improve their writing. We found that after our collaborative assessment we were focusing more on the ideas, arguments, and organization of students’ writing and less on grammar and mechanics, so that by working together we were able to grade each student more holistically.

Similarly, I participated in multiple partnerships with Hostos faculty to design Writing Intensive syllabi and assignments. In some cases, I became inspired to incorporate ideas into my own classes, and in others, my teaching experience proved fruitful for developing faculty members’ assignments. I was particularly impressed by a creative dialogue assignment by Professor Amina Tajbhai (see Tamara Maatouk’s article for details) and incorporated a tweaked version into my Literature and Film course this semester to great success. I helped Hostos faculty add more personal informal writing to their syllabi to give students the chance to connect with challenging and historical course materials. I also helped them to fine-tune formal assignments so that the objectives, requirements, and steps were purposeful and clear to all students. And afterward, I returned to my own assignments and altered them, too.

I joined collaborations that went beyond assignment assessment and design, as well. I found immense value in collaborative writing with my peers on both the 2022 and 2023 _WAC Reader_ collections of selected readings and resources on a particular theme. From supporting each other’s individual writing to collective time management and organization, the collaborative experience led to richer texts and improved my own writing process overall. It also led me to experiment with assigning collaborative projects to my students in the form of podcasts, interviews, and creative writing. My contributions to these readers also included two interviews, both of which helped me to think more seriously about ongoing and recent trends in writing education. In my interview with Professor Kris Burrell for our _WAC Reader_ on “Antiracist Writing Pedagogy,” he reminded me of the importance of critical questioning.

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that challenges the standard white Eurocentric structure of higher education. He helped me think through ways that we can spread an antiracist pedagogy to our entire campus community, including by holding campus-wide forums open to student voices and workshops for faculty. In my second interview, this time for our WAC Reader on “New Directions in WAC,” Professor Chris Anson taught me about a “writing in the disciplines” model. I left that interview with a better understanding of how discourses are shaped depending on their intended purposes and with tools for having direct conversations with students about linguistic justice and the ways that we can utilize and celebrate different languages and voices within the classroom using creative assignment design and public-oriented projects. Throughout all of my work with other teachers and scholars at Hostos, I became a more thoughtful, open-minded, and reflective teacher and scholar. As I move forward to a full-time gig as a Writing Lecturer in the UAlbany Equal Opportunity Program, I know that collaboration will remain key to my success as a teacher, and to my commitment to an antiracist pedagogy that values all students and their diverse languages and lived experiences.

On the “Simple Act” of Writing

By Carlos G. Espinal

As a writing fellow at Hostos Community College, I was able to think and reflect on the apparently “simple” act of writing and the ways it is taught. This may sound boring and cliché but after doing my A.A., B.A., M.A. and now Ph.D. at CUNY, I am convinced that careful attention to the entire process of writing makes the difference between a great college course and a good one. Among the various projects that I worked on was a syllabus for a Writing Intensive course on Latina Women’s Writing. This work, which I did with Prof. Inmaculada Lara-Bonilla, allowed me to reflect on and see the complex process of creating educational resources geared toward writing. Even though I have taken many WI courses and read the basic texts and principles of Writing Across the Curriculum as part of our weekly meetings with the other fellows and our coordinators, in the process of creating this syllabus I went over issues and discussions with Prof. Lara-Bonilla that further enhanced my understanding of the centrality of teaching writing in all courses.

The bond between writing and critical thinking is a given that we often overlook when implementing our assignments. At a time of budget tightening, when the news is inundated with stories of teacher anxiety, stress and burnout, I could appreciate even more the effort and attention to detail that I had seen in so many courses. In this syllabus, I worked with exercises which incorporate other genres other than the standard college essay. Most intriguing to me were the various ways to incorporate creative writing to the research process. Writing is hard for our students and for many of us; thus it is vital that we pay careful attention to the kind of assignments we dispense.

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Two Years as a WAC Fellow at Hostos: A Retrospective

By Pamela Franciotti

As I sit down to write this piece, I transport back to the time spent writing my first WAC newsletter last year. I cannot believe how quickly time flies; being a second-year WAC fellow at Hostos, I've been highly involved in a variety of diverse projects, research and bridging conversations between students, faculty, staff, and other fellows. I recall one of my first meetings as a fellow with the WAC coordinators: although a bit nervous, I soon realized that while I indeed had a lot to offer, I also had much to learn, which was the most stimulating part of this WAC journey.

In one of my first projects, I had the chance to test my linguistic expertise while designing activities focused on grammar, reading and writing for English developmental classes at Hostos. I wrote about this experience extensively in last year's WAC newsletter, which recalled the challenges I faced commuting to and from my theoretical linguistics background to a more applied, pedagogical perspective. In these two years, I also had the chance to collaborate with faculty at Hostos developing their Writing Intensive (WI) syllabi on subjects far from my field of expertise. Last year, I assisted Prof. Marcella Bencivenni on the development of her WI syllabus and writing assignments for her class on US Immigration History, and in Fall of 2022, I assisted Prof. Charles Rice-González in developing a WI syllabus and writing assignments for his class Introduction to LGBTQ+ Literature in the English Department. Collaborating with faculty was extremely inspiring. I learned that there are myriad ways to creatively develop writing assignments and that, despite popular opinion, writing can be scaffolding exercises, which is so often overlooked to the detriment of the student. Since this syllabus was somewhat intricate in giving the students various options to complete any assignment, I got to deliberate on the benefits and pitfalls of choosing one option over the other. I also learned a lot about designing writing exercises by looking at the many other syllabi divergent from my field of study. In their creativity they showed me many different ways a student can practice writing to become proficient and how much more can be done with the apparently simple act of writing and the way it is taught. Nothing here was, is or will be simple.
fun! One particularly engaging assignment is found on Prof. Bencivenni’s history syllabus, the *Oral History Interview Analysis*. For this assignment, students are asked to choose a subject, conduct an interview about their immigration history, and then complete a write-up of their findings. As a linguist who conducts experimental research, I love data collection and data analysis and was particularly excited about helping Prof. Bencivenni with this assignment. We had several discussions about the importance of providing students with precise guidelines in order for them to successfully complete the assignment and to have a good understanding of expectations. Among others, it was crucial to include a list of suggested interview questions to ask their interviewee, as well as some general guidelines to follow in preparation of the interview and during it. These included asking for consent to be recorded, in addition to preferred language, date, time and modality to conduct the interview. Most of these guidelines are basic research protocols, which already begin to bridge subjects across the curriculum and expose students to more advanced academic projects.

“These experiences were extremely rewarding and taught me core rules about assessment, assignment and activity design. One must consider your audience: who are your students? What’s their background knowledge on the topic you are presenting? What do they need to know in order to complete the assignment? And most importantly, what’s the learning goal? Next, one must consider the assignment process: what details are being given about the assessment? Why is it important to the course? What types of supports are necessary and might need to be modified throughout the drafting process? I have found that the presence of appropriate scaffolding helps elevate student learning by allowing them to break down the steps and successfully conquer each piece; therefore, learning and achievement are smaller parts to the bigger endgame. Ultimately, interweaving the answers to these critical questions will ensure a student-centered environment that secures the voice and individual value of each person’s role in the class.

Approaching the end of my time as a WAC fellow at Hostos, I not only reflect back on the past, but toward the future. I would like to take this opportunity and thank the WAC coordinators, all my WAC fellow colleagues and all the faculty I worked with who have provided me with a journey marked by successful collaborations and meaningful conversations over the past two years.

Looking Back to Move Forward

*By Teófilo Reis*

As my year as a WAC fellow comes to an end, I reflect on how what I learned during this fellowship will inform my next professional steps. In a few months, I will start as an assistant professor of philosophy at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. As a soon-to-be junior faculty, I am excited to incorporate the lessons I learned at Hostos into my own teaching.
One of the first realizations I had working on WAC was that we, the instructors, must be mindful of our writing, especially when formulating assignments. We frequently caution students about writing clearly to communicate their ideas since the reader is not inside the writer’s head. However, we sometimes fail to observe that same mandate when creating assignments. A beautiful, well-thought, and creative assignment may not work simply because clear instructions were not provided. Before being a WAC fellow, I used to include a short description of each major writing assignment in my syllabi, with full details explained later in class, followed up by posting a summary of the explanation. Although very common, this way of proceeding is far from optimal, as students may miss class on that specific day, not understand all the requirements, or we may simply fail to deliver the instructions clearly. After the WAC fellowship, I became a firm believer in detailed assignment sheets with carefully written guidelines, making life easier for students and instructors.

Over the last year, I analyzed several syllabi for courses in different areas, ranging from English to economics to chemistry. I was particularly pleased to see multiple efforts to introduce WAC in STEM courses. Such efforts inform my planning for the Fall 2023 semester when I will teach Philosophy of the Americas and Symbolic Logic I. Since logic courses tend to be challenging for philosophy students, I am paying special attention to how to incorporate WAC strategies into them. One approach I find helpful is using informal writing to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their learning journey. For example, for my Symbolic Logic I course, I will ask students to write a learning journal where every week, they will write one paragraph about what they learned in the past week and how it connects to topics covered earlier in the semester. This moment of reflection will also allow them to formulate their questions better, which will help me calibrate the next week of classes. A formal assignment I am currently working on is a translation exercise, which will ask students to write an explanation of a critical concept or result of the course in accessible language suitable to someone who is unfamiliar with formal logic.

Before applying to the WAC fellowship last year, I knew very little about WAC. Now, only one year later, WAC is an integral part of my pedagogical practice, which aims at helping students become critical thinkers. I am thrilled that I encountered WAC early in my career, and I cannot wait to return to the classroom and apply what I learned to my future classes!

Writing Fiction to Learn History

By Tamara Maatouk

As a historian, I approach history with a grain of salt, for it remains nothing more than an interpretation of the past, through fragmented bits and pieces of a bygone period, with a touch of speculation and an abundance of inference. Yet, for the most part, that is not the general perception of history. From a young age, we associate history with meaningless, tedious memorization of facts, mainly dates, names, and events. The types of questions we often read on history exam sheets or writing assignments range from what happened to when, where, and who. Our answers to the why and how almost always replicate the information we see in some textbook or hear in a lecture, both presented as factual narratives. And the cycle of more rote memorization, suspension of disbelief, and minimal critical thinking repeats itself. We learn to hate history as a subject matter instead of learning how to think historically.

“We learn to hate history as a subject matter instead of learning how to think historically. But that cycle can be broken, and here comes the significance of Writing Across the Curriculum.”
But that cycle can be broken, and here comes the significance of Writing Across the Curriculum in teaching history to undergraduate students. As a WAC fellow at the Hostos Community College for AY 2022-23, I worked on several projects, from redesigning the WAC website to facilitating the WI certification process for adjunct faculty. Still, it was in the weekly meetings with the fellows and coordinators that I benefitted the most. It was a common for fellows guiding faculty members through the process of designing WI courses to present samples of the proposed writing assignments. This never ceased to lead to insightful discussions while equipping us with the knowledge of various informal and formal writing exercises that we can employ in our teaching careers. Out of all assignments, one from Prof. Tajbhai’s ENG 200 class stood out.

“This 3–5-page assignment asks you to take two female characters from two different readings and put them in conversation,” the instructions read.* In addition to being fun, creative, and engaging, such an exercise necessitates a critical reading of the assigned text on the student’s part, without which they cannot complete it. The dialogue will definitely be fictional, nothing short of the student’s imagination, but to write it, the student must know enough about the character to whom they are giving voice. To do so, the student must learn the material to familiarize themselves with the historical context in which these characters lived. In such an approach, learning the four Ws (what, when, where, and who) becomes a byproduct of the writing process, as they take a back seat to the why and how, which, in turn, gain a new purpose altogether. To ask why and how is not to memorize ready-made answers that would guarantee a full grade, but to understand the conditions that make a specific thought, action, or interaction possible in a particular society in a certain period.

The dialogue exercise can be an informal or formal assignment, a take-home assignment or in-class activity, and students can write it individually, in pairs, or in groups. It focuses less on grammar mechanics or stylistic conventions and more on the thinking process by exploring connections and putting the material in conversation. Most importantly, it serves a common objective of both WAC and history: it promotes critical thinking.

*Narrative Project, ENG 200: Medieval and Renaissance English Literature, Professor Amina H. Tajbhai, English Department, Hostos Community College.
Demonstrating Clear Instructions in the WI Certification Process

By Maggie Fife

In my two years as a WAC fellow at Hostos, I have worked with a number of faculty members who are designing a Writing Intensive (WI) course. Working with these faculty members has been an enlightening process – not only did I get to see how instructors across disciplines design their courses, but I saw firsthand how WAC principles show up at every level of course design. Just as it is important to provide our students with clear and concise instructions and requirements, it is essential to provide faculty members who are designing a WI course with clear expectations.

A checklist of requirements is given to each faculty member who designs a WI course. After a year and a half of utilizing the checklist as a Hostos Writing Fellow, I thought these requirements were straightforward and left little room for interpretation. However, working with my co-fellows and collaborating with Hostos faculty members showed me that these instructions could be seen differently through the eyes of thoughtful instructors across the college. When designing an assignment for our students, WAC principles encourage us to see the assignment instructions from the student’s perspective. The same needed to be done, we realized, with the WI certification process. WI courses must incorporate assignments with revision, formal and informal writing assignments throughout, and include diverse writing assignments of varying genres. In our weekly WAC meetings, our cohort discovered we had some questions about these requirements, a few of which I’ve included below:

- Do we recommend that professors split required 10–12 pages of writing into multiple assignments? If so, how many?
- How many formal assignments need to incorporate revision?
- How do we quantify the length of certain professional writing assignments, such as pitch decks, powerpoint presentations, and resumes?
- If informal writing is mentioned as a course requirement, but not incorporated into the final grade, is it really a requirement?

Working through the various interpretations that arose showed us that we should revise the way we present our WI course requirements to faculty members designing their courses. My co-fellow Pamela Franciotti and I worked together to clarify these expectations for ourselves and for the faculty members we work with as WAC fellows. We modified the guidelines that faculty members are given, separating out and clarifying the requirements, suggestions, and the expected timeline for the WI process (included below). Pamela and I also created a version for WAC fellows, with reminders and tips for clearly communicating expectations to the individuals they work with.
This process really drove home the point that as educators, we should try to view our own materials with fresh eyes often. No matter how clear and intuitive instructions feel, there is almost always something to improve.

WI Certification Process

By Maggie Fife and Pamela Franciotti

Throughout this process you will be asked to create a syllabus and multiple assignments that you will present in front of the WI Task Force in order to certify your course. The WAC Fellow that will be assigned to work with you will provide feedback on your syllabus and assignments, making sure your course incorporates WAC/WRAC principles, and will help you prepare for the WI Task Force presentation.

Required documents to present to the WI Task Force:

❖ Completed syllabus with course schedule
❖ Written prompts and instructions for all formal writing assignments
❖ Written instructions for some informal writing assignments
❖ Completed WI checklist
❖ 250-300 word essay on the WI process (see checklist)

Your course must meet the following general requirements to be certified as a WI:

❖ The course incorporates formal and informal writing assignments throughout, with a clear distinction between the two.
❖ Informal writing must be explicitly mentioned as a course requirement.
❖ The course requires 10-12 pages total of formal writing, spread over multiple assignments (usually three or four assignments).
❖ At least two formal writing assignments explicitly incorporate revision.
❖ A minimum of 50% of the final grade is based on written work.
❖ The course includes diverse writing assignments of varying genres with clear written prompts.

Timeline:

If you are planning to teach this course as a WI next semester, you will need to have the syllabus certified as a WI at the end of the current semester. In order to be certified, you will need to present your WI syllabus to the WAC Task Force at a meeting that will take place during finals week. You will need to schedule the meeting two weeks in advance, and must submit your final materials to the Task Force via email one week before the meeting. The WAC Coordinators will reach out to you to schedule the meeting and distribute your materials to the Task Force.

For additional resources and WI course examples, explore our website: https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/for-professors-2/
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