Greetings from the WRAC Coordinators

By Dr. Linda Hirsch and Dr. Andrea Fabrizio

Welcome to the Spring 2018 edition of From the Writing Desk, the newsletter of the Hostos Community College WAC/RAC Initiative. The articles in this year’s publication speak to the many ways writing and reading are supported at Hostos and the myriad projects undertaken by our WAC Fellows to further this work. In this issue you’ll find articles on supporting student research, helping Writing Center tutors work with science-focused writing and creating a Writing Intensive syllabus by tapping into prior knowledge. The Fellows also provide some keen observations on how WAC principles are applicable to work in film editing and public speaking.

We invite you to explore the roles of writing across our campus represented in this newsletter, and we encourage you to visit our website http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/ to check out our new Writing in the
Join us in saying thank you to our WAC Fellows Eylül Fidan Akınıc, Daisy Bernstein, Shelley Buchbinder, Nora Goldman, Sara Rychtarik, and Yuko Shiratori. Their creativity, dedication and commitment have made indelible contributions to our work in providing students with meaningful opportunities to write and read across disciplines and enhance their proficiencies in these areas. They have also assisted us in efforts to reimagine the liberal arts at Hostos and work with the Columbia Core in English composition courses. We wish them much success in their graduate work and beyond.

Please contact us if you would like to collaborate with WAC in any way. See you at our WAC Workshop on Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum led by Dr. Steven Pearlman and David Carillo of the University of St. Joseph on May 30th.

Wishing all a wonderful summer,

Linda Hirsch and Andrea Fabrizio,
WRAC Coordinators

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**SURFing into Research**

by Nora Goldman

Most students at undergraduate colleges only get to conduct research as part of their courses, but real-world academic research is an entirely different experience. Some Hostos students are lucky to have an opportunity to do research outside the classroom through a wonderful initiative I learned about when I was asked to assist in organizing it.

One of my projects as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Fellow this year was to support the Student Undergraduate Research with Faculty program (SURF). A program not often seen in community colleges, SURF gives faculty members a full course release to spend the spring semester working with groups of three students each on approved academic research projects. The students chosen for these projects get a stipend as well as a high-impact learning experience that has been demonstrated in other institutions to correlate with higher GPAs, graduation rates, problem-solving skills, and overall academic engagement.

I assisted Silvia Reyes, the Title V coordinator, and Sarah Brennan, the Executive Assistant to the Provost, to help students and faculty get the most they can out of the project. At first, I was not sure how I would bring my WAC experience to bear on a research initiative, but it turns out that the SURF program is a perfect example of how the WAC philosophy is applicable beyond Writing-Intensive coursework.

As soon as the spring semester began, the research teams, each made up of one or two faculty members and three students, began meeting regularly to work on an original research project proposed by the faculty mentors.
last fall. At the same time, the students attended a series of weekly research workshops led by librarian Lisa Tappeiner, whom I assisted in planning and executing the student meetings. Being a good researcher means knowing how to find and read academic research efficiently, and Professor Tappeiner and I used informal writing-to-learn activities to help students learn their way around the research process.

As we guided the student researchers through the resources that the CUNY library system has to offer, they completed activities having to do with their particular projects, such as formulating research questions in their own words and defining key terms and concepts that might lead them to relevant sources. Activities like "write-pair-share," in which students responded to written prompts individually and then discussed their answers with a partner and then the whole group, were an effective way of helping students familiarize themselves with the particular genre of academic research papers. The students located, summarized, and answered comprehension questions for the main sections of an article. This allowed them to become familiar with the paper on their own but with support, which a lecture or at-home reading assignment would not have done as well.

I shared my own experiences as a researcher, including lessons I’ve learned the hard way about how to navigate databases, manage references, read dense academic papers effectively, and interpret seemingly indecipherable quantitative results. I wish I had been given instruction in reading academic papers instead of learning how to read and process them in the sink-or-swim environment that higher education too often forces onto students! SURF provides an opportunity to learn this skill in a better way than I did.

Meanwhile, the faculty periodically checked in with one another and the Title V team to share their experiences, challenges, and strategies for helping students get the most out of this research opportunity. WAC principles proved to be highly valuable on the faculty side as well. The skills involved in scaffolding tasks so students develop the skills they need to deliver their best possible work are necessary for any mentor or project manager. For example, if a mentor’s goal is to have students design and deliver a poster on their research, that task must be broken down into stages, each building on the last.

Students must be familiar with the structure of a genre before they try to write in it. For instance, students can look at examples of posters and list the sections common to all of them, and any other similarities they notice. Then, they can focus on one example and summarize and ask questions about each section to prepare them to plan and create their own, which of course must be done over multiple drafts.

Throughout the whole process, the faculty mentors must set clear expectations and effectively convey the goal of an assignment for their research teams. Just as an instructor cannot expect students to write a good paper if it isn’t clear why they are having them write it, a research mentor cannot expect a student researcher to be invested in a project if it is unclear what the goals of the research are. The students who are mentored with these principles as a guide are given an invaluable learning experience they can carry with them on any path they pursue during or after their time at Hostos.

Applying WAC to Speech Communication...and Back
by Eylül Fidan Akinci

One of the takeaways of being a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Fellow at Hostos Community College was to help me rethink my approach to the Speech Communication course I have been teaching at Baruch College. WAC’s emphasis on using low-stakes writing to think, learn, and build more complex discourse seemed transferable to formal speech.

Speech Communication is required for all undergraduate degrees as well as in the pre-Business and Weissman School of Art and Sciences pathways curricula, so there is an “across-the-curriculum” feel to Speech Communication too. Speaking and presentation skills are as essential as writing, not only for business and management majors but for any college student. As with writing, these skills need to be broken down, repeated, and cultivated over time. Not surprisingly, these skills are viewed as either innate or readily acquired prior to higher education. For students who come to the U.S. from other learning contexts that are mostly based on written exams and papers, the opportunity to practice public speaking has been near to none, as the experience of 80% of my students at Baruch confirms.

As WAC demystifies undergraduate writing, Speech Communication does the same for speech and presentation. If writing is an anxiety-raising process, speaking formally in front of people is triply so for many. If writing requires organizing thoughts in a clear and accessible manner, oral communication demands even more concise structure and stylistic appeal due to its performative essence. If a strong paper is the product of good research and a comprehensive bibliography, sharing solid information with an audience within the span of less than 15 minutes requires exactly that and then some. If developing critical thinking depends on good writing and reading skills, unpacking how rhetoric and verbal argumentation work is equally essential for becoming conscientious and discerning citizens. In a performance-based economy and public culture, an across-the-curriculum public speaking course promises far more benefits than mediocre PowerPoint presentations.

I had heard the term “scaffolding” from a previous WAC Fellow and had been somewhat applying it in my assignment design for informative, persuasive, and group demonstrative speeches. This year, as I learned more about low-stakes assignments, informal writing, revisions, and minimal marking through our Fellows’ workshops and faculty meetings, I discovered ways to more intentionally break down the process of making a speech presentation from the ground up.

First, I gave more space for in-class speaking exercises in the spirit of WAC’s emphasis on low-stakes writing. While my formal speech prompts did not change from before, for each speech I now asked students to submit on Blackboard over the course of a few weeks: their topic, central ideas, a preliminary bibliography,
comment on their peers’ videotaped performances. For evaluations, I limited myself to giving a maximum of three comments and focusing on issues that repeated across their presentations. More importantly, instead of the anonymous peer-evaluation rubrics I had previously used, I organized post-presentation feedback sessions among the students. These sessions functioned like speed-dating between the half of the classroom that presented and the other half that listened. As they quickly changed partners every three minutes, I could see that students were much more direct and progressively more articulate and detailed in their responses than what they usually came up with on paper forms.

While WAC principles improved my students’ research and presentation skills and showed the power of writing for formal oral communication, I found that the reverse is also true and useful. In his recent book on the relationship between speaking and writing, Peter Elbow, whose revolutionary ideas for the democratization of writing and literacy deeply informed the WAC movement,¹ advocates for harnessing the ease and unplanned flexibility of casual speech for overcoming the anxieties and blocks of expository or essayist writing.² While many professors do include “class presentations” of research papers or formal group projects in their syllabi, I contend that scaffolding them with informal peer-to-peer pitches and focused group conversations would not only develop public speaking skills in time, but also give more room to test and rehearse ideas, to get and learn to give feedback, and to experience an ongoing sense of accountability and motivation in a social setting of equals.

Building on Prior Knowledge: Demystifying the WI Process
by Dainy Bernstein

Over the past year as a WAC Fellow, I worked with faculty members to develop or refine their Writing Intensive (WI) sections. I noticed a theme developing during my first meetings with each of them: Every course already included many aspects of WAC pedagogy, and the professors all spoke with passionate enthusiasm about WAC philosophy, only without using WAC terms. Each professor had been worried that they would have to dismantle their syllabus and recreate it from scratch. They had been willing to take that step for the benefit of their students, but I was happy to reassure them that this was not necessary. Drawing from their own styles of teaching and the syllabi they already had, we were able to build assignment sequences to apply WAC pedagogy more clearly.

In addition to a completed WI section of a course, there are other benefits to working one-on-one with a WAC Fellow. As Dr. Eugena Griffin, one of professors I worked with, put it: “No matter what happens with this course, whether it’s approved or not, this whole process was worth it because I learned so much about how to teach, and I know I’ll apply this to all my classes from now on.” As a WAC Fellow, I loved hearing that. One of our goals as part of the WAC program working with WI sections is to arm teachers with the tools, skills, and terminology that enable more precise and effective use of writing in all their classes – not just in the WI-designated sections. To illustrate the process and benefits of certifying a WI syllabus, let me recount my experience with Professor Deborah White, who created a WI section of “US History: Reconstruction to the Present.”

When I first started working with Professor White, I asked her to explain her goals and purposes in the course. I took notes as she spoke excitedly about what she hoped students would gain from her course. When she finished speaking, I showed her my notes and drew lines and arrows connecting her ideas. Her goals for the course were easily divided into two categories: content and skills. We continued talking about each of those categories, refining the multiple goals under each one. We then looked at the formal assignments that Professor White already used, examining them to determine which of these goals were addressed. Using that framework, we were able to edit and revise those assignments so that the goals of each one would be clear to the professor, the students, and the WI Task Force.
Some of the most amazing and satisfying moments during this past year have been when I was able to give professors WAC terms for practices they already engaged in. When Professor White described to me how she uses her non-graded quizzes and reviews as a sort of practice for writing full-length essays, I told her, “Those are informal writing activities. Those are writing-to-learn activities.” Of course, we needed to discuss the concept of writing-to-learn, a major component of WAC pedagogy. We worked on the wording of these in-class exercises to maximize student learning, and to prompt greater critical thinking in addition to recall of information covered in class or in the textbook. And then, when Professor White had grasped these new concepts, she was able to assign clearer names to her revised in-class activities. We also tied these informal writing activities to the formal assignments and fleshed out the scaffolding of each formal assignment.

In addition to the planning that went into certifying the course as WI, my work with Professor White continued as she taught her WI section of the course. During this period, as she put her planned writing assignments and scaffolding sequences into practice, she noted obstacles that often arise as we teach, stemming both from the unique set of students in each class and from glitches in design of our assignments. We worked together to revise and redesign some of the assignments to better suit her purposes and to better serve her students. Now, at the end of the semester, her students are excited about writing, she is excited about reading her students’ work, and her students’ grasp of the subject matter—as well as their skills in putting together sentences and paragraphs—is significantly improved.

The major change that Professor White made while teaching the course was what I like to think of as “loosening the formality of formal assignments.” I discovered while working with faculty that the designation of “formal writing” scares not just students, but professors as well. Professors tend to think that “formal writing” means an academic-style, five-page essay. This is just not true. So during the semester, when Professor White began to sense a problem with the formality of the writing in the course, we adjusted. After some brainstorming, during which I asked Professor White to simply list all the historical figures or demographic groups in the span of the next essay’s assignment, we came up with an entirely new essay format. She asked her students to write an essay about one topic in two parts: an editorial and a letter to the editor. This allowed students to assume two different viewpoints and personas in order to describe and analyze the historical events. It broke up the assignment for them so that it was not so overwhelming.

And their submissions proved that the assignment was a success: They were focused, clear, and full of detail and original thought. I saw a few of the papers, and the difference from the first paper was astounding. The rigor of revisions was also far above what students had been able to do for
the first paper. For her final research paper, Professor White planned an assignment that results in a typical academic essay, but she designed the scaffolding as an exercise in “investigative journalism.” Students were required to research an issue that was covered in the history class, connect it to contemporary events, and write an essay in the style of investigative journalism.

Both Dr. Griffin and Professor White went through a rigorous process to revise their syllabi and have them certified as Writing Intensive. But both were able to enhance their teaching methods with WAC pedagogy, incorporating writing as part of the learning process for their students by drawing on their own personal styles.

iMovie and WAC Pedagogy: Video Editing Provides Writing Insights
by Sara Rychtarik and Shelley Buchbinder

As the WAC Program at Hostos celebrated 15 years of serving faculty and students, ten WAC faculty participants were interviewed to collect and share their experiences. In our first semester as WAC Fellows at Hostos, we chose to take the interviews that had previously been collected and make the 15th-anniversary WAC video our final project. As good doctoral candidates, we began by transcribing the interviews to get a sense of the material we were working with, but we were unsure about how to arrive at a finished video. As we began working, we saw that our processes of drafting and editing paralleled important WAC principles.

When facing a blank screen or page, we often start writing and end up where we should begin. Scholars like John Bean highlight how the writing process produces meaning. We think as we write, and early writing is therefore by nature often messy and full of ideas not fully realized or organized. As we move along in the writing process, we begin to outline, write, re-outline, and rewrite. The early stages of thinking while we write are crucial and take time and space process. Writing can be very daunting. The greatest fear is that blank, white screen pulsating at you...Using low-stakes writing has allowed students to realize that they do have something to say.”

Faculty interview as informal process
As we listened to the recorded interviews in which faculty members speak about their experiences with WAC at Hostos, we began to see the interview itself as an informal writing assignment. The WAC Fellows who had conducted these interviews had written specific prompts for the faculty members (the interview questions) and had given these prompts to them in advance of the interview, thus allowing the faculty to decide how they would prefer to approach the assignment (the interview). Even though none of the faculty members were reading from a prepared script

Many students share an anxiety about beginning a project that requires a new skill or baseline knowledge.

away from the pressure of producing a final piece.

As Professor Heidi Bollinger commented in her interview about the importance of low-stakes informal assignments to get students started, “For many students — our students, students everywhere — writing is a scary
that they had written in advance, it was evident that some had somewhat rehearsed their responses, while others were reflecting on the questions and composing their replies during the interview.

Both approaches worked equally well in the final interviews. By being able to prepare in a manner that worked best for them — drafting replies in advance or reflection in advance of the interview — faculty members were at ease during the interviews and shared many insightful comments about their experiences with the WAC program at Hostos.

Seeing these parallels, how would we begin work in the videos?

**Video-editing as informal process**

Through this process of making a video from clips recorded by previous Fellows, we saw resonances with the writing process, and it shed light on the challenges students face when completing writing assignments. We saw this video project unfold as a writing assignment that demonstrated the broader application of WAC principles to creative processes beyond writing. Our WAC coordinators had given us the space to be creative with our final product, and we could see ourselves as students who had been given an assignment with loose page and time limits, but who still had to construct a narrative arc and final product.

As we began work, we had no idea of the themes or subject matter we would find and highlight in the final video. Despite the blank screen in front of us, we welcomed the challenge and began the process by creating a workflow that would enable us to collaborate effectively and efficiently. We decided that the best way to determine what topics and themes we were going to be working with would be to transcribe each interview. This way, we could summarize any relevant quotes that pertained to WAC pedagogy and organize them around themes.

We conducted this process of transcribing, paraphrasing, and creating thematic categories as a **triple-entry journal** exercise. A triple-entry journal is a common informal writing tool which helps readers extract main ideas from what they’ve read, explain what they observed, and organize their thoughts. For each faculty interview, we chose a few key quotations from our transcription and listed them in our first column. Then, we summarized these quotations in our second column. In the third column, we shared our observations and thoughts about the quotations, which helped us to organize the quotations and place them into thematic categories such as “Teaching” and “Student Learning/Outcomes” and “Working with WAC Fellows.”

During this process, it became clear how WAC principles were embedded in our work.

Being able to brainstorm, think, and make connections is crucial to the writing process, especially in the early stages. In terms of WAC pedagogy, the informal writing assignment is a **low-stakes assignment** designed to encourage students to get their thoughts out on paper, in whatever way is...
most comfortable for each student, in order to form and develop their thoughts. And our learning of WAC pedagogy helped us become unstuck on our own project.

Applying informal writing in the role of student
While informal writing was embedded in the video project in the format of interviews and content arrangement, it also became an important part of the technical process of editing the video and helped us to work through the moments when we were stuck looking at a blank video-editing screen. Getting started writing or working on a project can be daunting and can lead to prolonged avoidance. Some projects or papers are hard to start because of limited competency and/or understanding. Many students share an anxiety about beginning a paper or project that requires a new skill or baseline knowledge.

Although we had volunteered for this video project, we are not film editors and the only video editing software that we had was iMovie. We watched tutorials on functions, played around with editing and sometimes found ourselves frustrated, producing clips that were not cut precisely and didn’t have proper sound mixing. To move forward, we started with our existing analysis of key themes which we had produced during the stage of transcription and triple-entry journaling. We could work on the narratives of the clips before addressing the technical aspects. Then, we worked together to bounce around ideas and experiences with editing. We found that while we could work separately on clip selection, the technical editing was done better together. This process of experimenting and learning in a group helped us move forward as we gained skills and competency through the editing process.

While a film editor with competency and editing software would be shocked by our difficulties, we are not film editors. As writers and researchers, faculty are often surprised by the difficulty students have with what they perceive as simple assignments. However, there are ways to start with existing skills and informal writing exercises that allow students to work with each other, make progress on their papers, and develop new skills.

Conclusions
Working from the perspective of students facing a writing assignment and using WAC writing exercises during the process of editing our video project helped us to see WAC pedagogy as a flexible set of tools, not a prescriptive set of rules. Beyond set requirements for Writing Intensive sections, WAC pedagogy helped frame and change our thinking and approach to a project.

In the course of meeting with faculty members, we found implementing WAC in the classroom impacted them as writers as well. Dr. Yoel Rodriguez, for example, credited the WAC initiative at Hostos with having inspired him to become a better science writer and also to value writing, while Dr. Jerilyn Fisher recognized the WAC initiative and its Fellows for helping her strengthen her ability to develop interesting and less conventional assignments. The power of getting started somewhere through informal processes can develop skills for writing and beyond.


Check out the completed video, “Celebrating WAC at Hostos: Faculty Reflect,” on the WAC website: http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/fellow/featured-videos/
Developing a Tutoring Guide for Writing in Science
by Yuko Shiratori

Students come to Hostos with a range of writing skills, but they often do not know how to apply these skills to writing in the disciplines. While the foundation of writing is similar across the various disciplines, each discipline has its own discourse and unique requirements. For example, writing for a science class is different in style from writing for an English class. WAC pedagogy and principles respond to these kinds of needs for students to practice writing in the disciplines.

One of my tasks as a WAC Fellow was to work with the Writing Center, which is directed by Professor Matt Moses. Professor Moses and I discussed potential project ideas that I could contribute to the Writing Center. Because of my science background, we decided to create a tutoring guide for science writing. Since most tutors are English majors, they tend to hesitate to help with science writing assignments. If there were a tutoring guide for writing in science, any tutor would be able to help students develop writing skills effectively in science.

Not only tutors have hesitation and fear about science writing: students also face challenges. Just as students in non-science majors have math anxiety, students in science courses tend to have writing anxiety. However, learning science is much more complex than memorizing formulas and testing experiments in labs. Writing is a very important part of science as well. Students in science classes need to discuss their research and experiments through writing, and it is important that scientific papers be clear and easy to understand. Strong writing skills also facilitate professional success in obtaining grants for further research.

In order to develop a tutoring guide for writing in science, I was introduced to Professor Yoel Rodriguez, who teaches WI courses in chemistry and physics. Professor Rodriguez was very enthusiastic about this project and offered me help. He kindly shared his syllabi and his experience with students with me. In fact, his syllabus for PHY 210 (General Physics I) became the basis of the tutoring guide. This course has laboratory sessions and is also designed as a WI section; thus, students are expected to have a significant amount of both formal and informal writing.
According to Professor Rodriguez, students in his class are not familiar with science writing at the beginning of the semester. Through informal writing assignments such as explaining the regular daily activities, students become familiar with styles and characteristics in science writing. Professor Rodriguez and I discussed what kinds of writing techniques and strategies students would need to improve their writing. With effective writing strategies, students would be able to demonstrate their knowledge of science for specialized audiences, such as journal reviewers. Among the strategies, synthesizing texts is most required for students in a physics class. They have prior knowledge and findings as a result of experiments. However, they often lack the skills to combine these two sources of information in their writing.

Our tutoring guide provides useful vocabulary of transitional words in order to help students organize their writing logically. It also includes several exercises for students to improve their writing. One is to find an appropriate conjunctive adverb such as “however” or “although” to connect two clauses to make a sentence clear. Another exercise is paraphrasing: it is a useful exercise for practicing the skill of synthesizing, as well as avoiding plagiarism.

Effective science writing uses direct language and avoids vague and complicated sentences. To help make writing clear, accurate, and concise, our tutoring guide offers guidance on mechanical aspects of science writing such as abbreviations, hyphenations, and punctuation. Through exercises of editing and annotating weaker writing samples which are included in the tutoring guide, tutors can teach students to identify writing errors, as well as to familiarize themselves with good science writing.

My experience working for the Writing Center as well as working with Professor Rodriguez was thought-provoking and reassured me that my science background could contribute to student writing. I would like to thank both Professor Moses and Professor Rodriguez for the privilege of working with them. I hope our tutoring guide for writing in science will be a useful resource for the Writing Center.

For more information about WAC at Hostos, visit the website at http://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/ or contact the WRAC Coordinators

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