What is Writing Across the Curriculum?

Writing, by its very nature, is interactive because the writer always writes for an audience. Writing goes well beyond merely getting students to recall course material. It requires critical thinking and intellectual engagement. Writing powerfully supplements other assessment techniques (such as objective testing), because it reveals a writer’s personal mastery and interpretation of course material.

WAC is a pedagogical movement that advocates writing as an excellent way to engage students in active learning. WAC scholar Susan McLeod explains that WAC “does not mean a program that is merely additive—more term papers, more courses, more proficiency tests—but one that is closely tied with thinking and learning, one that will bring about changes in teaching as well as in student writing.”

Teachers benefit from a WAC program because they find ways to get students to manage time for developing ideas, researching, revising, and editing. Teachers learn to evaluate writing in time-saving stages, so they can avoid overwhelming paper loads. WAC is about effectively delegating responsibility to students so they can practice making connections between writing and learning.

WAC operates on two basic concepts:

Writing to learn—better adapted to early learning and general education; asks students to use brief, informal, ungraded writing exercises to:

- Raise questions about lectures
- Put new concepts in their own words
- Reaction to reading assignments
- Evaluate research sources
- Summarize class discussions
- Respond to peers’ drafts
- Report on projects or group work
- Participate in electronic discussions
- Help design exam questions
- Explain & self-assess personal applications of disciplinary principles

Writing in the disciplines—better adapted to more advanced learning and courses in the major; gets students, through multiple drafts and constructive feedback, to:

- Learn the required formats in disciplines or professions (e.g., case studies, lab reports, business letters, story problems)
- Imitate disciplinary or professional styles (e.g., uses of passive or active tense, use of “person”)
- Apply discipline-specific forms of citation (e.g., MLA, APA)
- Identify and critique reliable disciplinary or professional sources
- Incorporate discipline- or profession-specific vocabulary
- Anticipate expectations of readers in the discipline or profession
- Perform acceptable disciplinary or professional research methods
- Know the best persuasive techniques of the discipline or profession
- Understand the typical writing tasks in a specific discipline or profession

MAY WORKSHOP, 5/20-21:
Incorporating WAC principles effectively can make a tremendous difference in your own satisfaction with a course. It profoundly affects your students’ learning, too. Many NIU faculty have already participated in this annual workshop and have responded enthusiastically to it. Why not find out more about how to improve your students’ writing skills and share creative ideas with your colleagues? SEE THE FORM ON THE BACK!
3rd Annual Workshop in Designing a Writing-in-the-Major Course

Q: When is it, and what will I get out of it?
A: This two-day workshop on designing a writing-in-the-major course will take place May 20-21, 2004. You will collect a wealth of resources for transforming one of your courses. You and colleagues will share ideas on how to promote critical thinking through writing, how to design effective writing assignments, how to provide feedback that balances content and correctness, how to manage the paper load efficiently, and how to create rubrics that enable students to grasp what you want them to accomplish. The workshop will also serve as evidence of ongoing professional development for your annual review and/or tenure and promotion. You'll receive a copy of the best available text on designing writing-in-the-major courses, John Bean's Engaging Ideas. Lunch provided on both days.

Q: What is a writing-in-the-major course?
A: It's a course that:

1. Breaks a major assignment into stages that require drafting, teacher & peer feedback, revision, & editing
2. Includes different kinds of informal, ungraded writing (journals, web board entries, listserv discussions, peer response, etc.)
3. Distributes writing throughout the semester, rather than concentrates it at the end—and encourages visits to the Writing Center
4. Emphasizes that writing assignments constitute at least 30% of the course grade
5. Keeps professors, not graduate assistants or aides, in control of designing writing assignments & grading/marking papers
6. Incorporates time-effective ways to manage the paper-load effectively and efficiently

Q: How do I become a participant?
A: Please identify a course you want to turn into a writing-in-the-major course and supply a copy of the current syllabus. Submit an application, responding to the questions below. Have your Department Chair and Dean sign the application. Send the packet of materials to: Brad Peters, Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum, English Department, Reavis Hall 215. Further questions? Call 753-6718, or email bpeters@niu.edu

Application Questions (to copy this form, go to http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/mayworkshop.html):

1. What is the course you want to transform into a writing-in-the-major course—and what kinds of writing do you currently include in the course?

2. How do you expect students to benefit from your transformation of this course?

3. How do you expect your department curriculum to benefit from your transformation of this course?

4. Briefly explain what particular priorities you have for this course’s transformation in terms of promoting critical thinking, designing assignments, providing feedback, managing paper load, assessing students’ written work—or other issues concerning instruction in writing.

Faculty signature______________________________

Department Chair’s signature________________________

College Dean’s signature_________________________

Date________________________

Please submit this application and a copy of your syllabus by May 1, 2004. Workshop registration is limited. Send to:

Brad Peters, Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum
English Department, Reavis Hall 215
bpeters@niu.edu
Tel. 753-6718