Writing about reading assignments helps students to create a “companion text.” Students see that a critical reader is a kind of author. We can invite students to experiment with a variety of short companion texts:

- “Talk-back” notes: jotting down important points, confusing spots, places of disagreement as if talking to the author.
- Reading logs: making regular, free-choice responses that link personal experiences with the content of texts.
- Focused reading notes: tracking a key theme or concept in a flow chart or under column headings.
- Summary/response note-books: dividing a page in half to summarize on one side and to comment on the other.
- Interviews: inventing questions & using a text to provide the “interview responses.”
- Genre switching: responding creatively to a traditional text format, e.g., the autobiography of a pancreas, a poem about an isosceles triangle, a newsletter about what students learned in a three-week period in chemistry.
- Microthemes: summarizing reading assignments concisely on note cards.
- Translations: writing a difficult passage in one’s own words, deliberately avoiding any language that the author uses.
- Explications of visual aids: interpreting the meaning of a graph, map, table, image, etc.—or designing a visual aid to clarify a particularly challenging textual passage.
- Multiple-choice or short-essay questions: turning in weekly questions on reading assignments that become part of an exam the next week.
- Headline essays: collecting newspaper or magazine headlines on a topic (e.g., math in the news) and writing a short summary of how those headlines add up.
- Visual to Verbal Mini-projects: putting together posters, power-point slides, or handouts that summarize a reading assignment. Students orally present, then write reflections on what they learned.

Create Mini-Portfolios to Assess Reading Skills

In larger classes, term papers or longer research projects may not be as practical as a collection of shorter reading responses—each 1-2 paragraphs long—that can be written in five to ten minutes at the beginning of class, toward the middle, or at the end. We can keep record with a +, √, or –.

At midterm and at the end of term, we can ask students to revise 4 to 6 pieces that reflect their “best learning.” They assemble these pieces in a portfolio, adding a cover letter. The cover letter should include the reasons why the students have chosen these representative pieces, how the pieces demonstrate their “best learning,” and where these pieces fit in with the course objectives and goals we’ve established in our syllabus. Students have the responsibility of typing and attaching revisions to their original pieces, so that the material indicates their improved critical reading abilities. We can assess, using a primary trait scoring grid (see Vol. 2, Issue 2).
Faculty In School of Nursing Take Steps to Improve Assessment of Writing

The faculty in the School of Nursing is considering how to reformulate their assessment of student writing. Julie Robertson—the WAC Advisory Board member who represents them—has facilitated the project. The faculty has invited the WAC coordinator to speak to them about improving writing assessment. As a result, the faculty has been able to examine more critically how they currently use portfolios to assess student outcomes.

Writing Center staff have visited many individual classes in the School of Nursing, enabling the faculty to form pedagogical links with Writing Center staff, while informing students of Writing Center services at the same time.

The faculty has also asked the WAC coordinator to lead two major workshops during the spring 2001 semester—one in motivating students to revise, and one in streamlining large-scale assessment. Just so, the faculty is discovering ways to help students improve writing, and they have moved toward a “pilot project” in developing a more effective use of portfolios. The faculty’s portfolio subcommittee has begun a formal proposal to School of Nursing administrators, outlining changes in:

- setting up the portfolio assessment
- determining and assessing portfolio contents
- getting entire faculty “buy-in” to the assessment process through a system of merit & rewards
- getting student “buy-in” through producing a tool that measures achievement, indicates specialized strengths, and enhances the job search
  - exploring funding alternatives that may sustain the assessment system and reinforce student/faculty “buy in”
  - using portfolio assessment for ongoing, “in-house” faculty development
  - determining what courses can be earmarked as “writing-in the-major” courses
  - considering follow-up instruction for students whose portfolios do not pass (e.g., requiring them to enroll in ENGL 250: Practical Writing, focused on “Practical Writing in Nursing” and taught by professorial faculty in nursing)

WAC Reaches Out to Teachers in Rockford Schools

Recently, Professors Susan Callahan and Michael Day from the English department conducted a Saturday workshop for junior and senior high school teachers in the Rockford district. The workshop focused on reading and writing across the curriculum.

Callahan helped the teachers analyze their own reading skills by introducing them to a reading and writing exercise that simulated the difficulties students often experience. She went on to discuss the kinds of “writing to learn” exercises that allow students to develop critical reading skills. Her advice on using mini-portfolios to assess such exercises matches with the suggestions that are listed in this newsletter.

Day presented an extended activity in reading and evaluating web pages, so that the teachers could help students to approach Internet sources more rigorously when doing research projects. He provided the teachers with an online guide that he also encourages NIU faculty to access at: <http://www.engl.niu.edu/mday/web/wmc.html> The Rockford teachers then searched the Net for sites that would provide useful teaching resources.

The workshop was sponsored by a National Science Foundation Grant that Professor Jule Scarborough, Technology department, recently obtained.

Writing Center Increases Support for Students and Faculty

In the second semester of its stepped-up campaign to make its services more visible to students and faculty alike, Writing Center staff at Reavis 306A have visited nearly 100 classes. During the fall ’00 semester, more than 1,650 students benefited from tutoring conferences. The spring ’01 semester promises to exceed those numbers.

Gail Jacky, staff supervisor, recommends that professors have their students make appointments in advance by calling 753-6636, or by stopping in. Undergraduates and graduates from all disciplines are welcome. The tutoring staff often helps students work closely with reading assignments as well, so that greater reading comprehension can produce better writing.

If professors want a Writing Center representative to do a fifteen-minute presentation for their classes, Jacky will schedule the visits.

Once students realize how useful the tutoring conferences are, they tend to return. This pattern provides fine supplemental instructional support for professors. Try the website at: http://www.engl.niu.edu/writing_center/