Writing Across the Curriculum

What is Writing Across the Curriculum?

Writing Across the Curriculum is a pedagogical movement that works toward improving students’ learning through uses of writing in all disciplines and subject areas. 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 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 apply what they learn.

WAC operates on two basic concepts:

**Writing to learn**—better adapted to early learning and general education; asks students to use informal (and often interactive) writing exercises to:

- Raise questions about lectures
- Put new concepts into their own words
- React 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
- Reflect upon & assess their personal progress and learning processes

**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)
- 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

**BEST PRACTICES IN WAC**

The most satisfying experiences with WAC often include the following best practices in teaching:

1. **Design assignments that specify a clear format, research expectations, type of reader, and purpose**
2. **Break assignments into stages (e.g., informal brainstorming of topics, project proposal, annotated bibliography, progress report, rough draft, final draft)**
3. **Provide students beforehand with a rubric that reflects the specific requirements of assignments**
4. **Present students with a model of what a successfully finished assignment may look like, and discuss options**
5. **Set up “writing workshops” where students are given specific guidelines for responding to other students’ drafts, and/or make use of tutors in a Writing Center**
6. **Require students to write at least one draft on which the students receive constructive advice for revision**
7. **Require students to use a style sheet to check for editing concerns such as grammar, correct documentation of sources, etc.—before they turn in a final draft**
8. **Use the rubric (see #3) to grade the final assignment**

**SAMPLE TEAM PROJECTS IN WAC:**

- Proposal and marketing plan for starting a new business
- Lawsuit and trial against Romeo and Juliet’s parents
- Windshield survey and plan for improving community health facilities
- Description and analysis of how a neighborhood has changed over 5-6 decades
- Pollution analysis of a local river and publication of the findings
- Evaluation of financial accounting systems in a local business
WAC: Best Practices for Classroom Management and Critical Thinking

1. Skim through the information on the other side of this page. What two or three points have you noticed that expand upon, alter, or confirm your understanding of WAC? Share your points with a colleague next to you.

2. Identify one important format for the written work that you believe students should be able to perform in your subject area, and list 2-3 important aspects of that format. E.g., in First Year Composition, students should be able to identify and write a generic “academic research essay” which contains: (A) an introduction and clearly recognizable thesis or statement of a problem; (B) evidence from print and online sources that either develop the thesis or contribute to the analysis and proposed solution of the problem; and (C) demonstrated ability to differentiate between opinion and fact.

3. Look through the “Sample Team Projects” on the other side of this page. Brainstorm and share with two colleagues a team project that you currently do, or a project that you might like to try, with one of your classes. Choose a recorder to take notes, and elect a presenter who will briefly describe to the rest of us one of the projects you talked about.

4. Please provide me with a list of teaching practices that you might like to learn more about—or problems that you’d like to resolve—in a course designed to help you implement Writing Across the Curriculum in your own subject area. This course will take place at a Rockford site in the Spring semester 2005, and you’ll get more details later. Please email me your list.

Brad Peters, Coordinator of Writing Across the Curriculum
English Department, Reavis Hall 215
EMAIL: bpeters@niu.edu
Tel. 815-753-6718