

Writing-to-Learn Assignments in Content-Driven Courses

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Instructors in the communication sciences face many challenges when trying to help students develop all of the knowledge and skills necessary for them to become competent clinicians. The primary purpose of this article is to discuss some ways to increase the amount of writing that occurs in the classroom, as well as help instructors use writing to help students develop ownership of the process.

Writing is a professional fact of life for speech–language pathologists and audiologists: We write diagnostic reports, daily progress notes, progress summaries, professional correspondence, even work memos and letters of recommendation. Through writing, we address varied and multiple audiences. Often we have time to prepare formal documents, but other times we must execute the tasks with immediacy. We have long outgrown the student notion that we have a particular style of writing or that we are a particular type of writer. The world of work has made us proficient, adaptable, multifaceted, and ever learning.

A primary obligation of a discipline’s educational program must be to fully prepare students for the writing and documentation responsibilities of being effectively communicating practitioners. As teachers of a discipline, we should not overlook the value of having students write for both learning and assessment purposes as they work their way through the curricula. However, as Russell (1994) pointed out, the instruction of writing has been traditionally “separate from other instruction” (p. 4). The Council on Professional Standards in Speech–Language Pathology and Audiology

sought to address this situation when they created new standards that mandate student competency in written language (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2000). Of course, this acknowledges written communication as more than a taken-for-granted by-product of academic and professional life. The cost for instructors to implement, monitor, and document student competency in writing is an increased, time-intensive grading load.

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM (WAC)

Instructors should not overlook the very act of writing as a valuable method for students to process the information under investigation. As stated by Vygotsky (1962), cognitive functions such as analysis and synthesis develop more fully with the support of written language. Although educators theoretically accept this notion, it is still difficult to implement appropriate writing assignments when faced with a full classroom and a tightly packed knowledge base to convey. We do not want to become what WAC proponent Fulwiler (1994) labeled “dabblers” (p. 56), who agree about a need for better implementation of writing pedagogy but whose own practices remain unaltered.

The WAC movement that has taken root on college and university campuses across the country is not a new one. Seminal WAC scholars such as McLeod, Murray, Thaiss, and Emig have developed and championed this cross-disciplinary theory of writing instruction since the 1970s. It is within this pedagogical philosophy that

instructors can consider writing to be something that should be commonplace in the classroom, and not reserved for essay tests and research papers.

MISCONCEPTIONS: ASSIGNING WRITING VERSUS TEACHING WRITING

As the writing component expands in an existing curriculum, an increase in the number of writing assignments does not necessarily forward the principles of WAC. What a curriculum does not need is more product-oriented, lockstep writing assignments: (a) assignment given, (b) assignment completed, (c) assignment graded, (d) assignment returned. Strenski (1988) warned of the misapplication of WAC when the subject specialist is given the writing intensive course but does not fully understand writing as a means of learning. Instead, it becomes a “bureaucratic convenience” (p. 32) to reach the course’s word count, to measure learning, or to assign a grade.

Once students have completed their required freshman composition classes, educators spend surprisingly little time on instruction in the skill of writing. Furthermore, as students move through college and settle on a discipline, specific writing needs appear. For example, an early introduction of audiology and speech–language pathology majors to the Introduction, Method, Result, Discussion format used in the writing of research reports is time well spent, as few students are familiar with the formula. A second example is that, overwhelmingly, most students are familiar with the Modern Language Association format for research, as they have been primarily taught their research techniques by English or writing instructors who rely on this style of documentation. Therefore, the implementation of American Psychological Association (APA) documentation becomes a fairly extensive process for students, and the simultaneity of both Modern Language Association and APA in the students’ research repertoire is a source of confusion for many. Therefore, more expansive instruction in the APA method should continue throughout students’ time in a communication sciences and disorders program.

Students continue to require instruction in writing if they are going to be competent to meet the demands of their discipline. Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to present some ways in which to implement and manage meaningful writing assignments in content-driven classes. The topics addressed in this article will be the following: the use of minimally graded writing assignments, the teaching of short topical essays, and the use of grading rubrics and peer review for writing assignments.

MINIMALLY GRADED AND NONGRADED SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

One way instructors can incorporate more writing, while keeping the workload manageable, is to change how they view writing in the classroom. The most typical writing tasks are essay tests or research papers, but the WAC philosophy about writing is that it can also be used to help students to learn the topic under investigation (Bean, 1996). As thinking translates into writing, students and the instructor are more fully able to monitor learning through short writing exercises. To help students write to learn, the following nongraded or minimally graded writing exercises are useful: exploratory or reflective writing, journaling, and entrance and exit slips.

Exploratory or Reflective Writing: Writing to Learn Opens the Door

Exploratory writing encourages students to engage in the think–write process in topics for which they do not have a solid background. With this type of activity, students write what they know about the topic under discussion. If they know nothing, then they should make predictions based on the title of the topic or unit, or they should relate the subject to other areas of interest or expertise. The instructor collects the writings, reviews them before the next class period, and then shares some of the responses. The sharing aspect is vital, for the dialogic nature of writing to learn allows learning to take place among students.

For example, when the class is going to start a new unit, such as “The Relationship Between Cognition and Language,” the instructor asks students to preview the chapter before the next class. After the students peruse the information, the section headings, the highlighted information boxes of text, and any end-of-chapter questions, they write about (a) what they think the chapter is going to be about, (b) what information they want to learn by the end of the chapter, (c) how the material integrates with previously learned material, or (d) possible uses of this material. Furthermore, this allows for the lecture to be shaped around some of the more interesting questions and considerations about the topics. This writing-to-learn activity allows the instructor to monitor students’ preconceptions about upcoming subjects or units.

Journaling: A Writing-to-Learn Investigative Process

As opposed to the diagnostic nature of reflective or exploratory writing exercises, journaling can bring the stu-

dents into a more long-term investigative relationship with the material (Juell, 1985). Journaling concentrates the students' attention on elements of an observation or assignment that they might undervalue or perhaps miss altogether. There are several ways to use journaling in content-driven courses. One is to help students manage larger writing projects such as a research paper. For this type of journal, the students start using their journal to document and reflect on the material they are reading for their paper. The instructor takes these up either periodically or at certain times in the semester. For example, there might be two dates for journal submission during the semester. By the first date, the students should have written journal entries providing documentation for finding a topic with adequate literature for a research paper. By the second date, the students should have written journal entries providing documentation of articles and books or chapters and how they will be used in the research paper. It is within this framework that the instructor can monitor the progress of research papers, help the students begin the writing process, and monitor their thought processes as they move toward the submission of their paper.

An additional way journaling might be used is through a problem-based learning assignment. A journaling project for class might include the observation of a particular clinical population. This can be done either by using a problem-based learning text, like the one by Gilliam, Marquardt, and Martin (2000), or by observing actual clients. For example, the instructor asks students to observe a patient, or several patients, during the semester. In correspondence with lecture and reading material, the instructor assigns students questions about the type of patient(s) being observed—questions that the students must answer in their journals. The format of the writing can be either informal or more clinical in nature. To keep grading to a minimum, these assignments can easily be pass/fail or just for credit. These assignments expose students to clinical writing and help them learn the material under discussion.

Entrance and Exit Slips

Entrance and exit slips are short writing exercises that occur at either the beginning or end of class. They are efficient ways to incorporate writing with minimal grading. To use an entrance slip during the first 3 to 5 min of class, ask the students to write down three substantive things they learned from the previous lecture or the assigned reading. This can be a way to start the day's lecture with a review of the previous material. The instructor

takes up the entrance slips and reads anonymously a random sampling of the papers, or students read voluntarily from their writings. Exit slips are a way for students to summarize the important things they learned in class that day or to make comments about things they found confusing. As opposed to the unpopular quiz method of motivating students to read and study (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998), giving the students a topic to write about from the assigned reading or from the previous lecture is a more positive approach. Furthermore, entrance and exit slips allow the instructor and the class to monitor and share the thinking that is occurring about the material under investigation before the topic is formally tested.

THE SHORT TOPICAL ESSAY OR ESSAY TEST

Another type of writing that is a well-established assessment tool is the short topical essay—typically found on the essay examination—in which writing is used as an assessment tool (Bean, 1996). For the short topical essay or timed essay test, students analyze and synthesize information into a well-organized, concisely written text. Students tend to respond by providing a quick summary of the information with little or no reflective analysis. They thus miss the central purpose of the short topical essay, which is to allow the instructor to see their thought processes and the depth and breadth of their understanding.

Instructors can approach these tests as tools not just for recapitulation of facts, but for active learning, as they can provide lasting templates for much of the short writing tasks that students will face as professionals. Even though the essay test is one of the most frequently used evaluative tools in the college classroom, few instructors supply specific instruction on how to write for the test. Walvoord and Anderson (1998) pointed out that if instructors are going to grade students' written products, then it is critical that they take the time to teach the criteria that will allow students to earn high marks. The components of a good short essay or answer to an essay question might include the following: (a) level and quality of content; (b) organizational formats to aid clarity and readability; (c) parallel structures to guide the reader through parallel points; (d) use of transitions between sections or ideas; (e) balance between generalizations/reflections and substantiating examples/facts; (f) meaningful paragraphing; (g) topic sentences that focus the reader's attention; (h) use of specific examples; (i) use of tone and style to characterize the writer; (j) integration of material gleaned from

lectures and class discussions; (k) reflections of particular interests or idiosyncrasies of the instructor; (l) adequate conclusions; (m) references to particular texts or authorities; (n) appeals to reason, emotion, or the reader's ethos.

If an instructor is going to grade students for the quality of their short topical essay or essay test question, it is important to spend class time teaching these components (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). For example, after the instructor has discussed the criteria expected for a good short topical essay or essay question, the instructor might collect answers to essay tests—some good and some not so good—for distribution to the class. The example essays should not contain instructor comments or editorial marking and should be anonymous. After the students review the examples, have them rank them from best to worst. Once the examples are ranked, ask the students to explain their decisions based on the criteria. Not only will this help students improve their ability to write short topical essays, but it will have an influence on how they take notes and study.

GRADING RUBRICS AND PEER REVIEW

Although the nongraded or pass/fail type of grading is an effective way to increase the amount and vary the types of classroom writing assignments, there are more traditional types of writing-to-learn assignments that require more time to implement and evaluate. These include the academic term paper. Although the previously mentioned techniques are important to improving the writing of students, the most critical of techniques for writing in content-driven courses is the development of grading rubrics and the use of peer review.

One of the tenets of WAC is that instructors have to teach students how to write. Instructors of content-driven courses have difficulty carving out the time to teach writing, which is something that many believe the students should already know. However, as different disciplines stress different writing tasks, instructors in any field of study should be prepared to teach the technical and cognitive components of the writing students will be expected to perform.

Grading rubrics are one way to make explicit the requirements of a paper and to provide a natural mechanism for teaching students the different styles of the writing that are required.

For the term paper, the instructor asks the students to synthesize and interpret information they have read. This can be a complex process, and it usually leaves the students and the instructor dissatisfied with the result

(Kantz, 1989). Some ways to teach students the expectations of complex writing assignments are to develop grading rubrics or handouts and to begin the editing process with peer review.

Grading Rubrics

The use of grading rubrics helps both instructor and students develop a necessary, dialogic awareness of the expectations of the assignment. Developing a primary trait analysis (PTA) of the writing assignment is helpful before creating the actual grading rubric. Although developing PTAs and grading rubrics for assignments can be time consuming, they enable the instructor to create greater qualitative distinctions between grades, and they offer clarification for students (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). To develop a PTA, the instructor must determine the following components:

- what the students should learn from the assignment,
- the amount of content to convey,
- the quality and number of sources,
- documentation guidelines,
- the critical-thinking skills that students need to use,
- the balance between reflective considerations and researched substantiation,
- the overall form of the paper,
- specific matters of formatting,
- the accommodation of audience,
- the creation and consistent maintenance of the writer persona,
- good-paragraph criteria,
- intelligent use of professional vocabulary, and
- matters of clarity and movement.

The instructor should consider the development of the PTA to be a work in progress, as it will likely need modification based on student outcomes from its first few uses.

Although developing a PTA can help with the creation of a grading rubric, the two are not one and the same. A grading rubric requires establishing a point value for the traits that the instructor has identified as important for the assignment. For content-driven courses, we suggest that content and critical-thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis make up at least half to a majority of the points for the assignment, and this will be the substantiation of the learning inherent in writing-to-learn pedagogy. Form, on the other hand, does not

usually count for as many points as content, but it still determines a substantial part of the grade.

Walvoord and Anderson (1998) suggested that it is important for instructors to make explicit those components of written assignments on which students will be graded. Thus, the instructor should address APA style, formatting guidelines that make grading and readability easier, and even common errors that are particular pet peeves early in the writing process. Therefore, with every syllabus the instructor should provide a handout concerning submission guidelines for written work. Items on the checklist should include such basics as length, font pitch and style, a consistent system of word count, spacing, margins, headers, stapling, printer specifications, exact submission dates and times, and any personal idiosyncrasies of the instructor.

Editing Academic Writing Through Peer Review

Following the initial composition of the writing comes editing and revising, which can consist of teacher-only reading, single-peer review, two-peer editing, or group-response editing (Marchionda, 1984). Teacher-only review, more commonly known as grading, occurs when students write and the instructor marks the paper, acting as a combination of judge, doctor, and reader (Weinstein, 2001). This, although traditional, is a model that is time intensive for the instructor and does not give students ownership of the editing process. We should note that revision is a critical component of the writing process, and if the instructor allows no revision after grading, any suggestions or comments are little aid in helping students develop as writers. It becomes a dead-end writing process and not a process designed to help students learn.

In contrast, peer review, whether single- or two-peer, shifts the task of the initial editing to students and creates an opportunity for assimilating the material. The students become better readers of their own work and develop a truer sense of the composition process. This also allows the teacher to stop the practice of dead-end grading and allows for a vital self-monitoring of the initial assignment.

The peer-response session meets during class time and can occur one time or at various points in the students' writing process. It is a time when students share their writing with other students with the expectation that students will help one another with writing by providing one another with feedback (Freedman, 1987). To develop this skill, it is important to provide a peer-review sheet that serves as a guideline or reminder of things for which the peers should be reading. The in-

structor should also provide a common-errors handout that points out common grammatical and style errors. Both the peer-review and common-error handouts actually are helpful templates for students to have when they are in the early phase of the writing process.

Clinical Documents and Peer Review

Although students are required to master the principles of academic writing for their coursework, they must also be provided with sound principles for clinical documentation. The clinical writing tasks that instructors must teach students as they assume the technical writing responsibilities of health-related disciplines include diagnostic reports, treatment summaries, daily progress notes, professional correspondence, and caregiver correspondence. Even though each of these documents has distinct characteristics that define it, each shares important common, formulaic features that are helpful to the practitioner-writer.

In some programs, instructors teach clinical writing as part of the coursework in addition to its being a part of the clinical practicum. Therefore, toward the end of implementing writing-to-learn techniques to improve the clinical writing of students, the instructor devises a peer-review process for students. For example, each student clinician acts as a peer reviewer for another student clinician. These peer-review teams review certain clinical documents before they are submitted to the supervisor for approval and grading. Once the peer-review system is implemented, the quality of the reports improves as meaningful learning takes place. Students benefit from reading the clinical reports of others. They learn such things as ways to phrase a discussion of difficult behavior and ways to write up tests or procedures.

As part of this process, it is critical to develop peer-review sheets to help students focus on the special requirements of clinical documentation. This type of writing requires direct instruction in short writing. The particular needs for concision, validation, professional vocabulary, controlling ideas, and objective accuracy are critical components of clinical documentation. The following are components that might be addressed in a peer-review checklist:

- Is the documentation client focused versus therapist focused?
- Is the documentation outcome focused versus attempt focused?
- Are all evaluative words substantiated with actual client behaviors?

- Is the document written for multiple audiences?

In addition to encouraging peer review, instructors can streamline some clinical documentation with the development of a handbook with multiple checklists to help students with the important task of mastering clinical documentation.

CONCLUSION

WAC principles are strongly grounded in the notions not only that writing allows instructors to evaluate students but that students can learn more about a topic under investigation if writing is incorporated in the classroom. Furthermore, those principles suggest that all instructors, not just writing instructors, are responsible for teaching writing. In an attempt to help instructors who teach content-driven courses, we described three different writing techniques: using minimally graded writing assignments, teaching short topical essays, and using grading rubrics and peer review for writing assignments. These are not the only techniques that instructors can use when teaching writing, but they are some that are useful in the facilitation of the mastery of critical information and the management of additional grading with an already full workload.

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