

## Writing Across the Disciplines

## Preparing for the Profession

How can students learn to write well? The usual response is to suggest that they sign up for a writing class. This is not the wrong answer, but to suggest that writing instruction begins and ends in the English Department is to underestimate the way that writing impinges on all subjects and to overestimate the possibilities in a three hours per week class. If writing is an essential survival skill, then the teaching of writing must be forefronted in all classes, not just in English classes.

Because writing is a developmental skill, students (and, indeed, their teachers themselves) are always changing and growing as writers; with proper guidance and encouragement, students can polish their writing skills to a high degree. Writing is a process that reflects the performer's abilities in critical thinking and logical development of ideas. As the writer grows intellectually and emotionally, the writing, too, should mature. Students are sometimes suspicious of written assignments, especially in classes that are not traditionally considered writing courses, and, to be sure, they have a right to be *if* the assignments are not clearly related to the course, if they are perceived merely as busy work. TAs must coordinate writing assignments with the course materials so that the process of learning is always integrally connected with the process of writing. Once students learn that putting their ideas down on paper is often a means of clarifying their thoughts, sometimes even of discovering them, they will more fully understand the value of their written assignments.

Writing is a process that involves thinking about ideas, organizing one's thoughts in a coherent way, and then making decisions about the most effective way to present those thoughts to a specific audience; it entails a gradual movement from the mind to the outer world. Writing well is always a process of revision--not just editing for spelling or punctuation but rethinking, reformulating, rewriting. When students begin to see that writing brings a certain kind of freedom--to explore ideas further, to reconsider original ideas, to reconstruct and improve--they may be more willing to participate.

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TAs who will be going on the job market in the near future can expect to be invited on campus to present a lecture as a part of the interview/screening process. Others may be presenting papers at conferences, demonstrating to prospective employers that they are contributing members of the field. In either case, the impression that is created at the interview or conference may have a direct impact on a student's career.

On Friday, April 8th, the Future Faculty Project of TAP will be offering a practice videotape session to help prepare graduate students for this experience. Graduate students are invited to prepare a fifteen minute talk, similar to the kind of lecture they would give in an interview situation. TAP staff members will videotape the talk. Students may then review the tape with a member of the TAP staff or may view it with a faculty member or friend to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their presentation style.

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No matter what the size of the class or the subject matter, ways can be found to integrate writing into the class. In small sections, regular writing assignments present no great logistical difficulty. Grading written work requires an investment of time, of course, but it is not a staggering burden. In larger classes, however, it is unrealistic to expect a teacher to grade several lengthy writing assignments over the semester, so teachers must devise creative ways to get students involved in writing, in a manner that allows the teacher to respond to the individual student in a meaningful way, and give the feedback that is a necessary part of the process.

Micro-themes--essays that are written on five-by-eight inch index cards--are an efficient way of helping students develop their writing skills, and they can be used effectively in almost any subject and in both large and small classes. Teachers should first determine, in detail, the grading criteria for the essays and then devise a

simple grading scale that reflects this. Students should understand exactly what is expected of them and how the various elements of the assignment will be weighed; if they understand the assignment thoroughly, they will be able to focus their writing more precisely and complete the assignment more readily. In turn, grading themes that are brief yet highly focused simplifies the grading process.

Micro-themes work best when the students have been given time to prepare, to think about the assignment and do some preliminary outlining in their heads. The assignments will vary according to the subject matter and the goals of the class. Some teachers ask students to write a summary of an article they have read, to respond to a question based on the reading, to explore the thesis of the essay; others present students with a problem to solve and then ask them to write out an explanation of how they solved it, or give them some data to interpret, with specific guidelines for responses. Such brief and sharply focused assignments, given three or four times a semester, reinforce the point that learning and writing are part of the same process.

Although some fields seem to lend themselves more naturally

*A young man has missed several classes. When he comes to class, he often falls asleep. He sometimes appeared confused. I suspect that he has a drug abuse problem. Is there something I should be doing?*

Teachers who suspect that their students have such problems have a responsibility to see that they get the help they need. Try to get this student to come to your office to speak to you about his performance in class, and express your concern about his behavior. Do not confront the student or make accusations; this may only make him defensive.

Before speaking to the student, you may wish to consult with a member of the Counseling Center at the student's college or someone at the Alcohol and Other Drug Assistance Program for Students at Hurtado. Trained staff members at these centers will be able to help you evaluate the problem and suggest ways of assisting. TAs are not trained counselors and should recognize their limitations. Their role is to get the student the help he needs, *not* to take on the role of psychiatrist.

*TapTalk* is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:  
Linda G. Schulze  
*TapTalk*  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J.  
08903  
(908) 932-7034

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## IN THE PROGRAMS

The Brown Bag Lunch for TAs in Science and Engineering will be held on Wednesday, March 30th, from 12 noon to 1:30 p.m. in the Busch Campus Center, 120 A. TAs are invited to bring their lunch (beverages and deserts will be provided) to a discussion with their peers about issues of concern to them: current teaching issues, job search preparation, assistance with teaching, scholarship, and career planning.

### Preparing for the Profession

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The videotaping will take place on April 8th, at 25 Bishop Place, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Students who wish to be videotaped should call Beth Griech or Jay Crossen at 932-7034 to make an appointment.

TA  
Helpline  
Call

932-11TA

Monday-Friday  
between  
the hours  
of  
8:30-4:30

## NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

### Borderline Students

By this time in the semester, most teachers have a fairly good idea of how the students in the class are doing--midterms are over, students have established a pattern of behavior in the class, other assignments, such as lab reports or oral reports, have been completed, etc. Inevitably, some students are not doing well and seem headed for a "D" or an "F". Some timely intervention by concerned TAs may help these students to improve their performance in the class before it is too late.

Teachers should identify those students who are doing poorly. If there are only a few, conferences should be arranged during your office hours to discuss the problems they are having in the class. Students are an optimistic group, and they often believe that they still have lots of time to pull themselves out of the hole they have fallen into before the end of the semester. It is your job to give them a reality check: show them where they stand in the class and detail what they must do if they hope to get a passing grade. If there are a large number of students who seem in danger of failing, you may wish to set aside ten minutes at the beginning of a class to discuss your concerns and explain to the class what opportunities they have to improve before the end of the semester.

Make sure that your students understand all the options they have before them. For students who are trying but still having difficulties understanding the course material, inform them of the tutoring opportunities that exist at the Learning Resource Centers. Some teachers recommend that students pair up with other members of the class to do homework together or organize study groups. Remind them that they should ask questions in class or come to see you during your office hours if they encounter problems.

Other students may be failing because they have missed too many classes or have not completed assignments or tests. These students present greater difficulties and probably have to be dealt with on a one-to-one basis. If students are having health or emotional problems, TAs should try to make sure that the students are receiving the professional assistance they need and then try to work out a schedule for the student to make up what they have missed.

Especially in large classes, students sometimes feel that the teacher does not care about their personal problems, so it is up to teachers to make the effort to reach out. A little push now may direct students back onto the right path and salvage the semester for them.

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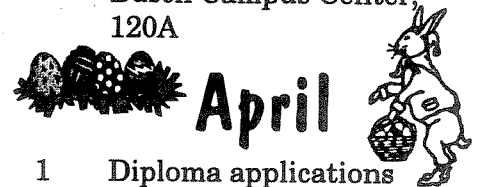
to writing assignments, writing can be made an integral part of learning in every field. Few mathematics teachers assign written work to their students, but some have made it an essential and valuable part of their courses. At the end of a class where a new concept has been introduced, a teacher may ask students to summarize in a few sentences what has been taught. An opening sentence or phrase may help the students begin to write. Some teachers require students to keep a journal in their notebooks, noting in a sentence or two

their impressions of their completed homework: what caused them difficulties, what they found interesting, how they arrived at the solution, what relationship it had to another kind of problem, etc.

Teachers who demonstrate to students that written exercises can help them to understand complex materials give them a stronger incentive to write, and to write well. By making the assignments brief and sharply focused, teachers make the work manageable for themselves and their students.



- 20 First day of spring.
- 25 Portfolio Distribution Workshop, 1:00 p.m., 25 Bishop Place, CAC
- 27 Palm Sunday  
Passover
- 30 Brown bag lunch for TAs in Science & Engineering, 12 noon, Busch Campus Center, 120A



- 1 Diploma applications must be filed for May degree.
- 3 Easter
- 8 Videotaping sessions, 25 Bishop Place, CAC.

### Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
25 Bishop Place  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903  
(908) 932-7034