

Writing in the Disciplines at The University of Michigan

John Reiff

The faculty of The College of Literature, Science and the Arts of The University of Michigan is in the process of developing a variety of models for teaching writing in the content areas as it prepares for the junior class of 1981-82. Students in this class are the first in the College to be required to take writing courses, preferably in their fields of concentration, in their junior or senior year. I will (1) describe five models for writing courses which are already offered to students in the College, (2) state a rationale for these models, (3) exemplify some approaches to assignment making in these courses, as well as (4) describe the writing workshop component which I developed for one course in the History Department.

Several Models for Content-area Writing Courses

(1) Some departments offer courses whose content is writing within the discipline. Professor Robbins Burling of the Anthropology Department, for instance, teaches a course in which students develop principles of criticism by examining published anthropological writing, both good and bad. They then write on anthropological topics of their own choosing and critique each other's writing.

In the Chemistry Department's upper-level course, *Chemical Literature and Scientific Writing*, students study examples of superior organization and argument in scientific writing--especially in chemical literature--and attempt to structure their own writing on those examples.

(2) Some departments satisfy the requirement with courses which focus on content but require considerable writing. The History Department, for example, offers its *Senior Colloquia*--small seminars required of all majors and dealing with topics such as the Indochina War or the History of Science--as the vehicles by which it will satisfy the requirement. Students in these *Colloquia* read extensively and confer with faculty members and teaching assistants at several stages in the writing of each of several papers. (see p. 76).

(3) Some departments offer courses which have not required much writing in the past, but have been restructured to do so now. The Mathematics Department, for example, is changing its course *Topics in Mathematics* to one which poses problems that students solve through a series of papers.

(4) Offering courses in which writing plays a less prominent role, one department requires students to choose any two to complete the writing program. During the second term of their sophomore year, biology students must take a course which satisfies one-half of the writing requirement; they elect another designated course to complete the requirement during their junior or senior years.

(5) And some departments may ask students to fulfill the writing requirement outside specific courses. The Geology Department has established a requirement which apportions student writings among different branches of the discipline. Acceptable writings include papers prepared for courses, and reports prepared for outside employers, as well as

proposals requesting outside agencies to fund research projects.

Writing Instruction Within the Content-area Courses

Individual faculty members are developing a variety of ways to balance the presentation of their subject matter with instruction in writing. Most writing instruction is tied to specific assignments and encompasses both immediate and long-range goals. The immediate aim of this instruction is to help students produce good writing in response to a specific assignment; the long-range aim is to help students better understand and control the processes by which they create written texts. Such instruction helps students identify the writing tasks preceding and following the production of a draft--the conceptual work of pre-writing and the editorial work of revision. Faculty members and teaching assistants can attend to students' work in a series of individual conferences during which plans for a piece of writing or the revision of a draft are discussed. Also, some class time can profitably be used for a writing workshop, for pre-writing work, and for grouping students to read and criticize one another's drafts.

Writing Assignments Within the Content-area Courses

Although the traditional audience for student writing has been the teacher-as-examiner, who reads and judges the finished product, teachers may choose to serve instead as expert consultants to their students as their students revise papers and submit these revisions for comments. Frequently, in such cases, teachers construct assignments directed at audiences other than themselves. They may establish peer groups to create real audiences within the class, or they may define hypothetical or actual audiences outside the classroom.

Often teachers vary the level of formality required in assignments. For example, some classes require both the formal work of polished papers and the less formal work of journals. Journal-writing may serve as an alternate means for students

to master course material and to communicate with the instructor about their interpretation of that material, or it may be focused specifically to lead to more formal writing.

Teachers may also vary the kind and number of assignments they construct. They may require students to submit both drafts and revisions of each paper they write, or they may require several short papers of essentially the same kind. In this case, successive assignments usually move within the same form from limited problems to more complex ones. A course with two long papers may require each paper to be submitted in stages: the first stage may be a precis of the final draft. The common feature of all of these arrangements is that they allow students to write and to receive help with that writing several times during the semester. Within this framework, students have room to grow as writers.

A Writing Workshop

Many of the principles of instruction and assignment design which I have presented here, I applied in the writing workshop component that I developed for a history course. In this history course, a **Senior Colloquia** concerned with the Indochina War, I worked with students who were assigned three substantial papers, due at regular intervals throughout the term. The students met with me in a workshop setting for an hour each week to work on their current papers. During the workshop, I engaged students in pre-writing and revision activities, focusing on writing as process rather than product.

Pre-Writing

My first step was to help students to interpret each assignment: What does the assignment demand? What questions must be answered? How may information be generated and what analysis is required? What boundaries are set by the audience for that piece of writing?

At this stage, I also ask students to focus on the historical experience they were studying and to analyze that experience as historians.

After students worked on their own, I asked them to articulate the main ideas and probable organization of their papers for each other. On the occasion of one assignment, a critical essay analyzing journalistic coverage of the war, I asked everyone to write brief abstracts of their papers-to-be; I presented these abstracts with an opaque projector. Together the students and I singled out the strengths and tried to discover possible solutions to the problems the abstracts suggested. This exercise served to encourage students to formulate their own main ideas, to sketch out their proposed development of those ideas, and to discover what difficulties they still faced. It provided students with models of successful and problematic approaches to the assignment, and it engaged students in immediate critical discussion of their peers' work. Such critical discussion was an important precursor to students' own work at the later stage of revision.

In connection with another assignment, which asked students to research an issue of their own choice related to the course material, everyone in the workshop completed the research guide which follows here; after completing it, they discussed some of the problems it identified for them. Following the class discussion, I reviewed these guides with each student individually.

Research Guide

1. Topic.

Have you decided on a subject to research?

If so, what is it?

If not, what subjects are you considering?

2. Guiding Question.

What question will your research try to answer?

If you haven't established one central question, what questions might you try to answer?

3. Hypothesis.

What do you think an answer to your question(s) will or might be?

4. Evidence.

What information have you already found that relates to your questions? From what sources? What further sources do you plan to explore? What do you expect to find in them?

5. Conclusions.

If the evidence you find supports your hypothesis, so what? What does this research mean in any larger context?

6. Documentation.

Do you have any questions about how to document the information you use in this paper--in handling quotes, in paraphrases, footnotes, a bibliography, etc?

7. Possible Problems.

What problems do you foresee with this assignment?

What would you (or we) need to do to solve them?

Draft and Revision

After the class participated in these pre-writing activities, students wrote drafts of their papers. I then structured other activities for them: They worked in editing groups of three or four; a week before the finished papers were due, each gave the other members within the group a xeroxed copy of his or her first draft. Group members had a couple of days to read the drafts and write comments to the author before they met as a group with me. During this meeting I functioned as a facilitator, reading drafts and revisions on request and encouraging students to be specific in their feedback about the strengths and problems of each draft. Feedback from each student was focused as follows:

1. Can I understand everything in your paper? If not, where does it lose me?

2. Do your evidence and your interpretation of the evidence convince me? If

(cont. on p. 91)

Fader (cont. from p. 54)

Furthermore, the use of writing in any curriculum as a means to the end of comprehending all subjects is persuasive of itself in the struggle to invest writing with the importance it possesses in the world of work but no longer claims in the home. One of the interesting social dislocations of our era is the poor fit between the decline of letter writing in the home and the increase in demands for writing in many different kinds of employment. Couple absence of practice in the home with decreasing practice in school (one inevitable result of increasing the number of students in secondary English classes--as in all others--during the last three decades), and no one should be surprised at the diminished competence in writing measured by many tests and regretted by all employers.

Finally, **Writing Across the Curriculum** offers a means for investing a young person's voice with an importance it may no longer possess in home or classroom. Homes with familial hours dominated by television and schools with all hours afflicted by large classes are unkind environments for nurturing the individual voice. The sense that one has something to say and someone to say it to, is a sense dulled by silence in the home and hordes in the classroom. That same sense, so basic to the belief that communication is worth the effort, is sharpened and expanded by the experience of writing at every opportunity. Inviting continuous, coherent participation in the process of communication, "**English in Every Classroom**" provides both student and process with an importance that nothing else in the curriculum can promise.

Daniel Fader, Chairman of the **English Composition Board of The University of Michigan**, has written extensively about the relationships between literacy and learning.

Reiff (cont. from p. 77)

not, what alternatives can I suggest for you to consider?

3. Can your paper be made more effective--in its conception of its audience, in its organization, or in its style and mechanics?

Using what they had learned from this exchange and discussion of drafts, students revised their papers before handing them in for final evaluation.

Student evaluations supported my impression that the workshop's most significant intervention in their writing was in how they conceptualized their work. One student reported that the draft exchange helped her reconceive the assignment: "I was lost on the first assignment; it wasn't until after the first draft I knew what to do." Speaking of the interchange that took place at that stage, she added, "Good criticism of my draft helped me to think. I learned to criticize and analyze--something I'd never done before."

The workshop also helped students in the **fine tuning** of their papers: They selected less awkward, often more elegant phrases, as well as appropriate punctuation. Students learned a sense of responsibility to one another as part of a community of learners. As they tried to help one another think through the problems in a particular paper, they often suggested approaches and sources of information to each other. Perhaps most important for their growth as writers, they experienced their writing as a process of vision and re-vision, in which initial ideas may be continually refined or transformed, and to which a careful reader may contribute a great deal.

John Reiff serves as Consultant to the Junior/Senior Level Writing Program at **The University of Michigan**.

Slisher (cont. from p. 79)

Social studies teachers have implemented the idea most fully. Dan Scripsema, Chairman of the Department, uses the research booklet in assigning a term paper in his **Civil War** mini-class. In addition, he both expects and grades for good spelling, complete sentences, and paragraph structure in daily work and tests. He says the extra burden on him is no problem. He notes that the students realize these standards are important in the course.

Steve VerSluis, a history and government teacher, assigns a bi-weekly essay in