Writing Development Initiative

In 2005-06, the Dean’s office introduce a project called the Writing Development Initiative to improve and develop students’ writing, following consultation with the UTM community that confirmed that writing development was a key priority for instructors. Focusing on key areas of writing proficiency, including organization, coherence, clarity, and grammar, each writing project that was approved was designed to help students, working within the requirements of their disciplines, to become better writers.

Almost all of the departments participate and have developed writing tasks suited to the objectives of their discipline, aimed at engaging students to become better writers. A wide variety of strategies are employed to improve students’ writing and evaluations are done of the progress and success of each project at the end of the course. We are very pleased with the enthusiasm that has been shown by UTM departments, the critical support that the Academic Skills Centre has given to this project, and the positive feedback that we have received from students. An evaluation of the first year of the project is available at _________________. For more information on the initiative, please contact your department chair or Assistant Dean Lynn Snowden at lynn.snowden@utoronto.ca.
Follow-up Report on this Year’s Writing Initiatives

The purpose of this report is to provide advice to chairs and instructors on some basic principles and strategies for integrating writing into the curriculum derived from the experience and feedback of instructors who participated in the Dean’s Pilot Project for Writing Development. We adopted the approach we did – to make each project course-specific – so that students involved would be writing in subject areas of interest to them, and were completing writing tasks that are unique to, and follow the conventions of writing in, that discipline. Finally, each project was premised on the assumption that simply assigning more writing was not a recipe for writing improvement. Rather, writing assignments must be accompanied with strategies to help students become better writers, included guided and constructive feedback and clearly articulated expectations.

While much of the following has most direct implications for writing-intensive projects, there are findings that any instructors wishing to integrate more writing into their courses or to help students get more out of the writing tasks they assign could use.

1. Departmental and Instructional Leadership

The leadership of chairs and instructors was a critical element in the success of these projects. Chairs need to check in with instructors involved with writing projects to see how they are doing, provide advice, encourage their efforts, and recognize their work. It was gratifying to learn that most instructors enjoyed their projects and wanted to continue to offer them in the future, perhaps in large part due to the support of their chairs. Enthusiasm among instructors proved to be a precondition for success of the project, particularly given the time commitment. To some extent, the extra time can be offset with extra teaching assistant hours, but in any case the extra effort should be recognized.

Chairs also need to negotiate to obtain the kind of TAs that will be most well suited to writing development (see below).

Best Practice: One chair worked closely with the project in her department from its outset. There were 2 sessions held before classes begin for, respectively, the instructors and the TAs to introduce the criterion-based marking process. At the end of the course the chair convened a meeting of all instructors involved to enable them to share insights and determine what changes should be made. The project helped to build a sense of cohort among instructors and engaged TAs in the broader objective of making our students better writers.

2. Selection of Courses/Mode of Delivery of Writing Development

The projects spanned a wide variety of courses, from fourth year seminars for specialists to large introductory multi-section courses. Perhaps surprisingly, large courses were as successful, if not more so, in their projects because of the vigilance of the course coordinators in fostering the writing development objectives. The following is a summary of some of the main strategies used, most in combination.

Criterion-based Assessment: Many of the projects used a method called criterion-based assessment. Instructors develop a clear set of criteria to be used in assessment of writing tasks, train the TAs to work with the model, and inform students of the criteria. Cleo Boyd, director of
the Academic Skills Centre, can provide information to those interested in exploring this model of assessment as well as guidance on the integration of other writing development strategies into curricula. One of the overwhelming benefits of this approach is the fact that it gives students a very clear idea of what is expected of them. Students who are intimidated by writing often claim that they are not clear what their instructor’s expectations are or indeed why they received the grade they did. Criterion-based assessment helps to allay some of this anxiety (and minimizes the incidence of students’ querying the grades they receive).

**Intensified use of TAs:** Most courses had increased TA hours, enabling TAs to:
- i) undergo more intense training on the requirements of the writing project and their role in it
- ii) meet more frequently with students in the course
- iii) meet more frequently with the course instructor or course team
- iv) spend more time marking and providing more detailed feedback. It is crucial that TAs provide not only more frequent feedback, but also feedback focused on improving writing skills.

**Enhanced Focus on Writing Instruction in Class:** Instructors who did not follow the criterion-based assessment model and adopted a more ‘holistic’ or ‘intuitive’ approach still worked vigorously to communicate to students what constituted good writing in their subject and crafted their assignments to elicit progressively more refined writing as the course unfolded.

**Re-drafting:** This is a very popular technique, designed to encourage students to gain a better understanding of the writing process and to produce a piece of work for which they receive feedback, but which carries little weight in the derivation of the final grade. In redrafting, students submit what is supposed to be a relatively sound first draft and receive guided feedback for improvement. Using this feedback, they then submit a final draft. Some instructors who used this technique concluded that it was a good idea to give some kind of a grade for drafts (or even a fixed grade for submitting a draft). One instructor found that some students submitted sloppy first drafts requiring significant improvement because they did not contribute toward the final grade.

3. Teaching Assistants

The selection and training of TAs is another critical factor and in many cases the high quality of the TAs was pivotal to the success of the project. In many disciplines, TAs with the skills to assess writing and with an interest in being involved in a project like this are in short supply. Nonetheless, having properly trained TAs who understand the criteria being used for grading and performance was incredibly important to the success of these projects. *It is critical that you build time into the TA contract for all of the responsibilities related to writing development, including more time for meetings with students and with course instructors, training, and more time for marking.*

**Training of TAs:** In order to win students’ trust and make them more confident about writing, you want TAs who clearly understand the expectations for grading, having similar standards and provide students with constructive feedback direction about their writing. TAs must also focus on the course’s writing objectives when covering writing assignments in their tutorials.

**Investment in TAs:** Increased resources are generally required for writing-intensive courses principally because markers need to provide more instruction, feedback, and meaningful direction, and spend more time meeting with students.
Encouraging Students to Make Use of their TAs: Many students commented at the end of the writing project that they wanted to have more opportunities to meet or communicate with their TAs about their writing; other students did not make the most of the TA support that was available. Create opportunities for interaction with TAs and encourage students to use them, perhaps by impressing upon them the positive implications for their writing performance.

Development of Feedback Mechanisms about TA Performance/Attention to feedback from students (see next section for more on this point): Some instructors invited feedback about TAs partway through the course and used this feedback to help them to use their TAs more effectively in the writing project. One instructor invited students to see her if they had concerns and consequently learned of dissatisfaction with one TA’s marking style, a problem which was rectified very quickly. Other instructors ‘checked’ some of the TAs marked assignments to see what kind of feedback was being given to students. Another department chair distributed year-end student evaluations for TAs, which in turn informed the design of that department’s 2006-07 project.

Best Practice: One instructor of a very large first year class, in addition to putting together a manual for the TAs in the course, ensured that TAs new to criterion-based marking ‘practice marked’ former tests to ensure that TAs are grading based on the same principles. Throughout the course, means and standard deviations were always calculated for each TA’s grades to ensure that grading remained similar throughout the course. Students with poor grades during the course were directed to the Academic Skills Centre or to a facilitated study group. As part of the final assignment, a statistical research report, students were urged to review their work with the instructor and TAs. In general, because of the rewriting process and because of the 2 months given to the project, students generally received their best grades on this project, often producing clear and concise work.

4. Instructors, Course Management, and Assignments:

The most successful writing projects had instructors who were enthusiastic, understood the project’s purpose, did not view it as an ‘add-on’ to the normal course curriculum, and were prepared to take on the additional commitment of time involved in making a writing-intensive course a success.

Assignments: Assignments must set out clear expectations for students and highlight the writing criteria central to the evaluation of the project. For example, if good organization was the most important criterion, this should be clear in your guidelines and markers should be most attentive to this feature of writing.

Communication between TAs and Instructors: A few of our projects hit some rough spots when TAs were delivering feedback that was not conducive to the success of the project. Instructors need to ensure that TAs are delivering focused feedback and effective instruction in a way that furthers the goals of the project – and make students want to write and to become better writers.

Instructors should be prepared to meet with their TAs at well chosen points in the course, i.e. at the outset of the course, just prior to an assignment deadline, or just following the marking of one.

Complementary Activities and Support Services: Many of the project leaders worked closely with the Academic Skills Centre in the design of their projects, training of TAs, mid-course
evaluations and correction, and other activities. Instructors also used techniques such as the following in tandem with carefully devised writing assignments:

1) Using a writing manual, such as “Writing in the Social Sciences” (similar guides were offered in humanities courses)
2) Providing writing workshops. One course provided these to cover: a) developing a thesis; b) supporting an argument; c) referencing; and d) structure.
3) One instructor brought in a representative from the textbook company to help students learn how to use on-line resources in support of their work; in another other course, tutorials/workshops were provided on higher-level library skills and the skills associated with writing of a research article.
5. Some General Tips, Strategies and Observations

i) **Mid-course correction:** As the course unfolds, you might find that the criterion you first thought was most important (i.e. grammar) turns out to be less significant than other criteria, such as organization. Adjust your criteria accordingly. Similarly, your writing assignments might yield other skill deficiencies (i.e. reading, critical thinking, etc.) that must be addressed before students can rise to the challenge of the assignments you created (or lead you to scale back your writing expectations).

ii) **Scheduling of Assignments:** If you expect students to use the feedback from the previous assignment or a draft, it is critical that there is sufficient room in your syllabus for students to remedy problems that are identified. As noted elsewhere, sometimes assignments yield the need for further remediation, such as a workshop on research techniques, before students can begin their next assignment. Use of electronic submission and return of drafts or essays (for instance through UTM Submit) can expedite this process, but will require training for TAs and some instruction for students. This can be supplied through the UTM library.

iii) **Integrating more writing requirements in the course does not necessarily work in and of itself.** There has be some form of writing instruction, writing feedback, and clear articulation in advance of students writing the assignments what the assessment criteria will be and a clear description of the assignment expectations and requirements.

iv) **Some Additional In-Course Strategies that proved successful:**

   *Examples of good writing are often helpful.* Students can often benefit by seeing examples of good writing and having their TA or instructor deconstruct them to illustrate the constituents of a good piece of work.

   *Frequent smaller assignments often work better.* Students often find writing assignments, particularly in first year, daunting in themselves. Giving them shorter assignments with well punctuated feedback helps them both to improve their writing and to become more comfortable with the writing process.

v) **Stumbling blocks:** Reading turned out to be the critical problem in some projects. In many cases, students’ writing is not improving because they are not reading effectively the material being assigned and the requirements for the assignment. They are unable to follow the arguments presented in the text, interpret graphical information, and/or attain even a basic grasp of a proper experimental design. In one course, students’ reading deficiencies were so weak that the writing project was not successful. Consult with Cleo Boyd if you encounter this problem.

vi) **Final observations:** Don’t be overly optimistic. Take one step, focusing on one particular element of good writing and giving students time to practice it. Departments found that in some cases writing proficiency progressed from poor to acceptable; in one project students’ organization of their argument improved but there was little improvement in other basic writing skills.

As with all writing assignments, it is important to be vigilant about plagiarism, perhaps using resources such as turnitin.com.