

Report on the Department of Visual Studies Writing Initiative, 2014–15

Submitted by Alison Syme to the RGASC, Mar. 27, 2015

The Department of Visual Studies Writing Initiative focused on three large first-year courses: FAH101: Introduction to Art History, CIN101: Introduction to Cinema Studies, and VCC101: Introduction to Visual Culture. The way writing was taught differed in each course. I will address the diverse approaches and what we learned from them in FAH101 and CIN101 in turn. (As the term is not over, I do not have feedback on VCC101 yet. I will send comments later.) I also include TA feedback on the Writing Training they received from the RGASC.

FAH101:

Following the model that has been used in the DVS for years, the writing initiative in FAH101 consisted of Dr. Michael Kaler offering one hour per week of writing instruction, Writing TA Training for the course TAs, and TA hours for marking special writing exercises. Dr. Kaler summarised his comparison of students' diagnostic papers at the start of the course with their final papers as follows:

Thesis Statements: All but one of the students used a thesis statement in the first paper, indicating that they at least understood the concept. In all but two of the cases, the thesis statements were better in ways corresponding to what we discussed in class—clearer and more detailed—in the second papers; in the two where the statements were worse (less clear or vague), this could be attributed to the authors trying to get too fancy in language and/or saying too much and losing control of their sentences.

Topic Sentences: Unlike thesis statements, these were not all used in the first essay, suggesting that students had not internalized them as aspects of academic writing enough to spontaneously produce them. All the students used them in the final paper, and while they were not all used imaginatively, all students understood the basic idea.

Integrating Evidence: The students were taught the ICE (introduce, cite, explain) method for using evidence in their writing. Little evidence was used in the first paper, as students hadn't had time to prepare; in the second paper, those students who used evidence (not all did) tended to do better at C and E than I in their presentations.

Development: Few students paid much attention to developing the ideas in their essay in the first example—again, not surprising, given that they had no time to prepare for it. In the final test, most of the students showed that they at least understood the need for some kind of development in their writing. I saw a few cases of rote application of transitional expressions and structuring by paragraph; I also saw one use of the hamburger format that nonetheless made that format work through clear organization and signposting. In addition to this, several of the papers I read showed more original and nuanced approaches to development of their thoughts.

Grammar/Sentence Structure: Students who were good writers here stayed at approx. the same level in terms of mechanical things, although a greater degree of polish was apparent in the final test writing. Several of the weaker students improved, in a couple of cases tremendously, and two ELL students made huge strides in terms

of comfort with English structures (in one case) and in terms of greatly decreased use of first-language (French) structures and organization.

Dr. Kaler was “very pleased with the improvement displayed in students’ writing,” noting that “discussions of specific issues, and the extra practice in writing, played a part in improving the students’ understanding of academic writing, and their ability to perform it.” However, Dr. Kaler suggested that more time should be spent on grammar/sentence-level issues and on writing and revision exercises that would allow for “ongoing implicit lessons in the importance of editing and proofreading.” He noted that making effective use of evidence was one of the students’ biggest challenges, so developing exercises to hone this skill will be important for the next iteration of the module.

The TAs for FAH101 commented on different aspects of the initiative. One found the “ticket out the door” exercise particularly useful. Another thought the plagiarism quiz was successful “and interesting to mark and discuss with the students.” They all found the revision assignment very valuable as it “forced the students to work to really integrate and edit changes to their papers;” the students took it “very seriously” and many of them “significantly improved the original essay.” One TA mentioned that there was not enough time allotted to the reading portion of the quizzes asking students to paraphrase key exercises from a given text, noting that while “ELL students often seemed to struggle with this the most,” native English speakers also had difficulty. This seems easily fixable with more time or shorter texts. The TAs also mentioned logistical concerns about the coordination of the writing lectures and the tutorial exercises: a need for clearer communication, more appropriate selection of reading paragraphs, and a common understanding of the goals of various exercises. Some of these problems improved after several weeks and more meetings. More coordination before the term begins next time will hopefully alleviate most of these problems. Another concern the TAs had was that they received no specific guidance in the Writing TA Training Program on how to deal with the problems of ELL students. Overall, however, the TAs found the writing initiative component of the course rewarding and effective.

Suggestions for Next Year: It would be ideal if the same person could teach both the Art History and the Writing Initiative components of FAH101. Given the unlikelihood of this happening, we need to work on integrating the Writing Initiative more organically with the rest of the course. With sufficient notice and guidance, for example, the Art History instructor could select paragraphs for the reading exercise(s). More communication between the entire teaching team should help keep everyone focused on the same goals and ameliorate logistical problems. As outlined in our proposal for next year, we have plans for integrating more grammar exercises into the module. Our TAs definitely need more specific, practical strategies to deal with ELL issues, so we request that this be covered in the Writing TA Training in the fall.

CIN101:

The TAs for CIN101 received Writing TA Training from the RGASC. In the course, and

following the advice of Dr. Tyler Evans-Tokaryk, two tutorials were devoted to writing instruction and exercises, and a revision exercise of the students' first papers was assigned. At the end of the term, a grammar and paragraph structure quiz was given.

The CIN101 instructor found that the writing component put “too much pressure on the assignment structure and content of sessions for the class; it was just one thing too many to incorporate since [the students] really need tutorial time to address questions about the readings and ideas introduced in lectures.” However, as a Department we are committed to trying to address the writing problems of our incoming students—even if it means sacrificing essential class time to this project. Although relatively little can be accomplished in this format—the FAH101 writing module, while also not ideal, is much more effective—both the TAs and the instructor did think that the students benefitted from the revision assignment, so we will keep this in place next year. One problem that arose, however, was that the TAs received mixed messages from the RGASC and the instructor on feedback and assignment sheets, so for next year we will have to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

The CIN101 end-of-term quiz demonstrated that all of our students require basic grammar instruction: virtually every student failed. The quiz, designed by Dr. Kaler and modified by me (to make it even easier and more comprehensible for the students), showed how much remedial work needs to be done. As we do not have time to do this in tutorials, we hope to strengthen the effect of the writing training by asking all students to complete the revised grammar workshops and quizzes on the DVS Blackboard Organisation in addition to the writing exercises in the course.

Suggestions for Next Year: In addition to the revision exercise, we need to ensure that students receive grammar instruction. We also need to ensure that the instructions given by the RGASC and the faculty member teaching the course are not in conflict.

Writing TA Training Program

We consider the Writing TA Training Program a valuable resource. The TAs for the various DVS courses all agreed they benefitted from the training; several mentioned learning how to give effective feedback on papers and how to write clear assignment sheets as highlights. However, the TAs did have some constructive criticism to offer, which we hope will be taken into consideration when planning the fall training sessions.

The Sales Pitch: “many of the TAs [felt] that the two-day session was too focused on explaining why we were at the session (i.e., selling us on the idea of teaching writing).” “Talking about the philosophy of teaching TAs how to teach writing [was] not helpful.” “Too much of the training seems to focus on a defence of the approach to the training.”

ELL and Diversity Issues: “We were given no satisfactory strategies for what I continue to see as one of our biggest and ever growing challenges—working to teach writing to ‘English language learners.’” “I was also disappointed with the advice from the ELL rep ... about equity and international students. Her comments about being

sympathetic and sensitive to their needs were too vague to be of help.” “The most useless and frustrating part of the training was a one hour lecture on the diversity of U of T from a Prof new to the school. For those of us who have been studying and teaching at U of T for years, this was not news, and felt like a condescending waste of time.”

Grammar: “During the training session devoted to these issues many other grad students expressed a lot of concern about not knowing anything about grammar based on their Ontario high school curriculum. This is a big concern. In my opinion, it really helps to just cover what the rules are for colons, semi-colons, dangling modifiers, etc.”*

Exercises: “The ‘practical exercises’ portion could be much stronger than in its current form.”

*Please note that I conveyed an identical concern about the lack of grammar instruction from the TAs when the training was offered the previous year. I am dismayed to hear that this aspect of the training has not been improved.

Concluding Remarks:

I am grateful that the Department of Visual Studies received funding for its 2014–15 Writing Initiative and hope that we will be funded next year as well. However, I want to remind the RGASC and UTM that the level of remedial instruction our students actually require is beyond what any of these band-aid solutions can address. Since the university has decided to download responsibility for the writing problems of our incoming students onto departmental TAs (for the most part), this means departments either have to sacrifice essential class time in a twelve-week term to writing instruction or add hours onto courses (if we are lucky enough to receive funding for a one-hour-per-week writing lecture). I remind the university that almost all of the institutions it considers its “peers” have mandatory writing courses, and that we need them too.