

Report on the Department of Visual Studies Writing Initiative, 2015–16

Submitted by Alison Syme to the RGASC, May 1, 2016

The Department of Visual Studies Writing Initiative focused on four large first-year courses: FAH101: Introduction to Art History, two iterations of CIN101: Introduction to Cinema Studies (offered in the fall and winter terms), and VCC101: Introduction to Visual Culture. The way writing was taught differed somewhat in each course. In what follows you will find the course instructors' reports, feedback from TAs, and concluding remarks.

FAH101H5F: INTRODUCTION TO ART HISTORY

Bernice Iarocci, Instructor (lectures and Writing Initiative tutorials)

The Role of the Writing Initiative Module in FAH101

The Writing Initiative Module for FAH101 consisted of a weekly, one-hour tutorial (referred to here as the "WI tutorial"). The Writing Module was worth 15% of the final grade. The rest of the course included a two-hour lecture and one hour supplementary tutorial (the "regular tutorial"), both held weekly. All these components of the course were closely related to one another, to a great extent because I taught both the lectures and the WI tutorials, and I was in constant contact with the four TAs for the course.

The WI tutorials were intended to boost the students' overall writing abilities and target more specific skills related to the course's two written assignments. These two papers were a visual analysis of a work from the Art Gallery of Ontario and a critical analysis of an assigned reading. In the latter paper, the students were also required to relate the reading to an assigned work of art. Given our results and student feedback, it is my belief that the WI tutorial was a valuable and successful addition to FAH101 and it should be continued. If this year's design for the Module is followed in the future, I would suggest a few changes, which are outlined below.

Grammar Instruction

At the beginning of the course, there were three weeks of grammar instruction in the WI tutorial. This component was designed in conjunction with the RGASC. For the three tutorials, I adapted powerpoints on grammar that were designed by the team at the RGASC. These powerpoints involved instruction and quizzing that allowed for student interaction and discussion. They were also posted on Blackboard so that students could review them. Laura Taylor, Assistant Professor at the RGASC, furthermore helped me set up a series of online quizzes that were accessible to the students on Blackboard. By the end of the three-week period, the students were required to complete nine of the quizzes with perfect scores. The students were allowed to take the quizzes as many times as were necessary to get 100% on each. I believe this grammar section was successful (see **Results** below).

Types of sources (Recommendation: in the future, change to Types of Writing)

One of the WI tutorials was dedicated to clarifying the differences between primary and secondary sources, and it addressed how they are used and cited in scholarly writing. Both types of sources were found in the course reading, thus this topic was directly relevant to the course material. That said, in the future I would probably shift this topic to a regular tutorial and devote this WI tutorial slot to different types of university papers. In my considerable experience teaching first-year undergraduate students, many students, if not most, enter university believing that all papers require a thesis statement. Many also think that papers necessarily require research. It therefore would be highly useful to introduce students to different types of writing. The latter is especially apropos to FAH101, because our assignments involve visual analysis and a critical reading analysis. The RGASC website also includes some excellent material that can help develop this topic.

Essay Writing Guidelines and Skills

Besides the one session taken up with a test, at the end of the term, the remainder of our tutorials had to do with essay writing. The topics included **Academic Integrity and Citation, Thesis Statements, Paragraph Structure, Essay Structure, Editing, and Argumentation**. For much of these sessions, I incorporated powerpoint material developed by Michael Kaler and others at the RGASC. If the Writing Module is repeated, I would keep all of these topics, except perhaps for Argumentation. It is certainly a fundamental skill, but more urgently needed, I believe, is further instruction on different forms of citation.

One session was devoted to Academic Integrity and Citation, but I would recommend that, in the future, these topics be spread over two sessions. Our consideration of academic integrity involved clarifying the differences between the summarizing, paraphrasing, and direct quotation of sources. Of all the topics we covered in the Writing Module, this one got the most positive verbal feedback from the students. In my experience, as well, the differences between these uses of sources need to be clarified when it comes to undergraduate writing. It also takes time to get students to understand the differences. Because the citation portion of this session was rushed, and it is also a crucial issue in essay writing that is very (if not, most) often done incorrectly, in the future I would spend a whole tutorial covering different forms of citation, including proper CMS note and bibliographic forms.

Results

With regards to the first three weeks of Grammar Instruction, only a handful of students did not complete all the required quizzes. I also received positive verbal feedback from a number of students regarding this part of the module. They said that, even if they had started the course with a basic knowledge of grammar, they still learned new rules, for instance, the proper uses of the semi-colon and colon. Many students also responded positively to learning about common errors in undergraduate writing, such as sentence fragments and comma splices. While for sure we continued to find these mistakes in the students' writing throughout the term, we did perceive a general improvement in grammar, measured between the first and second assignments.

I have reported some positive verbal feedback from the students regarding the sessions devoted to essay writing skills. It must be said, however, that when it came to evaluating differences between the first and second assignments for the course, improvement was difficult to gauge because the assignments were of different types. We did not see an obvious overall improvement in paragraph structure. However, diagnostic tests were administered in the WI tutorial, at the beginning and end of the course. The same question was given to the students, and they were asked to write an essay response. While, admittedly, there is no way to prove that the writing module can take full credit for the improvements, it should be noted that around a quarter of the students wrote better responses in the second test. I noticed, in particular, better essay structure. Many students also wrote more. (They were given the same amount of time to write both tests.) Moreover, a few ELL students showed dramatic improvement in their writing skills. These results would perhaps be even better if attendance at the Writing Module tutorials could be boosted. Attendance started off well at the beginning, but then declined steadily as the term went on. I realize this typical for many courses, but perhaps holding weekly or bi-weekly quizzes -- that count towards the final grade, and in-lieu of one, big final test -- would give more students incentive to attend class.

The results of the final test for the WI tutorial were also positive. The test covered material from throughout the term and it included a passage that the students were required to edit and correct. They were also asked to explain their work. Out of 150 students who took the test, 65 (over a third of the class) received 80% or higher and only 32 failed.

I strongly believe that the Writing Module is a valuable part of FAH101. Its very existence tells students that the DVS sees the quality of their writing as crucial to the success of their education. If the Module is repeated next year, besides the few changes noted above, I would advise keeping the same topics for the WI tutorials. I would also strongly recommend adding more in-class writing and/or take-home writing that is assigned in the WI tutorials. The latter assignments could be submitted and discussed in the regular tutorials, and their content could overlap with the week's regular tutorial material. This would even further integrate the WI tutorials with the rest of the course.

[Note: Because Dr. Iarocci's account is so thorough, I did not ask the FAH101 TAs for additional input. For the other first-year courses, I did ask TAs for input as the course instructors were not as involved in the implementation of the Writing Initiative.]

VCC101H5S: Introduction to Visual Studies

Prof. Kajri Jain

Our major use of the Writing Initiative hours was to implement revisions on our two writing assignments, the first compulsory and the second optional. The TAs devoted time during the tutorials to grammatical issues, particularly in the lead-up to revising the first assignment. Tutorial time was also devoted to other aspects of the assignments. I think what we had this year is the minimum in terms of what's needed for next year (in part

because we can't always count on our TAs to be well informed or conscientious about helping with writing). My impression is that the writing revision exercise is very valuable for getting students thinking about addressing their writing skills and identifying some basic mistakes, and of course in demonstrating the improvement that revisions make possible.

Feedback from VCC101 TAs:

Akshaya Tankha: In my opinion, the writing initiative was quite useful for the students. Some of my students showed a marked improvement in their writing over the course of the term. Others managed to correct certain errors while continuing to repeat mistakes in other areas that had been highlighted earlier. Still others managed to commit new errors in their efforts to overhaul their writing style, which demonstrated an eagerness to respond to the initiative. That, in my opinion, was the biggest take away from the initiative. The students appeared to be invested in engaging with the challenge and came away a little more conscious about the process of writing, even if they didn't manage to show marked improvements.

A little over 50% of my students submitted the optional paper re-write. I suspect the main inspiration here was a chance to improve their marks. But even so, to do so at a busy time during the semester was impressive.

I learnt a lot from the writing training at the beginning of the term. It helped me devise ways in which to engage the students in the hour-long tutorials and respond to their queries and concerns in a measured capacity. Specifically, the workshop gave me greater perspective on how to approach marking and commenting on student essays. In this regard, the only concern I had was that the RGASC approach to marking added an extra 15–20 minutes to the time assigned for each paper. So while I finished the semester feeling really good about having done the workshop and learning from it, I also realized that I spent several additional hours grading papers.

Going forward, my suggestion would be that the TAs' hours should be increased for the same volume of work since a greater focus on writing and commenting on mistakes rather than correcting them in the process of checking adds more time to the grading process.

Luke Kuplowsky: In regards to our training, I found it very productive and insightful. It always benefits to re-frame the habits we fall into when marking and the training opened up different ideas to what types/approaches to marking yield the most productive responses in a student. The writing exercise did benefit the students who were actively engaged in the course. In my tutorials, I found the top 4 or 5 students learned a lot from the exercise, as marking grammar on students papers is often largely ignored when there is no expectation of returning to it. The rest of the students either changed so little, or kept making different mistakes that it didn't seem to address the larger problems in their writing habits. As for the second paper revision, I had about 11 out of 30 students complete it. Once again engaged students improved problems of rhetoric and grammar,

while others handed in near identical versions of their first paper with marginal changes. The one problem I found overall with the writing initiative, is that our TA grading hours did not take into account how extensive it would be to mark the papers in a way that alerted them to specific grammar mistakes.

Candice Bogdanski: For the second rewrite, 20 of my students took advantage of the revision opportunity (so just under 2/3).

The initiative had both pros and cons in my opinions. While students were able to respond to and often correct grammatical errors that I noted clearly in their writing, I am not sure that it provided enough of a learning experience for them to improve their writing the second time around. In fact, when they took to rewriting portions of their paper (rather than just correcting single words), they often came with new errors.

We used an abbreviation key (developed by the head TA and revised by each TA), so perhaps this would be a useful resource to provide in advance and perhaps require students to append to their papers so that they can potentially check their writing against the list of errors in advance of the first submission.

Evaluating the first round of both assignments was extremely time-consuming, and I know that most of us exhausted our allocated hours in the process. I also worried that the second round of papers didn't necessarily represent complete or final drafts, with students knowing that they could revise and improve their grade later in the term. Future TA contracts for this course should definitely include more hours to reflect the time required to grade these assignments in such detail.

The TA training was effective (and I am also a writing instructor at the RGASC, so I tried to emphasize the value of our resources for the VCC students). That being said, it seemed to confuse our roles – suggesting that we were 'writing TAs' rather than TAs with a high volume of written assignments in the course.

My only other concern relates to the separation of grammar editing from content revision. Perhaps this exercise is valuable for the first assignment and its revision, but it may be more relevant to allow students not only to improve their formal writing skills but also to express their ideas more clearly and accurately through grammatically correct prose in the second critical reading paper. While I certainly place heavy emphasis on the importance of proper grammar and spelling, I think that it is also necessary to note that good writing is strongest when it is a clear representation of the student's ideas and understanding of the topic at hand. That being said, I understand that this is only one course and that it is at the first-year level, so only so many initiatives can be enacted in an effective manner

Bernice Iarocci: The Writing Initiative for VCC101 involved extensive marking of grammar mistakes on the students' first papers. They then had to submit a revision, which we graded. The same process for the second paper was optional. As always, I think this is a very useful exercise for first year students, because it makes them aware that revision

can result in an enormous improvement in their work. At least some of them also learned some points regarding grammar and writing, not only because of the revision itself, but also because we spent a good part of one tutorial going over common mistakes together. (I should add, I think any straightforward grammar instruction is, generally speaking, well received by many of the students. They seem to want to learn it.)

There are a couple of cons to the revision process however, and I'll list them here:

1) for some reason, very few students did ALL the revisions I indicated on their papers. (Other TAs found the same thing happening with their groups.) For each student, we marked up the entire paper, indicating every point where there was a problem, and we also noted what the problem was -- comma splice, sentence fragment, punctuation, etc. I also provided each student with a key explaining what my markings meant. This was stapled to each paper. Yet, despite this silver platter of help, most students failed to do all the revisions. Rather puzzling and frustrating!

2) I am not sure that this exercise is helping many of the students who have very poor writing skills, including many ELL students. I think this kind of intervention just cannot get deep enough for them. Even if the student understands that they've written a sentence fragment, for instance, they are often still not able to correct it into a proper sentence. Unfortunately, very often, revisions for these students just result in more mistakes.

I'm sorry to say I don't know what the solutions to the above problems would be. The second seems especially difficult. I'm attending a writing-teaching workshop with Michael Kaler at the RGASC in early May, and we're supposed to bring some kind of exercise or assignment we typically do with our students. I might take this one, just to see if he or anyone else there has any ideas about it. As I've said, I do think, on the whole, many students learn from this exercise, so it's definitely worth trying to refine it.

CIN101H5F: Introduction to Cinema Studies (Fall 2015)

Prof. Meghan Sutherland

I used a couple of different approaches to incorporate the Writing Initiative into CIN101 coursework. First, I designed the three major writing assignments for the course to work in a larger progression that focused on the development of a different skill at each stage. A portion of tutorials focused on the corresponding skill in advance of each due date. The first assignment asked students to describe a scene from a list of possible films in close detail and stressed the importance of basic writing skills—grammar, most immediately, but also word choice and other elements of writing that distinguish a closely attentive description from a vague one. TAs went over some basic elements of sentence construction and led exercises in close description and avoiding generalizations during tutorials to clarify expectations. The second paper asked students to merge their skills of close description from the first assignment with the construction of a strong thesis in

another scene analysis. In the weeks leading up to the due date, TAs focused on the construction of a strong thesis statement in tutorials, but also incorporated a related writing exercise: students were asked to submit a typed summary of one of the readings assigned for class that week, and in it, to isolate a short passage they identify with the thesis statement and explain how the author used evidence to support it. The goal was to get them thinking critically about what makes a strong thesis and paying attention to examples of writing they had before them to do that; the assignment was marked. The third paper assignment completed this progression by asking students to incorporate references to scholarly research into a thesis-based analysis of multiple scenes from multiple films. In advance of the due date TAs led a tutorial in which they presented students with stronger and weaker thesis statements and asked students to explain what made them good or bad; they also went over proper citation formatting and tips about distinguishing scholarly from non-scholarly essays.

Feedback from Fall CIN101 TAs:

Lisa Peden: In terms of the writing initiative, my feeling (which I also confirmed by reviewing the grades) was that the writing and grades did not improve significantly. It may be because the re-write portion was not done in the fall, as we are now doing in the spring semester [see below]. Having been a TA in both courses, I believe the re-write seems to have had the most impact because it forces the students to stop, read and actually reflect on the comments for improvement the TA has made on their paper. Oftentimes, I see students just turn to the last page to see their grade, then put the paper down. However, I do not want to dismiss the importance of the step by step building nature of the written assignments in the fall. I believe this was helpful and overall grades did not seem to slip as much. Still, there wasn't a great improvement in the grades/writing throughout the semester.

As far as the writing training with Michael Kaler, I can honestly say it was one of the best training sessions I have ever attended. I have attended endless sessions like this and usually find them disappointing. However, Michael's approach and ideas were unique. As well, working with the two other TAs at the outset of the course so closely, with Michael's guidance, generated a lot of good discussion and ideas. Tyler came in and gave a short presentation in the afternoon, but I did not find this helpful. It seemed rushed and rehearsed and I personally did not get much out of it. Overall, though, the day was very productive and Michael was excellent.

Cooper Long: I can say that I have strongly positive feelings towards my involvement with the Writing Initiative Program last fall. In fact, I think the training that was administered by the RGASC (and by Michael Kaler and Tyler Evans-Tokaryk, specifically) was the most helpful TA training that I have ever received.

I particularly benefited from the suggestion to include semi-frequent "low stakes" writing tasks in tutorial. I found this to be an excellent way to give students practice writing, and also to stimulate participation in discussion, since more reticent students can read what they have written, rather than just extemporizing. I also appreciated our discussion,

during training, about what types of feedback are most helpful to burgeoning student writers.

I suppose that the question of whether I observed evidence of student improvement is a more difficult one. It's hard for me to say whether students improved as a result of any specific Writing Initiative components, or just as a natural result of acquiring more practice at academic writing. That said, once again, I think that my use of more writing-based exercises in tutorial made for significantly more varied and engaging sessions, so I feel that students certainly benefited from my writing training, albeit somewhat indirectly.

CIN101H5S: Introduction to Cinema Studies (Winter 2016)

Prof. Matt Stoddard

Here is a summary of Writing Initiative efforts in CIN101 this term.

February 12: rewrite of first paper. (Students were given a week to revise their first papers based on feedback from their TAs. The mark for the rewrite--10% of the final mark--was separate from the mark for the original version.)

February 26: Writing Workshop 1 in tutorial. (Discussion of a sample film review in preparation for the second paper assignment, which asked students to write their own film review.)

March 18: 50 min presentation in lecture by Michael Kaler (Writing Specialist, Academic Skills Centre) on writing a critical essay, with special attention to the elements of a good thesis statement. Slides from the presentation were then posted on Blackboard.

March 18: Writing Workshop 2 in tutorial. (Discussion of a sample critical essay in preparation for the final paper.)

Three papers in all (not including the rewrite), with increasing word count requirement and increasing weight given to interpretation rather than description.

For the writing workshops, all tutorials discussed the same materials. However, I allowed each TA to approach this material in whatever specific fashion they saw fit.

Feedback from Winter CIN101 TAs:

Lisa Peden: In terms of the re-write, I believe it provided an excellent opportunity for students to improve their writing in many ways. For example, because the students needed the feedback to complete the re-write, I could see from the re-write that most of the students had actually spent time reading my comments in detail. This, in turn, resulted in some excellent re-writes with some students' grades going from the C+ range to the A-range due to the improved quality in writing. Some students (but this was the minority) did some basic superficial changes and those grades remained the same. However, overall, there was a significant increase in the quality of writing and the grades.

In terms of the writing workshops, this time was invaluable as we were able to focus on assignments and writing specifically in tutorial. After we reviewed the assignment, and I provided some instruction, students wrote “practice” thesis statements, paragraphs, etc. (depending on the assignment) and then we peer edited each other. It was incredible to hear students actually saying “that thesis would be stronger if...” or “that thesis is strong because...” and I was so pleased because they seemed to actually be getting it! They were understanding how/where their writing was weak or strong, what was missing, what was good, etc. Again, because we were able to devote the entire tutorial to this, I feel we were able to really work through some issues in their writing at a pace that allowed students to ask questions, as well as to stop and think about what was really being asked of them for the upcoming assignment and how to go about writing it. I think this provides a strong writing foundation for first year students.

Somrata Sarkar: The Paper One Rewrite, on the whole, allowed students to meaningfully improve their writing. While there was a range in the quality of the changes, overall, it appears students were enthusiastic towards the opportunity to improve their work. One student took the initiative to rework the entire structure of her paper so that it could more effectively convey her observations; this resulted in a greater degree of clarity and flow in her writing. The tutorial workshops also allowed me to elaborate on common grammatical issues found in student papers and address what could be done to resolve such issues. Some of these challenges existed in incorrect semi-colon usage, sentence structure (i.e. use of run on sentences), and dangling modifiers. The students seemed more comfortable with these concepts after the session, or in the least, aware that these are issues to be mindful of when writing. The workshops generated many useful questions from students as well, particularly towards thesis construction and how to make claims more nuanced.

Overall, it seems those who are interested in improvement will take advantage of the Writing Development initiatives that are offered by the Department of Visual Studies. Perhaps those who still struggle with their writing style may benefit from participating in smaller group workshops that more specifically address their writing needs.

Judith Lemieux: For Paper One, students had to write a brief description of a scene, using the terminology learned in the course. For this assignment, I was more lenient with grammar and style, placing more emphasis on students’ mastery of the terms and their attention to the details of the scene.

I will say that most students showed great improvement in the rewrites; I could tell if they went back and watched the clip again, if they actually made an effort to revise and improve their assessment of the scene. Of course, some students only revised the areas I pointed out to them. One thing I would do differently next time is emphasize the importance of going back and re-reading their work, and stress that they aim to improve the strength of their ideas as a whole, not just scan for the areas marked up by their TA. One recurring issue is that students will only look to improve what their TA points out to them, and not take initiative on their own. Students still need to learn that it’s their job to improve their work as well.

For the workshops, the TAs drew from the course textbook, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*, which offered guidelines on how to write a film review, and a critical essay. I drew from these chapters, but also from the material included in the Writing TA Training Resources stick, given to us by Michael Kaler when we had our training. These materials were very helpful in that they outlined the basic components of good writing/critical reading, and I integrated the information in tutorial.

With the second paper, the film review, overall students followed the guidelines of the assignment. It's a little difficult to tell if students improved, because the second paper required a different approach to the material, with more emphasis on evaluation/critical engagement of a film. I noticed that students understood the assignment, but the trouble spots had to do with critical engagement.

Ultimately, students can't be expected to master the tips we give them on how to improve their writing; this comes with exposure to academic writing (reading scholarly essays) and their own writing efforts throughout University. This is why assigning a rewrite is a good idea, because it requires students to actively review/assess the strengths and weaknesses of their writing.

Conclusion:

The reports from instructors and TAs suggest the importance of continuing the DVS Writing Initiative as well as ways to improve it next year; they also suggest the continuing challenges ELL students face and create in our classrooms. The comments from TAs and instructors about the need for more TA hours are of particular concern to me, as the DVS Writing Initiative budget was already cut back last year. While I would like to discuss strategies to improve the way some of our assignments are designed and graded with the RGASC, here are some plans for next year:

- revision exercises in all of our first-year courses (the instructor who did not include a revision exercise is on leave next year)
- continued emphasis on grammar but some changes to the way the first paper in VCC101 is graded
- more effort to integrate the ELL Initiative (run in part with Dr. Laura Taylor) with our first-year courses so that ELL students can receive the benefit of additional language instruction and practice