

DVS Writing Initiative 2016–17, Final Report

Submitted by Alison Syme, DVS Chair, to the RGASC, May 7, 2017

The Department of Visual Studies 2016–17 Writing Initiative focused on three large first-year courses: FAH101H5F: Introduction to Art History, CIN101H5F: Introduction to Cinema Studies, and VCC101H5S: Introduction to Visual Culture. In what follows you will find brief descriptions of how the Writing Initiative was structured in each course, and reports from the instructor or head TA. Concluding remarks reflect on some of the new challenges we encountered this year and include suggestions for next year.

FAH101: INTRODUCTION TO ART HISTORY

Dr. Betsy Purvis, Instructor (lectures and Writing Initiative module)

The Writing Initiative Module for FAH101 consisted of a weekly, one-hour lecture devoted to writing instruction in addition to the regular course lecture and tutorials. The Writing Module was worth 15% of the final grade. The writing instruction offered was intended to boost the students' basic understanding of grammar and overall writing abilities, as well as target 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 an article analysis. Students were required to take and pass all of the RGASC's online grammar workshops and quizzes by October 9. The first writing assignment included a revision exercise.

Instructor's Report:

Overall, the Writing Module lectures were well-attended and students were engaged. The first several classes were geared toward practice for the first writing assignment, which was a short visual analysis of a work of art. On our first meeting, we did an initial dry run of a visual analysis in class as a writing bench mark for the students and then had a second Writing Module lesson dedicated to the language and vocabulary of visual analysis. This material was further reinforced in the FAH101 tutorial.

Subsequently, in preparation for both the writing and revision exercise of their visual analysis assignment, we had several classes dedicated to exercises that allowed the students to more actively use what they were learning in the Blackboard Grammar Module workshops and quizzes. In these exercises, students identified errors in sentences and then found ways to correct and rewrite them. After completing the exercises, the students then did peer marking of one another's papers, and we finished with me going over solutions I had formulated to the problem sentences. These sentence-based exercises then progressed into work on short paragraphs. Many students found this helpful in terms of reinforcing grammar, punctuation, and spelling basics as well as proofreading skills. The results showed in the students' marks for the visual analysis and its revision. Overall the marks increased from an average of 69% for the original submission to an average of 73% for the revision. Furthermore, from the first benchmark visual analysis done in class

to the visual analysis component of the final Writing Module test, there was also noticeable improvement.

The second half of the Writing Module focused on technical aspects of writing – organization, thesis statements, and citations/plagiarism. Judging from the responses during the in-class work we did on the last two sections (thesis statements and citations/plagiarism) this was an area that was in need of improvement. In general, the second essay (a textual analysis of a piece of art historical scholarship) showed improvements in these technical areas of writing, thanks to class and the Blackboard workshops and quizzes. However, marks overall were lower on this assignment (average 66%), which was mostly due to deficiencies in engaging in an analytical, critical reading of the scholarship. Nonetheless, students’ understanding of what constitutes plagiarism (and proper citing) was noticeably improved in terms of their performance on the final Writing Module test as well.

Overall, the in-class Writing Module course and the online Blackboard Grammar workshops and quizzes proved to be useful didactic tools, which ultimately helped to improve student writing in demonstrable ways. In my course evaluations, several students expressed regret that there was not more time and teaching dedicated to different types of art writing and analysis. This would not really be possible without creating an entire class devoted to writing. For students who are already at an intermediate to advanced level with their first-year writing skills, such a class would be extremely valuable. For English language learners, who were many in this class, a writing intensive course of this type would be a challenge, though perhaps of use if adequate supplementary ELL support and tutoring were made available. On that point, based on feedback from our ELL tutor (Dr. Laura Taylor), the course-related ELL tutorials for FAH101 and CIN101 were very useful for those who attended. One unfortunate aspect of the ELL tutorial this year simply had to do with scheduling of these two classes. Many ELL students lamented that they were unable to attend the ELL tutorial because of the overlapping FAH101 and CIN101 lecture and tutorial schedules.¹

In summation, the material covered in the Writing Module had an overall positive impact on the students’ work in measurable ways. I would recommend maintaining and, if possible in the future, even expanding this program.

--Dr. Betsy Purvis

¹ Note from AS: these two classes and their respective ELL tutorials were originally scheduled to be held on different days, but they had to be moved to the same day due to UTM space and scheduling constraints. Unless courses get moved around again, FAH101 and CIN101 should be on different days during the Fall 2017 semester.

CIN101: AN INTRODUCTION TO CINEMA STUDIES

Prof. Matt Stoddard, Instructor; Dr. Christopher Rowe, head TA

Scope of the Writing Initiative in CIN101

The Writing Initiative in CIN101 included a revision workshop and exercise, other writing-focused tutorials, and an extra credit reflection assignment.

Head TA's Report:

Revision Workshop and Revision of Paper One – This tutorial exercise and attendant resubmission of the first paper was a highly successful initiative, combining as it did a group-study approach in a classroom setting with an applied out-of-class exercise in such a way that it enabled students to a) reflect upon and self-correct their issues with written expression; b) participate in an object lesson on the importance of editing their own work; and c) receive direct grading incentives for writing-focused work. It was well worth setting the time aside in tutorial to go over the corrections and comments on the paper, complete the exercises on the handout clarifying the issues to be addressed in the revision, and exchange these (and papers) with a fellow student in order to receive different perspectives on the kinds of issues that crop up in academic writing. My own tendency was to signal (with on-paper marks and identifiers) every correction to be made on the paper that I could find, and to subsequently grade the revision based upon how many of these identified errors were corrected (a number of students thus received 100% for producing appropriate revisions of all errors). While this may have been too generous a grading scheme, my aim was to reward careful editing to the fullest possible extent. Though I understand the reason for the even 10/10% split for the first paper/revision split, I believe that it may have been as appropriate to give a lesser weight to the revision, such as a 15/5% split.

Other Writing-Focused Tutorials – In terms of the other tutorials that were focused upon writing, such as the one preceding the film review (paper two) – these were necessary in order to introduce the different approaches and registers appropriate for different essays, but were in my experience rather less effective in terms of their impact upon student writing than was the tutorial offered *after* the return of the marked paper one. My own suggestion would be to consistently use portions of tutorials to go over the returned assignment in the case of the second paper as well, while also using a portion (roughly half) of a tutorial beforehand to introduce the paper requirements and form. The reason for this is that many of the students clearly benefitted from the review of comments/corrections for the first paper, and the results of this were clearly shown in the second assignment; but by the third paper, a number of students had lapsed back into less careful writing and formatting tendencies in their papers (I acknowledge, though, that there may have been other reasons for this, such as the end-of-term rush). A second exercise in self-correction, editing, and revision – even one without a specific grade attached, or for extra credit – could very well help to maintain the students' focus upon written expression.

Extra Credit Assignment and Reflection – The extra credit assignments were handled particularly well in CIN101, and I would encourage this system to be maintained in this and other first-year courses. The more writing that students do – whatever the grading scheme attached – the better. That said, the reflection on writing improvement did not appear to grab the students’ imagination, and many produced rote responses, though there were a few quite encouraging responses that demonstrated a growing consciousness in the student of different essay forms and styles, personal writing habits, and tendencies toward certain grammatical errors. In particular, it was notable that many students pointed all the way back to the revision workshop and submission as a particularly illuminating exercise that assisted them in the development of an awareness of the importance of grammar, structure, and formatting.

--Dr. Christopher Rowe

VCC101: INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL CULTURE

Prof. Kajri Jain, Instructor; Dr. Bernice Iarocci, head TA

Scope of the Writing Initiative in VCC101

The Writing Initiative in VCC101 included a revision exercise and workshop, weekly journal writing, and writing practice in approximately one third of the tutorials.

Head TA’s Report:

1. What We Did

Visual Analysis Revision and Tutorial: The TAs extensively marked up the first page of Assignment #1 (which was 3 pages long) with regards to grammar and other writing-related problems. For the most part, the TAs indicated where there were errors but did not provide the correction. Students had a week to revise their papers. The assignment was worth 8% of the final grade, with the revision counting for 4%. Students also had the option to repeat this revision process for Assignment 2 (Critical Analysis of an assigned reading). When the first assignment was returned to the students, the TAs went over common errors in tutorial.

Weekly Journal writing: Students were required to write a 250-word entry every week in their Blackboard journals, using key concepts from the week’s readings. At the end of the course, the students revised and submitted their three best readings, which together comprised 15% of the final grade. The weekly exercise therefore required the students to engage in regular writing practice. (2% was deducted from the final grade for each missing entry.)

In-tutorial writing practice: For about a third of the tutorials, TAs incorporated low-stakes writing practice into their tutorials, using various methods that had been covered in

previous Writing Training conducted by the RGASC. Typically, students submitted these at the end of the tutorial, in a ticket-out-the-door manner (i.e., as means to mark their attendance). The TAs did not, however, always co-ordinate such writing week-to-week: for two of the tutorials, all TAs agreed to do the same exercise, but individual TAs were also free to incorporate these exercises on an ad hoc basis. These writing samples furthermore served as indicators of the level of students' informal writing skills in cases of suspected academic offenses.

2. How It Worked

Objective Assessment:

For the revision exercise, the TAs kept track of types of errors so as to note what to do for the follow-up instruction. In the follow-up instruction, they covered a range of issues, but focused in particular on four: word choice, common splices, dangling modifiers, and pronoun usage. For the latter three issues, the students were instructed using a worksheet with examples. In this, the TAs followed the advice of Michael Kaler, who ran the Writing Training the TAs received at the outset of the course: he said that, while the marking of the papers could indicate the full range of writing issues, it is most effective to focus on a few recurring problems.

At the end of the term, one of the TAs (Bernice Iarocci) gave her two tutorial groups (taking this as a representative sample) a diagnostic test. Students were asked to correct the writing errors in a paragraph. In grading these, Bernice compared the results to what she had noted on Assignment 1. She noticed some improvement with respect to run-on sentences (including comma splices) and semi-colon usage. Other problems, such as spelling and dangling modifiers, showed very little or no improvement.

Subjective Assessment:

In comparing the writing of Assignment 1 to that of Assignment 2, the TAs perceived that there was some general improvement in writing over the course of the term. It was noticed, however, that many students did not try as hard as they could have for the assignment revisions. A good number of students did not bother to fix all the errors that were indicated to them by their TAs, and few attempted to correct the second part of the assignment, which was only partially marked up by the TA. (As noted above, after the first page, the students were to proofread and seek out errors on their own.)

Students were given two opportunities for self-assessment. As part of an optional extra credit assignment, students were asked to write 250 words, reflecting on how their writing had improved over the term (if at all). In the final tutorial, all students were given a self-assessment sheet to complete. The results are shown here. (NOTE: The comments on the extra-credit more or less coincided with those on the self-assessment sheets, with the latter being more extensive.)

The student self-assessments were completed anonymously, so students could feel free to comment honestly. 141 students out of 204 enrolled completed the assessment sheet.

Students were asked to rank their improvement on a scale of one to ten, with respect to three different aspects as well as overall:

GRAMMAR

	# of students	
No Improvement	1	2
	2	4
	3	8
	4	12
	5	23
	6	35
	7	31
	8	22
	9	3
10		1
Substantial Improvement		

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

	# of students	
No Improvement	1	4
	2	3
	3	13
	4	14
	5	15
	6	32
	7	33
	8	24
	9	3
10		0
Substantial Improvement		

WORD CHOICE

	# of students	
No Improvement	1	2
	2	5
	3	6
	4	9
	5	20
	6	25
	7	46
	8	18
	9	9
10		1
Substantial Improvement		

OVERALL

	# of students	
No Improvement	1	0
	2	5
	3	8
	4	4
	5	16
	6	35
	7	43
	8	24
	9	6
10		0
Substantial Improvement		

Students were also asked to comment on to what degree (if at all) they felt their writing had improved and what components of the course contributed to this. The comments have been categorized, with the results shown below. To summarize, the vast majority (101 students – 72%) singled out the revision exercise as the most effective means of improving their writing over the course of the term. There were many enthusiastic comments about its helpfulness. Students noted that the revision was incentive to improve both one’s grade and one’s writing. Many appreciated the detailed markings and comments on their papers. One student even proposed that students were unlikely to read the comments on their papers without the revision requirement.

DEGREE OF IMPROVEMENT

	# of students
My writing declined	2
No improvement	11
Improved a little, or not sure	18
Improvement	67

WHAT HELPED

	# of students
Revision exercise	101
Weekly journal entries	15
Grammar instruction in tutorial	12
Having many assignments and types of writing	7
RGASC	4
PELS tutorials	3
Library Resources	2

3. What We Have Learned

What we have learned from the self-assessments is that students appreciate the opportunity to revise their work and receive credit for it. They also believe that the process is a highly effective way to better their writing. Generally speaking, nonetheless, it is possible that many students overestimate their own improvement. It is very difficult to assess the differences between an original assignment and its revision objectively and systematically; however, all the TAs agreed that, in the vast majority of cases, improvement was relatively small. That said, the TAs agreed they each had a few students who worked hard on the revision, with dramatic results.

Even though only 12 students noted in their self-assessment that the in-tutorial writing and grammar instruction was helpful, the TAs did perceive the students to be, on the whole, very engaged when we went through the worksheet with them. We believe this component – which involves not just the TA instruction, but also discussion and the students correcting sentences and paragraphs – is a necessary step in the revision process and in the teaching of writing skills in general. It should be noted, too, that only some of the TAs found the time (again, this was on an individual, ad hoc basis) to move beyond basic sentence mechanics to things like paragraph and essay structure. It therefore would be most helpful to have more time to cover writing-related issues, although this would cut into the review and teaching of course content.

As for lasting improvement, all TAs agreed that there was, generally speaking, a small degree between the writing quality of Assignment 1 and that on Assignment 2. However, the possibility of judging writing quality should also take into account the different nature of these assignments (a visual analysis as opposed to a critical reading analysis).

4. Possible Changes

It is notable that some students (15) saw the weekly Journal entries as being an effective form of writing practice. It can be noted, nonetheless, that three other students commented that they wanted more regular feedback on these. The TAs provided feedback only at the beginning of the course: going through the journal entries is very time-consuming, and there were simply not enough grading hours available for monitoring the entries throughout the course. We suspect that more students would perceive this exercise to be helpful as writing practice if regular feedback were available, however it might not be possible to find funds for the extra grading hours.

--Dr. Bernice Iarocci

Conclusion:

The reports from instructors and head 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 about the need for more TA hours are of particular concern to me, as the DVS Writing Initiative budget has decreased slightly each year over the last three years.

In last year's final report, we planned to incorporate revision exercises into all of our first-year courses, which we have done. We also planned to change, and did change, the way the first assignment in VCC101 was graded (so that the TAs did not spend so many hours marking up grammatical errors). Lastly, we planned to better integrate the ELL tutorials run by Dr. Laura Taylor and our ELL Initiative with our first-year courses so that ELL students could receive the benefit of additional language instruction and practice. Despite the scheduling problem that arose in the fall term with FAH101 and CIN101, we accomplished this. While the ELL tutorials are not formally part of the DVS Writing Initiative, it is relevant to note here that attendance at the tutorials increased, and over 60 students qualified for the newly introduced Co-Curricular Record Annotation (Professional English Language Skills – Visual Studies). A new factor that affected how we approached our courses over the course of this year was our becoming aware of shadow courses operating alongside our first- and second-year courses. In consultation with the Dean's Office, we have taken numerous steps to address this issue, including informing students about the risks and downsides of such additional "instruction." Starting this summer, we are (with the permission of the Dean's office) disallowing double enrolment in conflicting courses (as some students double enrolled in courses, taking a shadow course instead of attending one of the real courses), trying out a 2nd-year ELL tutorial in conjunction with FAH274 that focuses on the course readings, and, where possible, changing test formats and assignments—all of which we hope should have a salutary effect on student learning.

Since UTM is currently going through a Strategic Planning process that may have consequences for the way writing is taught at UTM, we propose that, for next year, we continue with the structure of the DVS Writing Initiative remaining more or less the same (TA training, funded instruction for the module in FAH101, TA hours for grading writing-instruction-related assignments). We will consider some of the tweaks suggested in the reports (for example, reweighting the first assignment and revision exercise in CIN101), and try to find ways for students to engage more thoroughly with the revision exercise through the whole of their papers in VCC101. We do request additional hours for grading, so that students can receive feedback on their journal entries and other low-stakes writing exercises in all three courses.