

## ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTRE

### Writing TA Training Program<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Resources

- a. USB Thumbdrive
- b. RGASC Faculty (throughout the term)
- c. Hedengren, Beth Finch. *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in all Disciplines*. New York: Bedford /St. Martin's, 2004. (Note: there are scanned chapters on your USB Thumbdrive and five copies available to borrow.)
- d. Web Resources, for example:
  - <http://writing.utoronto.ca/>
  - <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
  - <https://wac.colostate.edu/>

#### 2. Situating UTM's Approach to Writing Instruction

##### The Challenge

*"One common theme that emerged from our academic units' plans was the importance of investing in developing the writing skills of our students, driven both by concern that some students arrive at UTM without the writing skills they need to succeed in their academic work, and the importance of enhancing student writing in our programs as part of degree learning expectations."*

(UTM Divisional Academic Plan, August 2012 Draft)

#### 3. WAC/WID Approaches

*"WAC focuses not on writing skills per se but on teaching both the content of the disciplines and the particular discourse features used in writing about that content."*

Susan MacLeod

#### What are WAC & WID?

"Writing across the Curriculum" and "Writing in the Disciplines"

Based in scholarly fields of Writing Studies and Rhetoric and Composition

Curricular reform movements that emerged in the 1970s in the US

Approach writing instruction two complementary ways:

Learning to write (LTW)

Writing to learn (WTL)

---

<sup>1</sup> Introductory material used as part of the RGASC's Writing TA Training sessions.

## **WAC/WID Pedagogy**

1. Helps students develop rhetorical skills in the kinds of *reading* and *writing* that they will do throughout their scholarly and professional lives.
2. Recognizes that *writing isn't a universal skill* that transcends disciplinary and knowledge making practices.
3. Writing takes place in a context, always

## **4. The Challenge Student Writers Face in Learning Academic Discourse(s)**

*“Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the various discourses of our community...And this, understandably, causes problems.”*

David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University”

Please write a brief response to the following statement:

“Learning [*INSERT YOUR DISCIPLINE, e.g. 'History'*] is like learning a language.”

What does the above quotation remind you of/make you consider? Do you agree with it? Why/Why not? How can you relate the quotation to your own experience as a researcher-writer, teacher, or student?

## **Aims of WAC/WID**

1. Help students “invent the university,” i.e. to acculturate them within their academic discipline(s).
2. Support students’ development as thinkers and communicators within a challenging curriculum.
3. Develop and assess teaching methods: e.g., assignment design, group and individual instruction, effective grading practices.
4. Formulate disciplinary expectations explicitly and communicate them clearly.

## **Writing in the Disciplines (WID) Challenges**

1. How can we explain and justify the conventions and processes of writing in our disciplines to students?
2. How can we explain and justify our disciplinary expectations to students?
3. How can we engage students with the challenges and satisfactions of disciplinary writing?

## **Typical WAC/WID Model**

English department hires WAC faculty to train and mentor senior undergraduate or graduate students to work as tutors/writing consultants across the disciplines, often in stand-alone courses, e.g., “Writing in the Sciences” or “Writing in the Social Sciences”.

What potential problems do you see with the above model?

## **Writing in your Discipline**

1. Why does writing matter in your discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Think about a piece of writing you are doing now and describe its purpose.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Consider a common genre in your field (e.g., lab report): why do students need to know it? How would you respond if a student asks, “why do you do things that way?” What is the biggest problem that students have with producing this sort of writing?

## 5. WAC Philosophy Summarized

1. Writing is the responsibility of the academic community.
2. Writing instruction should be continuous throughout undergraduate education.
3. Students need practice to master the conventions of an academic discipline.
4. Writing plays a key role in developing critical thinking skills; learning discipline-specific content understanding; and building competence in specific research and dissemination practices to various disciplines and professions. -Roger Graves, "Writing to Learn", 2007

## 6. Benefits of WAC

Students' writing improves.

Students learn disciplinary content better if they write about it.

Students feel more involved and attached to their programs if they write.

Student engagement with the subject matter being taught increases significantly when they are more frequently asked to write about that subject.

**Students enjoy the courses.**

## 7. WAC Resources

WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/index.cfm>

Journals:

*Across the Disciplines*

*College English*

*The WAC Journal*

*Written Communication*

Check your disciplinary teaching journals, e.g.,

- *Journal of Chemical Education*
- *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*
- *The History Teacher*

You can draw from this literature to improve writing instruction in your department/discipline.

## WAC @ UTM

*The Writing Development Initiative as WAC*

From the Call for Proposals:

*“ . . . a pool of funds is available to support projects that **integrate writing instruction in core courses** across the curriculum. Departments are encouraged to submit proposals for projects that will **help students become better writers as they work within the requirements of their discipline**. This year, we are developing more centralized forms of support while we continue to encourage individual Departments to **integrate forms of writing instruction into their programs to meet the unique needs of their students**.”*

### Writing Development Initiative Program

To receive funding, proposals need to:

1. Provide a basic **overview of the strategies** you will employ to improve students' writing.
2. Indicate how **Teaching Assistants** will be used in your project.
3. Indicate whether your department intends to take advantage of the RGASC's **Writing TA Training Program**.
4. Describe the writing tasks students will be doing; provide details on writing instruction; indicate additional number of words students will write.
5. Identify the **number of students** impacted.
6. Identify **strategies for measuring students' writing improvement**.
7. Include a budget.

### Individual WDI Projects

More than twenty projects in eleven different departments.

Well over six thousand students impacted (may be some overlap, but not much)

All integrated in courses.

Most take advantage of *Writing TA Training*.

All involve new / revised / additional writing assignments.

All involve more feedback on writing.

Most include formal instruction on writing.

### WAC Program with Writing TAs

Funding provided to train and support a **Writing TA**

Funding provided to support **activities related to the teaching and evaluation of writing** in designated course(s).

## The Approach

Writing TA (with assistance of Writing Specialist, if desired) supports writing instruction in academic units by:

- a. working with disciplinary instructors to **incorporate writing and writing instruction into course** (assignment design, pedagogical strategies, curricular resources, etc.), and
- b. helping other course TAs **provide writing instruction and formative feedback** to students on their course assignments.

## Why Does This Approach Work?

1. Allows participating departments to identify ideal courses, instructors, and methods.
2. Ensures that **curriculum belongs to faculty** and departments
3. Leverages existing knowledge and abilities of TAs across the curriculum.
4. Ensures that expertise developed within the department stays in the department
5. Integrates the course content with writing instruction, ensuring that students develop abilities relevant to the discipline.

## Why a Writing TA?

6. TAs are experienced learners and writers (in their discipline).
7. TAs are best positioned to help students move to the next level in their critical writing and critical thinking skills.
8. TAs understand the course, assignments, and prof's expectations.
9. TAs benefit from the professional development and improve their own writing.

## Writing Exercise

Personal reflection:

Jot down what you anticipate being the greatest challenge(s) associated with being a "writing TA".

Jot down what you anticipate being most rewarding about your role as a "writing TA".