Writing Skills Development across the Discipline

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Part I: Future Job Seekers

Undergrads,
AuD graduate students,
MS graduate students

THE BUCK STOPS HERE.

• Yes, parents should have insisted their children read rather than play video games
• Yes, high schools should have prepared students better.
• Yes, the English 101 class does not prepare students for professional writing

But they are your students now.
Making our students “Job Ready”

- Many of our undergraduates will not go further within the profession.
- No matter what job they eventually take, they will need writing skills.
- Examples follow.

Journalism

A familiar site?

Arizona Daily Star, February 5th, 2011

Caterer

"In the baker's defense, how often do you use the word "happy" on a cake, anyway?"

http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/
Road Construction

From I Judge You When You Use Poor Grammar

Porn Star

“One day Amber was offered an exciting new job. To celebrate, she added an apostrophe to her name, thinking it would make her seem more sophisticated.”

http://cakewrecks.blogspot.com/

Credential that Counts  Alexandra Levit

• National Work Readiness Credential
  • Assessment based
  • Targets general skill areas
    • Communication
    • Problem solving
    • Decision making
    • Conflict resolution
    • Negotiation
    • Analytical thinking
• “...the assessment has clear benefits for students and recent graduates seeking entry level jobs...”

Wall Street Journal, 2010
The Target: Advanced Writing Skills

- Expert writers
  - are goal directed
  - understand their topics
  - consider how paragraphs and sentences advance the goal
  - use cohesive devices to tie sentences and paragraphs together
  - aware of and anticipate readers needs
  - attend more to meaning than form in writing
  - make more revisions than non-expert writers

(Flower and colleagues, 1980, 1986)

Developing Writers

- Often do not view writing as a product
- May believe revision is about word choice or punctuation
- Cannot simultaneously incorporate feedback on multiple elements of writing
- Revision must target specific skills
  - how to introduce a topic & support it
  - how to build an argument
  - how to check for grammar problems
  - when to look at spelling/punctuation

Why isn’t English 101 the solution?

"Not an English degree, what it covers, grammar & vocabulary."
Why technology is not the solution.

Who are the poor writers?

- Individuals with limited access to quality writing instruction
- Individuals with diagnosed language or learning disabilities
- Individuals with undiagnosed language or learning disabilities

Why can’t students write well?

- Poor comprehension of the material
- Macrostructure problems
  - Poor ability to organize information
  - Poor ability to use different organizations for different purposes
- Microstructure problems
  - Poor ability to produce advanced grammatical forms.
  - Weak vocabulary skills
  - Spelling and punctuation problems
Poor Comprehension of the Material

• The renaissance was a time when people felt more worth in their beings. Martin Luther was nailed to a church door in Germany for selling papal indulgences. He died a horrible death by being excomunicated with a papal bull.

http://history-world.org/essays.htm

Poor conceptual background for comprehending the material

• A student discusses a case example of a 4-month-old child:

“The infant is consciously aware of phonotactic because her verbal response follows the accepted English rules for words.”

---Yours in Horror,
Mary Alt, PhD

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• Microstructure problems
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  • Weak vocabulary skills
  • Spelling and punctuation problems
While there are some areas of the brain that work individually, under certain auditory conditions many stimuli can be linked in a function with each other depending on both localization and lateralization. The ability to hear can effect the location in which the brain processes different forms of speech. Phonetic and emotional tasks are relatively processed in the right hemisphere. The focus put on a certain ear will effect which auditory cortex is activated. Non-primary as well as primary regions can be activated depending on sound level. Different tones of speech, complex and pure activate both hemispheres of the brain.

Too many ideas in first sentence makes this difficult to follow.
- Idea 1, some brain regions work individually
- Idea 2, sometimes auditory stimulation evokes linked function
- Idea 3, linked functions may be distinguished by their localization and lateralization patterns.

Paragraph does not establish a topic/have one coherent theme

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**Unfortunate Transitions**

**Do you like Horses?**

Join the First Annual Barbeque of the University of Arizona Horsemanship Association!

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**Why can’t students write well?**

- Microstructure problems:
  - Poor ability to produce advanced grammatical forms.
  - Weak vocabulary skills
  - Spelling and punctuation problems
**Advanced Grammatical Forms**

- Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates was killed by an overdose of wedlock.

- Simple syntax predominates
- Casual language inappropriate for professional writing

http://history-world.org/essays.htm

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**Errors of Sentence Construction**

- Wong et al (1999) studied when the people with the implant heard silence it activated the right temporal region.
- Sound levels are seen in both hemispheres when researched by Hart et al (2002).
- Heschl’s gyrus has more involvement in sound levels.

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**Why can’t students write well?**

- Microstructure problems:
  - Poor ability to produce advanced grammatical forms.
  - Weak vocabulary skills
  - Spelling and punctuation problems
Use your professional background

- Word finding errors
- Weak semantic representations
- Poor access to phonological form

Weak Vocabulary

- Sir Francis Drake circumcised the globe with a 100 foot clipper.
- The government of England was a limited mockery. Queen Elizabeth was a virgin queen and her troops shouted hoorah when she revealed herself in front of them. She beat up the Spanish armadillo.

http://history-world.org/essays.htm

Why can’t students write well?

- Microstructure problems:
  - Poor ability to produce advanced grammatical forms.
- Weak vocabulary skills
- Spelling and punctuation problems
Spelling & Punctuation

• The climate of the Sarah is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere and certain areas of the dessert are cultivated by irritation.

http://history-world.org/essays.htm

What can be done?

• Consider the primary goal for writing assignments
• Develop a departmental writing curriculum
• Incorporate best practices for writing instruction

Goals for Writing Assignments

• Demonstrate knowledge
  • Essay exams
  • Ungraded Essays
  • Class generated test questions
• Acquire new knowledge
  • Term papers
  • Article reviews
  • Short papers
• Improve writing skills
  • Feedback
  • Rewrites
  • New topics each semester
What can be done?

- Consider the primary goal for writing assignments
- Develop a departmental writing curriculum
- Incorporate best practices for writing instruction

Writing Curriculum

- Goal 1: “Hit them hard with the writing stick.”
  - Focus their attention on writing skills
  - Convey the program’s “seriousness of intent” concerning writing
- 200-level required courses
  - Read single data-based journal articles
  - Explicit teaching on writing
  - Multiple short writing experiences
- Graded for writing form
  - Writing error rubric is provided
  - NOT graded for content, style, persuasiveness, etc.
Writing Curriculum

- Goal 2: Master professional writing conventions
  - Use a professional tone
  - Support positions with evidence
  - Master basic writing skills
- 300-level classes
  - Multiple short writing experiences
  - Graded for writing form and content

Writing Curriculum

- Goal 3: Write to communicate
  - Adapt writing to different professional needs
  - Use a professional tone
  - Support positions with evidence
  - Master basic writing skills
- 400-level classes
  - Short and long writing assignments
  - Graded for writing form and content

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- Consider the primary goal for writing assignments
- Develop a departmental writing curriculum
- Incorporate best practices for writing instruction
WRITING INSTRUCTION

- Components of exemplary writing instruction: Recurring themes
  - literacy models (print exposure, peer examples)
  - regular writing practice
  - planning, feedback, revision
  - explicit instruction of specific skills
  - thematic ties of writing to other activities

Butler & Silliman, 2002

LARGE CLASS TECHNIQUES

- Provide a rational for instruction
- Include writing lectures
- Provide a grading rubric
- Teach editing
- Teach how to elicit feedback
- Provide feedback
- Provide a chance for revision

Examples of lecture slides
200-level Neuroanatomy course

Course materials
Why Writing in a Science Course?

Gaffes in Cover Letters Likely to Mean the Hook for Hapless Job Applicants

Letter: "My intensity and focus are at inordinately high levels, and my ability to complete projects on time is unspeakable."
Response: You don't say!

Letter: "With the advent of windows, I acted as a consultant to a variety of small businesses."
Response: Sounds a little like spying.

M. Messner, *Resumania*, 2005

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Going in to business?

The direct cost of poor writing—whether read by customers or your coworkers—may be up to 10% of [sales income]...bad writing not only confuses customers, it may anger them.

Peter Geissler
*Business Consultant*

*America West Magazine, May 2005.*

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From those who employ...

- Question: How important is writing skills for the retention and promotion of your employees?

  "It is absolutely critical to have good writers around, whose knowledge is steeped in the subject matter. [Those who can write] have absolute job security. Furthermore, those with leadership skills, political savvy, technical competency and communication skills (including writing) are the ones who can write their own career ticket."

  Jeannette Plante, Engineer
  *Owner & Founder, Dynamic Range Corporation*
**Large Class Techniques**

- Provide a rational for instruction
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**Sentence Construction**

- One idea = one sentence
  - Avoid redundant sentences (2 sentences = 1 idea)
  - Avoid run-on sentences (1 sentences > 1 idea)
- Sentences have Subject + Verb minimum.
- Use sentence length for emphasis
  - longer for explanatory purposes
  - shorter for making a strong point

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**Sentence Construction**

- One idea = one sentence
  - Avoid redundant sentences (2 sentences = 1 idea)
  - Avoid run-on sentences (1 sentences > 1 idea)
**Word choice**

Make sure the word means what you intend

![Snoopy comic strips](Image)

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**Punctuation errors**

- Most common error is use of the semicolon.
- If you feel the need to use one...
  - Remove your fingers from the keyboard until the feeling passes (James Kirkpatrick).
  - Use two sentences instead.

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**LARGE CLASS TECHNIQUES**

- Provide a rational for instruction
- Include writing lectures
- Provide a grading rubric
- Teach editing
- Teach how to elicit feedback
- Provide feedback
- Provide a chance for revision
• Takes away grading “subjectivity”
• Teaching assistants can use it reliably
• Scale the points off relative to the egregiousness of the communication problem the error creates
Outline-level Editing

- Does the first paragraph introduce the overall topic?
- Does each paragraph establish a single topic related to the overall topic?
- Are the topics represented by each paragraph correctly ordered?
- Are all sentences within a paragraph related to the paragraph topic?
- Does each sentence include one and only one idea?
- Is there important information missing (do I get lost)?
- Is there redundant or partially redundant information?
- Ignore other aspects of the writing

Is there important information missing (do I get lost)?

**Too many ideas in one sentence**

Early study of the brain involved careful observation of the behavior of patients who had suffered brain damage. Famous cases in history involved damage to the frontal lobe from a stroke and from an industrial accident. These cases are proof that the frontal lobe has various functions.

Is there important information missing (do I get lost)?

- Early study of the brain involved careful observation of behavior in patients who had suffered brain damage. One famous case in history involved damage to the frontal lobe from a stroke. The patient’s subsequent loss of expressive language revealed the frontal lobe’s role in speech. A second case involved damage to the frontal lobe after an industrial accident...
Large Class Techniques

- Provide a rational for instruction
- Include writing lectures
- Provide a grading rubric
- Teach editing
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- Provide feedback
- Provide a chance for revision

Student need to solicit the write level of feedback for the stage of their draft

- Early writing: Need content feedback
- Later drafts: Need form feedback
- Penultimate draft: Need spelling & punctuation
- Can use worksheets to teach students to elicit correct level of feedback

Large Class Techniques

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**Large Class Techniques**

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**Revision Ideas**

- Credit for Editing
  - Show analysis of macrostructure
    - Paragraph ordering
    - Paragraph coherence
  - Show analysis of microstructure
    - Sentence level
    - Word level (meaning and specificity)
  - Spelling & Punctuation
  - Credit for an improved re-write
In professional and business writing, it's not just the thought that counts.

Graduate Students: AuD, MS
Report writing

Reasons for poor writing
- Residual deficits from a handicapping condition
- Poor understanding of the target
When writing problems aren’t writing problems

- Lack a clear model of the target
- Discrepant “guidance” from multiple clinical faculty
- Lack of confidence in their interpretations

Lack of a model

- Provide annotated models in your clinical handbook

Tips for great report writing

- Sections and Subsections Principle
- Test Scores aren’t the Final Word Principle
- Read Out Loud Principle
- Tell a Story Principle
- Hit by a Bus Principle
**Sections and Subsections Principle**

- For formal reports, even when there are specific categories (e.g., Background, History), make an outline to organize your thinking about the information within the section. What is the most important thing to say? What information supports that proposition? What is the next most important thing to say?

Francis Harris, PhD

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**Test Scores aren't the Final Word Principle**

- For report writing, for every sentence that reports a test name and score, they need to follow-up with a comment on spontaneous behavior in that area.

Jennifer Casteix, M.S.

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**Read Out Loud Principle**

- For all writing, read the report out loud before making it "final". I find this often reveals places where wording is awkward, sentences too long, meaning uncertain, repetitions rampant, etc.

Julie Petersen, AuD
Tell a Story Principle

- For evaluation reports, tell a story. Too often students will follow a model or template for report writing without talking about the most important things: Challenges with testing, perceived differences in processing strategies, difficulty physically putting a device in, that the family will be moving away in a month, etc. In other words, what would you tell your fellow student about the visit?

  Tom Muller, AuD

Hit by a Bus Principle

- For therapy notes, I subscribe to the "hit by a bus" writing regimen. I tell the students: if you were hit by a bus tomorrow and couldn't work for two weeks, how well would the person who is covering for you be able to step into your shoes? Do you have any information on what motivates the child, how much scaffolding and repetition are you using, do parents participate, etc.

  Jennifer Casteix, M.S.

Above all: Get the facts right

For News is fair and balanced. Evolution is an unproven theory. Global Warming is a myth.

Artificial Intelligence
Conclusion of Part A

“The higher our expectations for education, the greater their opportunities.”

ExpectMoreArizona.org