Writing Across the Curriculum

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Inside this issue...

How Business People React to Errors; or, Does Errors Matter? Part II
Page 4

Talking about WAC and General Education
Insert

Assigning In-Class Writing
Page 5

Ideas for In-Class Writing Assignments
Page 6

WAC Workshops for Winter 2002
Page 8

Tenses and Other Tensions

Ted Bunn *(Lake Campus) regularly teaches EC 200 and 201, as well as classes in marketing and management. The following article is a condensed version of a presentation made at the Midwest Conference of the Two Year College English Association on October 11, 2001.*

I'll begin with quotations from recent end-of-quarter evaluations by two students:

"Mr. Bunn is too picky on outside writing assignments. This isn't an English class."

"You are teaching an introductory course, not conceptual thinking."

These two comments, I believe, highlight a problem. Many students compartmentalize their courses. English is one compartment; Sociology is another; and heaven knows, Economics is in a dreaded compartment all by itself. To put it bluntly, they believe it is necessary to think about writing correctly only in an English course.

Wright State University's Writing Across the Curriculum program is one way to weaken the walls students mentally erect between English and all other subjects. Selected general education and introductory courses, mostly in disciplines other than English, are designated "writing intensive." We're expected to make the writing assignments serve as an aid to understanding the subject.

To do that in EC 200 (Economic Life) I give four writing assignments. The first three require the student to locate a current newspaper or magazine article related to class discussions or the text. He or she is to write a paper explaining which economic principle the article illustrates and attach a copy of the article. These three assignments force students to read current periodicals they probably wouldn't. One student commented that her husband couldn't understand why she read the *Wall Street Journal* every evening when she came home. The fourth assignment requires a short research paper on a subject selected from a list of suggested topics. As an option, the student may develop a personal economic analysis before writing a paper about how life illustrates such economic principles as scarcity of resources, time and budget constraints, trade-offs, and opportunity costs. These WAC assignments are a valuable guide to the student's understanding of economics.

Large classes are common for general ed courses, so the grading of all those papers takes time. For three of the four assignments, I also must read the articles to see if the student is making valid connections. Some of the students'

continued on page 2

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papers are excellent; some certainly are satisfactory; and there are some, God help me, packed with grammar errors, dreadful punctuation, and strings of words that require guesses to figure out what the student was trying to say. That brings me to the major thrust of this presentation: the six major problems I see in student papers.

1. The Nonsense Quotient

This problem is rooted in homonyms. Too many students drop the wrong word into their papers, creating total nonsense. Although the product often is funny, a homonym mistake always results in poor work.

"As the market drops, investors are MORNING their losses."

"The Federal Reserve is considering WEATHER a further cut in interest rates is advisable."

"How does this problem EFFECT me?"

"Money you can't afford to LOOSE shouldn't be risked in the stock market."

"Enrolling in college ten years after leaving high school serves a DUEL purpose for me." (I wonder who or what will get killed.)

Why are homonym errors so common? Relying too much on SpellCheck certainly contributes, because the software will not highlight a real word even if it's a wrong choice. Phonetic spelling is another culprit, as are a limited vocabulary and sloppy proofreading.

My solution is providing a list of homonyms and other frequently confused words during the first class of the quarter and telling students paper grades will be lowered if they misuse any of the words on the list. The original list included about 20 of the most frequent homonyms errors: it's, its; their, there, they're; to, too; cite, site, sight; who's, whose; lead, led. Students keep finding new homonyms, so the list now has 63 examples.

2. More or Less than a Sentence

A paragraph in one paper had six lines of text, including three independent clauses, some subordinate clauses, and a few introductory phrases. The only internal punctuation was one comma. The other end of the spectrum is represented by dozens of sentence fragments, especially modifying clauses, such as, "Although the court questioned Microsoft's attorneys."

3. Just Who Are THEY?

Many students just don't understand that every pronoun must have a clear and obvious antecedent. They don't proofread carefully enough to see if there is a noun to which that pronoun refers. Here's an example from a paper: "Consumers and companies are frequently in conflict. They want the highest quality at discount prices."

4. People Is Funny

Problem number four revolves around verb-subject agreement—using singular verbs with plural subjects, or plural verbs with singular subjects. Part of the problem is not knowing which noun is the subject of the sentence, especially when a singular subject of a sentence is followed by a prepositional phrase that includes a plural noun. Here's a simplistic example, not unlike errors in many papers: "Writing correctly for students are a challenge."

5. Comma Coma

Students often seem to sprinkle commas randomly, much like dusting sugar on cereal at breakfast. The rules for correct use of the comma are not that complicated. Commas separate indepen-

dent clauses joined by a conjunction, words or phrases in a series, elements in an address or date, or a modifying subordinate clause. A less common use is the so-called parenthetical comma to set off material that could be enclosed by parentheses. Some students say they were taught to use a comma whenever there seemed to be a natural pause. Incorrect use of commas could make a radical change in a contract.

6. Is IS right, or WAS it?

A frequent student mistake is shifting tenses from present to past or past to present for no reason. The probable cause for tense mistakes, I believe, is poor proofreading, or perhaps no proofreading. In reading newspapers, magazines and even books from good publishers, I often wonder if anyone proofreads any more.

There you have my sextet of the most common mistakes in student papers, a sextet which causes a great expenditure of red ink. Most undergraduates believe, or at least have been told, that college training will increase their future earning power. Statistically, there is truth in the belief. Prospective employers do value post-secondary education. An applicant's grades are apparent evidence of his or her achievement. Too many students focus on memorizing enough to get a decent grade on a test, without fully understanding meanings. There also are those who argue, whine or even cheat to get a better grade. As a result, grades are not a foolproof measure of ability. Ultimately, employers expect employees to be able to collect information, analyze it, organize it, reach conclusions, and express themselves clearly. Meeting that expectation demands a high level of language skills. I wish students would spend less time fussing about grades and give their minds a chance to consider how economics connects to their daily lives and the world they live in.

One student's evaluation illustrates the resistance we all face in the classroom: "He kept telling us we should develop our curiosity about things. I took his advice. I'm curious why he thinks this stuff is so important."

However, an experience I had five weeks ago demonstrates what can happen when a student brings an open attitude to his or her courses. As a result of a series of unlikely coincidences, I crossed paths with two women who had been in my composition classes at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown (PA) in 1952-1953. I met Joanne Litzinger and her husband in a hotel elevator in Johnstown. In the casual conversation I mentioned my name, and she gasped and said she had been one of my students. Not only that but a good friend, Shirley Boardman, who is a professional editor and writer, also had been in that class. The next morning Mrs. Litzinger rang my hotel room to tell me she had called her friend in New Jersey. Both women remembered English composition as one of the most satisfying and important courses in their college careers. Mrs. Boardman wanted to write me to thank me for putting her on the road to a satisfying career as a writer and editor. Mrs. Litzinger asked for my email address, assuring me I would hear from Shirley Boardman.

This was all very flattering, but I didn't really expect a former student would cross over 49 years to write a thank you. A week after I returned home, Mrs. Boardman

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sent me a four-page email. I've chosen part of this letter to conclude my presentation:

"Why do I remember so many details from that twice-a-week, evening class almost 50 years ago? I really don't know… I had no inclination on my part to work—or play—with words. I dreaded writing the assigned themes and book reviews as much as the next person. I could never think of a subject for the themes, and I probably never got the point of any of the books I read. But part of the impact, I think, was a result of living in Summerhill for 16 years and then going to Catholic high school, so my whole experience at Pitt that year was like seeing sunlight for the first time after living in a windowless room illuminated by a 40-watt bulb. And your class was especially memorable, because you encouraged us to read and think critically. You fostered exploration of diverse ideas and attitudes and maybe philosophies that had never been mentioned to me before. I can't begin to guess how many times over the years I've thought of you and one of your suggestions or directions, not only when I was writing something but also when I was editing something someone else had written."

> I do not believe students can understand error unless they and teachers alike better comprehend error in terms of its *impact*—not just textual conventions defining errors, not just categories or rankings of errors, but the ways in which errors manage to bother nonacademic readers.
>
> (Beason 34)

How Business People React to Errors; or, Does Errors Matter? Part II

Several readers responded positively to an earlier newsletter article on the importance of error ("Does Errors Matter?" March 2000). That piece drew heavily on "Not All Errors Are Created Equal," Maxine Hairston's 1981 report of her findings concerning the reactions of business leaders to errors in writing. By way of an update, I'd like to share some findings reported by Larry Beason in "Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors" (2001). Not only is Beason's study much more recent, but it goes beyond Hairston's in investigating how—and why—business people react as they do. His comments may provide some helpful material for people wishing to impress on their students the importance of careful revision and proofreading. I hope the following brief summary of his main findings will encourage you to read the full article.

Beason worked with fourteen business people—seven in Spokane, Washington, seven in Mobile, Alabama—who were engaged in the daily reading and writing of business documents. The subjects first completed a questionnaire recording their responses to twenty errors, ranking them on a four-point scale ranging from "not bothersome at all" (1) to "extremely bothersome" (4). They were then interviewed to get an in-depth explanation of those responses.

The twenty items on the survey consisted of four versions of five types of error: (1) misspell-

continued on page 6

Assigning In-Class Writing

Suggestions from the September 2001 WAC Workshop

The WAC workshops on September 26 and 27 dealt with using short in-class writing assignments. Faculty often ask students to summarize the key points covered, to stimulate flagging discussion, to provide an opportunity for reflecting on complex issues, and to check reading comprehension. Faculty who attended provided ideas and suggestions for accomplishing these and other pedagogical goals.

Joe Law (English) occasionally combines in-class writing with a completed assignment ready to be turned in that day. In ENG 204 (Great Books) he frequently asks students to write about a text before discussing it in class. If class discussion suggests that students have had difficulty with the reading, he asks that they take the short paper they are about to turn in and write a sentence or two explaining how their understanding has changed during class. Not only do these comments give students a chance to articulate a new perception, but they also reduce the time needed to address misunderstandings of the text.

Jeanne Ballantine (Sociology and Anthropology) regularly teaches SOC 200 (Social Life), a GE course that may enroll nearly 400 students per section. Even in a class that size, she finds that impromptu writing can be a good way to help students grasp the material. It also provides useful information for her in that she can address misunderstandings or other issues revealed in these informal writings.

For instance, she will occasionally ask that students write about "the muddiest point" of the day's discussion—identifying what seemed unclear or confusing. At other times, she has shown a documentary film concerning other cultures and asked that students relate what they have just seen to concepts covered in class.

Near the beginning of a term, she may ask students to interview each other to obtain certain information (they're doing a variety of field work without necessarily calling it that—as well as getting acquainted in a large lecture class.) Later in the quarter, she may ask them to work in pairs to develop a suitable survey question or ask them to improve a flawed question.

She also asks students to do an informal mid-term evaluation of the course. So that students can get credit for having done the evaluations but remain anonymous, she asks them to fold a sheet of paper in half, put their names on the top half, and answer three simple questions on the bottom half: What has been useful in the course? What has not been useful? What would you change about the course? Students then tear the sheet in half and turn them in. Jeanne notes wryly that some of them are disappointed when she fails to adopt their suggestions that readings and tests be dropped for the rest of the quarter. However, she adds, much of the information is valuable for her own purposes.

Everyone wanted to know how she handles all the paperwork. She doesn't evaluate any of these impromptu writings formally but simply checks that it was turned in. Cumulatively, these points can count toward a participation component of the overall grade or be used for bonus points.

When **Nicky Macklin** (University Writing Center) teaches ENG 330 (Business Writing), she uses in-class writing to involve students in a different way. Since writing is the focus of that course, she asks students to create some text or revise an existing one to illustrate the principle being discussed (e.g., the "you" attitude or concise style). For instance, if groups of students revise a single paragraph of a memo, she can show the whole class the various revisions the groups have devised, which is especially simple in a computer classroom.

The discussion that ensues not only addresses the topic but provides feedback without having to grade or otherwise mark a paper. As **David Seitz** (English) pointed out, this approach differs from the other examples in that it focuses as much on the *craft* of writing as on the content to be learned.

Finally, from **Charlotte Droll** (University Library), we learned that impromptu, in-class writing can be valuable even if you're not teaching a class. She frequently visits classes to make informational presentations about library resources available for students. She wraps up the session by asking students to write a short note to a friend explaining which of these resources seem likeliest to be helpful. That allows students to consolidate this new information, and it also supplies her with feedback she can use for planning future presentations.

Ideas for In-Class Writing Assignments

In-class impromptu writing connected with lecture or assigned reading

- What question(s) do you still have about [the topic of the day's lecture, the reading assigned for today]?
- In two or three sentences, explain [a principle or concept introduced in lecture or in assigned reading].
- What is the main point of [today's assigned reading]?
  Note: It's possible to focus on any number of things within the reading, such as the author's recommendation(s), an extended example the author uses to illustrate his or her point, and so on.
- Define [a key term or concept introduced in lecture or assigned reading].
- Is [a case you provide] an instance of [a new concept or term]? Why?
- Which [of two alternatives you provide] is a better illustration of [a new term or concept]? Why?
- Provide a modern example of [a principle being discussed in the context of an earlier historical period].

In-class impromptu writing connected with other writing assignments

- What do you see in this paper [just returned] that will help you in planning and/or revising the next one? What did you do well? What do you need to improve?
  Note: Instructors might return these responses a class or two before the next paper is due.
- Before you turn in the assignment that is due today, think about how today's lecture/discussion has affected your thinking on the topic. In a few sentences, explain how your understanding has changed.
- Select one incorrect answer on the exam [just returned], and explain your reasons for giving that answer.

"Does Errors Matter II" continued

ings, (2) incomplete sentences, (3) fused sentences (two sentences combined without punctuation or conjunction), (4) unnecessary quotation marks, and (5) word-ending errors (incorrect verb forms—such as "had chose" and "was suppose"—and the absence of *-ly* from adverbs). Beason provided a range of errors in each category. The misspellings, for instance, were *recomendations*, *they're* (for *their*), *metods*, and *aboutt*.

Acknowledging that his sample is too small for statistical comparisons or large generalizations, Beason focuses instead on the individual responses to particular errors. Each spelling error—to keep the same example—received three of the four possible scores from the subjects, a reaction Beason says may be affected by features of the text itself. Readers are more likely to be bothered by *aboutt* than *recomendation*, for instance, because of the relative complexity of the second word. An error in a complicated sentence is likely to be more troubling because the reader is already struggling with the meaning of the sentence, whereas an error at the end of a paragraph is less likely to be bothersome because the overall meaning of the paragraph is already clear by the time the error occurs.

Readers are also affected by factors outside the text, the most important for our purposes being a reader's reaction to the image of the writer generated by the error. Under the heading "writer as a writer," Beason groups reactions indicating that his subjects perceived writers who commit these errors as hasty, careless, uncaring, and uninformed. When Beason looked into whether there was a difference in reaction to errors that seemed to result from carelessness and errors that appeared to stem from a lack of knowledge, he found that the results were not consistent. Whereas some respondents were more lenient toward "accidental" errors, others found the same errors even more bothersome because the writer, "in these readers' estimation, essentially

decided to ignore a problem that could have been easily fixed" (52).

In a second category ("writer as business person") errors can project several negative traits: the writer is likely to seem (1) a faulty thinker, (2) not a detail person, (3) a poor oral communicator, (4) poorly educated, and/or (5) sarcastic, pretentious, or aggressive. Though the perception of traits 1, 2, and 4 is unsurprising, the other two call for explanation. Beason found that a few of his respondents assumed that the errors appearing in the writing would carry over into the writer's speech. One, a human resources administrator, expressed concern that the writer "would struggle with the important negotiation and conflict-resolution skills needed in day-to-day discussions" (54). The conclusion that the writer was likely to be sarcastic came from a single type of error, the unnecessary quotation marks, which some respondents perceived as making fun of the person or idea being referred to.

A final category ("writer as organizational representative") takes up the way the writer represents the company he or she works for. The respondents expressed concerns about the image of the company such a writer would project to customers and in court. A vice president and branch manager for a regional banking corporation commented, "Errors tell me what your company's like. […] If I'm going to write you a letter, then my image went out in that letter, or my company's image" (56). Respondents employed in real estate, health care, or finance—professions frequently involving contracts or litigation—raised questions about what would happen if the writer's work were introduced as evidence in court. Although the survey answers of a senior agent for an insurance company suggested he was less bothered by errors than most of the others, he was "emphatic" in his interview about the seriousness of error as he envisioned a courtroom scene:

> Whatever your writing is, they blow it up [onto a screen] the size of a wall! [He waves his arms.] The opposing attorney goes through whatever you have up there word by word. And if it doesn't look good to a jury or to anybody else, and if you have anything up there that's not right … they're going to use that against you. (57)

By reporting both how and why a small group of nonacademic professionals respond to error, Beason's study provides a valuable look at the world of work our students will be entering—or may well have entered already. Because he was writing for an audience of writing specialists, his conclusions focus on implications for teaching writing in the context of composition courses. However, his findings may prove even more useful for those who deal with writing in courses in engineering, finance, immunology, urban planning, art history, microbiology, history of the theater, and any number of others. Error involves more than breaking a rule in a handbook. Error impedes communication by obscuring the writer's meaning and by projecting an image of the writer as unreliable.

> At times, the subjects moved beyond the writer's caring about the document itself; they often stated that the writer did not care about the reader or whatever exigency prompted the document.
> (Beason 50)

> Readers in business not only draw on their own individual ways of interpreting a text, but also make guesses as to how other people inside and outside the organization might be bothered by errors.
> (Beason 57)

Source

Beason, Larry. "Ethos and Error: How Business People React to Errors." *CCC* 53 (2001): 33-64.

Winter 2002 WAC Workshops

What's New in the New APA Publication Manual?

Thursday, January 17, 2002
3:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.
023 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library (Center for Teaching and Learning)

Still have questions about the changes made in the APA Manual that came out in July? **Joe Law** (WAC Coordinator) will host a session that will take you through the major differences in the latest edition.

Grading Exams Quickly and Consistently—It Can Be Done!

Wednesday, January 23, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.
023 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library (Center for Teaching and Learning)

It's already time to be thinking of grading exams. How can you evaluate them quickly and consistently? **Carol Engelhardt** (History) will share some of the strategies she learned while scoring AP exams in European history for four of the last five summers.

Working with ESL Students

Wednesday, February 6, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.
023 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library (Center for Teaching and Learning)

Many instructors do not feel prepared to work with the writing of students who speak and write English as a second language (ESL). Join **Rick Johns**, director of the Learning English for Academic & Professional Purposes (LEAP) program, for a discussion of effective strategies for working with students whose first language is not English.

Turnitin.com—A User's Report

Wednesday, February 20, 2002
12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.
023 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library (Center for Teaching and Learning)

Last fall, Wright State subscribed to Turnitin.com, a program for detecting plagiarism. If you have made use of this service, you are invited to share your experience with it. **Joe Law** (WAC Coordinator) has been using it in ENG 204, a writing intensive GE course, and will lead the discussion.

To register for workshops, call Joe Law at x2155 or email him at joe.law@wright.edu.

Joe Law, Coordinator
Writing Across the Curriculum
027 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library

Talking about Writing Across the Curriculum and General Education: An Open Invitation

If you are teaching a General Education Writing Intensive course this quarter, you should have received a copy of this message already. I would like to extend the invitation to the campus community as well.

For the past several years, the spring surveys of faculty teaching WI courses have provided valuable feedback about the WAC program. This year I would like to look more closely at WI courses in general education, partly in anticipation of the revised GE program that will go into effect Fall 2003.

Would you be willing to meet informally with other people who teach GE WI courses to discuss the issues that have come up as you have taught these classes? In addition, I would like to hear your concerns about WI classes in the new GE program, in which all classes will be four hours rather than three. I am especially interested in planning activities for 2002-03 that would be useful for people who will be teaching in the new program in Fall 2003. I don't anticipate that the meetings will last a full hour.

If you would like to take part in these discussions, please check ONE of the times below, fill in your name and email address, fold this page in half so that my name and address are on the outside, and drop it into campus mail.

I'll be in touch with you with more information, including a meeting place. For dates selected by faculty at Lake Campus, I will try to locate a room with a teleconference hookup.

_____ Wednesday, February 27, 3:00 p.m., location TBA

_____ Thursday, February 28, 3:30 p.m., location TBA

_____ Friday, March 1, 12:00 noon, location TBA

Name ____

Email ____

Joe Law
WAC Coordinator
027 Paul Laurence Dunbar Library