

Writing Across the Curriculum

Wright State University
March 2002
Number 26

Turnitin.com: It's Not Just for Plagiarism Any More

Joe Law, WAC Coordinator

In Fall 2001, the Office of the Provost agreed to subscribe to Turnitin.com, a plagiarism detection service, and make it available for all faculty. Gary Dickstein (Director of Judicial Affairs) and Virginia Nehring (Associate Professor of Nursing and Faculty President) presented several workshops to introduce the program to faculty, and their demonstrations of the capabilities of Turnitin.com showed it to be an effective way to detect plagiarism of sources available on the Internet and from online term paper mills.

While I was taking part in one of those workshops, it occurred to me that—in addition to its value in detecting plagiarism—Turnitin.com also might be a useful tool for teaching certain aspects of writing. The following comments describe two ways I used the service in the ENG 204 (Great Books) course I was teaching that quarter. Although I have not reproduced any student papers in this article, the newly created examples are very close approximations and include Internet texts that were located with Turnitin.com.

How Turnitin.com Works

A very brief explanation of the way this service works will probably be useful. The text of a paper submitted electronically to Turnitin.com is compared to texts available on the Internet (including such term paper mills as SchoolSucks.com and Evil House of Cheat) and in Turnitin.com's own database of papers submitted by all its subscribers. Any sequence of five or more matching words is identified. In the report returned by Turnitin.com, those matches are highlighted and keyed to the URL of the site where they were found.

Inside this issue...

[Web Resources for
Students](#)

Page 7

[Center for Teaching and
Learning Workshops for
Spring 2002](#)

Page 8

[WAC Workshops for
Spring 2002](#)

Page 10

Figure 1 shows the top portion of an originality report.

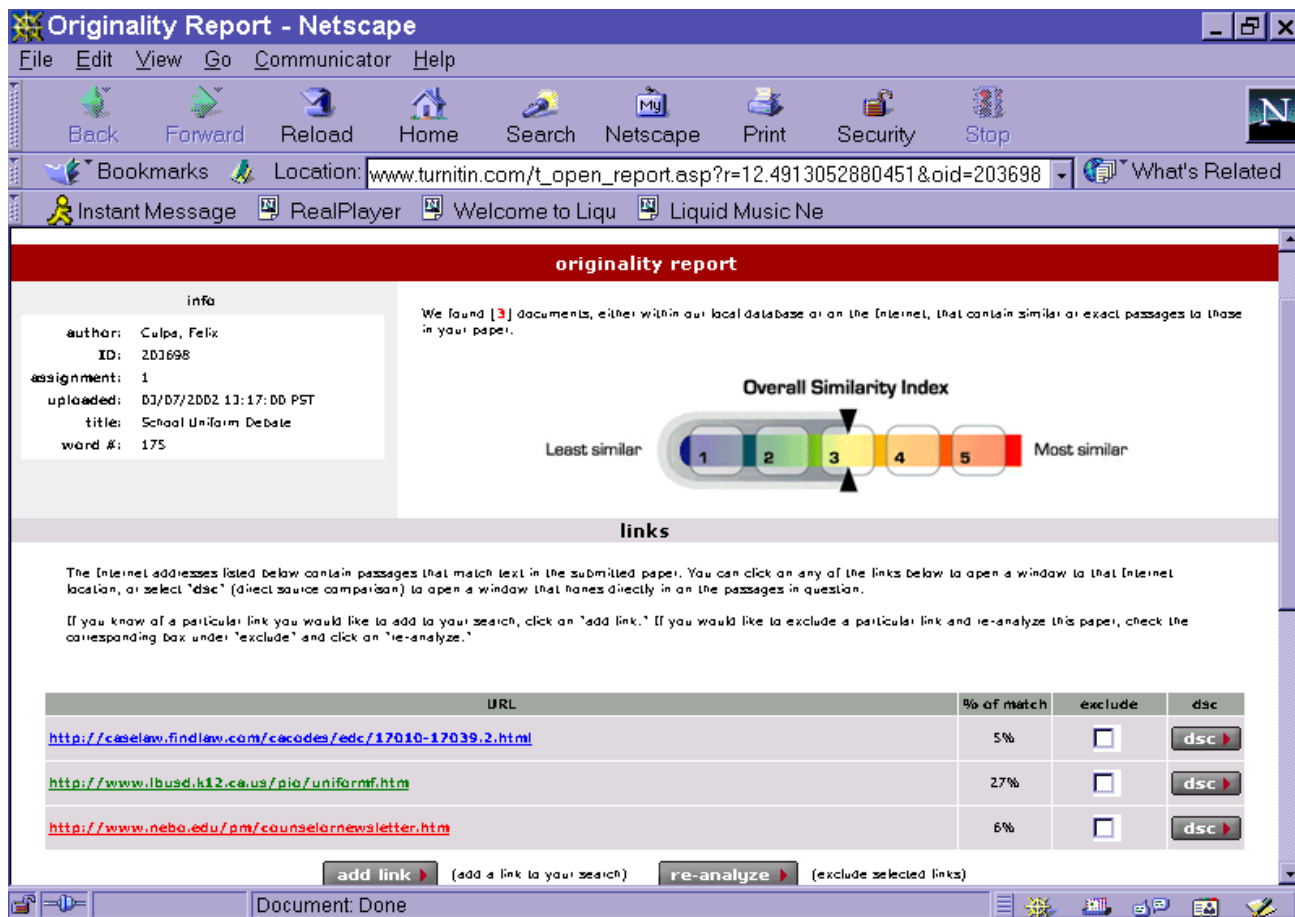


FIGURE 1 Overall Similarity Index and URLs for Matching Text

The box on the right indicates the number of documents in which there were matches, and the scale (Overall Similarity Index) is also color coded to indicate the degree of similarity (increasing in intensity from blue to red). In the box at the bottom of this screen is a set of URLs (each a different color) that contain matching text. Clicking the direct source comparison button **dsc** at the end of the line takes you to the page where the text appears, with the identical text highlighted.

The following screen capture (Figure 2) shows a portion of the text of the originality report on a paper about Alexander Pushkin's "The Snowstorm." Underlined words match that same sequence of words in a document on the Internet or in Turnitin.com's database. These markings are color coded to the URLs at the top of the originality report.

An exact match does not automatically indicate plagiarism, of course. In some cases, a highlighted passage may simply be a cliché that appears in many places (for example, one paper I submitted contained the words "when all is said and done," which readily found a match). The illustration below comes from a paper about a short story that is available online. The writer has quoted from the story and documented it appropriately.

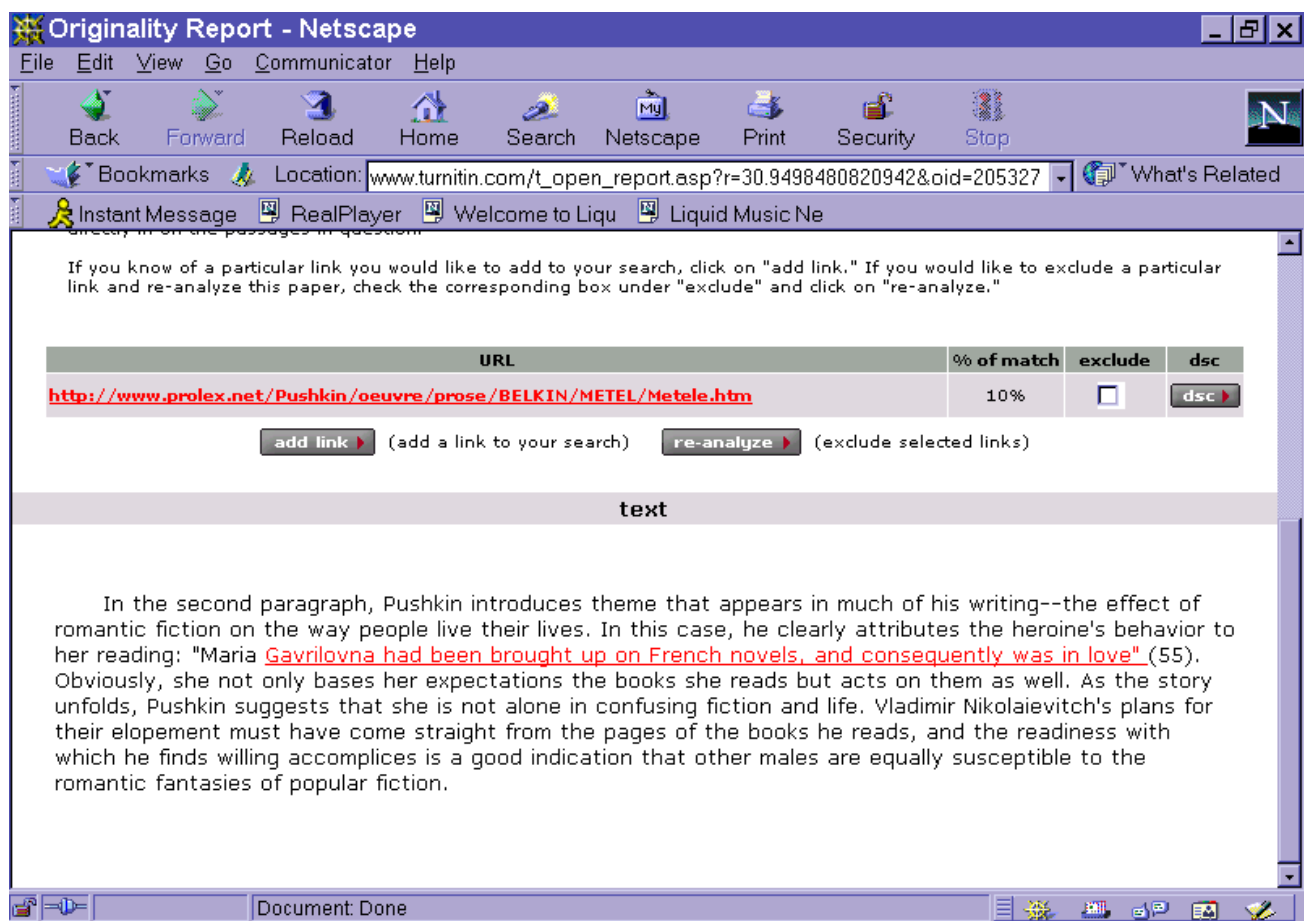


FIGURE 2 Matching Text

Incidentally, the originality report for the paper of another student writing about the same story points to a limitation in the plagiarism detection program. This student slightly misquoted the same phrase, omitting the word *and*: “had been brought up on French novels, consequently was in love” (55). In the originality report, only the first seven words were underlined because the omission makes the short remaining sequence of words no longer identical. Thus, typographical errors or the alteration of a strategically located word may prevent the detection of a text that has been (mis)copied.

Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

Most discussions of plagiarism in academe appear to focus on detection, proof, and punishment. Plagiarism detection services are discussed in those kinds of terms as well, with their promoters stressing ease, quickness, and certainty of detection. If students have committed plagiarism, they will be found out at the end.

The end of the process provides fewer teaching opportunities than the earlier stages, and for that reason it may be useful to use Turnitin.com with a draft. Most of the instances of plagiarism I have dealt with have been the result of misunderstanding or carelessness, not a deliberate attempt to deceive. In ENG 204 I told students (in writing) that they would not be penalized if the originality report on a draft showed that an outside source was insufficiently documented; however, if the problem recurred on the final version, they would face disciplinary action for academic misconduct.

For the first set of drafts I received that quarter, two originality reports made it clear that I needed to work with the writers concerning their use of outside sources. In one case, the writer had, in fact, attempted to attribute the ideas to another writer. However, what had been presented as a paraphrase was actually direct quotation. With a printout of the report and the web page that had been quoted (the identical language already marked), it was easy for me to demonstrate—and for the writer to see—just where the problem lay.

The other case was not quite so straightforward. The opening paragraph of the originality report came back looking something like this:

In *Measure for Measure* Isabella is an especially important character. She is a female who manages to be vocal and intelligent as well as pure and holy. She is also significant in that her role in the play focuses primarily on her moral dilemma. Does she save her brother and give up her valued chastity or does she save her own soul, allowing her brother to die?

The highlighted text led to *The Women of Shakespeare*, a page created by students in a 1997 Shakespeare course at the University of Georgia. Kim Price's essay on women in *Measure for Measure* contains the following paragraph:

Isabella is a very intriguing Shakespearean female. She is one of the few females who manages to be vocal and intelligent as well as pure and holy. She is also significant in that the play focuses primarily on her moral dilemma. Does she save her brother and give up her valued chastity or does she save her own soul while allowing her brother to die? By playing on Elizabethan viewpoints concerning women, nuns, and chastity, Shakespeare uses Isabella in developing his plot and theme. Does she save her brother's life and give up her valued chastity or does she save her own soul while allowing her brother to die?

Clearly the writer has borrowed far too liberally from Price's online essay, particularly as there was no acknowledgment of Price in the draft. Had this appeared in the final version of the paper, it would have been impossible to treat it as anything other than plagiarism, whether it was a deliberate action or unthinking carelessness. In a draft, however, it was possible to use it as a teaching opportunity—reinforced with an unusually convincing warning of a serious penalty for future violation. The final paper drew more sparingly (and more effectively) on Price and acknowledged the borrowing.

Working on Revision

The two examples just given suggest that Turnitin.com can be used beneficially in helping students learn more about avoiding plagiarism. However, the originality reports may have other uses as well. For instance, the slight misquotation mentioned above resulted in only a partial match for a phrase enclosed in quotation marks. An incomplete match of that sort can be turned into a reminder that quotations must be exact. The match with a cliché provides a similar opportunity for discussing clichés, along with compelling evidence that the expression in question really *is* a cliché.

Students submitted both a draft and a final version of each paper, so the first draft was among the documents to which the second paper was compared. Thus, in the new originality report all groups of five or more words that had not been changed from the draft would be highlighted. In that report, then, it is literally clear at a glance how much (or how little) has been revised. The example used as the basis for Figure 3 is, admittedly, an extreme case. According to the originality report, it repro-

duces 94% of the draft. The writer made only minor changes at the end of the introduction and in the final paragraph. In the report I printed out for the student, the duplicated words were underlined and in red, the new text unmarked. To make the illustration as graphic as possible for the newsletter, I have replaced the original text with a series of Xs and the changes with Os.

I might as well admit that one of my goals was not exactly noble. For years I've muttered about the minimal amount of revision I sometimes see. The second originality report would be ocular proof I could wave under the noses of the non-revisers. And there was some satisfaction in seeing the reactions of those whose reports contained only a few scattered clusters of unmarked words. They seemed genuinely surprised that their revisions amounted to so little.

As it turned out, I had some surprises of my own as well. Reports like the one in Figure 3 were far less common than reports showing 25% to 50% change—sometimes more. The reports made it evident that students really were modifying their texts, even if those changes weren't immediately evident as I read the new version. As I began to look more closely, I was reminded of something else I should have been considering, too. Once writers complete a draft, they tend to make fairly slight modifications, such as simple word substitutions. That's why the papers seem so little changed to the reader. When change was more evident in these papers, it was almost always because writers were responding to content-focused comments on their drafts. A student trying to account for a likely counter-argument or provide a clear illustration will inevitably revise more thoroughly than one who has not been given specific goals for revision.

Conclusion

After a single quarter's experimentation with Turnitin.com, I can offer only the most tentative sort of conclusion, of course. A plagiarism detection service certainly can play an important part in dealing with plagiarism, but it should be part of a more comprehensive approach to the problem. Before it comes into play, we need to be sure our assignments do not facilitate (or even invite) plagiarism. We need to be sure our students know what constitutes plagiarism—and recent news stories demonstrate they're not the only ones a bit fuzzy on that count. Using Turnitin.com at the draft stage last fall has been enough to convince me that it can be an effective tool for teaching those distinctions. I urge others using the program to consider using it at this point as well as with a final version of the paper.

Although I am less certain of the effectiveness of using originality reports to discuss revision, the experiment did remind me of the importance of providing content-focused comments on a draft. Although a second originality report may provide a striking visual record of the amount of text left unchanged, the extent to which that might be a starting point for further growth remains unclear. However, I will be repeating the experiment at the next opportunity. If you decide to take on a similar project, please let me know what you learn.

NOTE: For information about setting up an account to use Turnitin.com in your class, contact Gary Dickstein, who is the site administrator for Wright State. He and Virginia Nehring will be offering two workshops this spring (April 18 and May 2). For more information, see the listing of Center for Teaching and Learning workshops on pages 8-9 of this newsletter.

Web Resources for Students: Highlights from Wilton High School

Wilton High School in Wilton, Connecticut, hosts a Web site of “Links to a Better Education” at <http://www.chemistrycoach.com/linksto.htm#Links to a Better Education>. This site contains forty-two sections of links, including collections of resources on study skills, critical thinking, and scientific writing. While this is a high school site, many of the provided links are to college and university sites.

Resources for Writing in the Sciences

One of the resource links included in the scientific writing section, for example, is a Virginia Tech site, “Writing Guidelines for Engineering and Science Students” at <http://fbox.vt.edu/eng/mech/writing/>. This site offers general tips for writing along with information specific to different writing tasks such as memos and other correspondence, formal reports, and proposals.

The Virginia Tech site also features links to related sites, PowerPoint slides for teaching writing and speaking in the sciences, and a list of instructor resources, complete with exercises and homework assignments.

Another section of the Wilton page includes resources on writing laboratory reports, with many links to sites that include descriptions of the sections needed in a laboratory report and examples of format.

General Writing Resources

A number of the areas of the Wilton site are writing-specific, listing links dealing with avoiding plagiarism, writing for essay tests, improving grammar and vocabulary, and writing papers. Several of the links in the note-taking section detail the Cornell method of taking notes, complete with diagrams. Although not specifically writing-related, other areas that students might find helpful are the collections of links on studying chemistry, physics, and biology.

One excellent collection of printable handouts on a wide range of writing topics is housed at Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>. The Wilton site links to several different sections of Purdue’s OWL. The OWL has many handouts on general writing and grammar issues, common problem areas for non-native speakers, and specific writing tasks like writing resumes or cover letters. Handouts are available to print as hypertext or Adobe Acrobat files, making the resources printer-friendly, too.

Students may benefit from being pointed toward this site, allowing them to browse on their own for resources. In addition, instructors may find links to sites that can assist their students with specific types of writing assignments and provide models for students to use or critique.

Thanks to **Tracey Steele**, Sociology, for bringing the Wilton High School Web site to our attention.

Cynthia K. Marshall

CTL Spring Offerings 2002

Call x3162 to register for CTL workshops.

Electronic Classroom Orientation: Led by Robert Frey, Classroom Services Coordinator, CTL, and Phillip Combs, Computer Systems Administrator, CTL. This session will acquaint faculty members with CTL's electronic classroom equipment. Attendees will see the equipment used in the classrooms and learn how to operate the equipment. Useful how-tos and tips on proper equipment use will also be discussed. This orientation assumes that the participant has a basic working knowledge of Windows and/or the Mac OS and is comfortable with running basic desktop applications such as Microsoft Office. Wednesday, March 27, 10:00-11:00 a.m. in 225 Allyn.

How to Handle Violations of Academic Integrity Luncheon: Led by Gary Dickstein, Director, Judicial Affairs, and Robert Adams, Chair of Academic Integrity Hearing Panel and Associate Professor, Political Science. Did you know that over 71% of high school students surveyed in 1999 admitted to cheating? Sixty-eight percent of college students admitted to it too! This presentation will explore current issues associated with academic dishonesty, assist you in developing measures to reduce cheating in your classes, and provide a step-by-step outline on using the University's new Academic Integrity Policy. Wednesday, April 3, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

"The First Year of College: Assessing What We Value" Teleconference: Featuring: Thomas Angelo, Cecilia Lopez, Linda Suskie and Randy Swing. The expert panelists will share their insights for building assessments on competencies, skills, and issues that really matter. Using examples from institutions of various sizes and types, they will help viewers decide on assessment strategies and tools that include what to do with assessment information once it's available. The panel will advise participants on using nationally and locally developed assessment instruments and describe powerful multiple measures for gathering direct and indirect evidence of student learning. Thursday, April 4, 1:00-4:00 p.m. in 145 Russ Center.

Educational Records Luncheon: Led by Gary Dickstein, Director, Judicial Affairs and Joyce Hail, Assistant Registrar. Personal privacy is a growing concern for many people in today's world. Privacy is also a concern for many students. This session will provide a detailed explanation of the university's policy and the do's and don'ts of releasing student information (academic grades, disciplinary outcomes, home address, Social Security number, etc.) We will provide a copy of the new policy, various forms, and help you understand what information can and cannot be released and under what circumstances. Monday, April 8, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

Using the Internet to Enhance Onsite Student Learning: Lessons Learned Luncheon: Moderated by Dan DeStephen, Director, CTL and Professor of Communication. Panelists are Timothy Wood, Professor of Biological Sciences and Kirsten Halling, Assistant Professor of French, Modern Languages. This session will feature a panel of faculty sharing their successes (and failures) in integrating online learning into their courses. Participants will learn how to successfully integrate online learning experiences into their classes. The panel will share examples of online assignments and discuss student reaction to web-based instruction. Thursday, April 11, 12:00 noon-2:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

Word to Web: Don't Convert. Communicate! Luncheon: Led by Jeff Hiles, Instructional Web Designer, CTL. This presentation will show you how to make Web pages that help visitors get what they want, load faster, and adapt to the different needs of a wide range of users. We'll start with Word and PowerPoint documents and show simple ways to take control of their hidden lives and communicate effectively on the Web. Friday, April 12, 12:00 noon-2:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

Speaking Skills for the Classroom Teacher Luncheon: Led by Dan DeStephen, Director, CTL and Professor of Communication. Nervous about lecturing to a class of 200 students? Do you want to know how to help students remember more about your lecture material? This workshop will focus on basic techniques for handling nervousness. We will also discuss your lecture from the perspective of your student. By attending this workshop, you will learn how to gain and hold the attention of your students. Wednesday, April 17, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

Turnitin.com Workshop Luncheon: Led by Gary Dickstein, Director, Judicial Affairs and Virginia Nehring, Associate Professor of Nursing and Health. Interested in reducing cases of plagiarism in your class? Do you want a way to motivate students not to cheat? This workshop will cover how to use this newly acquired plagiarism detection service. Helpful hints and suggestions will be given by Dr. Virginia Nehring (an experienced user of the service) to make using Turnitin.com as easy as possible. Thursday, April 18, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. or Thursday, May 2, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. both in 023N Library.

"The Changing Mosaic: Designing Successful Experiences for the New American College Student" Teleconference: Featuring: Herman Blake, Mary Stuart Hunter, Gail Mellow, and Barbara Schneider. With the 2000 census as a backdrop, four of America's most respected practitioners and scholars will lead a timely discussion on the changing face, and attitude, of America's new college student. The most complex issues will be tackled, including how to educate an increasingly diverse population and how to increase the relevance of higher education for a traditional-aged student population that is increasingly difficult to characterize in terms of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Thursday, April 25, 1:00-4:00 p.m. in E154 Student Union.

"Teaching and Learning at a Distance: What It Takes to Effectively Design, Deliver, and Evaluate Programs" Book Group Luncheon: Led by Chris Roberts, Instructional Designer, CTL. Teaching and Learning at a distance is an area of education that is growing rapidly alongside the technology that makes it possible. But success in this area requires more than advanced technology; it requires skillful instructors, well-designed courses, and students prepared to learn in this format. Our discussion will examine insights from experienced practitioners into what is needed to make teaching and learning at a distance successful for everyone involved. Call x3162 to make your reservation and to receive your complimentary copy of the book. Tuesday, April 30, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

A Solid Syllabus: Establishing Essential Expectations of Excellence Luncheon: Led by James Uphoff, Associate Director, CTL. Much attention to creating a syllabus is a prerequisite for establishing expectations of excellence for the students in the course. This workshop will explore essential elements of such a syllabus including goals, grading, attendance, tentative schedule, and quality of work among other factors. Faculty are requested to bring a copy of one of their own syllabi to share with others in the discussion group. Tuesday, May 7, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. in 023N Library.

WAC Luncheon Workshops Spring 2002

Getting Students to Revise Effectively

*Wednesday, April 24
12:00 noon -1:00 p.m.
or*

*Thursday, April 25
12:00 noon-1:00 p.m.
Both in 023N Library*

How much do your comments on early drafts help students improve their writing? How much do you need to mark to show students what they need to do to improve? How can you ensure that students do more than simply correct the errors you have identified? Join faculty from across campus to

discuss these and related questions. It will be a good opportunity to share what you have learned—and to learn from others.

Writing Intensive Classes and the Summer Quarter

*Wednesday, May 22
12:00 noon-1:00 p.m.
or
Thursday, May 23
12:00 noon-1:00 p.m.
Both in 023N Library*

Everything about summer classes seems to be intensified, including writing assignments.

Whether it's in-class writing, journal entries, drafts, or finished research papers, they arrive twice as fast as in a regular term. Talk with faculty from across campus about reading and responding to writing in the more concentrated summer term.

**To register for
WAC 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