What Do We Mean by "Writing"? by Barbara Walvoord

Writing is more than grammar and punctuation. A statement developed by faculty under the auspices of the Association of American Colleges and Universities says, "Written communication is the development and expression of ideas in writing. Written communication involves learning to work in many genres and styles. It can involve working with many different writing technologies in various formats on paper and online, and integrating texts, data, and images" (Handa, 2004; Rhodes, 2010). Further, writing is not a separable quality of student work; rather, it is enmeshed with critical thinking, information literacy, problem solving, quantitative reasoning, and other skills.

WAC and WID

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) refers sometimes to the whole movement (as I use it in this book) and sometimes to an emphasis on using writing to help students learn and explore ideas. Writing in the Disciplines (WID) emphasizes learning disciplinary forms of writing. You do not have to distinguish. The best writing programs help students employ the full power of writing for many purposes.

Why Work on Writing?

Here are some of the reasons for an institution to work on student writing:

- Writing can enhance students' higher-order learning, as suggested in more than one hundred studies summarized by Russell (2001).
- Writing is part of several high-impact practices that research has linked to student learning. These practices include writing-intensive courses, frequent higher-order exams and assignments, prompt feedback on student work, tutoring, and supplemental instruction (Selected elements from Kuh, 2008; Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, 2013; and, for community colleges, the Center for Community College Engagement, 2012).
- Writing is an important skill for students' academic success in college, which in turn affects retention (Habley, Bloom, and Robbins, 2012, p. 33).
- Writing is one of the skills most emphasized by employers (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010; Summary in Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011, p.26; National Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005).
• Working with student writing affects student engagement, which affects both learning and retention (Light, 2001, p. 55).

• You can work on writing in a number of ways throughout the institution, and you can involve large numbers of faculty and classes. The composition program, writing lab, and writing-across-the-curriculum efforts can be tightly integrated or not, depending on your circumstances.

• Faculty workshops can help faculty develop ways to use writing effectively in their classes and to incorporate other strategies that research has linked to learning (Walvoord, Hunt, Dowling, and McMahon, 1997).

• Writing improvement is an outcome you can assess; methods are suggested in the following chapters.

More broadly, as Brandt notes in her study of literacy and society, "Literacy has always been intimately connected to [equality] and to the well-functioning of a democracy.... How can you have an effective voice in this society if your literacy is not protected and developed equally to others?" (2009, pp. 14-15).

What Is "Good" Writing?

"Good" writing in biology may look somewhat different from "good" writing in philosophy or business. Thus broad definitions of "good" writing tend to focus on the writer's ability to meet the needs of audience and purpose, whatever they are. Resources 1.1. lists statements that may be helpful.

Resources 1.1: Definitions and Rubrics for "Good" Writing

• The VALUE rubric for writing, developed under the LEAP program of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (www.aacu.org/leap).

• The statement of outcomes for an introductory composition course, with suggestions for further development of student writing in other disciplines, by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html).

• The "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," endorsed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project (http://wpacouncil.org/framework).

• The CLAQWA rubrics, which are part of a system for peer review, grading, instructor feedback, and program assessment. They describe the cognitive levels as well as the full range of writing skills across the disciplines (http://claqwa.com). Banta, Griffín, Flateby, and Kahn (2009) describe the CLAQWA system as one of "three promising alternatives" for assessing college students' knowledge and skills (pp. 12-18).

• The National Writing Project (2010, p. 147) objectives related to digital and multimedia forms. * Conference on College Composition and Communication, "Position Statement
The Degree Qualifications Profile is a national framework stating what students should be expected to know and do when they earn an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree.

The following list is my own version, drawing on the documents in Resources 1.1.

The expert writer:

- Focuses the writing appropriately for the demands of the assignment, situation, and audience, whether that means constructing an argument, recommending solutions to a problem, or reporting scientific research. Uses the modes of reasoning and inquiry, as well as the conventions of correctness that are considered appropriate to the discipline, but also understands the rhetorical situatedness of those modes and their intellectual, political, and social consequences.
- Organizes the writing in an effective way for its audiences and purposes.
- Locates, evaluates, integrates, and cites information from various sources.
- Follows ethical principles for research and writing, including collaboration with peers, use of sources (avoiding plagiarism), and ethics of the disciplines such as protecting privacy, presenting accurate data, and respecting alternative viewpoints.
- Integrates quantitative material, charts and graphs, images, and other multimedia material as appropriate; understands, critically evaluates, and appropriately employs new technologies and new digital and multimedia forms.
- Produces clear, coherent sentences and paragraphs shaped for their audiences and purposes.
- Uses the grammar and punctuation of Edited Standard Written English (ESWE) in appropriate circumstances, such as formal academic, business, civic, and professional writing.
- Follows productive writing processes.
- Collaborates effectively with others to both give and receive feedback on a writer's emerging work.

Grammar and Punctuation

It is best to avoid terms like "correct English" or "bad English" or "error" when discussing grammar and punctuation, because these terms imply an inaccurate understanding of the realities of language:

- All languages (including nonstandard forms of English) are rule-bound. There is a rule for "She work at IBM" and a rule for "She works at IBM."
The rules in every language change over time, and different forms of language arise in different cultural or geographic communities.

No set of language conventions is inherently better than another. Skilled writers and speakers will "code switch" - using "she work at IBM" in a home or neighborhood setting and "she works at IBM" in an academic or professional setting.

Every multicultural and multilingual society tries to balance, on the one hand, the need for a common language that allows all citizens to understand one another, and on the other hand, the pull of the varied ethnic and linguistic identities of its citizens.

Every society struggles with the propensity of humans to use language differences to enforce stereotypes and discrimination.

Based on these facts about language, one can say that academic and professional writing "conforms to the conventions of Edited Standard Written English (EWSE)." Bean (2011, pp. 71-86) offers a fuller discussion of related issues.

How do Students Learn to Write?

Students do not just "learn to write" in high school or in composition class and then apply that model to all future situations. "Written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum," affirms a statement by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (n.d.). More broadly, students need a language-rich environment in which they are constantly engaged in reading, speaking, and writing.

How Do Students Learn to Transfer Writing Skills?

Transfer of writing skills from one course to another is difficult (Beaufort, 2007; Moore, 2012; Nelms and Dively, 2007). Faculty can help in these ways:

- Explicitly encourage reflection and metacognition, whereby students consider similarities and differences among writing situations and reflect upon their own writing and learning.
- Help students to recognize how writing skills learned in one situation will be used later, and how earlier skills can be applied in a present situation.
- Use similar vocabulary about writing from one course to another. * Assign writing in many courses so that students constantly confront the need to develop and apply their writing skills.

What about Speakers of Other Languages?
Students who speak English as another language are described by various terms, none of them entirely satisfactory: "multilingual," "nonnative," "ESL" (English as a second language, though English may actually be their third or fourth), "L1" and "L2" (referring to English as first language or a second/later language), and "L1.5" (referring to resident ESL students). The term I use in this book is ESOL (English speakers of other languages). The following are basic principles (see also Resources 1.2).

- Combat stereotypes. Find out as much as possible about the experiences and needs of ESOL students on your campus.
- Help faculty to deal knowledgeably and strategically with the needs of ESOL students in their classrooms.
- Establish support services that students find accessible and helpful.
- Value the literacies that ESOL students possess, in their native languages and in English, including the literacies expressed as they communicate electronically with their peers and as they participate in their various communities.
- Help students understand U.S. academic expectations about plagiarism and collaboration.
- As a responder, focus first on the students' ideas; let them know that they have been heard and taken seriously. Then select a few language issues that the student can work on.
- More broadly, work toward institutional and societal appreciation for multicultural literacies, for written "accents," for forms of communication enabled by new technologies, and for multiple "Englishes" developed in many nations. If a campus is really serious about supporting global perspectives, that must include a global perspective on written language as well.

Resources 1.2 : English Speakers of Other Languages

- Conference on College Composition and Communication (2009) has a policy research brief on how institutions should understand and support the writing of ESOL students at classroom and institutional levels.
- Cox (2011) summarizes the literature from both WAC and second-language writing, discusses how ESOL students are faring in WAC programs, and recommends further action and scholarship. This article is part of a special issue of Across the Disciplines devoted to WAC and second language writing. The entire issue is available online.
- Hall and Navarro (2011) summarize the research on how ESOL students learn to write academic English (in the same issue as Cox, 2011).
- Matsuda (2012) describes the complexity of the issue and discusses specifically how to address ESOL issues in many areas, including first-year composition courses, WAC programs, writing centers, and graduate writing courses.
- Wolfe-Quintero and Segade (1999) present a qualitative study of ESL students enrolled in writing-intensive (WI) courses and a resulting faculty workshop model.
How to Improve Student Writing

A robust body of research tells us how to improve student writing.

The Bottom Line

Research suggests that, in as many classes as possible, students need to write frequently, receive feedback, and learn metacognition. In more detail, they need to experience the following (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; applied for technology by Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996; Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.; Addison and McGee, 2002; Center for Community College Engagement, 2012):

- See that writing is important and necessary
- Experience a safe, supportive, yet rigorous environment with instructors who believe in students' ability to improve as writers
- Read, read, read, and, more broadly, work within an interactive, language-rich environment
- Write frequently in genres that require higher-order thinking
- Learn to work in multimedia forms and use developing technologies
- Get helpful guidance, feedback, and chances to revise
- Learn mindfulness about their own writing (metacognition) and principles they can apply across contexts

References


Nelms, G., and Dively, R.L. "Perceived Roadblocks to Transferring Knowledge from First-Year Composition to Writing-Intensive Major Courses: A Pilot Study." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 2007, 31(1-2), 214-240. [Note: the version that appears in the print copy of the journal is an earlier draft that should not have been published. Corrected version is online at [http://wpacouncil.org/archives/31n1-2/31n1-2dively-nelms.pdf](http://wpacouncil.org/archives/31n1-2/31n1-2dively-nelms.pdf)

