

THE WRITING CENTER

BULLETIN SPRING 2006

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LOCATION

Liberal Arts 144
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OUR PROGRAMS

All programs are supported by Academic Affairs and are free to UM students, staff, and faculty.

§ Tutoring

Open weekdays, Jan. 23 – May 9.
Referrals and walk-ins welcome. Tutoring hours reserved for non-native speakers of English on Tues. and Thurs. evenings.

§ Workshops

Custom workshops in your class, seminar, or department. Call to arrange.

§ Writing Assistants

Assigned by The Writing Center to help faculty critique, but not grade, students' drafts in courses. Call x2470 by Feb. 6 to request a WA for spring semester.

§ Online Help

Go to www.umt.edu/writingcenter for free instructional handouts, links to writing sites and guides, information for faculty and advisors, overview and preparatory materials for the UDWPA.

Formal Writing Connects Students to the Discipline

In this bulletin, we return to the advice of Professor John Bean of Seattle University on making effective writing assignments for undergraduates. Bean's book, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2001) is now available at The Mansfield Library as well as at The Writing Center.

While Bean encourages faculty to make informal, exploratory writing assignments to help students see writing as an accomplice to critical thinking, he recognizes the place of formal writing across the curriculum. Formal writing usually requires students to revise and edit their work over days or weeks to achieve what Bean calls "finished prose."

The difference between formal and informal writing assignments is not just how they are evaluated. Through formal writing assignments, faculty try to get students to mimic the mental and communicative habits that characterize a particular discipline. Because grading formal papers involves more than checking for an intellectual pulse, faculty expectations are often significantly higher for formal writing than students realize. To elicit papers more like those you envision, we suggest a few rules of thumb covered by Bean in his Chapter 5, "Formal Writing Assignments."

One of Bean's broad recommendations is that you design writing tasks that flow from your instructional goals for the course as a whole. Do you want students to master key concepts or become familiar with a range of approaches to a topic in your field? If the former, ask students to write a letter explaining a key concept to a peer or family member in non-technical language. To teach students how to evaluate competing ideas, give them a thesis statement that calls for comparison and contrast and ask them to support the thesis in a few pages. Or, pose a

Formal Writing (cont.)

question or problem in a single sentence that forces students to make their paper into a reasoned answer to your question.

These approaches guard against the tendency many students have to write “all about” papers when you expect them to analyze, evaluate, argue, and reason. But they also fit with the idea that writing assignments are best conceived of as problem-solving activities in a defined context. You should provide explicit information about the audience, the role of the writer, and the purpose of the paper—the same tools you have when you write for professional purposes. This allows students to better focus on the thinking and writing processes that are used in your discipline.

Resist the temptation to carefully design your course and then top it off with an open topic research paper or a couple of choose-your-own book reviews to meet the writing course requirement. Without evident ties between the thinking required in class and what you ask them to write, students will fall back on generic (aka high school) models of writing and disappoint you more often than not.

To best connect formal writing assignments to the course, give clear, written directions for each assignment. Bean suggests you provide students with a separate handout for each writing assignment in a course. Directions should include: a description of **the task** (the focus and purpose of the paper, i.e. the problem to be solved); **the role of the writer and the audience** (designating yourself, the expert, as the audience puts the student in an unnatural rhetorical position); **the format** for the paper; **the process** for the task (deadlines for outlines, drafts, peer-editing, conferences, etc.); **the criteria for evaluation**.

Analyzing your formal assignments into component parts allows you to revise the assignment in future semesters in just those areas that you want to adjust. If you have a

website for your course or a Blackboard supplement you can publish assignment guidelines at any time during the semester instead of squeezing everything into the syllabus at the beginning of the term. You can even design the writing assignments after you have had a chance to get to know your class.

Bean observes that while thesis-driven papers are still, perhaps, the most common writing assignments in college courses, other kinds of “finished” writing can serve students and faculty well. Poems, dialogues, story endings, interviews, academic autobiographies, case studies, or personal reflections are all excellent options when used to involve students in their own learning.

A good writing assignment, in Bean’s view, is not merely a vehicle for checking students’ command of English writing conventions. Rather, he concludes that “a good writing assignment deepens students’ engagement with course material, promotes critical thinking, and helps [students] learn the discipline’s discourse—its characteristic methods of inquiry, analysis, and argumentation.”

Tutors Writing

Writing tutor and UM graduate student in English **Desiree Cromwell**, recently presented “A Dialectic between Ideologies: Love and Marriage in the Twelfth Century” at the Third Annual Graduate Colloquium of the Medieval and Early Modern Institute at the University of Alberta. Adjunct Assistant Professor and Tutor Coordinator **Henrietta Goodman** has had two poems, “Red Poppy” and “Like a Shell the Body Opens”, accepted for the next issue of the *North Carolina Literary Review*. COT writing tutor **Kisha Lewellyn** has won the Richard J. Margolis award for her master’s thesis “Voices Hinged: A Triptych of Reflections on Farming and Ranching in the Bitterroot” (EVST 2005). Congratulations to these UM writers at work!