

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)
Faculty Handbook

2013 - 2014

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CUNY Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Fellow Fact Sheet (for Faculty)

Who is a WAC Fellow?

In 1999, a Board Resolution created a CUNY-wide initiative to integrate writing across academic disciplines at all CUNY colleges. The Resolution also created a new CUNY WAC Fellows program to support Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) across the University. Advanced CUNY doctoral candidates, in the full range of departments at the Graduate Center, go through a rigorous application and interview process to be granted a WAC Fellow position. Each college is appointed six WAC Fellows every academic year who join the WAC team while enrolled full-time in the final stages of their Ph.D. program. CUNY trains fellows in WAC best practices through various workshops given throughout the year. Fellows also meet with City Tech coordinators on a weekly basis to discuss issues of writing and pedagogy.

What does a WAC Fellow do?

WAC Fellows carry out a number of duties with the overarching goal of helping faculty to integrate writing as a tool for learning across the City Tech curriculum.

- They conduct various workshops for the college and specific departments. Topics have included peer-review, student engagement, assignment design, plagiarism, and efficient grading strategies.
- They work individually with City Tech faculty members. The work may include, but is not limited to, assignment design, syllabus development, and increasing student engagement. Fellows provide tailored feedback and ideas to meet faculty needs, which may vary across courses and disciplines. Fellows often conduct workshops during classes and may hold open hours to follow-up on the workshop topic, but do not otherwise work one-on-one with students.
- Although WAC Fellows do not grade assignments, they can read student work and offer support and suggestions to faculty for dealing with patterns of errors.

Who at City Tech may request support from a Fellow?

All City Tech faculty members may request a fellow. Faculty members from disciplines that do not traditionally focus on student writing are especially encouraged to apply. You may submit a request to the WAC coordinators (see contact information below) at any time. The coordinators will attempt to match fellows with faculty based on discipline, needs, and availability.

Questions?

If you have any questions, or wish to submit a request form, please contact the current City Tech WAC Coordinators: Professors Laureen Park (Social Science) LPark@citytech.cuny.edu and Rebecca Devers (English) rdevers@citytech.cuny.edu .

For more information and useful resources, please visit our page on the Faculty Commons:
http://facultycommons.citytech.cuny.edu/wac/wac_index.shtml

Writing-Intensive Course Requirements

Successful entry into a career area generally requires significant writing skills. To ensure that students gain these skills, City Tech has added the following to the requirements for all degree programs:

- Successful completion of two writing intensive courses for the associate degree, one of which must be a course in the associate core and one a first-level course in the major. These courses must be completed prior to the attainment of 45 credits. For associate degree transfer students: a total of two writing-intensive courses, one in the core curriculum and one in the major.
- Successful completion of an additional two writing-intensive courses for the baccalaureate degree, one in the baccalaureate core plus one in an upper level course in the major, making a total of four. For baccalaureate degree transfer students: a total of four writing-intensive courses, two in the core curriculum and two in the major.

Writing-intensive courses have a “W” appended to the section number in the schedule of classes. Writing-intensive courses completed successfully at other CUNY colleges or at colleges that have articulation agreements with New York City College of Technology will count toward meeting these requirements. (City Tech Catalog 2011-13. P.36)

In order for a course to be designated “Writing Intensive” it should, at a minimum, include the following:

A minimum of fifteen pages of writing per student.

However, it is more the *integration* of writing into the learning process of the course rather than the number of pages assigned that makes the course writing-intensive. Writing assignments should contain a mix of informal and formal exercises and be structured to help students gain a richer understanding of course material.

Critical reading, logical thinking and the use of writing to help students understand the topic at hand.

In as far as reading, writing and thinking are interdependent activities; students should be expected to practice these skills to better engage with course material.

The use of appropriate style and disciplinary conventions in writing and speaking.

Each discipline uses particular—i.e. citation, vocabulary and organizational—styles: Students should receive instruction and opportunities to demonstrate competence in discipline specific elements.

The productive use of research resources, including the library, specific to the discipline.

Each discipline may use specific research resources: students should receive instruction as to what these resources are and how to use them. Assignments based on the use of such resources could allow students to demonstrate competence in the use of resources.

A detailed syllabus.

The syllabus should communicate course objectives; the concepts the students are expected to master, and the instructor’s grading policy.

Involvement of students in the writing process: from brainstorming, to drafting, to revision, to finished essay.

Students should have the opportunity for peer review and revision of their own work.

Working with a Fellow Independently of a Writing-Intensive Course

Faculty at CityTech often work with WAC Fellows independently of a WI course as the same core techniques involved in assisting WI course development can aid further student learning in all courses. The following list captures how fellows can aid faculty in pursuing their goals of improving student learning in their classes:

Writing Across the Curriculum Fellows can assist faculty regardless of course type in:

- Using writing as a tool to learning course content through multiple avenues/types of assignments
- Enhancing clarity both within syllabi and course assignment instructions/prompts for the purpose of better student understanding of faculty expectations
- Brainstorming new, interactive, and unique writing assignments to engage students with course material
- Creating a balance in informal and formal writing assignments within their course
- Using scaffolding (assignments that build off each other) to ensure maximal student learning towards a larger course project or paper through the use of smaller assignments spread across the semester
- Utilizing minimal marking techniques to allow the use of more writing within the course while being reasonable in the time it takes faculty to read and grade them
- Generating ideas for using peer review (when students check/grade each others' work) for assignments which could benefit from revision processes

If you are interested in working with a fellow or even having an initial meeting to discover how they may assist you as faculty, please see the fact sheet in this handbook on page 3 explaining WAC fellow duties and contact either Professor Lauren Park at lpark@citytech.cuny.edu or Professor Rebecca Devers at rdevers@citytech.cuny.edu to be connected to a writing fellow.

*Also, remember that we offer multiple faculty workshops each semester which are fellow-lead and are periodically advertised through CityTech email.

WAC Best Practices

1. Writing Across the Curriculum

- View writing as a tool to students' deep learning of course content
- Reflection is an important element in any discipline: writing offers students an opportunity to reflect on elements of their coursework from what worked well in exam preparation to how they would proceed differently with lab work in the future to how they moved from one draft to the next when writing an essay
- Students—any learners, really—need orientation into writing in the discipline: Writing practices change from discipline to discipline, course to course, or even professor to professor, so be sure to discuss guidelines and expectations

2. Written Comments on Student Writing

- Instructors need not read and comment on everything students write: informal writing exercises can be read by peers or used to start class discussion; occasional or random collection can keep instructors in contact with students' writing without feeling overburdened (simple check system can be useful in keeping track of some incoming student work)
- The level of commenting offered should correspond to the level of importance of the writing activity: an informal piece need not have any response, a response paper might warrant questions for further thought, and a formal essay might elicit comments toward revision
- Higher-order concerns need attention before low-order concerns: suggestions should facilitate organization, focus, or argument revision before grammar, spelling, and vocabulary edits
- Feedback need not only come at the end of an assignment: collect or workshop thesis statements, introductions, or other important discrete portions of writing assignments prior to due dates of large assignments to allow for practice

3. Making the distinction between high- and low-stakes writing

- Low-stakes: Informal writing assignments, not graded or minimal points, very limited structure so as to encourage creativity and critical thinking
- High-stakes: Formal or traditional writing assignments, graded, structured

4. Assignment Design

- Writing can facilitate learning by staging or scaffolding assignments: Begin with small, informal pieces that gradually build to the bigger issue raised by the assignment
 - Informal/low-stakes writing assignments can build to more formal/high-stakes ones
 - This can minimize plagiarism in high-stakes assignments, as scaffolded assignments clearly indicate students' idea generation and critical thinking processes
- Essential for instructors to give typed assignment handouts which explicitly state the writing format, audience, and assignment requirements (length, references, deadlines)
- Writing activities should link with course goals: Writing should not be done merely for the sake of writing, but should enforce and promote course-specific learning

5. Technology offers important lessons

- Take advantage of technologies such as blogs, wikis, social networking, and e-mail to encourage clear, effective writing with very real audiences

6. ESL/Multi-lingual learners

- The writing assignments that we develop teach students thought processes that we value, not just writing styles. Focus on ideas and organization in ESL student writing, instead of writing

mechanics, and be realistic about expectations for them. Remember that they can complete course work successfully despite still-developing language skills, partly because knowledge can thrive independently of language, especially with well-designed assignments and other WAC practices.

Common Faculty Concerns

"I'm not an English professor. I can't/don't have time to teach my students grammar/punctuation/spelling."

WAC is not exclusively, nor even primarily, about the mechanics of writing. WAC philosophy distinguishes between “higher-order” and “lower-order” features in writing, where higher-order concerns pertain, for example, to the organization, structure, and critical content of the writing, whereas lower-order concerns pertain to grammar, punctuation, and spelling. At WAC the emphasis is on high-order features. Indeed, attention to higher-order features often leads to improvement on lower-order features of writing as well, as students have more mental resources left over to focus on these once they’ve become more comfortable with the higher-order components of their work.

"Will you correct my students' writing?"

Grading or correcting student writing is not one of the duties of a WAC fellow. The WAC fellow fact sheet has a list of WAC fellow duties and services. At the same time, the WAC fellow may also offer to look over student writing and identify patterns of errors to be addressed in a holistic manner, which will likely meet the needs that the faculty member is addressing when s/he asks a fellow to correct students’ writing.

"I don't have time in class to assign writing exercises. I have too much material to cover as it is."

Some faculty members are concerned that adding writing to their course curriculum will take up too much class time. But there are several ways around this, such as assigning writing that requires little to no class time. For example, students can be asked to do a “free write” for three minutes at the beginning or end of class. Or they may be asked to do a blog post outside of class. In addition, assigned writing exercises should always be in the service of course goals, thus aiding the coverage of course material, rather than hindering it.

"I already have enough grading as it is. I can't take on any more."

Some faculty members are concerned that assigning writing in their courses will add too much extra grading time. But there are a number of strategies available to avoid this. WAC fellows can guide faculty members through what is known as “minimal marking” techniques. In addition, the faculty member need not grade or even look at every single piece of writing. The assigned writing is meant to help students build up their writing muscles—the faculty member can check-in and keep track of student progress without reading all student output. Finally, the faculty member may choose to run a peer review, where the writing assignments, especially “low-stakes” or informal ones, can be evaluated by other classmates according to a specified set of criteria.

"This is a(n) [X] course. There's no place for writing."

Writing is a basic skill that plays a role in every course. WAC philosophy views writing as a tool for learning—a way for students to express their thoughts and grapple with difficult concepts and material, which applies across disciplines.

An Overview of City Tech OpenLab

City Tech's OpenLab is an open-source digital platform where students, faculty, and staff can meet to learn, work, and share their ideas. Its goals are to support teaching and learning, enable connection and collaboration, and strengthen the intellectual and social life of the college community.

One advantage of OpenLab is that it has a more inviting and user-friendly interface than Blackboard both to students and instructors. One of its strengths is that it is based on open source blogging platforms such as Wordpress or Buddypress. Many faculty members have incorporated OpenLab course blog sites in implementing WAC-inspired assignments. One of the most popular ways of using the blog has been to assign students to share a relatively low-stakes piece of writing on the course blog as they prepare for larger and more formal types of assignment. The platform allows instructors to create categories for postings, so that they can group them accordingly when grading.

Another benefit of City Tech's OpenLab is that it offers a place for interdisciplinary initiatives such as Learning Communities and A Living Laboratory within City Tech. Students, instructors, and courses as well as projects can have their own spaces on OpenLab, and such an open and multimodal interaction enables truly interdisciplinary and dynamic academic exchanges among those who are involved.

The Writing Across Curriculum program has its own project site under the Projects category of OpenLab, and fellows are to post entries on practices or ideas that best capture or correspond to WAC pedagogy or philosophy. The postings include topics such as exemplary assignments across the curriculum within the courses offered at City Tech, and other thoughts and reflections that are relevant to WAC principles. WAC workshop materials, such as slides and handouts, are also posted after the workshops are given.

Access OpenLab here: <http://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/groups/writing-across-the-curriculum/>

Past Workshop Topics Conducted by CUNY Writing Fellows

- Plagiarism
 - How to design plagiarism-proof assignments.
 - How to avoid common misunderstandings.
 - Encouraging student appreciation of the need for citing work.
 - Review of appropriate citations.

- Syllabus and Assignment Design
 - Incorporating writing into course curriculum.
 - What place low-stakes and high-stakes writing have in promoting and supporting learning objectives.
 - Rationale for encouraging writing – promotes critical thinking, communication skills, advances career prospects, etc.
 - Place of blogging as a low-stakes writing strategy.

- Minimal Marking and Efficient Grading Strategies
 - Rationale - encourages student responsibility for learning.
 - How to assign more writing without overburdening faculty.
 - The importance of revisions.

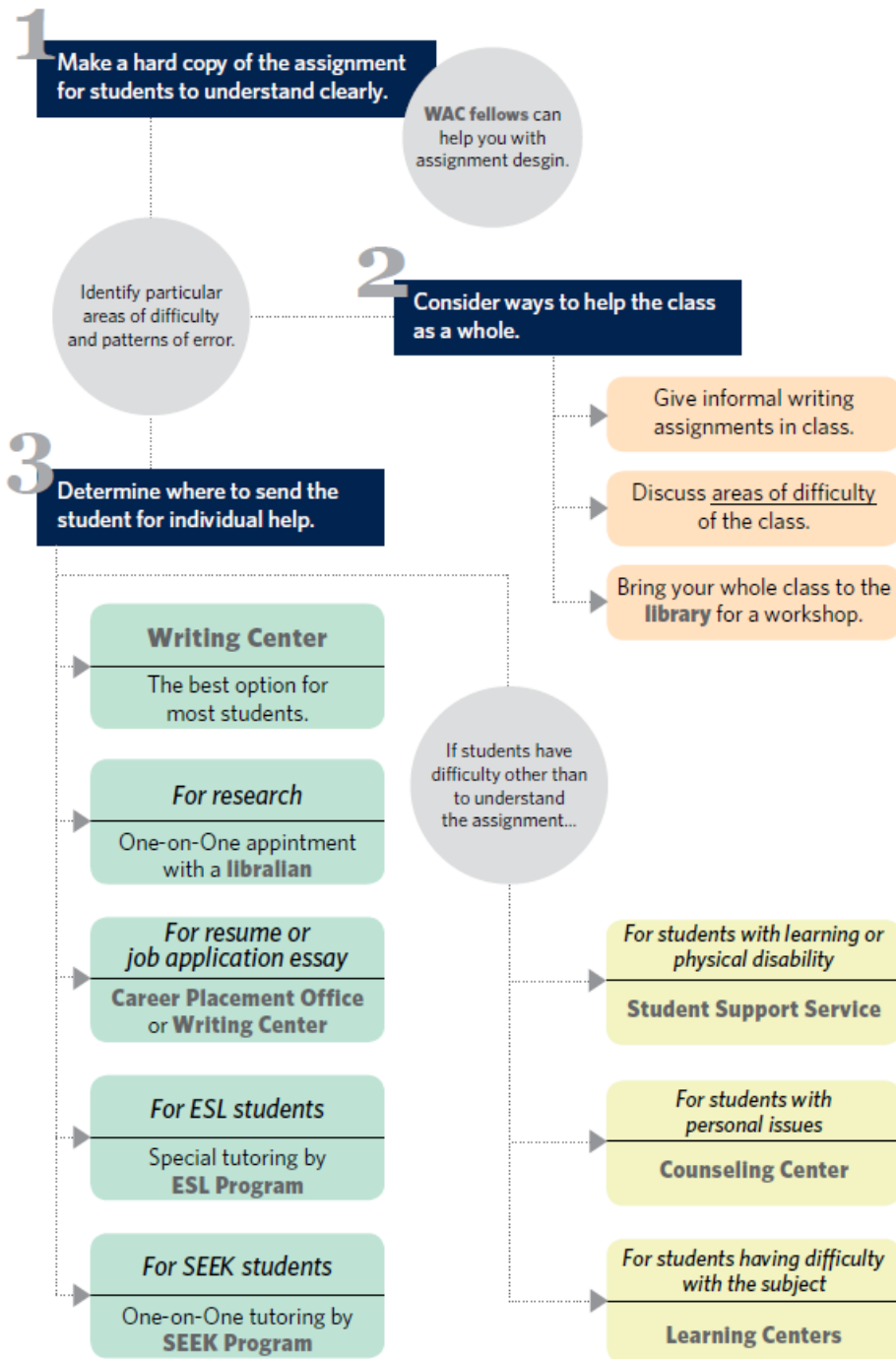
- Student Peer-Review
 - Rationale - helps the student reader and writer think more critically about writing.
 - Strategies for students in marking other students' writing.
 - Efficient in-class procedures for promoting student peer-review.

- Rubrics
 - Rationale – makes the assessment process transparent to students.
 - Considerations for qualitative assessments of student papers.
 - Technical requirements to consider.

- Assignment Sequencing
 - Encouraging the practice of writing throughout the semester.
 - The value of focusing on the process of building a writing project.
 - The value of low-stakes writing as preparation for larger works.

Helping Students with Writing (Flowchart)

▶▶ HELPING STUDENTS WITH WRITING ◀◀



Designing WAC-Friendly Lab Reports

Written by WAC fellow Zachary Aidala

Lab reports are a canonical example of undergraduate science writing. Being ubiquitously assigned at the undergraduate level, they represent a major component of social/behavioral, life, physical, engineering and computer science laboratory-based courses. Despite their universal prevalence, many students at all academic levels demonstrate particular difficulty writing quality lab reports even if they have done so previously, whether at or below the baccalaureate level.

Part of this likely stems from the unfamiliar (or at the very least, wildly different) format required to compose undergraduate laboratory reports. Unlike formal writing typically assigned in other undergraduate courses, lab reports require students to summarize, describe, analyze, critique, compare, contrast, and interpret complex scientific content. In essence, students are being asked to produce a replica of a scholarly journal article *with little to no experience in reading, let alone writing in the style of a professional scientific article*. This represents a marked contrast with writing expectations in other courses at the baccalaureate level. For example, in a comparative literature course, students are already quite familiar with the content and structure of a novel, irrespective of the particular one(s) they are asked to critique. It is therefore less critical whether they have read a professional literary critique in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal. However, a biology research methods course is likely the first time an undergraduate will encounter the sole conduit for communicating scientific discovery – a peer-reviewed scholarly article. Rarely are they exposed to any science writing beyond textbooks in their introductory pre-requisites for a research methods course.

Therefore, despite presenting students with the already taxing task of learning scientific principles and jargon, we also expect them to produce polished lab reports in which they must synthesize and integrate this information into an appropriate, professionally written format. In many courses, students are required to write multiple (if not many) full length lab reports (Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, References) in one semester, which generally leaves little time for reflection and self (or peer)-critique. In general, this type of approach does not allow students to hone their scientific writing skills nor synthesize and integrate complex principles (Bean, 2001).

Many professors lament the poor quality of their students' science writing skills throughout the semester, and will note that many students rarely improve despite writing many lab reports for the course. To achieve such an end (students improving their science writing skills, and thereby their content knowledge), it may be useful to try a different tack. One alternate approach has been successfully implemented in undergraduate introductory chemistry by City Tech professors Jay Deiner and Diana Samaroo. In this model, different sections of the laboratory report are scaffolded in throughout the semester, some of which are initially prompted with guided questions from which students compose the appropriate formal sections (Deiner et al., 2012). Students are first asked guided questions to help them compose an abstract (Fig. 1), which along with the title page and results sections, are the first sections written. In subsequent lab reports, additional sections are added on. *Because students are able to focus on one or two sections at a time, they are able to both practice writing those sections and receive detailed feedback from the instructor on how best to improve those particular sections.*

The implementation of Deiner et al.'s (2012) method has enjoyed success in their introductory chemistry course, with the majority (77%) of students assessed scoring at a developing writing level or above on the final lab report. More telling perhaps is that abstract grades were significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) for students that were given the Deiner et al. (2012) method than the traditional method of writing laboratory reports.

Question 1: What did you do and why?

Sample answer 1: I made saturated solutions of five salts and measured their densities. I did this so I could calculate the solubility of the salts.

Question 2: What results did you find?

Sample answer 2: I found that the order of the solubility of the salts is A (xg/L), B (xg/L), C (xg/L), D (xg/L), and E (xg/L).

Question 3: What can you conclude based on these results or how can you apply these results?

Sample answer 3: Based on these results I can conclude that nitrates are generally soluble and that sodium salts are generally soluble.

Now, write the abstract by writing the answers to the above questions in the form of a paragraph. Remember passive voice, formal language, grammar, and spelling.

Sample Abstract: The densities of saturated solutions of ammonium nitrate, calcium sulfate, copper(II) nitrate, potassium nitrate, and sodium chloride were measured to determine their molar solubilities. The order of the solubility of the salts is A (xg/L), B (xg/L), C (xg/L), D (xg/L), and E (xg/L). These results indicate that nitrates and sodium salts are generally soluble.

Figure 1. Worksheet showing how to use self-inquiry to write an abstract for general chemistry.

Figure 1. Example of guided response questions for composing an abstract. Taken from Deiner et al. (2012).

In some cases of course, instructors are unable to implement sweeping changes of this nature, as they are often constrained by external factors (e.g. the curriculum set by their department). For example, student may be required to write a full length lab report for each lab covered in class.

In such cases, it may at the very least be beneficial to adapt the grading criteria to focus more heavily on certain sections than others. Such grading flexibility would allow the instructor to attend to particular sections in sequence, and allow students to gain comfort and improve their writing quality section by section. Another method for improving student lab report quality, should there be time, is to invite students to peer review each others' reports. By using effective in- and out-of-class peer review strategies, students can help improve each others' writing on rough drafts and cut down instructor grading time (Bean, 2001).

Suggested Reading on Writing across the Curriculum

- Bazerman, Charles, et al. *Reference Guide to Writing across the Curriculum*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press LLC, 2005.
- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011.
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