GTA NEWS

On August 17, 18, and 19, we welcomed approximately 80 new GTAs from the College of Liberal Arts who will be grading and responding to the undergraduate writing associated with the gtPathways writing integration effort. On these three mornings, GTAs learned strategies for efficiently and reliably grading papers as well as approaches for providing meaningful comments on the papers. On August 20, a dozen new Writing GTAs (W-GTAs) from the Department of Psychology participated in a similar orientation that prepared them for the work ahead. Orientations were held in the Clark Building.

5 GTAs registered for E608, a one-credit, five-week course. In the course, GTAs continue their consideration of grading and responding practices. They also experiment with many forms of writing integration, doing low-stakes, in-class writing for critical thinking, participating in online discussion forums, and practicing “templates” for source representation and integration. They produce several documents that reinforce professional development, including a grading philosophy and a connectivity document that explains the relationship of a course assignment to larger course objectives.

Psychology GTAs are currently involved in grading and responding to writing that’s being studied as part of a gtPathways writing integration research project. The study examines whether two forms of instructor assistance influence student writing performance. One form of assistance involves the dissemination and explanation of a grading guide that’s handed out at the time of the assignment. The other form of assistance is direct instruction on the particular goals of the writing assignment, in this case the development of the paper’s argument. Researcher co-PIs, Sue Doe and Karla Gingerich, obtained a grant from the national Writing Program Administrators organization to conduct this study.

GTA VOICES

We asked new GTAs the following questions at the CLA orientation. Here are the thoughts they shared.

Q: What aspects of your GTA position are you looking forward to?

- Reading students ideas and contributing to their learning experience
- Working with students and the faculty to ensure the students can express their ideas and understanding on a subject
- Opportunity to immerse myself in pedagogical thought and technique
- I’m always interested in how students process course information, so grading will be interesting
- I’m excited to work one-on-one with students, to develop relationship with them, and to watch them grow as writers
- Building relationships and mentoring
- Conveying some strategies to students that have been helpful to me over the years
- Meeting with students and hopefully getting them excited about college academics

Q: What parts of your GTA position most concern you?

- Being able to recognize problems in student writing and effectively comment
- Not always knowing how to evaluate a student’s work properly
- Connecting with my faculty member and knowing what their expectations are concerning my responsibilities
- Dealing with difficult students
- Finding the right balance and keeping up with my work/studies
- Dealing with students who find the class a low priority in life and still expect high grades
gtPathways Profile: George Stetson

By Bruce Shields

George Stetson

Doctoral candidate George Stetson has made it a priority to integrate writing into his classroom assignments. A sixth-year PhD candidate in the political science department, Stetson has been teaching every year since becoming a graduate student. He spent the first years of his studies as a graduate teaching assistant, but he now works as a full-time instructor. When he first began teaching, he attended the gtPathways workshop as part of his requirements, which he admits he did with some reluctance. However, it was there that he realized the importance of writing integration. Now he firmly believes that writing is one of the most effective methods to get students to learn, more so than multiple-choice testing and other methods of teaching. “Writing is absolutely fundamental,” he says.

Through his devotion to writing integration, Stetson has come to envision writing as a process that takes time and practice, a belief that has guided his methods in helping students improve their writing. “Writing is not intuitive… [it’s] not just common sense,” he says. To Stetson, instructors have a responsibility to help navigate the process, but he doesn’t think anyone’s alone in discovering how to do so. Scholars have devoted their careers to writing integration, and Stetson believes GTAs and instructors who institute writing integration into the classroom should take advantage of their material. He says there’s a “whole set of tools out there to make you become better professionals.”

Stetson acknowledges that it’s tempting for instructors to rely on the same tools they’ve always used and sometimes those tools work. But he encourages all professors to view writing integration as a new set of tools that might make work a lot easier. Stetson also believes that because of technology, students have changed in some ways. With texting, the Internet, and other forms of technology, students now process information differently than they did in the past. He believes that there’s some good and some bad that has come out of the way technology has evolved. However, he warns against fighting against technology and instead advocates taking advantage of it. At the same time, he says, students can preserve and develop solid writing skills that work in traditional academic settings.

Stetson also has developed ideas about designing writing assignments. He analyzes his students’ exposure to text and challenges them to elevate their handling of rhetorical concerns. Additionally, for each assignment, he aims to give explicit instructions in order to provide a clear framework for his students to work within. On the next page read a sample assignment Stetson designed.
George Stetson’s Assignment for Pol. Sci. 446

Basic Task
You have been assigned an important task. After graduating from college you landed a job with an upstart NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) called Critical Ideas. The mission of this organization is to use critical research to help policy makers and political activists become aware of alternative solutions to contemporary problems, issues, and events in South America. You must present a 4-5 page paper at ONE of two events: the World Social Forum (WSF) or the World Economic Forum (WEF) Specifically, your task is to (1) identify and explain the issue to your audience, (2) describe why it is important, and (3) provide an alternative solution or alternative ways of thinking about this issue. It is important to note that you do not necessarily have to find the solution for the issue that you will address, rather your essay might suggest new directions for inquiry, research, or conversation.

A word about the audience
The audiences for this assignment are also very important. The meetings at Davos (WEF) and in Brazil (WSF) are similar in that they address common issues, but they are different in that the participants are coming from very different perspectives, with different objectives. The WEF consists of mainstream world leaders and policy makers (the presidents of WB, IMF, presidents of US, Europe, etc.) that are in control of big economic, political, and social decisions that to one degree or another have an impact on the themes that we discuss in class.
The WSF, on the other hand, is the response to Davos, from activists, policymakers and others who want to make profound changes in the world. The official slogan from the WSF is “another world is possible.”
You must choose your audience and address it in a way that makes sense. If you think about this in terms of conversations, you will write very different papers considering who is in the conversation and what you are trying to accomplish. It is important to know your audience. This project, therefore, requires that you do research beforehand on these two very different venues.

Five Goals for Assignment Design
(1) Tie the writing task to specific learning goals and course objectives.
(2) Note rhetorical aspects of the task, i.e., audience, purpose, writing situation.
(3) Make all elements of the task clear.
(4) Include grading criteria on the assignment sheet.
(5) Break down the task into manageable steps.

The Student Perspective on Teachers’ Comments
Interested in how students feel about written comments on their papers? Tune in to the YouTube video “Manifesto: The Hope for a New Kind of Feedback” which was produced by students at Columbus State University. Nancy Sommers of Harvard University has a cameo appearance in the video. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93J_0Qxsci4

“When do we ask student writers to select a conversation within their own field and try to contribute to that discussion? When do we train students to identify the central points and discussion within and across articles? These are skills that are necessary for students to have in order to become critical thinkers, writers. Perhaps there should be a stronger focus on training these skills in the freshman level courses and implementing them throughout the rest of the academic process.”

- Josh Elder, Psychology Grad Student -
Responding To and Grading the Writing of International Students
By Nancy Berry (nancy.berry@colostate.edu) of the Intensive English Program

Outlined below are some of the challenges GTAs have encountered in responding to and grading the writing of international students together with strategies that have been used successfully in meeting those challenges.

Challenge One
General incomprehensibility

What to do ...

Offensive Strategies (before the assignment is turned in):
1. Ensure that assignments are well-designed with explicit expectations and instructions.
2. Encourage international students to come to your office hours for further clarification.
3. Encourage international students to go to the Writing Center.
4. Provide opportunities for submitting the assignment in stages or for submitting one complete draft prior to turning in the final assignment.
5. Suggest that an international student use an editor during the final stage of their drafting process.

Defensive Strategies (after the assignment is turned in):
1. Before you start grading, be clear about the objectives for the assignment. How important are grammar and other writing mechanics in the rubric? Be reasonable.
2. Grade holistically. Consider content and organization, specifically, whether the student has understood and met the objectives of the assignment, before focusing on writing mechanics.
3. If mechanics are (visually) preventing you from grading holistically, read the paper out loud.
4. Be aware that cultural background can influence text organization. Consider making recommendations the student can use next time.

Challenge Two
Trying to balance standards and compassion

What to do ...
1. If an international student’s assignment is incomprehensible after applying the various strategies outlined above, then the assignment should be graded accordingly.
2. While compassion can have a role in the evaluation of international student writing (especially when the problems are related to grammar, punctuation, and word choice), we are not doing international students any favors by awarding passing grades on assignments that do not meet the content objectives. It is more compassionate to give students feedback that will help them improve their ability to produce quality assignments in the future.
3. If you are teaching a graduate-level course, it is even more important for international students to be held to high standards and referred to appropriate resources if they fall short.

Challenge Three
Plagiarism

What to do ...
1. Meet with the student to find out about their composition/research process. Follow department guidelines for handling cases of suspected plagiarism.
2. If the student does not understand what plagiarism is, discuss it with the student.

Challenge Four
Time

What to do ...

The reality is that grading and responding to international student writing will often take more time than you would prefer! However, the more you do it, the less time it will take and the more helpful you can be.

PHOTO ESSAY

Teaching and learning are about looking; looking closely, looking over time, looking again, looking with purpose, looking to make sense.

Bob Fecho