# Working with Student Writers in the College of Science

## Michelle Hager & Tom Moriarty

University Writing Center & Writing Across the Curriculum

www.sjsu.edu/wac/cos

SJSU | WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

# Bad News

Uh oh...

# There is No Writing Pill

- No grammar shot.
- And writers seem to forget much of what they've learned – much of what they might be good at – when faced with new and challenging writing tasks.
  - Especially when they move from their 1st-Year Writing courses to writing in their disciplines.

# Why Do They Forget?
# Transfer of Writing Skills

- Writers need cues and reminders to activate previous writing skills and apply them to new contexts.

- And every new context requires some new skills, too.

- So no writer will ever come to your class fully prepared and ready to go.
  - Ever.
  - Never.

# So, What Can We Do?

As teachers of content and the ways of participating in our disciplines.

# Talk About the Ways You Write in Science as Unique Genres

- With unique rules and expectations.
- Here is a handy, customizable guide you can use to teach students about your discipline's genres:
  - http://www.sjsu.edu/wac/pages/seminars-and-workshops/workshops-f16/handouts-and-notes/genreanalysis/index.html

## Genre Analysis

Genre analysis focuses on how new knowledge is made and shared in a field, and how writers participate in their disciplinary discussions as professionals and/or academics. It includes considering the processes and strategies for making new knowledge in a discipline and the processes and strategies for sharing that knowledge with others.

*Process for Analyzing a Genre*

1. Collect samples that represent a genre. These samples should include professional and student versions of the genre.
   - Questions to consider when collecting samples for analysis: What kinds of "texts" – articles, reviews, essays, bibliographies, commentaries, podcasts, websites, etc. – do people in this field produce?
2. Analyze the samples and identify substantive and stylistic features that are shared among them.
   - Questions to consider about substantive features (content): How do people do research in this field? What kinds of research designs do people in this field use? What kinds of things do they study? How do they study these things? What kinds of "data" do they collect? What counts as "good" data or ideas in this field? What doesn't really count as usable data in this field? What kinds of arguments do they make with their data? How do they make them?
   - Questions to consider about stylistic features (organization and style): How do people in this field write them? How do they make arguments? How do they contextualize their work within the field? How do they organize their documents? How do they write them? What is the appropriate tone? Language use and style? Length? Format? Citation system?
3. Talk to writers who produce texts in these genres and find out how they go about their work.
   - Questions to consider when talking to writers about how they work: How do writers tend do research in this field? What are the typical methods / procedures for coming up with new ideas and/or generating and collecting usable data? How do writers tend to produce texts in this genre? What are the typical processes? How do they begin? Do they write alone or with others? How do they structure / schedule / organized their working together and/or alone? What are the typical phases of the process?
4. Formulate the organizing principles of the genre. Once you are all done, you can write up a set of rules for a genre, specifying the substantive and stylistic features that define the genre, as well as the processes for creating and sharing new knowledge in the genre. Some examples:
   - "If you want to write a research report in Sociology, here's what you do…."
   - "If you want to write a literature review in Engineering, here's what you do…"
   - "If you want to write a personal essay in a Stretch English course, here's what you do…"
   - "If you want to write a research proposal in Education, here's what you do…"

*A Couple of Deep Thoughts*

- Genres are typical ways of doing things with texts in certain situations. Writers in similar situations (recurring situations) make similar rhetorical choices (rhetorical actions) which readers come to expect (typified). That's a genre. And we can distill the basic rules of genres using Genre Analysis.
- Genres change and evolve over time. The "rules" of a genre are always loose (the rules are not absolute), flexible (the rules can be bent, though usually not broken completely), and ever changing (they change over time). But you can see basic patterns.
- Genres both enable and constrain. They enable us to communicate in different disciplines because they set up a common set of expectations between readers and writers. You know what to expect so you can learn the expectations as a reader and a writer of a genre. They constrain because they encourage us to meet those expectations.

# Think of Assigning and Teaching Writing as Coaching

- Students learn how to write in new genres **in process** – while they are doing it.

- Just like a coach, we can't just show film and put them in the game and expect them to succeed.

- Nor can we just run drills and put them in the game and expect them to succeed.

- But we can – just like a coach – break down the process and engage with our student writers as they write real documents for real audiences.

# Practical Things
# That Seem to Be Helpful

Which is kinda like good news.

# Give Students Samples and Examples

- And methods for thinking about them that help writers see the expectations of the genre.

- Use the Genre Analysis guide, customized to your particular genre (like Chemistry lab report, for example).

- An Idea: Collect and share your students' work from previous semesters, both good and bad examples. (I like to share B-/C+ examples – it drives my students nuts.)

# Give Students Clear Expectations for Each Assignment

- Give them the usual stuff about length, format, audience, purpose, sources, research, etc.

- But also give them, and talk about, genre expectations, using the vocabulary and language in the Genre Analysis guides.
  - Both the substantive and stylistic features of the genre.
  - How people in your discipline go about making new knowledge and sharing it with varied audiences.

# Give Students The Chance to Write –
# And Have Their Writing Responded to –
# As a Recursive, Iterative Process

- Break assignments down into parts (abstracts, introductions, methods, results, analysis, discussion, implications, etc.) and phases (invention, organization, drafting, polishing).
- Giver writers opportunities to get feedback throughout the process.
  - From us and their peers.
  - And what I like to think of as "Super Peers" like embedded writing tutors or writing center tutors.
- The most productive writers:
  - Regularly share drafts and partial drafts with teachers and peers.
  - Understand that writing is an iterative, recursive process. It is not linear.
  - Receive feedback designed to help them make progress from where they are now. Not feedback designed to inform them how far they are from acceptable.

# So What Should We Do in Our Classrooms?

A few things

# Give Students Samples and Examples

- From our own students.

- From our discipline and our own writing.

- And discuss the samples with students. Don't just pass them out and say, "Write like that!"
  - That's why mediocre samples are also good.

# Discuss and Articulate the Expectations of the Genres

- Using the language in the Genre Analysis guide.
- Talk about both substantive and stylistic features.
  - How do people do research in this field?  What kinds of research designs do people in this field use?  What kinds of things do they study?  How do they study these things?  What kinds of "data" do they collect?  What counts as "good" data or ideas in this field?  What doesn't really count as usable data in this field?  What kinds of arguments do they make with their data?  How do they make them?
  - How do people in this field write them?  How do they make arguments?  How do they contextualize their work within the field?  How do they organize their documents?  How do they write them?  What is the appropriate tone?  Language use and style?  Length?  Format?  Citation system?
- And the processes people in your field use to produce texts.
  - How do writers tend do research in this field?  What are the typical methods / procedures for coming up with new ideas and/or generating and collecting usable data?  How do writers tend to produce texts in this genre?  What are the typical processes?  How do they begin?  Do they write alone or with others?  How do they structure / schedule / organized their working together and/or alone?  What are the typical phases of the process?

# Coach Our Writers Through the Process

- Engage with our writers early and often. Don't just assign a paper and then collect it four weeks later.

- Give content and organization feedback first.

- Save correctness feedback for later drafts.

- Set lofty goals that they will have to achieve to pass the class, but work **with them** to get there.

  - Give developmental feedback based on where they are at and how they can make progress.

# Encourage Our Faculty to Learn More Through Writing Across the Curriculum Seminars

- We offer a variety of one-day workshops and extended, paid seminars every semester.

- And faculty can propose workshops, seminars, and research projects to help us improve writing instruction at all levels, in all disciplines, all across campus.

# Encourage Our Writers to Make Use of All Our Writing Support Resources on Campus

- Meetings with you for content and organization feedback.

- Meetings with peers for content, organization, and correctness feedback.

- Meetings with Writing Center tutors and other "Super Peers" for content, organization, and correctness feedback.

# What can the Writing Center do to help?

Services for students and faculty

# Writing Center Information

- The SJSU Writing Center is open whenever classes are in session.
- Our mission is to enhance the writing skills of SJSU students so they can communicate clearly in any setting (informal, academic, or professional).
- We will work with writers from all disciplines, of all grade levels, and during all phases of the writing process (from generating ideas to revising for clarity).
- We now have two locations:
  - The **second floor of the MLK Library** for **tutoring appointments** that are scheduled in advance
  - **Clark Hall 126** for **drop-in** tutoring sessions
- We are expanding!

# Writing Center Services for Students

- Students can schedule up to two tutoring sessions in advance per week; they can receive additional assistance through drop-in tutoring.

- In addition to tutoring, we have numerous resources posted online (most of which are created by our student tutors): http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/writingresources

- We also offer a full slate of 20-30 workshops every semester on topics ranging from "Common Grammar and Punctuation Errors" to "Basic APA Style" to "Body Paragraphs" to "Writing for Your Audience."

- We are pilot testing synchronous online tutoring sessions.

- We will be open longer hours starting in the fall.

# Writing Center Services for Faculty

- Use our online resources (videos, handouts, our blog) and encourage students use our services. Please do not *require* them to see us.

- Submit a request for a 10-15 minute "House Call," in which one of our tutors will come speak with your students about our services.

- Submit a request for a one-hour workshop, in which one of our tutors will visit your class and conduct a workshop for your students.

- Ask us to participate in college or department events.

- Suggest that your best writers apply for tutoring positions at the Writing Center (and send me their names and email addresses so I can reach out to them).

- Apply for a course-embedded tutor.

# Course-Embedded Tutors

- We "deploy" our writing tutors in different ways. Some work on the regular schedule at the Writing Center while others work as embedded tutors in a specific class. (Some do both!)

- You can apply for an embedded tutor if you are teaching a writing-intensive course. The call for applications comes twice per year from the Writing Across the Curriculum program.

- A course-embedded tutor can be used in a variety of ways.
  - If the tutor is assigned to work with you, he or she will dedicate **five hours per week** to supporting your students.
  - The exact activities of the embedded tutor are worked out between the tutor and the faculty member (within some set guidelines). The tutor can attend class, have meetings with you to determine student needs, conduct one-on-one or small-group tutoring sessions, and/or create and conduct in-class workshops.
  - The tutor cannot grade or formally evaluate student work—he or she is not a GA or TA.

# Department-Embedded Tutors for Graduate Students

- We have agreements with numerous colleges and departments across campus to have a tutor embedded within a department (or college).

- That tutor works exclusively with **graduate students** from that college/department for a set number of hours per week.

- We're currently working with the iSchool, the MST program, Mechanical Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, and the College of Education. In the past, we've also worked with CASA and Student Athletic Success Services.

- Contact me if you're interested in this service for your college or department.

# Thank You!

Questions, comments, discussion?