WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

## SPRING 2019 NEWSLETTER
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

SPECIAL ISSUE: GRAMMAR

Hello BMCC faculty,

At the end of another semester, we at WAC are reflecting on what we have accomplished this year. In addition to training a new class of professors to teach Writing Intensive courses, we held the first ever WAC Day in February, and our WAC Fellows led workshops on peer review last month. This semester's newsletter includes reports from these events but primarily focuses on grammar. In a mix of theory and practice, the following pages discuss not only why it can be so challenging and fraught to impart correct grammar to students but also offer concrete resources and exercises you can use to incorporate grammar instruction into your courses. Our aim in this issue is to communicate that grammar is one piece of what makes strong writing as well as to dispel two common misunderstandings about where grammar instruction belongs. It is neither the purview of composition classes alone nor anathema to WAC pedagogy. Rather, grammar is a collective project. In courses across all disciplines, we can instruct our students on how to improve their writing from outlining to sentence structure.

Enjoy your summer!

Cheers,
Your 2018-2019 BMCC WAC team

REPORT FROM WAC DAY
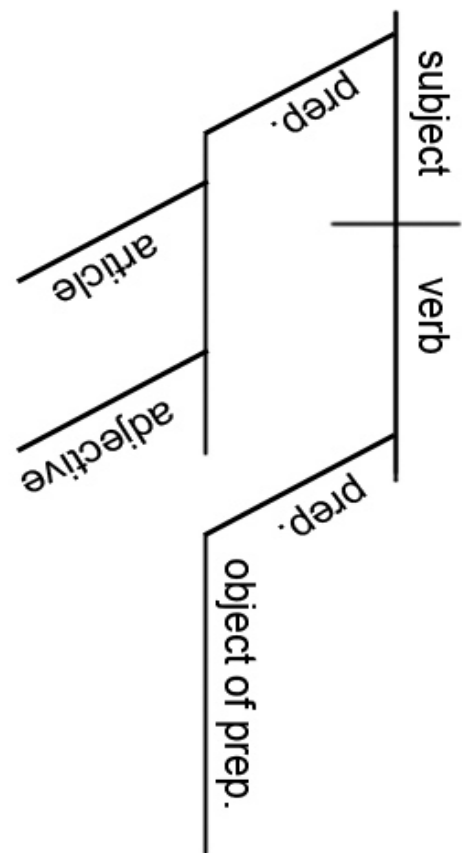
WAC DAY
by Phoebe Rumsey

On February 6, 2019, BMCC hosted its first Writing Across the Curriculum Day! Dean Jim Berg (Academic Affairs) kicked off the event with a hearty welcome to all attendees and speakers. The first discussion panel included BMCC faculty members Jennifer Langley (Teacher Education), Lisa Rose (Human Services), and Kelly Secovnie (English) who engaged in a thought-provoking discussion of the successes and challenges of teaching writing intensive courses, including questions surrounding the use of peer-review in the classroom. A highlight to the event was the attendance of many students who had taken Writing Intensive courses and their participation in a student panel. Students shared their experiences of WI courses and brought keen insight to the legacy that the WAC program instills in students as they move through courses, programs at BMCC, and beyond. The event concluded with an inspiring presentation by guest speaker Sandra Jamieson from Drew University who shared her innovative tactics and writing strategies she implements in the classroom. In the closing question period teachers and students alike were eager to engage in discussions of WAC strategies that spilled over into the closing reception. The event was organized by WAC Coordinators Holly Messitt, Christa Baiada, Rifat Salam, Mary Sepp, and facilitated by the WAC Writing Fellows.

The student panelists (from left to right): Ratna Salim, Dakota Oliveira, Sofia Wyszynski, Afroditi Milisi, Melissa Andrade, Calicia Stephenson, Damian Ruff, Salwa Rageh, and Alexis Delapuenta.

Testimonials from our panelists:

"I was one of the faculty panelists, and I found the whole event to be helpful for me in thinking about my teaching and how to continue to innovate and improve. Particularly revealing for me was the student panel. I was touched and moved by how much these classes have meant to our students, and it inspired me to keep on keeping on with the work I'm doing, both in my 300-level WI classes, and in the Composition classes I teach every semester, using the same philosophy and pedagogy."

Kelly O. Secovnie, PhD
Associate Professor, English Department

"I really enjoyed the experience I had at the WAC day forum. This was my first ever participation in a panel, and everyone helped me to feel comfortable. It was so interesting to listen and see the reaction of our audience and how interested they were on the subject. I wasn't expecting all these questions either, which was amazing! I wish I could be a part of it again in the future!!!"

Afroditi Milisi, graduating student in Health Information Technology

"What does writing mean to you?"
Highlights from the WAC Wall

"Writing helps me to explain how I feel more effectively"

"Sharing my thoughts with the world"

"The coming to be of a thought"

"Sharing your story"

"Finding a new way to capture the world"

"Writing is where I discover what I think"

"A way to escape reality and transfer into a whole new world"

"Writing is a very human way of making life bearable"

"Writing means liberation"

"Expressing emotions"

"Freedom!"

Writing-to-Learn Grammar
by Sarah Lucie

Don't grade for grammar! If you've undergone WAC training, you've probably heard the advice before. Copyediting students' essays wastes your time, since students often do not read these comments, and they do not retain or implement the grammatical corrections when there's no understanding of why the corrections were made. Rather, WAC recommends limiting your comments to one or two big ideas, and then highlighting one grammatical error that you found occurring within the paper as a trend.

These recommendations have led to the common misconception that WAC doesn't care about or can't focus on grammar. But this doesn't have to be true. WAC is only recommending that you don't do something that has been proven to not work. What doesn't work? Unfortunately, many common methods are unhelpful, including copyediting for grammatical errors, grading for grammar, teaching grammar through fear, or drilling decontextualized grammar worksheets.

This does not mean that writing-to-learn cannot include writing-to-learn grammar. In fact, many students report dissatisfaction with their own grammar knowledge and actively seek improvement. So, how can we help those students? How can a Writing Intensive course address grammatical concerns?

Generally it has been found that grammar instruction is most successful when explicit, contextual, and playful, where grammar is understood as a tool in effectively communicating ideas. If you're teaching a WI course, this means identifying the grammar skills necessary for writing within your field, and teaching how to write correctly through successful writing examples that students can dissect and mimic. If you want to know what this looks like in the classroom, or need some proof, a reading list of some helpful sources on grammar pedagogy follows. Many of these sources refer to studies conducted in secondary education, because research on this topic in higher education is much less common. However, many of their findings can be transposed to the BMCC classroom with some creativity.

1. Dean, Deborah. "'EJ' in Focus: Shifting Perspectives about Grammar: Changing What and How We Teach." The English Journal, 100 (4), March 2011, pp. 20-26.

Dean aims to shift our perspective on writing pedagogy, undoing the division between what we say and how we say it. She argues that a broader awareness of language and its varying uses in different situations will lead to a more effective teaching.

2. Foltz-Gray, Dan. "Responses to Error: Sentence-Level Error and the Teacher of Basic Writing." Research and Teaching in Developmental Education, 28 (2), Spring 2012, pp. 18-29.

Foltz-Gray discusses how teachers mark student errors in writing, advocating for positive feedback and specific comments, at a formative stage with revision in mind.

3. Jones, S.M., D.A. Myhill, A. Watson, and H.E. Lines. "Playful Explicitness with Grammar: A Pedagogy for Writing." Literacy, 47 (2), 27 Nov. 2012, pp. 103-111.

Authors report that grammar improves when it is connected to the needs of the writing style being taught. The study includes practical classroom examples that demonstrate the pedagogical approach.

4. Myhill, Debra, Helen Lines, and Annabel Watson. "Making Meaning with Grammar: A Repertoire of Possibilities." mETAphor, 2, Jan. 2012, pp. 1-10.

Authors study standard English classes for ages 13-14 and advocate that grammar be taught as a tool for meaning making, in part by examining the range of possibilities different grammatical choices invite.

5. Spada, Nina and Yasuyo Tomita. "Interactions Between Type of Instruction and Type of Language Feature: A Meta-Analysis." Language Learning 60:2, June 2010, pp. 263–308.

Authors find that explicit instruction of grammar terms and usage is more effective for both simple and complex features, and that it leads to students' ability to use these features in their own writing.

The Politics of Grammar
by Jack Crawford

Writing is an undoubtedly political act: we write to express ourselves, to make bold claims, to speak. Thus the form and minutiae of this speech are also implicated in power structures, and the policing of "correct" writing is also bound up in political stakes. As a faculty member, you are a prospective instructor of "correct" grammar. Whether you mark grammatical errors as you read students' papers or not, your style of grading papers inevitably communicates your priorities to your students and negotiates these political stakes. As an instructor then, it is important for you to know not only what is "correct" but also how grammar instruction functions politically.

One piece of our reticence to deal with grammar may be this understanding of it as contentious terrain. While other articles in this edition of the WAC newsletter will address concrete and practical ways to fold grammar into your course, we also want to pause and address precisely why grammar offers such rich fodder for debate. Grammar is caught up in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed, in her 1993 study of women and the Black Baptist Church, the "politics of respectability." Since the nineties, this term has been widely used to name an approach to addressing, primarily racial, inequality that calls on young people to 'behave' respectably as representatives of their minority group. Such an approach places the onus for rectifying inequity with individuals and encourages assimilation to a white middle-class standard.

At the same time, this standard is unfixed. Language and its grammar can and do change over time. Our corrections of students' writing must also take into account regional differences (flashback to my first year teaching in New York: I remember correcting a student's "on line" to "in line." Little did I know!). A recent and contentious example of this shifting status of language to reflect critical social shifts is the transformation in accepted use of "they" as a singular gender-neutral pronoun. (This is not to say the singular "they" has been accepted without a fight. In light of resistance to this shift, plenty of folks have also pointed out that "they" has historically functioned as a plural pronoun.)

"They" might invoke a different set of concerns than "aint" but both words are bound up in this socio-cultural politics of grammar. By correcting students' grammar without offering context for those corrections, we tell students that their forms of speech are wrong rather than acknowledge that there are multiple Englishes. These dialects or forms exist in a hierarchical relationship, and power structures, in particular pertaining to race and class, are implicit and explicit in arbitration over "correct English."

However, Standard Enlgish is also the language of currency in middle class American professional world, and it is also our task to prepare our students to enter into and navigate this world. So how do we as professors, teaching the incredibly diverse BMCC student body, negotiate this political minefield while preparing our students for a world of employers who might evaluate their intellects based on their grammar? One approach is to be explicit with students about code switching and acknowledging that they might have to deploy different grammars in different contexts. This kind of approach both lets students know that we respect their native grammars and asks them to be adept at moving between dialects of speaking and writing, a challenging task that demands a kind of intimate and self-conscious knowledge.

Grammar from the Perspective of Reading
by Ryan McElhaney

Over the last fifty years, the emphasis on grammar instruction in the college classroom has been questioned practically and morally. There is little evidence that decontextualized grammar instruction improves students' ability to write grammatically. Equally important are the political-cum-moral concerns about the (re)enforcement of historically-laden conventions in writing (discussed by my colleague, Jack Crawford, in this newsletter).

So, why are instructors still widely concerned with their students' ability to write grammatically? One justification I have consistently heard raised is that students' ability to write grammatically affects their post-college success. Graduates whose everyday writing is, for instance, littered with subject-verb disagreements are less likely to be hired or advance in their career. Thus, it is incumbent on colleges (read: college instructors) to ensure that their students are "able to write."

This justification, however, does little to address the moral or practical concerns mentioned above. Its focus on the knowing "how to write" (to the exclusion of other academic concerns) is held hostage to the current pedagogical landscape in which effective decontextualized techniques for improving the grammaticality of students' writing are lacking. Furthermore, the idea that economic matters justify an emphasis on writing grammatically in college instruction does little to allay the worry that this emphasis recapitulates and reinforces morally questionable practices and structures.

The importance of grammar is too often approached exclusively from the perspective of producing rather than consuming writing. Yet, being able to appreciate differences at the grammatical level can be essential to fully understanding a text. An instance of this from philosophy (my colleague, Will Camponovo, discusses examples from poetry later in this newsletter) is the difference between the indicative and subjunctive conditional. Consider the pair of statements (first highlighted by Ernest Adams): (I) If Oswald did not kill Kennedy, then someone else did. (S) If Oswald had not killed Kennedy, then someone else would have.   Here, the difference the grammar makes is as stark as can be–the first statement is almost certainly true given that Kennedy was killed (if not by Oswald, then by someone else), while the second statement is probably false (had Oswald decided not to kill Kennedy, it is unlikely that someone else would have). This may be easily missed if one is not conversant with the difference between the subjunctive and the indicative.

This difference, and differences like it, make a difference. Thus, the ability to fully understand a text depends on recognizing subtle distinctions that depend on grammar. Students who are encouraged to appreciate and understand grammar not as the right or only way to write, but as a system of conventions the knowledge of which allows them to understand texts may actively engage with these conventions not because they are the only correct way to write, but because they wish to achieve a certain effect.

This focus on grammar from the perspective of reading is not from the outset interested in having students conform their writing to grammatical conventions. It, thereby, avoids some of the moral concerns raised against traditional grammar instruction. Instead, knowing conventions and being able to actively appreciate them matters because this affords readers the ability to understand more and more deeply. Finally, while this way of approaching the importance of grammar instruction is not an instructional method or technique, it provides a jumping off point for generative and meaning-making approaches to grammar instruction.

Re-Thinking the Grammar Exercise: From Poetry to Pinterest
by William Camponovo

Most of us have similar (likely pained!) childhood memories of line-ruled composition notebooks, sentence diagramming, and grammar exercises. And yet, studies as far back as Roland Harris's 1962 tracking of middle school students, or the work in 1963 of Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer show us that conventional grammar instruction may be flawed. As those latter scholars noted, "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (qtd. in Patterson 51). Why, then, is our default teaching of grammar so often dependent on rote exercises and repeated actions when so much of our other pedagogy is rooted in authentic tasks, creativity, and experimentation?

As a poetry instructor, I may see things through a certain lens, but I think we can perhaps get a lot of mileage out of teaching grammar through the prism of poetry. Canonical (and short!) texts such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams and "We Real Cool" are prime candidates to teach because they accumulate meaning through their grammatical choices–in fact, they insist upon grammar. "The Red Wheelbarrow" achieves momentum through clauses and prepositions. "We Real Cool," in eight short lines, builds an entire world for its characters, doing so by demonstrating the power of pronouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives.

However, for those feeling more adventurous, teachers and students alike could re-work punctuation in the short, non-traditional poems of E.E. Cummings and Lucille Clifton. (Clifton's "Miss Rosie" is a particular favorite to prime discussions about how grammar, punctuation, and syntax represent strategic choices.) Cummings and Clifton, in being so radical, invite conversations about the intellectual and emotional power of things we take for granted–the commas, the question marks, the dashes.

But lest this seem too biased, might I suggest approaching grammar from an altogether separate angle: social media. Some of my best moments in teaching grammar involve the use of social media. Our students are exceedingly rhetorically aware when it comes to social media. Each platform, be it Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, or Snapchat operates with different grammatical, syntactic rules (after all, Twitter caps its length at 280 characters). Our students know this! And that knowledge is a knowledge of form, structure, audience, and context.

If you think this a bit absurd, pick a trending meme from Instagram or Twitter, bring it in to class, and mess it up–change its grammar, fiddle with the syntax. The students will know. Ask them how its meaning has changed; ask them why it isn't as funny anymore. And whether or not they know it, they're explaining to you the rhetorical power of those boring, rote things–grammar, punctuation, syntax. But now it is something that operates in their daily lives, and can be shown to them as something over which they already have immense familiarity.

You can experiment with grammar through memes, or through canonical American poems; there is, ultimately, no right way to teach it. (Just maybe don't use composition notebooks, though.)

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