



Borough of Manhattan Community College

Writing Across the Curriculum

Self-care Edition



Hello, BMCC Faculty,

We've almost made it through! This semester has been a challenge for everyone. While from the outside it seems as though we've found a relief from the stresses of commuting physically, we've discovered just how much we relied on adopting a good seat on a long train ride as a mobile office. It's no easier now than it was back in March, and now we've found ourselves left to deal with months of attrition on top of it. The professoriate is a group that has a great amount of experience working in solitude, but we've historically been able to use teaching as a way to keep contact with social spaces. We aren't immune to the stressors plaguing our families or our students. And that's okay.

Our teaching work leaves us with many hats beyond the demands of lecturing. We are mentors. We are life coaches. We carry with us the struggles that our students share with us in confidence when they have nowhere else to turn. We console them and encourage them to make do with the resources they have available. And in the thick of the work, it can be easy to lose sight of the moments when we might take our own advice. Are we sleeping enough? Are we tending to ourselves and our own work/life balance? Are we staying hydrated?

This issue is dedicated to the ways in which we might practice mindfulness in our approaches to teaching online. Where can we encourage students to contribute more so we aren't trapped speaking into the lonely void? How do we manage our commenting in a constructive way? What can we do to proctor a remote final exam? And when can we get back to just marking up a piece of writing with a pen again? The conversations within this edition are hardly the final word on these subjects, but they may present something to consider as we move towards another semester of more distance learning.

Take care of yourselves, everyone. We'll see one another again soon.

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Your 2020-2021 BMCC WAC team

In Memoriam: Professor Mary Sepp



Professor Mary Sepp, Academic Literacy and Linguistics, passed away on September 30, 2020 after a long and hard-fought struggle with illness. Mary was a beloved member of the department and a true linguist.

She studied French and Russian as an undergraduate and spent her junior year in France. She completed a master's degree in Russian Area Studies at Hunter College. She also began learning Estonian and Swedish and moved to Estonia to teach English. She returned to earn a Ph.D. in Corpus/Computational Linguistics from the CUNY Graduate Center. For her doctoral work, she studied Italian in Italy.

Mary taught ESL. She was noticeably patient with students, understanding their difficulties in learning a new language. Mary was also a principal force behind the linguistics program at BMCC. She most wanted an English grammar course, which became one of the first linguistics courses.

Mary was an excellent colleague. She got along with everyone. She did every task with dedication, from developing Department and WI course schedules to serving on P&B. Her Chairs, Ken and Gay, probably asked her to do overmuch. Mary was serene, and whenever things got heated, would go to her office just to sit quietly. When Ken needed advice on a department issue, he would talk it over with Mary, whose perspective and insights he valued.

Mary was a kind, lovely human being. She was kind and gentle, but her sweetness did not make her a pushover. She had strong principles. She would disagree when necessary, but nicely. She did not gossip and that made her stand out. If you went to Mary to poke at someone, the most she'd respond was to label that person a "character."

She struggled quietly with her health, rarely saying anything about how she felt. All anyone would notice was, perhaps, her hairstyle.

We miss her, and when we finally return to campus, her physical absence will be felt poignantly.

Prof. Gay Brookes and Prof. Ken Levinson

Managing Online Discussion Forums without Burnout

The new normal of distance education has made online discussion forums an even more integral part of our teaching. Yet sitting in front of a laptop all day long drowned in a series of videoconferences, real-time online lectures, and emails, one might feel overwhelmed by students' postings made to the discussion boards. What strategies can we use for "housekeeping" asynchronous online discussion boards to avoid work overload?

Craft discussion questions that stimulate student-based dialogues

Giving a discussion question that establishes an imaginary audience and clarifies a purpose can be extremely helpful. Such rhetorical contexts embedded in a question can have students respond to naïve, puzzled, or resistant audiences rather than to the instructor. If you have noticed students not engaging sufficiently with their peers' postings, ask them to write in response to an imaginary audience. Highlighting the audience that students are encouraged to engage with can signal that using problem-solving skills in class discussion help communicate their ideas with everyone involved in talking, and that they should look at classmates' responses to compare the solutions. As students increasingly root their responses in dialogues with peers, you can stay in the backseat and jump in only occasionally when students make glaring errors or give misleading information.

Set aside a specific time of the day for responding to postings

Remote working tempts us to keep checking in email boxes and logging into discussion boards. Instructors often feel obligated to jump in instantly as students post their responses throughout a week. While giving instant feedback is a good idea to correct misconceptions and support students as timely as possible, frequent intervention can also demand lots of online time on the instructor's part and may forestall student interaction. Try setting aside a time block for responding to student postings, and avoid logging into discussion board platforms at other times of the day. This simple but valuable practice helps avoid burnout and use our limited available time more effectively.

Coach discussions in the sideline and write a 'wrap-up' post

You still have to steer discussion in an appropriate direction, but the instructor's role as a coach limits to a fairly light touch that doesn't require a lot of toiling over offering substantive feedback. Studies on asynchronous online discussion boards suggest that instructors' making frequent posts and intervening student-centered dialogues can reduce the rate of student participation. They tend to treat the instructor as an authority figure, opting to wait till the instructor initiates the discussion or offers a solution. Instead of engaging with frequent posts, consider writing



Ja Young Jeon
WAC Fellow

Ja Young Jeon is PhD Candidate at The Graduate Center. She is currently working on her dissertation project, which examines how early modern playwrights used ventriloquism to think through theatricality, cross-gender impersonation, and gender relations. She has written and presented essays on cultural meanings of urban spaces, gendered closet, and revenge tragedies' depiction of the male tongue. Prior to being a WAC fellow, Ja Young taught at Hunter College.

a 'wrap-up' posting that comes at the conclusion of the discussion. In a summary posting, the instructor can finish up any unanswered questions, direct students to representative postings, appreciate productive solutions, or pose additional thinking points.

Post video summaries at the end of discussion

Yet some students might struggle with keeping up with next week's class materials and choose not to bother with reading the 'wrap-up' post. For the instructor, too, writing a summary reviewing multiple points in the discussion can be exhausting. Posting a video summary can be a useful alternative, especially because Blackboard allows us to post [video responses](#) using the system's built-in function. As filming oneself talking to a group of students feels more casual, there's no need to be meticulous: keep your video summary simple, short, and engaging. Video posting is also more personal; because it enables students to see you and reduces anonymity, all participants will feel enhanced interpersonal connection. Or, if you're teaching an upper-level course, you might also assign a student to post a wrap-up video for one week's discussion.

Save and reuse any past materials for summary posts

Important points and key information that you write one semester to 'wrap-up' posts or responses to student postings might reappear in the next time you teach the same class. Save and recycle your summary posts that you think might be useful in the future. It would be a more time-saving method to save the reusable responses in a separate digital note or document. Instead of revisiting your previous discussion boards by clicking through the forums, keeping and pulling up free-standing "response notes" for each online class can save any extra labor that sometimes gives us annoyingly trivial troubles.

Less is More: Modeling Care through Responses to Student Writing



Shima Houshyar
WAC Fellow

Shima Houshyar is an anthropology doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, working on the politics of infrastructure, the environment, and the state in Cold War Iran.

Responding to student writing aims to guide and encourage students to revise their drafts and help them in their thinking process. Instructors often communicate important and unspoken lessons to students by commenting on their writing. But, as all instructors know, feedback can be incredibly time-consuming. The various marginalia instructors write on drafts are often cryptic, incomprehensible, and overwhelming to students. Students then come back with very little revision in their subsequent drafts—perhaps a rewording or re-writing of a sentence here and there. However, giving and receiving feedback can be an important mode of extending care and attention to students in Zoom university where both instructors and students are experiencing high levels of anxiety and burn-out. Here are a few principles to bear in mind for time-saving and effective feedback.

Feedback Should Be Feed-forward

Feedback should always be provided on drafts that students can revise, not on final papers with no chance of revision. In fact, feedback should be “feed-forward”¹ because the purpose of providing feedback to student writing should be to revise a future draft, as opposed to evaluate what the student “got wrong” in the past on a paper that they have already submitted. Provide comments often and early in the semester.

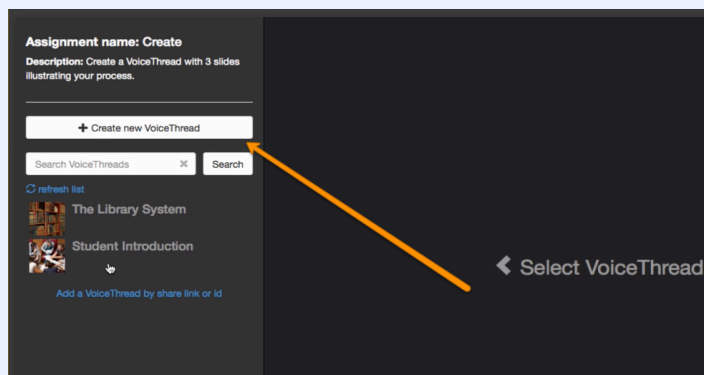
Less is More

Ideally, the instructor should focus on only one or two issues for each draft. Choose the comment that will have the most impact on the paper’s improvement and focus your

guiding questions or comments on specific places or paragraphs in the draft. Instead of deconstructing the student’s paper, paragraph-level commentary that summarizes what the student has done and that gives directed, localized, and specific commentary is the best approach. Additionally, when students submit a draft, consider asking them to attach a short “Dear Reader” letter in which they inform the instructor of the issues they need most help with.

Focus on Higher Order Feedback

Effective feedback focuses on higher order concerns, such as argument, evidence, and structure/organization, as opposed to grammar or stylistic issues. Guided feedback and probing questions about ideas and arguments can motivate students to dig deeper and feel more encouraged in revising their papers. Correcting students’ mistakes and grammatical or stylistic errors often communicates to students “what they got wrong.” In this case, students will often opt to do a series of copy-edits (if that) and reword a few sentences. It also encourages the erroneous thought that copyediting equals revision.



Model Commenting Through Video and Voice

Instructors can experiment with [Voice Threads](#) on Blackboard or create short 1-5 minute screen-grabbing videos to model reading student papers and commenting on them. They can use voice comments as end comments on the paper draft, instead of writing comments at the end of a paper. If teaching a synchronous class, instructors can model grading a paper in class in order to show their thought process early on in the semester. Modeling reading student papers demonstrates that reading is always a dialogical process and illustrates what it means to “engage” with the text. Chances for miscommunication in tone that students often read into teacher comments also decrease when the student can hear the teacher’s voice. Providing comments through a nonwritten medium also allows students to feel more connected and feel that they are receiving one-on-one attention and that their work is being taken seriously.

¹ <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/feedforward/>

Exams and Tests in the Time of Corona

While it is no surprise by now that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has thrown everything instructors and students are accustomed to in the classroom out the window, with the end of yet another semester of distance learning, the looming question of final exams grows ever closer. We once again need to reconsider how we conduct final assessments. How do we ensure academic integrity if you cannot physically be present in the room? Even if platforms such as Blackboard lock a student's computer so they cannot access other windows or apps, it's naive to think that a large majority of students don't have a second device. Do we ask students to put on their cameras while they do the exam over Zoom? It's very easy to position a webcam in a way where the offending action is obscured or out of frame, even though certain viral work-from-home faux-pas might suggest otherwise. Is it even ethical to require students to appear on camera? Particularly in an environment such as CUNY, with such a diverse student body, appearing on camera might make students incredibly uncomfortable, or even unsafe. Most importantly, what if our students don't have access to computers, and have been completing all of this semester's work through their smartphones or tablets?

Moreover, with the added pressures on faculty — both tenured and contingent — to produce online content for students and invest more work hours into learning new platforms and technologies, the threat of burnout is ever present, amplified by pandemic anxiety, quarantine fatigue, and the constant stress of political and economic instability. From our homes, we teach, attend meetings, continue to meet publication and funding application deadlines, and try to adapt conventional methods of teaching in a very unconventional time.

So as this semester — a semester during which we collectively grew into distance teaching and learning — draws to a close, perhaps it is best to examine how many conventional elements of teaching can (or should) be adapted to an online model. Perhaps timed exams, with identifications and facts, are not the best way to go about assessing our students' success. Perhaps the answer lies in written responses to key questions and concepts from the semester, allowing our students to use writing as a form of thinking as well as a form of communication. Perhaps considering final assessments as a platform for students to communicate what they have learned throughout the semester, rather than a performance of facts will allow us all a moment of relief and respite in what has been an incredibly challenging semester. A shift away from traditional assessments structures that don't necessarily translate to distance-learning will allow all of us — students and faculty — to practice a moment of self-care, and care for each other.



Agnieszka Anna Ficek
WAC Fellow

Agnieszka Anna Ficek is a PhD candidate in the art history department and an adjunct instructor at Baruch College. She holds a BVA from the University of South Australia, a BA from SUNY, and an MA from Hunter College. Her dissertation work examines Inca-themed visual, material, and literary culture in France during the long eighteenth century. She has recently published her scholarship in peer-reviewed journals; *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* and *Studies of Eighteenth-Century Culture*.

Alternatives to Traditional Tests and Exams

'Take Home Exams': using Blackboard features, you can create a take-home exam with a mix of questions including essay, short answer, multiple choice, etc. I allow my students a week to complete the exam, and format the questions to look for analysis and comprehension of the course material.

Short Essays: Unlike traditional essays, exam essay questions can require shorter responses (a few paragraphs) making it easier on the instructor in terms of grading. Students benefit from microtheme assessment, as noted in *Bean's Engaging Ideas* (111-115).

Virtual Class Presentations: At the time of the scheduled exam, opt for 2-5 minute (depending on class size) class presentations responding to key themes of the course over Zoom. Students can submit a slide beforehand to the instructor to illustrate the topic of their presentation.

Video Submissions: As an asynchronous variation on virtual class presentations, using PowerPoint or Keynote record functions, students can film themselves responding to course themes and main questions and upload their videos to a private class YouTube channel.

Bringing Analog to Digital Spaces



Jessica Lugo
WAC Fellow

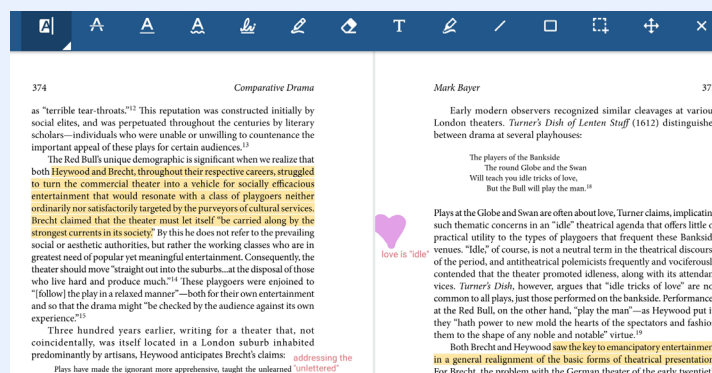
Jessica Lugo is a PhD student at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research includes the study of classical influences in Early Modern English Drama and the means by which mythology is routinely fractured in the service of an Elizabethan/Jacobean social agenda. Her teaching interests focus on advancing diversity and inclusion in higher education, as well as promoting methods through which the humanities can become more accessible to entry-level students.

In the time since we've moved to distance learning, many of us feel obligated to fully revamp the way classes are conducted. The sudden switch to a paperless environment has been a difficult adjustment to make for students and faculty alike. While we could spend our time becoming experts in digital pedagogy until we've become one with the Matrix, it may be a kindness to ourselves to try out some free software that might allow us to adapt some of our most traditional methods to a virtual environment.

Many of us already have a PDF annotation software of choice. But in the interest of accessibility and ease for new users, my recommendation is [Xodo](#), available as a free download on both desktop and mobile platforms. Due to its focus on integration, it should be available to students regardless of technical or financial limitations. Its editing functions are intuitive and provide enough basic functionality to support student needs. Moreover, the supported stylus integration means that the larger screens provided by tablets and some laptops can be made to replicate the offline experience and allow students to return to the tactile sensation of highlighting passages and scribbling comments in margins.

Considering the student experience, WAC principles note the importance of reading comprehension preceding effective writing. Students write more effectively when they have something substantial to say. Part of providing that substance comes from supporting the synthesis of course material. We already understand that digital distraction

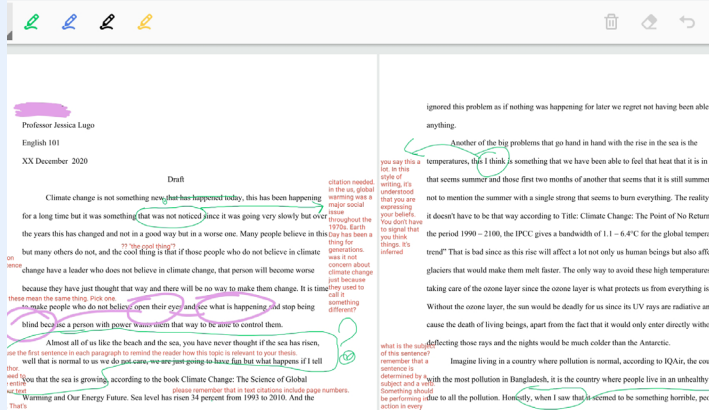
takes a toll on students' ability to take complete and effective notes.¹ Even before the pandemic, the profession was feeling challenged by students' lack of focus when they went without access to physical books. Students CUNYwide had taken up the habit of reading on their phones, cramming whole texts into a 3x6" rectangle. More recently, students might still be trying to work on phone but many more, out of current necessity, have purchased or been provided with tablets or chromebooks. Since they may have access to larger screens, we can encourage them to utilize that larger scale and promote engagement.



It is well documented that, while students may be able to read a digital text on a screen at the same rate as a paper copy, there is a noticeable drop in reading comprehension.² Since standing over a copier for hours is not currently an option to assist students who would perform better with a physical medium, we may want to consider helping students overcome this challenge by teaching them how to make their screens perform more like a book. Reading from a screen is more suited to light, casual consumption,³ and students benefit greatly from engaging with a more active reading style. With a stylus or a finger, students can highlight texts and doodle in the margins just as they would with a physical textbook. It allows for a return of study habits that might have been lost to touchpad clicks and endless scrolling. The program even contains the option to flip pages by swiping rather than scrolling, to restore the sense of turning a page.

Faculty may also find use of this program when it comes time to grade papers. Blackboard's feedback options are extensive, but can be frustrating to instructors who've grown accustomed to working through a stack of student writing with pen and paper. Likewise, the rigidity of relying on Word's "track changes" or Google Docs' "suggestions" oftentimes leaves feedback seeming particularly

- 1 Flanigan and Titsworth, 2020.
- 2 Kong et al, 2018.
- 3 Clinton, 2019.



impersonal.⁴ And since students are already less likely to read feedback at all when they can see their grade posted elsewhere,⁵ providing feedback feels like it needs to become more laborious than ever. For those seeking a return to simpler methods, Xodo's annotation tools are just as efficient here. Suggestions to move a paragraph can again be conveyed with a circle and an arrow as quickly as one might draw it. And since the file will save as a graphical pdf, there's less time spent explaining to students how to receive those functions. There's a surprising amount of liberty in being able to fall back on recognizable methods.

4 Heron-Hruby et al, 2020.

5 Laflen Michelle Smith, 2017.

A normal tablet might not be able to transform into something with the weight and presence of a physical book, but we can still find a way to our machines behave in a simulation of the analog workflow many of us still mourn.

For the interested, we've uploaded a demo of Xodo's functions here: <https://youtu.be/Gb1y2uah52k>

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WAC HAPPENINGS

This fall, WAC has focused on pedagogical support and community building through a series of remote refresher workshops and open forums on implementing WAC principles in online synchronous and asynchronous modalities. We have cultivated these opportunities to share best practices and challenges among our WI faculty and have expanded our welcome in open forums to all instructors. In addition, we offered two workshops through the CETLS for instructors college-wide. If you have not had the opportunity to attend, we hope to see you in the spring as we continue to offer workshops!

Pending budgetary approval, we also hope to be able to offer our WAC Faculty Training Seminar for instructors to earn WI certification. Keep an eye on your email for an application!

And, please **SAVE THE DATE for WAC Week** culminating on March 12, 2021. In lieu of a face-to-face WAC Day, we are planning a virtual series of events including open teaching, a student panel, faculty-breakout sessions, and a keynote speech by Andrea Fabrizio of Hostos College.

Contact Us

ASK A FELLOW:

BMCC Faculty interested in incorporating more writing into their curricula can seek assistance from our writing fellows by sending an email to bmcc.wacfellows@gmail.com.

We can offer:

- feedback on an assignment before sharing it with students
- help developing a rubric
- suggestions about low-stakes activities or mini-lessons related to elements of writing
- discussing specific problems concerning commenting or grading
- to bounce ideas off someone concerning what is or isn't working related to writing or writing-to-learn in your class

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WAC Resources Online

BMCC WAC Site

<https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/wac/wac-principles>

The WAC Clearing House

<https://wac.colostate.edu/intro>

Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab)

<https://owl.English.purdue.edu/owl>