



Borough of Manhattan Community College

Writing Across the Curriculum

Literacy Edition



Hello, BMCC Faculty,

This is the time of year when the #BMCC tag on Instagram is flooded with newly-accepted students on the brink of their futures. It adds to a digital cacophony as it mixes with the shouts of current students struggling through finals season, reminding us of how much emotion goes into every step of this process. This year, we've met that energy, doing our best to keep up with advances ourselves. We've spent the year learning about new pedagogies and trying out a number of new technologies as we try to find the best way to curate online learning in our own style. This might make it feel like we've earned a graduation ceremony of our own.

In this issue, we address a few forms of literacy to consider for the future. We consider literacy traditionally in terms of helping students read and helping ourselves read their submissions. But lately, it has also been digital, in terms of learning new apps and different modes of thinking.

This year has sent us all on a quest to re-evaluate what it means to have mastery over our language. When nearly all text is written, communication feels less certain than ever. Are our directions being understood? Have we given our students enough ways to signal for aid when they're overwhelmed? How do we manage an engaging setting when every email is a writing project all on its own? We might not have all the answers yet, but fluency is an ongoing process.

Take care of the people important to you, and we'll meet again in the Fall.

Your 2020-2021 BMCC WAC team

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Faculty Advice

This semester, I assigned the plagiarism tutorial created by Indiana University (<https://plagiarism.iu.edu/>). Students were required to take the tutorial and submit their certification test for credit. My goal in assigning this was to make sure students were able to identify plagiarism and know when they were engaging in it- inadvertently. In the past, I gave mini-lectures on citations, summarizing, and paraphrasing, but in reading their papers, I often found that students still weren't clear about what counted as plagiarism. The test is very challenging (as students across the nation have reported and IU recognizes) and the whole process can take up to 2 hours (which can be done in shorter sessions). However, it is thorough, and I have not found a shorter tutorial/test that I like. I made sure my students were aware of this and gave multiple opportunities and reminders for students to submit their certification.

My students who completed the tutorial commented that although it was very challenging, they learned a lot of new and helpful information. I look forward to seeing how that plays out in upcoming papers.

Monica Foust, Assistant Professor of Psychology

While discussing reading across the curriculum in our WAC workshops, we try to be thoughtful about the readability in the texts we assign to our students. We review [Fry's Readability Scale](#), one method which works by considering the length of sentences and the number of polysyllabic words: the longer the sentences, the higher the grade level of the material. Most introductory college-level textbooks average about a 10th grade level equivalent. When selecting course texts, it's helpful to determine the readability at the same time.

Traditionally, putting Fry's method into use would require the labor of counting syllables, but technology has automated the process. [Microsoft Word](#) can provide a grade level score after a grammar check is performed. [Readabilityformulas.com](#) provides an online tool that provides a score for a text sample. Similarly, [wordcounter.net](#) provides robust text analytics. Even the stronger students find it helpful to have some additional reading strategies as they move into upper-level coursework. Sharing our reading strategies and text choices with our students certainly won't hurt.

*Rifat Salam, Associate Professor of Sociology
WAC Co-Ordinator*

[Discord](#) is a digital instant-messaging platform frequented by gamers that allows participants to type chat comments or join video- or audio-based chat rooms. In my Writing Intensive Intro to Shakespeare class, I adopted it for low-stakes informal writing outside of class in lieu of weekly Blackboard discussion posts. It also allows quieter students who fear the unmuting or hand-raising functions in Zoom to contribute and participate on their own time.

I included weekly Discord comments and responses as part of the course participation policy. It opened a fluid and largely student-centered space for conversation, questions, and even silly memes or videos. Often I didn't even need to offer written responses to student comments since they were so engaged with each other; emoji reactions allowed me to indicate I was listening and reading, and I could use Zoom classroom time to reference and amplify debates and student comments. Overall I feel this experiment was a success and allowed for a truly participatory, decentralized community that underscored the importance of informal writing principles.

Boyda Johnstone, Assistant Professor of English

Digital Reading Across the Curriculum



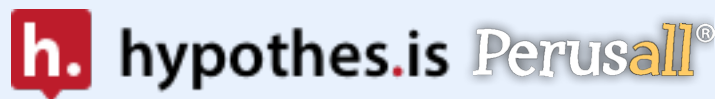
Shima Houshyar
WAC Fellow

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.

The question of digital reading has in recent years become a controversial topic among students and instructors. The debate over “digital versus paper” has raged for some time, but it has come into sharp relief as the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed our classes online. This has forced us to reckon more seriously with the role of technology in education and digital literacy. While studies have shown that students prefer to read on paper, the cost of printing, particularly for CUNY students, often proves prohibitive and appears wasteful. As Anton Borst (2017) has noted, however, not all students are “digital natives” nor do all of them have the time or resources to access digital tools. Differences of class, race, language, and nationality all affect whether and to which digital spaces students have access and thus impact their ability to read or read deeply. Students often engage in “hyperreading”—that is, reading that involves skimming, jumping around, and multi-tasking to which screens and online texts afford themselves. This form of reading is often associated with distraction and low engagement, but it is, in fact, a useful skill that many of us already use as teachers and researchers. Our job then is to teach students the skills of “slowing down” and deep reading given the all-digital environment.

Online social annotation tools such as [Hypothes.is](#) and [Perusall](#) are a great way to demonstrate the reciprocity of reading and writing in order to deepen engagement and reading comprehension across digital spaces. These platforms are digital spaces where students can see each

other’s comments on a text and respond to each other’s annotations. Reading is often conceived as a solitary activity. But by modeling annotation in the classroom through the use of social annotation tools, instructors can show that reading is fundamentally a “social” activity. It can help students see themselves as having conversations with texts and entering a dialogical relationship between themselves and the author, as well as with a community of other readers and interpretants of texts. Social annotation tools work best if one demonstrates what annotation actually means and looks like (beyond just highlighting). This means showing them an example of a text that you (or students from another semester) have annotated. Furthermore, asking students to respond to at least one other student’s annotation is another way to create opportunities for discussion and engagement that occurs before coming to class. Social annotation can also enable shy or less talkative students to participate and engage with the course material in a more relaxed and comfortable manner.



Just like with the use of online discussion boards, the instructor can always pose certain questions of the text to guide student reading and direct attention to certain points. This is a great way to “scaffold” annotation at the beginning of the course. But it is important to remember that learning how to pose questions of the text is itself a reading skill that students can learn as the semester goes on. For example, halfway through the semester, instructors can ask students to pose questions from the text in their annotations after having seen several models at the beginning of the semester. Collecting these annotations and questions and then referencing them during class time can allow for more engaged participation.

In short, online social annotation tools demonstrate the social nature of reading through which students enter into conversations with texts and with each other and thus reinforce the mutual integrality of reading practices to writing skills.

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Museums and Online Teaching

While distanced learning and teaching has provided innumerable challenges for both instructors and students over the last three semesters, there are ways in which this new mode of learning has also opened up worlds to students beyond what would traditionally be available. As college communities may begin to breathe a sigh of relief at the prospect of returning to the campus, we now reimagine what the post-pandemic classroom will look like. In this new world, we have an opportunity to more thoroughly integrate digital platforms into the hybrid and in-person models that await us. Even though New York City's museums have been physically open for a while, barriers such as ticket prices (even with suggested donations), accessibility, and the ongoing physical and mental burnout resulting from the pandemic mean it might be a while until we can expect students to seamlessly integrate museum visits into their educational pathways. In the meantime, I provide a couple of ideas on utilizing digital museums in the classroom, not just in art history or related fields, but across the disciplines.

Single-Work Class Discussion

Museum institutions throughout the city have invested in their virtual presence over the course of the pandemic. More objects have been digitized with high-resolution images, and catalogue entries have been expanded. Online museum collections provide digital highlights such as podcast episodes, video lectures and discussions with curators, as well as open-access catalogues and publications relevant to a particular object in the collection. Through the virtual Zoom classroom, instructors can guide students through these spaces leading to generative discussions, or short in-class writing assignments regarding specific works. Instructors can either use the screen share feature to explore the digital space, share links with students in smaller breakout rooms, or use platforms such as [GoogleDocs](#) to integrate co-writing into the classroom.

Virtual Museums

One of the greatest advantages of the virtual learning model was that educators and students are no longer limited by physical space. While New York City has an almost-unparalleled wealth of arts and culture, virtual spaces allow our students to experience museums from around the globe. Digital platforms such as [Google Arts and Culture](#) allow students to visit spaces like [the Acropolis Museum in Athens](#) or [the Rano Raraku sculpture on Easter Island](#) in a history classroom, the [Nairobi Natural History Museum](#) for science students, the [Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna](#), or the lush outdoor spaces of [Inhotim in Minas Gerais](#) in arts and art-adjacent classrooms. Students can play with filters, selfies, and pocket galleries, and examine works closer than would be possible in the physical space of the museum. The virtual museums can be used either over zoom during class (much like the single-work discussions),



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or for longer writing assignments exploring and evaluating the efficacy of the virtual museum model.

Hybrid Comparisons

As New York City lurches forward to a total reopen on May 19, 2021, museums will become more and more accessible to students. The CUNY community already has long-standing arrangements with more than a dozen museums and cultural institutions to provide free tickets to students, faculty, and staff. With restrictions easing, and vaccination rates climbing, the museum's physical location can once again be considered a possible extension of the classroom. By using the digital museum presence as a guide, longer-form writing assignments that ask students to consider the vast differences between digital and physical spaces can serve to draw attention to issues regarding the post-pandemic accessibility of the city. [The Frick Collection](#), recently moved to the Breuer building on Madison Avenue, offers [virtual tours for students](#), as well as free entry for the CUNY community, providing one example of how instructors can use the gap between physical and virtual spaces as a site for generative discussions not just of art history, but throughout the academic departments at BMCC.

ADDITIONAL LINKS

CUNY Arts Free Museums:

<https://www1.cuny.edu/sites/cuny-arts/free-access/>

Google Arts and Culture:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/>

Metropolitan Museum Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>

Defunding the Grammar Police: Rethinking Writing Assessment



Jessica Lugo
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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.

Writing is about communication. It can be easy to lose sight of its purpose after all the time we spend thinking and rethinking our relationship with writing intensive courses. For some of us, this is generational. Students brought up under Common Core in the K-12 environment were taught to see grammar as a contextual element of language,¹ while by and large the professoriate continues to perpetuate what Myhill and Watson call a “folk theorization of grammar as central to supporting students’ accuracy as language users.”² And though some of us find solace in the objective nature of grammar as a means of evaluation, weighing grammatical mistakes too heavily runs the risk of tallying flaws rather than considering why those errors existed.

As tempting as it can be to conclude that grammatical errors are the domain of linguistics and ESL tutors, there is an enormous disparity between the types of grammatical mistakes made by resident students and international students even before being compared to native English speakers.³ BMCC’s student body contains a rich patchwork of life experience, and it is impossible to contain everything under a request to work on their grammar. To help students communicate in clear writing, we must first provide explicit guidance.

Clearly communicating problems with readability

What are we really asking of students when we tell them that they need to work on their grammar? As WAC tends to recommend in discussions of assignment design and feedback, vague comments are challenging for students to parse, limiting their ability to seek help. Are we sending them off to learn parts of speech? Are we asking for more a varied sentence structure? Is the student misusing the past perfect tense? “Grammar” can mean too many things for a student to know where to turn for improvement. Many of us have developed the habit of using “grammar” as a shorthand way to collectively speak of disruptions in communication. We ask students to work on their grammar when something sounds ambiguously strange. If our issue is with tone or vocabulary usage, we may even be

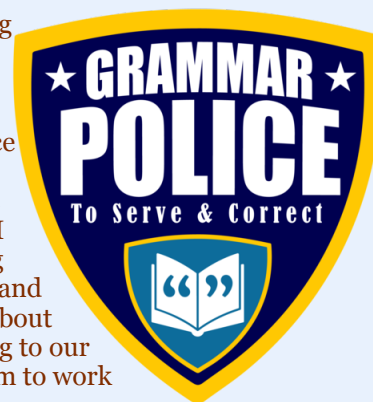
sending students on the wrong path; perfectly grammatical scholarship has been written and published in African-American Vernacular English.⁴

A more sustainable approach would be to signal to students when their mixed constructions make them harder to understand. A comma splice is a normal error, but students who produce word salad require intervention. Students need to understand which element of their writing is keeping them from expressing their ideas.

Grading by relevance to the field

Many students who have difficulty with written English major in trade fields. Using grammar as a punitive measure becomes a form of bloodletting that disproportionately affects students from international and underrepresented backgrounds. Ute Knoch et al present an answer to this kind of grade suppression in the form of rubrics that focus on “indigenous criteria.”⁵ Under their reasoning, the graded elements are presented in order of importance, wherein the weight of the grade is set on the development of ideas as relevant to field-specific communications rather than setting the focus on mechanical construction.

Shifting the tone of writing assessment closer to the language of reading and communication de-escalates a potential source of trauma for the student experience. We can create more inclusivity in our WI courses by simply revising the weight of our grading and becoming more mindful about what we’re communicating to our students when we tell them to work on their grammar.



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Endnotes

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| 1 | Common Core | 4 | Young, 2011. |
| 2 | Myhill, 2014. | 5 | Knoch et al, 2020. |
| 3 | Di Gennaro, 2016. | | |

Digital Curation and Student-Centered Writing Projects

The idea of curation goes beyond the brick-and-mortar museum buildings and exhibition rooms. Along with the rising visibility of both serious and colloquial online curation, digital humanities more broadly highlights pedagogical benefits that the particular contexts of digital curation can give to students and teachers alike. In this article, I quickly explore what pedagogical values, especially for writing intensive courses, can be found in digital curation, and turn to suggesting some practical curation assignments for both short-term and long-term writing projects.

Curating-to-Learn, Curating-to-Write

As Julia Flanders has suggested, “remix and recontextualization” is one of the forms of curatorial work. In reorganizing and quoting items off from existing collections to generate new interpretations and perspectives, students learn not only lower cognitive skills in Bloom’s taxonomy like understanding, but also higher skills of evaluating and creating. Working with open collections or public data resources, students combine artifacts together in a different way for a new pattern, gaining crucial skills in critical thinking. In terms of writing, the central benefit of digital curation arises out of the particular rhetorical contexts it sets, which prompts student-centered writing projects geared towards engaging with wider audiences. Compared to the traditional term paper, written primarily for the instructor and in many cases never revisited by students, digital exhibits up and running on the web enable students to reach real, general readers out there. This newer rhetorical context makes students productively conscious of the genre of their writing such as curatorial notes and caption, encouraging them to think more deeply about rhetorical effectiveness in order to communicate the information on their exhibits more clearly to audiences, who are educated but generally unfamiliar with the topic. The output of their research gains a longer lifecycle, and as the main directors and contributors to the project, students take central roles and responsibilities in overall learning experiences. If assigned as groupwork, curation assignments are also good for boosting collaboration.

Short-term Curatorial Projects

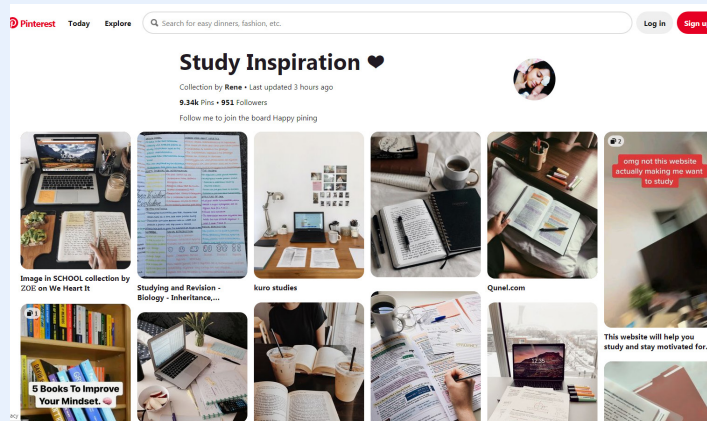
A low-stakes curatorial assignment can be a useful companion or even replacement of the annotated bibliography or other forms of pre-research paper task, in which students present secondary materials to support, challenge, or otherwise contextualize their research. With creating a curation webpage using simple platforms like Pinterest and Tumblr, the student develops their own toolbox, in which visual, audio, and textual sources, such as photographs, maps, YouTube clips, newspaper articles, and scholarly essays, are



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collected. Writing components come into play as integral part to boost both higher-order critical thinking and writing skills. To each collected item, the student adds a caption as well as tags for easier categorization, and provides a longer curatorial statement (2-3 pages, double-spaced) to explain the overarching idea or frame of their collection, just as we see small placards of item description and longer guides at the starting point of the museum exhibition. Because the digital collection is open to the public, the student is asked to take into account outside viewers, and think rhetorically—be alert to the genre, purpose, and audiences of their writing.



A collection of “study inspiration” images on Pinterest

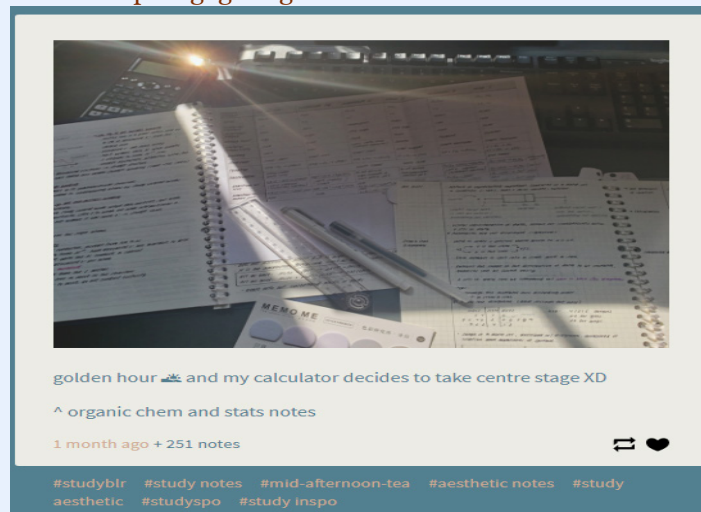
Additionally, students can be tasked with visiting the exhibits of their peers and writing a short visitor response in which they evaluate the effectiveness of writing pieces and source categorization in a collection. This will be a useful opportunity to hold a classroom conversation about the rhetorical properties of digital collections: how the tags function, what perspectives and narratives the collection

demonstrates, what roles writing plays in presenting those ideas, what particular biases are embedded, etc.

Semester-long Curatorial Projects

A nice project can be found in Elizabeth Tavares' semester-long curatorial assignment, which she designed for her Introduction to Film course at University of Illinois. In this final project, her students build Omeka curations using the digital exhibition tool with the same name. By having her students include in the collections the scaffolding assignments such as review, critique, and analysis of films, Tavares directs them to see their writing pieces done throughout the semester as versions of artifact. Although her students can freely take parts of their own essays off from the original contexts, these writings should be remixed and recontextualized in tandem with the thoughtful arrangement of exhibits. The students also select and reorder other additional objects and items off from online archives and resources. The project then requires the students to rearrange these materials into sections, and to provide short descriptions to items on display. The biggest writing component is a 10-12 pages "visitor guide." Modelled on the guidebook genre, the visitor guide should be accessible to visitors online, and thoroughly walk them through each section of the exhibition. The purpose of the digital exhibition and its accompanying visitor guide is to

support and contextualize students' final arguments about the social effects of the film they are assigned to examine. This example gives us an entry point into developing a similar kind of curatorial assignment that integrates other writing tasks conducted throughout the semester. Although students will need to create free accounts on Omeka.net, Omeka doesn't require any programming knowledge to build digital exhibits. The specific instructions for assignment can be adjusted with different levels of technical detail and pedagogical goal.



A "study inspiration" post, from @mid-afternoon-tea on Tumblr.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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Tavares, Elizabeth. "Omeka Curation."

<http://www.elizabethtavares.com/resources/OM-Final-Curation.pdf>

"Archival Literacy: Reading the Rhetoric of Digital Archives in the Undergraduate Classroom."

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24633856>

"The Possibilities of Uncertainty: Digital Archives as Cunning Texts in a First-Year Composition Curriculum."

<https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-7879138>

A quick guide for Omeka (CUNY GC online):

<https://gconline.commons.gc.cuny.edu/omeka/>

Asynchronous two-part workshop on Omeka:

<https://digitalfellows.commons.gc.cuny.edu/teaching-with-omeka/>

DIGITAL CURATION TOOLS

1. **Omeka:** The most widely used open-source online curation and publishing tool, Omeka.net offers a free trial plan with limited functions and storage, yet this free account is good enough for undergraduate students' projects. Comes with plug-ins and themes, no programming knowledge is required to build digital exhibits.
2. **Pinterest:** Suitable for building image-based collections, yet users can also put text descriptions and tags. Easy to use, and familiar with many students.
3. **E-link:** Easy to save and display links, yet all items entered in the collection must have web links. Free account comes with various themes tailored to specific occasions and needs.
4. **Tumblr:** With some tinkering to themes, a Tumblr page can be turned into a simple digital exhibit. Suitable for short-term curation projects.

WELCOMING NEW WAC FACULTY

This spring we trained a new cohort of faculty in WAC pedagogy: Jason Ostrowe (Criminal Justice); Meghan Williams (Allied Health Sciences); Stefan Stankovic (Social Sciences); Warren Benfield (Social Sciences); Joanna Giza (Science); Brielle Buckler (Business), Eleanor Schwartz (Business), and Marcelino Guillen (Human Services). Each will be teaching their first Writing Intensive course in the fall. Welcome to the WAC community!

If you would like to integrate effective and interesting writing into your specific course curricula and become certified to teach Writing Intensive courses, we invite you to apply for the fall 2021 WAC Faculty Training Workshop. You may access more information and the application on our website:

<https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/wac/prospective-wi-faculty/>

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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>