

## Note from the editor:

### Our readers respond

In a *Literacy Link* survey conducted last April to get feedback, readers responded quite positively and offered suggestions about what they would like to see in future issues, such as articles from faculty outside of English and more "how to" articles. With these suggestions in mind, I have collected articles about the use of writing from three faculty members outside of English. David Weaver and Ken Gewerth write about current experiments with writing in Political Science and Criminal Justice, and Judith Hill demonstrates the integral part writing plays in her Ethics courses. Judy Moehs, an adjunct English faculty member, in an article I condensed from *Mathematics in Michigan*, suggests how writing may be used in the mathematics classroom.

Each of these discussions shows that writing is used not merely as an adjunct to other teaching methods but as an integral part of the course: students write to learn. Writing offers a way for students to see, and learn about, a subject from the inside, as participants, rather than merely looking on from the outside, as observers. And getting students more involved in their own learning is an important goal for all faculty.

JIM GEISTMAN  
INSTRUCTOR, ENGLISH

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## Imposing a tight structure in Applied Ethics

by Dr. Judith Hill

Students in my 200-level Applied Ethics courses (Business Ethics and Medical Ethics) are required to write three 5-6 page essays during the course of the semester. I impose a fairly tight structure on these essays. Typically, the essay will take the form of a response to a specific moral question. For example: "Baby Doe was born with certain severe birth defects to unmarried, unemployed teen-aged parents. The baby suffers from a condition that will cause her death within a few days unless she has immediate surgery. *With* the surgery, she could live for several years (especially if additional surgical procedures are provided); but she will still be severely impaired, both mentally and physically. Should the life-saving surgery be performed?"

The first step in dealing with the question is to state as clearly as possible

a general principle of euthanasia, e.g., "Euthanasia is justifiable when and only when a patient has a permanent mental or physical disability that would prevent anything like a normal life." The second step is to *defend* this principle of euthanasia to the case in question: If we accept this principle, should we or should we not perform the surgery in the Baby Doe case?

There are two reasons for insisting on this structure. First, I want to discourage students from dealing with moral questions on an ad hoc basis. Seat-of-the-pants moralizing is usually not well thought out, and is often inconsistent with other positions one holds. Second, the point of Ethics courses is not-*cannot* be-to provide specific answers to every moral question students will ever have to deal with. The point is to teach moral reasoning *skills*, so that students can work out the

answers to moral questions for themselves as they arise.

I should add that I do not assign these essays without a great deal of preliminary discussion. Typically, we will discuss the specific case in class before students are required to write their essays. I will assign one group of students to defend the position that Baby Doe *should* receive the necessary treatment, and another group to defend the position that she should be allowed to die. Each group constructs the best defense it can, along the lines described above, and drawing on readings discussed the previous week. The groups then present their arguments to the rest of the class and try to deal with challenges from the opposing side. By the time the class discussion is over, each student should have a fairly clear idea of the major positions on the issue, and where he or she stands on it, and why.

The SVSU Writing Center, 135 Wickes Hall, offers tutorial services for students working on writing. Trained student tutors help writers organize and develop ideas and materials; use reference works, quotations, and documentation (both MLA and APA formats); eliminate basic errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage; and revise a paper that has already been evaluated. Student tutors *will not* fix papers for students by proof-reading or rewriting.

How can you use the Center? Urge your students to come to the Writing Center early and often. Make clear their assignments so that tutors can help them meet your expectations. Explain the value of having a "friendly reader" respond to their words. If you require students to work in the Center, we can arrange tutorials that address the problems you want addressed. Our records allow you to monitor attendance and progress. Finally, clarify what we cannot and should not do—you expect their work to be *theirs*; though we collaborate and advise, we will not do work for them.

CHRIS LOONEY  
COORDINATOR,  
BASIC SKILLS-ENGLISH

## An experiment in progress

by Dr. David Weaver  
Professor of Political Science

The Political Science faculty is considering a program revision intended to provide our students with a common "core" experience throughout their years at SVSU culminating in a final, "capstone," exercise. At base, this concept will have the student focus on a contemporary issue for two or more years in addition to the usual courses of study. Each student will build a portfolio of information and commentary stressing organizational, research, and writing skills development along with attendant thinking and analytical processes. It is intended that the process evolve in complexity and sophistication so that students will be able more effectively to engage and benefit from a capstone seminar and research exercise during their senior year. This program might be implemented through a required course to be taken each year before the senior year in which a seminar setting supported by faculty mentoring (involving all the political science faculty) will encourage and focus the students' topical interests and activities, thus linking a sense of relevance to skill development and intellectual growth.

Traditionally, essay examinations and term papers have been the typical means of evaluation of student performance in most political science courses. The concept of a developmental portfolio as a learning/teaching device and an evaluation tool may serve largely to displace those traditional methods. As a preliminary experiment with an analog of the portfolio, we are requiring a course notebook in combination with substantial class

participation, rather than testing, in several upper-division courses. In these classes, each student will prepare a notebook in which a summary of required reading will be prepared along with a commentary reflecting the student's thoughts and reactions, incorporating notes and responses to class discussions, "Think-Piece" essays assigned as appropriate, points to raise during class discussion, and the like.

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Models for composing the notebook are offered, but students will be encouraged to develop their own approach. The emphasis will be upon personal interaction with learning materials as well as the integration of knowledge. The instructor will review each notebook on several occasions as well as at the end of the term. It is hoped that a more positive and productive student-instructor relationship will be thus encouraged. At the same time, the notebooks should encourage the student continuously to engage course material and to be prepared for class participation. Perhaps most important, we may be able to address each student's needs more effectively than the more traditional methods seem to have allowed.

# Mathematics: The writing connection

by Judy Moehs

When writing is an integral part of the mathematics curriculum, student understanding of mathematics increases and math grades improve (Linn, 1987; Mett, 1987; Havens, 1989). Writing activities provide teachers the opportunity to assess student understanding of the material, find out how effective the presentation of that material is, and communicate individually with students (Linn, 1987; Miller and England, 1989).

It is not surprising that writing works so well in the math classroom, given the similarities between writing and mathematical problem solving. Both involve choosing a topic (defining an unknown), deciding what needs to be said (determining what is known), organizing thoughts and writing a rough draft (devising a solution strategy), and revising and editing (reaching a conclusion and checking results) (Bell and Bell, 1985).

Five assignments demonstrating the mathematics and writing connection follow. Teachers may use them in any way they deem profitable; however, it is important that all assignments be modeled and responded to in some way.

1. If the answer is \_\_\_\_\_, what might the question have been?
2. Summarize what you just (read, heard, discussed, took down in your notes).
3. Rewrite \_\_\_\_\_ so that it would make sense to a (third-grader, your mother, a precalculus student, an alien, a student who's been absent).
4. How are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ alike? How are they different?
5. Write a story problem based on this (picture, graph, equation, information).

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# Writing and research methods in criminal justice

by Ken Gewerth

Associate Professor, Criminal Justice

Every year, in criminal justice programs across the country, scores of unfortunate faculty members face the thankless task of teaching research methods courses to thousands of students who don't want to learn the stuff in the first place. There are a variety of reasons why both faculty and students approach methods classes with such dread. For faculty, it is much more fun to *do* research than it is to talk about it; trying to describe the chaotic and creative research process in an orderly fashion is like trying to tell someone how to blink. For students, the class is a big waste of time, since most won't be conducting quantitative research when they graduate and get a real job anyway; and besides, all that talk about things like cluster sampling, split-half reliability, and concurrent validity is boring. At SVSU, teaching methods classes is complicated even

more because the abilities and skills of our students vary tremendously, making it difficult to know where to "pitch" the class.

Unfortunately, I haven't come up with a way to make teaching or learning research methods fun. But, I am trying to make it a bit more palatable by taking something of a nontraditional approach to the class. First, I try to emphasize to the students that criminal justice research (even the quantitative stuff) is nothing magical, but rather just another way of communicating. At its heart, research in our field is a process of (1) making some observations about the problem of crime, (2) trying to figure out what those observations mean, and (3) telling someone else (like a legislator or another researcher) about those observations, usually in writing. Putting the research process in this context brings it into the realm of the student's everyday experience, and allows me to stress that without good

writing skills, the most elegantly designed and flawlessly conducted research is worthless.

Second, I de-emphasize the quantitative aspects of the course, and instead work to strengthen students' ability to locate existing information about the criminal justice system and present it clearly and concisely in written form. Upon reflection, I realized that most of my "real world" research experience did not involve the design and execution of original quantitative research, but rather summarizing, integrating, and critiquing existing information and presenting it in written form. Consequently, this semester I have devised a series of short research and writing projects. Some, for example, require the students to summarize rather lengthy U.S. Supreme Court decisions (40-50 pages) in a 2-5 page memo; others require the students

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## **Criminal Justice**

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to go on a kind of "scavenger hunt" through the library to locate facts about the criminal justice system; still others require the students to edit and correct examples of terrible writing which I have saved from previous semesters.

This is the first semester that I have employed a totally "project driven" approach to the methods class, so I'm not quite sure how it will work out. I hope that the changes I've made provide students with the fundamental techniques for locating and communicating information in the criminal justice field. Let somebody else tell them about things like multiple time series and pretest/posttest control group designs.

## ***the SVSU Literacy Link***

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Department of English  
2250 Pierce Road  
University Center, MI 48710