the SVSU Literacy Link

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Change on the Horizon for English III

Mary Harmon, Chair of the English 111 Committee

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To ensure that course texts, assignments and best teaching/learning practice consistently and coherently align with course outcomes, Dr. Mary Harmon has been appointed English 111 Faculty Coordinator and Chair of the English 111 Committee.

The hard-working English 111 Committee includes Drs. Debra Combs, Harmon, Judith Kerman, Elizabeth Rich, Janice Wolff as well as Lecturers Jim Geistman, Chris Giroux, Lynne Graft, Laura Yelsik and Writing Center Director, Diane Boehm. To date, they have revised 111's outcomes and stated practices and written a course rubric, all of which appear later in the Literacy Link. Additionally, committee members have devised methods of on-going course and program assessment, constructed summer training sessions for all 111 teachers on July 16, 17, and August 21, 2001, and re-instituted a mentoring program for new teachers of English 111.

Currently, Dr. Rich is creating an English 111 web page which will link to the English 111 Framework, sample assignments, the course rubric, faculty biographies and schedules, and textbook information. Ms. Graft and Mr. Geistman are planning for the English 111 SVSU Freshman Writing Award, detailed elsewhere in the Literacy Link.

Because English 111 Adjunct Faculty will have more responsibilities than they have had in the past, compensation for teaching Composition I has been raised significantly to $800.00 per credit hour.

All teachers of English 111 will have a unique opportunity to participate in an active teaching/learning community as they work together toward common goals and as they meet periodically during the fall and winter semesters for sessions in which they norm their grading and discuss the challenges and rewards teaching freshman writing offers.

English III Outcomes

The student who successfully completes English 111 will be able to:

Use writing processes which develop exploratory drafts into revised prose for specific audiences.

Make informed rhetorical choices for specific purposes and audiences.

Read critically and analyze material written for university audiences.

Engage in interactive/collaborative reading and writing activities.

Employ a repertoire of writing strategies to

a. generate, select, and focus writing topics;

b. plan, organize, and structure writing to develop a focus and purpose

c. use specific and concrete methods to support positions in a manner convincing to targeted audiences;

d. review, critique, revise.

Conduct introductory library and other research, integrate facts and opinion from multiple sources, and document appropriately.

Edit writing to conform to the general conventions of academic prose.

English III Practices

Students' products will be assessed using clearly defined criteria: see the course rubric and anchor papers. Conferences, portfolios, multiple drafts may be used to assess process. Both product and process will be taken into account when assessing student work.

Students will write approximately 7500 words in the course, no more than half of which will consist of informal texts to encourage fluency, reflection, and self-expression.

Students will write a minimum of five formal papers; one or more of these papers will include introductory research. Suggestions for assignments include: a focused narrative which supports a thesis; summary and response; response and application; argument from personal experience and observation; argument using outside resources; explanation/exposition; comparison and contrast; process analysis; analysis of arguments; a review of a book, film, play, experience; an interview

To attain the grade of "C," students will demonstrate significant competency in all of the course outcomes as well as the ability to write successfully in academic contexts.

Students will be provided with hands-on opportunities to develop technological skills for research and for creating documents, i.e., word processing, e-mailing, and on-line researching.

English 111 Analytic Rubric

	Content	Organization	Style	Conventions
"A" Papers	The paper engages its intended audience, demonstrating insight and complexity. The paper convincingly and richly develops and supports a single focus and purpose. When appropriate, the paper effectively integrates relevant outside sources.	The overall organizational structure is appropriate to the audience and purpose. Paragraphs are fullly developed and logically related and sequenced. The opening effectively establishes the relationship between the reader and the paper's purpose. The paper closes effectively.	Connections within and between paragraphs create cohesion. The sentenses are clear, coherent, and syntactically varied. Precise word choice and an appropriate tone support the paper's purpose and display a command of the conventions of academic writing.	Format is correct and appropriate. References to sources are accurately cited and documented according to the appropriate style manual. The grammer, spelling, punctuation, and usage conform to the conventions of academic writing.
"B" Papers	The paper thoughtfully engages its intended audience. The paper develops/supports a single focus and purpose. When appropriate, the paper correctly incorporates outside sources.	The overall organizational structure is appropriate to the audience and purpose. Paragraphs are logically related, but some may lack richness of detail or evidence. The opening establishes the relationship between the reader and the paper's purpose. The paper comes to closure.	Connections within and between paragraphs usually create cohesion. Sentences are usually clear, coherent, and syntactically varied. Word choice and tone support the paper's purpose and usually display a command of the conventions of academic writing.	Format is correct and appropriate. References to sources are usually cited and documented according to the appropriate style manual. The paper is free of serious errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, or usage.
"C" Papers	Although adequate in content, the paper may not fully engage its intended audience. The paper generally develops/supports its focus and purpose, but may occasionally wander from its central idea. When appropriate, the paper includes relevant outside sources, although they are not always purposeful or integrated.	The overall organizational structure is generally easy to follow and appropriate to the audience and purpose. At times, paragraphis may lack richness of support or may be mis-sequenced or slightly off track. The paper's opening or closing may be mechanical or trite.	Connections within and between paragraphs are evident, but may be awkward, mechanical, or ineffective. Sentences are generally clear and correct; however, some may be basic, choppy, or lack syntactic variety. Word choice ant tone generally support the paper's purpose but may less consistently display a command of the conventions of academic writing.	Format is generally correct and appropriate. References to sources are generally cited and documented , but not always in the appropriate style. Errors in grammer, spelling, punctuation, or usage occasionally interfere with communication and damage the writer's credibility.
"D" Papers	The paper does not engage its intended audience. The paper fails to develop/support its focus and purpose or wanders from its central idea. Necessary outside sources are lacking or, if used, are not relevant, purposeful, clearly introduced or integrated.	The overall organizational structure is illogical, unclear and/or inappropriate. Paragraphs frequently seem unrelated or repetitive or are poorly contructed and contain limited support. The opening is overly general, missing, or misleading. The closing is weak or missing.	Connections between and within paragraphs are missing or ineffective. Sentences are frequently basic, choppy, or repetitive in structure and may display lapses in clarity or coherency. Inappropriate word choice or tone detract from the paper's purpose and frequently display a lack of command of the conventions of academic writing.	Format is not consistently correct or appropriate. References to outside sources are not clearly cited; documentation style is generally inappropriate. Many errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage impede communication and undercut the writer's credibility.

No credit: The paper does not fulfill the assignment and/or the paper is illegible.

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No credit: The paper is illegible.

Erratum

Corrected English 111 Analytic Rubric.
This replaces the rubric found at the bottom of page 2 of the April 2001 Literacy Link.

Lit Link Oh, Comma On!

Elden Kohn, Writing Center Mentor

A comma here, a comma there,
Why not put one everywhere?
They fit so well; they look so nice.
Who cares about a comma splice?
And if I should have one or two,
I guess that's just tough luck for you!
(Omitting commas here or there,
I'm sure no one will really care).
So what's the fuss? I must admit,
I'm really quite fed up with it!

The persona of this poem seems to be suffering from what we might call comma indifference syndrome (CIS), something I have seen all too often in my experiences with writers at the Saginaw Valley State University Writing Center. But this appears to be only a small part of a larger comma "epidemic" of sorts—an epidemic that takes its toll on even the most proficient writers. At some point, we have all been frustrated by this tiny punctuational cornerstone of written English. And understandably so, for the comma has power that no other mark possesses: simply inserting or removing it can change meaning entirely. Although I have not witnessed it personally, I'm sure this little mark has sparked fuming confrontations among English teachers, with the only resolution being an affirmation of the comma's ambiguous nature.

However, as the persona of the poem above shows us, teachers and experienced writers are not alone in their frustrations over comma usage. In fact, students are the ones who are tormented most. Imagine knowing that your professor wants a grammatically perfect paper, and you cannot decide whether to put a comma in a sentence that looks awfully long! This is what students deal with—doubt, fear, perplexity—all because of a little comma. So, we must ask ourselves, "Why does such a little mark cause so many problems?" and "What can we do to deal with these problems?"

Hypotheses

Since comma usage is so complex, it would be safe to say that the reasons students have problems with commas are also far from simple. However, there are several likely possibilities for students' problems, most of which involve either lack of basic knowledge of comma usage or students' attitudes about commas.

1. Overlooked or Forgotten Rules

More often than not, the root of students' problems with commas is a simple ignorance of the rules. This seems somewhat surprising, since, by college, students have been instructed on this matter repeatedly. However, considering the wide range of comma usage, it is not so hard to understand that students might occasionally miss a rule. Additionally, students often receive their last formal grammar instruction at the beginning of their high school years. It is possible that a rule they once knew—and followed diligently, mind you—is now lost amongst the wealth of other knowledge they have learned.

2. Misapplied Rules

One can never know what goes on in a student's mind. (Indeed, one may not want to know!) But, once again considering the multitude of comma rules, it seems safe to say that the odds of these rules becoming jumbled and mixed together are high. With this in mind, we can understand that students may simply "mess up" in their application of a comma rule. For instance, consider the compound sentence "My dog ate all of his food, and my sister gave him some more." Most students know that in a compound sentence, the comma goes before the coordinating conjunction. In rare instances, I have seen papers in which students reversed the order. It is clear that the students "knew" the rule—at least there was an attempt at avoiding a run-on sentence. But for one reason or another, something went awry in their thinking. In most cases, simply pointing out the "flip-flop" is enough to jolt students' memories.

Oh, Comma On! continued on page 7

SVSU Freshman WRITING AWARD

This award has been initiated to impress upon students and faculty the importance of freshman writing.

English 111 teachers may nominate three papers per class. Qualifying papers will be from 3-5 pages in length and have wide audience appeal. Papers will be submitted on November 30, 2001 to the judging committee by Fall English 111 teachers.

Brochures will be printed before the end of the term, fully outlining the criteria for the award.. Students will also receive a handout at the beginning of their Fall English111 class. Information will also appear in the Fall Literacy Link and on the English 111 Web page which will be developed by Dr. Elizabeth Rich.

Winners will be announced in January 2002 at a campus-wide reception, where Dr. Robert Yien will present the awards to the students. Papers will appear in a special edition of the Winter *Literacy Link*.

Five winners will be selected and prizes will be as follows:

1st:	**$500**
2nd:	**$400**
3rd:	**$300**
4th:	**$200**
5th:	**$100**

Lit Link Designing and Assessing Gen Ed Courses

Diane Boehm, Director, University Writing Program

z As we look ahead to the new General Education curriculum, many of us are moving from the process of developing course frameworks to thinking about the best way to design–or redesign–course specifics to meet the objectives of the program. The most effective courses, I believe, will incorporate the following principles:

Begin with assessment. What student outcomes/learning objectives is this course designed to achieve? To put it another way, what should the learners be able to do after completing the course? What new knowledge will they have acquired? What new skills or behaviors will they have mastered? What new perspectives or attitudes will they have attained?

Our methods of assessment and evaluation inevitably drive teaching and learning. James Stice, Dorsey Professor of Engineering (Emeritus) at the University of Texas at Austin and founder of the National Effective Teaching Institute, explains why:

When you've [identified your outcomes/objectives], you know what your course is about and what it is supposed to accomplish. It becomes easier to construct exams that measure achievement of the objectives. You don't waste time talking about irrelevant material in class. You can select class activities, readings, and homework assignments that are more focused on helping students achieve the objectives–if an activity doesn't further the objectives, why have the students do it? Objectives even help in selecting a suitable text–the one that best illuminates what you want students to learn or be able to do.

A logical way to design a course around learner outcomes is to construct the course "backwards." Rather than beginning with the course content, begin with a student focus and follow a sequential process:

1. Clearly state the learner outcomes: what should students be able to do when they complete the course?
2. Identify the discrete learning tasks which must be accomplished for students to achieve each outcome.
3. Identify the skills/abilities students possess when they enter the class.
4. Sequence the course learning tasks so that students build from entry level skills to final outcomes in a graduated pattern.
5. Build the assignments and course activities around the necessary learning tasks; choose a textbook which undergirds the course learning tasks.
6. Monitor students' learning (their individual progress toward the course outcomes, not just their grades).

This general approach can apply to courses in all general education categories. Take, for example, a unit on energy in a Category 4 general education chemistry course, in which the objectives are for students "to understand basic scientific concepts," "appreciate how these concepts are verified through experimentation and observation," and "become knowledgeable and responsible citizens in dealing with the challenges of a sophisticated technological society."

1. Learner outcome: students will understand energy sources and utilization.

2. Discrete learning tasks: students will learn the definition of energy; use units of energy; understand the need for energy; see the relationship of chemical energy to chemical reactions; and recognize the role of alternative energy sources such as nuclear, solar, geothermal, etc. Students will analyze the risks and benefits associated with various energy sources.

3. Students will probably have a vague understanding of energy, but little or no knowledge of how energy is derived from common energy sources. Most students probably have not been introduced to energy units and calculations. Many students have had little experience in science in general.

4. The students' abilities to think logically and quantitatively are built from the beginning of the course. By the time students reach this unit, they should have learned to balance chemical equations and understand the relationships implied by the chemical equations. In this unit, students will be introduced to formal definitions of energy and learn the differences between energy and power, heat and temperature. They will learn about the distribution of fossil fuels, the use of nuclear energy, solar energy and other energy sources. They will learn about environmental and social issues surrounding the human population's ever-increasing energy demands.

5. Two types of assignments will be given. The first type will emphasize the analytical reasoning and scientific content. To achieve these goals, homework assignments involving calculations with various energy units (e.g., nutritional calories, calories and Joules) will be given. Students will learn the concepts of exothermic and endothermic chemical reactions and do calculations to determine how much heat is generated from burning typical fossil fuels. Students will read graphs and maps to obtain quantitative information about energy utilization. The second type of assignment will develop critical thinking skills, requiring students to apply the scientific principles to analyze the societal impact of energy utilization. A sample assignment might be to write a short paper such as the following:

Your community is planning to build a new power plant in response to increased energy needs. Would you vote in favor of a coal-powered plant or a nuclear power plant? Examine the risks and benefits associated with each option and write a short essay defending your position.

6. Both formal and informal monitoring of student work takes place. Homework assignments and essays are collected and evaluated. Short in-class assignments give the instructor immediate feedback on which concepts are clear and which need further clarification.

(Example from D. Huntley, Chemistry)

Category 6 courses, as another example, will prepare students to "analyze and interpret social phenomena and human thought processes using the techniques and procedures of the social sciences." The planning of a psychology course might look like this:

1. Learner outcome: students will be able to relate psychological principles of learning to their own experiences.

2. Discrete learning tasks: define and differentiate classical and operant conditioning; understand stimulus generalization and discrimination; define and differentiate positive and negative reinforcement and punishment; describe the four schedules of reinforcement and give examples of each; understand the concepts of expectancies, locus of control, learned helplessness, and explanatory styles; critically read and summarize a professional article on this topic; write a summary/response based on the article.

3. Students are likely to enter the course with little or no understanding of these psychological principles; their experience level with writing summary/response papers may range from novice to some experience.

4. Students will need to engage in two sequences of learning tasks. First, they need to learn the fundamental psychological principles of learning, as well as the factors which facilitate or inhibit learning. They will also need a method to examine their own learning histories. Second, they will need to know about the following: the selected journal and the format of journal articles; how to read critically to distill and present a writer's main ideas; how to synthesize course material, a writer's arguments, and their own reflections; how to formulate a reasoned response to another writer's ideas and present evidence for their stance.

5. Assignment: Write a summary and response based on a recent professional article in a psychological journal which argues that universities have been remiss in not teaching students how to take advantage of basic research on human learning to improve their own academic learning.

Course activities to prepare for the assignment:

a) participate in an exercise to identify examples of both classical and operant conditioning in the student's personal life;

b) identify the UCS, UCR, CS, CR, operant, and consequence in these specific examples;

c) devise a personal program to improve study

Designing continued on page 6

Lit Link Attitudes About Writing: Changes Over Time

William K. Barnett, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology
(Former Dean, College of Arts and Behavioral Sciences)

I have been a thirty-nine-year-old liar for more than thirty years and finally, as I am about to retire at the end of this semester, have decided to tell the truth. I have been a university administrator for a great many years and for the last dozen, a full-time faculty member. This brief paper simply contains some reminiscences on what changes I have seen with regard to writing over time. I am sure that some of the below remarks may be disturbing to some of us. So be it. At my age I can be a curmudgeon if I want to be.

In terms of numbers, we still have as many very good students as ever and the very good students of today are every bit as good as the very good students of years ago. However, there seem to be many more very poor students than there used to be and the average student is not nearly as good as formerly. This opinion is primarily based on armchair speculation and experience rather than hard scientific research. Students are also less conscientious and less prone to follow directions than they were in the past.

For example, when I graduated from high school in Detroit in 1947, almost no one in my class could be termed a functional illiterate. During my last year there I had about eight hours a week of homework to do and I still have the seven term papers I wrote as a senior. I was a speaker at that same school a very few years ago and found that few students had any homework to do at all and those that were conscientious only had a couple of hours per week. Of thirty-five seniors in one class I met with, only two had a term paper to write that semester. Some could not really read.

I recently reviewed a grade book completed in my first teaching assignment in an urban community college. At the end of the semester, the thirty-one students had a total of five absences. In my two introductory classes right now with 120 students, I already have seventy-three absences, with nearly half the class missing at least once.

The basic reading and writing skills are of a lower quality now than they once were. In my first college year in an urban community college, less than five percent of the entering students really needed remedial reading and remedial writing. Now a goodly portion do. While I was dean here we had students with high school diplomas who read, according to highly-regarded national tests, at only the second grade level. Many in Mardy Oeming's remedial reading classes could not read aloud an article on the front page of the Detroit Free Press.

The attitudes with regard to writing on the part of both faculty and students have also changed a great deal. For example, when I arrived at SVSU over twenty years ago, almost all students and the overwhelming proportion of the faculty agreed that the responsibility for evaluation and teaching of writing rested solely in the English Department. There were a few exceptions. David Rayfield was one who deducted points for writing deficiencies in Philosophy classes and Bob Thaler did too in Sociology classes, and there were others.

I've been a thirty-nine-year-old liar for more than thirty years...

In my first year as dean, at least ten or twelve times I had students come to my office, some of them in delegations, to protest losing points for writing errors in classes that were not in the English Department. They felt that was not only unfair; it was illegal or should be. In my last year as dean I did not get a single such complaint although more teachers had adopted writing standards.

Early in my tenure, the English Department tried to promote the concept of "Writing Across the Curriculum" by getting a whole lot of faculty from other departments involved in teaching and evaluating writing. They provided a number of workshops and sought volunteers. Quite a few participated, but most did not. A great many felt the same way as students, such was not their responsibility and doing so would be unfair and probably illegal. Some of the speeches were quite vehement, "It's the English Department's responsibility and why are they asking me to do their job when they are obviously failing?" Of course, some would say, often only in a whisper, that they regarded themselves as not competent to teach or evaluate writing.

Of course, as we all know, the teaching of writing is hard work and not very rewarding. Many students who have writing problems have had them for many years, have suffered indignities and insults, and are very discouraged. I had many arguments with English faculty about teaching composition. With rare exceptions, no one wanted a heavy load of composition courses, preferring literature and humanities instead. Even English faculty regard teaching writing as a burdensome and an unrewarding, discouraging task.

As time has passed, however, many faculty outside the Department of English have become more and more involved teaching writing, encouraging students to participate in the Writing Center, and allowing writing performance to influence grades. The numbers are increasing. Although many faculty do not participate, there are but a few raised voices against getting involved and virtually no one will argue it is immoral or improper to have writing standards in various departments.

We had a consultant visit us some time ago and she provided some good advice. If you want to analyze your graduates do not look at your program requirements; rather, look at the transcripts of what students took. Although we provided training in the use of computers in a large number of courses, it was possible for our graduates to complete their degrees without taking a single one of them.

Students are smart cookies in many ways. They will learn how to beat the system and do so. As teachers, we all have reputations among the students. A great many know who among us has writing requirements and standards and who does not. (Some years ago one Composition I class at SVSU only had five pages of writing requirements but six pages of paper doll cut-outs.) If one really lacks writing skills, it is possible with a judicious selection of courses/teachers to graduate without writing skills. It is not only athletes at major universities who both graduate and are illiterate. We are working our way towards full participation by all faculty, but until we do so, many students will slip through. (We have been embarrassed to read some letters from some of our graduates after they are out in the real world because they are so poorly written.)

We have looked at an upper-division-writing-performance test with graduation dependent on passage. A lot of the resistance to such a requirement came from several sources and included each of the following: (a) Wouldn't it be terrible if students who got A's and B's in composition courses failed? (b) Why the hell should a student with a major in (list engineering, chemistry, sociology, etc.) with a three-point-five average fail because of some stupid English Department test? (c) What kind of remedial courses would we need to offer failures, and who would want to teach them? Not me. (d) If we do this we will drive students away and others won't enroll. There were others in a similar vein. By the way, each of these quotes is actual to the best of my recollection, some from faculty and others from administrators.

Raymond Tyner raised consciousness about writing among many faculty and staff, but particularly among administrators, with a newsletter called Right Writing. Each issue contained wisdom about writing and teaching writing. However, one section spread fear in the academic community. In his own inimitable style, Raymond aimed at one particular administrator in each issue by giving examples of his or her writing with criticism. No one could wait to see the latest victim and some administrators avoided writing memos, turning to the phone instead, afraid of ending up on the end of Tyner's scalpel. It did, however, make everyone aware of the importance of good writing.

In summary, things got pretty bad, but are now getting better. More and more people are becoming involved. Things like the writing lab, writing center, articles and papers like Literacy Link, and the attitude of faculty and administrators are making a difference. I sure would like to come back in another twenty years (perhaps as a fifty-nine-year-old liar) and see what has happened here at SVSU. I thank you for this opportunity to be involved in such a fine enterprise.

skills and retention of new knowledge, applying principles of classical and operant conditioning;
d) identify the peer-reviewed psychology journal, explain the typical structure and purpose of a psychological article, and demonstrate the process of critical reading;
e) review two models for a summary/response paper--one effective, the other ineffective--and discuss the differences between the two;
f) arrange for out-of-class peer review of drafts;
g) present evaluation rubric.

6. Monitoring the learning process, formally and informally, through the sequence of course activities will uncover concepts which are not clear and students who might need assistance.
(Example from A. Swihart, Psychology)

This course design process achieves one of AAHE's (American Association for Higher Education) Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning:

Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way–about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning. (190)

2. To achieve an outcome, teach for it. Once we have answered the "what" question above, we must next address the "how" question. The principle of teaching to achieve an outcome may seem self-evident--but exactly how do we help students appreciate "a wide range of perspectives and experiences" or achieve "competence in communication"? These are not "add-ons" to course content; they are basic components of the focus for instruction in the General Education program.

One of the three General Education goals, for example, is critical thinking–yet when I talk with colleagues about how to teach for this, often it seems that we expect it to happen by osmosis. If we truly value critical thinking, we must define for ourselves what that term means in the context of a specific course; determine how we will assess for it; and then plan appropriate course activities that move students from where they are when they enter the course to where we wish them to be at its conclusion.

This is no easy task. In William Perry's model of intellectual development, most beginning college students enter at the dualism stage, imagining education as "the acquisition of correct information and right answers" (Bean 18). Our goal is to move students from this simplistic model, through multiplicity (understanding different points of view and why they exist) and relativism ("everyone has a right to his or her own opinion") to commitment, a critical thinking stance in which they are able to recognize, evaluate and explain differing points of view and take a stand consistent with the evidence and their personal values. In other words, they are able to "think critically," "reason logically," and then "communicate effectively" that which they have learned (the three goals which are to be addressed in every General Education course).
This type of intellectual growth occurs only when students are fully engaged with course content and processes, when they know the purpose for a course and see where it's going.

Students also need continuous and consistent learning experiences if they are to mature intellectually. When I teach the current English 112 course, for instance, a significant number of students generally must revise and resubmit the first assignment, an opposing viewpoints paper in which they are required to research two opposing perspectives on a controversial issue and explain them to a reader who is not familiar with the issue. (A favorite topic this semester was Napster.) In spite of assignment guidelines that limit personal opinion to the conclusion, many students write a paper defending their own perspective on the issue (Napster rules! Who needs copyright laws anyway?). They find it very difficult to research, examine and present divergent perspectives on an issue, both because the process is unfamiliar to them and because they have not learned how to suspend their own opinion so as to listen to and evaluate the arguments of others. Unless these thinking processes are reinforced in other settings, however, students will not fully acquire this essential skill.

Thus, moving students' thinking along a continuum of intellectual development first requires carefully crafted course reading/writing/speaking/listening assignments that shape students' thinking, rather than just imparting information. Accomplishing General Education's three curriculum goals, however, will also demand consistent reinforcement within all the General Education courses students take. Only then can we feel confident that program assessment at the end of students' General Education experience will demonstrate the intellectual growth the curriculum is designed to foster.

3. Integrate communication and thinking objectives with course content. The "how" question requires, then, that we approach course design holistically. Students master course content when they are required to use it–to talk about it, write about it, apply it. To achieve what our curriculum promises, three instructional practices become necessary. We must
•Design effective, outcome-based assignments which integrate content with development of critical thinking, logical reasoning and communication abilities, as in the examples above;
•Establish clear evaluation criteria for course assignments based upon the outcomes (students have a right to know in advance how their work will be evaluated: what does an "A" paper look like? what weight will various aspects of the assignment carry?);
•Provide explicit feedback to let students know which outcomes they have mastered and which need further work.

4. See our course in the context of the entire program. Ultimately, the "how" question requires us to see the relationship between our course and other courses students will take. We cannot assume that students will see the relationship between their learning in different courses unless we help them understand why the General Education program exists.

Nor can we assume they will bring all necessary skills to our course. Having long ago become masters of our subject area, we may have forgotten the processes by which we gained understanding. But our students need to learn these processes.

In the case of written communication, for instance, students in Communication Intensive courses will have had English 111 (now taught as a basic skills prerequisite to General Education), but will not have taken what was formerly English 112. Thus they may not have had in-depth preparation in research strategies, multiple genres and formats, APA documentation, or methods of analysis, persuasion and argumentation.

If these skills are necessary to meet course outcomes, students will need specific instruction to successfully complete course assignments. (In fact, the Writing Center devotes many tutorial hours to "filling in the blanks" for students, helping them understand the processes involved in completing a given assignment.) As instructors, we need to devote course time to teaching vital procedures such as how to research in the field; how to construct a paper or presentation for a defined course purpose; how and why to use a specific format.

The Writing Program Administration (WPA) Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition suggests ways for faculty in all programs and departments to build on the freshman composition foundation by helping students learn
•The main features of writing/[speaking] in this field
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•The expectations of readers/[listeners] in this field (61)
•The conventions of usage, specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation in this field. (63)

Fortunately, many excellent models of outcome-based assignments, evaluation rubrics, and feedback strategies are readily available--from our colleagues, professional books and articles, and websites. Some useful electronic resources, including a bibliography of books on teaching and learning available in our library, may be found on the Faculty Teaching/Learning Institute website at www.svsu.edu/~dboehm/FTLIresources.html. As part of its ongoing assessment process, the General Education Committee will also assemble models and examples of General Education courses and practices each semester.

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skills and retention of new knowledge, applying principles of classical and operant conditioning;
d) identify the peer-reviewed psychology journal, explain the typical structure and purpose of a psychological article, and demonstrate the process of critical reading;
e) review two models for a summary/response paper--one effective, the other ineffective--and discuss the differences between the two;
f) arrange for out-of-class peer review of drafts;
g) present evaluation rubric.

6. Monitoring the learning process, formally and informally, through the sequence of course activities will uncover concepts which are not clear and students who might need assistance.
(Example from A. Swihart, Psychology)

This course design process achieves one of AAHE's (American Association for Higher Education) Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning:

Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way–about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning. (190)

2. To achieve an outcome, teach for it. Once we have answered the "what" question above, we must next address the "how" question. The principle of teaching to achieve an outcome may seem self-evident--but exactly how do we help students appreciate "a wide range of perspectives and experiences" or achieve "competence in communication"? These are not "add-ons" to course content; they are basic components of the focus for instruction in the General Education program.

One of the three General Education goals, for example, is critical thinking–yet when I talk with colleagues about how to teach for this, often it seems that we expect it to happen by osmosis. If we truly value critical thinking, we must define for ourselves what that term means in the context of a specific course; determine how we will assess for it; and then plan appropriate course activities that move students from where they are when they enter the course to where we wish them to be at its conclusion.

This is no easy task. In William Perry's model of intellectual development, most beginning college students enter at the dualism stage, imagining education as "the acquisition of correct information and right answers" (Bean 18). Our goal is to move students from this simplistic model, through multiplicity (understanding different points of view and why they exist) and relativism ("everyone has a right to his or her own opinion") to commitment, a critical thinking stance in which they are able to recognize, evaluate and explain differing points of view and take a stand consistent with the evidence and their personal values. In other words, they are able to "think critically," "reason logically," and then "communicate effectively" that which they have learned (the three goals which are to be addressed in every General Education course).
This type of intellectual growth occurs only when students are fully engaged with course content and processes, when they know the purpose for a course and see where it's going.

Students also need continuous and consistent learning experiences if they are to mature intellectually. When I teach the current English 112 course, for instance, a significant number of students generally must revise and resubmit the first assignment, an opposing viewpoints paper in which they are required to research two opposing perspectives on a controversial issue and explain them to a reader who is not familiar with the issue. (A favorite topic this semester was Napster.) In spite of assignment guidelines that limit personal opinion to the conclusion, many students write a paper defending their own perspective on the issue (Napster rules! Who needs copyright laws anyway?). They find it very difficult to research, examine and present divergent perspectives on an issue, both because the process is unfamiliar to them and because they have not learned how to suspend their own opinion so as to listen to and evaluate the arguments of others. Unless these thinking processes are reinforced in other settings, however, students will not fully acquire this essential skill.

Thus, moving students' thinking along a continuum of intellectual development first requires carefully crafted course reading/writing/speaking/listening assignments that shape students' thinking, rather than just imparting information. Accomplishing General Education's three curriculum goals, however, will also demand consistent reinforcement within all the General Education courses students take. Only then can we feel confident that program assessment at the end of students' General Education experience will demonstrate the intellectual growth the curriculum is designed to foster.

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3. "When in doubt . . ."

This attitude might occur in the student mentioned earlier whose professor required a grammatically perfect paper. Pressed for time and riddled with uncertainty, the student might simply decide to use a comma in the sentence, even though it is not necessary. As seen in this case, some students tend to think that commas are the panacea for all of their punctuation problems. Sadly, commas may be the only form of punctuation they know; therefore, they become their crutch in uncertain situations.

4. Aesthetic Effect

Let's face it, folks; commas are cute. They just hang there on the paper, their curved form dangling helplessly between clauses and nouns, innocently unaware of the domineering effect they have on readers whose eyes curiously peruse the page. Okay, maybe not that cute. But for the writer with a limited repertoire of punctuation, commas serve to add a sense of sophistication (or so it seems) to an otherwise redundant pouring out of words. A paper littered with commas might not always be the result of simple ignorance, or rule misapplication, or a careless attitude; rather, it might simply be the writer's attempt to "take it up a notch"—an attempt to use the resources available in order to achieve a higher standard. The over-usage must be addressed, but seen in this light, it can also be admired.

Solutions

Considering the complex nature of comma usage and the many possibilities behind students' misuse of commas, there might be few concrete solutions to the comma "epidemic." However, that does not mean we should give up; there are several things we can try.

1. A Simple Analogy

An analogy relating commas to real life might help the comma abuser/over-user get the point. Simply ask students to consider their friends: we like our friends; we go places with our friends; we spend lots of time with our friends. But do we really want our friends around 24 hours a day, following our every move? Hopefully, students will get the point: friends are great, but they have their place. In the same way, commas are a great tool. However, just as friends overstaying their welcome can be a pain, overusing commas can dilute their effectiveness and burden readers.

2. New Friends

From the analogy above, students can also see that they like their different friends because of the variety they provide. That same variety is available for punctuation: one need only pull out a grammar handbook to discover several alternatives to using a comma. We can introduce students to colons, semicolons, dashes, parentheses, and a whole slew of different punctuation opportunities. We cannot simply assume that students are readily familiar with these alternatives. (While I was aware of colons, semicolons, etc., I rarely used them at all until college.) Taking the time to show students how to use these forms will benefit not only the students themselves, but also the teachers and professors who read their papers. In addition, that student who wants to sound more sophisticated can learn how to do it the right way.

3. Practice

The only way we can effectively learn something is through practice. While students have probably been drilled to death on commas throughout their educational careers, a little more practice can never hurt. Books full of comma drills are readily available for this purpose, but Professor Diane Boehm, the Writing Program Director and one of our Writing Center Coordinators at SVSU, suggests that it would be more beneficial for students to learn from their own work. She highlights three steps that must take place if students are to correct their errors.

First, students must identify their errors. Ideally, they would do this themselves; however, the "red pen" of professors and collaboration in a tutorial session can also be useful identification tools. Once identification takes place, the reason for the error must be discovered: an understanding of the faulty thinking process is a crucial step in correcting errors. Did the student just place the comma randomly? Did the student place the comma by ear? Questions like these can be useful for determining where the student went wrong. Once students understand their thinking errors, they can work to learn a new, correct pattern of thinking—a pattern that must be reinforced through repetition. By identifying errors and the flawed thinking processes behind them, then replacing those processes with correct ones, we can help students recognize their difficulties and give them the tools necessary to overcome them.

4. LIES

As I have noted, the number of comma rules is often overwhelming; indeed, it is almost impossible to know each rule verbatim without consulting a grammar handbook. How can we break this conglomeration down into something students can manage (and remember)? While categorizing comma usage might have its ill effects, it would seem that a simple, easy-to-remember explanation of the basics would give students at least some guideline to follow. I know that in my experiences attempting to explain comma usage to students, I would often forget a group of rules. The use of the acronym LIES has helped me make commas easier to explain.

L(ists) This is the one comma r ule that everyone knows. The only problem here is variation: some writers place a comma after all of the items in a list, while others eliminate the comma before the conjunction. This problem can be resolved by simply reminding students to be consistent with whichever form they choose.

I(ntroductory Material) This involves commas that are used following both conjunctive adverbs (however, indeed, furthermore, et al.) and dependent clauses (which begin with subordinating conjunctions, such as after, if, when, et al.) at the beginning of sentences. I like to use the phrase "They leave you hanging" to describe the effect this material has on readers. A useful tool here is the Drop Test: alternatively covering up each part of a sentence to see if the other could stand alone as a sentence. By covering up what comes after these "introductory" words and the clauses that contain them, students can usually see that they do not present a whole idea—they only lead into the "meat" of the sentence. It is a good idea to have a grammar handbook available in order to show students different conjunctive adverbs and subordinating conjunctions that indicate when commas are necessary.

E(xtra Material) This is another broad category, but it revolves mainly around parenthetical expressions and also includes conjunctive adverbs that fall in the middle and at the end of sentences. The Drop Test is useful here as well: have students cover up the word or information in question to see if what remains is a complete sentence. If it is, a comma (or commas) is most likely needed to separate the "extra material" from the rest of the sentence. A sentence exemplifying this might be "My father normally a very prudent man decided to jump into the lake with his clothes on." Use of the Drop Test will show that the phrase "normally a very prudent man" is not necessary for a complete sentence. It is, therefore, "extra material" and should be set off with commas.

S(entences) This category addresses the companion of the comma splices that our disillusioned persona was so insensitive about: run-on sentences. Most students know that if two complete sentences are to be connected with a comma, a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, et al.) must be used. For students whose papers are plagued with run-ons, the Drop Test once again proves effective. Ask students to look for coordinating conjunctions in their sentences; then ask them to consider what comes before and after these words separately. Can both parts stand alone? Does each part have its own subject? Asking questions like these will help students be able to recognize run-on sentences.

These categorizations certainly do not encompass all of the possible uses of commas; however, they do present what I think is a good starting point, as well as a good reference, for students who are struggling with commas.

Conclusion

Comma usage is definitely one of the most problematic aspects of writing, and one might, indeed, say that these problems—not to mention their effects—constitute an epidemic of sorts. But the outlook need not be grim; though problems with commas are numerous, there are also a number of ways to approach and address them, some of which I have discussed here. By working with students to clear up misconceptions and help them learn how to correctly and effectively use commas, we can make everyone's life a whole lot more enjoyable. Rather than proclaiming, "I'm really quite fed up with it!" we will all be able to master, and appreciate the value of, commas.

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Program, the General Education Committee asserts that the "primary objective of the Program is to achieve a continuing pattern of improvement in student learning, instructional process, and content quality."

Many years of teaching have taught me the truth of this axiom: if I use the same processes I have always used, I will get the same results I have always gotten. We have collectively decided that we want better results. That will occur as collectively we develop better processes to achieve better results.

As we implement the new curriculum, we have an opportunity not only to challenge our students to be the best that they can be, but to challenge ourselves to do the same.

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