

# Clear instructions, great expectations

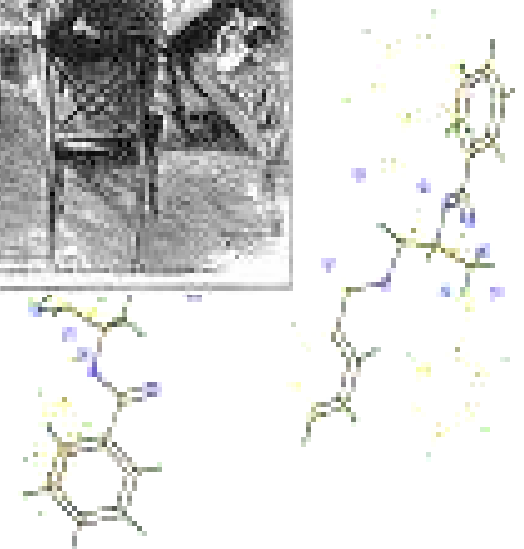
## Creating good writing assignments

Roger Graves

Director, Program in Writing, Rhetoric,  
and Professional Communication  
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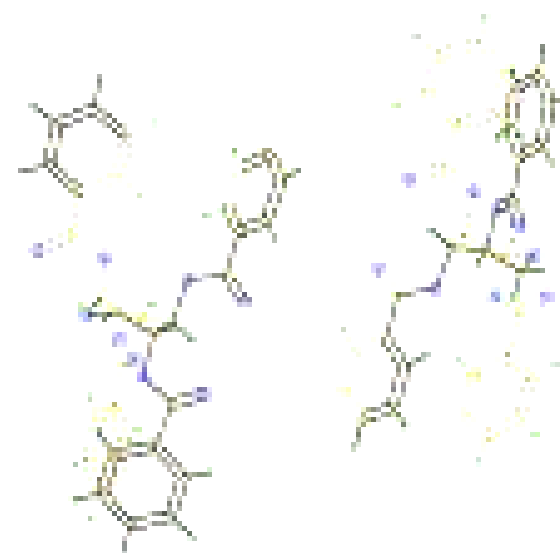


[www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org)



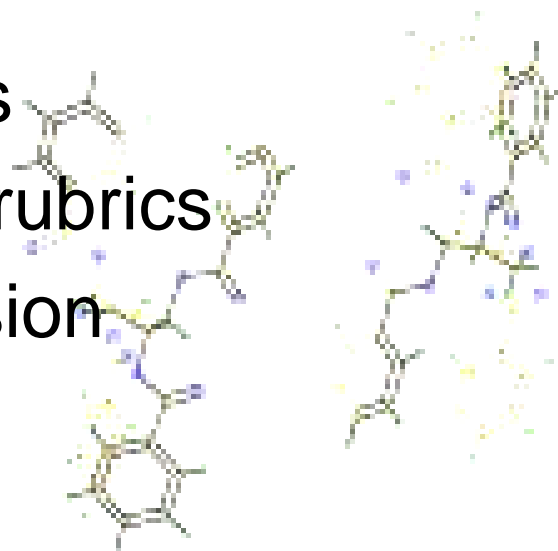
# Great expectations

- Like the protagonist in Dickens' novel, we sometimes come to class with great expectations of our students, only to be disappointed by their actual performance on written assignments



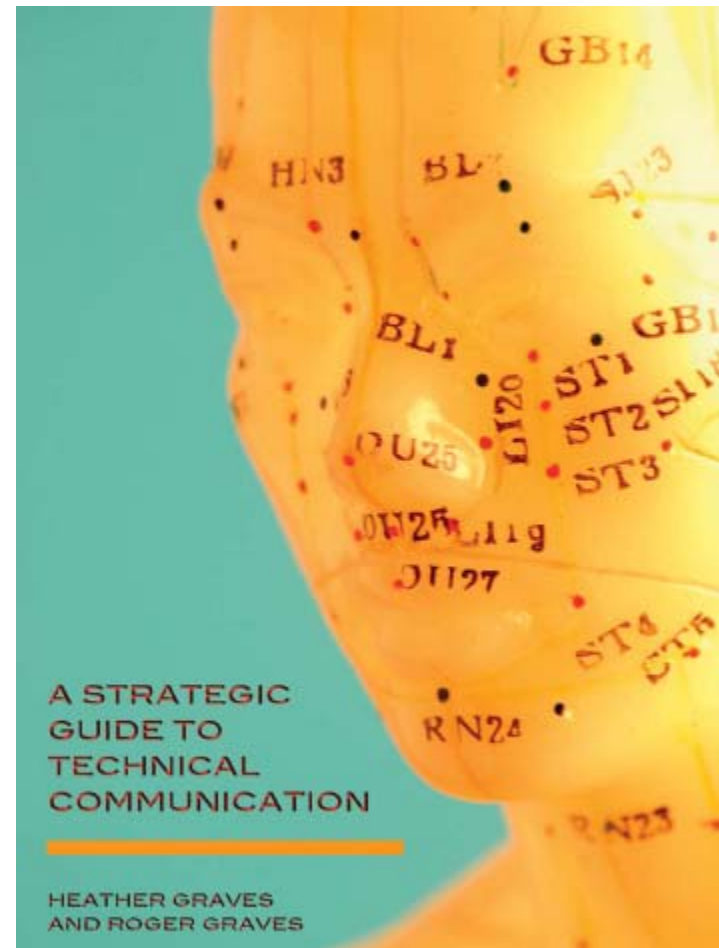
# Agenda

1. Assignments as instructions
  2. A short guide to writing instructions of all kinds
  3. Guidelines for writing assignments
  4. Drafting; workshopping; discussion
- Break
5. How students read assignments
  6. Guidelines for creating grading rubrics
  7. Drafting; workshopping; discussion



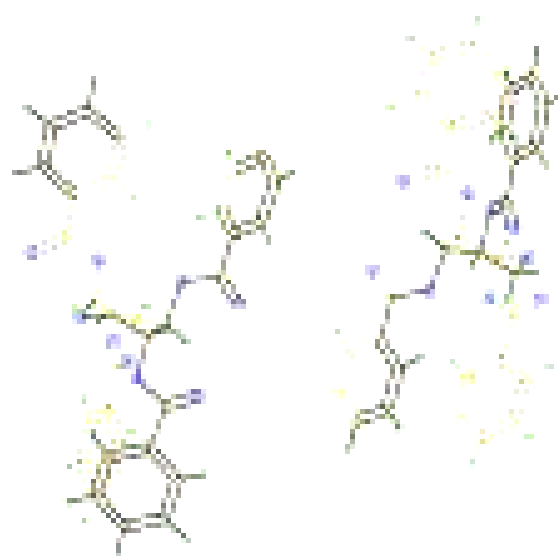
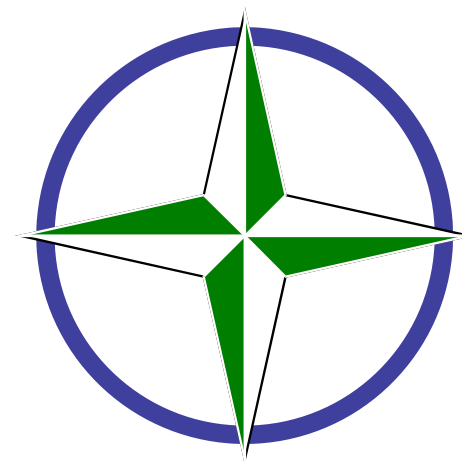
# 2. Writing instructions

- One way to forestall disappointment is to write clear instructions
- As the co-author of a technical writing textbook, I have some advice on this



# Orienting Your Readers

- Define your terms
- Write a brief overview of the entire procedure
- Provide a list of tools or concepts that the reader/user needs to know to complete the procedure successfully

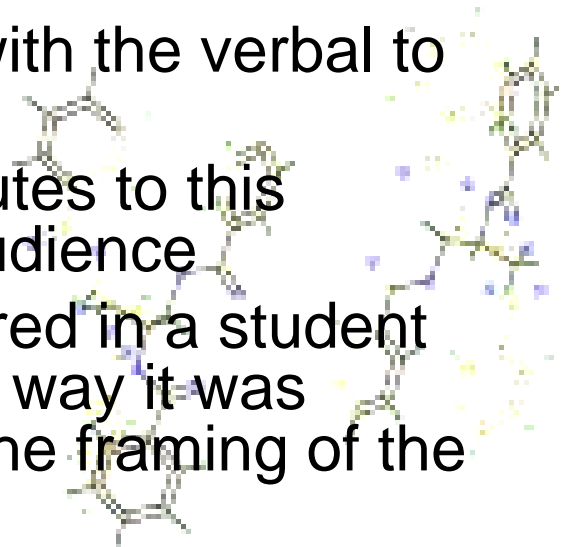


# Orient your readers: example

## Purpose

This essay should demonstrate that you can identify the audience, ethos, and purpose of a written text (Chapter 1). You should also demonstrate the ability to apply the concepts from Chapter 2—visual and verbal explanations, organization, point of view, focus and frame, and interest in texts. Your essay should explain

- the purpose of the news article,
- the ways in which the visual interacts with the verbal to accomplish this purpose,
- how the language of the article contributes to this purpose and communicates with the audience
- how the context of this article (it appeared in a student newspaper at a university) affected the way it was written, the selection of the topic, and the framing of the topic



# Plastic bags harm marine animals, ecosystems

## London Plastic Bag Project screens documentary film



By Desiree Gamotin

Gazette Staff

How could something as commonplace as using plastic bags for garbage be damaging to the environment?

The BBC documentary film *Message in the Waves* answers this question and reveals how our throw-away lifestyle threatens ecosystems. Shot in Hawaii, the documentary shows the detrimental effects of plastic pollution. The film contrasts beautiful shots of the island and waves with scenes of distressed marine species on the shore.

Millions of seabirds, turtles, seals and dolphins have suffered from the entanglement or ingestion of plastic bags and materials disposed by humans. Filmmaker Rebecca Hosking, moved by her experience filming this movie, has inspired entire towns in the UK from using plastic bags.

As part of Waste Reduction Week, a national environmental initiative, *Message in the Waves* will be screened at Hyde Park Unit-

ed Church here in London this Saturday followed by a discussion on the environmental issues raised in the film.

The screening is held by members of The London Plastic Bag Project, a volunteer-based movement that promotes sustainable reduction in plastic bag use in London, Ontario.

"Plastic bags are conceived by consumers as free so people use them then throw them out," Annemarie Bosco, London Plastic Bag Project member, comments. "Canadians use 55 million bags a week but they have a lot of environmental costs that are hidden."

Although the film is shot in Hawaii, Bosco says plastic pollution is a global problem. She argues we must realize the things we do here affect the environment thousands of miles away. Having lived in Australia where reducing plastic bags is a priority, Bosco noticed plastic bag reduction is a relatively new concept in London.

"There's a huge contrast between here and Sydney. Here, the issue hasn't come to the floor yet," she says.

Part of the reason is people are unaware of the problems posed by plastic bags. Since they are not biodegradable, they decompose into bits of plastic that can contaminate the ground and clog waterways.

Bosco pointed to the wave of awareness that has increased since the Ontario provincial government stepped up efforts to reduce



**LONELY, I AM SO LONELY. I HAVE NOBODY, TO CALL MY OWN.** BBC documentary *Message in the Waves* shows scenes of beached seals among plastic debris.

the use of plastic bags by 50 per cent. Grocery stores like Dominion and Loblaws now sell 99-cent reusable shopping bags.

For those who use plastic bags in trashcans, Bosco suggests giving something value when reusing it. For example, try to use up all the packaging that you can, using milk bags for garbage to reduce additional bags.

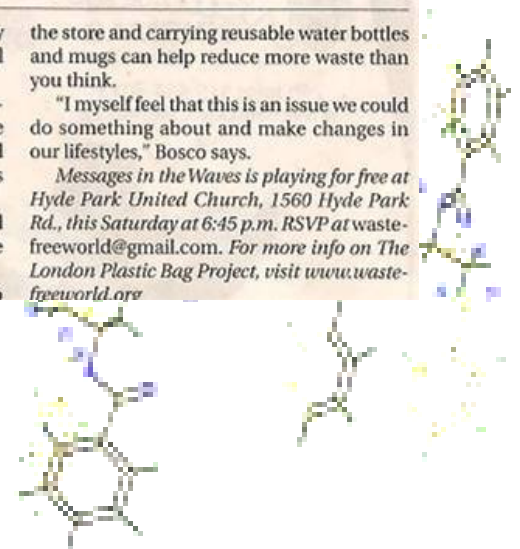
"Once I started doing that, I changed all my shopping habits," Bosco adds. "Just be mindful when you're buying stuff."

Even simple habits like taking tote bags to

the store and carrying reusable water bottles and mugs can help reduce more waste than you think.

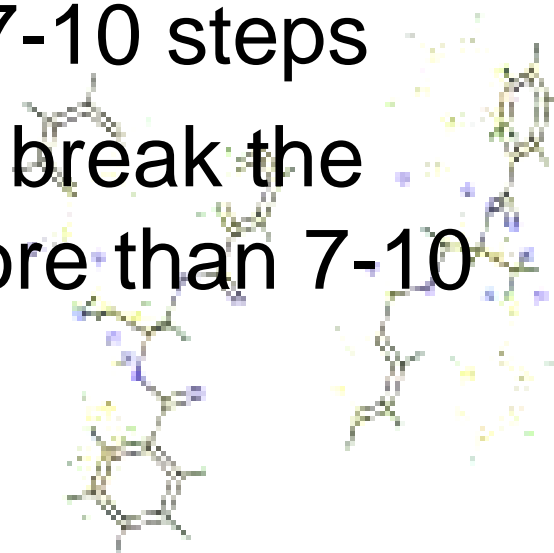
"I myself feel that this is an issue we could do something about and make changes in our lifestyles," Bosco says.

*Messages in the Waves* is playing for free at Hyde Park United Church, 1560 Hyde Park Rd., this Saturday at 6:45 p.m. RSVP at [waste-free-world@gmail.com](mailto:waste-free-world@gmail.com). For more info on The London Plastic Bag Project, visit [www.waste-free-world.org](http://www.waste-free-world.org)



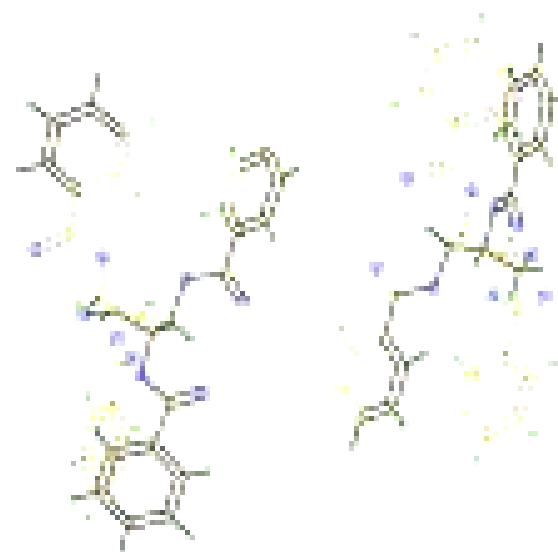
# Break Instructions into Steps

- Use numbered lists for steps that must occur in chronological order
- Use bulleted list for items that do not have to appear in sequence
- Limit each sub-procedure to 7-10 steps
- If there are more steps, try to break the task into sub-groups of no more than 7-10 steps



# Keep Steps Discrete

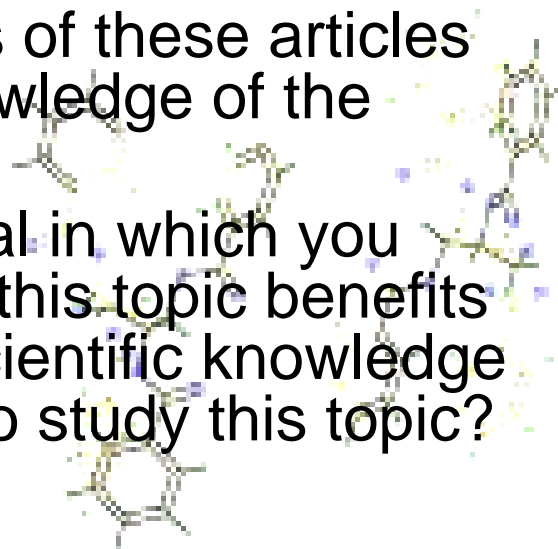
- Each step should describe one action
- Packing more than one action into a step invites errors



# Keep Steps Discrete: Example

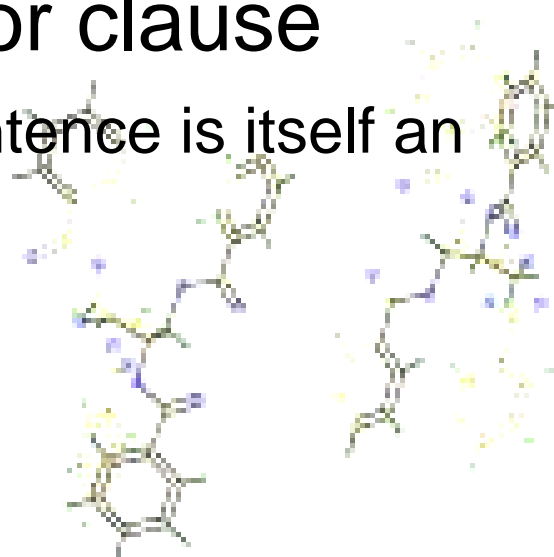
## **Invention/Drafting/Research strategies**

1. Identify a scientific topic that you are already familiar with or that you want to learn more about.
2. In the research class on Oct. 31 in UC 2, find 5-10 sources that you might be able to use in the research essay (Assignment 4)
3. Email pdfs or full-text copies of these to yourself.
4. Write short (50-100 word) summaries of these articles describing what they add to your knowledge of the topic.
5. Write the introduction to your proposal in which you make the argument that researching this topic benefits you in some way or improves your scientific knowledge and background—why do you want to study this topic?



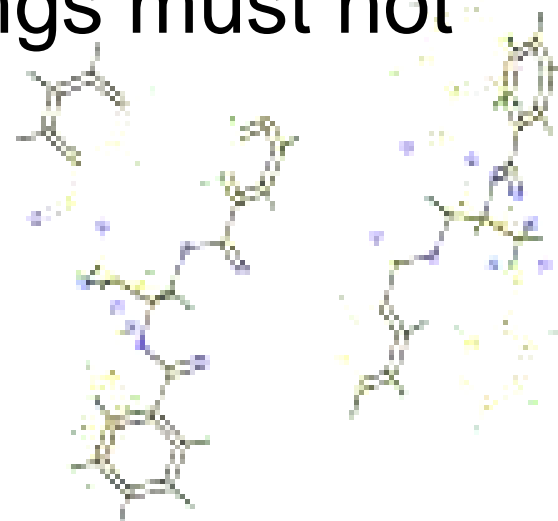
# Use imperative sentences

- **Use** the imperative (command) sentence order: “Verb + Object” [This sentence is itself an example of this principle]
- If conditions apply to the action, include them in a dependent phrase or clause *before* the imperative. [This sentence is itself an example of this principle]



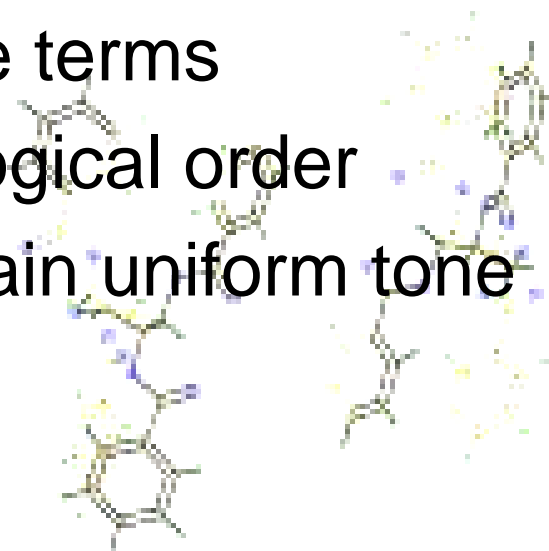
# Nice-to-Know vs. Need-to-Know

- Provide only “need-to-know” information for readers
- To decide, create a working definition of your readers, and constantly re-examine it
- Apply “Occam’s Razor”: “Things must not be unnecessarily multiplied.”



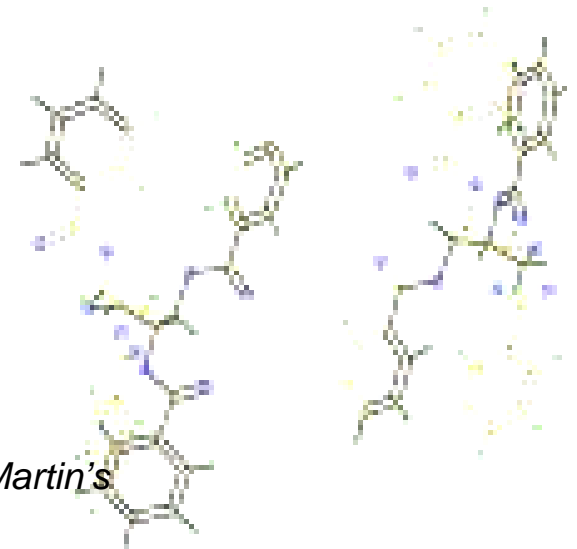
# Strategies for Effective Instructions – A Summary

- Overview
- Group into chunks
- Step-by-step
- Clarify key points
- Include alternatives or substitutions
- Tips, warnings, cautions
- Troubleshooting
- Adapt to reader's level
- Use imperative
- Define terms
- Use logical order
- Maintain uniform tone



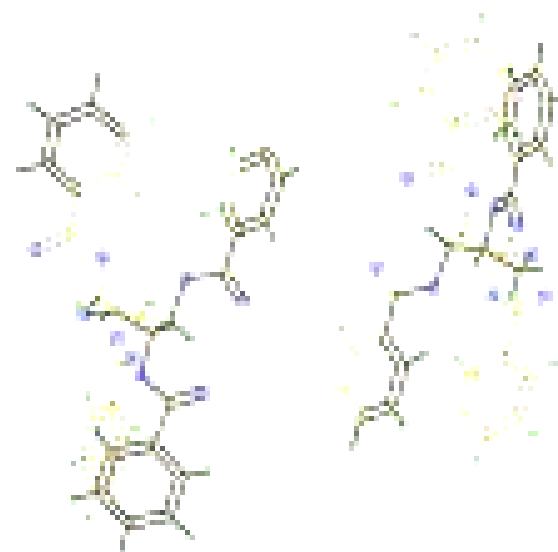
# 3. Guidelines for writing instructions

- Topic/description
- Purpose
- Audience
- Invention/drafting/research strategies
- Length
- Drafts/workshopping deadlines
- Revision policy
- Drafting
- Criteria/rubric/grading



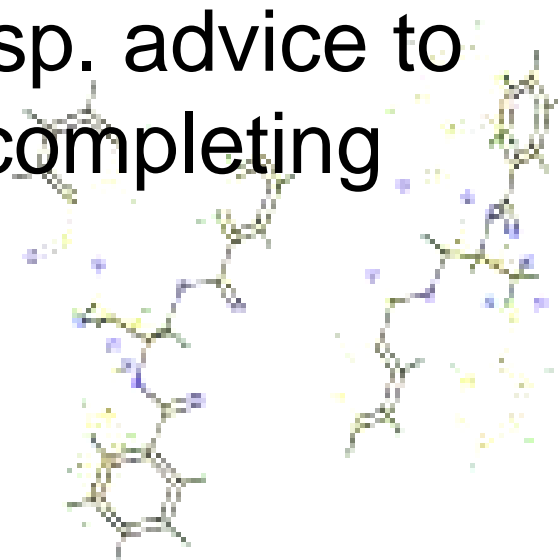
# Drafting

- Open a word processing file and begin revising a writing assignment
- Alternatively, draft a writing assignment using the headings in the previous slide



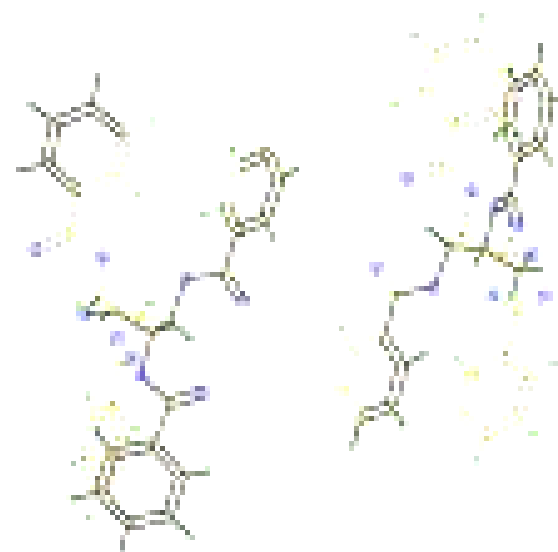
# Workshopping

1. Read at least three other people's drafts, either on screen or printed out
2. Note **language** they have used, esp. descriptive verbs
3. Note **procedures** they list, esp. advice to students on the process of completing the assignment



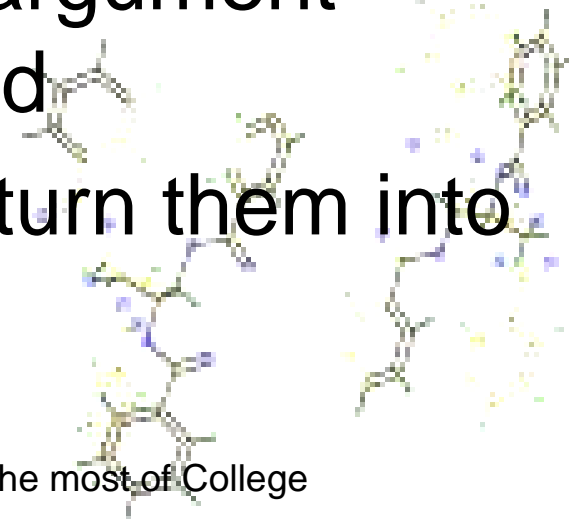
# Discussion

- Did you need all these categories?
- Do your students need other kinds of information?
- Conflicts?
- Observations?



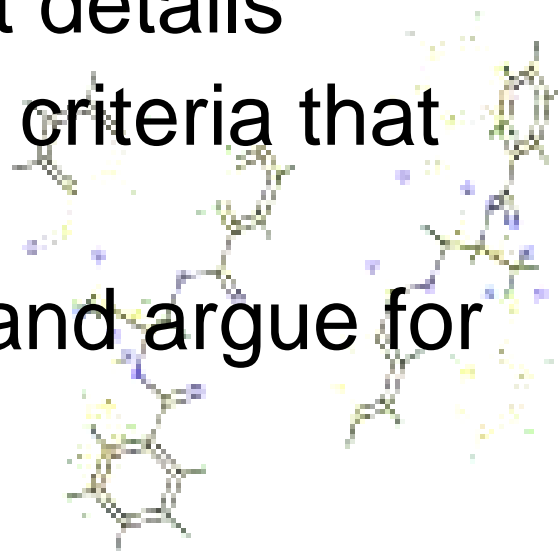
# 5. How students read assignments

- **Questions** we ask—“why” and how”— need to be elaborated to make obvious the implied argument we want to read
- **Directives** (“discuss,” “consider”) need to be elaborated to identify the argument from sources you want to read
- **Open-ended assignments:** turn them into questions



# More advice to students

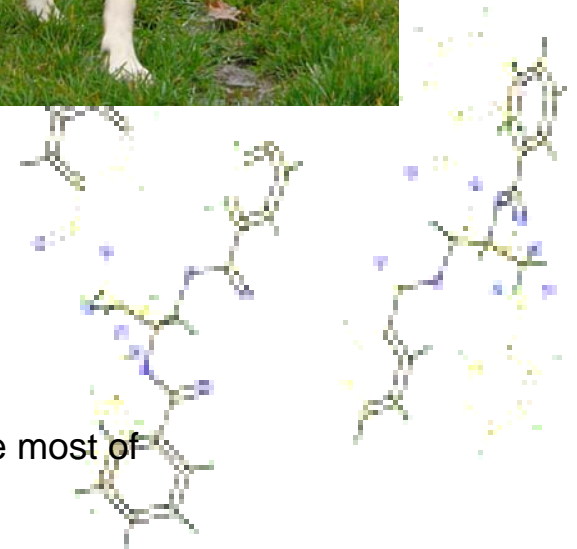
- **Analyze:** find connections
- **Compare and contrast**
- **Define:** make a claim about how something should be defined
- **Describe:** observe and select details
- **Evaluate:** argue according to criteria that something is good, bad, best
- **Propose:** identify a problem and argue for a solution



# Instructors as audiences

Aims:

- ~~To please~~
- ~~To entertain~~
- **To engage**



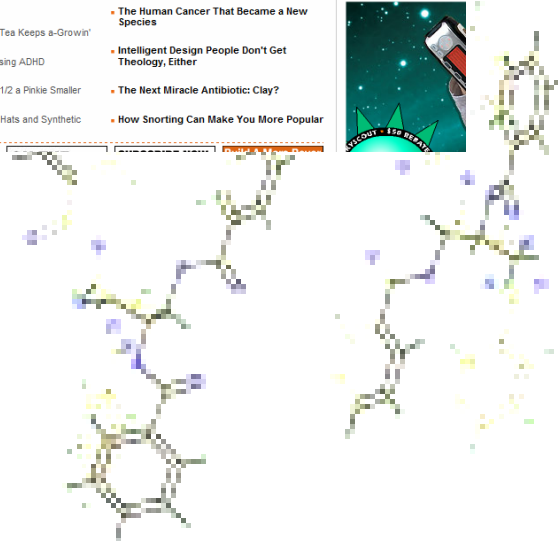
O'Brien, Emily, Jane Rosenweig, and Nancy Sommers, "Making the most of College Writing."

# Writing for other audiences

- Non-academic Audience

For the brochure, your initial audience for this assignment is your instructor; readers of general purpose newspapers and science-oriented magazines form the **primary** audience.

The screenshot shows the DISCOVER website homepage. At the top, the word "DISCOVER" is written in large, bold, black letters. Below it, the tagline "Science, Technology, and The Future" is visible. Navigation links include "Health & Medicine", "Mind & Brain", "Technology", "Space", "Human Origins", "Living World", "Environment", "Physics & Math", and "Video". A "Daily Dose" section features a video player with a thumbnail of a man and a woman sitting at a table. To the right of the video player are several article thumbnails with titles like "Interview: Joe LeDout", "Internet Defender", "Caging Carbon", "Planet Science", "Household Robots", and "Scientist of the Year". Below the video player, there are sections for "Departments" and "Blogs" with various article titles. On the left side, there is a promotional banner for "GET A YEAR OF DISCOVER" for "ONLY \$2.08".

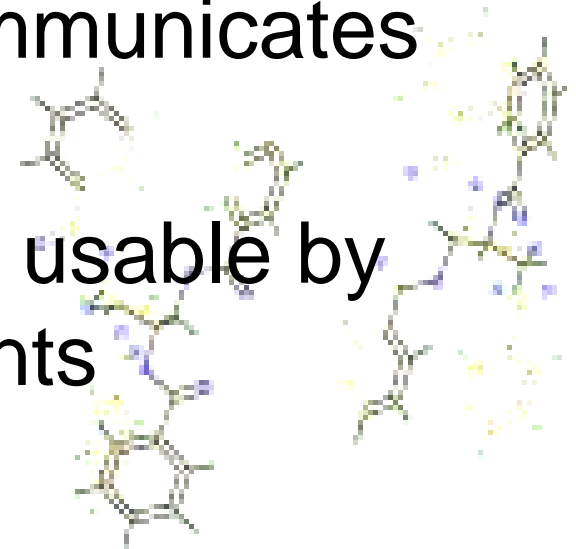




Writing Program General Writing Rubric	
Topic	Writing Program General Writing Rubric
Level	Writing Program General Writing Rubric
Criteria	Writing Program General Writing Rubric
Score	Writing Program General Writing Rubric
Comments	Writing Program General Writing Rubric

# 6. Guidelines for rubrics

1. Identify your marking criteria
2. Describe levels of quality: excellent work looks like . . .; poor work has these characteristics . . .
3. Create a document that communicates this information
4. Format the rubric to make it usable by both yourself and the students



# Sample Rubric



## Writing Program General Grading Rubric

Writing Program

Faculty of Arts and Humanities



### Grade Ranges

Below 50	50-60	60-70	70-80	80-90	90-100
<p>Grades in this range identify assignments with problems sufficiently severe and/or pervasive that they significantly compromise the document's ability to communicate.</p> <p>Grades in this range generally indicate ONE or more of the following characteristics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Plagiarism.</li> <li>2. Failure to follow the assigned topic.</li> <li>3. Severe systematic problems</li> </ol>	<p>Grades in this range identify assignments that, while generally acceptable, have AT LEAST ONE of the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ a significant global deficiency (mistaken audience, inconsistency in purpose)</li> <li>▶ several major problems (see list below)</li> <li>▶ numerous minor problems</li> </ul>	<p>Grades in this range tend to be fairly common in writing courses.</p> <p>These grades identify a generally good performance on the criteria listed below with minor problems of various kinds throughout the assignment or in more than one category.</p>	<p>These grades may also be given to assignments that contain some minor mistakes, or even a very small number of more significant ones, provided that other outstanding attributes compensate for them.</p>	<p>More common than 90+ but still relatively rare, assignments in this range demonstrate the same features as those in the upper range (clear purpose; coherent and cohesive writing, varied prose style), but to a slightly lesser degree or with a few minor problems.</p>	<p>Grades in this range are very rare, and identify assignments that show considerable originality and unusual skill in addressing an audience, accomplishing a purpose, using an appropriate style, choosing an appropriate document design or format, and proofreading thoroughly.</p>

Please note that these descriptions are guidelines only, and do not cover all situations.

### Evaluation criteria

Category	Description of a major problem in this category
<b>Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ an unclear, vague, weak, or otherwise problematic thesis statement</li> </ul>
<b>Audience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ inappropriate linguistic register; incorrect assumptions about background knowledge of reader</li> </ul>
<b>Coherence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ problems with paragraph length/structure</li> </ul>
<b>Cohesion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ lack of connection between ideas, paragraphs</li> </ul>
<b>Style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ lack of sentence variety, awkwardness, faulty sentence structure</li> </ul>
<b>Grammar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ sentence boundary errors: fused sentences, comma splices, sentence fragments</li> </ul>
<b>Proofreading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ typos, misspellings, and so on common enough to significantly slow down the reader</li> </ul>
<b>Format</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ poor document design for technical writing assignments; incorrect essay format</li> </ul>
<b>Citation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ problems with proper citation format, scholarly procedure</li> </ul>

Writing Program Office (revised July 2006)



# Sample Rubric



Writing Program Student Writing Rubric

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
5 Pages of writing					
Chapter 6: Scannability					
Chapter 7: Links					
Chapter 8: Chunky Paragraphs					
Chapter 9: Reduce Cognitive Burdens					
Chapter 10: Menus					

## + Writing 207: Website Development Criteria

### Criteria

5 Pages of writing

1. Page 1—
2. Page 2—
3. Page 3—
4. Page 4—
5. Page 5—

Chapter 6: Scannability

- Titles—
- Subheads—
- Keywords, phrases, links--
- Lists--

Chapter 7: Links

- Emphasis—
- Number of links—
- External/outbound links--
- Pre-linking information—
- Use of keywords--

Chapter 8: Chunky Paragraphs

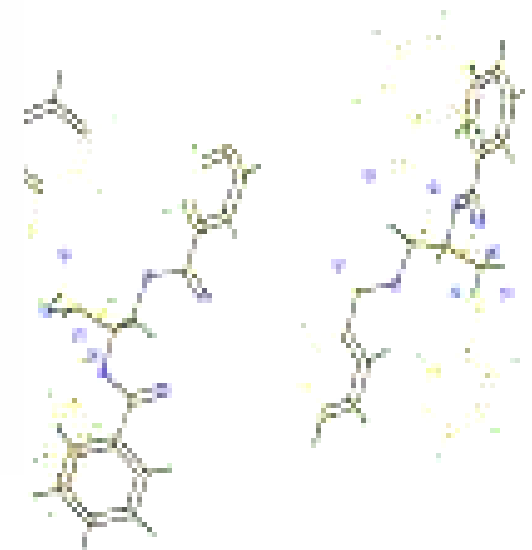
- One main idea--
- Context first--
- Conclusion/lead in first paragraph--

Chapter 9: Reduce Cognitive Burdens

- Reduce clauses—
- Eliminate nominalizations--
- Highlight the agent and action--
- Avoid negatives--
- Reduce scrolling—
- Print the document option—

Chapter 10: Menus

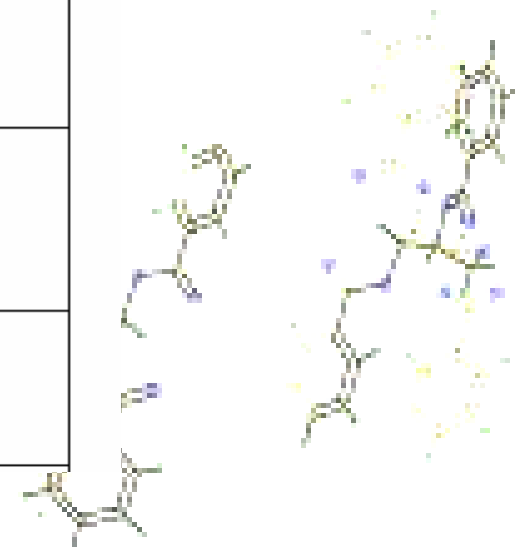
- Reusable headings—



# Science writing rubric

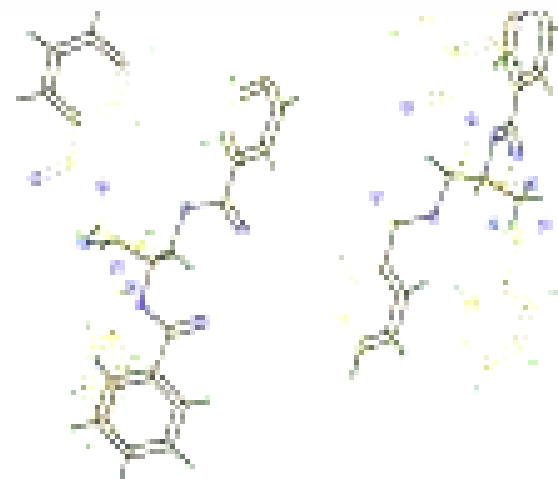
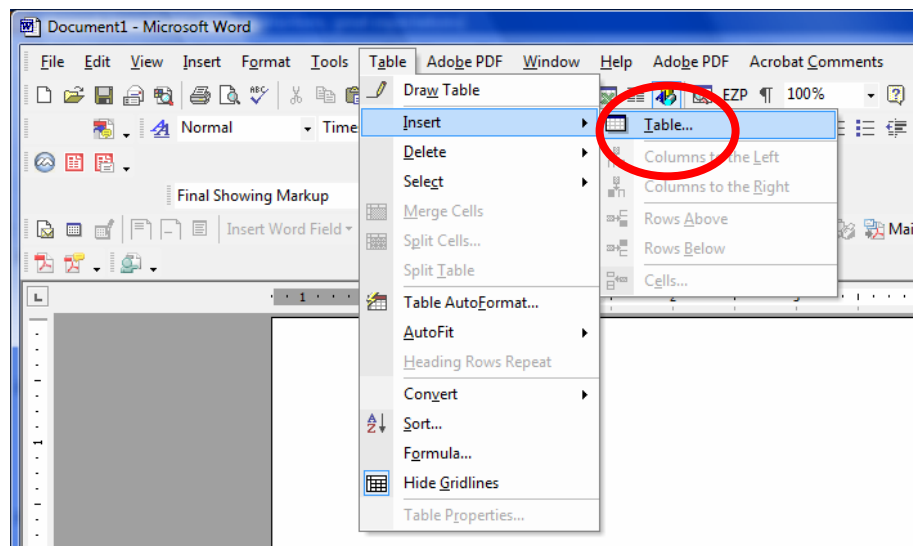
## Assignment 2: Lab and other reports

Criteria	Rating		
	Excellent	OK	Needs work
<b>Audience:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adapted to scientists</li> <li>Appropriate level of background knowledge</li> </ul>			
<b>Organization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses the IMRAD structure</li> <li>Uses transitional words to signal the structure</li> <li>Has an appropriate title</li> </ul>			
<b>Language/diction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scientific jargon used?</li> <li>Neutral, impartial tone?</li> <li>Final draft proofread</li> </ul>			
<b>Purpose</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction <i>explains</i></li> <li>Procedures <i>describe</i></li> <li>Results <i>report</i></li> <li>Discussion <i>analyzes</i></li> </ul>			
<b>Style</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No informal word choices</li> <li>Language is objective and neutral</li> <li>Tables and figures labeled</li> <li></li> </ul>			



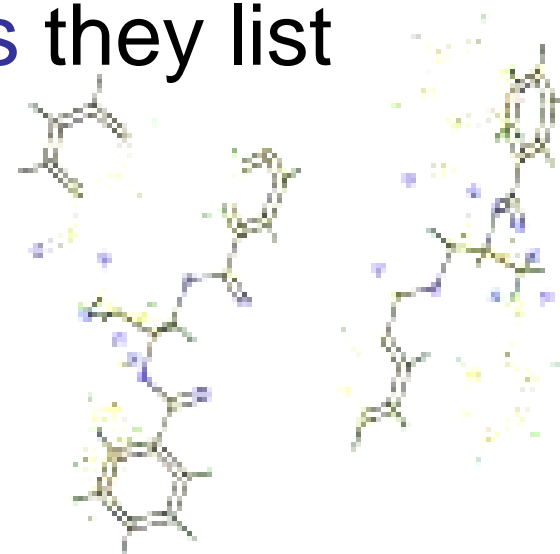
# 7. Drafting

- Open a word processing file and begin drafting a writing assignment rubric
- Consider using the tables function to format the rubric



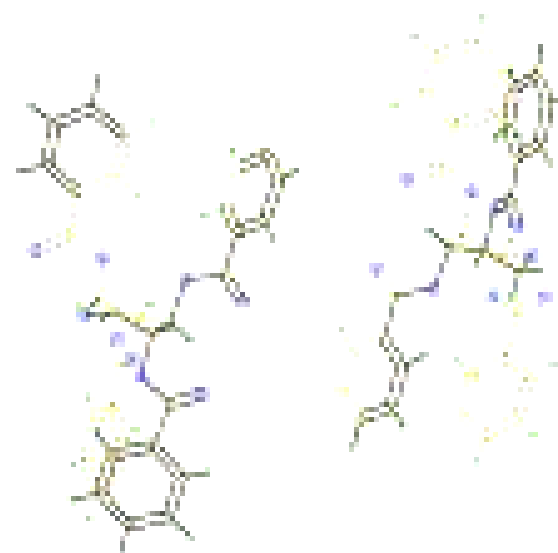
# Workshopping

1. Read at least three other people's drafts, either on screen or printed out
2. Note **language** they have used, esp. descriptive verbs
3. Note **qualitative descriptions** they list



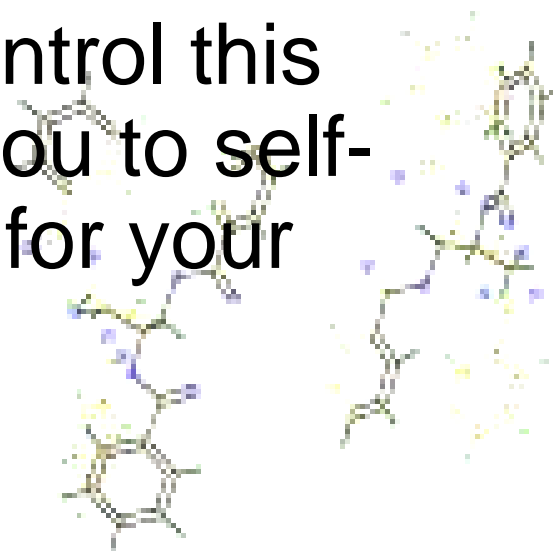
# Discussion

- Problems?
- Conflicts?
- Observations?




# NSSE, Outcomes, and you

- Assessment tools, like NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and other “benchmarking” or outcomes statements, increasingly rely on explicit statements describing levels of student achievement
- Rubrics are useful ways to control this process because they allow you to self-define the learning outcomes for your course




# Slides from this presentation

- <http://publish.uwo.ca/~rgraves3/>




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Associate Professor

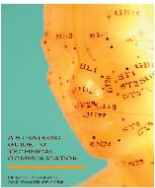


### Appointments


Director, [Program in Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication](#)  
Co-Vice-President, [Canadian Association for Teachers of Technical Writing \(CATTW\)](#)  
Co-Editor, [Inkshed \(Newsletter of the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning\)](#)  
President, [London Chapter of Society for Technical Communication](#)

### Books

[A Strategic Guide to Technical Communication](#)  
With Heather Graves. Peterborough: Broadview, 2007.

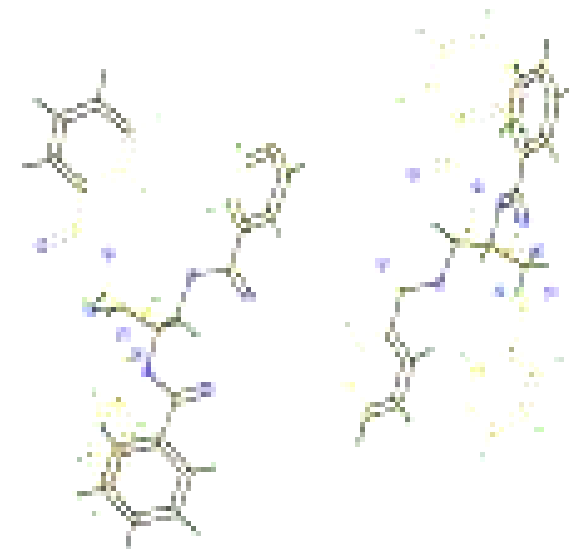


[The Brief Penguin Handbook, Canadian Edition](#)  
With Lester Faigley and Heather Graves. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2007.



### Recent Presentations (2006-2007)

Learn, Do, Reflect: Service Learning Activities in Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication Service-Learning Committee Meeting, UWO October 4 2007  
[Assessing the Writing of ESL Students](#) Fall Perspectives on Teaching, UWO August 30 2007  
[Writing Centres in Canada: Historical Perspectives and Institutional Locations](#), CATTW 2007, Saskatoon May 29  
Slides from Writing to Learn: Learning to Write at UWO April 4, 2007  
[Writing to Learn: Learning to Write](#)  
[WAC Resources Handout](#)  
"Editing for Cohesion." Workshop for London Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, London ON March 29, 2007  
[Writing Centres, Writing Seminars, Writing Culture: Teaching Writing in Canadian Universities](#) Arts and Humanities Research Day Poster, UWO March 27, 2007  
"The UWO Writing Project." Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York NY, March 24, 2007  
Slides from presentation at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax March 15, 2007, and Loyalist College, Belleville ON May 31, 2007  
[Track Changes: The emergence of the visual in writing instruction](#)  
Oral Presentation slides for Scholar's Elective students at UWO, March 19, 2007  
[Oral Presentations: Advice and Tips](#)  
Creating Effective Visual Displays



# References

- Glenn, Cheryl, Melissa Goldthwaite, and Robert Connors. *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*. New York: St. Martin's, 2003.
- Faigley, Lester, Roger Graves, and Heather Graves. *The Brief Penguin Handbook*. Toronto: Pearson, 2008.
- Graves, Heather, and Roger Graves. *A Strategic Guide to Technical Communication*. Peterborough: Broadview, 2007.
- O'Brien, Emily, Jane Rosenweig, and Nancy Sommers, "Making the most of College Writing." Harvard Expository Writing Program, [http://www.fas.harvard.edu/%7Eexpos/EWP\\_guide.web.pdf](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/%7Eexpos/EWP_guide.web.pdf)

