are still teaching. Fortunately, they didn't give up their original goals to do this. Two recently defended their creative writing theses; five more have finished their master's degrees in literature. Nine are pursuing doctoral degrees in literature; five have given papers at CCCC. The TAs and I now share more than terror! We agree with Don who wrote, "Strangely enough, in discovering the hard work, the agony, and the frustration teaching entails, I have grown to love it more than I ever thought I would."

Helping TAs Across the Curriculum Teach Writing: An Additional Use for the *TA Handbook*

Ellen Strenski

Graduate student teaching assistants do much of the responding to student writing on university campuses. TAs usually outnumber faculty, and since TAs are often themselves future faculty, TA development is an exceptionally cost-effective investment of a WPA's time and energy with both pedagogical and political payoffs. This article recommends one easy way that a WPA can influence TAs—by providing copy about undergraduate writing for publication in the campus *TA Handbook*.[1]

Most universities have some kind of handbook given to campus TAs. Usually titled "Handbook," as in *Handbook for Teaching Assistants* (Delaware), or *A Handbook of Resources for New Instructors at UTK* (Tennessee, Knoxville), they also appear under such names as *Instructional Resource Book for Teaching at UNL* (Nebraska-Lincoln) or *Pathfinder: An Introduction to Teaching at UNR for Teaching Assistants* (Nevada, Reno). Some are published under the auspices of a special office, like the Texas A & M University Center for Teaching Excellence. Others, like Rutgers' or the University of California at Irvine's, are sponsored by their Graduate Divisions, and some are prepared jointly, like the University of Georgia's. At the least, these handbooks describe bureaucratic issues such as class rosters and record keeping. At best, they are complete "How To" manuals for good teaching. Most fall in the first category.

As for authors, these handbooks are written by one or more graduate students (an English Department graduate student at Brown), or by one or

more administrators (at the University of Texas at Austin), or are compilations of various pre-existing documents, (such as the University of Arizona's). Academic backgrounds of authors range across the curriculum, with a representative sprinkling from English and Education, but including other disciplines too. Few, if any, are faculty, certainly not English or Writing faculty.

Not surprisingly, then, composition specialists will find most of these TA handbooks unenlightened about student writing. Of approximately 50 different TA handbooks I examined, the most common co-occurrence with the topic "writing" was the topic "cheating." That is, if undergraduate writing was discussed at all, it was in the context of helping TAs discourage plagiarism, and every handbook referred to plagiarism and the university's policies about it, sometimes within a discussion of "ethics" rather than writing.

The number two writing topic discussed was "grading," often synonymous with "correcting" papers, and usually in a context exhorting TAs to judge student work by the public, supposedly agreed-upon, standards described in its University catalog (A=excellent, B=good, etc.). The third most common co-occurrence was information about other available help on campus (like tutorial or writing centers). Although some of these TA handbooks are excellent, most do not even mention topics like ungraded writing, drafts, assignment design, peer editing, or commenting on papers.

Most authors of these TA handbooks clearly do not know about recent advances in our understanding of the thinking-writing process. Moreover, these handbooks for TAs are much less enlightened than comparable guides for campus faculty, probably because only a few campuses with strong WAC programs, like La Salle College or the University of California at Davis, have such faculty publications, whereas almost every university has some kind of generic handbook for TAs.

Although more and more universities are now instituting regular TA training seminars to instruct graduate students in various pedagogical issues, including handling undergraduate writing, much TA development is still perfunctory at best. A 1986 MLA survey found that under 60% of Ph.D.-granting English Departments provided courses or internships to prepare their graduate students to be TAs. What about the other 40%? And what about the teaching preparation of TAs in departments other than English, departments that inevitably pay less attention to undergraduate writing?

Often a handbook is really the only support available to TAs, and the attention given to undergraduate writing in many of these handbooks could be improved. Here, then, is a useful opportunity for the WPA to help TAs with some suggested principles and techniques, and at the same time to claim campus visibility and credibility as a spokesperson for writing instruction.

What exactly should be offered as copy to the campus Graduate Division or Office of Instructional Development, then? It is not enough to provide current and accurate information. It must also be accessible and geared to TAs' perception of their needs. The present authors of TA handbooks are preoccupied by plagiarism and grading standards. But what about the TAs themselves? What matters most to them? Copy should, above all, address the urgent concerns about writing that are specific to the real-life situations of the graduate teaching assistants that these handbooks aim to support.

According to several surveys I have done at UCLA of a cross-section of campus TAs and of head TAs in various campus departments, the most urgent problem that TAs associate with undergraduate writing, ranking far above all else, is the related issue of time management and handling the paper load. TAs have their own seminar papers, theses, and dissertations to write. How can they cope with several onslaughts each quarter or semester of hundreds of midterms, papers, and finals? Second, according to my surveys (which I make no claims for being particularly scientific, but which I believe to be highly suggestive), what troubles TAs most about the undergraduate papers they read, and what they would like most to be able to help student writers with, is organization (a finding, incidentally, which is similar to a survey of all the faculty in the UCLA Sociology Department). As one TA reported about his expectations for a developed argument, "I feel bad when I read a paper that doesn't communicate to me what I think it should—which is why I'm not as concerned about spelling and grammar as much as the bigger things."

Unlike the image projected by most of the current TA handbooks, TAs, at UCLA anyway, are also more concerned about this primary issue of organization (how the evidence is presented to support a thesis) than they are about cheating (how to recognize and deal with plagiarism,) or grading (how to assign grades fairly). When asked, "What problems trouble you most in connection with student writing?" cheating and grading were consistently ranked lower than thinking (how students'

writing may express poor understanding of course material), process (how the student may have handed in a rough draft, perhaps not even proofread, rather than a final, revised and edited version), or commenting (how to comment helpfully). Most of the present handbooks are clearly out of line with TAs' real situations and their teaching dilemmas as they perceive them. Therefore, the WPA should aim at helping with these two main issues: TAs' own time management and ways TAs can help students write more organized papers.

In his or her volunteered copy for the campus TA handbook, the WPA can make several useful suggestions about TA time management. First, by referring to TAs' own experience as the prolific writers that they are, acknowledge the writing process and suggest the cost-effectiveness of intervening at some stage(s) before the final paper or before a formal outline. One quick, manageable, system that works well employs index cards. A TA who gets an index card from each student with a carefully framed research question on it, or a thesis statement and several sentences of supporting claims, or several sentences explaining why the topic is worth investigating, has gone a long way toward shaping undergraduate papers that will ultimately be easier and faster to read and grade, and that will also be more organized. The index card system can also work to get students into the library ("Cite five potential sources in correct bibliographical format"), or even to get started ("Copy the question that you picked from the handout and then tell me in several sentences why you chose it"), as well as to help students shape a persuasive argument ("Write several sentences describing what a reasonable person might object to in the position you take" or "Describe in several sentences a different theoretical approach to this subject from the one you take"), and in various other ways.

Exploiting this writing process does not have to entail reading complete drafts of papers, which TAs usually find a logistical impossibility. A set of index cards can be read quickly and responded to, or not, on the back of the cards. And, of course, attention to the writing process and intervening strategically in it reduces the likelihood of that bugaboo, plagiarism.

TAs also seem to associate grading with issues of time management rather than with cheating, so recommend that they establish beforehand and explain to students the criteria used to grade papers. This process can begin with the students' predictable question about the professor's assignment, "What does he or she want?" When TAs clarify and operationalize a professor's assignment, most of which are usually somewhat unclear if

not downright mystifying for students about to undertake the task, they can introduce these grading criteria in terms of organization and argument. To do so, they can establish the need for claims and evidence, and can discuss and illustrate the quality of proof to be provided from lectures, textbooks, discussions. Reassure the TAs that elaborate bureaucratic checklists are not necessary and that their gut response or general impression is OK, especially if they have "normed" a few papers together with other course TAs and the professor.

Commenting takes a lot of time and is often unproductive, so inform TAs that extensive comments are not necessary. Elaborate suggestions for improvement are useless if the student cannot rewrite the assignment, and "correcting," that is, careful copyediting, is usually a waste of time. If the TA wants to comment on student papers beyond justifying the grade, explain what kinds of comments work best to help the student improve, for example, personalizing the comments by addressing the student by name (which will encourage the student to read the comments in the first place), praising success, asking questions for clarification, or suggesting tentative revisions that relate to problems caused for the reader and that anticipate ways of solving the problem in a subsequent paper.

TAs' concern for features of student papers, and their wish to help students write better by commenting on papers, can be addressed again by the notion of drafts. Rather than expend their energy once the assignment is finished, that is, rather than do a post mortem on student papers, suggest that TAs redistribute their available time and invest it earlier in the students' writing process. In that way they can truly help students organize a developing argument, monitored again on index cards or by peers. And one successful paper is, of course, the best preparation for subsequent success.

Mediating the professor's assignments, or designing an assignment of their own, is another troublesome issue for TAs. Ranking assignment design (how the instructions in the professor's assignment may have misled students and therefore led to poor papers) as his particular number one problem in connection with student writing, a TA explains, "Assignment design is most important because it is what *you* have most control over & can blow the whole assignment." The WPA can therefore helpfully suggest ways for TAs to demystify an assignment, e.g., clarifying important terms like "describe," and "analyze," or providing sample papers for illustration.

What the WPA should also do in this forum is resist several temptations. One temptation is to recommend an easy solution, like abbreviation symbols for marking student papers, which are easy to reproduce in a handbook and which TAs will embrace as a seemingly efficient shortcut, but which is a pedagogical delusion. Another temptation is to ride one of our own hobby horses, like the evils of the passive voice, which is misleading when addressed to our TA colleagues in the sciences and engineering, and distracting to others. And finally, we should restrain our repugnance for the 5-paragraph essay. Many of the mid-term essay answers that TAs read are variations on this structure, which TAs can teach as a genuinely useful heuristic for organizing an argument.

TA handbooks, then, are a golden opportunity for WPAs. To seize this opportunity, all it takes are a few phone calls, a visit or two, and a relatively brief time composing something enlightening. In return, we make and win campus friends, we publish more useful TA handbooks, and we help TAs, who represent a great reservoir of teaching talent on our university campuses.

Note