Creating the Institution-Specific Writing Guide

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In fall 1991, "Writing at Guilford: A Manual" appeared at the Guilford College bookstore. Orders had already been placed for the illustrated 154-page guide, some by freshman English teachers but most by instructors of writing-intensive courses ranging from "Environmental and Natural Resource Economics" to the religious studies department's "Age of Shogun." In its first semester of availability, the text was to be used as a supplementary course text by 20% of Guilford's students, with many more purchasing it for general reference. The next semester, that percentage would increase to 30%, with other instructors indicating plans to use the guide the following academic year and the administration considering a proposal to require its purchase by all incoming freshmen.[1]

The guide's appearance capped a more-than-five-year exploration of ways to improve writing at the college. My hiring as Guilford's first cross-curricular writing director had been a first step. A second was forming a task force whose charge was to study the then-current situation and to bring forward recommendations. A third was adoption of a voluntary writing intensive program and the start of dialogues with the departments to develop a required course in each major that would introduce that major's discourse and thus serve as part of a *de facto* upper-level writing requirement. The fourth was commissioning a text to provide common resources and to articulate the goals of the college as a community of writers and teachers of writing.

The move toward such a guide was natural. Guilford is a Quaker institution, which means a consensus model in the prosecution of its business, a model in which each individual is encouraged to bring her own light to bear on issues and finally to join in the common sense of the meeting. In a recent article in *Lingua Franca*, Paul Elie argues that colleges and universities at large might well profit from this model, given the benefits of a process that fosters harmony and embodies the essence of liberal education on a day-to-day basis (23). Widespread adoption of consensus for conducting higher education's official business is not likely, however, given the model's requirements of small institutional size and a wide Quakerly commitment to openness. Nevertheless, I do think that in the field of writing program administration, this one fruit of the consensual

model--the writing guide--deserves consideration, given its sizeable benefits.

First I will highlight the guide, then the benefits. What immediately follows is the guide's revised table of contents. The original table, which followed considerable discussion at meetings and forums, was mapped in a 1989 shop-talk lunch to which all interested Guilford faculty were invited, with 20 (of a total of 91) attending. This sketch, once fleshed out, became the manual's first draft, composed during the summer of 1990, and submitted for review and possible experimentation to all faculty members in the fall semester of the same year, one year before widespread use began.

Amid the volume of constructive suggestions that came in response to the first draft were requests for inclusion of more material. Hence, in the revised edition, two new sections were added: Section V, containing specific revising operations (requested by a psychology professor) and Section XIII, including hands-on materials for peer-editing (requested by an economics professor). The latter section was developed over the course of two years in college-wide workshops that focused on peer-edit groups.

The guide will likely expand in the next annual revision, with the most dynamic growth occurring in Section XII. As more instructors use the manual for "w" courses, the demand for relevant sample papers increases, as does the supply of good papers.

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Now, the benefits:

Benefit #1: The guide offers important information and resources.

Because of its cross-curricular focus on writing, the guide provides a fuller, more informative overview of writing at the institution than does either the college catalog or the English department brochure. What is more, the messages for students are that (a) writing is important enough to be addressed separately in its own publication and (b) writing is a college-wide operation.

The manual divides introductory information about writing at the college into separate sections, one that focuses primarily on English department writing programs and the other on writing outside the English department; how the two interact is addressed in the latter section. The English department materials lay out the freshman English program, its objectives, and the inevitable intricacies of placement; they also describe English department writing courses available past the freshman year. Beyond-the-department materials include information about the different types of writing required at the college, as well as the general expectations of Guilford professors.

The later section entitled "Resources" identifies aids to the student and includes suggestions on how to use them: the professors themselves, the Academic Skills Center and its many programs and the director of composition. The subsection on "Books on Writing" lists entries in four categories: "Books on Writing and Editing," "Writing in the Disciplines," "Writers on Writing," and "Examples of Excellent Non-Fiction Prose." Annotated descriptions appear where appropriate. Each title is also followed by a symbol or symbols that indicate the book's campus locations, whether these be the college library (in which case a call number also appears), the Academic Skills Center, or the college bookstore.

Other resources are interspersed throughout the guide. All involve topics and fields of activity that cut across disciplinary lines. For example, Section V discusses and illustrates five revising and editing activities endorsed by all professional fields. Section VI provides generic suggestions for the format of an academic paper. It also covers styles of documentation--why and how these styles (e.g., MLA, APA, CBE) differ across disciplines, which discipline-specific style manuals to consult; and it offers guidelines for inclusive language that illustrate the most common problems of sex-role stereotyping related to vocabulary and style. Section VII discusses plagiarism and how to avoid it.

The primary audience for these resources is the student. It is worth noting, however, that an even more appreciative audience is the faculty member, especially outside the English department, whose knowledge of and access to these aids is often limited.

Benefit #2: The guide promotes a common language about writing.

One of the most invigorating effects of both the guide and its shared creation has been increased and empowering conversation about writing and its teaching. This conversation may take place formally during scheduled luncheons and meetings or informally when two or three faculty members stop in a hallway or faculty office to compare notes on recent paper assignments or the use of peer-edit groups.

The conversation spreads across classrooms, benefiting students as well. Professor A in physics can talk specifically to sociology major B, who is taking astronomy as an elective, about the professor's expectations for an assigned lab write-up. Student B knows that she can then engage in further conversation, whether with Professor C in English or Tutor D at the Academic Skills center; all can draw on the guide for common terminology, as well as for understanding of the process by which this particular assignment can be produced.

Section III discusses general professorial expectations, all gleaned through surveys and faculty forums, in the traditional language of invention, arrangement, and style. This section resembles a commons room for writers of all disciplines, a place furnished with stuffed chairs and hung portraits of past members of the tribe, to which we all belong by virtue of writing. The room is full of lore and writerly voices. We learn that in the search for inspiration, D. H. Lawrence would climb naked into mulberry trees, Dame Edith Sitwell would lie down in a coffin, the poet Schiller would raise his desk lid to sniff the fumes of rotten apples.[2] We hear the voices of Michener and Dillard and Forster and Nabokov and the authors of writing texts, as well as those of Guilford's philosophy and political science and chemistry departments.

Section IV presents the writing process in terms of a series of tasks, each with its own criteria for excellent performance. The tasks range from picking a topic through final proofreading. The line-up may change from assignment to assignment and from department to department, but the language of the methodology remains the same. This section also blocks out a sample calendar that illustrates a month-long, day-by-day approach to the writing of a 10-page paper and presents suggestions for prewriting and rewriting drawn from across the college faculty and underwritten by texts like D. C. Heath Co.'s *Writer's Guide: Psychology* or *Writer's Guide: Life Sciences*, texts not grown solely on English department turf.

The guide facilitates discussion that sharpens our common understanding. The new precision then becomes encoded in the subsequent year's revision, leading to more discussion and even greater precision. For example, a teacher in the freshman Interdisciplinary Studies program raises a question at a shop-talk lunch about the "General Characteristics of Good Journal Entries" that preface three sample journal entries in Section XII. He accepts "reflectiveness," "a reaching out to make syntheses," and "awareness of oneself as a learner" but questions "informality." The journal he assigns, it turns out, consists of a set of critical analyses of readings and lectures; the analyses are not as polished as final essays, but they focus less on generating and pushing thoughts than on completing them. His journal deliberately prizes left-brain over right-brain activity. That preference runs against the grain of the guide's definition of "journal," and faculty members around the table agree that the guide's next addition should address the diversity of journals assigned at the college. Meanwhile, each discussion participant has had the chance to think concretely about what "journal" means and to hear about different approaches to journaling that she may wish to integrate into her own program.

Benefit #3: The guide articulates common standards.

What we value and define as excellent varies from discipline to discipline and from instructor to instructor. Nevertheless, we can establish common values and definitions, a bureau of writing weights and measures. Their existence reassures students that at the core, what makes writing good does not shift mysteriously with each new classroom. They can also aid the sociology or chemistry instructor to evaluate the "writing aspects" of student papers more confidently, knowing that she is applying a community standard and using a common taxonomy of response.

In *Research on Written Composition*, George Hillocks demonstrates that one of the methods that most improves students' writing is developing in them a meta-awareness of the specific criteria for writing excellence and then integrating those criteria consciously in their work. Hillocks' surveys indicate that focus on such criteria "results not only in more effective revisions but in superior first drafts (160)" and that this pedagogical strategy is twice as effective, for example, as either sentence-combining or free-writing.

The guide works to develop student meta-awareness by presenting specific, cross-curricular expectations related to invention, arrangement, and style; a detailed set of common grade descriptions; and samples of excellent student writing, together with professorial commentary, drawn from several disciplines. The student also actively engages with criteria when using the directives in Section XIII, "Peer Editing."

The cross-curricular expectations derive from a series of open conversations and faculty forums, from submitted data (syllabi, faculty handouts), and from ongoing suggestions for guide revision. Invention, arrangement, and style are discussed in separate sections, each concluding with a set of numbered principles endorsed by the Guilford faculty. For example, the invention expectations are:

1. Papers should contain original, probing thought.
2. Papers should be characterized by fullness of material.
3. Papers should balance abstractions with concrete detail.
4. Papers should make connections.
5. Papers should be critically alert.

The arrangement expectations are:

1. Papers should have a clear purpose.
2. Papers should remain focused on the task throughout.

3. Papers should hang together well, with appropriate organizational divisions.
4. Papers should flow smoothly.

The style expectations, also gathered consensually from the faculty, are:

1. Papers should exhibit a tone that is appropriate for the intended audience.
2. Sentence lengths and structures should be varied.
3. Papers should be tight--not wordy.
4. Papers should employ strong active verbs [exceptions are noted and students referred to the legitimate scientific usages of the passive that are illustrated in the sample student papers in Section XII].
5. Papers should be clear.
6. Papers should abide by the specific stylistic conventions of the discipline.
7. Papers should be correct.

A word on "correctness." Grammar and spelling always generate considerable discussion among faculty outside the English department. These instructors are frustrated by the often high level of surface error that can result from the grammar indifference students seem to bring to non-English-department courses. The instructors may or may not mark the errors, may or may not send their students to the Academic Skills Center. They are often insecure about their own knowledge of grammar and look to the English department for leadership in dealing with what appears to them a higher-order concern (even while perceiving that in the process era, grammar does not appear to be one of the English department's higher-order concerns).

Thus, Section VIII of the guide treats grammar separately, first by reconciling English-department and cross-disciplinary views (i.e., not important in the early stages of the paper-writing process but very important in the product) and second by discussing seven red-flag items that Guilford professors have agreed most need addressing. Just for the record, the Guilford list includes the sentence fragment, the run-on sentence, the comma splice, non-agreement of subject and verb, faulty pronoun reference, the misused semi-colon, and faulty parallelism.[3] The list's smallness gives faculty an easy handle on a large parcel of error; its appearance in a public guide empowers the faculty member to say to a student, "There's no excuse for your not taking care of this problem. I won't accept it in your writing any more than other Guilford faculty members would."

Section IX's general grade descriptions codify agreed-upon expectations into a set of statements with which a faculty member can evaluate student writing, again with a sense of what the entire community values.

Finally, Section XII's collection of sample student papers provides a visible display of expectations satisfied. Prefacing each is a discussion by the relevant professor--whether physicist or psychologist or political scientist --identifying the specific features that make the lab report or research paper excellent. These discussions reinforce the shared-ness of standards related to excellent writing, whatever the context, just as the grade descriptions reify the standards themselves whenever the descriptions are used.

Benefit #4: The guide provides the entire college with ownership of the writing enterprise.

One problem that Writing Across the Curriculum has experienced from its beginnings has been the turf-wary resistance of those who believe that English department proselytizers have little to tell them about writing in their own field. One factor that has eased resistance, and at the same time expanded the understanding and pedagogy of the English department proselytizers, has been active collaboration, often resulting in coproduced materials. The Guilford guide represents such a joint venture.

Evidence of community authorship appears in the voices the guide includes, which offer a range of the departments and even the administration, as the vice president for student development helps to answer Section I's question, "Why Write?" Evidence also appears in the cross-curricular materials, gleaned from syllabi and handouts, which are spliced into the guide's tissue. Thus, in the guide's discussion of invention, a religious studies faculty member, who is also a Zen monk, comments on awareness of one's own critical assumptions. In addition, a journalist, who headed the London bureau of the Associated Press and produced ABC news in New York before coming to the college to teach journalism, offers a list of specific editing suggestions that are included in Section IV's "Suggestions for the Rewriting Stage."

The guide's cross-disciplinariness makes it appropriate for the freshman classroom as well as a useful adjunct to a writing-intensive course. An often-articulated goal for freshman English is that of introducing the discourse of the academic community. How better to accomplish this than by having the college at large present what that discourse is?

Some fine-tuning of underlying theory remains. The guide's dual appropriateness, for example, raises what may or may not be a significant pedagogical concern. Clearly, function should determine content, and in the guide, functions pull in different directions. Should the manual's principal role be to introduce college-level discourse and be a general survival guide, issued to all freshmen prior to their arrival? Or should we

shape the manual more directly for the college's burgeoning writing-intensive program? Without a junior-level requirement, we rely on our "w" courses, where the guide may be the sole writing text, to present advanced principles and a higher level of sophistication. We have not consciously decided where to pitch the book. Will the middle meet the needs of both sets of instructors?

This issue will doubtless appear on the agenda of future planning lunches where the Guilford faculty continues to establish jointly the role of writing at the college and to continue authorship of the text that defines and expresses it. This phenomenon--the continued community conversation --perhaps looms as the writing guide's chief benefit. Just as the book becomes a concrete repository of materials gained from many faculty members and many disciplines, so it represents the synthesis of many articulated views and ideas, shared with the intention of improving a pedagogy in which we all have so much at stake.

Notes

1. The Guilford guide is presently nonprofit; students pay only the xeroxing and binding costs. One of the reviewers of this article has suggested, however, that such a booklet may be "a good way of generating a little income for the writing program."

2. I am indebted for these anecdotes to Diane Ackerman's "O Muse! You Do Make Things Difficult!"

3. This list compares closely with similar lists gathered nationally. See, for example, the *St. Martin's Handbook*'s identification and discussion of the most common error patterns among college students in the late '80s (Lunsford and Connors xxv-l).

Works Cited

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