

Be careful what you ask for: Writing assignments across the curriculum

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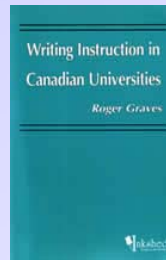
Co-investigators

Theresa Hyland, Huron University College
Boba Samuels, UWO



Publications

- Author of *Writing Instruction in Canadian Universities* (Winnipeg: Inkshed Publications, 1994)



- Co-author of the Canadian edition of the *Brief Penguin Handbook* (Pearson/Longman 2007)



- co-editor with Heather Graves of *Writing Centres, Writing Seminars, Writing Culture: Teaching Writing in Canadian Universities* (Winnipeg: Inkshed Publications, 2006)



- Co-author of *A Rhetorical Approach to Technical Communication* (Broadview, 2007).



Current research projects

- **An interdisciplinary approach to text annotation** (co PI with R. Mercer, Computer Science); **\$79,768**
- **A Study of Doctoral Writing** (with D. Starke-Meyerring, A. Pare, H. Graves, M. Horne); **\$228,824**
- **Writing Beyond Borders: Writing Studies Across Disciplinary and National Borders** (with H. Graves); **\$21,795**
- **International Association for Interdisciplinary Research in Writing Studies** (with C. Beaudet and others); **\$75,000**

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](#)

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

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.



[Writing Centres, Writing Seminars, Writing Culture: Teaching Writing in Canadian Universities](#)

WAC/WID at Western

- **UWO created Writing 101a (Writing 101F/G and Writing 101b (now 202F/G) in 1978.**
- **In the early 1980s, UWO instituted the essay requirement in a further effort to improve the writing of undergraduate students.**
- **Today, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Writing Program offers 18 courses to over 1500 students each year, and the SDS Effective Writing Program offers one-on-one tutoring, classroom presentations, and web-based resources.**
- **Future: Graduate course in Teaching Writing; writing course for international **faculty****

Missing data

- **Key genre of writing in the disciplines is the writing assignment**
- **Conveys the purpose, audience, intellectual goals of the course**
- **No data exists that catalogues assignments across disciplines at Canadian universities**

Academic writing/Alternative discourses

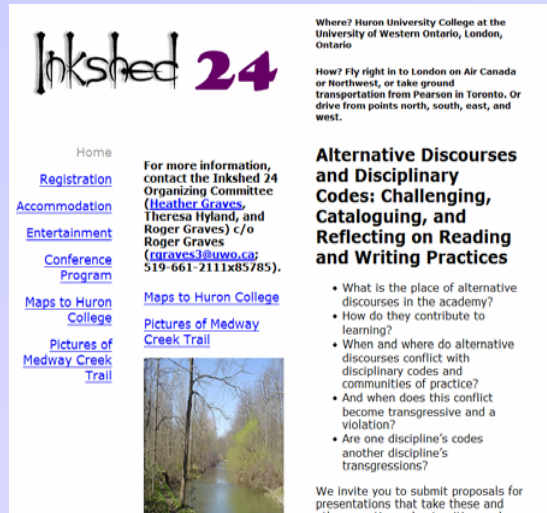
The idea of a static, fixed “academic” discourse is incomplete

Diverse or alternative discourses are present in a wide variety of disciplines:

- **Alternative formats (field notes, letters)**
- **Alternative media (blogs, wikis, websites)**
- **Alternative syntax (Englishes)**

(Thais and Zawacki 2006)

Inkshed 24: Alternative discourses



Inkshed 24


Home
[Registration](#)
[Accommodation](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Conference Program](#)
[Maps to Huron College](#)
[Pictures of Medway Creek Trail](#)

For more information, contact the Inkshed 24 Organizing Committee (Heather Graves, Theresa Hyland, and Roger Graves) c/o Roger Graves (rgraves3@uwo.ca; 519-661-2111x85785).

Alternative Discourses and Disciplinary Codes: Challenging, Cataloguing, and Reflecting on Reading and Writing Practices

- What is the place of alternative discourses in the academy?
- How do they contribute to learning?
- When and where do alternative discourses conflict with disciplinary codes and communities of practice?
- And when does this conflict become transgressive and a violation?
- Are one discipline's codes another discipline's transgressions?

We invite you to submit proposals for presentations that take these and other questions about culture and



- **First nations students: how can they adapt this discourse to their culture and values (Anne Hungerford, SFU)**
- **Variations within Geography at U of T from one professor to another (Brock MacDonald)**
- **Graffiti as constructive communication; getting students to see how discursive systems work/compete in society (Pete Vandenberg, DePaul U.)**

Alternative assignments

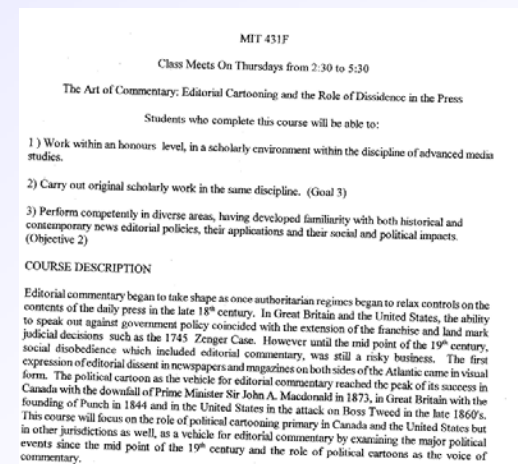
- **How prevalent are these alternative discourses in academia?**
- **How are they realized in the student experience?**
- **What is the relationship between the “alternative” and the “norm”—academic writing?**

Exigency & Pilot Study

- **The Writing Program offers Writing 121: Writing for MIT [MIT = media, information, and technoculture], 2nd year course**
- **Meetings with administrators led to questions about how the course articulates with first year and upper division MIT courses**

Results

- We needed to fine tune our coding sheet
- Faculty members would not participate in a voluntary study (3 of 31)
- We turned this into an administrative initiative using public documents (syllabi)



Draft coding sheet

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS PROJECT 2007

Coder Name: _____ Date: _____ Course #: _____

1. Course name/number: TV Theory + Crit

Total number of writing assignments required: _____ (fill out separate form for each)

2. Assignment coding #: _____ (assigned when entered into database)

a) Genre (prof's label): HPA memo

b) Descriptors used: explain provide describe
connect format guidelines

c) Number of tasks (modes) included in assignment: _____ mark per mode

*Sub tasks/
components*

d) Modes: Outline Proposal Draft Annotated bibliography

Final copy Presentation Other How schedule

3. Assignment description

a) Description/information provided Y N

b) Statement of purpose (learning goal) Y N

c) Length/# words: 750

d) Choice of topics Y N if yes, list (>2) open

e) Marks value: no

f) Time to complete: 4 wks or less 5-12 wks end of term

g) Audience specified: Y N who? coll. @ met.

h) Plagiarism warning: Y N Turnitin

i) Feedback provision: Y N

j) Feedback in written form: Y N if no, _____

k) References required/specified Y N # of refs: _____

l) Style manual specified Y N MLA

m) Resources/sources suggested Y N restrictions _____

4. Rubric/Marking scheme

a) Exemplar/prototype/sample text provided Y N

Phase 2: Liberal Arts

We gathered syllabi from across the curriculum:

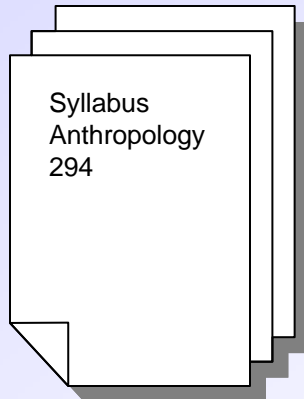
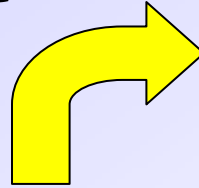
- English (24)
- **Philosophy** (19)
- Economics (20)
- International and comparative studies (18)
- **History** (14)
- Psychology (13)
- French (13)
- **Political Science** (11)
- Chinese (11)
- Business (7)
- Religious studies (4)
- Japanese (4)
- Hebrew (2)
- Math (2)
- Sociology (1)

Objectives of our study

- ✓ **To list and describe the range of writing assignments that students are required to produce in a given discipline.**
- ✓ **To determine how the assignments for upper years differ from the assignments for the lower years.**
- ✓ **To determine:**
 - ✓ **faculty expectations of the writing skills of the students in each undergraduate year**
 - ✓ **the manner in which these expectations are revealed to the students.**
- ✓ **To determine the implications of these findings for teaching.**

Procedure: Assignments

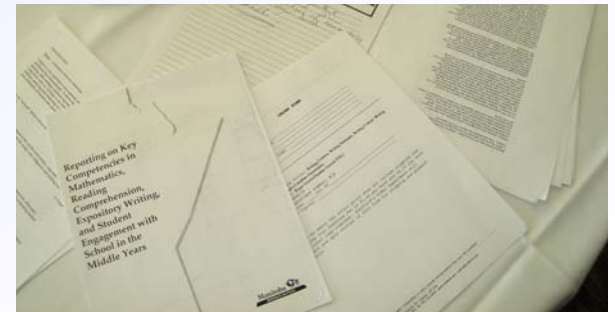
- **We gathered copies of course outlines and assignments that are given to students.**
- **All assignments and documents were coded by the researchers—see handout.**



- **course year level**
- **genre**
- **word length**
- **value (percentage of final grade)**
- **source documentation**
- **provision of feedback**
- **method of assessment (rubric, holistic, analytic)**

Procedure: Coding

- **Coding scheme developed in pilot study**
- **Syllabi and assignments collected, copied, and numbered**
- **All assignments and documents were coded by the researchers**
- **Data sheets will be entered into SPSS; for this presentation, I used Excel**



Sample assignment description

4.0 EVALUATION

TESTS: There will be 1 term test in October worth 15% of the course mark. There will be a final examination that covers the entire curriculum, during the April examination period. This final examination is worth 35% of the course mark. Both tests will consist of identify-and-describe items, and essay questions.

Poster: Three classes in early November will be devoted to student posters. Students will work in pairs on these posters and each member of the pair will share the mark awarded. Students may select their own partners and those who fail to do so will be assigned by the Instructor. If there is an odd number of students in the course at the time the partnerships are formed, the Instructor will negotiate an arrangement with the odd man (or woman) out. Once formed partnerships may not be rearranged for any reason. Moreover, if one member of a partnership is unable to complete the project for any reason, the remaining member will have to complete the project on his or her own with the Instructor taking that into account in the grading. Each poster will occupy a space **not more than 3' high by 4' wide** and will be on display from 2:30 PM until 4:30 PM in some prominent place within the College on one of the class days. Poster sessions will be assigned by lot, although partnerships may trade sessions with another willing partnership after the assignment of sessions. These posters will be open to the Community at large. From 2:30 PM until 3:30 PM, poster authors must be present beside the poster to answer questions that viewers may want to ask. Students not presenting in a particular session are expected to attend the poster sessions. Poster topics should be relatively narrow (e.g., Morgan's Canon; or, the history of extraversion in personality) as opposed to broadly general. If not inherently obvious from the context, the historical aspects of the topic must be made clear in the poster. Presenters are expected to have gone beyond the assigned reading and at least some of the sources should be primary sources. As is the case with my lectures, I expect the **focus to be on the ideas**, with the lives of the people only discussed in support of the ideas. **Posters are scholarly exercises and sources of ideas must be referenced as would be done in a laboratory report or essay. In that regard, all quotations must be identified as such using the usual APA rules. If plagiarism is found to**

Process

Format

Presentation

Topic

References

Sample essay assignment

Essay: Each student must write and submit an essay comparing and contrasting the ideas of two scholars important in the development of Psychology and at least one of which was not covered in detail in the lectures. **There may be additional restrictions on the topics permitted.** Additional details regarding this essay will be given in class and on WebCT. The essay should be about 2000 words, must be literate, critical, and scholarly in being properly referenced, including the identification of any quotations as such. The essay is worth 30% of the final grade and is due by 4:00 PM on Monday, December 11. **LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL SUFFER A PENALTY OF 2% PER DAY** (including Saturdays and Sundays). As is the case with the posters, I must approve essay topics **prior** to your beginning work on them. Two students may **not** write on the same topic and so it is first-come-first-served. **Students must turn in one hard copy of their essay and must also submit it to Turn-it-in.com, and by remaining in this course, students are agreeing to have their essays compared to other essays, web sites, and other published sources, for evidence of plagiarism.**

Procedure: Interviews

- **Follow-up interviews will be requested from a random sample of participants in order to examine in more detail the expectations of instructors regarding these assignments.**



Results—so far

Limitations

- **From 3 of 15 departments**
- **Incomplete data even from within these 3 departments**
- **Based on document trail: oral instructions not included, supplementary documents often not provided**

Range of writing assignments

- ✓ **To list and describe the range of writing assignments that students are required to produce in a given discipline.**
- **Essays: long, short, research, critical, major, primary source, critical review**
- **Proposals**
- **Book reviews**
- **Reading reports**

Faculty expectations

- ✓ **To determine:**
 - ✓ **faculty expectations of the writing skills of the students in each undergraduate year**
 - ✓ **the manner in which these expectations are revealed to the students.**
- **Rubrics (15/55)**
- **Exemplars (0/55)**
- **In-process feedback (3/55)**

Rubrics, written in paragraphs, are the preferred way of communicating expectations.

Rubric/criteria

Grading: A grading sheet will be given to the class so that each member of the class understands what must be undertaken. In summary, each assignment will be graded according to the following criteria: 1) 5%: Assignment is submitted on time, MLA, APA, Chicago style, 12 pt. font, required number of pages, words and sources, title page, name, student no., correct referencing (late penalty is 2% per day); 2) 25% Depth of analysis: Analysis using the knowledge gained in class, through readings and discussions. The analysis must be detailed enough to provide a useful document for a previously uninformed reader to understand the topic under discussion. Additional references outside those provided in class are welcomed and recommended if they increase the depth of the analysis, remembering always that the Internet is a vastly inferior research tool, unless the materials presented therein are of peer-reviewed journals, papers, or papers of record. Please refrain from using the latest fluff-ball site to come flying down the pipe. Further, research into individuals and their ideas can only be attempted at a superficial level by using online tools. The Internet is far better as an >information= tool: gathering facts, phenomena and so forth about political jurisdictions, rather than as a knowledge tool of complex analysis embedded a precise question. There is no substitute for a research library. Organization:15%: Each piece has a clear logical development, and all points in the analysis are referenced. Originality:15%: There is evidence of creativity in that the topic has been analyzed in an interesting way. Grammar and form: 20%: Paper is free of errors. 20% A clear, unbiased critical analysis of the historical perspective as raised in the subject under discussion. The author or subject under discussion is not treated in jejune, emotionally-charged terms (good/bad, better/worse, more/less) but is presented in a professional style.

Due Dates:

The are due in weeks 6 and 11.

Format

Analysis

References

Organization

Creativity

Grammar, mechanics

Program-wide rubric

Writing Program General Grading Rubric

Writing Program

Faculty of Education



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"> 1. Plagiarism. 2. Failure to follow the assigned topic. 3. Severe systematic problems 	<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"> ▶ a significant global deficiency (mistaken audience, inconsistency in purpose) ▶ several major problems (see list below) ▶ numerous minor problems 	<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
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ an unclear, vague, weak, or otherwise problematic thesis statement
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ inappropriate linguistic register; incorrect assumptions about background knowledge of reader
Coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ problems with paragraph length/structure
Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of connection between ideas, paragraphs
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ lack of sentence variety, awkwardness, faulty sentence structure
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sentence boundary errors: fused sentences, comma splices, sentence fragments
Proofreading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ typos, misspellings, and so on common enough to significantly slow down the reader
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ poor document design for technical writing assignments; incorrect essay format
Citation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ problems with proper citation format, scholarly procedure

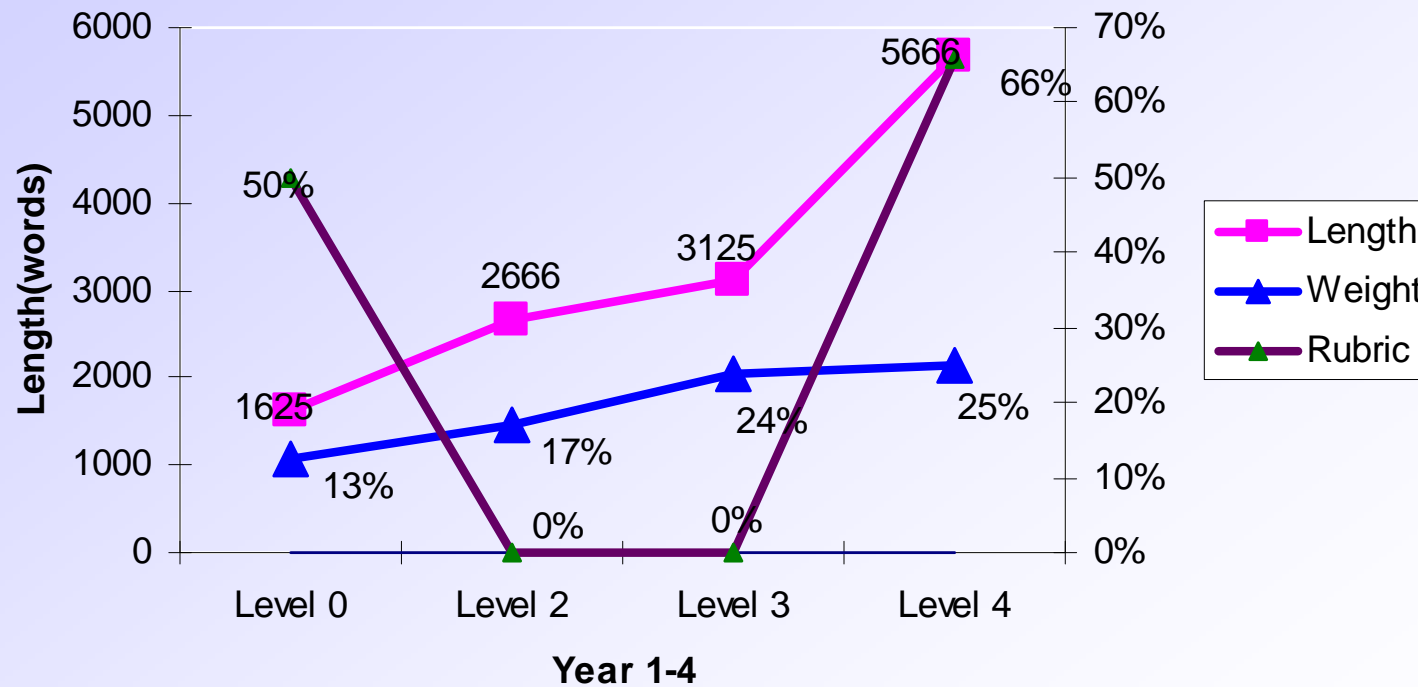
Year 1 ⇒ Year 4

- ✓ How do the assignments for upper years differ from the assignments for the lower years? **More of the same**

	First year	Senior year
Length (essays)	1450	4525
Require references/sources	1/5	4/6
Specify style sheet	0/6	4/6
Audience	Not identified	1/6 (other students)
Genre of assignments	4 (essays, proposal, book review, pre-essay assignment)	4 (essay, proposal, outline, presentation)

Department snapshot: History

History courses



Implications

- ✓ **To determine the implications of these findings for teaching.**
- ✓ **Assessment**
- ✓ **Literacy of graduates**
- ✓ **Funding**

NSSE and Writing

- **To what extent had your experience at Western contributed to: Writing Clearly and effectively?**
- **To what extent had your experience at Western contributed to: Speaking clearly and effectively?**

Writing and Learning

- **writing plays an indispensable role in developing critical thinking skills, learning discipline-specific content, and understanding and building competence in the modes of inquiry and dissemination specific to various disciplines and professions**

Georgia State WAC Program,

http://wac.gsu.edu/content/introduction/what_is_wac.shtml

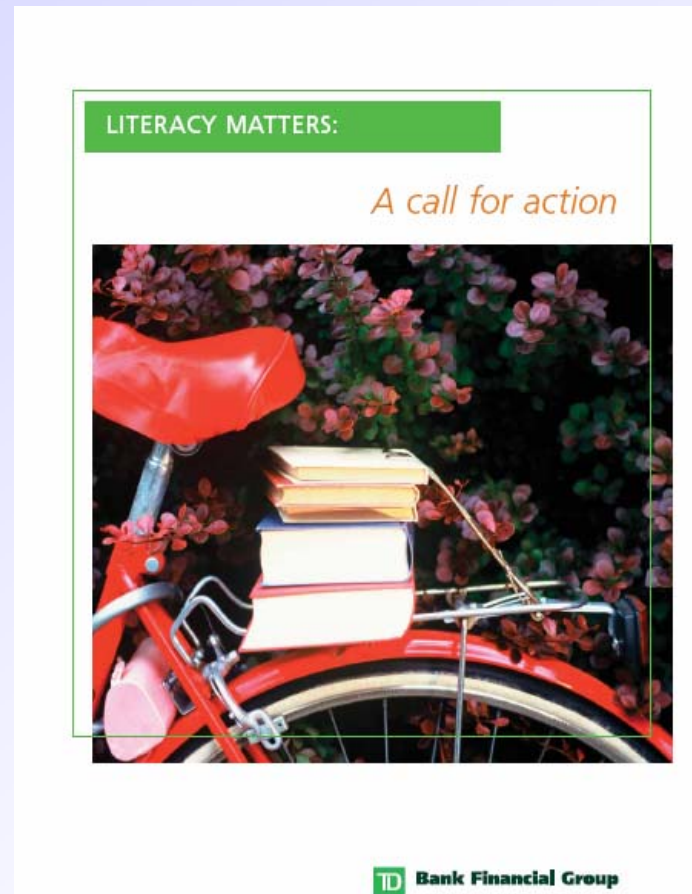
Writing and Learning

[S]tudent engagement with the subject matter being taught increases significantly when they are more frequently asked to write about that subject, particularly in courses in their junior and senior years.

Richard J. Light. "Writing and Students' Engagement " *Peer Review* 6.1 (Fall 2003): 28-31.

Literacy of university graduates

- **11-14% of university graduates have inadequate prose literacy**



Research Partnership

- **Woodworth College at the University of Toronto is doing a similar study**
- **We have shared coding schemes**
- **These projects address Ontario Council of University Vice-presidents (OCAV) assessment initiatives**
- **We hope to obtain ongoing funding (SSHRC) to build the database of information on student assignments**

Funding

We wish to thank the Teaching Support Centre, UWO for funding Phase Two of this research project.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Teaching Support Centre (TSC) at the University of Western Ontario. The header includes the university name and the TSC logo. A navigation menu lists: Home, About TSC, Faculty Programs, Graduate Student Programs, Services, Awards & Grants, Resources, and a search box. The main content area is divided into three columns:

- For Graduate Students:**
 - Future Professor Series (Fall 2007) - [View Program / Register](#)
 - Academic & Professional Communication Series - [View Program / Register](#)
- For Faculty:**
 - Research on Teaching Small Grants Program - [More information](#)
 - Teaching with Technology Workshop Series - [View Program / Register](#)
- Quick Links:**
 - [Classroom A/V Support](#)
 - [WebCT Videos & Manualettes](#)
 - [Service-Learning at Western](#)
 - [PressWestern](#)
 - [Other Western Links](#)

At the bottom, there is a section for "Reflections" featuring a notice about the Fall 2007 issue of the newsletter, mentioning James Côté and a link to the [newsletter archive](#). To the right of this section are links for "Upcoming Events for Faculty" (CALENDAR) and "Simple Steps Toward Quality".