

## Nine Myths About Writing and the Composition Program

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provides general strategies of writing that would apply in many disciplines. WR 39 C involves a single research project that requires library and internet research about public policy issues.

**8 - In the Composition Program, students write about novels and poetry, and this sort of writing derived from belles lettres is fairly useless for my discipline.**

It is true that an occasional poem or short story might appear in the curriculum of lower-division writing. However, for the most part, we are training students to write about academic texts from a variety of disciplines. We want students to read analytically and to derive their own positions based on careful reading and argument. In WR 39 B, for example, the focus on rhetorical principles of audience-purpose-

genre are applicable to many disciplines and writing occasions. In WR 39 C, students read about public policy issues and present arguments that would help them fulfill their future roles as citizens. In setting up the writing requirement, the Council on Educational Policy hoped to create a program that would serve the entire campus, and we are faithful to that charge.

**9 - The practice of having students read each others' papers—so-called "peer review"—seems fairly useless or perhaps merely the trading of ignorance.**

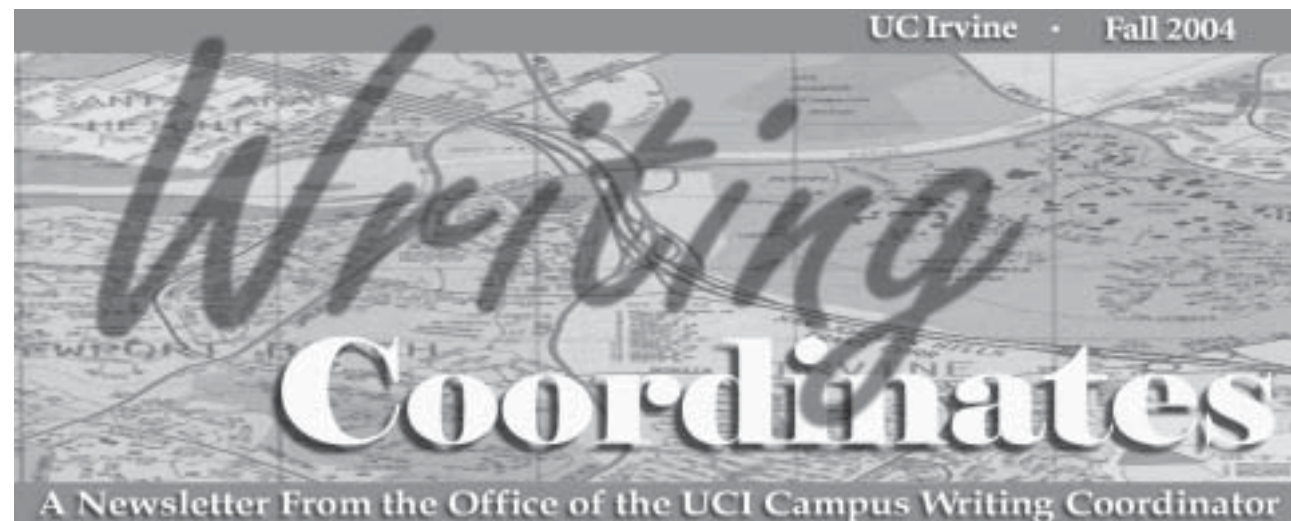
The practice of reading one another's papers and providing feedback comes from the real world. When I write a draft, I show it to a friend for feedback. I don't

want grammatical correction, necessarily, but I need to know about pacing, organization, and clarity. I want to know how my writing choices affect a reader. Students at first are fairly poor at this practice, yet over time they improve and their comments become sharper and more useful to the writer. In addition, training in the careful reading of a draft assists students in critically reading and evaluating their own drafts.

If you wish to learn more about the lower-division writing program, I would suggest you visit the program website at [eee.uci.edu/programs/comp](http://eee.uci.edu/programs/comp).

Guest Columnist: John Hollowell,  
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### From the CWC

In this issue, *Writing Coordinates* charts scenes of writing within and across the boundaries of the campus. Graduate Writing Fellow Katherine Mack interviews the first student to submit a portfolio to the CWC Writing Awards competition. Senior Darlene Tong is an articulate advocate of the writing life, both in and outside school.

We mark a significant milestone in the history of writing at UCI as we bid farewell to John Hollowell, who will retire at the end of the spring 2005. Dr. Hollowell has directed the composition program for over two decades and distills his experience for us in a lively piece debunking persistent myths about writing.

Our third article features Professor John Dombink's Criminology Outreach Program. Undergrads from Criminology, Law, and Society use writing to connect with middle and high school students who may not yet have college in mind.

Check our website for information about this year's writing awards, past issues of *Writing Coordinates*, and current photos of CWC offspring ([www.writing.uci.edu](http://www.writing.uci.edu)).

Susan C. Jarratt  
Campus Writing Coordinator

### Contest Winner Darlene Penarbia Tong Reflects on the Relationship Between Life and Writing

Darlene Penarbia Tong, a busy senior at UCI double-majoring in Spanish and International Studies, minoring in History, and working part-time for the Center for International Education, first caught the CWC's attention when she won the Campus Writing Coordinator's 2003-04 Award for a Writing Portfolio.

In a written reflection about her portfolio and a follow-up interview with Katherine Mack, Graduate Writing Fellow, Darlene relates her intellectual growth as a UCI undergraduate to the development of a political consciousness. She explains that she values her portfolio because it reflects that evolution: "My university education has given me the tools to develop a critical eye on the U.S. government and its policies. The writings in Darlene's portfolio certainly reflect this development. She wrote the first piece in her portfolio, "Red Channels: America's Little Black Book" for Humanities Core. Darlene feared that her self-described "provocative" essay about the Red Scare of the 1950s would earn her a low grade in the course, but instead she was awarded a UROP Undergraduate Writing Award. "A Game of Strategy," written in her sophomore year, analyzes the United



Katherine Mack, Graduate Writing Fellow and Darlene Tong talk about writing.

States' various interventions in Latin America over the course of the twentieth century. As she relates in her reflection, this paper comes out of her burgeoning interest in International Affairs and her awareness of "what it meant for a country to pursue and protect its interests in the international realm." The most recent essay in her portfolio, "High Fidelity: Implications of the Chile-U.S. Free Trade Agreement," takes a more diplomatic and measured approach to International Affairs. In it, Darlene considers the incentives for both nations of the Chile-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. As Darlene recognizes in her portfolio reflection, this essay represents "the most well-rounded and legitimately critical of the selected works." While the political content and increasingly sophisticated tone of the pieces in her portfolio implicitly reflect Darlene's growth as a writer and thinker, her reflective essay—a

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In my nearly twenty-five years on the campus as the Director of First-Year Writing, I've encountered a number of myths about writing and the Composition Program. Despite efforts to talk about these issues, they persist in the students' and faculty's minds and one hears them almost daily. I'd like to take a moment to address the nine most persistent myths that prevent members of the campus community from understanding how the Composition Program conceives of its task.



John Hollowell, Director of Composition

### 1- Learning to write is like getting a flu vaccination; one shot and you're fixed and immune to error.

The philosophy of the Composition Program is that writing requires continual practice to build a repertoire of writing approaches and skills. Ideally, it is something learned and practiced in many contexts throughout the four years of college and beyond.

### 2 - One (or two) quarters is enough to learn everything about writing.

Again, the constant practice of writing, learning to approach audience-purpose-genre across a wide range of writing tasks will be

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common component of portfolios—makes that growth explicit both to Darlene and her readers.

In the interview with Katherine, Darlene summarized the motivating factors behind her decision to maintain a portfolio of her writings: “It’s important to keep your written work because you can see how your writing has developed over a period of time. I’m amazed to see how much more sophisticated my writing has become over the past three years, though I’m sure that in three years I’ll look back on my writing now and shake my head in embarrassment.” Darlene’s response echoes one of the benefits associated with portfolio writing—the ability to track one’s growth as a writer and a thinker.

Professors who consult the CWC about student writing often voice concerns about students’ ability to use scholarly sources not merely to support or to refute an argument but to help it develop in complex and nuanced ways. When asked what she meant when she characterized her writing as “more sophisticated,” Darlene referred to the ability to integrate sources into her papers to strengthen her argument without losing her voice to those of the academic experts. As Darlene notes, such “sophisticated” writing is the result of hard work and lots of practice.

Darlene is an accomplished academic writer, but she trumpets the benefits of writing (and moving) beyond the classroom. She is a world traveler who has studied for extended periods in Costa Rica and Chile, and she encourages others to explore the world with a pen in hand: “More people should try writing for leisure. It’s therapeutic.

Writing stuff down is a way to release emotions and thoughts that you otherwise wouldn’t be aware of.” Here Darlene articulates one of the core values of current Writing Studies: Writing is a mode of learning and discovery both about the world and the self. Darlene draws a parallel between her relationship to writing and personal relationships, but she also emphasizes her enjoyment of writing as a solitary experience. She explains: “I like relationships that are personal, and that includes writing. I like the fact that writing only includes the paper and me – no one else gets involved.” Not surprisingly, Darlene is also a song-writer, a practice she describes as “a combined art of writing and music.”

Darlene understands writing as a process and a rhetorical act. She offers some sound advice to UCI students. Before the pen hits the paper or the fingers hit the keyboard, she recommends reading and rereading the writing prompt: “The first thing I do before writing a paper is read the directions given. I make sure I know what is asked because nothing is worse than having five pages of good writing but none of it really answering the question.” Darlene emphasizes the need to start writing early and to communicate frequently with the intended audience of her written work. When it comes to academic papers, she says: “I usually start early on an assignment because I try to get input from my professor as much as possible. After all, he or she is the one who is going to read it.”

Rhetorical and personal, expressive and critical, functional and artistic: Darlene’s words give us a rich sense of the many worlds writing enables. We thank her for sharing them with us.

## The Criminology Outreach Program: Extending UCI’s Culture of Writing to OC Public Schools

For some Orange County middle and high school students, COP isn’t slang for police officer but a window into college life and habits of mind, including the use of writing to generate, process and communicate complex ideas. COP is the Criminology Outreach Program, founded and directed by John Dombink, a professor in UCI’s Department of Criminology, Law and Society. From 1999-2003, COP has spread UCI’s culture of writing to 1,800 students in various Orange County public middle and high schools characterized as “low-performing” because of the low percentage of the student body that attends four-year colleges after graduation. Each quarter, approximately fifteen UCI

undergraduate mentors introduce COP student participants to college course content, university intellectual life, and policy debates within the field of Criminology.

In Professor Dombink’s program, not only middle and high school participants but their UCI undergraduate mentors as well get to practice writing. For example, high school students have kept a weekly journal to which their UCI undergraduate mentors have responded. In this informal exchange, student participants use writing as a mode of discovery, exploration, and connection. Both middle and high school students have also written weekly analyses of news events related to topics in Criminology. The



students get an early introduction to discipline-specific research, as they do library work on sentencing guidelines, corrections options, and defense strategies in preparation for mock trials.

The CWC celebrates COP’s successes and looks forward to contributing to COP’s efforts to share the intellectual energy and knowledge of UCI’s undergraduates with future college students in the Orange County community.

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needed. The first-year writing in the WR 39 series begins this process, but writing papers in many contexts, in many disciplines, is necessary for students to improve.

### 3 - Grades on papers are totally subjective and idiosyncratic matters of opinion; some individual instructors grade harder than others.

While it is certainly true that all grading has subjective elements, it is not the case that grades in the WR 39 program are merely a matter of opinion. We publish graded sample papers in *A Student Guide to Writing at UCI*, and we publish rubrics highlighting specific elements (rhetoric, organization, style) for evaluation. We also hold frequent “norming” sessions with instructors to try to minimize the degree of variation that exists.

### 4 - Good academic writing sounds pompous and complicated.

Beginning students in first-year writing sometimes use thesauruses and dot their papers with fancy-sounding words. Actually, our goal is to teach the formal diction of academic discourse. Such a goal does not mean that papers should be either dry or bombastic. Especially in WR 39 C, Argument and Research, researched papers based on sources are expected to be lively, coherent, and direct.

### 5 - Teaching grammar is the way to reduce errors.

This is one of the most persistent myths that looms when faculty or TAs are faced with error-ridden papers. However, a great deal of research has shown that direct drilling on grammatical error has very little effect on correctness. The most effective pedagogy—that used in the WR 39 A series—is to work on a series of drafts with feedback given (selectively) between various drafts.

### 6 - Good writing should be right the first time; good writing should be neat and tidy.

Actually studies of professional writers, such as those published in *The Paris Review*, show the opposite to be true. Even the great writers mark up their pages, make word changes, and revise large portions of their work. We try to model this “messy but essential” process in the WR 39 series and encourage students to create a series of drafts that incorporate successive changes and improvements.

### 7 - Most writing in the WR 39 series is based on personal writing -- what one faculty member called “little golden thoughts of me.”

Actually, we guard against the kind of narcissism implied by the quotation in the myth. WR 39 A begins with a “significant moment” piece, but quickly makes a transition to analysis of academic texts. WR 39 B has been revamped to include a rhetorical focus based on audience-purpose-genre and

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