

The Evolution of the Upper-Division Writing Awards Contest

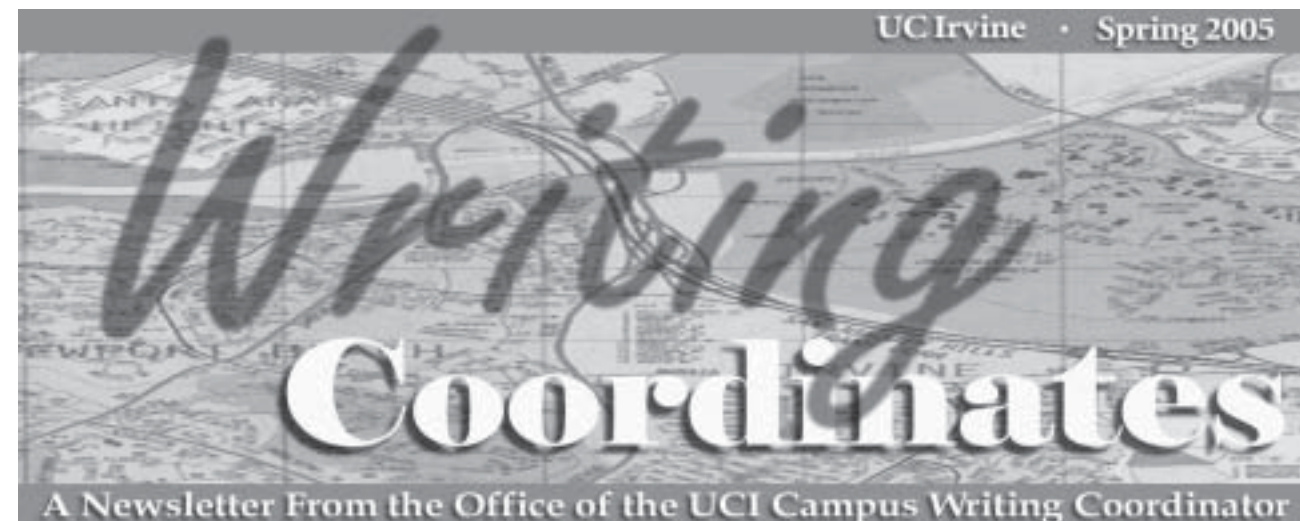
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What particularly struck the judges of the portfolio category, for which submissions tripled this year, was the diversity of students' writings. Sheena Tahilramani and Ashley Brenner, the two first-prize winners, compiled writings in multiple genres that addressed a range of topics. Sheena's portfolio included her own works of literary journalism, an analysis of that genre, and more traditional literary criticism, Ashley's portfolio contained writings about the relationship between

literature and history, the physics of sound, and the risks of aspartame. The judges chose to recognize Kristina Crawford and Carla Neeld, the two winners of the Honorable Mention, for their use of the occasion of the portfolio personal statement to reflect on their simultaneous development as writers and independent critical thinkers. Finally, Shawn Augsburger, winner in the category of public writing, impressed the judges with his ability to call on the capacity for writing to have an effect beyond the classroom. Shawn's editorial

about the Grokster case in the New University generated discussion amongst UCI students about the implications of new technologies on questions of ownership and copyrights, and it also elicited a response from the President of the Songwriters Guild of America. The Campus Writing Coordinator hopes to encourage more of this kind of public writing. As this year's award winners demonstrate, UCI students can use their substantive intellectual resources and writing prowess to address pressing social and political concerns.

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The CWC would like to congratulate the winners of the 2004-05 Upper-Division Writing Awards:

Excellence in Upper-Division Writing

Humanities and Arts:
Amber Israelsen, ICS

"The Internet: Benefits of the Next Communication Frontier"

Instructor: Ellen Strenski, Composition

Social Sciences:
Erika Siegel, Psychology and Social Behavior

"Textualism and Statutory Interpretation"

Instructor: Professor Mark Petracca, Political Science Science and Technology:

Melody Li, Biology
 "The relationship between carbon dioxide concentration and the photosynthetic rate of the climbing shrub, *Syngonium podophyllum variegatum*"

Instructor: Jessica Poulin, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology

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On Becoming a Writer

"I'm just not naturally a good writer." Teachers of writing frequently hear students make this pronouncement, as if some fortunate few among us have an innate ability to write well. In her winter 2005 course, Sex in the US to 1860, History professor Sharon Block worked to dispel this illusion. Though History 146D is not an official "W" course, she made the teaching of historical writing an integral part of her course. I spoke with Tracy Sachtjen, the course TA, to learn more about what she and Professor Block did to demystify the writing process for their students and enable them to write a variety of history-specific assignments throughout the quarter.

Professor Block's writing pedagogy reflects two truisms in Rhetoric and Composition: that writing is a process and that it is always context and discipline specific. In 146D, students received the midterm and final two weeks before the



Tracy Sachtjen, Professor Sharon Block's TA for History 146D: Sex in the US to 1860

deadline, giving them time to write multiple drafts and receive feedback on them. In fact, Professor Block made getting feedback on a draft of the midterm a required element of the assignment. Rather than require one long paper due at the end of the quarter, she assigned six shorter writing assignments that introduced students to a range of historical methods and questions. Students compared and contrasted primary sources; used readings

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On Becoming a Writer

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and lectures to historicize legal, social and political events; and practiced “writing to learn” exercises that demonstrated how close attention to detail in primary sources produces historical analysis. For each assignment, Professor Block also suggested a pre-writing exercise, such as a chart or diagram, to get the writing juices flowing. Finally, she modeled the kind of analysis and writing that each

assignment required in class and provided additional explanation and examples on the course website, which you can visit at: <http://eee.uci.edu/05w/28150/> Tracy also introduced two innovative strategies to help History 146D students improve their writing: She offered students extra credit if they read their papers out loud to a friend or went to the writing center to get help on a draft. According to Professor Block, “[Tracy] came up with really creative and

original ways to get students to focus on the process of writing and editing.”

Tracy acknowledged that Professor Block’s thorough approach to the teaching of discipline-specific writing required a great deal of time and energy on everyone’s part. But she hastened to add that as a result the students produced more interesting writings and learned more about the discipline of History and the tasks of the historian. In the end, both Tracy and the undergraduates reaped the benefits of Professor Block’s commitment to teaching and her sound writing pedagogy.

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Effective Public Writing:
Shawn Augsburger, History
“Grokster case matters”

Writing Portfolio

First Prize

Ashley Brenner, History/
Anthropology

Sheena Tahilramani, Literary
Journalism

Honorable Mention

Kristina Crawford, Women’s
Studies

Carla Neeld, Political Science

Susan C. Jarratt

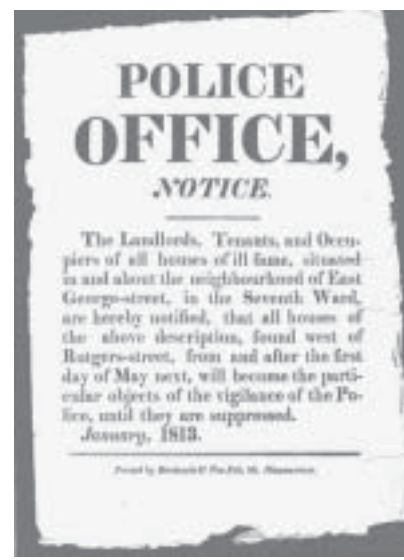
Campus Writing Coordinator
(on leave, spring 2005)

Steven J. Mailloux
Interim Campus Writing
Coordinator

Professor Block’s students wrote about visual and textual historical artifacts:



Keep within Compass
(English, laid paper, 1785-1805)
Winterthur Museum (54.93.1)



From Marilyn Wood Hill
Their Sisters’ Keepers
(Berkeley, 1993)

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UCI Undergraduates Offer Their Two-cents on Effective Writing Pedagogy

When asked what advice they’d like to offer writing instructors, the UCI students that we interviewed for the CWC research project, “Retrospective Writing Histories,” offered a range of suggestions.

The majority commented on the impact of an instructor’s persona or ethos on their learning experience and called for teachers with passion and energy. As one Computer Engineering major explained, “The inspiration is really important. . . Just the energy really helps the students to be motivated and involved in writing or whatever the class might be” (68). Others stressed the importance of patience. Our interviewees appreciate instructors who are open, humble and compassionate.

A Psychology major applauded those teachers who are willing to meet with their students and look over their papers: “I think I improved because the teachers made themselves available” (38). Conversely, an English major described the negative pedagogical impact of what he calls “dismissive criticism:” It kind of kills the enthusiasm for doing it [the work] and turns it into labor” (99).

Our interviewees also emphasized the need for high expectations. In their eyes, low expectations convey instructors’ lack of confidence in students’ abilities. Not only are low expectations self-fulfilling—students adjust their effort and performance to teacher expectations—they also suggest instructor disinterest in the class and the course

material. Such inferred disinterest encourages a similarly apathetic attitude in students. A Computer Science major reflected: “I would ask teachers just to keep challenging students, to have high expectations of them, because if you don’t take the class seriously . . . than neither will [they]” (150).

Though students admitted to lamenting the heavy workload of writing-intensive classes when they were in them, the majority felt that they learned more in these classes than in their exam-based courses. A few even called for more writing instruction! One Political Science and History double-major commented sagely: “I think that if the professors pushed more writing throughout the years, the students wouldn’t be so anti-writing” (235).

The Evolution of the Upper-Division Writing Awards Contest

Each year, the Office of the Campus Writing Coordinator reconsiders the categories of the contest to reflect the changing nature and criteria for judgment of university writing. Due to the wide-range of submissions we received last year in the category of Excellent Academic Writing, this year we made awards in three areas: Humanities and Arts, Social Sciences, and Science and Technology. Amber Israelsen’s multi-

modal and multi-media analysis of the Internet, Erika Siegel’s incisive analysis of the Supreme Court’s (ab)use of textualism in statutory interpretation, and Melody Li’s thorough and detailed lab report about the Climbing Shrub represent the range of student writing on our campus. These three pieces also remind us of writings’ rhetorical nature, as each responds to a particular assignment in a specific course and for a



Prize winners Ellen Strenski and Amber Israelsen

discipline-specific audience. This award recognizes not only the student, but also the instructor, whose writing prompt and guidance throughout the process, play a crucial role in generating the final written product.

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