

What in-depth writing analysis tells us

Feedback for educators and students alike

OND UWaterloo 2015 Session 407a
Alice Schmidt Hanbidge, Judi Jewinski, & Karolina Korsak
ashanbidge@uwaterloo.ca; jjewinski@uwaterloo.ca;
kkorsak@uwaterloo.ca

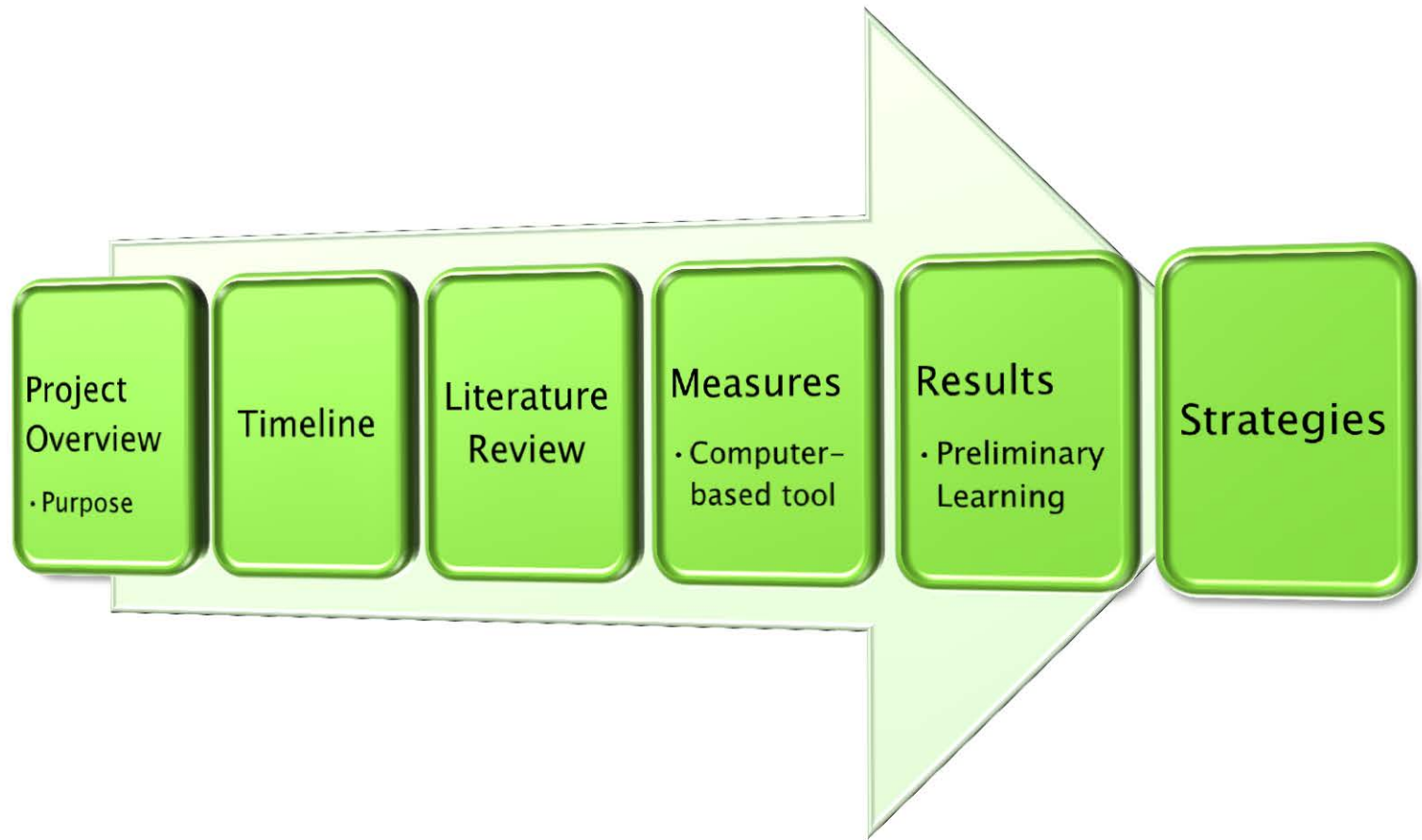
“The writing deficiency of students today is clearly a systemic problem”

Alter & Adkins (2001, p. 505)

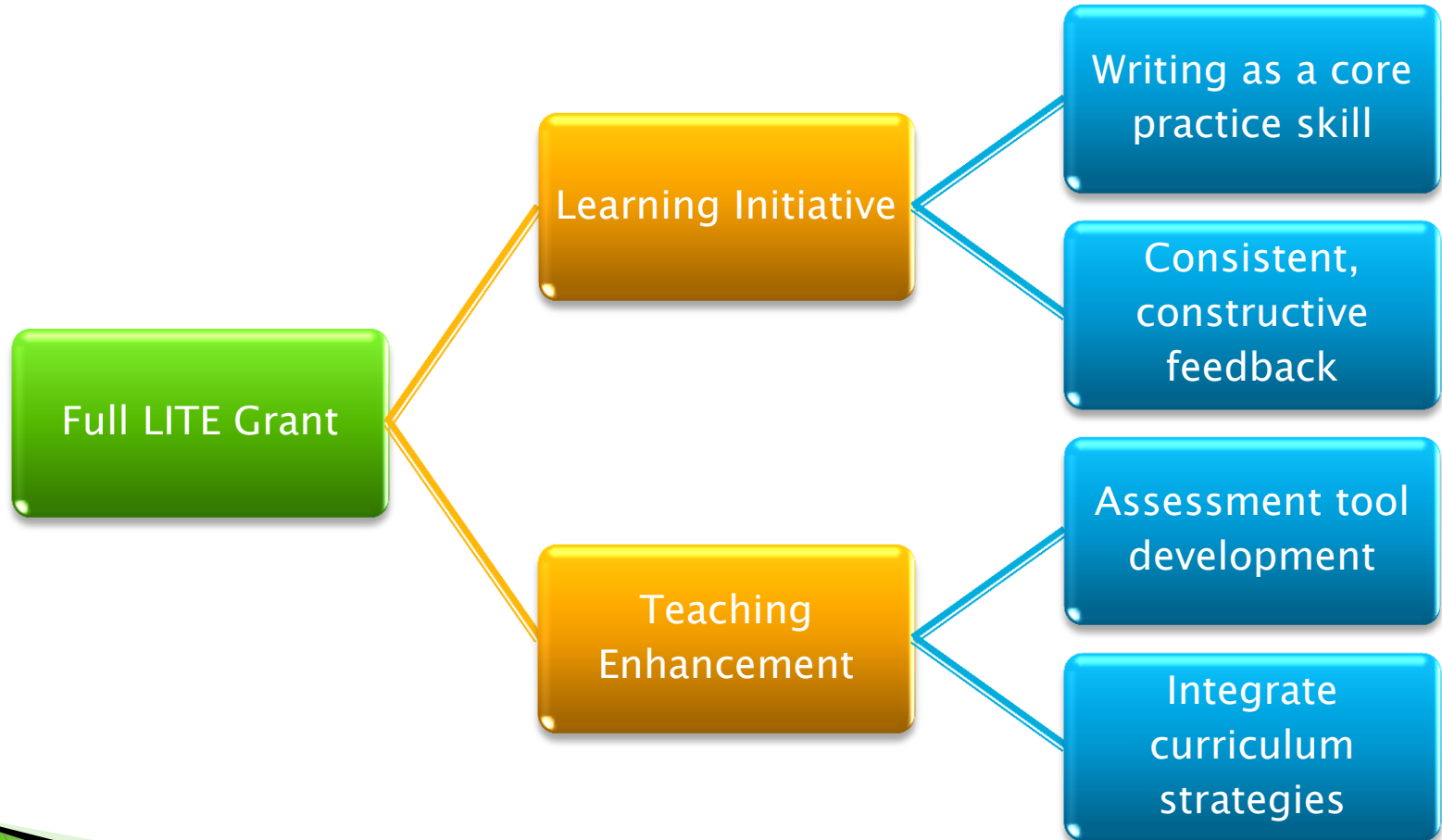
- suggest educators clarify and communicate the processes for effective writing



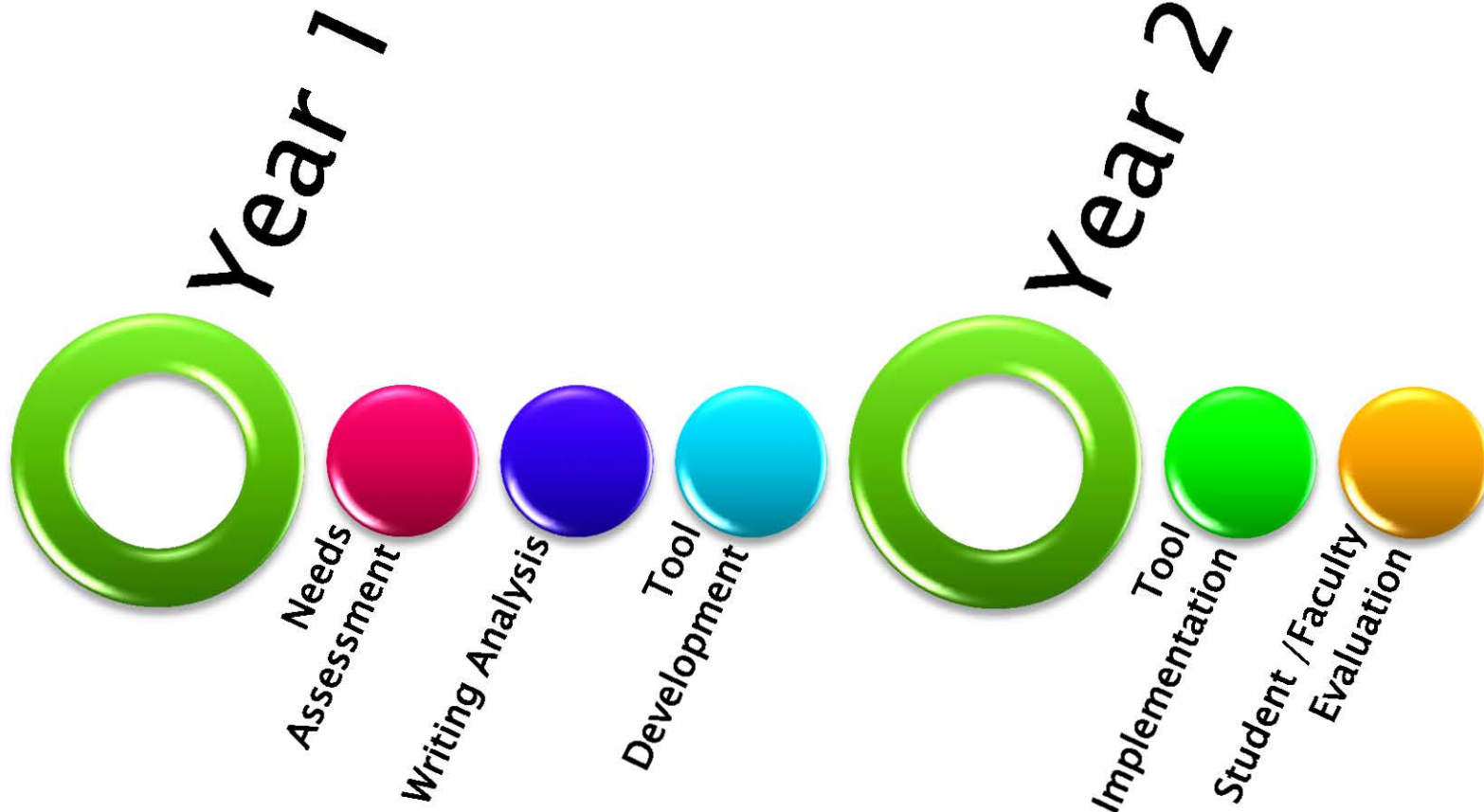
Presentation Overview



Project Objectives



Phased Timeline



Environmental Scan

- ▶ Part of a Canada-wide SSHRC-funded project assessing assignments for such features as
 - Number and frequency
 - Genre
 - Audience
 - Number of drafts
 - Feedback
- ▶ 75.9% of BSW assignments are “papers” (compares to 79% Canada wide) and other characteristics were also typical

Best practices in writing studies call for lots of practice with feedback. How much writing is called for in the Social Work curriculum?

	# of Assignments	# of Courses	Average
Total	29	6	4.83

This is good news! Students do a lot of writing during the one-year BSW program.

Food for thought: Are assignments coordinated across the curriculum?



How clear are students on expectations?

Scoring guides for writing assignments

Yes	21%
No	79%



Formative Feedback on writing assignments

Yes	3%
No	97%

Time for action!

Percentage of nested assignments n=29

Yes	7%
No	93%

Literature Review

Writing Need

- ▶ Pare & Allen (1995):
 - Advocacy
 - Communication with clients and professionals
 - Preserving legal evidence
 - Maintaining consistency when clients reassigned to new workers
 - Maintaining integrity of clients

- ▶ Emphasis on more rigorous writing in social work (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Hughes et al., 2011; Waller, 2000)

Hughes, N., Wainwright, S. Ward, N. (2011). Developing the writing skills of social work students: Connecting academic and professional expertise. *Journal of Academic Writing*. 1(1).

Pare, A. & Allen, H.S. (1995). Social work writing: Learning by doing. Pp. 164–173. In G. Rogers (Ed). *Social work field education: Views and visions*. Dubuque, IA: Hunt Publishing Company.

Waller, M. (2000). Addressing student writing problems: Applying composition theory to social work education. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*. 5, 161–166

Literature Review

Proposed Solutions

- ▶ Writing across the curriculum or Writing in the discipline (Janni & Mellinger, 2015)
- ▶ Evidence-based learning modules (Hughes et al., 2011)
- ▶ Writing assistance programs and specialized class for documentation skills (Simon & Soven, 1989)

Janni, S.J. & Mellinger, M.S. (2015). Beyond “writing to learn:” Factors influencing students’ writing outcomes. *Journal of Social Work Education*. 51, 136–152.

Hughes, N., Wainwright, S. Ward, N. (2011). Developing the writing skills of social work students: Connecting academic and professional expertise. *Journal of Academic Writing*. 1(1).

Simon, B.L. & Soven, M. (1989). The teaching of writing in social work education: A pressing priority for the 1990’s. *Journal of Teaching Social Work*. 3(2), 47–63.

Literature Review

Alter & Adkins (2001):

► Results:

- 35% scored below minimum
- Lack organization and focus

Janni & Mellinger (2015)

► Results:

1. Lack of effort due to time constraints
2. Overwhelming content
3. Wanting clarity, direction and support
4. Students' perception about their learning
5. Students' perceived self efficacy

Alter, C. & Adkins, C. (2001). Improving the writing skills of social work students. *Journal of social work education*. 27, 493–505.

Janni, S.J. & Mellinger, M.S. (2015). Beyond “writing to learn:” Factors influencing students' writing outcomes. *Journal of Social Work Education*. 51, 136–152.

Literature Review

Haswell (2000)

- ▶ Longitudinal study of changes in writing

- ▶ **Results:**
 1. Mean sentence length
 2. Mean clause length
 3. Holistic rating (4 raters blind to the study purpose)
 4. % of words in final free modification
 5. % of words in introduction
 6. Mean number of coordinated noun structures
 7. % of all free modifiers
 8. Total words
 9. % of 9+ letter words

Haswell, R.H. (2000). Documenting improvement in college writing: A Longitudinal Approach. *Written Communication*. 17(3), 307–352.

Three evaluation components:

1) Student confidence is measured

- Writing Confidence Questionnaire

2) Student writing is evaluated (n=54)

- manually for style (diction, sentence economy) and typical errors (grammar, mechanics)
- electronically for readability and some of Haswell's measures [a new macro was developed to streamline assessments and format results]

3) Faculty members are surveyed

- Needs assessment, evaluation tools and measures

Computer Program

New Macro by Tran (2014)

1. Strips formatting in document
2. Highlights words being analyzed
3. Computes custom variables and combines with Readability Stats

Filename, Average Words per Sentence, Total Words, Intro Words, Conclusion Words, 9+ words, 9+ ratio, 'this' count, 'this' ratio, Passive Sentences, Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level
 "22573-59635 - [redacted] Mar 19, 2015 11:43 PM - narrative therapy final.docx", 28.3, 1078, 183, 331, 127, 0.1178108, 6, 5.565863E-03, 23, 43.9, 14.1

Word non-commercial use

Readability Statistics

Counts	
Words	1078
Characters	5175
Paragraphs	5
Sentences	38
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	7.6
Words per Sentence	28.3
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Passive Sentences	23%
Flesch Reading Ease	43.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	14.1

Microsoft Word

Creating new output document

OK



	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
name	Average Wc	Total Words	Intro Wor	Conclusio	9+ words	9+ ratio	'this' cou	'this' rati	Passive Numbe	Flesch Rei	Flesch-Kincaid		
7-606	24.4	1077	189	144	178	16.53%	9	0.84%	22%	0.90	35.9	13.9	
52-606	19.9	824	234	156	108	13.11%	13	1.58%	17%	0.85	47.1	11.3	
29-606	20.8	1086	207	287	161	14.83%	7	0.64%	17%	0.82	46.3	11.6	
5	51.94663-606	19.8	1014	166	167	127	12.52%	18	1.78%	29%	1.46	47.5	11.4
6	60.28378-606	25.4	1103	210	45	168	15.23%	11	1.00%	21%	0.90	48.1	11.7
7	59.56148-606	23.9	956	179	109	147	15.38%	6	0.63%	22%	0.92	38.2	13.8
8	26.63733-606	22.6	972	61	101	173	17.80%	17	1.75%	13%	0.58	31.5	14.2
9	34.73158-606	27.8	1111	167	126	123	11.07%	17	1.53%	31%	1.12	37	14.8
10	45.74308-606	20	960	140	119	154	16.04%	10	1.04%	14%	0.70	31.3	13.8
11	36.19366-606	23.1	977	121	87	136	13.92%	18	1.84%	19%	0.82	43	13
12	29.43228-606	30.1	857	138	292	143	16.69%	6	0.70%	7%	0.23	28.5	16
13	47.7552-606	21.8	1007	199	119	153	15.19%	12	1.19%	26%	1.19	36.3	13.6
14	30.22622-606	20	589	66	64	95	16.13%	10	1.70%	10%	0.50	38.6	12.8
15	55.25453-606	22.3	985	189	184	143	14.52%	1	0.10%	25%	1.12	35.4	13.8
16	49.54264-606	19.2	984	169	124	153	15.55%	2	0.20%	19%	0.99	36.2	12.9
17	14.45972-606	25.6	1014	174	69	155	15.29%	6	0.59%	30%	1.17	38.1	13.5
18	63.28895-606	19.5	977	154	77	151	15.46%	12	1.23%	26%	1.33	40.6	12.4

Progress

Fall 2014

- Confidence survey
- 2 assessments over two sections (1 case study, 1 reflection paper)
- Assessment feedback was shared with students, who were invited to consult with writing centre staff (7 did)

Winter 2015

- 2 assessments over two sections (2 reflection papers)

Spring 2015

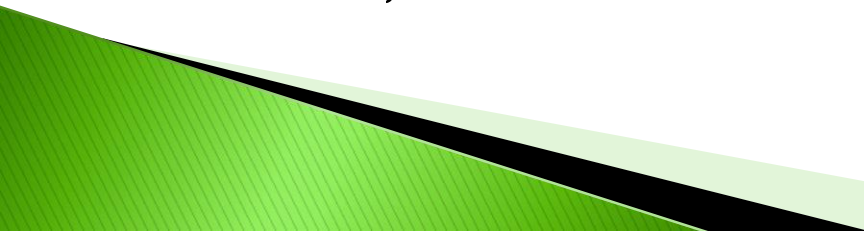
- 1 assessment over two sections (1 research paper)
- 

Preliminary Findings

11 “Wordy” sentences contain deadwood, tautologies, and other problems with conciseness.

	AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH (ASL)	% OF STUDENTS WITH ALS ≥ 20	% OF STUDENTS WITH “WORDY” SENTENCES	% WORDS WITH 9 LETTERS OR MORE (EG. “HARD” WORDS)	% OF PASSIVE SENTENCES	EASE OF READABILITY (FLESCH TEST)
Journal A (N = 28)	22.46	78.6%	N/A	10.36%	17.00	52.92
Journal B (N = 24)	25.77	87.5%	N/A	12.59%	18.15	41.83
Case Study A (N = 30)	24.41	90.0%	46.4%	14.39%	26.87	36.53
Case Study B (N = 28)	23.85	85.7%	42.9%	13.39%	24.25	42.84

What we learned . . .

- ▶ BSW results paralleled Haswell and Kelly–Riley results characterizing features of higher level writing (esp. “hard” word scores)
 - ▶ Formal (more academic) papers were characterized by
 - Longer, denser sentences
 - More passives
 - More hard words
 - ▶ The class given a template for the reflection paper were measurably more effective (simpler words, shorter sentences, fewer passives)
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Reflection Paper Comparison F/W

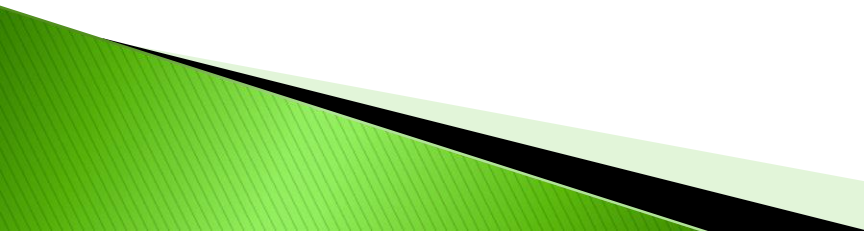
CATEGORY	% OF STUDENTS FALL N = 54	% OF STUDENTS WINTER N = 51
Students with ALS ≥ 25	37.0%	28.6%
Students with ALS ≥ 30	5.6%	1.8%
Students with high overall style and error averages	16.7%	7.1%
Overall style average $\geq 2.75\%$	37.0%	5.4%
Students with wordy sentences	77.8%	7.1%
Overall error average $\geq 2.0\%$	27.8%	21.4%
Overall error average $\geq 3.0\%$	5.6%	3.6%
Students with repeated errors in punctuation	83.3%	58.1%
Students with $\geq 1.5\%$ vague pronoun use ["this"]	9.3%	25.5%

What we learned (continued) . . .

- ▶ Students with the highest combined error and style averages received lower grades from faculty, who were marking for content only
- ▶ All 7 of the students who took advantage of the writing centre appointment improved their style average by at least 40% on their next reflection and 6 of them improved their error average:

	Pre-Appointment	Post-Appointment	Class Average
Style Average	3.0	0.9	1.0
Error Average	2.2	1.6	1.4

Best Practices / Next Steps

- ▶ Inform with research to complete data analysis
 - ▶ Recommend scaffolding assignments and offering formative feedback (writing centre)
 - ▶ Engage students in assignment topics
 - ▶ Engage faculty
 - ▶ Need to factor writing into student assessments
 - ▶ Develop evaluation measures and methods
- 

Applications? (WIIFM?)



1. Do students know your expectations?
2. If you have high expectations for good writing, do you share these with students?
3. Do you wish students paid more attention to the feedback you provide?
4. Do you provide opportunities for students to compare their work with others?
5. Do you share your love/hate relationship with writing with them?



WHO

WHAT

WHERE

WHEN

WHY

HOW

QUESTIONS

ANSWERS

References

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Alice Schmidt Hanbidge ashanbidge@uwaterloo.ca →

Judi Jewinski jjewinski@uwaterloo.ca

and Karolina Korsak kkorsak@uwaterloo.ca

Session 407a