

# **Students' Composing Processes and WAC: Reflections on a Pilot Survey**

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# What is “Process”?

- “how writers compose...how they walk through the process of actually producing a text, from coming up with ideas for it to finalizing the piece” (Wardle and Downs 236)
- “...how, when, where, with whom, and with what resources students write” (my study)

# Background on Process

- The Cognitivists (1960s-1980s)
  - writing problems as problems of thinking/processing
- Lester Faigley (1986)
  - process theory “must take a broader conception of writing, one that understands writing processes are historically dynamic” (537)
- Robert R. Johnson (2010)
  - ancient notions of craft
    - *techne* (the arts and theories of making)

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See also *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Ed. Charles Bazerman and Paul A. Prior. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

# Why I am interested in Process

- Composition teacher and WPA
- WAC-based Writing Center director
- Colleague of designers and engineers
- Writer who wants to know more about *how*
- WAC consultant who wants to help others
- Professional writing consultant
- Father to emerging writers

**What Constraints Affect Process?**

# Common Constraints Affecting Process

- Time/time management
- Space/environmental factors
- Genre conventions
- Audiences and their expectations and desires
- Cultural context (rules, norms, variability)
- Prior knowledge and information literacy
- Availability of credible information resources
- Interest level, self-efficacy, motivations
- Prior experience as a writer
- Others?

# The context for my study...

- Who
- When
- Where
- Why
- How



# **My exploratory study...**

To some degree, this first stage is more about the questions than the data, the line of inquiry that will help me learn more about students' writing processes.




# 1. What is your year in college?



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		Response Percent	Response Count
Freshman		0.0%	0
Sophomore		0.0%	0
Junior		16.7%	3
Senior		55.6%	10
Faculty		27.8%	5
Other (please specify)		0.0%	0
<b>answered question</b>			<b>18</b>
<b>skipped question</b>			<b>1</b>

## 2. What is your major or discipline?

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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Biology</b>		<b>61.1%</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Chemistry</b>		5.6%	1
<b>Biochemistry</b>		27.8%	5
<b>Engineering</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Physics</b>		5.6%	1
<b>Other (please specify)</b>		0.0%	0
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>18</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>1</b>

### 3. Students: What types of writing have you been ASSIGNED in college?



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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Abstracts</b>		84.6%	11
<b>Annotated bibliographies</b>		76.9%	10
<b>Argumentative essays</b>		84.6%	11
<b>Creative writing/poetry</b>		61.5%	8
<b>Lab reports</b>		<b>100.0%</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Multimodal/Multimedia presentations</b>		76.9%	10
<b>Personal essays</b>		84.6%	11
<b>Policies and procedures</b>		53.8%	7
<b>Professional/Technical writing</b>		38.5%	5
<b>Reflection pieces</b>		61.5%	8
<b>Research papers</b>		92.3%	12
<b>Reviews</b>		84.6%	11
<b>Scientific writing</b>		92.3%	12
<b>Social media</b>		7.7%	1

## 4. Faculty: What types of writing have you assigned to your students?

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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Abstracts</b>		80.0%	4
<b>Annotated bibliographies</b>		20.0%	1
<b>Argumentative essays</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Creative writing/poetry</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Lab reports</b>		<b>100.0%</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Multimodal/Multimedia presentations</b>		80.0%	4
<b>Personal essays</b>		20.0%	1
<b>Policies and procedures</b>		20.0%	1
<b>Professional/Technical writing</b>		60.0%	3
<b>Reflection pieces</b>		20.0%	1
<b>Research papers</b>		40.0%	2
<b>Reviews</b>		40.0%	2
<b>Scientific writing</b>		80.0%	4
<b>Social media</b>		0.0%	0




5. Students: HOW FREQUENTLY have you received instruction on how to develop writing PROCESSES that will successfully move your projects from beginning to end?



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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Frequently</b>		38.5%	5
<b>Somewhat frequently</b>		<b>53.8%</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Infrequently</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Somewhat infrequently</b>		7.7%	1
<b>Never</b>		0.0%	0
		Other (please specify)	0
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>13</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>6</b>

6. Faculty: HOW FREQUENTLY do you provide instruction on how students can develop writing PROCESSES that will successfully move their projects from beginning to end?



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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Frequently</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Somewhat frequently</b>		<b>50.0%</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Infrequently</b>		<b>50.0%</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Somewhat infrequently</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Never</b>		0.0%	0
	Other (please specify) <a href="#">Show Responses</a>		1
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>4</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>15</b>


7. Students: For the writing you do in CORE courses, how prepared are you to develop PROCESSES that will successfully move your writing projects from beginning to end?



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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Well prepared</b>		<b>53.8%</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Prepared</b>		46.2%	6
<b>Somewhat prepared</b>		0.0%	0
<b>Not prepared</b>		0.0%	0
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>13</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>6</b>



8. Students: For the writing you do in courses IN YOUR MAJOR/DISCIPLINE, how prepared are you to develop PROCESSES that will successfully move your writing projects from beginning to end? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Well prepared</b>		<b>50.0%</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Prepared</b>		41.7%	5
<b>Somewhat prepared</b>		8.3%	1
<b>Not prepared</b>		0.0%	0
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>12</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>7</b>

9. Students: When you are developing a writing project--that is, WHEN YOU ARE IN PROCESS--how often are you likely to seek assistance from the following resources? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Multiple times a day	Once a day	Multiple times a week	Once a week	Rarely	Never	Response Count
<b>Faculty/TAs</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	23.1% (3)	30.8% (4)	<b>46.2% (6)</b>	0.0% (0)	13
<b>Family/friends</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	7.7% (1)	23.1% (3)	23.1% (3)	<b>46.2% (6)</b>	13
<b>Peers</b>	0.0% (0)	7.7% (1)	15.4% (2)	<b>46.2% (6)</b>	23.1% (3)	7.7% (1)	13
<b>Print and digital resources on writing/how to write</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	15.4% (2)	7.7% (1)	<b>38.5% (5)</b>	<b>38.5% (5)</b>	13
<b>Writing Center Tutors</b>	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	46.2% (6)	<b>53.8% (7)</b>	13
					Other (please specify)		0
					<b>answered question</b>		<b>13</b>
					<b>skipped question</b>		<b>6</b>

10. Students: WHERE do you engage in the writing PROCESSES necessary for successfully completing assigned projects?



Create Chart








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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Classroom</b>		38.5%	5
<b>Home</b>		<b>100.0%</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Instructor's office</b>		15.4%	2
<b>Lab</b>		76.9%	10
<b>Library</b>		76.9%	10
<b>Other public spaces</b>		15.4%	2
<b>Student Center</b>		23.1%	3
<b>Writing Center</b>		0.0%	0
		Other (please specify)	0
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>13</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>6</b>

11. Students: WHEN do you do the PROCESS-ORIENTED WORK necessary for successfully completing assigned projects?

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		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>Mornings</b>		30.8%	4
<b>Afternoons</b>		38.5%	5
<b>Early evenings</b>		<b>84.6%</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Late evenings</b>		<b>84.6%</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Early mornings</b>		23.1%	3
		Other (please specify)	0
<b>answered question</b>			<b>13</b>
<b>skipped question</b>			<b>6</b>

## 12. Students: HOW, if at all, have your WRITING PROCESSES changed since you started college? Please be specific.

- “Basically I've gotten better at streamlining searching for data; I know better what resources are good and reliable and, especially with scientific materials, can tell fairly quickly whether the source is going to be helpful. As far as my writing process, I rarely outline more than a very general idea, which is in contrast to the mandatory lengthy process of detailed outline-draft-review-final process which was enforced in high school. Basically, I don't really write linearly anymore. I write sections at a time, developing my ideas, and often add connections, and the introductory and concluding paragraphs, when I'm mostly done.” (emphasis added)

## 12. Students: HOW, if at all, have your WRITING PROCESSES changed since you started college? Please be specific.

- “It hasn't.”
- “I talk to my professors more often now than I did freshman year, and I write less drafts (usually just a rough then 1 edit to a final)”
- “My writing processes have become longer and more extensive. I have now begun to write in sections, and not necessarily in order. I make sure to write many drafts before the final is turned in.”
- “My writing has become more technical and has gotten to the point that the details are now automatic and mindless.”

# 13. Students: Please describe THE PROCESS OF HOW you might typically go about successfully completing an assigned writing project in a CORE course.

- “A core class requires very simple writing in my opinion. You are given a prompt and you write.”
- “In a core course I will put off the assignment until the night before it is due and then shamble it all together for a free A.”
- “Start with formulating a strong thesis, whether argumentative or explanatory. Then search for sources either as books at the library or online journal articles through databases. Pick out specific quotes from sources to support thesis. Organize quotes in a way that best supports thesis. Begin structuring my thoughts and my evaluation of quotes around cited pieces. Form effective transitions between thoughts, sections, and paragraphs. Write the introduction, and then the conclusion.”

## 14. Students: Please describe THE PROCESS OF HOW you might typically go about successfully completing an assigned writing project in a course IN YOUR MAJOR/DISCIPLINE.






- “This is a bit different; I do extensive research first, which usually involves finding many sites I don't end up using as well as many sources I don't end up using as well as many that I do. Often as I read through papers and documents, my thoughts on my research topic changes and I have to reevaluate my own ideas and approaches.”
- “Research, research, research, write methods and results, write intro, discussion and abstract.”



# Another student on process in the major:

“Most assigned writing in my discipline is in the form of a research proposal. Start with specific aims of a proposed project. Limit specific aims to less than five. Then, begin doing research and find what background information or previous findings are relevant to the project. Write the background and significance section with these found facts. Do not include opinions. Background and significance should end with what is unknown pertaining to this area of research, ending with the hypothesis, which is in effect the thesis of the paper. Then, write the methods that will be done for this project, explaining any relevant procedures, what the expected results are, and how these results will help support or refute the hypothesis. Then, write the preliminary data section. Carefully describe all previous research done pertaining to this project. Finally, write the works cited, using the appropriate refworks journal style format.”

15. Students and Faculty: What technological tools do you employ while engaged in the PROCESSES you follow as you move from the beginning to the final versions of your written projects in your major or discipline? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

		Response Percent	Response Count
<b>e-Tablet/whiteboard</b>		5.6%	1
<b>Pen/pencil and paper</b>		83.3%	15
<b>Slideshow software such as PowerPoint and Prezi</b>		22.2%	4
<b>Word processing program</b>		<b>100.0%</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Whiteboard with markers/chalkboard</b>		27.8%	5
		Other (please specify) <a href="#">Show Responses</a>	1
		<b>answered question</b>	<b>18</b>
		<b>skipped question</b>	<b>1</b>

**16. Students: If you have been assigned multimodal projects (i.e., those presentations that may include an intersection of words, still or moving images, animations, colors, music, sound, and more), please reflect upon one of those projects and DESCRIBE YOUR PROCESSES that allowed you to successfully move from the beginning of the work to the final version.**

- “Used a search engine to find a passage.  
Transcribed passage to slides. Selected an appropriate song from my library. Set the lines to the music.”
- “I haven't been assigned [a multimodal project] before.”

## 17. Students: Please DESCRIBE YOUR IDEAL WRITING PROCESS...

- “Honestly, as much as I hate having to turn in things like annotated bibliographies and abstracts ahead of time, it does help me to get the process moving. So ideally, I'd have two or three set deadlines to turn in "pieces" of the final paper or project. Other than that, though, I prefer to work virtually alone. I use my paper and pencil to map ideas, my word processor to write sections at a time, a whiteboard for big-scheme organizing. Having the professors available to email or talk to about the paper is very helpful. Peer review in classes much less so; if I need help, I'll just ask a friend whom I actually trust to be intelligent and know about what I am working on. For that reason also, I have never used writing center tutors or TA's, and do not plan to.”
- “I always need to be on campus so I can access papers online that I would otherwise not have access to. I also need to start really early before it is due because it takes so much time to write in a biochemistry mindset. Furthermore I enjoy writing in a lab or in Hughes because my setting puts me in the correct mindset. Where as writing in the core subjects can take place anywhere.”

## 17. Faculty: Please DESCRIBE YOUR IDEAL WRITING PROCESS...

- “I don't have a good answer to this; it's not something I've every really considered, nor do I feel like I've ever really had the time to consider it. I think mostly having the free time to write, regardless of how it is accomplished, represents the "best case" scenario.”

## Another faculty member on his/her ideal writing process:

“Primarily, my writing is related to course materials I prepare for students. The challenge here is to anticipate how students might misinterpret descriptions or instructions, and craft sentences in a way that reduces confusion. This will often require the creation of annotated diagrams, and the inclusion of equations.

I also do technical writing for research, and when doing so, I must also intermingle text with equations, diagrams, and graphs. The best case scenario here would be a single software package that lets me intermingle text, equations, and diagrams EASILY, with additional simplicity [sic] in layout formatting.”

**What, if anything, have I learned?**

# Why ask faculty about students' processes?

- Provides impetus for interdisciplinary discussions about process-approaches to writing.
- Acknowledges that many faculty will not read WAC/WID literature on process.
- Invites discussions about process and pedagogy.
- Introduces faculty to support systems for



# Why ask students about their processes?

- Invites students to reflect on WAC/WID composing processes on their own and with peers.
- Creates an additional opportunity for students to engage in undergraduate research on WAC/WID.
- Invites students to expand their network of support (e.g., visiting a WAC-based Writing Center)
- Helps student tutors see how students think of the Writing Center as a resource.

## Reminders...

“Narrative descriptions of composing processes do not provide sufficiently graphic evidence for the perception of underlying regularities and patterns. Without such evidence, it is difficult to generate well-defined hypotheses and to move from exploratory research to more controlled experimental studies.”

Sondra Perl, “The Composing Processes of Unskilled Writers” (1979)

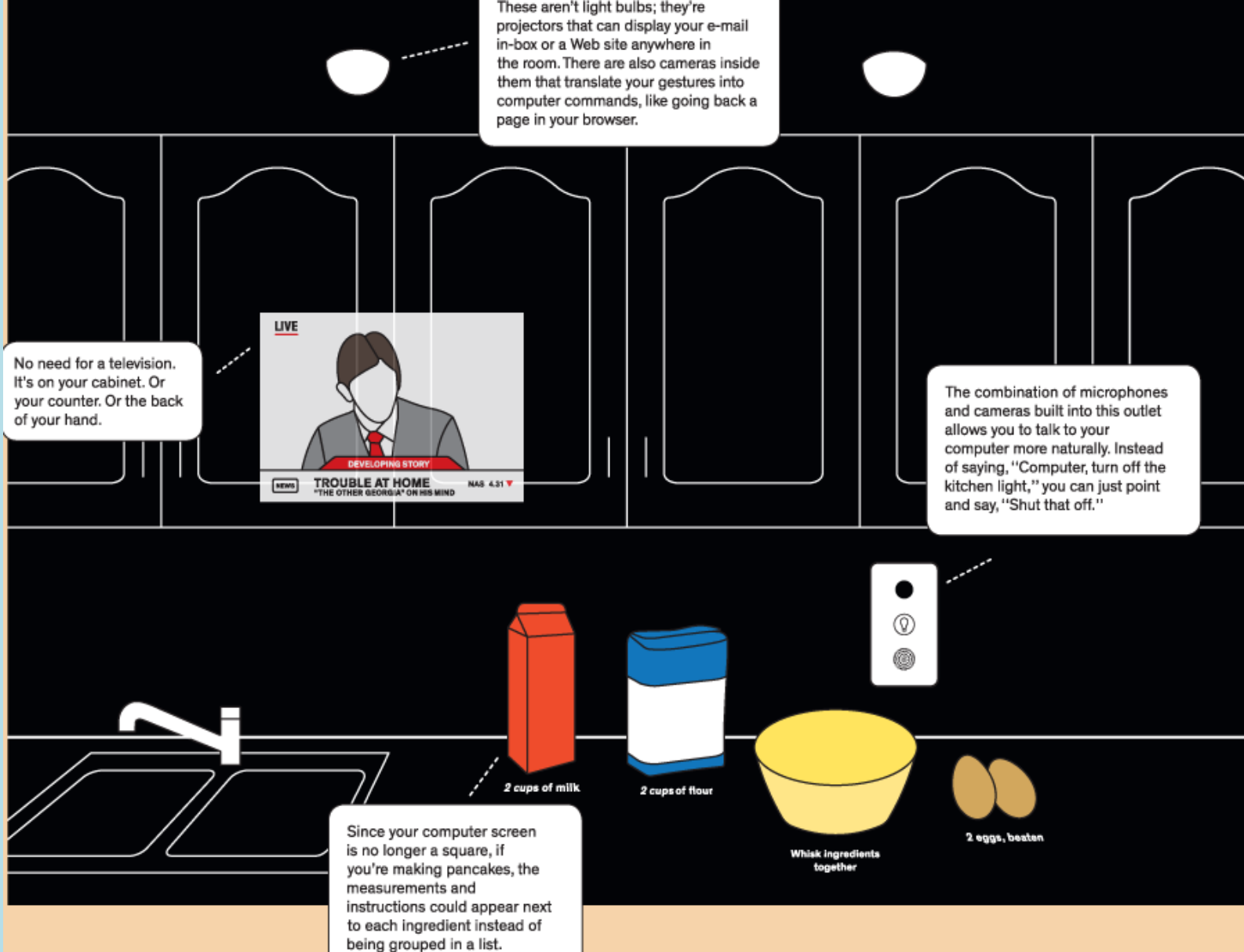
## Reminders...

“Thus, the problem for WID professionals is how to bridge the gap between writing in and writing outside the disciplines, the knowing that and the knowing how. This is not a problem that can be solved by reference to our own discipline’s understanding of the relationship between writing and knowing. Rather, we need to be able to conceptualize writing in the disciplines in a way that is grounded in the disciplines themselves, a viable alternative to an understanding of writing as universally generalizable.”

Michael Carter, “Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines”  
(2007)

# The Future of Process?

- “Multimodal Texts go beyond the alphabetic. They may include still or moving images, animations, color, music, sound and more” (Ericsson and Hill).
- Multimodality Across the Curriculum (MAC)
- (More) Reciprocity in WAC/WID scholarship.
- Other ideas?



From Maggie Koerth-Baker 's  
"32 Innovations That Will Change Your Tomorrow" (2012)

# Next Steps?

- Submit IRB protocol for follow-up interviews.
- Continue reading about process, post-process, activity systems, genre studies, ways of doing, etc.
- Collaborate with Patricia Freitag Ericsson and Crag Hill at WSU and focus even more on multimodality.
- Scale up revised survey to include more faculty from more disciplines and institutions.
- Continue to share results with WAC/WID colleagues.

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**Questions and suggestions? Please  
contact me.**

Thank you!

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