At a teaching institution like Belmont University, faculty want students to dig deeper into material, to weigh ideas, to respond to these ideas critically, and to develop arguments that link theory and practice. Put another way, faculty members want our students to become more thoughtful practitioners while they are at the university—the goal being that this mindset will serve students and their respective communities long after graduation. For many who teach, this dynamic requires students to write.

Writing impels deep learning in powerful ways, and as the contributors to this newsletter show, disciplinary constraints need not apply. That is to say, no matter the context, students can benefit from the messy but productive activity of engaging words on the page. This issue features reflections on writing and pedagogy from faculty across a range of departments, schools, and colleges. All share convictions that writing pushes students to grapple with course content in rigorous fashion and that the efforts involved in assigning writing are well worth the rewards.

Confession: For the Fall of 2014, I was facing two service learning courses—in two different subjects and with two very different groups of students. Having done this before, I remembered the workload associated with these courses and their service projects. Thus I was pondering: “How few reflective writing assignments can I give and still meet the reflection criteria for a service learning course?” [Note: the three components of an effective S-L course are that (1) the service enhances the learning objectives of the course, (2) the service meets a real community need, and (3) students have opportunities to reflect on their work during the service.]

Then I attended the August Teaching Center workshop where Ken Bain discussed deep approaches to learning. Many of his points resonated with the learning goals that I hoped would be met through the service project. Two in particular seemed relevant: Learners will have a chance to do the discipline before they fully know the discipline, and learners believe their work will matter. Feeling confident that the service project fully engaged them with the discipline, I streamlined the writing assignments in one of the courses, botany, to focus on a few key elements that would help me discern if students thought their work really mattered.

In botany, students collected, dried, and prepared tree specimens at the Sam Davis Home in Smyrna. Samples were prepared for both the herbarium at Belmont and the Sam Davis Home and will be used by the staff there to apply for an arboretum designation. The students were clearly engaged in the work of botany and learned all the intricacies of identifying trees, working with scientific taxonomic keys, and preparing specimens as they navigated the service project. They researched websites of other arboreta and wrote a short 300 word essay on how public spaces are used to enhance awareness, but did they think their work mattered?

A reflective exercise at the end of the semester provided an opportunity to assess this component of deep learning. Students were asked to write a 600 word essay in which they provided a brief summary of their experience in the project, as well as what they learned about people and their use of arboreta, what they learned about themselves, and how the project enhanced both their understanding and appreciation of plants.

There were a few expected comments in the essays—students recalling their frustration with learning complex botanical terms on their own, hours spent in the lab keying out trees, and disparity in work effort among their peers. But the majority of the essays glowed with a keen sense of accomplishment, pride in being able to identify trees as the students walk across campus, an acknowledgement of all they learned about plants (“never knew plants were so complicated”), a deeper appreciation for plants (“trees are really fascinating!”), satisfaction in knowing the Sam Davis Home staff can apply for arboretum designation, and honor in that the students had an opportunity to work with their classmates on this huge project. They clearly knew that their work mattered—to me, their peers, themselves, and the staff at the Sam Davis Home. There were even words of thanks to me for pushing them so hard! This last element reminded me of two other components of deep learning that Ken Bain shared: Learners believe other people have faith in their ability to learn, and learners believe they can learn.

Perhaps I could have gained this same information through other means of assessment, but writing about learning continues to be one of the best ways for my students to realize how much they have learned and to share that learning with me.
I write intentionally broad question-prompts that need to be refined by students finding sources and their own research direction. I try to encourage curiosity with these questions. Although the prompts imply a kind of binary comparison-contrast analysis, my Classical Civilization students do not need to pursue only one narrow line of investigation. They can tailor the question to suit their own interests. They are asked to consult with me and with Zach Fischer, research librarian, before they finalize their argument. Here are some of the questions randomly assigned on the first day of class:

- Milman Parry, the "Analysts," and the "Unitarians;" who was the author of the Iliad?
- How reliable is archeological evidence for the Trojan War?
- Manicheism vs. orthodox Christianity — what makes one a "cult" and the other a "religion"?
- Plato's Apology: why did a philosopher who claims to know nothing threaten a powerful democracy?
- Antigone and Maenads: how much freedom and power did ancient Greek women have?
- Mos maiorum: how did ancient culture influence Roman views on marriage, family, and love?

I ask students to remember their audience. They are aiming at the level of the intelligent, engaged university undergraduate community. They do short presentations to the class using maps and slides, and the class provides immediate feedback on BlackBoard. Students should not assume prior knowledge about these topics, and they should avoid excessive jargon. I hope that they can be informative and direct, but not eliminate complexities. They should engage the material, and not merely recite facts. In addition, they need to use a plain and direct prose style. I want them to think of words as things to "see through" instead of things drawing attention to themselves. Essays should tell a story while making an argument. As preparation, students read a few articles in Smithsonian, Civilization, or Archeology to get a sense for an appropriate style and tone. Although these periodicals are not scholarly, they are well written and researched, and they are pitched to a general audience of educated readers. Their writers use clarity, creativity, and they inform and persuade. They do not use sentence fragments, run-ons, split infinitives, or passive sentences.

History presents many unanswered questions, and good argumentative writing must admit history's ambiguities and uncertainties. Students should avoid the use of vague phrases such as "some historians believe..." or "historians say..." They need to name sources outright: "Donald Lawson argues that Aeschylus based his drama on an evolving concept of Greek law and justice." If students are dealing with factual material, they present it as fact. They should write, "Heinrich Schliemann discovered conclusive evidence for the ancient city of Troy near Hisarlik, Turkey" not, "Some historians believe Heinrich Schliemann discovered random objects probably related to the Bronze Age Greeks." When uncertainty exists, writers might say something such as, "we are still uncertain whether or not the Gilgamesh flood, if it occurred, predates the Genesis version," or "there are various interpretations of available evidence such as..." If our perspective on an issue is changing, they might say, "current research indicates (or suggests)..."

If an existing controversy is relevant, students should identify the schools or primary thinkers in contention, such as: "Arthur Hattfield believes that Bronze Age warriors such as depicted in Homer's Iliad developed the chariot, but supporters of the McCoy school argue that chariots were not used until late in the Iron Age." They should not hesitate to refute faux history, mythic history, or just plain stupid historical assumptions. For example, "There is no evidence whatsoever that the Greek island of Corfu is the same place visited by Odysseus and named by Homer as Scheria."

By giving students wide-open prompts that appear unanswerable and quixotic, I want to stimulate curiosity and encourage fact-based, clear writing that fosters deep learning in Classical Civilizations.

### WHY TEACH WITH WRITING?

**By Bonnie Smith Whitehouse, Ph.D., Department of English**

1. Writing deepens thinking and increases students' engagement with course material. In fact, research done by Richard Light at Harvard confirms that "students relate writing to intensity of courses. The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students' level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students' self-reported level of interest in it—is stronger than any relationship we found between student engagement and any other course characteristic" *(The Harvard Assessment Seminars, Second Report, 1992, 25).*

2. Writing can improve our relationship with our students.

3. Writing gives us a window into our students' thinking and learning.

4. Writing assignments can improve our classroom discussions.

5. Writing assignments provide us with an opportunity to teach students to organize ideas, develop points logically, make explicit connections, elaborate ideas, argue points, and situate an argument in the context of previous research—all skills valued in higher education.


7. Our students and we remember what we've written, in part, because writing individualizes learning.

8. Writing is unique in that it is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product communicating the results of critical thinking.

9. Critical reading and writing is rooted in real-world problems.
When I ask my students to write, I also ask them to revise. And, of course, I am not alone. All general education writing courses at Belmont require students to write multiple drafts, and faculty members have to be both thoughtful and savvy as they respond to multiple drafts of our students’ writing. When I ask novice students to define “revision,” I find that their answers can vary wildly. Some see revision as housekeeping (i.e., fixing grammatical errors), and some see revision as a massive renovation project (i.e., retooling an entire argument to better suit one’s purpose). Over the years, I have worked hard to develop a vocabulary about revision that distinguishes between the different tasks we may need to perform as we draft. In their 1989 book A Community of Writers, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff developed a bodily metaphor for talking about revision that continues to prove helpful for me. So I offer you these three metaphors as you find ways to respond to multiple drafts and communicate to your students about what meaningful revision may look like for them. You can tell your students to:

REVISE THE BONES: I tell my students to “revise the bones” when it’s clear the process of drafting helped them see really wanted to say something different or they didn’t understand the full implications of what they were saying. I tell students that if they reread their draft and the “so what?” question has not yet been answered, revising at the bones may be for them! If you really believe the process of writing can change what you think or what you believe (or indeed, can change you), then you know what I mean. Sometimes we have to overhaul a piece of writing at the level of the bones so a new body can emerge.

REVISE THE MUSCLES: When I tell a student to revise the muscles, I’m telling them that they have something worth saying, but they need to consider the needs of their readers more deeply. Reorganize. Delete. Move. Distill. Clarify. Maybe that conclusion would really function better as an introduction. Generally, revising at the muscular level means stepping out of your own head and imagining how your readers will read the draft and accommodate their needs better. A draft that needs to be revised at the muscular level will often benefit from the response of a partner or a peer group.

REVISE THE SKIN: This is what beginner students generally think about when they consider revision and imagine that they just need to revise by “cleaning up” the errors with documentation, punctuation, grammar, and formatting. Of course, all of us need to revise at the level of the skin, but frankly, it’s a waste of time to revise at this level if the bones are out of whack, if the “so what?” question has not yet been answered, or if a draft is not yet functioning well at the muscular level by accommodating the audience’s needs.

One of the many ways we can foster deep learning in our classes is by helping students take responsibility not only for revising their papers but also for revising their assumptions about what writing is. That is, we need to help students see that writing is not just a product or a means to a final grade; writing is a potent process and a powerful tool that can help us reorient everything we (think we) know about a topic, and writing multiple drafts can help us get there.
I’m a nomadic grader. I grade essays at the Green Hills Starbucks, the Maryland Farms Starbucks, the Bellevue Starbucks, even at the Starbucks on 21st Avenue, across from that university which shall not be named. I grade essays in starts and stops, in fits and fidgets. I’d probably pull my hair out from grading if I weren’t already worried about losing my beautiful mane to that male-patterned baldness I see sneaking up on my Dad. I’m an anxious essay-grader.

So, why, with so many students in my classes, particularly those freshman level Introduction to the Old Testament classes, do I continue to assign essays? Besides the reasons that we’re supposed to say, that student research essays engender deeper level learning and empower students with transferable research and writing skills, I also assign essays simply to invite students to become fellow researchers, to contribute to the intellectual climate of our classroom community. Besides, and perhaps this can just remain our little secret, I get a shock of joy at witnessing the creative and articulate ways my students struggle with the texts we’re reading, with the work of scholars in the field of religion, and at the variety of ways my students create meaning for themselves in the process of their own writing.

The most significant piece of writing my Intro to Old Testament students do each semester is a close reading essay assignment that I’ve shaped over the past couple of years. The two prompts, of which students choose one, ask them to develop an argument about a particular passage of scripture and to research the passage in terms of historical, theological, and literary criticisms. The first option is a traditional close reading prompt; the second invites students to utilize a work of art, which can be a work of visual art, a movie, a novel, a poem, or anything in between, in order to address the different ways that a particular passage of scripture has been interpreted.

I’ve read essays on comic irony in the book of Jonah, on the influence of medieval science in biblically themed art of the Renaissance period; I’ve even read the work of a conservative Christian female student as she struggled with feminist biblical scholarship in the story of Hagar from the book of Genesis.

As much as the hard work of providing significant feedback on essays requires of me, as much as class size has caused me to have to pare back the number and length of writing assignments I give, I find the process of assessing student essays to be rewarding in the midst of the exhaustion. I still find it invigorating to discover what students can do when I give them the tools they need to research and to write, and then turn them loose to see what they find. Very often, it’ll make me put my coffee down, smile, and scribble all about my joy in the margins of their work.