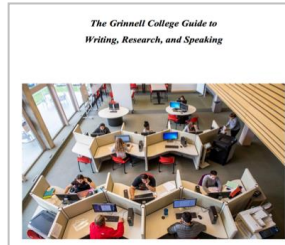


FACULTY FORUM

all about the Grinnell College Guide to Writing, Research and Speaking

A Grinnell-Focused Guide

In Summer 2017, faculty members Tim Arner and Janet Carl with students Vincent Benloch, '18, and Helen Eckhard '18 undertook a Mentored Advance Project to create the first electronic guide to writing, researching, and speaking specifically designed for Grinnell College. The publication, launched in Fall 2017, which features advice relevant to students of all skill levels and working in all disciplines, reflects Grinnell's culture and institutional knowledge.



The Guide authors built flexibility into their design, creating short sections that students can read chronologically or periodically as the need for ideas and advice arises [see sidebar]. They also included many short “tips” to which students may refer for advice on both process and product.

The Guide reflects Grinnell Culture by, according to Tim, “incorporat[ing] advice from faculty [and] materials from faculty.” The Guide links to Erik Simpson’s “Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis” and to Science’s Investigations. Also, the document refers to Grinnell locations, such as the Writing Lab and Burling Library, and uses Grinnell-specific examples. Tim noted, “The fact that the student introduction quotes Derrida [is] one element that [is] not just a very Grinnell thing, but a very Vincent thing. And so I think there are moments that make [the Guide] very Grinnellian.”

As another important aspect of the Guide’s Grinnell-specific character, the writing team aimed to make it widely useful. Helen commented that they tried “to appeal to students across divisions.” To do so, they foregrounded the question, “How can we create a guide that will be equally useful to students writing an English paper as those writing a lab report in biology?”

While making the Guide broadly applicable, the writers had to strike the appropriate tone and to balance competing needs. As Vincent noted, “We really were trying to make it scalable, so that you could have a first-year use it or you could have a fourth-year who’s writing their MAP use different sections of it.”

The participants in the project unanimously point out that they view the Guide as a document that will continue to evolve to reflect changing standards of academic writing.

Guide users can quickly turn to the section that addresses their immediate need, while professors may assign portions of the Guide as class readings to support writing assignments.

The Guide Includes

The Process of Writing

- reading a prompt
- prewriting
- drafting
- revision

Parts of a Paper

- title
- introduction
- thesis statements
- body paragraphs
- conclusions

The Research Process

- relationship to writing
- developing a research question
- searching for sources
- evaluating sources

Oral Presentations

- before the presentation
- during the presentation
- after the presentation

Grammar and Style

- five common mistakes
- write with the right word
- two grammar debates
- high school [style] hand-me-downs
- college-level style
- academic honesty



Origin of the Project

THE NEED

Janet formulated the idea of developing Grinnell's own writing guide after attending a workshop during which the University of Puget Sound Writing Center director described how they had created an online writing guide with Puget Sound references and examples. What she heard, said Janet, seemed like "the answer to my prayers."

What finally convinced Janet of the faculty and student need for a Grinnell Writing Guide was "a syllabus from a tutorial instructor" which included "days of discussion about various writing topics; every reading assignment was on the Purdue O.W.L. website. I thought, 'We are Grinnell College, and we have to send everybody to the Purdue Owl?'" Laughing, she continued, "I thought, 'We can do better than this.'"

A FACULTY PARTNERSHIP

In selecting a faculty partner, Janet "thought of Tim because he's done such interesting things with MAP projects, including the translation of *Beowulf*, and he's interested in digital humanities."

"Janet and I have worked together quite a lot in workshops" said Tim, "and I'm interested in this kind of work, [so] it made sense to come in and help to oversee students doing this kind of work."

THE STUDENT AUTHORS

The two students selected for the project each offered a unique skill set. Janet encouraged Vincent, "one of the strongest writers" in her Teaching Writing class the previous spring, to apply. "Obviously," Janet said, "we were looking for people who had strong writing skills."

In addition, Janet explained, "We had intended to have the guide include [advice on] research." To facilitate the Guide's research element, Phil Jones, who was "part of [the] early conversations," recommended Helen, not only a Burling Library research assistant but also a writing mentor for Tim.

AN ATTRACTIVE PROJECT

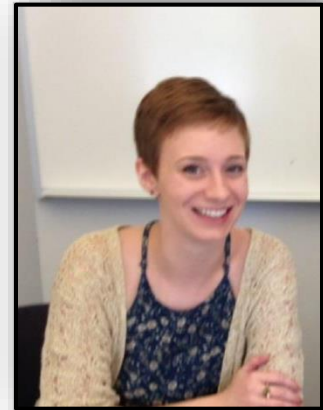
Reflecting on the project's benefits, Vincent said that he found that working on the Guide provided him with "specific information" useful in tutoring both his writing mentees and students in Grinnell's Liberal Arts in Prison Program.

In addition, by working on the Guide, Vincent said his own writing has improved "as a product of osmosis. You can't take all of this in and not have it change the way you look at writing." Greater awareness that he will "edit and polish and change" his writing has allowed Vincent to start "writing faster and sharper" than he did before—"a happy byproduct."

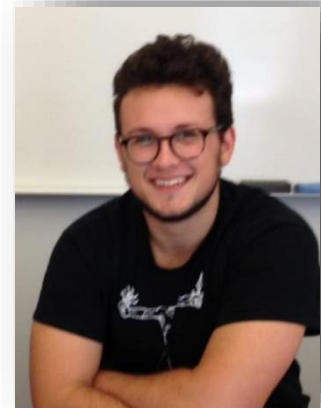
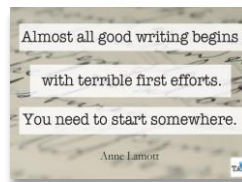
One aspect Helen appreciated was the project's flexibility. "Vincent and I were both going to have a lot of freedom to shape [the Guide] in the way that we thought it would benefit students the most. That was really appealing to me."

Vincent explained that the Guide development experience was "such a big task in organization and concision [that] it gave me new tools in how I represent my own work and how I represent my ideas." He notes that job interviewers have "pick[ed] up on that," adding that interest in the Guide from potential employers, faculty and others has "been unexpected, but I'm really happy about it."

The Authors' Thoughts



"I saw this as the kind of resource that I wish I had had as a student during my time at Grinnell, especially during my first year. I just thought it would be really nice to create that for future generations of students—or to create the first iteration of it at least."
—Helen



"Not a lot of colleges have their own specific writing guide, and I liked the idea of doing the groundwork for a project that would probably keep going and expand. Looking back on it, it was one of the things I'm most proud of doing while I've been at Grinnell."—Vincent



Methodology and Process

Perhaps the most astonishing part of the process of writing the Guide was how smoothly Helen and Vincent worked together and how much they accomplished in only two months.

In the beginning, both students were leery of collaborative projects because of unpleasant memories of in-class group work. According to Helen, “We really had to problem solve creatively together to figure out” the collaboration. Vincent claimed to feel “very lucky to have Helen as someone to collaborate with because she was very on it,” and Helen concurred “it was an incredibly balanced collaboration.”

The student work built on the outline Janet wrote in the planning stages of the project. Then, according to Vincent, he and Helen drew on their own “understanding of what we would have been looking for in a writing guide.”

Helen and Vincent played to their respective strengths; Helen’s position in the library made her eager to write the research section, and Vincent’s experience in two heavily writing-driven majors, political science and philosophy, gave him insight into the writing process and parts of a paper. According to Vincent, “It was sort of a combination of, ‘What do I think, as a student, I would find most useful?’ and also we read a lot of writing guides both online and in print versions, and took the best of all of those and compiled them into what we thought was the most pertinent.”



The MAP participants actually surprised themselves with how well the collaborative process worked. Janet points out, “They turned out 85 pages in one summer.” Vincent expressed similar astonishment at what he and Helen had accomplished, saying “I honestly did not know how much we were actually writing. We got to the end of the [summer], and ‘Oh, my God, this is like a 90-page document!’”

What stood out most strongly to Tim was how “easy it was; how strong the students’ performance was.” The smooth collaboration of the MAP participants culminated in a well-written and highly useful document for the Grinnell community.

Facilitating Future Incarnations

While a summer MAP allowed Vincent and Helen to create a substantial first version of the Guide, the creators foresee “opportunities,” said Janet, “to get more students involved in contributing” to it.

For example, according to Tim, a section on faculty feedback and student response should be substantial. He described this proposed section as “a significant project” on its own, requiring “a lot of work to talk to a range of faculty [and] to talk to students.”

“I’d like it to be a living document,” Tim reflected, “so that we can keep adding and refining.” Janet also hopes the Guide will continue to become more and more useful “for faculty as well as students.”

Therefore, they are looking for suggestions [see sidebar]. “As faculty and students use it,” Tim said—“whether it’s minor issues or sections that they’d like to see added—I hope that they will come to us and say, ‘Hey, we’d love to see this.’”



Questions & Suggestions

To ask questions and offer suggestions about the Guide, please e-mail

Janet at carl@grinnell.edu

or Tim at arnertim@grinnell.edu.

We’d Like to Know

What resources do you use in your discipline that you think the Guide should link to?

How would you like the Guide to be more interactive?

Do you have an assignment that you think the Guide should help share?

As you respond to student writing, what do you think about?

What do you think would be most useful for you and your students at each end of Grinnell students’ writing experience?

What discipline-specific issues would you like to see the guide include or connect to?

Initial ideas for useful additions to the Guide

• additional links to resources

To make the Guide more responsive to student and faculty needs, the team would like more links to related resources—“more examples, or fuller explanations” embedded in the document that, as Vincent explained, “there isn’t the space for” in the Guide itself.

• an increasingly interactive format

A student who’s interested in writing and a student who’s a computer science major could collaborate to make the Guide, as Helen described it, “more interactive for students and easily accessible.”

For instance, Helen thought, “Something that would be really fun to do would be to [incorporate learning] games.” Increasingly “intuitive iterations of the project” would encourage “a student to stumble upon [additional helpful] information after accessing the things they were originally looking for.” Likewise, Vincent suggested, the Guide could have “interactive worksheets connected to it.”

While they’ve included “fun examples...they’re all static,” Helen said. She wonders, “What could we do to make them more dynamic and to...make the information more memorable” for students?

• model papers & model assignments

Eventually, Janet would like to see faculty from diverse disciplines submit annotated model papers to show “why this is a fabulous intro to a sociology paper, and what makes this a great history paper”—adding, “I also wanted to include some really interesting [writing and research] assignments...as sort of, ‘Oooh, steal this assignment.’”

• examples of faculty & student reader responses

Tim imagines a section on “reading and responding to feedback on papers,” where faculty say, “Here’s what I’m thinking about when I’m reading papers [and] writing comments.” Those faculty responses could be “paralleled with students saying, ‘Here’s how I read comments when I get my paper back.’” By offering “both...perspectives,” the Guide could teach students to “think about how feedback works in more critical ways.”

• assistance specific to first-years & fourth-years

A section focused specifically on assisting tutorial students might make the Guide seem less “daunting” to that group of first-time users, suggested Vincent; carrying out interviews and “looking at syllabi” to determine “how tutorial professors” help first-year students achieve writing and speaking competencies could help demystify the process for students.

“On the flip side,” Vincent noted, MAP students who “push the upper edges of what [they] can do with undergraduate writing”—or who intend to use their MAP either “as a writing sample for graduate school or to publish it”—would benefit from a resource that cuts across the four-year Grinnell writing spectrum.

• material addressing discipline-specific challenges

Although Helen and Vincent worked to make the Guide broadly applicable, rather than discipline-specific, the team also imagines opportunities for connecting to existing discipline-specific goals, or stylistic choices, perhaps by making connections to departments’ writing outcomes.

Helen admitted, “I do like the idea [that] when you’re writing an introduction,” the Guide could answer the question, “what does that mean for a science paper versus a philosophy paper?” Vincent agreed that, for students who are connected to their majors, “the Guide would benefit from more disciplinary specific examples that are pin-pointed by professors or by students.”

Finally, Tim expressed the hope that the Guide will play a larger roll by “emphasiz[ing] that writing is a conversation.” He noted, “If the guide gets people into the Writing Lab, that’s a great thing. If [its] advice [to] go ask your professor if you have a question about the prompt” causes more students to take advantage of office hours, “that’s a great outcome.”

— Bill Rudolph, Helyn Wohlwend

Project Coordinators’ Final Thoughts

Eventually, the Guide could “give each department a page—not just to lay out the [discipline-specific] writing outcomes, but the philosophy in the discipline. You know, ‘In sociology, we privilege this...in terms of evidence and style. In English, we like to do this. In Psychology, you would do this.’” —Tim

Because ‘ownership’ of the guide could change—as the Guide is used, and as faculty and students suggest improvements, its evolution will be dependent upon “somebody in a department or the Writing Lab to stay interested and make it a priority” as an ongoing project. —Janet

