



## Write Tight: Dabble With the Drabble

Looking for a new way to challenge students in their writing, critical thinking, creativity, and connections with course content? Have them create a Drabble, a unique, succinct, and fun writing exercise, as a classroom activity or assignment. These very short novels help students choose their words wisely and think carefully about what they want to say.

The Drabble comes from an unlikely source, the British comedy troupe Monty Python, and their 1971 publication, *Big Red Book* (Chapman et al., 1971), which described this word game as a competition where the winner creates a novel using 100 or fewer words. In 1987, Steve Moss, then editor of the *New Times*, an independent newspaper in San Luis Obispo, California, took the art form to a new high, or, more accurately, low. Under Moss' leadership, the newspaper began sponsoring annual Drabble contests but changed the original Monty Python format, reducing the allowable number of words to 55. Other rules include the following:

- The novel must include a setting.
- The Drabble should feature one or more characters.
- The story must include conflict.
- The conflict must be resolved.

This shorter format, known as 55 Fiction, excludes the words in the novel's title, which cannot exceed a count of seven. Staff at the *New Times* offered these encouraging words to first-time Drabble writers:

Writing a 55 Fiction story isn't as easy as it looks. A haiku poem is short. So is a quarterback sneak. But nobody thinks they're simple to execute. It's just that the people who do them well make it seem that way. Taking a great story concept and developing it within such a limited space is a little like carving a beautiful sculpture from a tiny block of wood. The working range is truncated and intimate, but the goal is no different than if you were creating on a much larger scale. You're trying to perfectly merge various elements into a coherent whole that ultimately makes people say, "Wow, that's really great!" (Moss, 2012)



“A picture can tell a thousand words, but a few words can change its story.”

—Sebastyne Young,  
Author

## Examples of Drabbles

Here are two Drabbles, the first using the longer and the second the shorter format.

### Whodunnit?

Only five of us made it to the escape pod. We peered through the viewports at the cataclysmic destruction of our spacecraft as we spun away into the Deep Black. It had been a deliberate, traitorous act—some mole undetected by the crew—and we knew that the saboteur had to be on board. We exchanged suspicious glances.

I studied the others closely. The second technician was looking particularly nervous—fidgeting and sweat-soaked. The navigator didn't meet anyone's eyes for long.

I sat back, thinking hard. Which one of them would be the first to guess it had been me? (*52 Drabbles*, n.d.)

### Love on the Net

Sarah sat at the table, awaiting her perfect match, pink carnation held at the ready.

When Jason arrived, their eyes immediately met across the crowded café. As he sauntered over to her, his smile quickly faded.

"You told me you looked like George Clooney," she said.

"You told me you were a woman!" he retorted. (*WriteWords*, n.d.)

## Applications for the Classroom

Effective Drabble writing requires students to consider carefully the plot of their stories and choose their words to fit within the constraints of the 55- or 100-word format—great skills for any writer to develop. Drabbles also can be valuable learning experiences across academic disciplines and courses. The following examples demonstrate the range of activities Drabbles can inspire in the classroom:

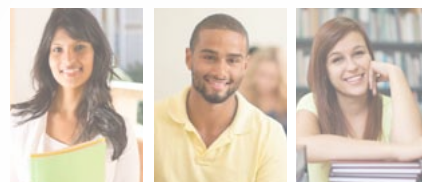
- Students can create a Drabble on a specific discipline or content-related concept in any class connected to specific course outcomes, themes, or subjects (e.g., mitochondria, Mark Twain, quadratic equations, existentialism).
- The shortened format can help students outline the main points they want to communicate in another writing assignment, allowing them to brainstorm ideas and making the Drabble a preview of that work.
- Students can post their work on the class's learning management system and then critique their peers' novels in the Drabble gallery.
- To add an extra step, students can illustrate their Drabbles with one photograph.
- To make the assignment more creative and incorporate the use of technology, students can translate their Drabbles into a comic book format or a movie, using iMovie, for example.
- The class can sponsor a Drabble contest or night, letting students share their work with a larger audience.

July 25-27, 2014  
Asheville, North Carolina

Institute on

FIRST-GENERATION

COLLEGE STUDENTS



The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition invites those interested in programs and initiatives for first-generation students to join us for the Institute on First-Generation College Students. Faculty will build a framework for examining trends and practices connected to building a comprehensive and intentional approach to ensure the success of first-generation students.

Individual sessions are designed to build on one another so that participants leave with a personalized action plan for use on their home campuses. Modeling the active pedagogies we advocate for our classrooms, the Institute faculty employ group work, problem solving, case studies, discussion, and other active strategies to engage participants in learning.

Register at:  
[WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/FGCS](http://www.sc.edu/fye/fgcs)

Creating a brief, pithy narrative of 55 or 100 words is fun for students and instructors and fosters classroom learning opportunities in any course. Drabbles encourage students to think more clearly about their writing and choose every word with care, and as an added benefit for faculty, what could be better than grading an assignment that is only 100 words long?

## REFERENCES

- 52 Drabbles. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://52drabbles.blogspot.com/>
- Chapman, C., Python, M., Palin, M., Idle, E., Jones, T., Cleese, J., & Gilliam, T. (1971). *Big red book*. London, England: Meuthen Publishing.
- Moss, S. (2012). Special issue: 55 fiction 2012. *New Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.newtimeslo.com/special-issue/56/55-fiction-2012/how-to-enter/>
- WriteWords. (n.d.) Retrieved from [http://www.writewords.org.uk/forum/75\\_8979.asp](http://www.writewords.org.uk/forum/75_8979.asp)

## 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience Updates

### Jordan Smith Undergraduate Student Fellowships (See photo to the right)

Each year the National Resource Center awards five fellowships for outstanding undergraduates to attend the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. The purpose of the fellowship program is to advance the leadership skills and knowledge base of undergraduate students so that they may, in turn, use what they learn at the conference to enhance and encourage first-year student development on their respective campuses.

### 2014 Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates (See photo to the right)

The National Resource Center and Wadsworth/Cengage Learning announced the 10 educators who were selected as the 2014 Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates at the 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience in San Diego, California. These educators share a common goal of improving the educational experience for entering college students. They have been awarded this distinction for their exceptional work on behalf of first-year students and for the impact their efforts have on the students and culture of their institutions.



### Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars Award

José Saldivar of the University of Texas-Pan American received the 2014 Excellence in Teaching First-Year Seminars Award at the 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience in San Diego, California. The award, sponsored by the McGraw-Hill Companies and The National Resource Center, recognizes an instructor who has achieved great success in teaching

first-year seminars and inspires student learning, development, and success.

At an institution with more than 90% Mexican-American enrollment, Saldivar integrates culture and ethnicity into his courses through readings, discussion, and self-reflective assignments. He helps his students understand how their cultural and language heritage interact with their identities. Making these connections in the classroom, he consistently receives ratings of good or excellent from 97-100% of his students.

## Award Recipients

### Jordan Smith Undergraduate Student Fellowship



Left to right: Lynn Gold, graduate assistant, National Resource Center; Jordan Grapentine, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay; Renaldo Gacad, Washington University in St. Louis; Josh Dusing, University of South Florida; Victoria Savage, Whittier College; and Jennifer Keup, director, National Resource Center. Not pictured: Marissa Mannello, University of Connecticut.

### 2014 Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates



Left to right: Colin J. Morris, associate professor of history, Manhattanville College; April Heaney, associate lecturer for the Department of English and Learn director, University of Wyoming; Barbara Boyette, assistant academic dean for Academic Support, Guilford College; Peter Ellard, associate vice president of Academic Affairs for Student Retention and Success, Siena College; Shelagh Rose, assistant professor of languages, Pasadena City College; Phyllis Simpson, dean, Student Services/director of Counseling, Our Lady of the Lake College; Cynthia Mosqueda, faculty coordinator, counselor, and governor at large-FACCC, El Camino College; Tracy Gottlieb, vice president of Student Services, Seton Hall University; April Mann, director of New Student & Carolina Parent Programs, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Jennifer Keup, director, National Resource Center; and Shani Fisher, executive editor, Cengage Learning. Not pictured: David T. Ouimette, executive director, University of Connecticut.

# What's Happening at The National Resource Center

## Conferences and Continuing Education

### Conferences and Institutes

#### Institute for the Success of Student Veterans

April 4-6, 2014

University of South Carolina (Capstone Campus Room)

The institute will focus on understanding the student veteran population, integrating student veterans to campus culture, overcoming hurdles of enrollment and admissions, and meeting the needs of student veteran families. Individual sessions are designed to build on one another so that participants will leave with a personalized action plan for use on their home campuses. To register or for more information, please go to <http://sc.edu/fye/ISSV/>.

### Save the Dates

#### Institute on First-Generation College Students

July 25-27, 2014

Renaissance Hotel, Asheville, North Carolina

#### 21st National Conference on Students in Transition

October 18-20, 2014

Denver, Colorado

### Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions or forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 25 participants. Visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc> for more information.

### Online Course Offerings:

#### Fostering First-Year Student Success

July 14-August 8, 2014

Facilitated by Stephanie Foote

#### Proving and Improving: Foundations of First-Year Assessment

August 18-September 19, 2014

Facilitated by Dallin George Young

Research Reports on  
College Transitions No. 4  
**2012-2013 National  
Survey of First-Year  
Seminars: Exploring  
High-Impact Practices  
in the First College Year**

*Dallin George Young and Jessica M. Hopp*



For a quarter century, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has been examining the prevalence, structure, and administration of first-year seminars on American college campuses. The 2012-2013 administration of the National Survey of First-Year Seminars was expanded to explore the connection between the seminar and other high-impact practices in the first college year, including learning communities, service-learning, common reading programs, undergraduate research, and writing instruction. Findings are disaggregated by institutional characteristics and seminar type so that readers may easily identify the course features with the greatest relevance for their own context.

(2014). ISBN 978-1-889271-90-3. \$25.

[www.nrcpubs.com](http://www.nrcpubs.com)



## New Releases



### Writing in the Senior Capstone: Theory and Practice

Lea Masiello and Tracy L. Skipper

Writing facilitates learning, helps students gain skills in analysis and synthesis, and supports a range of other personal and intellectual developmental outcomes important to employers. Yet, surveys of employers continually highlight the need for better communication skills among recent college graduates. To that end, *Writing in the Senior Capstone* offers the rationale and practical guidance for infusing writing into culminating academic experiences for college seniors. Recognizing that writing-intensive capstones already exist on many campuses, the authors also offer a range of strategies and activities to support the development of independent senior projects, while honing students' thinking, writing, and presentation skills. ISBN 978-1-889-27187-3. 156 pages. \$30.00. To order your copy, visit us online at <http://www.nrcpubs.com/p/118/writing-in-senior-capstone>.

## National Resource Center Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center is actively involved in the conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunities to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet staff members.

**The Power of Peers: Exploring the Impact of Peer Leadership Experiences.** Presented by Jennifer R. Keup, director, and copresented by Dallin George Young, assistant director for Research, Grants, and Assessment; at the 2014 American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Annual Conference; 3-4 p.m.; Tuesday, April 1, 2014; Indianapolis Marriott Downtown-Indiana E; Indianapolis, Indiana.

**Surveying the National Landscape of First-Year Seminars: A High Impact Practice.** Presented by Dallin George Young, assistant director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, and copresented by Jennifer R. Keup, director; at the 2014 American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Annual Conference; 4:30-5:30 p.m.; Tuesday, April 1, 2014; Indiana Convention Center-133; Indianapolis, Indiana.

## Research

### Paul P. Fidler Research Grant

The Paul P. Fidler Research Grant encourages the development and dissemination of knowledge that has the potential to improve the experiences of college students in transition. The grant is named in memory of Paul P. Fidler, a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, whose pioneering research on student learning and success had a vital impact on work to promote the success of all students in transition. The award includes a cash stipend, travel to two national conferences, a presentation at a national conference, and priority consideration for publication. The application window for the 2014-2015 Paul P. Fidler Research Grant will open April 1, 2014, and close at 11:59 Eastern, July 1, 2014. For more information, please visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/research/grant>.

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### The Toolbox

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*The Toolbox* is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox).

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