



## Beth McCall, M.A.

Instructor of Developmental English — Gaston College

### Aplia™ Helps English Students Get Off to the “Write” Start

Beth McCall has been teaching developmental writing at Gaston College in Dallas, North Carolina, for 22 years. The community college’s motto is “opportunities for life,” and teachers in any discipline would probably agree that writing skills are vital for individuals wanting to benefit from life’s opportunities. Beth has used the Aplia™ online homework tool for five years to give her students opportunities for the consistent practice that helps them on their path to writing proficiency.

#### COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Beth’s developmental English courses have a hybrid format, with four class sessions taught each week on campus and one session per week taught online. She teaches approximately 100 students each semester, ranging in age from 17 years to 70. Students represent an array of traditional students as well as non-traditional students who have families and part- or full-time jobs.

Beth was introduced to Aplia by her Cengage Learning representative. “I’ve always been treated respectfully by Cengage Learning representatives, so I am predisposed to use their products,” she says. “I guess I’m brand loyal. I believed that Cengage Learning would be there for me if I had any technical or other issues with Aplia.”

#### THE CHALLENGES

Beth’s biggest challenge is keeping students motivated and on track so that they’ll be prepared for subsequent coursework. Her students face an array of personal challenges that can derail many learners. “They have a lot of balls up in the air,” says Beth. “If an unexpected event occurs, such as a child getting sick, that often takes priority, understandably.”

Many of Beth’s students, who had academic difficulty in high school or have been out of school for so long that they need to refresh their skills, struggle with the course. Others are adjusting to new technology. Says Beth, “There were no personal computers when some of my students graduated from high school, yet they have to turn in assignments in the first week on a computer. They have to go from 0 to 60 technologically at the same time that they are trying to grasp grammar and punctuation concepts.”

#### THE RESULTS

Beth uses Aplia in her weekly online sessions and for homework to give students practice with grammar and punctuation, transitional phrases, and the like, helping them to build fundamental skills. Aplia also exposes students to examples of good writing. Its terminology, definitions, and level of difficulty match her textbook. “The textbook has limited space for practice exercises, and having Aplia more than doubles that,” she says. “It’s also beneficial for students to have help when I’m not available. For some students, Aplia offers a good review and reinforcement of what they already know. For others, it provides the information and practice that gets them from not understanding to understanding.”

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#### CHALLENGES

- **Developmental writing students often struggle** with the course material and need lots of practice to build skills and preparedness for subsequent courses.
- **Students with diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and skill levels** need varied learning resources and problem-specific guidance as they complete their homework.
- **Improving student retention rates** is an ongoing objective.

#### SOLUTIONS

- Aplia
- Fawcett, Susan, *Grassroots with Readings: The Writer’s Workbook*
- Fawcett, Susan, *Evergreen: A Guide to Writing with Readings*

#### RESULTS

- **Aplia builds fundamental writing and grammar skills** by providing students with much needed practice and concept reinforcement. Of students who took a basic writing course with Aplia, 89% passed the next course in the sequence.
- **Diverse chapter-specific exercises**, including interactive questions with animations, address various learning styles and cover a range of skill levels. Constructive feedback on each response encourages learning and further practice.
- **Improved school retention rates were attributed in part to Aplia**, which allows students to access course materials, get immediate feedback, and keep up with homework when they miss class.

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Apla course management tools help Beth stay in touch with her class; Apla also allows her to upload additional course materials for easy access by students. “Without Apla, I would be hard pressed to find the time to create exercises, post them on BlackBoard® (the school’s learning management system), and grade them.”

Beth’s favorite Apla feature is the instant response that it provides to students. “When they submit their answers, they get constructive feedback. For incorrect answers, a prompt tells them where in the chapter they need to review.” Succinct instruction and a diversity of chapter-specific exercises (each with different variations) address various learning styles and cover a range of skill levels. For instance, some problems include interactive animations that allow students to “see” how grammar works. Apla also has a diagnostic assessment tool that enables instructors to evaluate where they should focus their teaching efforts.

“One of our course outcomes is to include a technology component. With Apla, I know that I am giving my students up-to-date technology and preparing them for their other courses and the work world,” says Beth. Apla is also advantageous for busy students who can’t always make it to class. “I can post my lecture notes and course materials, and they can see their homework online so they don’t fall behind.” As students complete assignments, grades are posted in the Apla gradebook, a tool with various reporting features that allow instructors to monitor performance for individual students and for the class as a whole.

Gaston’s retention rates have improved, and Beth believes that Apla plays a role. “Our higher retention rates are due to a combination of factors, but it makes sense that if students who miss a class have Apla, they don’t fall behind on homework, they don’t get discouraged, and they stay in the course.”

With respect to student performance and Apla, Beth says, “Of the students who pass my course, 89% of them pass the next course in the writing sequence on the first go around — so I can say that students leave my class adequately prepared. I think Apla plays a role in that success, because it helps students establish the grammatical and punctuation foundation that they need to succeed later on.”

Beth is also a fan of Cengage Learning Digital Course Support Services. “I am a technodinosaur, and my Digital Solutions Coordinators helps me all the time. I have had nothing but good experiences with Cengage Learning staff. Any English teacher who needs or wants a technological component should look at Apla.”

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