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The Franklin College of Arts and Sciences Writing Intensive Program

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“Writing has never been more important, and we believe this new program will give students a great advantage in all they do.”

—*Dean Wyatt Anderson*

Program Goals and Principles

Writing—and writing well—is not a concern exclusive to those in English Departments. A recent survey found that 98% of professionals considered writing to be “very important to doing their jobs well,” and they reported spending an average of “46 percent of their working hours” writing (Lunsford and Connors 698). In fact, as this same study indicates, “engineers report spending more time writing than do English teachers” (698). Although the purpose of a university education is more than simply job training, learning to communicate well in writing is an important component of professional life outside the academy as well as within it. Students, however, tend to believe that writing is something they need only do in Freshman English. They are, of course, wrong: not only will students be required to write in many courses during their university careers, but also they will be required to write at work after they graduate—perhaps to write even more than do English teachers!

Since its inception in 1997, the Writing Intensive Program has thus offered a growing number of “writing intensive courses” designed to extend students’ writing experience. These courses are premised on the assumption that students need to write not only to prepare for post-university work but also to enhance their university learning experiences. Making writing central to learning across the curriculum helps students achieve two important objectives:

1. Writing in the disciplines improves thinking skills and promotes learning of the subject matter, the “content” of any course;
2. Writing initiates students into the disciplinary conventions of knowing, researching, and communicating knowledge.

Writing Encourages Learning

Composition scholar Janet Emig, drawing on cognitive psychology research, argues convincingly that writing and learning are strikingly parallel cognitive functions. As most of us would agree is also the case with teaching, the more one writes about something, the more one learns about that something. Further, by encouraging an active kind of

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learning, writing allows students to engage course material on a more integrative cognitive level than is possible if they only hear or see material presented to them. Although we certainly want our students to learn a substantial body of knowledge, we also want them to be able to analyze, to assess, and to use that knowledge. This involves cognitive functions that are facilitated by writing. According to Emig, “if the most efficacious learning occurs when learning is reinforced, then writing—through its inherent reinforcement cycle involving hand, eye and brain—marks a uniquely powerful multirepresentational mode of learning” (“Writing as a Mode of Learning” 125).

Additionally, a great deal of testing pedagogy rests on the assumption that being able to write competently about a topic demonstrates that a student knows it. Thus, the Writing Intensive Program addresses the need to provide students with the assistance they need to perform competently and to demonstrate learning in writing.

Writing Initiates Students into Disciplinary Practices

Composition scholar David Bartholomae argues that “bad” student writing often results when a student tries to write as a scientist, when she doesn’t know how to write as a scientist. As all of us can attest, sentence-level errors increase when students attempt writing assignments with which they have little or no experience. The Writing Intensive Program recognizes that teaching students how to write means teaching them the discourse conventions of a given discipline: teaching them how to think, how to argue, how to write as scientists, sociologists, geologists, music historians. Judith A. Langer’s “Speaking of Knowing” argues that “Writing (and the thinking that accompanies it) then becomes a primary and necessary vehicle for practicing the ways of organizing and presenting ideas that are most appropriate to a particular subject area” (71).

This second goal, of course, features a faculty-development component as well: it requires faculty to articulate “the rules of argument and evidence that represent the ways of thinking unique to each discipline” (Langer 83). Writing Intensive Program faculty agree that this is key to effectively using writing to teach. Adding a writing component to a course thus not only initiates students into each discipline, but also encourages faculty to articulate their largely tacit knowledge regarding their discipline and to re-evaluate their pedagogical practices.

Both Writing Intensive Program goals aim to use writing as a way of making better students and better teachers. They encourage students and faculty to think differently about writing as a process in a discipline and to intervene in that process

- 1) by staging assignments,
- 2) by providing guidance along the way,
- 3) by encouraging multiple drafts, and
- 4) by responding to student writing with an aim to educate not to punish.

Writing Intensive Courses

Writing Intensive Program courses have included those currently in the curriculum that have been structured to emphasize writing more fully, as well as courses that have been specifically designed as such (for example, “Topics” courses). Past Writing Intensive Program courses have included:

Human Anatomy	<i>Dr. David Lindsay</i>
Techniques of Art Appreciation and Criticism	<i>Dr. Candace Stout</i>
Medieval Art	<i>Dr. Tom Polk</i>
History of Music	<i>Dr. David Schiller, Dr. Steven Valdez, and Dr. Glenda Goss</i>
The Buddhist Tradition	<i>Dr. Shanta Ratnayaka</i>
Roman Didactic Poetry	<i>Dr. Keith Dix</i>
Bacterial Genetics Laboratory	<i>Dr. Elliot Altman</i>
Sociology of War and the Military	<i>Dr. Jim Dowd</i>

What constitutes a writing intensive course varies from discipline to discipline, but in general such courses work from an understanding of writing as a process and offer students more opportunities than would be possible in a non-writing intensive version of the course: a) to engage in innovative writing assignments, b) to get feedback on work in progress, c) to refine their work, and d) to practice the writing conventions of a discipline. In short, the program emphasizes the fact that effective writing does not appear miraculously, fully formed, but rather results from learning more about writing as a process with various steps, all requiring attention and care. **The Writing Intensive Program is “intensive” not because it requires an overwhelming amount of writing but because it offers students an “intense” engagement with the writing process.**

To help meet Writing Intensive Program goals, participating faculty are assigned a Writing Intensive Program Support Assistant trained specifically by the program in writing across the curriculum skills. The assistant helps in developing, responding to, and evaluating student writing. In recent evaluations, Writing Intensive Program students applauded the professionalism and quality of help they received from their “writing coaches.”

Positive Student and Faculty Responses to the Writing Intensive Program

Responses to assessment surveys indicate that both student and faculty participants believe that the Writing Intensive Program delivers opportunities for an enriched academic experience. While WIP students as a rule don’t like to write, they do tend to see the value of writing, and some explicitly credit participation in a Writing Intensive Course with making their attitudes toward writing more productive. On Fall 1998 surveys, more than half of students (approximately 55% of those who responded) reported that the WIP experience influenced their attitudes toward writing in a positive way, for example, by increasing their confidence and helping them to

“I wouldn’t say I was crazy about writing. However, it is definitely a better way to learn, which is most important. It also forces the class to be prepared for discussion, which was also much more informed because of the writing. It also promotes personal interaction with the teacher.”

—anonymous student, WIP course evaluation

see writing as a more manageable task. Moreover, more than three-fourths (81% of those who responded) said that their WIP course positively influenced their writing skills and course performance. Furthermore almost three-fourths of those who responded noted that their writing intensive course helped them learn course material. Approximately the same number of students also felt that a writing intensive course offered more learning enhancements (contact with faculty and support assistants, more individual instruction and more feedback on their work) than a non-writing intensive course. As one student put it, “To be honest, I’ve always hated writing, but this was my first major class, and I learned more in here than in any other class.”

From a faculty perspective, the Writing Intensive Program’s approach to writing in the disciplines provides benefits such as these: “Keeps students interested in subject matter”; “Helps keep their attention; enhances language perception”; “Increases realization of writing’s importance”; “Helps us find areas students aren’t clear about”; “Makes students more thoughtful toward original drafts”; “Makes students more attentive and more careful about writing.” Participating faculty believe that the extra care that WIP participation fosters tends to translate into writing progress. On average, by the end of the semester, responding WIP faculty in Fall 1998 reported stronger writing, as they define it, for more than half (71%) of their students.

“The students, I suspect, will argue that they wrote too much. . . . But I take satisfaction in knowing that over the course of the quarter, most students demonstrated marked improvement in writing.”

—History Professor William Holmes

Tips for Preparing Courses That Reflect Writing Intensive Program Goals

Include in your syllabus and discuss in class the purposes of the writing component and all writing assignments.

The idea that writing is a punishment — the lone student detained after class to write “I will not...” one hundred times on a chalkboard — dies hard. Students need to be convinced that writing assignments are an essential part of course learning, not something you have “tacked on” in order to make their lives more difficult. Discuss the purposes of writing and the goals of writing assignments in terms of benefits to your students, for instance, communicating that you require writing in order to a) help them learn and b) learn to communicate more effectively according to the discourse conventions of your discipline, which, after all, are relevant to the writing at work many students will do.

Create innovative writing assignments that a) help students learn material by writing about it and b) teach students to connect the research skills, patterns of proof, and ways of using language to writing competence in their discipline. Here are two suggestions (see “Ideas for Incorporating Writing” for more):

- Ask students to choose two ideas from a day’s lecture and to briefly explain how they relate to each other. This activity can be especially powerful in developing invention/problem-solving skills if you specify that the ideas must be incongruous in some way.
- To build students’ understanding of the critical thinking processes that writing in your course entails, ask them to define the skill terms relevant to your course assignments; for instance, in your field, what activities do analysis, critical synthesis, a lab report, or review require?

Help students elaborate the writing process and apply it to communicating in your discipline:

- Sequence writing assignments in stages that allow opportunities for input and working with others.

- Give students opportunities for prewriting: for instance, ask them to e-mail working theses, outlines, writing plans before drafting.
- Help students distinguish between Rewriting and Editing: focus on global concerns (ideas and organization) first, and reserve sentence-level issues (grammar, punctuation, usage) for Editing.

As successful writers in many fields recognize, effective writing does not appear spontaneously, perfectly formed, but results from a process with key steps that all require attention and care. Though the writing process does not follow a strictly linear path, writing research demonstrates that it parallels the insight process acknowledged in many disciplines and that it involves these phases: a) Prewriting, what the rhetorical tradition calls “invention,” or discovering ideas, resources, ways of thinking about and planning an approach to a topic and which also includes discovering formats and setting objectives; b) Drafting, the step with which many students start and stop writing; c) Rewriting, the process of revising and refining work in terms of goals; and d) Editing, which addresses sentence-level concerns and conventions. Rather than requiring more writing, writing intensive courses offer a more intense engagement with this process. To address it, faculty should stage assignments so students can receive feedback and direction in all parts of the process.

A key to teaching writing as a process in any discipline — and as a learning process at that — is to explain that different parts of the process entail different activities and attitudes toward “error.” Avoiding error, as most of us know, is how many students define writing. In fact, writing research demonstrates that inexperienced student writers equate “writing” with finding “the right words” and using correct grammar, activities more usefully addressed in Editing stages of the process, though they are taken to be the whole of writing. Few

students know that more attention to Prewriting — for instance, getting help with setting goals for an assignment or finding an organizing principle to direct their work in promising ways — will give them greater gains than consulting a thesaurus. Attention to Prewriting enables a writer to have a greater stock of ideas to draw on when Drafting and Rewriting.

Contrary to common practice for many students and teachers, Drafting and Rewriting are not optimal times to address sentence level concerns. Although grammatical effectiveness and sentence errors are important and all too easy to mark on student drafts, writing researchers argue that focusing on these issues too soon in the writing process is not productive. In fact, when faculty emphasize sentence-level errors during Drafting and Rewriting stages, they unwittingly reinforce limiting assumptions about writing, namely that it is not about thinking but about arranging words correctly. In short, writing process wisdom argues that Drafting and Rewriting are stages in which to focus on global issues such as organization and development. The most useful time to focus on sentence-level concerns is Editing.

Respond to student writing to aid learning and motivate Rewriting.

Commenting on student work effectively is an art. For many of us, the key is to make students want to continue working with an assignment, which means calling attention to what seems promising in a draft, as well as to what needs work. Reviewing our own learning histories, many faculty can probably point to an effective teacher who saw more in our writing than we did at a particular time and who led us to learn more. This is the challenge of responding effectively. However, the tendency to mark every error on student papers — and there are plenty — often compromises the potential of our responses to be helpful. Marking every error is counterproductive at any stage of the process. In fact, writing research indicates that student writers can process only 3-5 negative comments per page. Thus, over-marking errors — in effect “correcting” student papers — is an inefficient use of faculty time:

it becomes an overwhelming task that does not aid the student writer. To respond effectively to student writing:

- Look for patterns of error rather than marking up each fragment or tangled sentence.
- Mark representative errors, perhaps suggesting options.
- Frame suggestions in terms of goals: give a reason for each suggestion.
- Consider the goals of a particular phase of the writing process, since responding to an initial draft is different from grading a final one.
- Prioritize as well as limit suggestions: student need to know what’s most important to do next. That’s the direction they depend on us for.

Use writing intensive teaching assistants effectively.

Writing Intensive Courses allow faculty to draw on teaching assistants who can help explain writing assignments and approaches, provide feedback to students and support their efforts. Students tend to perceive this as a value-added component of a writing intensive course. To take advantage of teaching assistants’ special training:

- Faculty should encourage or require students to meet with their teaching assistants for individual conferences or workshops.
- Writing Intensive teaching assistants should have opportunities to intervene in each stage of the writing process, rather than serving as “graders” of the finish product.
- To enrich the learning experience for everyone, provide for your teaching assistant and your students guidelines for writing in your course. Let them know what constitutes good writing (samples are always helpful) and make clear the criteria you use to evaluate writing.
- Finally, be clear about what you expect from your Writing Intensive Program assistant. Identify his or her responsibilities and authority for the course.

Ideas for Incorporating Writing into Course Learning Experiences

In the forms of writing most appropriate to your discipline, from 5-minute paragraphs and informal notes written in class to e-mail responses, be inventive in designing opportunities for your students to write, to engage what they're learning, and to build and practice the processes that stand to improve writing quality as your discipline defines it. Some ideas:

- Ask students to respond in a half page to “the most important idea” from a class meeting (Meyers and Jones 24).
- Assign an insight log in which students track particularly memorable, inspiring, or problematic ideas from course readings.
- Near the close of a class meeting, invite students to write a key point recap of the day’s discussion, to propose a topic for the next meeting, or to write a brief agenda for it.
- Give students a set of questions or problems from which to choose, and ask them to write a strategy for how to go about responding to the question or solving the problem.
- To teach writing as a discovery strategy, ask students to brainstorm in writing or to generate but not answer a set of questions on an issue.
- Invite students to map in writing the steps they envision taking to do a task on your syllabus. They might also file a work plan or timeline for completing course projects.
- In professional life, electronic communication is increasingly the way work gets done, and it offers great opportunities for the Writing Intensive classroom. Experiment with e-mail and Web venues for stimulating written responses. Ask students to e-mail their working theses for papers; discussion groups can engage students to write informally about course concepts and issues.
- Invite students to write a brief “practice exam” and a rationale for it that explains what it aims to test.
- Brief writing activities can make multiple choice exams effective as a way of teaching how to justify a decision: a chemistry professor requires students to explain WHY a choice is right or students receive no credit for their choice (Meyers and Jones 24).
- Research on learning in management suggests that unless a new strategy or concept is applied in context soon after it is introduced, the chances of the learner ever applying it diminish strikingly. Writing activities offer a useful way of immediately applying, exploring, and practicing “ways of knowing” in a discipline.

Per Writing Theory and Research, Seven Compelling Reasons for Using Writing in Your Courses

1. **Writing is a “way of learning.”** Writing entails high-order, domain-spanning thinking processes that are integral to learning.
2. **Writing encourages “active learning.”** From brainstorming to e-mail to formal papers and essay exams, writing provides a way for students to “see what they think” and to elaborate on it. Writing not only reinforces but also permits learning.
3. **Some kinds of thought, especially the kinds we hope teaching moments inspire, emerge only when we try to communicate them to ourselves and others.** Writing fosters the ability to explore and articulate relationships, to wrestle with “why” and “how,” to learn what counts as support in a discipline, and to refine thinking.
4. **Many disciplines evaluate student performance in terms of writing ability.** By incorporating writing activities into your courses and making effective writing important, you give students vital practice in the skills on which their performances in many academic fields will be assessed.
5. **Giving students more opportunities to write and more responses to their work makes improved writing quality more likely.** Writing is learnable. Providing students with help with the processes of writing and with opportunities to write will improve idea fluency and flexibility, develop metacognitive abilities required to engage in complex decision-making tasks, and introduce students to the ways of communicating ideas that are specific to your discipline. What it means to think like a scientist is inextricably linked to what it means to write like a scientist.
6. **Writing is important to achievement not only in academic disciplines but also in other workplace settings.**
7. **Emphasizing the uses and benefits of writing in your courses helps improve students’ attitudes toward their own abilities and invites them to use writing in new ways.** Moreover, using writing to enhance learning makes you more aware of what constitutes writing effectiveness and stands to improve the quality of your own work.

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Writing Intensive Program

Participating in the Writing Intensive Program: Call for Course Proposals 1999-2000

Proposal Guidelines: The Writing Intensive Program Committee invites proposals from all faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences and will select approximately 30 proposals from a wide range of disciplines. For obvious reasons, writing intensive courses should be designed for enrollments of fewer than 30 students. However, full consideration will be given to proposals involving break-away writing/discussion groups within courses with higher enrollments. Proposals should describe the course, explaining how it fits course design and program goals as listed. Proposals may be supported with attachments such as sample writing assignments and syllabi. Please include an estimate of the course enrollment and specify what semester it is scheduled to be taught. In addition to your original proposal, please include four photocopies. All proposals will be evaluated by the Writing Intensive Committee: *Michelle Ballif*, English; *Bill Provost*, English; *Tom Polk*, Art; *Ted Shifrin*, Mathematics; and *Barry Palevitz*, Botany.

Proposals will be accepted through April 1, 1999.

Please submit them to:

Dr. Michelle Ballif, Director
Writing Intensive Program
Department of English, Park Hall 252

To learn more about the Writing Intensive Program, contact the program Director, Dr. Michelle Ballif, at 542-1261 or mballif@arches.uga.edu, or visit the web site at <http://parallel.park.uga.edu/~mballif/writing.html>.

The Office of Instructional Support & Development

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