

University Writing Committee Final Report 2013-14  
June 25, 2013  
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**Attendance Summary:** The University Writing Committee (UWC) met 9 times – August 29, September 12, October 10, November 7, December 12, January 23, February 27, March 27, and April 24. See attendance table below

**Summary of Activities:** The University Writing Committee (UWC) is charged with regularly reviewing the writing plans and their implementation to identify patterns and make recommendations for the on-going improvement of writing and writing instruction. All department writing plans are on a three-year reporting rotation and in 2013-14 the UWC was scheduled to review the reports from 36 programs. Seven programs asked for a delay because of changes in faculty or departmental leadership, or in the case of Business Administration, because the program was under consideration for elimination. Those programs that asked for a delay – Chemistry and Biochemistry, Aviation Management and Aviation Flight, Foreign Language Education, Political Science, Health Services Administration, and Public Administration – were rescheduled for review in 2014-15. The UWC also reviewed and approved a revised writing plan for Industrial Design. Based on the analysis of the information submitted by departments, the UWC concludes that:

- all reviewed departments have successfully begun implementation of their writing plans
- the five principles are being maintained in all departments, though the UWC continues to notice that many plans provide relatively few opportunities for revision
- many departments are continuing to revise their strategies for assessment as they complete the first couple of years of their writing plans
- faculty engagement in the development, implementation and assessment of writing plans has been strong. In fact, many reports describe efforts to involve new faculty in the writing plans and efforts to maintain consistency in writing assignments and assessment across sections of given courses

As was noted last year, those departments that seem to be making the most progress in implementing the writing initiative share several common features. The UWC continues to note that strong plans include the opportunity to write for more than one audience, especially in assignments that provide authentic professional writing assignments, the use of well-designed rubrics which are employed as both learning and grading tools, informed use of student peer review, and greater opportunities for revision.

A consistent area of weakness in many programs is assessment of student writing. Many of the reports included information regarding the assessment of writing opportunities, but struggled with the assessment of actual student writing. In some cases this reflected a lack of identification of elements of student writing to address while in others the difficulties stem from problems with assessment methodologies. Given this continuing and widespread difficulty with assessment, one of the major efforts of the UWC this year was to revise the instructions given to departments in preparation of their self-assessment and reviews. The new guidelines provide more directed instruction and suggestions for identifying areas of student weakness with regards to writing and for assessment. A more detailed summary of the patterns and the revised directions for the next cycle of reviews was sent to each of the reviewed programs, their department chairs/heads, and the associate dean for undergraduate studies in the colleges along with specific comments directed to the program. A copy of the general summary is attached to this report.

**Plans for 2014-15:** The major goal for the coming year will be to the continued review of departmental self-reports. In addition, Dr. Marshall and the various college representatives to the UWC will continue to meet with those departments whose reports are up for review this coming year to provide additional guidance as they review their writing plans. The Office of University Writing continues to develop programs, workshops, and on-line resource materials to support both students and faculty, including WriteBites on-line and Conversations in Celebration of Teaching (scheduled for January 30) both of which showcase exemplary assignments and strategies for including writing in the major.

## Response from the University Writing Committee to Reviewed Programs 2013-14

The University Writing Committee is charged with reviewing the writing plans for all undergraduate programs on a three-year rotating cycle to identify patterns and make recommendations that will improve the culture of writing and writing instruction at Auburn. What follows is:

- A. [a summary of the patterns identified in the implementation review reports from 2013-14](#)
- B. [the guidelines for the second review cycle which will occur in 2016-17](#)
- C. [specific comments to your individual department/program](#)

In the first review cycle the University Writing Committee (UWC) solicits reports on the status of writing plans developed by undergraduate programs and approved by the UWC in 2011. For each report, programs were asked to:

- Provide a short summary explaining what the department had planned to do, what happened, and what had been accomplished since the original writing plan was approved
- Discuss any obstacles encountered in implementing the plan or in including the five writing principles<sup>1</sup> and make suggestions for the UWC to consider
- Describe structures that ensure continuity, include new faculty in the writing plan, and embed writing in the major rather than segregating these experiences into a few classes taught by a few faculty
- Report on next steps to improve student writing and writing instruction, describing what the program would focus on next and why
- Discuss what kinds of support they would like to see for faculty and/or students given their experiences implementing their writing plan so far
- Report whether the program requires students to compile a senior/career portfolio either paper-based or electronic, and, if so, describe the requirement in order to provide base-line assessment data for the University's ePortfolio Project
- Provide examples of exemplary assignments, rubrics, structures, strategies, or assessment processes that would be helpful to others

### Summary of Implementation Review:

As is their charge, the UWC looked for patterns across all reports submitted this year to identify components that were indicative of progress toward the goal of embedding significant writing experiences in every major, integrated into courses taught by disciplinary faculty. The UWC determined that most reviewed programs were able to report success in the first three principles:

1. including multiple kinds of writing relevant to the discipline
2. providing more than one opportunity across the major for students to practice writing
3. creating assignments that had students writing for a variety of purposes and audiences

Departmental reports revealed weaknesses in principles

4. allowing students to revise their written work based on individual feedback from the instructor and/or peers
5. developing an assessment plan that used the data obtained to make decisions that enhance the writing experiences of students in the major

### General Recommendations for Principle 4:

The program reports that describe difficulty with giving feedback and allowing revision cite time constraints as the biggest obstacle. However, many program reports describe strategies that have been successfully adopted, including:

- Using peer-review so that students get feedback before the instructor sees the writing
- Hiring graduate students to assist in providing timely feedback
- Giving multiple assignments of the same type given throughout a class or across courses so that comments on early assignments guide revisions/improvement in subsequent assignments<sup>2</sup>
- Developing a departmental or genre-specific rubric that can be used across multiple courses so that students can more easily see the connections between prior experiences and new assignments

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<sup>1</sup> The five writing principles include: 1) more than one kind of writing relevant to the discipline, 2) more than one opportunity to practice those kinds of writing, 3) more than one audience and purpose, 4) feedback and opportunities to revise, and 5) an assessment plan that informs subsequent decisions about writing or writing instruction.

<sup>2</sup> We note that such a strategy requires prompt turn around so that students can use the comments to improve, and attention to the kinds of comments that will help guide subsequent writing.

The UWC notes that departments that assessed student writing specifically to determine if revision improved the quality student writing discovered what has been long established: rewriting, especially after receiving comments, improves the quality of the final product. The UWC also wants to underscore that encouraging revision establishes habits of writing that are routine for most professionals and academics. Finally, the UWC reminds departments that the Office of University Writing has developed resources to help faculty with writing, including in-class collaborative lessons focused on revision. See [www.auburn.edu/writing](http://www.auburn.edu/writing) for additional materials and programs.

#### General Recommendations for Principle 5:

Many departments described assessment processes that seemed unlikely to provide adequate data to inform subsequent decisions. The UWC reminds programs that the goals of the initiative are to improve student writing *and* to foster a productive culture for the teaching of writing. Departments that seemed to be having the most success employ strategies that might be usefully adapted by others, including:

- Creating rubrics that identified specific aspects of writing relevant to the discipline rather than treating writing holistically (see examples of rubrics for different disciplines and genres in the resource library at [www.auburn.edu/writing](http://www.auburn.edu/writing))
- Combining individual assignments across multiple courses to get a larger sample size and to see the big picture of student performance
- Establishing routines (such as retreats, committees, collaborative groups focused on writing/writing assessment) for faculty to consider the assessment data together, discuss it in relation to teaching practices, and agree on a focus for improvement based on their interpretation of data
- Establishing programs or events (sometimes in collaboration with the Office of University Writing) for faculty to learn more about teaching writing, effective and efficient responses to student writing, and/or strategies for resolving specific challenges (large enrollment courses, discipline-specific genres, linking academic writing to writing in the world, etc.)
- Including attention to teaching and teaching writing in the annual review process
- Using assessment strategies that combine the work faculty are already doing (grading) with the programmatic questions about how students in the major are performing (assessment)
- Being less concerned with statistical analysis than with professional interpretation, especially in programs where enrollment is small

The UWC continues to think that small but meaningful changes are more likely to be sustained and thus more likely to produce an appropriate atmosphere for attending to writing in relation to the other curricular goals we have for our students. The UWC notes that the Office of University Writing was established to help programs and individual faculty as they work to embed significant writing experiences in every major.

#### **Guidelines for the next review:**

The UWC recognizes that departments find it difficult to work on improving writing unless they are specific about the features of writing that their students need to improve. We have also found that assessing student writing *and* assessing the way a writing plan is working are both important, but different data might be needed to do each of these assessments. To balance these two kinds of assessments, and to make the process of submitting an update report as productive for departments as possible, we are suggesting a more focused approach to the second review cycle (2015-2018) and have adjusted the questions we would like each program to answer in their next reports based on our analysis of the first-cycle of implementation reports.

**Assessing Student Writing:** For the second review cycle, we ask that programs identify feature(s) of writing or writing instruction that will be the focus of their efforts. For example, some departments have already determined that students have trouble working with primary and secondary sources and so are choosing to turn their attention to this specific issue. Other specific features of writing that might be the central focus could be:

- writing with appropriate disciplinary authority or professional voice
- writing collaboratively
- using evidence to support a complex argument
- synthesizing multiple points of view
- writing that incorporates visual materials like charts, tables, photographs, or graphs

These are only examples, and not meant to suggest the focus your program should choose. The Office of University Writing is available to help faculty in determining what specific feature of writing might be the focus for their program's next review.

The UWC encourages programs to integrate writing into other program learning outcomes such as critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and discipline-specific applications if they have not already done so. Choosing one aspect of writing to concentrate on should help make the assessment of student writing easier. If you have questions about how to choose a focus, or if you have concerns about this more focused approach, please do talk with your UWC representative, or the co-chairs of the UWC, Margaret Marshall and Sharon Roberts.

When you complete your next progress report, you can expect these guidelines:

1. Identify the element(s) of writing that were the focus of your efforts to improve student writing
2. Given the specific aspect of writing you chose to focus on since your last report, briefly describe your assessment of student writing, what data you collected, and what you learned from that data<sup>3</sup>
3. Given this assessment process, briefly describe your next area of focused improvement and describe the strategies you will use to teach the elements that need the most attention.

**Assessing Your Writing Plan:** If you have not already done so, the UWC asks that you establish a process that a) promotes faculty consideration of the evidence of student writing performance in your program, and b) encourages discussion of the curricular or pedagogical decisions that will be taken in light of the evidence you've collected.

4. Briefly describe the relative strengths and weaknesses of your plan to provide significant writing experiences to students and how your plan reflects the writing principles<sup>4</sup>
5. Summarize both the breadth of your efforts with writing (numbers of opportunities, amount of writing, frequency of revision, etc.) and the depth of those efforts (integration of assignments within or across courses, use of peer review, development of evaluation rubrics, clarity of assignments, scaffolding writing instruction, use of portfolios, etc.)
6. Briefly describe any adjustments you have made/will make to your writing plan (new or modified courses, increased opportunities for revisions, strategies for increasing faculty involvement, or development of structures to support writing and the teaching of writing within your program)

**Specific Comments to Departments (inserted here):**

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<sup>3</sup> We are less concerned about the quantitative analysis of your data than we are with a) evidence that members of your faculty examined student writing in the process of collecting the data and b) evidence that members of your faculty talked together about what the collected data meant and how that data informs subsequent decisions about how to improve student writing.

<sup>4</sup> You don't need to indicate whether every course accomplishes each principle, but the UWC is interested in your assessment of how your overall plan achieves these principles. We are especially interested in knowing how the specific focus you chose for this review cycle interacted with the writing principles of your entire plan.