Writing Across the Curriculum at NIU: Newsletter


This issue at a Glance:

WAC Survey 1
Writing Course for Undergrads 1
WAC Stipends for Instructional Faculty 2
Upper-level Writing Program 2

Survey: Writing in Undergraduate Courses

When NIU students finish their First-Year Composition requirement, what kinds of writing assignments do they go on to do?

You will soon receive an email request to take a survey that can help the WAC Program, the University Writing Center, and the University Writing Project find out. We want to know how to support students and faculty better. If you teach undergraduate courses in general education or the major, please take a moment to fill it out.

The survey, designed on SurveyMonkey, consists of 9 questions, and you can complete them in 5-7 minutes. You will provide valuable and much needed data.

NIU faculty come up with a lot of fine formal assignments. Each year Writing Center tutors encounter an imaginative new business project. Or participants in the May workshop, “Design a Writing-Enhanced Course,” transform research papers into tasks that mirror on-the-job writing. Or evaluators for the Writing Project read lab reports that showcase the work of NIU’s promising young scientists.

However, faculty also ask students to engage in many other kinds of exercises, much of it done informally—in online, threaded discussions, for example, or in one-minute themes, or on a class wiki. These important forms of “writing-to-learn fly under the radar. Often students don’t even consider them as writing. Yet such exercises significantly impact student learning outcomes.

So let us know about the good work you and your students are doing, formally or informally. Please take the survey! The URL is: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RPRF932

Newly Revised Course Prepares Students to Write in their Major

For several years, students have enrolled in ENGL 250: Practical Writing if they wanted more practice with academic prose. This year ENGL 250 became even more practical.

NIU faculty often assign several common genres—literature reviews, critiques, lab reports, proposals, case studies, and data-based research. Now students are being familiarized with these genres in ENGL 250 so they will have a more thorough understanding of what such assignments ask of them in their chosen majors.

Students also receive practice with an assignment that resembles the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which selected NIU students now take as part of the national “Volunteer System of Accountability” (for further information, go to http://www.collegiatelearningassessment.org/ or http://www.niu.edu/assessment/cla/cla-student-FAQ.shtml).

Currently, those who teach ENGL 250 are either fulltime instructors or graduate instructors who have completed ENGL 629: Writing Across the Curriculum—Theory and Practice. Although English faculty currently teach the course, in the future, graduate instructors from other disciplinary fields may have the opportunity to do so.

ENGL 205 has typically drawn strong enrollments, and in the past, students have sometimes had to get placed on a waiting list. Some departments require students to take the course. The welcome news is that the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has pledged funds to increase the number of sections offered.

Students who want ENGL 250 should sign up as soon as registration schedules permit.

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**Stipends Offered for May Workshop**

When the end of your semester comes around, please consider enrolling in WAC’s “Design a Writing-Enhanced Course.”

This year’s workshop is on May 22, and will be co-sponsored by WAC and the Office of Faculty Development and Instructional design. You can earn a stipend of $250 by completing this day-long workshop, which runs from 8:30 to 4 PM.

You’ll also receive a free copy of John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*—a highly readable book that has become the must-have resource on incorporating effective writing-across-the-curriculum techniques into your teaching style. You will discover:

- How to motivate students’ critical thinking through writing
- How to use writing technologies to the best advantage
- How to design effective writing assignments
- How to give feedback to students that balances content and correctness
- How to manage the paper load efficiently
- How to create rubrics that enable students to grasp what you want them to do

If you’re interested in signing up for the May 22 workshop, please respond to the email that Faculty Development and Instructional Design has sent to you. You’ll meet faculty from many different disciplines who care, as you do, about improving your students’ critical thinking skills through writing. NIU faculty members give enthusiastic comments:

- “One of the most productive workshop events I could have imagined! A very enjoyable and insightful experience.”
- “I came away with at least 10 excellent ideas that I can use NOW.”
- “I loved working through the methods of engaged learning and critical thinking. It was great looking at ways to help students interact with course texts and the learning process”
- “The workshop provided ample suggestions for adding or modifying existing writing exercises in the classroom and organizing a body of knowledge into a useable format.”

### Bring 4 Sets of Answers to these Questions:

1. What is the course you want to transform into a writing-enhanced course, and what kinds of writing do you currently include in the course?
2. What are the main units or modules in your course?
3. What are your main learning objectives (or chief concepts and principles) for the course?
4. What thinking skills are especially important in your course—and crucial to your academic discipline?
5. What are the most difficult aspects of the course, based on previous students’ experience?
6. What problems do students typically have with the writing tasks you set?
7. What difference do you want your course to make in your students’ lives?

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**Follow-Up Stipends for Participation in University Writing Project**

WAC has teamed up with the Office of Assessment Services to offer NIU faculty an *additional* stipend of $250. Workshop participants in “Design a Writing-Enhanced Course” are eligible.

Here’s what you do. In the year following your participation in the workshop, you transform one of the undergraduate courses you teach. You select a set of student papers—from 3 to 10 pages—and you submit the set electronically or in hard copy to director of Assessment Services, Carolinda Douglass (this year’s deadline is May 4).

Then you submit your transformed course syllabus to coordinator of WAC, Brad Peters, along with (1) the writing assignments you’ve designed and (2) a report on how students’ writing has been affected. A sample student survey form and sample report are available. Stipend funding is provided by the NIU Vision 2020 Strategic Plan and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The objective is to increase the number of courses taught at NIU in which students, through their writing:

- Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies;
- Exhibit intercultural competencies;
- Analyze connections between human life and the natural world;
- Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought;
- Communicate clearly and effectively;
- Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals;
- Use quantitative and qualitative skills to address questions and solve problems;

or

- Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to the major to develop innovative outcomes.