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Strategies to Improve General Ed

The following list appeared on a general education assessment report the University of Cincinnati prepared for a North Central Review. Writing activities undergird most of the criteria.

- Revise amount of written/oral/visual/clinical or similar work
- Increase in-class critical thinking discussion & activities
- Increase student collaboration and/or peer review
- Provide more frequent or fuller feedback on student progress
- State critical thinking goals or objectives more explicitly
- State grading criteria more explicitly
- Increase guidance of students as they work on assignments
- Use methods of questioning to encourage critical thinking
- Increase interaction with students outside of class
- Ask colleague to critique critical thinking assignment/activities
- Collect more data on critical thinking activities
- Revise the content of critical thinking assignment/activities

Effective Grading, Walvoord & Anderson

Writing-in-the-Major Courses: What Are They?

As a result of the writing across the curriculum movement, many universities and colleges have established “writing in the major” courses. The University of Missouri—Columbia boasts one of the nation’s premier programs (go to http://cwp.missouri.edu/ for details).

According to MU’s Campus Writing Board, which regularly assesses writing-in-the-major courses, the most successful ones:

1. Are designed & taught by faculty members at a 20:1 student/faculty ratio
2. Include multiple assignments complex enough to require drafting, teacher & peer feedback, revision, & editing
3. Require 5,000 words (20 pages), including many drafts, & final versions
4. Distribute writing throughout the semester, rather than concentrate it at the end—and encourage visits to the writing center
5. Emphasize that writing assignments constitute at least 30% of the course grade
6. Use teaching assistants in large enrollment classes to bring student/faculty ratio down to a manageable level
7. Keep professors in control of designing writing assignments & grading/marking papers

In this context, MGMT 346: Business Communication has set a strong precedent at NIU, meeting similar guidelines.

Moreover, other departments are now expressing interest in the same type of course for their own majors. Psychology recently proposed PSYC 306: Research Writing and Design in Psychology, a course that will professionalize students in such writing tasks as article critique, literature review, question construction, hypothesis formulation, prediction, theorizing, and determining research design. Technology is exploring how to convert TECH 302: Graphic Presentation and Communication into such a course, emphasizing project design and group authorship.

Work-in-the-major courses significantly strengthen a department or program. The more these courses are positioned in the disciplinary curriculum, the more students are likely to develop the professional writing skills employers seek.

Clifford Mirman, Chair of Technology, notes that Chicago employers have already done a direct comparison between NIU and other university job candidates, identifying the need for a concentrated curricular focus on writing to help our students gain the competitive edge.

Workshop: Designing Courses for Writing in the Major

Mark your calendars! A two-day workshop on designing a writing-in-the-major course will take place after spring semester, May 23-24, 2002. Enrolled faculty will collect a wealth of resources for transforming one of their courses.

The workshop provides a copy of Becky Howard’s and Sandra Jamieson’s Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines. Participants will discover how to promote critical thinking through writing, how to design effective writing assignments, how to provide feedback that balances content and correctness, and how to create rubrics that enable students to grasp what faculty want them to accomplish.

A stipend of $500 accompanies workshop participation. Some colleges and departments have offered matching funds for their faculty who transform a course.

Go to http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/wmworkshop for more information.
Writing Center Assesses Students’ Drafting Skills

During 2000-2001, Writing Center staff conducted 3,800 conferences—1,654 in the fall and 2,146 in the spring. Students from all colleges excluding Law were represented. 1,401 individuals participated—552 freshmen, 45 sophomores, 98 juniors, 33 seniors, 15 graduate students, and 4 status unidentified. The majority of these 278 repeat visitors brought in drafts for more than one course or content area. Writing Center staff accounted for 1,529 of their drafts—a total of 458 student enrollments in the content areas.

Of the 1,401 students who visited the Writing Center, 278 students accrued three or more visits, including 83 freshmen, 45 sophomores, 98 juniors, 33 seniors, 15 graduate students, and 4 status unidentified. The majority of these 278 repeat visitors brought in drafts for more than one course or content area. Writing Center staff accounted for 1,529 of their drafts—a total of 458 student enrollments in the content areas.

Senior Writing Center staff (director, instructors, and GAs trained in calibration) read and ranked the 1,529 drafts from the files of the 278 repeat visitors. The number of drafts per repeat visitor ranged between 3 and 37. This range suggests an average of 5.5 drafts per repeat visitor. 277 of the repeat visitors’ 1,529 drafts were multiple revisions of papers that the students had already discussed with a tutor. The number of multiply-revised papers per file ranged between 1 and 9, and repeat visitors averaged one multiply-revised draft per file.

“Improvement” was defined according to four categories in the following rubric:

- The drafts increasingly demonstrate clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization.
- The drafts increasingly become more stylistically proficient, using rhetorical strategies and language appropriate to the task.
- The drafts increasingly demonstrate greater competency with the conventions of Edited American English and better meet expectations of format.
- The drafts increasingly demonstrate fuller development, exploring issues with greater depth, complexity, and sufficiency of detail.

Because this report focuses on 1,529 drafts—not on final written products—it cannot confirm a definite correlation between repeat visits and improved writing. Still, resulting tallies seem suggestive. Highest overall improvement occurred in development, averaging 2.46. Overall improvement in organization averaged 2.34. Overall improvement in rhetorical strategies averaged 2.29. Lowest overall improvement occurred in conventions (e.g. grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, format, documentation) with an average of 1.97. General overall improvement averaged 2.27.

The research supports results and implications of the large-scale writing exams that Assessment Services administered to a cross-section of NIU juniors from 1998-2000, implying that students’ writing abilities will develop only if they receive on-going instruction and practice in writing.

Uhalde Includes Peer Review in Revision Process

Kevin Uhalde recently invited Writing Center staff to help him incorporate peer review in an assignment for his sections of HIST 110: Western Civilization. The technique of peer review reduces time that faculty spend responding to papers. Students enjoy it.

Uhalde’s students came prepared with a draft of their assignment. They exchanged their drafts with a partner who was required to respond to these five items:

- Restate your partner's thesis in your own words, and evaluate how well-developed you think it is.
- Identify which two paragraphs best support the thesis, and explain why.
- Identify a paragraph that does not support the thesis well, and suggest how your partner might improve it.
- Evaluate how effectively your partner uses quotations from the readings, referring to an example that best illustrates the successes or difficulties you see.
- Provide specific recommendations on what your partner needs to do to meet expectations of format, length, grammar, and mechanics (e.g. punctuation, sentence construction, spelling).

The above questions directly corresponded with criteria Uhalde established for his assignment. Students learned that the substance and detail of their responses to partners would be factored in with their grades. They had a class period to do the responding. Such an exercise increases the probability that students will revise. It encourages them to read and think critically about their own work as well as others’. They teach each other to meet expectations.

Minor Encourages Writing in the Major

Bill Minor’s SOCI 289: The Criminal Justice System not only gives students ample practice in writing, but it also gives them useful instruction in how sociologists write. Students turn in a large term paper at the end of the semester, but Minor breaks down the project in stages throughout. His feedback often comes in the form of a letter to all, setting dates when students can turn in optional exercises along with helping them to appraise their sources critically. During the semester, Minor sets dates when students can turn in optional exercises for bonus points—and the exercises clearly fit in to the process of refining and working through aspects of the students’ topics. Students can do field work (observe a trial, schedule a police ride-along), report on web sites, review a movie, read a relevant book, or invent their own activity. Because the exercises are optional, Minor keeps the paper-load under control.

Some of Minor’s writing instruction comes in a handout that sums up important disciplinary conventions at the same time that it delineates the final project’s format. He calls his favorite tool “Fumblerules of Grammar”—a style sheet with a sense of humor, e.g., “Try to rarely, if ever, split infinitives”; “Passive voice is to be avoided”; “Eschew semantic obfuscation”; “Avoid clichés like the plague.”

By the time students start to draft their final project, they have a rich collection of their own work to assist the development of their topic.