

Proposed Changes to the University Writing Requirement

Introductory Remarks

As an academic community, we want our students—future professionals, citizens, and leaders--to write better. The proposed changes represent *significant* improvement over the current curriculum, which is dated, expensive, and limited in effectiveness. This proposal assumes that the proposed changes will not wholly “fix” the “problem” of writing at the University of Kentucky, in large part because writing is not a problem to be fixed, but instead, a skilled activity or exercise that requires constant application. Writing skills improve with practice *and care*; they wither from disuse and neglect. Writing will improve at the University of Kentucky when students write more and are held to higher writing standards in a significant portion of their coursework.

Some Goals

- 1) To move *toward* a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) model and away from the first-year only method (i.e., to shift some of the instruction and practice in writing to the second year or beyond)
- 2) To offer a more intensive, inquiry-based first-year writing requirement, as recommended by the Boyer Report: *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities* (<http://naples.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf/>)
- 3) To engage our students with more reading, as well as more sustained writing assignments, as recommended by the Boyer Report.
- 4) To improve the quality of undergraduate instruction by reducing the number of sections taught by adjunct instructors

Benchmarks

The University of Kentucky has been slow to adopt any kind of writing requirement beyond the first year. With the exception of the University of North Carolina, all of our benchmarks require writing after the first year.

- Twelve of our benchmarks have **writing-intensive courses in or linked to disciplines**
- Twelve of our benchmarks require **7 or more total hours of writing**, with a conservative average of 8.4. hours. Minnesota requires the most (16-18 hours).
- Five benchmarks (Purdue, Iowa, Michigan, Washington, and North Carolina State) have **4- or 5-credit first-year courses**. The University of Connecticut, not a benchmark, also uses this model.
- Benchmarks with a 3-hour first-year course offer remedial sequences; U.K. has chosen not to pursue this model.

Current Policy

The University requires competency in writing, which may be demonstrated in one of the following ways:

- (1) Students who have a standard score of 28 or below on the English section of the ACT must satisfactorily complete ENG 101 Writing I, and ENG 102 Writing II.
- (2) Students who have a standard score of 29 or above on the English section of the ACT may elect to take a special writing proficiency examination, administered by the English Department Writing Program. Students who pass this examination are eligible to fulfill the University Writing Requirement by successfully completing ENG 105 Writing: An Accelerated Course. Students who do not pass this examination are required to take the normal sequence of ENG 101-102.

Full-time students must enroll in either ENG 101 or 102 each semester until they have satisfied the University Writing Requirement, unless they qualify for ENG 105, in which case they may enroll during either semester of the freshman year.

By Senate rule, only in unusual circumstances (such as illness, injury, serious financial difficulties, or serious personal or family problems) will a student be permitted to withdraw from a course needed to fulfill the University Writing Requirement. Only the dean of the student's college can authorize such withdrawals, in consultation with the instructor and the Director of the Writing Program.

Perhaps most damaging about the current policy is the message it sends to students about writing. In narratives describing their writing processes, students report that “only English teachers care about writing” and that “instructors in other courses care only about their ideas.” When asked specifically about revision and editing—the refining and polishing skills—students claim that these are steps you take for an English class, but they are not necessary for other classes.

Summary of Proposed Changes

- ❖ Move from a first-year only to a **two-tiered requirement**: an intensive first-year course (or exemptions), followed by a course taken in the sophomore year or beyond.
- ❖ Discontinue teaching the ENG 101-102 *sequence* on the main campus. (ENG 102 will continue to be offered as needed.)
- ❖ Create a **4-credit ENG 104** course (with no placement requirements) that satisfies a First-year Writing Requirement.
- ❖ Require a **3-credit hour, 200-level** English course
- ❖ Should a WAC program be established in the future—a plan that USP will continue to discuss—a comparable course in another department or college would satisfy the Graduation Writing Requirement. While the English department strongly supports the idea of a WAC program, it also realizes that WAC pilots would require resources for course development, evaluation, and assessment and that such resources are now very limited or unavailable. For this reason, this proposal assumes that all instruction would continue to be delivered by the English Department.

Resource Issues

If offered through the English department, the second-tier writing requirement reallocates current resources and requires no additional campus, college, or department resources.

Details

The proposed *two-tiered* University Writing Requirement would require students to satisfy two conditions:

- First-year Writing Requirement
- A Graduation Writing Requirement, for now, a 200-level English course, to be drawn from

ENG 203 Business Writing
ENG 230 Introduction to Literature
ENG 231 Literature and Genre
ENG 232 Literature and Place
ENG 233 Literature and Identities
ENG 234 Introduction to Women's Literature
ENG 261 Survey of Western Literature I
ENG 262 Survey of Western Literature II
ENG 264 Major Black Writers
ENG 270 The Old Testament as Literature
ENG 271 The New Testament as Literature
ENG 281 Introduction to Film

In addition to learning the content objectives and completing significant reading assignments, students complete at least 10 pages of formal (though not narrowly specialized) writing that they draft, redraft, and refine in response to feedback provided by instructors or teaching assistants. Composition and stylistic issues (e.g., paragraphs, transitions, clarity, subordination) are addressed through mini-lectures, in-class workshops, conferences and/or texts such as Trimble's *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. Note: The English Department offers relatively few sections of ENG 204 Technical Writing and ENG 205 Intermediate Writing (Writing for the Social Sciences). These courses will *not* satisfy the 200-level requirement as we have no departmental resources (expertise or money) available to revise the courses as necessary and, more importantly, to offer additional sections. The English Department has no objection to the creation of these courses in other colleges or departments once USP has established WAC requirements.

The proposed two-tiered University Writing Requirement could be fulfilled in the following ways:

(1) All students on the main campus may satisfy the first-year condition by successfully completing ENG 104, a 4-credit course. Sometime after achieving sophomore status, but before graduation, students satisfy the second condition by successfully completing one of the writing-intensive 200-level courses offered through the English Department. A "C-or-above" policy on

all major essays, much like that in place at the University of Virginia, will stand as part of the accreditation assessment: Course grades of D (“unsatisfactory achievement”) and E (“unsatisfactory performance”), if earned because of performance on major essays, will not count toward satisfaction of the University Writing Requirement. Note: Students in the Honors Program will continue to satisfy the entire University Writing Requirement through that curriculum.

(2) Students who have a standard score of 32 or above on the English section of the ACT, 700 or above on the SAT, or 4-5 on the AP **English Language** exam will receive exemption from ENG 104. Students who earn a 3 on the AP **English Language** exam will earn credit for ENG 101 and may choose to take either ENG 102 or ENG 104 (encouraged). There is no exemption by CLEP. Scores of 3-5 on the AP **English Literature** exam or the equivalent on the IB exam will continue to receive 3 units of credit for ENG 161, which does not satisfy either condition of the University Writing Requirement.

(3) Students at LCC may satisfy the first-year requirement through the existing ENG 101-102 sequence. In-state transfer students can meet the first-year requirement through the equivalency of an ENG 101-102 sequence. Equivalencies for other transfer students will be evaluated through current procedures.

Full-time students must enroll in ENG 104 in either fall or spring of their first-year. They may drop the course during the first year, but beginning in their third semester, students enrolled in ENG 104 would not be allowed to drop the course, and they will be required to register for the course each semester until they have satisfied the first-tier of the Writing Requirement. Completion of the first-year requirement is a prerequisite for entry in all the 200-level writing courses. Students may complete the 200-level course at any time after achieving sophomore status but before graduation.

- ◆ Student assessment
 - Students must receive a grade of C or above (competent) on all *major* essays.
- ◆ Program assessment
 - Double-blind holistic scoring of a random sample of the final major essay from ENG 102, ENG 104 & 200-level.
 - Double-blind holistic scoring of all final major assignments for ENG 102, ENG 104, & 200-level

Discussion of Changes

The two-tiered requirement: The new requirement extends instruction and practice in composition beyond the first year. UK’s current model, which is quite dated, assumes that students will receive a kind of writing inoculation during their first year and, thereafter, will never again struggle with writing. Writing skills improve with continual practice, and conversely deteriorate when not used. Ideally, students will be held to high standards and receive additional practice in writing in their major courses of study.

The reading-intensive, writing-intensive focus of the tier: Writing improves with intense, careful reading that stresses analysis rather than “information retrieval” or skimming skills. For many writers, prose style improves through the reading and studying of good models. No matter their majors, students need to read carefully and analytically if they hope to be sound writers.

Exemptions: The University’s current policy of exemption (there is none for writing) is not consistent or competitive with the practices of better schools. Such exemptions help in efforts to recruit students.

Faculty in lower-division courses: As part of their standard teaching load, most research faculty in the English Department teach one 200-level literature course each year. While not all 200-level literature courses are taught by research faculty, at least some are. (All sections of business writing are taught by adjunct instructors or the occasional teaching assistant.) Currently, the number of research faculty teaching in the ENG 101-102/105 sequence averages at best one course every other year. The reasons for this are various, but almost all can be traced to two facts: the English Department’s research faculty is quite small in comparison to our benchmarks, and UK’s program does not offer graduate degrees in writing (the CPE has designated that only U of L can grant these degrees). The lack of a degree in writing is also the reason that UK does not have resources or expertise in business and technical writing. While UK’s English Department does have faculty in linguistics, film, and creative writing, most faculty members specialize in literature. Only two faculty members specialize in nonfiction writing; one currently directs the first-year Writing Program; the other directs the campus Writing Center.

Dual Credit: The current list of 200-level writing intensive courses includes options that also satisfy part of the humanities requirement of USP. It is appropriate and advisable that students be allowed to use the same course to satisfy both the second tier of the writing requirement and partial completion of a USP disciplinary requirement.