Undergraduate Writing Instruction

Proposed new unit: None

Contact person: Elena Plante, PhD
Speech, Language, & Hearing Sciences
621-5080
eplante@u.arizona.edu


Affected units: This does not involve re-organizing units, but redistributing the responsibility for a portion of the general education of students.
Undergraduate Writing

Statement of the problems:

- The first year English composition course sequence is not producing students who are prepared for writing in the discipline. In fact, for some disciplines (science, business), students report that they have to unlearn recommendations made in English composition that are inappropriate for writing in the discipline.
- The current requirement of 10 pages of writing per gen-ed class does not inherently lead to improved writing, particularly when the grading of writing is based solely on writing content rather than the written form (organization of content, grammar, word choice, spelling, punctuation).
- The lower division writing structure places a significant burden on instructors with large-enrollment classes.
- The allocation of TA moneys best serves the graduate program when lines can be used by strong graduate programs to recruit the best students. However, TA money best serves the undergraduate program when it follows student credit hours, even when those credit hours are not delivered by the strongest programs. These two goals are often in conflict under current methods of TA allocation.
- Students receive inadequate opportunities to read or receive instruction in how to read the primary literature in the field so that when they are asked to write critically on a topic, they are likely to include information from dubious sources (e.g., web sites, popular literature) because the primary literature proves too difficult to digest.

Proposal:

1. Replace English Composition

We propose that the responsibility for a two-semester entry-level writing instruction be moved to the colleges or schools that house the disciplines. Students enrolled in the Humanities, Science, Business, and the like would receive writing instruction within their school or college, from those who understand the general conventions and expectations of that general area of study. Undecided majors can select the entry-level sequence they prefer, but must take both semesters from the same college or school. The University would continue to offer writing courses for ESL students to meet their particular needs and ESL students could elect to take these rather than discipline-oriented classes.

The entry level course would provide instruction in reading the primary literature as well as producing critical summaries of it. The first semester introductory writing instruction would concentrate less on the content of what is produced than on the form, with grading linked specifically to the organization of information, use of grammatical sentences, accurate word choices, spelling, and punctuation. The second semester would focus equally on the form and content of writing. To promote a focus on writing form, individual writing assignments could be short (1-3 pages) and grading rubrics centered on writing form would facilitate grading by TAs. This format is modeled on a successful writing program that was used in a science gen-ed course (in which course enrollments are substantially higher than for English composition).
The classes would be taught by faculty with TA assistance. Faculty will either belong to units within the college or to the college directly (i.e., an undergraduate division independent of particular departments). The classes would be taught, not from a departmental perspective, but from a broadly-defined discipline perspective (e.g., Science, Humanities, Business). The classes would be taught primarily by faculty instructors who specialize in teaching, and therefore carry relatively high teaching loads (8 courses per year). This would allow a core set of faculty to specialize in discipline-related writing instruction, to develop a particular expertise in this area, and to develop an introductory course that coordinates with the types of reading and writing demands that the student will face as he or she progresses within a department’s curriculum. If a discipline did not require 8 sections of entry-level writing instruction that a single instructor can provide, these faculty could also easily contribute to the discipline’s general education mission. TAs would attend an orientation to promote consistency of instruction across classes.

Benefits:

- Students receive instruction that is more specific to the conventions of their broadly-defined field of study.
- Students receive instruction in how to be consumers of the primary literature in their general area of study (e.g., business, science, engineering, arts).
- Faculty teaching in Tier II and classes in the major should experience a reduced burden because they can hold students accountable for basic writing structure and are not backtracking to remove conventions established in English 101 when those conventions are antithetical to discipline-appropriate writing.
- TA-ships can be distributed more broadly across the departments because all bright graduate students (who are English proficient) should be able to TA an introductory writing class within their broadly-defined discipline.

2. **Change the gen-ed writing requirement**

The change would be from 10 pages of writing with at least one opportunity to revise work to a minimum of 5 pages of non-exam writing, with multiple writing assignments required and the opportunity to revise a majority of the writing assignments. This would give instructors of gen-ed classes the flexibility to assign shorter assignments that provide several benefits over the 10 page requirement, which is frequently assigned as a single paper. For example, they could give two one-page assignments and a three page assignment with the opportunity to revise each.

- Shorter assignments allow a more concentrated focus on a single writing goal (integrating knowledge, writing organization, production of grammatical sentences, etc.).
- Multiple shorter assignments provide students with more opportunities for feedback, which are critical to writing improvement, without adding an undue grading burden in large-enrollment gen-ed classes.
Budget:
Currently, the introductory English Composition classes have a student capacity of approximately 3600 students (11 to 26 students per section). According to the course registration list, 157 non-ESL sections were covered by TAs and 37 by adjunct instructors. None were taught by regular faculty. We estimate the cost of teaching these sections conservatively at 1.7 million dollars per year. The actual cost may be higher if there are administrative costs currently associated with these classes. In addition, salary information for adjunct instructors was estimated.

We propose an average class size of 60 with one faculty instructor and one TA per class. This will require 8 faculty instructors (assuming a teaching load of 8 classes per year per instructor) and 30 graduate TAs (assuming each TA teaches one course in the fall and in the spring). The justification for only one TA is that full-time instructors would need less TA support because they are not engaged in research or scholarship activities. It is also important to acknowledge that the TAs' role would be to support lecturers rather than provide the majority of instruction as they do now. The total cost would be approximately $1.2 million per year assuming an average faculty instructor salaries of $60,000 per year and an average TA stipend of $15,000 per year. Current ERE costs are included in the cost estimates.

Estimated net savings: $500,000 per year