

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL
concerning a
UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

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The Academic Matters Council has studied the Report of the Rhetoric Study Group and proposes the following recommendations:

1. That the University will administer a writing assessment test to every entering first year student.

The primary purpose of this test will be to advise students for proper placement in a sequence of writing courses. The test will consist of a substantial writing sample (about 60 minutes) done during each summer orientation; it will be read and evaluated by experienced writing instructors who are trained to evaluate such tests. Based upon these readers' recommendations, students will be placed as follows:

- a. Students who demonstrate an ability to explore themselves in written English with a competence faculty should expect from a first or second year student will be exempted from the first year writing requirement described below.
- b. Students who demonstrate a command of basic English usage and some ability in writing will be placed in an English Department course, "Expository Writing." This three credit course will be the only course which will satisfy the first year writing requirement.
- c. Students whose writing indicates either a lack of practice or an unfamiliarity with elementary written English will take an English Department course, "Basic Writing," a three credit course which will provide practice and review in written English. This course will not satisfy the first year requirement.
- d. Students whose writing indicates that further diagnostic testing is needed will be referred to the Communication Skills Center for such testing and students who declare English as their second language will be referred to the English as a Second Language Office. The Communications Skills Center and the English as a Second Language Office will prepare these students for admission to "Expository Writing."
- e. For 1982-83 the University will grant exemptions to the first year writing requirement on the basis of SAT scores (as described in the current undergraduate catalogue). Thereafter students will be exempted only by their performance on the writing assessment test or by the English Advanced Placement examination.

The writing assessment test will be made available to students not only during summer orientation but at other announced times during the academic year so that a student may repeat the test or make up the test if missed during the summer. Special consideration will be given to handicapped students for whom the time allotted or the physical setting might be deleterious. An on-going monitoring system will be established to assess the effectiveness of the test as a placement instrument. Information gathered from this monitoring will be shared with interested high schools.

2. The University will require the successful completion of a three credit course in the English Department, "Expository Writing," ordinarily taken during the student's first year.

Students may be exempted only by the circumstances described above in 1.a and 1.e. The objective of "Expository Writing" will be to enable students to write with more clarity and logic, with a confidence based on improved knowledge about the elements of prose style— language choices, correct grammar and spelling, strategies for organization, appropriate development, effective tone. Primary emphasis will be on the students' writing rather than lectures, grammar exercises, or the analysis of prose models. The course will not attempt to introduce students to specialized intellectual disciplines since that can be done more effectively in introductory courses offered by faculty and graduate assistants in departments. Specialized methods of research, including specialized vocabularies and systems of notes, can be taught better in the context of specific disciplines.

3. The University will require one writing intensive course normally taken during the student's third year.

Students write better when they are expected to write better; they are likely to develop the habit of careful writing when this expectation is satisfied in various intellectual contexts over a number of years. Based on these assumptions, all students, including transfers and those exempted from the first year writing course, will complete a writing intensive course during their third year. Each department, school or college, in consultation with writing specialists, will determine what kinds of writing competence its majors need. Based on these decisions, departments, schools or colleges will, when possible, develop and offer courses that meet the specific needs of their students. For example, Engineering might require technical writing, Business might require speaking and writing, Nursing might require report writing. In each instance, the faculty or graduate assistants teaching the courses will consult with writing specialists about setting up the curriculum, and the faculty committee which oversees the writing program will initially recommend approval and periodically review these courses.

As an option to specific courses developed and offered by departments, schools and colleges, these academic units may require that students in their third year select from third year course options that have been approved and are offered by other departments throughout the campus as a service to the University.

The function of writing in these third year courses will be to enhance and reinforce the subject being studied, not to teach grammar and spelling at the expense of that subject. Instructors will assist students primarily in formulating effective arguments and organization for a specific topic in a particular discipline.

In many cases, faculty and teaching assistants will need training to become more effective readers of student writing, and for this the administrators of the Writing Program will provide periodic training sessions. Many courses already being offered could satisfy this requirement by revising the writing assigned in them. In other instances, teaching assistants who now teach Rhetoric could be assigned to their departments to teach writing there. Those departments unable to provide faculty or to recruit graduate students might enlist staff from other departments; for example, graduate students in the Humanities might teach technical writing in Engineering. Ultimately it will be the responsibility of each department, school or college to negotiate with the Provost about staffing courses for the third year writing requirement.

Adequate funds will have to be provided so that departments which choose to develop such courses do not find their programs impaired because of reassignment of duties. Some departments may choose to turn to other departments to satisfy the requirement. In such cases, sufficient resources should be allocated by those receiving departments so that they can offer such a service without impairing their own programs.

4. Additional Work in Writing

In addition to the required courses described above, writing will be incorporated in other parts of the undergraduate curriculum. For example, the General Education Committee will be asked to include substantial writing components in the General Education curriculum, especially during the second year. Departments will be encouraged to offer fourth year elective courses which include advanced writing in their disciplines.

5. Auxiliary Instruction

Because instruction in writing is a long-term effort which requires assistance from various quarters, the following are also recommended:

- The Communication Skills Center will continue to provide diagnostic testing and course instruction for students with learning disabilities; in addition, it will maintain and, if possible, expand its walk-in facility for any students seeking assistance with written English.
- Writing centers, such as the one currently operating in Southwest, can be an effective and inexpensive support service for students; ideally, one will be available in each residence area and in specialized areas such as the School of Business or Engineering.

- There must be substantial coordination between the administrators of the Writing Program and the Admissions Office so that the Writing Program can effectively accommodate students who need specialized instruction, such as E.S.L. or courses in the Communication Skills Center. This coordination should also extend to the continuing dialogue with English departments in high schools.

These five recommendations are consistent with several recommendations made by other faculty groups in the past. As early as 1968, the Cook Committee made the following suggestions:

Since entering students show wide range in an ability to write clear and cogent prose, an effective instructional program in composition depends on an effective system of testing and placement . . . Proficiency in writing is unlikely to result from the work of a semester or even of a year in a composition course. It results rather from extended practice over time as the student grows in maturity and knowledge, and from the cultivation of writing in as many areas as possible in his education (p. 14).

As recently as 1980 the Rhetoric Program's Status Report anticipated these trends in the teaching of writing:

There will be a greater emphasis on both diagnostic and proficiency testing . . . there will be an increasing trend to provide writing centers and communication skills centers . . . There will be a trend to involve all sectors of the faculty in the teaching of basic and more advanced communication skills. This trend will require a program to assist faculty in this role (p. 30).

Suggestions for Implementation

1. The success of any writing program depends heavily upon adequate and dependable funding from the University administration. The program's director can only recruit and train competent new teachers if he or she has a firm budget six months before a semester begins.
2. The Writing Program will be supervised by a faculty Advisory Committee which represents the interests of the whole campus. It will recommend to the Academic Matters Council the initial approval and the regular review of all courses designated to satisfy the third year writing requirement. This committee will establish the Writing Program's goals and provide periodic evaluations of it to the Faculty Senate. The committee will also attempt to assess the impact of the writing program – especially that of the Basic writing courses, the Communications Skills Center and the English as a Second Language program – on the college careers of University of Massachusetts students.

3. **The Writing Program's director, a faculty member from the English Department, will ideally be someone for whom writing and the teaching of writing is a primary area of research interest. He or she will serve on the Advisory Committee which oversees the program, will report to it, and generally provide leadership for the entire enterprise. This person will have three assistants: one assistant to administer scheduling, teaching evaluations and some personnel matters, and two associates – one faculty member from the English Department will coordinate the assessment test and supervise the "Basic Writing" course; another faculty member from the English Department will coordinate course offerings which satisfy the third year writing requirement and will provide training for faculty and teaching assistants who teach those courses.**

4. **The Writing Program should begin with first year students entering in Fall 1982. A Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee will present to the Faculty Senate by November 1982 details of the program for satisfying the third year writing requirement.**

The Program and Budget Council has approved the first year writing requirement as described in this report and recommends it to the Senate. Concerning the third year requirement, it recommends that the Ad Hoc Committee established to present details of that requirement should submit a budget with its report for review by the Program and Budget Council. Further, the Council recommends that the budget for the entire writing program be readily identifiable so that accurate, detailed cost accounting data be available to the Council, the Senate and the administration.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate approve the Writing Program as described in Sen. Doc. 49-82 No. 82-057.