

Definition of a Writing Intensive Course

*Campus Writing Board and Council on Liberal Education
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Guiding Assumptions

Writing is at the center of the academic experience and is the responsibility of the entire academic community. By participating in the production and interrogation of a discipline's discourse, students advance their understanding of that discipline.

Writing may be broadly defined as purposefully communicating ideas by means of visible marks. The look and style of writing and the lengths and forms of writing varies from discipline to discipline.

What unites writing intensive courses across the curricula is the belief that writing, an articulation of thinking, enhances learning where it is meaningfully and intentionally embedded into a course structure.

A writing intensive course is more than simply a course that assigns considerable writing. It is instead a course in which students are provided with explicit opportunities, though targeted instruction, to improve their writing.

Requirements to Meet the Definition of a WI Course

To meet the definition of writing intensive a course must satisfy the following requirements:

Requirement #1: Writing is comprehensively integrated into the course

The writing in the course must be tied to the course objectives and course outcomes. The syllabus must reflect the critical role that writing plays in the course. Writing assignments in a WI course may be designed as a means to achieving mastery of course content, as a means to enable students to develop professional output, or as a balance between the two.

Requirement #2: Writing is a significant part of the course work

Students must write at least 2500 words or the equivalent of finished writing, in genres and modes of production appropriate for the course and discipline. The written products may be distributed over a variety of assignments or through a single major assignment; both are encouraged. Group-authored documents may be part of a WI course, but each student must meet the minimum word count.

Comment: The intent of this requirement is that each student completes a substantial amount of writing. The amount of finished product that constitutes "substantial" can vary among disciplines. One thousand words of political science writing is different than one thousand words of mathematical writing. In the sciences, where synthesis is valued, there can be substantial effort put into creating figures and captions that would not be part of a traditional word count. Recognizing this, those proposing a course for WI consideration are invited to explain in their application how the amount and type of writing proposed would enable every student to complete a substantial amount of writing.

Requirement #3: Writing is a significant part of the course grade

Writing must be a major component of the final course grade, with this relationship detailed explained in the syllabus.

Comment: One way to satisfy this requirement is for performance on writing assignments to be at least 33% of the grade. Another would be that students who perform poorly on writing assignments cannot pass the course. Course proposers are invited to explain in their application how writing is a major component of the grade.

Requirement #4: Writing is learned through revision

Instructors should provide substantial feedback on writing assignments, and allow revision in response to that feedback. Continuous, focused feedback building systematically over the course of the class is encouraged, as is a variety of modes and purposes of feedback.

Comment: A common form of feedback and revision is for students to submit drafts of an assignment or part of an assignment with sufficient time allowed for revision. However, in a laboratory course with multiple lab assignments, feedback might come on one lab report with the expectation that students will use the feedback to improve their writing in a subsequent report. For group-authored documents, courses are expected to implement a process where each student is able to benefit from the revision process. Those proposing a course for WI consideration are invited to explain how the requirement of writing through revision would be met in the course.

Requirement #5: Writing is explained and practiced in the course

Explicit writing instruction must be integral to the course, as part of the course content and as a significant, recurring activity. Through instruction, students should learn about writing, including its disciplinary structures and functions, and should practice writing in a variety of modes and settings appropriate to the discipline. The forms and types of writing instruction that will be used in the course should be explained in the syllabus or supporting teaching materials.

Comment: Course specific writing instruction appropriate to a WI course may take many forms, including engaging students in discussions of the relevance of writing to the discipline and course; asking students to analyze course readings looking specifically at the rhetorical strategies or writerly qualities; assigning frequent informal, ungraded or low-stakes writing activities (for example, "five-minute papers," concept maps, posts to online discussion boards or annotated design notebooks); facilitating frequent "five-minute writing workshops" to engage students in interactive and context-specific analysis of writing style, usage, or mechanical issues appropriate to current assignments; and providing students with style guides or books on writing appropriate to the discipline.

Comment: Support for instructors interesting in developing and implementing course-relevant writing instruction activities is available at the Center for Writing.

Requirement #6: Instructors should understand the practice of writing instruction

Those responsible for teaching and assessing writing in a WI course should recognize the importance of writing instruction. If teaching assistants participate in teaching and assessing writing, they must be trained and supervised. If multiple faculty members are teaching a WI course, all must ensure that writing intensive requirements are met.

Comment: Teaching assistants may be trained by the primary instructor.

Comment: An example of a course taught by multiple faculty is a capstone directed studies course. Here, a system should be in place to ensure that every instructor understands their obligation to teach writing and to respond to writing as they work with their students.

Comment: WI course instructors are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities and resources provided by the university to learn about the specific practices for effective, efficient writing instruction. For example, the Center for Writing's Teaching with Writing program offers support in seminars, workshops, panel discussions, individual and group consultations and online resources

ECAS Questions

Question 1 (see Requirement 1): How do writing assignments and writing instruction further the learning objectives of this course and how is writing integrated into the course? Note that the syllabus must reflect the critical role that writing plays in the course.

Question 2 (see Requirement 2): What types of writing (e.g., research papers, problem sets, presentations, technical documents, lab reports, essays, journaling etc.) will be assigned? Explain how these assignments meet the requirement that writing be a significant part of the course work, including details about group-authored assignments, if any. Include the required length for each writing assignment and demonstrate how the minimum word count (or its equivalent) for finished writing will be met.

Question 3 (see Requirement 3): How will students' final course grade depend on their writing performance? What percentage of the course grade will depend on the quality and level of the student's writing compared to the percentage of the grade that depends on the course content? Note that this information must also be on the syllabus.

Question 4 (see Requirement 4): Indicate which assignment(s) students will be required to revise and resubmit after feedback from the instructor. Indicate who will be providing the feedback. For group-authored documents, describe how each student will benefit from revision. Include an example of the assignment instructions you are likely to use for this assignment or assignments.

Question 5 (see Requirement 5): What types of writing instruction will be experienced by students? How much class time will be devoted to explicit writing instruction and at what points in the semester? What types of writing support and resources will be provided to students?

Question 6 (see Requirement 6): If teaching assistants will participate in writing assessment and writing instruction, explain how will they be trained (e.g. in how to review, grade and respond to student writing) and how will they be supervised. If the course is taught in multiple sections with multiple faculty (e.g. a capstone directed studies course), explain how every faculty mentor will ensure that their students will receive a writing intensive experience.