

## Second Writing Experience at Eastern Montana College

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Students attending Eastern Montana College are required to complete at least two writing courses. The initial course in English 101, Composition I, and is required of all students. A choice of two courses is available for the second writing experience. English 203, Basic Research Writing, or English 324, Advanced Composition, must be completed by all students attending Eastern. The inclusion of English 324, Advanced Composition, in the general education requirements was an attempt to provide a second writing experience for upper-division students. The attempt has been a mixed success.

### Background

Eastern Montana College is the third largest of the six units of the Montana University System which has an open admissions policy. Located in the largest metropolitan area in the state (approximately 100,000 residents), Eastern draws a larger proportion of students with writing deficiencies than do the other units. According to student body demographics for fall quarter 1986, 3920 students are attending either full-time or part-time. Of these students 60.3 percent are female, 60.2 percent come from the local county, 86.4 percent are commuters, and their average age is 26.5 years. In 1983, English 324, Advanced Composition, which had been the upper-division course required only of English majors, was added to the general education requirements as an option available to all students. The General Education Committee which designed the requirements in general education for students attending Eastern Montana College tried to create a coherent and thorough curriculum. In large part the committee succeeded; however, the process was political. To further complicate the process, the General Education Committee did not have a representative from the Department of English.

At Eastern Montana College the Oral and Written Expression component of the requirements in general education is a total of 12 quarter credits distributed as follows:

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| 1. English 101, Composition I   | 3 credits |
| 2. Communication Arts 110, Interpersonal Communication, or Communication Arts 130, Public Speaking                                | 3 credits |
| 3. English 203, Basic Research Writing, or English 324, Advanced Composition  | 3 credits |
| 4. English 102, Composition II or one of several specific courses in linguistics, logic, information theory, or computer science. | 3 credits |

Thus, all students attending Eastern Montana College must complete English 101, Composition I, as their initial college

writing course and either English 203, Basic Research Writing, or English 324, Advanced Composition, as their second writing experience. Because Eastern Montana College does not require the completion of any entrance testing for students, the Department of English has designed an English Placement Test which is administered to all students prior to their registration in English 101. No student can enroll in English 101 without a satisfactory score on the test. The test is a thirty-item computer scorable examination that identifies students' basic competencies in grammar, usage, and rhetoric. Students who are unable to achieve a passing score are encouraged to enroll in a remedial course, English 100, English Essentials. Upon completion of English 100, students can attempt the English Placement Test again. The writing program in general education, therefore, has the following basic structure:

	<u>First Writing Experience</u>	<u>Second Writing Experience</u>
English Placement Test	English 101 Composition I	English 324 Advanced Composition
English 100 English Essentials		English 203 Basic Research Writing
	English 102 Composition 2	

Fig. 1: First and Second Writing Experience Structure, Eastern Montana College.

Several possible tracks through the maze of composition courses exist for students. Students who choose or are required by their major departments to complete their writing courses at the lower-division level usually take English 101 and English 203, although some also take English 102 either before or after having taken English 203. Students can, therefore, receive a traditional three-quarter freshman writing sequence although the sequence may not be logical. Students who choose or are required by their major departments to complete a second writing course at the upper-division level must take English 324, Advanced Composition.

#### First Writing Experience

All students must complete English 101, Composition I. The course description states that English 101 provides instruction beyond basic writing competencies expected of entry-level college

students, treats writing as a problem-solving process, and emphasizes sentence construction and patterns of organization in expressive and referential writing. English 101 provides guidance and practice in all stages of the writing process: planning, organizing, and drafting well-formed single- and multi-paragraph essays; polishing, and revising for unity, cohesion, clarity, and formal style; and proofreading and editing for mechanics. While instruction in basic grammar is always an aspect of a composition course, grammar is addressed tangentially--as needed. The primary focus of the course is on writing. When students complete English 101, they should be able to:

- + Approach writing as a problem-solving process including thinking, decision-making, planning, composing, revising, editing, and proofreading skills.
- + Choose and focus a topic to fit the audience, purpose, and message.
- + Formulate purpose and thesis statements.
- + Organize information by time, space, climax deduction, and induction.
- + Develop ideas by example, facts, classification, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect.
- + Write unified and coherent paragraphs.
- + Write clear, concise, and fluent sentences.
- + Write multi-paragraph expressive and referential essays.
- + Recognize and avoid plagiarism.

With the completion of English 101, students may proceed directly to the required second writing experience at the lower-division level, English 203, Basic Research Writing. The student may elect to delay the required second writing experience and take English 102, Composition 2 which continues the introduction to the multi-paragraph essay with emphasis on the persuasive/argumentative essay. English 203 provides basic instruction in undergraduate research writing, including emphasis on library use and research format (either MLA or APA depending on the section).

### Second Writing Experience--Upper-Division

Those students who choose or whose major departments require the second writing course at the upper-division level, must take English 324, Advanced Composition. According to its catalog description, English 324 is designed to improve the writing skills of upper-division students not majoring in English. The course is further designed to develop strong competence in audience awareness, organization, development, mechanics, usage, sentence structure, and word choice in a variety of writing modes, including a research project. Students are expected to write regularly with a variety of purposes for a variety of audiences. Course content also includes emphasis on the composing process and its attendant problems. Attention is given to reading, speaking, and listening skills which relate directly to students' writing

ability. Further, the principles, techniques, and strategies which good writers use to write effectively are investigated. Instructors are expected to offer varied learning formats. For example, out-of-class writing, in-class writing, peer work, and oral presentations. Students who complete English 324 should be able:

- + To establish a tone (expressed attitude) and point of view which match purpose and audience: to engage the reader.
- + To organize information clearly, with transitions, appropriate grouping of related generalities and specifics, and details or evidence which demonstrate the thesis.
- + To develop ideas systematically and informatively, and to show sensitivity to the complexities of the situation under consideration.
- + To demonstrate dexterity in mechanics and usage: to control the punctuation code and deviate from it creatively and justifiably; to adapt usage to purpose and audience.
- + To revise, edit, and proofread competently.
- + To master sentence structure: to show skill in subordination, coordination, and embedding of phrases and clauses; to exhibit logic, emphasis, and coherence through relationship, separation, and sequencing of ideas
- + To choose words with a high degree of accuracy and discrimination, both denotatively and connotatively, to suit purpose and audience.
- + To practice essential research writing skills: retrieving data, summarizing proofreading, quoting, documenting.
- + To become proficient at a variety of traditional kinds of academic writing: for example, expository essay, persuasive essay, synthetic essay, critical essay, summary abstract, research paper.

Ideally, English 324 provides upper-division students with a rigorous writing course that will help ensure that graduates of Eastern Montana College have well-honed writing skills. English 324 is staffed with the best composition teachers from among the full-time members of the department, and the enrollments are normally kept below twenty students per section. A component on undergraduate academic research writing was added to English 324 when the course was revised for general education consumption so students cannot complete their general education requirements without receiving some instruction in research writing. Several fundamental problems exist, however, which have eroded much of the effectiveness of the second writing experience for upper-division students.

## Problems

1. When the campus-wide General Education Committee designed the requirements in general education, the committee (which did not have a representative from the Department of English) did not make the upper-division writing course mandatory for all students. Therefore, with a choice between English 203, Basic Research Writing, and English 324, Advanced Composition, most students elect the lower-division course. Only when their specific academic departments require the second writing experience to be upper-division must students take English 324.

2. Eastern Montana College recently adopted a system of pre-registration and registration whereby students enroll at the Registrar's office without having to produce any authorization from the academic departments to enroll in particular courses. The new system replaced the old arena-style registration where students at least had to receive authorization from the academic department before they could enroll. To further compound the problem, academic advising is spotty across campus. While some academic departments actively attempt to provide their majors with consistent academic advising, no regulation or procedure on campus requires a student to receive faculty advising before registration. Simply stated, academic advising is not mandatory at Eastern Montana College. Thus, many students make course selection decisions on their own. As a result, no method exists to ensure that prerequisites have been taken or that students are of appropriate class standing to take courses. A freshman can enroll in a senior course; and because class rosters are generally not available until the second week of the term, the faculty member and the academic department can only react after the fact. In this way, a number of freshmen and sophomores show up on the initial class rosters for English 324. Only by laboriously checking on individual students with the Registrar's office is an English 324 instructor able to confirm the lower-division status of individual students. Unfortunately, this procedural problem results in some lower-division students remaining on the rosters for the English 324 sections. Their success rate if they remain in the course is marginal. Most drop the class before the end of the term, and the success rate for those who complete the course is marginal. This is as it should be, but I would like to eliminate the problem. One method is to declare the course a restricted entry course so students will be forced to get the instructor's or the department's permission before they can enroll. Proof of upper-division status can then be required. This method is, however, cumbersome.

3. By the way the general education requirements in oral and written expression are structured, a student can proceed directly from English 101, Composition I, to English 324, Advanced Composition. Instructors have found that many students who enroll in English 324 are not ready for an advanced writing course. Typically, the students who are ill-prepared for a rigorous upper-division

course have had only English 101, Composition I. Since most students complete English 101 during their first quarter at Eastern, several years have elapsed since their last writing course, and a single quarter of college writing has not provided a sufficient preparation for an upper-division writing requirement.

Essentially, the screening process to ensure upper-division status of students enrolling in English 324 and the amount of lower-division writing instruction sufficient to ensure appropriateness for the course are the problems that must be overcome to establish an effective second writing experience. While the members of the Department of English have not been able to adjust the screening process during registration, they have approved requiring English 102, Composition II as an additional prerequisite for English 324. At least students who enroll in English 324 will have had two quarters of lower-division composition.

### Summary

The second writing experience required of students attending Eastern Montana College is adaptable to a variety of needs and circumstances as defined by the various academic constituencies on campus. For the departments which prefer majors to receive instruction in undergraduate academic research writing, English 203 is available. For departments which prefer majors to have a course in academic writing at the upper-division level, English 324 is available. While the model for an upper-division second writing experience at Eastern Montana College looks good on paper, procedural difficulties have eroded some of its effectiveness.