

# Composition Requirements at the University of Arizona

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The University of Arizona is a state-supported university serving approximately 30,000 students, both graduate and undergraduate. Because it directs substantial energy to research, the University is frequently accused of slighting undergraduate education. Such criticism normally overlooks the composition program, which displays a serious concern for improving the quality of education our undergraduates receive.

In 1980, the University's Faculty Senate mandated an enlarged composition program that contained the following five components (the Freshman Composition requirement had previously existed):

- + A minimum of two semesters of training in composition at the Freshman level. One-third of our students are required to take a third semester of composition.
- + A mid-career writing proficiency exam intended to identify students who have deficiencies in writing.
- + Developmental work in writing for third- and fourth-year students whose composition skills are below the standards required by the University Faculty.
- + Writing-emphasis courses which provide the opportunity for all students to apply their writing skills in their own areas of professional interest during their third or fourth year of study.
- + An Outreach program to articulate University standards and share concerns about students' composition skills among Arizona high schools and community colleges.

Implementation of the program is the responsibility of the University Composition Board, which has a staff of four academic professionals and two administrative/clerical people. Policy decisions are handled by the Intercollegiate Writing Committee, a standing faculty committee appointed by the Provost. At the end of 1986, the program is finally fully in place. The rest of this paper will describe the five components of the writing program.

## Freshman Composition

The Freshman Composition Program is a traditional two-semester sequence consisting of a first-semester course in argumentative and expository writing followed by a second semester of training in academic writing through the critical analysis of literary works. However, approximately one-third of our incoming students are not prepared for the standard first-semester rhetoric course; these students are required to begin with an additional course that addresses more basic questions about the relation between writing and thinking process, awareness of audience, and rhetorical purpose.

Placement in the appropriate first-semester Freshman Composition course is based on a one-half hour writing sample that is evaluated in holistic scoring sessions. This evaluation is compared to the student's score on the ACT (English) or SAT (TSWE). If there is an inconsistency, the essay is read (now for a third or fourth time) to finally determine placement. Approximately 4500 students are placed each academic year using this process.

The nearly 400 sections of Freshman Composition offered each year have an average enrollment of 25 students; most are taught by graduate assistants. In order to provide uniformity of courses and consistency of quality in teaching, each new graduate assistant is required to participate in a two-semester colloquium on teaching composition. He or she is carefully supervised by an experienced composition instructor so that classroom performance and paper evaluation can be improved.

Although the controls exercised over both student placement and teacher qualifications cannot, unfortunately, guarantee a superior course to every single student, they do ensure an overall consistency that is an essential basis for a composition program.

Upper-Division Writing-Proficiency Examination

All undergraduates who receive a degree from the University of Arizona are required to complete the Upper-Division Writing-Proficiency Examination (UDWPE). The proper time to take the exam is at the end of the second year or beginning of the third. During 1985/86, 4,300 students were tested.

The UDWPE is strictly diagnostic; a student may not take the test more than once. Its purpose is to insure that students entering writing-emphasis courses (see below) have at least minimal competency in writing. Even a sound Freshman Composition Program cannot guarantee student competence at the junior level: something over 50% of our graduates take their Freshman Composition elsewhere, and the skills of many students decay noticeably after they have completed their first-year writing courses. Currently, approximately 25% of students who take the exam earn an evaluation of "Unsatisfactory."

The test requires that the student write an extemporaneous essay within a time limit of two hours. The student is asked to read a brief article from some publication such as Time magazine or the Wall Street Journal and answer one of three questions that are derived from concepts discussed in the article.

The exam essays are evaluated holistically by faculty from all disciplines. Graders volunteer to read for us in 4-hour grading sessions. We arrange grading sessions so that each session has faculty from a variety of disciplines. This prevents the biases of a single group (such as the English department) from dominating the evaluations, and also helps spread interest in the writing program throughout all academic units at the university. We need 250 to 300 graders each year to evaluate the papers.

Developmental Work in Composition

Students whose performance on the UDWPE is unsatisfactory

are normally required by their college or department to take a course intended to improve their writing skills before they enter a writing-emphasis class. As a result, up to 1,000 students per year seek additional help.

One course some students turn to is a traditional 3-credit sophomore course in rhetoric. However, because that course has always been intended to extend competent writers' skills rather than restore lost competencies, the prospect of 1,000 students with writing problems descending on this course causes some consternation. As a result, we are now experimenting with a 1-credit writing workshop, which is specifically designed for upper-division students with writing weaknesses. The class, which has a maximum enrollment of 10 students per section, is an intensive course offered in 5-week blocks. It is taught by experienced composition teachers who are familiar with the rest of the composition courses offered by the English Department. It appears that many students can, indeed, improve their writing under these conditions, and the arrangement is attractive to both students and advisors when they are trying to fit an unanticipated composition course into an already tight schedule. On the other hand, it is not a miracle cure, and students with severe deficiencies do not benefit from it.

Some departments and colleges are playing a direct role in their students' developmental work. The Philosophy department, for example, requires its students to take a course they have identified within that department. The College of Agriculture has implemented a writing course for its own students; the course is team-taught by someone from the College of Agriculture and a person from the English department. The Faculty of Fine Arts is considering a similar program for its students.

### Writing-Emphasis Courses

Every undergraduate who receives a degree is required to complete at least one writing-emphasis course within his or her major. This course, which counts toward the major and is taught by a professor in that particular field, is distinguished by the characteristic that at least 50% of the grade is based on essays or other written assignments. Current guidelines require a minimum of 3,000 words of text from the student. Nearly 200 writing-emphasis courses are listed in the catalog for more than 130 degree programs in over 80 departments. Besides providing for more writing experience for students, the writing-emphasis courses are also provoking a broader interest in writing as an educational tool among the teachers of these courses.

### Outreach

Because they are "universal" requirements, the features of the program described so far have a direct impact on all of our undergraduate students. In addition, the Composition Program requires that we engage in outreach activities with the University's feeder schools--the high schools and community colleges around the state that many of our students attend.

A substantial number of these outreach activities take place off-campus: in the last five years we have logged more than 74,000 miles of travel within Arizona. Not only do we make it a point periodically to visit schools and community colleges throughout the state, but also we honor requests to lead on-site in-service workshops on topics in composition, and we participate in professional conferences both county- and state-wide.

On-campus, we host an annual conference for Arizona English teachers (at the high school level and beyond); in addition, we invite interested educators to observe testing and placement procedures during registration and to discuss topics of mutual concern in the teaching of composition.

### Results

In the past, it was possible for determined students to select curricula that would not require that they write a single paper after they completed Freshman Composition. The UDWPE, developmental work, and writing-emphasis now keep composition an almost constant part of students' careers at the University of Arizona.

Unfortunately, I cannot report that the result is that our graduates are now all prize-winning essayists. In fact, well over half of the UDWPE essays are either unsatisfactory or marginally satisfactory. At this point, we can only claim that we have substantial evidence that our faculty's intuitive sense about students' poor writing skills was justified, and the need for serious concern is legitimate. In addition, our feeder schools around the state are well aware of our determination to improve this situation. Furthermore, students beginning now as freshman are very aware of the expectations we have of their writing, and active participation in writing on the part of the faculty from many departments suggests that students who leave the University of Arizona in the future will have significantly better communication skills.