

The Upper-Level Writing Requirement  
at the University of Rochester

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When the University of Rochester's College of Arts and Science debated its general degree requirements several years ago, consensus was strong on one issue: students needed to write better. In consequence, undergraduates from the class of 1988 on will be required to complete not just a freshman-level composition requirement but two upper-level writing courses as well. Unlike the basic writing course, which is taught by the English Department, the upper-level courses are offered by departments throughout the College of Arts and Science.

The new requirements in writing join a new formal reasoning requirement and an established foreign language requirement to constitute a foundational emphasis within the College's general degree requirements. (In addition, students are required to complete a set of distributional requirements.) The emphasis on critical analysis through writing and formal reasoning should not be confused with a threshold requirement or with remedial work, for even students with the highest entering levels of achievement cannot place out of the writing or formal reasoning requirements. Freshman writing courses are available at several levels to accommodate varying levels of ability; students who do not qualify for any of these courses are placed in a non-credit course to catch up.

By encouraging the development of upper-level writing courses in all departments, Rochester--like other institutions engaged in "writing across the curriculum"--has asserted both the diversity and the commonality of the writing enterprise. The upper-level requirement acknowledges that definitions and standards of good writing will vary from course to course and from field to field. Simultaneously, however, it asserts the fundamental relationship, across the fields, between clear thinking and articulate writing. In seeking to reduce the compartmentalization that leads students to regard good writing as something done only in English courses, the College has enlisted the services of a research faculty whose members are professional writers in the very real sense that their professional success depends on their ability to publish.

The new requirement is supervised by a college-wide committee, composed of senior faculty members from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. This committee sets criteria for writing courses, reviews proposed courses, solicits new courses, and sponsors workshops for instructors. As the requirement reaches full implementation, the committee will also have the responsibility of evaluating its effectiveness.

To be accepted as a writing course, a course must meet fairly simple criteria: students must write at least 5000 words,



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complete at least four assignments, and be given opportunity to revise their work. They must also use a writing manual, which may range from the text used in the freshman courses to a professional style manual from the field of the instructor's specialization. Once a course has been approved, it remains so as long as it is taught by the same instructor and as long as that instructor wishes to have it so listed. In a few cases departments have asked that a particular course be registered as a writing course no matter who the instructor may be.

The writing requirements define a set of courses between the freshman composition course and the advanced seminar or research course, where students are likely to write a single long paper rather than a series of shorter papers. Reasoning that students should use the upper-level writing courses to prepare for research courses, the committee consciously designed the criteria to encourage the opportunities for practice that short, frequent assignments provide. In consequence, some faculty members have begun to speak of research courses and senior seminars as a third level of writing and to recommend that this third level be made mandatory throughout the College.

From the start it was clear that certain courses would qualify with little alteration as writing courses. Because it was also clear that the capacity of these courses was insufficient to meet demand, and that the existing courses were concentrated almost entirely in the humanities and in the social sciences, the writing committee launched a major campaign for additional courses. The considerable success of the effort can be attributed in part to spirited lobbying, but in perhaps larger part to the means the committee has found to make the requirement serve the needs of the various departments. First among these are the criteria themselves. Short, frequent papers can be an appropriate means of assessing and encouraging learning in a literature or economics course, but they can be equally useful in a laboratory course. In one natural science department, then, all juniors take a single laboratory course, which has been converted to a writing course; in another, students may choose a writing course from a selection of optional courses designed to draw students into research.

A second means for making the writing requirement serve the needs of the various departments has been the development of two kinds of upper-level courses: those in which all students receive writing credit and those where writing is an option. This latter kind of course is typically a lecture course, where grades are determined by examination. To convert such a course entirely to a writing course could place a heavy burden on the instructor or necessitate the elimination of useful examinations. Instead, the writing option allows the instructor to make contracts for writing with as many or as few students as he or she is able to accommodate. Each student fills out a brief form, which is signed both by the student and by the instructor and must be turned in by the normal deadline for adding courses. Until the last day of classes it is possible for students to switch back into the non-writing section of the course. In addition to allowing instructors to control



their involvement in the writing program, this option can also satisfy those who are accustomed to grading students on measures other than writing ability and who want to make a continued distinction between writing students and those graded "on content alone."

Faculty members in some of the larger courses have expressed willingness to take on extra numbers of writing students, provided they can have grading assistance. Accordingly, the College has decided to experiment with a program of Graduate Writing Assistants. The success of the project will be measured by its ability to develop writing assistants who differ from departmental graders both in the attention they give to writing and in the amount and kind of contact they establish with students. Three graduate students from the departments of history, political science, and philosophy have been appointed to the pilot program. In two of the departments the assistants are each assigned to a single course; the third has been given responsibility for specific students in a variety of courses. These graduate students have been joined by three from English, who have special interests in the teaching of writing and who are helping with upper-level writing courses taught in their own department. The six meet at infrequent intervals to exchange information and to compare experiences. The students from English have taken on the responsibility of gathering articles on the theory and practice of teaching writing "across the curriculum," and the group plans to read and discuss the most interesting of these with the goal of assembling some especially useful materials for distribution in future years. At the end of the year the group will participate in the evaluation of the project by reporting on its experiences and by making suggestions for change.

The disadvantage of a college-wide writing program is that most of the faculty members, despite their experience in writing, are not professional teachers of writing. To give them support, and also to create a visible focus for writing, the College has established a Humanities Writing Center, where students can learn word processing and obtain counsel and advice from experienced instructors of composition. Currently, about thirty machines are available in the Center, mostly Macintoshes and PC-jrs. Additional facilities are available for word-processing in the centers for general computing.

It is still much too early to evaluate the success of Rochester's new writing requirement. Because the first class will not graduate under the new requirements until next year, we can only estimate how many courses will be needed to meet student demand and how difficult it will be to marshall these courses. We are not sure whether our word-processing facilities and our tutoring resources will be adequate. The program for Graduate Writing Assistants is still in an experimental stage, and we do not know whether we shall want to develop a program for undergraduate peer counseling. We have only begun to think about measures for assessing the effectiveness of the new requirement. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for cautious optimism. With the unsurprising exceptions

of statistics, physics, and mathematics, courses have been approved for writing throughout the College. Two senior professors in the history department have responded to the call for a style manual by writing their own; it has been adopted for use by the department in all of its writing courses. Parents have expressed approval for the requirement at orientation meetings, and students who are not subject to the requirement have taken writing courses in order to obtain recognition for them on their transcripts. Faculty attendance at writing workshops has been excellent, and discussion has been vigorous. Time will tell whether the optimism was justified.