

Linda A. Morris  
Director of Composition

Two out of the three undergraduate colleges at UC Davis--Engineering and Letters and Science--require their students to fulfill a two-part composition requirement that is divided between a lower and an upper-division segment. The legislation governing the composition requirement offers students two major options: either they may take one lower-division and one upper-division writing course or they may pass a writing proficiency examination after they have completed a minimum of 70 units of degree credit. Technically, a student could satisfy the entire requirement by passing the examination, but rarely do students bypass the lower-division course. It is at the upper-division level that they exercise their options--exemption by examination or completion of an advanced composition course.

The examination option, which approximately half the students choose, is a two-hour exam consisting of a reading passage of 300-500 words, followed by a choice of two questions keyed to the reading passage. The reading passage and the exam questions are upon topics of general interest but assume no specific previous knowledge. Both exam questions ask the student to write an expository essay in response to the reading passage, supplemented by their own personal experience or observations when relevant. For example, one recent exam quoted a selection from a Lewis Thomas essay on the teaching of science and asked students to reflect upon their own experience in the sciences in relation to various points Thomas made in the essay. The students responded with interest and authority, evaluating in an insightful manner the way science courses are taught at the university.

The exams are evaluated holistically by a team of experienced readers who also teach the upper-division composition courses: they are graded on a 6-point scale and given two independent readings, with a possible high score of 12. In order to pass the exam, students are required to demonstrate their ability to organize their material clearly, to pursue the topic in a cogent manner, to offer specific support for their assertions, and to write in a style and manner appropriate to upper-division university students. The average pass rate for the exam is 70%. It is offered three times a year, and students are allowed to repeat it once.

A significant number of students bypass the exam altogether because they know they would profit from taking an upper-division course; many such students also have been urged by their major professors to take an advanced-level writing course in preparation for graduate school or entering the work force. For these students, and for those who fail the examination, two distinctive types of courses are available. The first of these, English 103, is a traditional advanced expository writing course that offers extensive



instruction in composition, emphasizing writing for varied audiences and revision strategies. In addition, several options are available within this traditional course structure--sections devoted to principles of legal writing, article writing, or report writing, to name only three.

The second course, English 102, represents a significant departure from the traditional course in that each section of this course is paired with a course in another discipline, such as anthropology or zoology. Students who enroll in the writing course, or "adjunct" course as it is called, must be simultaneously enrolled in the companion course, but not vice versa. Both courses carry their own independent credit, both are graded separately, and both are taught by an expert in the respective field--for example, a member of the political science faculty and a member of the writing faculty. The writing assignments in the composition course are based upon the readings for the companion course, although the writing instructor may ask the students to write about the material for a general educated audience as opposed to the specialized discipline-specific audience. Adjunct faculty members may include drafts of a paper for the companion course as part of their writing requirement, but they would not evaluate the final paper as an entity. They would additionally assign papers that would not be seen or evaluated by the instructors in the companion courses.

For the adjunct courses to work well, there must be cooperation and good communication between the writing faculty and the companion-course faculty. Ideally, no adjunct course is scheduled except at the request of the companion-course faculty member, and certainly not without his or her explicit consent. Adjunct writing instructors attend at least some, if not all, of the lectures of the companion course, the two instructors coordinate writing assignments and due dates for papers whenever possible, and if teaching assistants are involved in a large lecture courses, they too may be brought into the discussions.

The reactions to these adjunct writing courses have been highly favorable. From the point of view of the companion-course instructors, the adjunct courses result in better writing in their courses, and so they are pleased. A limited study also suggests that students who take the adjunct courses perform better overall in the companion course than do their counterparts who do not enroll in the writing course; the "advantage" shows up not only on the students' papers but also on course exams, which lends active support to the notion that writing about a subject enhances students' mastery of that subject. The greatest advantage in teaching these courses is that the students tend to be highly motivated; they are writing about topics they care about, often within their major field, and they are eager to improve their ability to write up to their full potential. Because of the close cooperation between the two faculties, the writing instructors have been able to influence how faculty in other disciplines use writing in their courses; they have been granted a degree of recognition across the curriculum that simply was unavailable



before the advent of the adjunct writing program.

The adjunct writing courses do have their potential drawbacks, however. Enrollment in the writing course depends upon enrollments in the companion course. If the faculty member in the companion course changes paper deadlines (this happens more often than one would expect), it affects the syllabus of the adjunct course. More seriously, the writing faculty occasionally feels as though they are merely handmaidens to the companion-course faculty--their job is to enhance the performance of students in another course; and upon occasion, the companion-course instructor wants all the benefits that accrue from having an adjunct writing course but does not want to be "bothered" by the writing instructor. Fortunately, instances of any serious problems are rare, and flexibility on the part of the writing instructors can overcome, for the duration of the quarter, most major obstacles.

The writing program as a whole has benefited from the experience of the adjunct course faculty. For example, the adjunct faculty have learned a great deal about the expectations of faculty across the disciplines, which has in turn altered the way they design and teach the traditional advanced writing course, English 103, as well as the lower-division expository writing courses. Faculty are more likely to include summaries and critiques; they work more from texts and other sources of data rather than relying upon "invention"; they work with options beyond the traditional belle-lettre essay form to cite only a few examples. As a result, they teach more valuable composition courses as measured by the students' quarterly evaluations.

Overall, the writing faculty, especially, has been pleased with the split lower division/upper division writing requirements at Davis and with the variety of ways students can fulfill the requirement. By looking at the relationship of the teaching of writing to the students' whole education, rather than seeing writing courses only in their narrowest application as helping students prepare for other undergraduate courses, the writing faculty has come to appreciate the ways in which upper-division writing courses contribute to the larger goals of general education at the undergraduate level. Faced with a choice between a traditional two-quarter, lower-division requirement and a multi-faceted, two-tiered requirement, the writing faculty and administrators overwhelmingly prefer the latter. Upper-division students are, on the whole, more receptive to writing instruction, better able to understand firsthand the value of writing well, and better able to benefit from the instruction they receive, which makes teaching writing at Davis more profitable for the students and more rewarding to the instructors.



A Short History of the Long Struggle at the University of Maine  
to Revise Arts and Sciences Curricula with Writing

A. Patricia Burnes, Faculty Advisory Committee on Writing  
Virginia Nees-Hatlen, Director, Freshman Composition

Since 1977, juniors in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Maine have had to demonstrate their ability to write the kind of professional prose expected in their fields. The junior-year writing requirement sounds and is ambitious, perhaps impossibly so. It has been implemented with various degrees of rigor and various levels of understanding by college departments and will soon be buttressed by required writing intensive courses. Its history, though, serves both as a record of the confusions that the idea of teaching writing can raise and as a catalogue of the issues a college needs to confront if it is to encourage student writing across the curriculum.

From its beginning, the junior-level requirement served multiple, often contradictory, agendas. In the spring of 1977, the college's Educational Policy Committee decided to "do something" about student writing. Encouraged by Newsweek's accounts of Johnny's inabilities to read or write, committee members voiced their own frustrations about everything from bad handwriting to illogical research reports. At first they wanted to solve all writing problems by reinstating the college's freshman writing requirement, but the committee member from English insisted that the committee also meet with that department to work out a comprehensive approach to improving student writing beyond the freshman year. As a result, the college did reinstate the freshman requirement, but it voted as well to make each department responsible for ensuring that its majors graduated with at least basic competence in those forms of writing implicit in its discipline.

To those of us in English, the junior-level requirement looked like a victory. In lobbying for it, we had talked about various ways to include writing in upper-level courses, believing that once colleagues had taught such courses, they would join us in recognizing writing as a uniquely powerful learning strategy and would come to think of student writing as everybody's responsibility. Things did work that way occasionally. A few departments specified particular upper-level courses through which students could satisfy the junior-level requirement. In most of those courses, regular writing did become a way to initiate students into professional discourses of a discipline. With some modifications, these courses remain, many taught enthusiastically by the faculty who first composed them.

But those faculty remain an elite group. Surveying our colleagues in October of 1986, we found that no department had joined the original few in enforcing the requirement through coursework. Instead six departments give thirty-minute to two-hour-long essays tests to majors, essays tests in which students choose and answer one question from a list of broad questions



receive comments from their physics professors. In the geology department, students take three core courses, each of which centers on the writing of a research report developed in stages with comments at each stage from the professor. In zoology (heavily enrolled with pre-meds) students in their first upper-level course sign up for a one-hour seminar attached to the course like a lab. Here students work in small groups with faculty on the kinds of writing they will be expected to do as scientists-- reviews of the literature, abstracts, discussions of scientific problems, etc. In all three of these departments, then, a model of writing intrinsic to the work of science is presented in repeated tasks supervised by faculty. All three fields hold in common the research report, with its clear parallels to the methods of research and inference in the sciences, so that whatever the particular structural solution their departments have adopted, these science majors are all learning the discipline while writing within and to the discourse community which constitutes it.

In the humanities, the absence of a sovereign form such as the research report requires more than structural solutions for mentoring undergraduate majors; in each humanities field where substantial revision of the curriculum has occurred since 1977, faculty have found it more important to define the universe of writing in their own discourse community than to decide on a mode of implementation (usually assumed to be a single professor in a single small to mid-sized classroom). Some of the most imaginative writing courses have been developed in art history, where the interpretive communities of art historians and artists and viewing public suggest varying rhetorical goals for professional art historians. Art majors write and revise catalogues for exhibits they select and mount at the campus museum as well as informal responses and critical papers in which a work of art is studied and contextualized in terms of relevant interpretative contexts, including the student's own developing sense of the work's significance. One such critical assignment contains the following credo, which moves toward what we would call "writing as a way of learning":

Literate writing has a beneficial effect not only on the reader's comprehension of what you have to communicate, but also on the clarity and quality of your ideas as you assemble them for communication.

The English department itself has been struggling to articulate what "English" implies for undergraduate instruction in writing. At present Advanced Composition partially satisfies the junior-year requirement in English, which is completed by submitting two papers on literary topics (approved by course instructors) to the major advisor. The Advanced Composition class itself has been bifurcated into two versions, one stressing Writing across the Curriculum, one Writing and Careers in English. In the latter, we try to anticipate the range of current professions in English by asking students to write and revise major projects in a variety



receive comments from their physics professors. In the geology department, students take three core courses, each of which centers on the writing of a research report developed in stages with comments at each stage from the professor. In zoology (heavily enrolled with pre-meds) students in their first upper-level course sign up for a one-hour seminar attached to the course like a lab. Here students work in small groups with faculty on the kinds of writing they will be expected to do as scientists-- reviews of the literature, abstracts, discussions of scientific problems, etc. In all three of these departments, then, a model of writing intrinsic to the work of science is presented in repeated tasks supervised by faculty. All three fields hold in common the research report, with its clear parallels to the methods of research and inference in the sciences, so that whatever the particular structural solution their departments have adopted, these science majors are all learning the discipline while writing within and to the discourse community which constitutes it.

In the humanities, the absence of a sovereign form such as the research report requires more than structural solutions for mentoring undergraduate majors; in each humanities field where substantial revision of the curriculum has occurred since 1977, faculty have found it more important to define the universe of writing in their own discourse community than to decide on a mode of implementation (usually assumed to be a single professor in a single small to mid-sized classroom). Some of the most imaginative writing courses have been developed in art history, where the interpretive communities of art historians and artists and viewing public suggest varying rhetorical goals for professional art historians. Art majors write and revise catalogues for exhibits they select and mount at the campus museum as well as informal responses and critical papers in which a work of art is studied and contextualized in terms of relevant interpretative contexts, including the student's own developing sense of the work's significance. One such critical assignment contains the following credo, which moves toward what we would call "writing as a way of learning":

Literate writing has a beneficial effect not only on the reader's comprehension of what you have to communicate, but also on the clarity and quality of your ideas as you assemble them for communication.

The English department itself has been struggling to articulate what "English" implies for undergraduate instruction in writing. At present Advanced Composition partially satisfies the junior-year requirement in English, which is completed by submitting two papers on literary topics (approved by course instructors) to the major advisor. The Advanced Composition class itself has been bifurcated into two versions, one stressing Writing across the Curriculum, one Writing and Careers in English. In the latter, we try to anticipate the range of current professions in English by asking students to write and revise major projects in a variety



of forms, such as the short critical journal article, a preliminary grant proposal, a personal essay or feature piece, a textbook review, etc. An unresolved issue in our department is the relationship of the "English paper," often a close reading of a primary text, to the short critical article, where, increasingly, the task is to locate one's own reading within a critical and theoretical context.

Summarizing all this, the only generalization that seems safe is also obvious: departments which in 1977 decided what kind of writing they expected of themselves and of their majors and who considered carefully how best to develop it are now pleased with themselves and with their programs. These include: the Department of Art, whose enthusiasm stems in large part from the work of a single faculty member who since 1977 has experimented with a variety of approaches to writing about art; the Department of Geology, whose faculty say the 1977 requirement gave them the push they needed to do what they knew had to be done; and the Department of Physics, which was praised during its last accreditation visit for, among other things, the work it was doing with student writing.

Departments which hung fire in 1977 may need something more fundamental than the new funds for implementation the college has agreed to. Our history suggests that writing intensive courses are easiest to create in departments which agree on discourse models and modes of inquiry and which assume that initiating students into the conversation of the discipline is part of their mission. This description fits most of the science departments at Maine (and, indeed, the institution of science in general) and may explain the integrity of their approaches to writing. Things are less simple in most of the social sciences and humanities. These disciplines allow for a variety of discourse models, and specific social science and humanities departments at Maine often contain several divisions, each with its own preferred methodology and scholarly audience. Deciding which model to privilege is, then, a decision difficult both intellectually and politically. Happily, most of the college's departments are aware of the problem and in the discussions occasioned by the new requirement are asking hard questions about what they most want of their majors. Whatever the courses finally created, the questioning seems healthy--yet another indication of language's complicity with thinking.