

# **Writing Items on the NSSE, a WPA/NSSE Collaboration**

**A WPA Working Session  
Saturday, July 14, 1:45–4:30 (G1/H1 Capistrano)**

In this double working session, we will work with Bob Gonyea (Associate Director, Research and Analysis, National Survey of Student Engagement) to develop more numerous and more effective items about students' writing experiences. The goal of this session (and afterward) is to generate 20 to 30 questions that can be tested in spring 2008, a subset of which may be included in the next edition of NSSE.

## ***The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)***

NSSE has been used by over 1100 higher-education institutions to help them “identify aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside the classroom that can be improved through changes in policies and practices more consistent with good practices in undergraduate education” ([http://nsse.iub.edu/html/quick\\_facts.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/quick_facts.cfm)). It's becoming an increasingly important instrument used by administrators to make decisions about undergraduate education.

Many higher education administrative leaders closely attend to NSSE results; many WPAs have indicated (on the WPA and WAC listservs) that their campuses use NSSE and that their administrators consider its evidence important. Nationally, NSSE results are often used to help determine which factors help students become more engaged in the college experience and which factors enhance attainment. Locally, administrators often use NSSE results to help them decide which programs deserve resources.

## ***The Problem/Opportunity***

At the national level, there is little numeric-data evidence that shows a clear relationship between students' writing activities and student engagement and learning. Administrators who primarily rely on this kind of evidence may be difficult to persuade.

This is our chance to work with the developers of this influential survey to help them understand how writing can play a role in student success. It may lead to a survey that allows us to determine the role that writing plays at our individual institutions and nationally.

Quite possibly, with a superior inventory of writing items, NSSE might provide numeric data that illuminates the connections between writing and engagement/attainment. This kind of evidence might inform our practices as WPAs and WAC/WID administrators. It might also help us advocate more effectively about writing programs (FYW and WID/WAC) at our home institutions and nationally.

## ***Rough Agenda for the Working Session***

1. “On NSSE.” Bob Gonyea gives a fairly brief talk on how NSSE works, its possibilities and constraints, what is meant by “engagement,” the life of a question from idea to testing to inclusion, what makes a good test question, and

how NSSE might be enhanced if it more effectively students' writing experiences.  
Question period.

2. "Working group." Together we collaborate to isolate the most important issues and generate some working questions.
3. "Next steps." How can we continue this collaboration? 20 to 30 test questions need to be ready by late September for a spring-2008 evaluation, for possible inclusion in next edition of NSSE.

Break: Refreshments will be available 2:45 to 3:30

### ***The Current Edition of NSSE on Writing***

In general, the blog comments from May 15 to June 14 of this year show that many of us would like the questions to probe more deeply and sensitively into students' writing processes and into the various kinds of writing students might do within and beyond the university (contexts, genres, purposes, etc.).

The current edition of NSSE includes six items on writing, focusing primarily on formal writing and on the amount of writing.

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In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following? (Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never)

- (rewropap) Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in
- (integrat) Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources

During the current school year, about how much reading and writing have you done? (None, 1-4, 5-10, 11-20, More than 20)

- (writemor) During current school year .... number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more
- (writemid) During current school year .... number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages
- (writesml) During the current school year ... number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages

To what extent has your experiences at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas? (Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little)

- (gnwrite) Writing clearly and effectively

## ***A Place to Start: Blog-Generated Comments on NSSE and Writing***

The current NSSE's inventory of writing questions was the topic of conversation on a blog at the WPA Council website (<http://wpacouncil.org/node/852>). We asked respondents to critique the current questions and generate ideas for new questions.

There seemed to be a natural consensus along these lines: The current questions show the quantity of formal writing students are doing, but the survey should be more sensitive to:

- purpose, context, genre,
- writing in courses other than English,
- use of writing center and other support services,
- revision practices,
- Ways to proceed: general strategies, the nature of the NSSE

Here are all the blog posts (as of 11:30 MDT, 7/707), arranged by issue and date.

### Purpose, context, genre

**Steve Bernhardt, May 15, 2007.** When I read NSSE results, I always feel that the questions and responses are good as far as they go, but I want them to go deeper. I would not eliminate anything current. I think it is very helpful to know something about frequency. Some issues we might address:

- writing as a social activity: collaborative, team-based writing
- learning to repurpose or repackage existing writing for new purposes or audiences
- learning to integrate data or research results into arguments
- writing for real audiences, for clients, as part of service learning or coops or internships
- learning to write within a disciplinary context, with a growing sense of disciplinary authority
- writing for publication
- gaining a sense of genre or variation based on situation, purpose, audience, medium
- writing in variously mediated genres, as web content or blogs or wikis, as multimodal, designed, visual communications
- writing for learning: response papers, journals, learning logs, reactions, informal postings, discussion or forum postings
- writing for self-sponsored purposes
- sense of confidence in oneself as a writer, able to size up a situation and develop an appropriate response.

**Sandra Jamieson,, May 19, 2007. [Drew University's modified NSSE questions.]** At Drew we incorporated 12 slightly modified NSSE questions into our new evaluation of teaching form (for individual faculty and program assessment use \*only\* -- the data will not go to the committee on Faculty). We just replaced "During the current school year" with "In this course." The NSSE writing questions were not so helpful to us though, so we used the question below. I'd love to see something like this on NSSE. It is a more

complex question because it makes the students think about \*why\* they were assigned writing, but I think it tells us a lot more than number of pages.

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[In this course] During the current school year, I used writing in the following ways  
[choose as many as apply]

- To help me understand the course material (such as notes, exercises, problem sets, annotations, summaries, definitions, or drafts and revisions)
- To share my response to course materials (such as response papers; journal entries; or posts to Blackboard, an online discussions group, or a listserv)  
Extracurricular events and activities
- To develop my analytical and critical skills or to explore issues in more depth (such as critiques, annotations, abstracts, or short essays spread through the semester)
- To practice the writing of the discipline (such as proofs, abstracts, synthesis, annotations, laboratory notebooks or reports, case studies, field reports, ethnographies, research proposals, or reports or research papers using discipline-specific resources and style sheets)
- To demonstrate my learning in the course (such as take-home or in-class essay examinations, quizzes, or a single term paper at the end of the semester)
- To expand my expressive, creative, or professional writing skills (such as creative writing, playwriting, journalism, business writing, or speech writing)
- Other [please use the comment box to describe]
- I did not do any writing for this course.

**Kate Ryan, June 5, 2007.** I'm grateful at NSSE's interest in revisiting the writing-related questions (and to Chuck for helping this happen). The focus of the NSSE questions on quantity of writing say so little about quality of writing. My school performs poorly on NSSE unless the question about writing 20 plus pages is figured out of data aggregation because length isn't an emphasis or requirement in our WAC-like courses or our first year composition course which is portfolio-based. I like so much more what's emerging here... I'd like to know what students find themselves learning/doing with writing as others have suggested.

**Chris Anson, June 9, 2007. Testing vs. Learning.** Another distinction that might be helpful (and which is reflected to some extent in the additional questions people have suggested) is how often writing is used to "test" something (accumulated knowledge, skills, or abilities) as opposed to learn something (as in wrestle with a concept, explore an idea or reading, reflect on some experience, and so on). Typically, learning-based writing will be lower-stakes, brief, and less formal; but it would be great to get a sense of how or whether writing to learn contributes to engagement. The Harvard Seminar data from the early 1990's showed a really powerful relationship between engagement and amount of writing, but it didn't really delve into the genres, uses, and levels of formality of that writing. I'm not sure how all that gets manifested in specific questions, but it might be worth thinking about if items on writing will be added.

**Valerie Balester, June 11, 2007.** The current questions are helpful in showing the extent to which students at our institution are writing for classes. However, it does not tell us much about activities that are not formal writing--students often don't count some writing-

to-learn activities, such as microthemes, as writing. Also, it does not address journal writing, posters, oral presentations which include Power Point or handouts, and other forms of writing. It does not address questions about the writing process well--it begins to get at them with the draft question, but much more could be explored there. It does not address attitudes about writing. We are also interested in extra curricular writing.

**Shelley Reid, July 7, 2007.** I really like Sandra's list of questions, the idea behind several of Steve's (can we find out what modes/media they're writing in, and what their confidence levels are), and one that Joel was getting at, which is especially related to "engagement" with university resources: (how often) did you revise after receiving specific feedback from \_\_\_\_ (a professor, writing consultant/tutor, peer)?

Another kind of engagement-level question might be something like this: when you were completing a writing assignment, which if any of the following did you do -- conference with a professor, email a professor, use a campus writing center (f2f or online), consult a writing textbook/handbook (paper or online), share your paper with a peer, ask a peer a question, consult a family member, other, none.

It might be interesting to ask a question about transfer: to what degree did/do you use writing skills (learned in English/Composition) (learned in your major field courses) in other school writing? in writing outside of school?

I wonder if there's a way to get at a perception of value-added: to what degree do you believe writing instruction at this school (in English/Composition) (in courses in your major field) improved your writing (in other courses) (outside the university)?

July 7, 2007 - 07:43 — [jmullin@mail.ut...](mailto:jmullin@mail.ut...) New

### [NSSE questions](#)

#### Writing in courses other than English

**Glenn Blalock, May 26, 2007.** [...]I especially like Sandra's list of questions because they ask for the "deeper" information that Steve seeks.

I'd like to find a way for NSSE results to show how much / what kind of writing they do in courses that aren't English. Sandra's questions get at that issue in a way, but those were class specific surveys, and the regular NSSE is not. Steve's suggestions point to non-English-class kinds of writing, but do students recognize that? Here's why I suggest that we be specific about writing other than English classes.

Several weeks ago I conducted two days of focus group interviews with science majors (juniors / seniors). Though the interviews were focusing on curricular changes that added writing and research to a lab course, we did ask several questions about writing experiences before this course. A vast majority of the students connected "writing experiences" only with English courses (writing or literature), and we had to ask follow up questions to learn about any writing in other courses (sadly, not much, by the way). I fear that too often students associate questions about "writing" only with English courses (and perhaps some few humanities courses), and as a result don't report or consider the writing they may do in other courses.

So I'd like to see some NSSE items that explicitly attempt to gather information about writing other than English courses.

Then, perhaps a follow up for those who report writing other than English with the kinds of specific questions that Sandra and Steve are suggesting.

(In an ideal world, too, we could ask some of those more specific questions about students' experiences in English / Writing courses. But I'm not sure how many items we might be able to add.

### Use of writing center and other support services

**Marcy Trianosky, May 16, 2007.** I would like to see questions about frequency of use of the writing center, and the kinds of issues that students address while they are there. For example, we could ask how frequently WC visits discuss development of ideas, finding and supporting a thesis with appropriate evidence, organization, and other higher order concerns, vs. finding and correcting sentence level errors, help with documentation, etc. Since writing center work is designed to be collaborative, questions that get at the collaborative nature of the WC visit would also be helpful.

**Valerie Balester, June 11, 2007.** I echo what Marcy says about writing center and other support services, such as the library. We also could also about the use of software (at Texas A&M we use Turnitin.com, for example).

### Revision

**Joel Wingard, June 14, 2007.** Everyone has made some great suggestions here! The direction of them in terms of distinguishing kinds or genres of writing and purposes for writing is the right one, IMO. I don't know how messy a revised NSSE might get, but I'd like to see something in the way of a question or questions that gets more at the quality of students' revision of their writing, not just the quantity. For instance,

If you revised a paper before turning it in, did you do that on your own or was it mandated by your instructor? In either case, from whom did you get feedback on an early draft? -- your instructor, a classmate, a writing center tutor, someone else?

How do you understand revision? As editing your errors and spelling? As reorganizing or refocusing your ideas? As adjusting voice and tone? As looking again at your thoughts? (These aren't asked here in a very easy-to-survey kind of way, I realize, but I think it would be nice if the survey could glean some "deeper" information about student revision of writing.)

### Ways to proceed: general strategies, the nature of the NSSE

**Joan Mullin, July 7, 2007.** I concur with the excellent responses here, and many of them would generate useful data for fyc, WAC (or any!) college class. Kate said "I'd like to know what students find themselves learning/doing with writing as others have suggested" and Glenn would "like to find a way for NSSE results to show how much / what kind of writing they do in courses that aren't English." But is this the aim of the NSSE, and can we actually change that aim? The questions we are suggesting here seem to address a different purpose than those of a student satisfaction survey (taken by currently enrolled students). Chuck says that Bob Gonyea believes "the idea that the

amount and quality of undergraduates' writing would be associated with engagement has, he thinks, good face validity.” Are our questions focused on measuring student engagement (and, the logic goes, their satisfaction as a result of that engagement)?

While we might work to change Bob’s focus on “amount” and even “quality” (and what does that mean to a student?) we can’t change the NSSE’s focus on satisfaction resulting from engagement. I am wondering how we might use that focus to our advantage (resource allocation) and for our own research. For example, students are satisfied and engaged in our first year writing classes because of the one on one attention, because we learn who they are, and we work with/honor what they bring to the table, because they know our names: they vote about engagement with their feet when they ask us their senior year for letters of recommendation because they believe we know them ...because our pedagogy with writing has engaged them.

In our alumni survey here, students are most satisfied with the writing in courses where they had useful feedback. As others pointed out, the writing center is mentioned as a place where students engaged in writing satisfactorily. Also, students are not satisfied when the purpose of the writing they is not clear to them: a twenty page research paper teaches them research (they are satisfied with that), but they now (as alumni) have to write paragraphs summarizing their research (they didn’t get enough direction with this and are less satisfied).

How NSSE is framed by the word “satisfaction” should be our guidepost and make us careful about what we ask: “How much writing do you do in other classes” may turn into an indictment of a WAC program if students don’t consider informal writing as writing and answer “not much”; or if the questions we propose address the usefulness of fyc or WAC writing in other classes, students may reply to NSSE (as they do in class evaluations)that they are not satisfied with the kinds of writing they are doing (informal, revised, developmental stages).The response may indicate a problem with writing instruction or, just as likely that students can’t yet see the writing they are doing as useful. Questions that ask “Do smaller classes help you learn to write more effectively?” might well be more advantageous to us and tell others what we know about instruction in writing: what questions/results about satisfaction would be useful to us and to our institution? Joan

**Joan Mullin, July 7, 2007.** I'd like to suggest once again that we try to tie the NSSE questions into the WPA Outcomes Statement, insofar as possible, since it was developed by a large number of active WPAs and adapted by a considerable number of programs. I believe that we need to repeat the same message over and over again to make it take, rather than re-inventing our wheels.

Asking students whether they have used what they learned in FYC or other writing programs is a dangerous query, and one I think we should avoid. My research (to be published in the Fall 2007 WPA Journal) suggests that students can be very negative about what they learned--and I'm not sure how valid their responses will be at the time the survey will be given.

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**Who else is willing to be listed as key to this project?**