

REPORT OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON WRITING REQUIREMENTS

The members of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements present recommendations that we unanimously agree will, when implemented, significantly improve writing instruction for MSU undergraduate students. In our deliberations we kept student needs foremost in mind but, in addition, were highly conscious of demands on faculty as well as limitations of financial resources. Because of the composition of the Committee membership (representatives from UCC, UCAP, the Writing Task Force, two Provost-appointed writing experts, and two students), and since our deliberations followed the Academic Council discussion of the Task Force Report, we benefitted from a range of specific faculty and student views and questions concerning the most effective writing curriculum for our institution. In addition, the Provost's responses to the Task Force Report and charge to the Joint Committee outlined student, faculty, and administrative concerns.

We have discussed all the matters raised in those documents. During our discussions, we benefitted from the experience of a number of people at other institutions as well as our own. As the appended bibliography suggests, MSU is not alone in reforming writing instruction--there is, in fact, a considerable body of academic literature about designing, implementing, and administering writing curricula. We concur with the observations of the Task Force that writing is a highly personalized and intricate art developed through student-instructor contact. It is an important component of a student's intellectual endeavor and, consequently, inextricably linked to critical thinking and other language processes such as reading, listening and speaking. Good writing is the product of instruction in writing at various stages in a student's academic experience and has a value which goes beyond academic life to extend into professional and civic affairs.

In the light of current practices elsewhere, but based upon our institutional history and circumstances, we recommend the following writing program of strong individual components.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- ! *Replace the current first year writing program with a two-tier program of writing across the curriculum.*
- ! *Tier I courses should consist of a four-credit developmental course and a four-credit first year course.*
- ! *Provide continuity to the writing experience by assigned writing in the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities courses.*
- ! *Additional work would be required of those students who pass the Tier I course but receive less than a 2.0 grade.*
- ! *Tier II requires students to write in upper level courses within disciplines. Academic units need to identify "W" courses and/or clusters of courses which meet the requirement.*
- ! *A Writing Center and Laboratory should be established to assist faculty with Tier II requirements, to provide student tutorial services, and to conduct pedagogical research to improve instruction.*

THE TIER I WRITING REQUIREMENT

Recommendations:

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1. *By placement examination, students will be required to enroll in*
 - a) A four semester credit developmental course and a four-credit first year semester course or
 - b) A four semester credit course or
 - c) Tier II program courses.

2. *Students who achieve at least a 1.0 but lower than a 2.0 in the first year course will be required to enroll in a two-credit tutorial course in the Writing Center taken concurrently with the Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities "A" course.*

There has been concern within the University community that the replacement of a three-quarter first year program with a one-semester course represents a significant reduction in a student's training in writing. In this program, writing instruction required of entering students with low writing achievement will be increased. The Joint Committee members conclude that a full two-tier program more than compensates for the small reduction in the first year instruction time for most students and represents an improved writing program for Michigan State University students.

First it must be noted that in instructional hours a four-credit semester course represents not one-half but two-thirds of the present program of nine quarter credits. Second, the four-credit course in which writing instructors are responsible for no more than two sections, each averaging in size those presently customary in other Big 10 universities (about 25 students per section), will enable faculty to employ more intensive, individualized teaching methods than are presently possible. Taken together, the increased continuity of instruction, the elimination of repeated start-up and wind-down time, and the addition of a writing component in the courses in Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities, the difference in the amount of required writing by most lower division students will be minimal. The reconfiguration of ATL staffing, with a reduction in total numbers of the faculty but a replacement of temporary staff by a number of tenure system faculty and graduate students, will release resources, that can be used to support a Writing Center and Laboratory. Most important, the first year writing course, whether taken in the Department of American Thought and Language (ATL) or its equivalent in the English Department, James Madison College or Lyman Briggs School, will no longer complete a student's writing requirement.

These changes will place MSU in line with the trend among Big Ten universities to provide one semester of first year instruction combined with upper division writing requirements. Only Purdue University among Big Ten universities still requires a year-long program for a majority of its students, and it does not have an upper division requirement.

DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL WRITING AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT

Students who place in the Developmental Level Writing course will have a full year of Tier I instruction. Based upon a combination of scores from ACT and SAT, the MSU Reading Comprehension Test and the Academic Orientation Program Essay, about eight percent of entering students are currently placed in the ATL Developmental Level Writing Program where they receive the intensive instruction they need. (The percentage of entering students who will require the developmental course will vary somewhat depending on the writing performance of each incoming class). The Joint Committee recommends that MSU retain such a system of placement and that, for students so placed, the developmental course be prerequisite for enrollment in ATL courses. Developmental students would complete a year long sequence of two courses, or eight semester hours.

The Joint Committee also recommends that some students be exempted from the Tier I requirement; in effect, this

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would recognize a level of skill roughly equivalent to that attained through Tier I courses and signal that such students are prepared to take Tier II courses successfully. MSU currently awards either waiver or credit on the basis of Advanced Placement scores of 2 and above. The Joint Committee recommends that students receive credit for the Tier I course only with a score of 4 or 5 or waive the requirement with a score of 3.

OUTCOMES OF TIER I COURSES

The Joint Committee affirms that students in Tier I courses will receive instruction in how to conceive, draft, revise and complete papers of varying lengths, plan and write an essay examination, search for information from libraries to use in their writing, cite sources of information and employ the rules and conventions of American English. The objectives of this instruction are to increase students' abilities to organize information into coherent forms, state a clear and authentic point of view, direct argument to specific audiences and control the patterns and mechanics of written expression. Students will engage these tasks in the context of a coherently presented set of interdisciplinary materials on American culture (or, in the case of Lyman Briggs School, on science and technology from a humanistic perspective) from which writing exercises and assignments are derived. In emphasis, these are writing, rather than content courses; students work with thematic materials, often chronologically arranged, as a basis for writing rather than primarily for mastery of information. Tier I courses deal with significant themes to facilitate writing instruction and to prepare students for Tier II courses which use writing instruction to facilitate mastery of disciplinary content.

A course designed to produce such outcomes might, for instance, require the reading and discussion of several books and articles; keeping a course journal; drafting, editing and revising four to six essays, including at least one requiring library research; and writing an essay examination.

Thus the outcomes described should be understood to mean that in the instructor's judgment, students who complete Tier I courses have performed at the levels indicated by the following grades:

- 4.0 The student's writing was consistently superior and expressed independent thought with grace, clarity and force. Papers were organized well, their purposes clear and their ideas supported with pertinent details. Words were used with precision and suited to the purposes of assignments. Papers were free from mechanical errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- 3.0 The student's writing was above average but weakened by ambiguity of purpose, monotony in expression, absence of originality, and lack of precision and economy in the use of words.
- 2.0 The student's writing was acceptable as college work, but lacked an original, significant purpose or point of view. Typically written work was characterized by inadequate support of generalizations, pedestrian style, trite expression, reliance on uninteresting details, or errors in mechanics.
- 1.0 The student's writing met minimum standards but was insufficient for predicting success in upper level courses requiring writing. Written work was often marred by confused purpose, lack of organization, repetition of ideas, imprecise use of words and frequent errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- 0.0 Writing did not meet minimum standards.

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The Joint Committee recommends that students who pass the Tier I course with a passing grade that is lower than 2.0 be required to enroll in a two-credit tutorial course to be taken concurrently with the “A” course of the Center for Integrative Studies in Arts and Humanities. (Under standard University policy, they would also have the option of repeating the course.)

WRITING IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES COURSES

Courses being developed in the Center for Integrative Studies in Arts and Humanities will include writing assignments. One model has writing assignments as the focus of discussion sections of a large lecture course as well as essays on mid-semester and final examinations. Writing experiences and assignments of this sort will have an important and positive effect through their reinforcement of writing skill gained in Tier I. This also means that students with a waiver or credit for Tier I could enroll immediately in the “A” course in Arts and Humanities.

THE TIER II WRITING REQUIREMENT

Recommendations:

1. *Students must satisfy an upper level writing requirement as stipulated by their College and approved by the University Committee on Curriculum. Units need to identify “W” courses and/or clusters of courses which meet the requirement.*
2. *MSU should establish a Writing Center to assist faculty in preparing Tier II courses and to consult with faculty about effective writing instruction. The Writing Center should also contain a Writing Laboratory for tutoring students seeking assistance with writing and providing the mandatory tutorials required for students who pass but do not receive a 2.0 in the Tier I course.*

The Council to Review Undergraduate Education (CRUE) recommended “that written assignments and instruction in writing...continue throughout the student’s undergraduate education.” We believe that implementing this recommendation will improve undergraduate education in three ways: writing assignments will encourage critical analysis and synthesis of major concepts in the students’ majors; they will give students experience in writing tasks, forms and styles appropriate to particular disciplines and professional fields; and they will reinforce and extend writing skills acquired in Tier I writing courses.

As they near completion of a specialized course of study, students can benefit profoundly from assignments which require them to assemble information from diverse sources into coherent, well-reasoned statements which demonstrate their ability to apply major concepts within a field of knowledge.

High levels of reasoning and writing skill will be expected in the employment for which Michigan State University prepares its students. When they become professionals, MSU graduates can expect to spend significant amounts of time producing and analyzing written documents. Thus a complete education should include practice in the writing tasks, forms and styles appropriate to the student’s discipline or professional field.

Academic research on writing is uniform in stating that effective writing performance requires continued practice. Student writing performance declines in the junior and senior years when not reinforced (Bok 1978; Ochsner 1990). Frequent practice, especially when focused on increasingly sophisticated writing tasks, preserves and builds upon levels of skill developed in first tier writing courses.

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Based upon reports from other institutions and upon the Project Write program at MSU, the Joint Committee members believe that our university can provide effective across the curriculum writing experiences for our students at the upper level. Subject matter faculty are best qualified to make assignments, evaluate written work, and provide feedback to student writers. Some subject matter faculty may want assistance in preparing effective assignments that improve students' abilities to communicate knowledge in ways that are effective in terms of demands on faculty time. Project Write, a joint effort between the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) and the ATL Department, explored ways to incorporate various kinds of writing into CANR courses. ATL faculty consulted with CANR faculty about the use of a "writing to learn" approach which helped CANR faculty design assignments which improved students' learning of their subjects. CANR faculty developed many alternatives to, and variations on, the traditional term paper and term project and developed grading methods which made the most effective use of faculty grading time. Response to Project Write has been overwhelmingly positive, and Project Write represents a pilot for implementing a Tier II requirement. (Pertinent information from Project Write is included in Appendix A).

COLLEGE REQUIREMENT

At the Tier II level, writing assignments are at the service of course content and the students' abilities to communicate it. Through the normal channels of academic governance for program and course approval, each department will gain approval for a systematic and coherent plan, including courses or groups of courses which certify that students are writing at an acceptable level for that field. The plan should also provide for a system of accountability. For example, a unit may wish to identify specific courses which satisfy the requirement through continuous attention to writing. Or, the unit may (as is the current practice in the Department of Mechanical Engineering) identify a cluster of courses, each with modest writing components, which collectively satisfies the requirement. Some may wish to develop a "Writing Option" program analogous to the "Honors-Option." Other units may decide upon an "Exit Portfolio" system. In any case, the Joint Committee holds that the faculty in the disciplines are best placed to establish what constitutes satisfactory writing experience in those disciplines.

OUTCOMES

The purpose of the Tier II writing requirement, therefore, is to insure that students at Michigan State University demonstrate command of written, edited English appropriate to the standards of the disciplinary and professional programs in which they are enrolled. Primary responsibility for defining such standards and for developing curricula and courses to teach them must rest with the departments, schools and colleges offering undergraduate majors. Although units will have considerable flexibility in implementing the Tier II requirement, departments should present for the approval of the University Curriculum Committee (UCC) a plan for meeting the following criteria, whether through a single course or by alternative means:

1. Writing assignments should be conceived by the instructor and presented to the students as integral to course learning.
2. Students should be expected to produce well written, edited, revised and proofread papers which communicate effectively in their fields.
3. In their Tier II writing experience students should have at least one writing assignment in which

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a draft is revised after feedback from the instructor and/or peers.

4. Students should have received instruction and practice in the tasks, forms and styles of writing appropriate to their discipline or profession. This should include, where possible, experience with communication technologies.

Examples of the large variety of assignments which faculty might adapt to their courses are included in Appendix B. Among the types of writing assignments are non-graded or contract-graded assignments, such as journals or logs, which ask students to think through problems in their subjects. They can include “real world” or applied writing such as letters, long and short memos, feasibility reports, radio and TV scripts, research summaries for decision makers, and plans and proposals. Of course, assignments may include more traditional academic and professional writing such as term papers and long projects.

Faculty can be assured, however, that short, quickly evaluated assignments can be very effective means of instruction. Faculty are not expected to become “English teachers” concerned with grammatical rules or line-by-line marking of student errors. Students who need extra help can be referred to the Writing Center for assistance.

WRITING CENTER AND LABORATORY

A Writing Center and Laboratory should be established to assist faculty who are incorporating writing into courses and to assist students having writing problems. Such centers have been successfully established at other Big Ten Universities--Indiana University, Ohio State University, University of Iowa, Purdue University, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin and the University of Michigan.

The Writing Center should have a full time Director accountable to the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, a full time secretary, and a sufficient number of faculty writing experts to help Tier II faculty establish and meet goals for their programs. While many faculty already incorporate writing in their courses, others will want help in identifying new methods of giving feedback and approaching grading--including non-graded and contracted graded assignments. As has been demonstrated through Project Write, such assistance in various forms, including workshops and newsletters, can be cost and energy effective and enhance instruction in the content area. In addition, the Center will be a place to write grant proposals and to conduct pedagogical research. Staffing with writing experts should not be difficult since MSU already has many faculty with such expertise (see Appendix C).

The Writing Laboratory can be staffed with undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants who tutor students required to complete tutorials, referred to them by faculty, or appearing on a drop in basis. At other institutions, these writing laboratories are open from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm to serve faculty and students.

EVALUATION

Four years after implementation, all aspects of the two tier writing program should be evaluated: Tier I courses, the Tier II experience, and the Writing Center and Laboratory. The program of evaluation should be developed jointly by the Center and affected units, with the Center evaluation following the normal pattern for review of Centers, including possible external review.