

Strategies to Unlock Student Engagement across Disciplines

A Study of Second-level Writing Course Documents at Ohio State



Writing Across the Curriculum
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Challenge 1

Lack of explicit alignment between course content and GE outcomes for writing

Challenge 2

Discursively limited writing assignments

Challenge 3

Lack of a coherent framework for understanding writing

Making Writing Meaningful

Students often cross the Oval as they move between different departments and classrooms. In these spaces faculty teach them how their discourses work: how they think, how they practice their craft, how they write, and *why this activity matters*. But when their students leave their classrooms, instructors may wonder whether they take what they've learned when they cross back over the oval to other departments and into their civic, professional, and personal lives. ***This is a particular concern for second-level writing courses***, where students get some of their only focused writing instruction from one of over fifty courses offered in over thirty departments.

As part of a 2014 survey of second-level writing instructors, we collected course documents from respondents who were willing to share them. 28 instructors from 14 departments shared syllabi and up to three assignment prompts. We examined these documents to see how instructors articulated [general education outcomes for writing](#) and how they framed writing tasks in the class.

In our analysis of these course documents, we have identified three potential core challenges (listed to the left) for writing in these courses, which, according to current research in Writing Across the Curriculum, could contribute to a disconnect students may feel when they try to take what they learn writing in one context to another. We also identify places where innovative instructors are framing writing in ways that might address these challenges. As much as faculty value what their disciplines offer through their modes of thinking, habits of practice, and processes of inquiry, they may not be giving students enough of an opportunity to engage with their disciplines' practices. But several instructors we studied may be finding ways of meaningfully engaging students with writing in their fields.

To return to our central image, because of these potential curricular disconnects, students may be losing what they've learned as they cross the paths over the Oval. CSTW is in an excellent position to study these disconnects further, since we meet students as they grapple with their writing tasks: as they come to the Writing Center, as they tackle an assignment in a course with an embedded Writing Associate, or as instructors work with WAC to articulate what they see in student writing.

WAC is currently collaborating with the coordinators of second-level writing courses in the seven departments offering the largest number of sections each year. Together, we plan to develop resources and training to help instructors better align their teaching with GE outcomes, frame contexts for their assignments, and articulate a framework to help students understand writing in the different contexts they enter as they cross the Oval.

Sincerely,
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Challenge 1: Lack of explicit alignment between course content and GE outcomes for writing

For many students, syllabi are a site of first contact with a course and its potential role in their University experience. OSU's General Education Outcomes are designed to connect disciplinary coursework to the larger learning experience at Ohio State. But for many of the syllabi we examined, the GE Outcomes were disconnected from disciplinary content and the topical themes of a course.

Expected Learning Outcomes for Writing and Communication, Level 2

1. Through critical analysis, discussion, and writing, students demonstrate the ability to read carefully and express ideas effectively.
2. Students apply written, oral, and visual communication skills and conventions of academic discourse to the challenges of a specific discipline.
3. Students access and use information critically and analytically.

Most of the syllabi we collected (24 total) listed the expected learning outcomes for second-level writing.

- As is required for courses meeting GE categories, most syllabi (20) simply listed the expected learning outcomes for second-level writing and any other GE categories the course met.
- Two did not list any, and three listed outdated or incorrect outcomes.
- Only two explicitly articulated how course assignments and activities addressed these outcomes.

A number of them had multiple lists of outcomes beyond Ohio State's GE Criteria, including

- College-level accreditation criteria, such as ABET
- Department-level program assessment criteria
- State-level criteria, such as Ohio's Transfer Assurance Guides
- An instructor's personal objectives for learning writing
- As above, only two of these syllabi articulated how the course met these outcome criteria.

The literature of effective course design has consistently stressed the importance of aligning course learning objectives with assignments, learning activities, and assessment. Without this careful alignment, students are less likely to make connections between the learning activities assigned in a course and wider curricular objectives, much less reliably demonstrate their learning in a course's assessments (Wiggins and McTighe 2005; Fink 2013; Palmer, Bach, and Streifer 2014).

This disconnect can be particularly acute within general education writing courses, where instructors often struggle to reconcile the broad educational motives of a liberal education and specific disciplinary contexts for writing (Yañez, Russell, and Smith 2009; Gere, Swafford, Silver, and Pugh 2015).

Solution 1: Promote alignment in course and assignment design

A few syllabi made a particular point of framing or re-articulating GE outcomes and assignments in terms of the core course themes

The syllabus excerpt to the right, from Landscape Architecture 2367, showcases what's possible when an instructor carefully elaborates on GE Goals. The instructor:

- connects writing and reading tasks (purple) to the academic discipline (green)
- describes the conceptual frameworks and discourses that intersect with writing and reading
- identifies specific writing genres and course activities that will connect students with the discipline
- suggests that the instructor has a clear understanding of how the course intersects with the department, discipline, and University curriculum objectives.

Furthermore, this instructor doesn't just restate course objectives with GE outcomes, but aligns assignments and activities throughout the course.

This alignment of goals and course content shows a familiarity with **backwards course design**, which encourages development of course activities, assignments, and assessment around learning goals and outcomes (Wiggins and McTighe 2005; Fink 2013).

EXAMPLE FROM LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE 2367

2) *Students apply written, oral, and visual communication skills and conventions of academic discourse to the challenges of Landscape Architecture. Students write and engage with visual communication within a broad range of formats that are typical with[in] contemporary design discourse.*

These range from analysis papers and position papers, to photo essays and multimedia blog posts. Students are given the opportunity to share their work orally through recitation readings and an in-class debate.

WHAT WAC PROPOSES

- **Encourage more backwards course design in 2367 courses through instructional development programs.** WAC promotes backwards design by connecting writing activities and assignments with key critical thinking tasks, and encouraging scaffolding of formal writing activities with sequenced informal activities. UCAT regularly facilitates a week-long course design institute founded on backwards course design.
- **Promote a conversation between 2367 instructors across departments about how GE outcomes for writing can be explicitly and meaningfully aligned with wider course outcomes.** The WAC program is currently planning a common event for second-level writing instructors to help them articulate how they meet expected learning outcomes for writing, and to share best practices across departments.

Challenge 2: Discursively limited writing assignments

On the one hand, many of the assignments we identified engaged students with compelling topics and questions within the field, or framed student writing within a disciplinary process of inquiry:

- position statements about ethical concerns regarding animal breeding practices
- research on everyday objects that are “black boxed”
- urban sociological case studies
- “coalition politics” in Harriet Jacobs’ writing
- experimental or observational studies of language variance

On the other hand, only a quarter of these assignments positioned student writers as writing for an audience for a particular purpose. Rather, writing seemed most positioned for students to demonstrate what they know to an instructor (Melzer 2014).

Written genres in our course documents

- 63 of the 88 major assignments we identified made no reference to an audience of any kind.
- When we mapped the verbs within the revised Bloom’s taxonomy table, we found that assignments were narrowly construed within the taxonomy matrix:
 - Verbs in assignments more often asked students to focus on **understanding** (164 of 666 verbs) and **analyzing** (223) rather than **applying** (122), **evaluating** (107), or **creating** (15).*
 - The knowledge domains associated with those verbs more often focused on **conceptual** knowledge (460 of 666) rather than **procedural** (130) or **metacognitive** knowledge (23).*

Research in college writing has revealed how vaguely framed writing tasks often confuse students, as they point toward contradictory or ill-defined motives for writing from a student’s point of view, or fail to help students adapt previous knowledge about writing into new contexts, which leads them to misapply that previous knowledge (Wardle 2009, Nowacek 2011).

Furthermore, as valuable as the kind of cognitive work instructors are currently asking students to do is (understanding and analyzing conceptual knowledge), broadening the thinking students do as they engage tasks—applying, evaluating, and creating procedural and metacognitive knowledge—would help students more effectively build toward complex projects, and give them opportunities to develop critical frameworks that they can take from one context to another (Heer 2012, Anderson et al. 2001).

To put this all another way, instructors across the disciplines research and teach in their fields because they believe their work contributes not just narrowly to their fields, but to important questions and problems that are significant in broader contexts. What our analysis of 2367 course documents suggests is that **instructors are missing an opportunity to invite their students meaningfully into these significant questions and problems in ways that show students how writing helps their work make a difference.**

*See Appendix A, which maps occurrences of verbs /knowledge category objects within the revised Bloom’s taxonomy table and includes illustrative examples from the assignments, and see our methodology section for an account of how we categorized assignment verbs and objects according to the updated Bloom’s taxonomy matrix (Heer 2012; Anderson et al. 2001).

Solution 2: Frame assignments with meaningful contexts and purposes

A number of courses assigned projects that engaged students in purposeful writing tasks.

Genres with context and purpose

Effective instructors introduce genre as serving a particular audience and context and addressing some concrete social action mirroring or even engaging contexts outside classroom.

Multiple cognitive tasks, multiple forms of knowledge

Effective instructors engage students with a range of cognitive activity and forms of knowledge within Bloom's taxonomy, scaffolding students' learning and giving them frameworks to recontextualize their learning in new contexts.

Examples of meaningful genres

- Town hall meeting speeches (Communication 2367)
- Crisis communication press conference (Agricultural Communication 2367)
- Problem solving proposal (Engineering 2367)
- Digital "immigration saga" ethnographic project (Arabic 2367)
- Exhibition curation project (Art Education 2367.02)

Well-designed assignments can overcome the challenges of limited writing assignments if they

- **contextualize writing** within a particular discourse community (Soliday 2011),
- **invite writers to participate** in that discourse, if in sometimes peripheral ways (Prior 1998),
- **propose meaningful questions or problems** of personal interest to writers (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006; Eodice, Gere, and Learner 2015),
- **engage writers in multiple contexts and formats** (Beaufort 2007), and
- **scaffold projects using varied cognitive tasks and metacognitive reflection** (Heer 2012 Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014).

WHAT WAC PROPOSES

- **Promote assignment and curricular design** that helps instructors better articulate how forms of writing are connected to field-specific modes of thinking, processes of inquiry, and habits of practice.
- **Broaden the range of genres instructors assign** that vary the audiences, contexts, media and get students to engage with meaningful, field-specific questions and problems.
- **Encourage instructors to assign genres that demonstrate how their field contributes** to their own and students' personal, professional, civic, and global interests.
- **Advocate for more varied scaffolding and reflection** into course and assignment design.

Challenge 3: Lack of a coherent framework for understanding writing

While all of the course documents we collected contained some elements of writing instruction, such as scaffolded writing practice, peer review, drafting, or short developmental writing, very few courses explicitly connected this practice (at least in these documents) to a coherent theory of writing.

Common Approaches to Writing Instruction

- Drafting process (23 of 28 instructors)
- Peer review (19 instructors)
- Writing/Rhetoric/Communication textbooks (16 instructors)
 - Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* most common (10 instructors)
- Scaffolded projects, e.g. research papers with proposals, annotated bibliographies, outlines, oral presentations leading to final project (15 instructors)
- Informal, shorter assignments, like journals (13 instructors)

Possible Limitations to Writing Instruction

- Course schedules most often were defined by content topics (17 of 24) or day's reading (20 of 24), rather than writing topics (7 of 24)
- Instruction in writing sometimes limited to
 - one day (4 of 24), e.g. special session on "social science composition", or
 - to lessons on a particular writing task (3 of 24), e.g. "resume day"
- Writing instruction mapped out for a relatively narrow form of generalized academic writing, e.g. thesis development, finding and engaging with sources, drafting and revising, etc. (3 of 24)

In a lot of the courses we examined, writing seemed to be incidental. Many courses focused primarily on subject-area content, which students were asked to write intensively about, but there was little explicit, ongoing instruction on writing or communication.

Studies of transfer of learning about writing have shown that students need to be taught how to "frame specific problems...into more abstract principles that can be applied to new situations" (Beaufort 2007; see also Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014). Few course documents share a coherent set of such abstract principles about writing, even when students were writing extensively.

Given that well over half of incoming students enter Ohio State with credit for first year writing, there is little opportunity for students to get focused instruction in writing or communication--unless many of these courses are redesigned to align content area themes with varied writing practice and provide students with the tools to adapt to the varied writing tasks they will face.

WHAT DO INSTRUCTORS NEED STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT WRITING THAT THEY CAN TAKE INTO THEIR CONTINUED COURSEWORK AND THEIR CIVIC, PROFESSIONAL, AND PERSONAL LIVES?

Solution 3: Develop a common approach to explicit writing instruction

A handful of courses did show evidence of ongoing instruction in communication theory or writing pedagogy

CASE 1:

Communication 2367

- Day to day topics, instruction, and activities oriented to communication theory
- Central textbook, *The Dynamics of Persuasion* (Perloff 2013), aligns with communication topics
- Scaffolded semester-long project framed around theory and communication campaign process
 - Annotated bibliography
 - Problem, Solution, Barriers to Persuasion paper applying communication theory
 - Audience survey and results analysis
 - Town hall speech in topic groups

CASE 2:

Teaching and Learning 2367

- Day to day topics, instruction, and activities oriented to writing pedagogy
- Daily readings on writing pedagogy and theory
- Semester projects scaffolded and aligned with pedagogical focus
 - Self-reflective writing on writing instruction and experience
 - Peer review grounded in pedagogical theory
 - Ethnographic project observing students
 - Scaffolded multi-genre and digital composition projects

These courses and others like them share the following characteristics:

- **Day-to-day topics, instruction, and activities** involve explicit focus on writing or communication theory, often (though not always) tied into core disciplinary concepts
- **Textbooks and/or readings on writing** aren't just incidental, or narrowly focus on general process or mechanics of writing, but provide a conceptual framework for understanding writing and communication.
- **Writing assignments and process** are scaffolded within this framework in explicit ways, and give students varied practice in a range of genres and contexts

While the balance between content matter and communication instruction can be harder for fields that don't have direct purchase on communication or literacy, a balance can still be struck by focusing instruction on a robust framework for writing instruction like [that offered by the NCTE/CWPA](#) and using the content area to provide *varying contexts* for students' writing practice.

WHAT WAC PROPOSES

- **In cross-departmental professional development for second-level writing instructors**, introduce some common framework for writing instruction (such as the [NCTE/CWPA Framework for Success in Post-secondary Writing](#)), and work with departments to share and adapt curricula that apply this framework in ways meaningful and appropriate to local contexts.

Methodology

As part of a 2014 survey of second-level writing instructors, we collected course documents from respondents who were willing to share them. We asked participants to share a syllabus, a course schedule (if not included in the syllabus), and up to three course documents. 28 instructors from 14 departments shared syllabi and up to three assignment prompts. Of these 28 instructors, all but three included a syllabus, and all but three included at least one assignment prompt. 11 included non-assignment prompt documents, including rubrics, peer review prompts, oral presentation prompts, and prompts for shorter assignments.

The core questions we sought to explore through these documents were:

- How did instructors articulate GE expected learning outcomes for second-level writing in these documents?
- What kinds of writing genres did they assign, and what kinds of audiences and contexts (if any) were writers asked to engage with?
- What kinds of writing instruction is evident in these documents, such as drafting, peer review, dedicated class time to writing instruction, writing-oriented textbooks, etc.?
- In what ways did the intellectual activity described in these documents map on to the revised Bloom's Taxonomy Table (Anderson et al. 2001)?

It is important to recognize up front that there are distinct limitations to looking at course documents as a way to accurately gauge an instructor's approach to teaching. Research on the teaching of writing has shown how instructor motives and intentions for assignments and activities are far from transparent, and that they can be bound up with unarticulated and contradictory expectations for students (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006, Giltrow 2002). Furthermore, classroom studies have also revealed how differently students might interpret writing tasks from instructors (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006, Nowacek 2011, Prior 1998).

However, what course documents like syllabi and assignments do offer is to illustrate what instructors felt was most important to communicate to students in writing, even if what they communicate leaves a lot of information tacit or is inconsistent: the explicit process they want students to follow, the core criteria they will assess student work by, or to highlight components of assignments they fear students will miss. So while the documents don't tell a comprehensive story about how instructors approach writing instruction, they do give us our best picture barring intensive qualitative work with instructors and their students. Instead, we can use this limited picture to compare to more intensive studies of writing instruction and learning to infer how writing instruction maps on to research in the field.

From the syllabi, we identified where instructors included language from the current general education expected learning outcomes, copying the language directly, modifying or supplementing it in some way. We also noted where outcomes from other sources were included (e.g. ABET accreditation criteria or department-level program outcomes). We also tracked examples of drafting, peer review, and shorter, more informal assignments, particularly when they scaffolded larger projects. Looking at course schedules, we examined what kinds of information was noted: whether the schedule listed just assignments and readings (a more content focused approach), or also included thematic information like questions or topics, particularly those clearly addressing instruction in writing.

From the documents shared, we identified 128 assignments (87 'major' assignments worth more than 10% of the final grade, and 41 worth less than 10%) for further analysis. We noted which assignments explicitly asked writers to consider an audience. We also identified 666 pairings of verbs and knowledge domain objects that we could map on the revised Bloom's taxonomy table (Heer 2012, Anderson et al. 2001). We often had to verbalize nominalized actions (like "write an analysis") or interpolate verbs from questions (e.g. "Why can this rule/role breaking happen more easily in fiction?" maps as "[consider] (concept)", that is, "analyze conceptual knowledge"). We characterized each of these 666 verb/object pairings based on the best available evidence we had, keeping in mind that there were likely other activities that were stated elsewhere (e.g. in class, through feedback) or that students inferred based on prior educational experiences (Cf. Anderson et al. 2001, p. 20-23).

Above, we've shaped our analysis to call attention to broad trends and connect these trends to research in writing and teaching and learning. We've also called attention to examples of writing instruction that seems to reflect recommended "best practices" in the field, and noted what the Writing Across the Curriculum program could do in its support and training of writing instructors across campus to encourage these best practices more widely.

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