

Writing Across the Curriculum

While writing instruction may have its home in the General Education curriculum, it is best achieved on an "across-the-curriculum" basis. That is, early instruction is provided in the General Education curriculum, but it is also required, under specific guidelines, in each major program as well. This practice may "blur the lines" between General Education and the Academic Major, but such a "blurring" is altogether appropriate in this regard.

Two key principles need to stand behind every decision that we make about writing pedagogy: engagement and helpful intervention. By *engagement* is meant student and faculty involvement with the task at hand. The topics of the First Year Seminars are an obvious example of a technique that encourages engagement. Another common example is the projects that upper level students often undertake in their majors; those projects that closely parallel professional activity are especially likely to enjoy the fruits of vigorous engagement.

By *helpful intervention* is meant any activity by which the writer receives input from others during the process of creating a written product. Helpful intervention can be accomplished in many ways: student-teacher conferences; peer editing projects (in-class or out); teacher review of topic, prospectus, or draft; consultation with workshop tutors; and so on. Teachers need to be trained in the importance and methodologies of helpful intervention.

The writing program at Messiah includes four classes: (1) a College Writing Workshop course, (2) a First Year Seminar, (3) a writing-enriched course, and (4) a writing-enriched course developed for the major (major-w).

- (1) *College Writing Workshop* -- Although not a course required of the majority of our entering students, the College Writing Workshop is an important element in any writing-across-the-curriculum program. It will both help students who have particular needs and limit the number of severe writing problems that teachers in the First Year Seminar program will need to address. Because placement in this course represents an entrance deficiency, the hours it represents fall under the "elective" category in the General Education/Major/Elective scheme. This part of the writing program, for those of whom it is required, may be satisfied by completing IDWR 099 College Writing Workshop during the fall semester of the student's first year.
- (2) *First Year Seminar* -- The second classroom writing component – actually the first component for more than 90% of our students – is the First Year Seminar. The seminar is the standard first-year writing experience in our program, and is consequently required of all students. While the content topics of each seminar vary widely, there is a substantially common approach to writing instruction and related assignments among the seminars. The requirement must be satisfied in the student's first year by completing one of the many First Year Seminars which are offered during the fall semester. Since this seminar is the standard first year writing experience in our program, several questions need to be answered.
 - (a) Who determines the writing component of the First Year Seminar? First, we need to embrace the necessity and desirability of variety in writing instruction. The professor who writes regularly and who purposes to teach her students "How I Go Through My Writing Process" is seldom ineffective; more likely to fail is the professor who teaches a textbook set of easy answers about how writing should happen. Thus individual professors will be encouraged to arrange their courses in order to incorporate the two key principles – engagement and helpful intervention – as they are best able. In addition, a Writing Committee works as a subcommittee of the General Education Committee to provide guidance for what

kinds of writing activities and resources prove most beneficial and practical. Furthermore, assistance needs to be made readily available for professors who want helpful input on how they are teaching writing.

- (b) How frequently will students write? The small size of the First Year Seminar is intended to allow frequent writing. The actual amount of "finished" writing depends upon the kind of helpful intervention incorporated, but certainly writing should be weekly if not daily.
 - (c) What kinds of writing will students do? Students should experience both reflexive and transactional writing; the ratio varies with the section. It is important, though, that students learn to handle texts in a way common to the liberally educated; that is, getting information from texts and incorporating it into texts of their own. (This, by the way, does not mandate, or even imply endorsement of a traditional research paper.) A class which focuses completely or primarily on personal writing seems less likely to fulfill this goal.
 - (d) What support should the First Year Seminar receive from other parts of the campus? Personnel in Computer Services may, on occasion, offer classes in learning to use the campus computer system. The library staff work with individual instructors to facilitate library orientation and provide additional support.
- (3) *Writing Laboratory* --The Writing Laboratory is a course designed to assist those students who, at the end of First Year Seminar, continue to demonstrate the need for further writing instruction. Any student who makes a C+ or below in First Year Seminar will be required to take a writing competency assessment. Students failing that assessment will be required to take the Writing Laboratory in the spring semester to ensure that their writing abilities reach acceptable collegiate levels.
- (4) *Writing-Enriched Course* ["W" Course] -- A student may take any "W" course to satisfy the writing requirement. No department may designate a general education W course as any part of the major writing requirement. Approved courses are listed in each semester's course schedule. The selected course may, but need not, simultaneously meet the "W" requirement and another general education, elective, or minor requirement. (See Structural Parameters for the Writing-Enriched Course Requirement.)
- (5) *Writing-Enriched Course in the Major* [Major-W] -- The major-w course is taken within the students' chosen disciplines; its primary purpose, in relation to writing, is to allow students to begin to acquire familiarity with the expectations of their own professional discourse communities. There is considerable variation in the kinds of courses into which various majors incorporate the writing emphases; each department is responsible for addressing this requirement as part of the academic major. (See Structural Parameters for the Major Writing Requirement.)

About the essentials of the "W" courses, two elements should be considered: pedagogy and formal requirements. Concerning pedagogy, it is necessary that completing a *writing process* be presented as a meaningful part of the course focus. Some minimal class time should be based on the two key principles of engagement and helpful intervention. The structural parameters for writing courses provide guidance related to the formal requirements associated with both the major "W" and "W" courses. The evaluation of these assignments should figure significantly into the students' grades in the course, and students cannot pass these courses without passing their writing assignments.

These three classes – four for particularly problematic writers – constitute the core of the writing program at Messiah. They represent, though, only the beginning of a real writing-across-the-curriculum approach. In actuality, we will produce excellent writers only as students come to see that faculty value good writing enough to write themselves.