

Writing Course Subcommittee

Interim Report

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Background

In late November 2008, the SVCIC established a Writing Course Subcommittee to make recommendations on, and to help coordinate, the development and implementation of the college's new writing half-course. Though its charge lasts until the course has been fully implemented¹, the subcommittee was asked to prepare an initial report to the faculty "in which the character and resource needs of any pilot program will be addressed and in which a recommendation regarding a full timetable for implementation of the writing course will be provided." We address these issues below. We also make some preliminary recommendations concerning the structure and content of the writing course. Though most of the committee's work on course development lies ahead—and will involve consultation with both faculty and students, as well as exploration of best practices elsewhere—the question of a pilot necessarily raises questions about course content and structure. We begin with these.

The Course

The committee recommends developing the writing course as a set of topical seminars taught by faculty members individually or in teams of two, with faculty drawn from every department, and with students placed according to their preferences among topics as much as possible. Such a model would create a more natural intellectual context for writing than a course without a topical focus, and would allow students greater freedom to write on topics of interest to them than a course with a single topic or a more limited set of topics. We anticipate that these features would enhance students' motivation to write and thereby enhance their progress in the course, as seems to have been true in Humanities 1. Within specified parameters (see below), sections might differ in various ways. But all would share the aim of building a core set of (nonfiction) writing skills widely transferable across disciplines and calibrated to the demands of later course work at the college. (Appendices A and B contain two examples of how a section of the course might look. These are offered as "proof of concept" rather than as definitive models.)

The relative advantages of individual versus team teaching will be considered further at a later date, but at this point the committee prefers to allow both formats, both to make the course as attractive as possible to faculty members who might teach it and to gain

¹ Or, at least, the text of the committee's charge suggests this, although the committee may need to be formally re-authorized after the February 26 faculty meeting.

flexibility in regard to staffing. To facilitate timely and extensive feedback on papers, as well as strong mentoring relations between faculty and students, we recommend that the course maintain a student-faculty ratio of no more than 8:1, in whatever configurations it is offered. This would amount to a slight reduction in the ratio historically present in Humanities 1 sections (we expect that the grading load in the half course would be somewhat heavier than in a half semester of Humanities 1).

Faculty members would choose their own topics, subject to the following provisos: (i) the topic and all reading assignments should be accessible without prerequisites (other than those required for admission to the college); (ii) though reading assignments might privilege the instructor(s) own discipline(s), they should include material from other disciplines and/or material intended for an educated general readership; (iii) reading selections should be chosen with a view toward discussing them not only for content but also as pieces of writing; (iv) the topic of each section should engage questions concerning the societal context and impact of science and technology. Though the committee considers it important to avoid building too many competing objectives into this one course, we believe the last of these provisos would contribute to the mission of the college and provide some mitigation for the loss of the Integrative Experience requirement, at the cost of imposing fairly modest restrictions on course design. Finally, all sections of the course would use the same writing handbook (yet to be determined).

The committee recommends the following tentative framework for written assignments and the use of class time. Each section should assign two or three papers (geared to the learning objectives in the next section) whose combined length should be between ten and twelve pages in final form. Each of these papers should undergo repeated revision. For at least two papers, there should be formal, in-class peer review sessions, with careful advance explanation of the peer review process (and ideally a practice exercise). Students should revise the peer reviewed draft for submission to their instructor. After receiving the instructor's comments (and grade), they should revise further and re-submit. If there is a third paper, the revision process may be somewhat abbreviated. In-class free writing and/or other forms of exploratory writing should be used to facilitate the development of complete drafts.

We would add to these assignment parameters the following general principles for the layout of syllabi: First, there should be writing (or revision) assigned every week of the course. Second, activities explicitly related to the improvement of writing skills should occupy the bulk of the class time each week. Such activities might include free writing, peer reviewing, discussing the structure or rhetorical assumptions of an assigned reading selection, reviewing citation conventions, among others (see Appendices A and B for further examples). What we exclude here is, primarily, coverage of topical content (necessary as that is)—e.g., a class discussion of the ideas presented in an article or a brief background lecture on the topic being explored in the seminar. These sorts of elements should occupy a relatively small amount of the weekly class time.

It should be noted that the committee envisions this course as the first component of a broader effort across departments to develop students' writing abilities. This course

should prepare students to move into subsequent course work but cannot realistically address all possible writing needs. What it can do, we believe, is provide a solid grounding in the most broadly applicable writing skills and practices.

Learning Objectives

Overall Course Objective

To teach students effective college writing strategies and conventions as the tools for critical inquiry through specific exercises in reading, thinking, and writing.

Detailed objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to

1. use informal writing to develop their thinking at different stages of inquiry;
2. deploy some main elements of persuasive and expository writing (see below) in formal papers;
3. recognize and use rhetorical purpose, voice, and audience analysis in academic reading and writing;
4. write clear, coherently structured papers that use appropriate evidence and diction toward forceful intellectual discourse;
5. demonstrate understanding of some of the main cross-disciplinary similarities and differences in conventions of expression and article formats;
6. develop an effective writing process that includes repeated revision of writing;
7. make use of the feedback process, both as reviewers and as recipients;
8. identify passages in their writing that call for citation, attribution, or acknowledgment, and apply appropriate forms of citation where needed.

Assignments will be designed to help students practice the following elements of persuasive and expository writing (singly or variously combined):

- a. articulating the results of a line of inquiry
- b. cogently defending a conclusion or point of view on a debatable topic
- c. describing an object or process relevant to a topic of study
- d. explaining difficult concepts
- e. explaining why a project was or should be undertaken
- f. synthesizing material toward a new conclusion
- g. critiquing a scholarly paper
- h. summarizing a body of work (for example, writing an abstract)

Pilot Course

Although it is an open question when the new writing course will be fully implemented with sustainable staffing², the committee believes that it would be helpful to pilot the course as soon as possible. Our best insights regarding course design and implementation will likely come from the experience of a pilot version. Based on the information we have obtained, a pilot involving roughly 40 incoming students is feasible for the fall 2009 semester. In this section, we present recommendations concerning the details of such a pilot program.

- The pilot course would be taught by five faculty members who have volunteered and whose department chairs have determined that they could feasibly be released from other teaching: Jeff Groves, Adam Johnson, Geoff Kuenning, Mike Orrison, and Peter Saeta.
- The course would be open to entering students as a substitute for Humanities 1. It would be briefly explained in the summer mailing containing the Hum 1 section descriptions and section preference form; students could express a preference for the pilot and would be placed as far as possible according to interest. (This procedure was followed successfully last summer for an experimental section of Humanities 1.) Each student would take two sections of the pilot (switching instructors), one in the first half of the semester and another in the second half. They would also participate in assessing the course (through oral and written feedback). Students who completed two rounds of the pilot and the assessment exercises would receive 4 units of credit for Humanities 1.
- The pilot would run in three sections—two team-taught sections of 16 students each and an individually-taught section of eight students.
- During the remainder of this semester (Spring 2009), the committee would consult with the pilot faculty to refine learning objectives and general parameters for the course. The pilot faculty would then develop syllabi and assignments for their sections over the summer, as well as receive training in writing pedagogy (e.g., peer review procedures, commenting effectively on papers, using informal writing in class, etc.). This summer work would be partly collaborative and partly individualized; the schedule for the collaborative aspects would be determined by a consensus of the participants. Wendy Menefee-Libey, HMC’s Director of Learning Programs, would serve as an advisor to the group; the committee (through its chair or other representative) would advise and consult as needed to ensure that planning for the pilot remained on track.
- Teaching the pilot course (for two half-semester) would count as teaching one full course. Summer planning would carry a separate stipend, which we

² As noted in the next section, we think of “full implementation” not just as the point when all students would take the course but the point at which enough faculty members had begun teaching the course to allow for regular rotation in and out. We think it is important to keep this larger goal in view, since it is likely that most faculty members who would teach the course would not opt to do so every year (and, of course, sabbaticals will require further rotation in the staffing). This “full implementation” point is also the point at which the need for summer training of new faculty in the course would diminish.

recommend be set at \$2000 or half the full summer rate. The Dean of Faculty would fund course replacements to balance out department staffing.

- The course would meet opposite Humanities 1 or whenever else works from the standpoint of scheduling. It would meet for 150 minutes per week (over two or three class sessions).

Full Implementation

To maintain an 8:1 student-faculty ratio at the current student body size, about thirteen members of the faculty would need to teach the writing course each year (this assumes that a faculty member would teach his/her section twice during the semester). Since teaching the writing course competes with offering other courses in one's field, we believe that no one should be expected to teach the writing course more often than every other year (on average). Not accounting for sabbaticals and other leaves, then, at least 26 (and preferably more) faculty members would need to be actively involved in the course in order to produce an acceptable rotation. We would consider this the point at which the course had been "fully implemented" (although sooner than that the college could begin requiring the course for all students).

The timetable for fully implementing the writing course will ultimately depend on several different variables, including the financial condition of the college and the timetable for implementing the other parts of the core revision, among others, and at present there is too much indeterminacy in these variables for us to make a firm recommendation about full implementation. Instead, we comment on two important limiting factors, involving (1) recruiting/training faculty for the writing course and (2) providing coverage in the courses the writing course faculty would otherwise teach.

In regard to (1), at the time of the core revision last fall, 26 faculty members had expressed interest in teaching the new writing course; a few others have expressed possible interest since then. We recommend that everyone teaching the course for the first time receive summer training in writing pedagogy and work collaboratively on syllabus development, with these summer efforts again carrying a \$2000 stipend.³ To facilitate the orderly integration of new faculty into the course, the best arrangement, it seems to us, would have the entire incoming class taking the course for the first time in the fall of 2011, with new faculty rotating into the course over the following two years, to the point of full implementation in the fall of 2013. This would be preceded by the above-

³ Thus, from 2009 through 2013, we recommend setting aside approximately \$52,000 for stipends for faculty preparing to teach the writing course. In addition, after 2009, there should be two faculty mentors, who have taught the course previously, involved in facilitating the summer training and planning sessions, each of whom should also receive a \$2000 stipend (for a total of \$16,000). The total allocated for summer stipends, then, should be approximately \$68,000 from 2009 through 2013. We do not include here a figure for additional compensation for the Director of Learning Programs for her role in training and consulting with faculty as they move into the course. The committee recommends that she continue in this role, and be compensated suitably, at least until the "full implementation" point defined previously. We are still exploring what sort of time commitment would be required in this connection.

described pilot course in the fall of 2009, followed by an expanded (and possibly revised) pilot course in fall 2010. In any event, we would like to see the college take whatever steps it reasonably can to move the implementation process along; in particular, if staffing issues can be worked out satisfactorily, we would like to see the pilot expanded to 64 students and eight faculty for fall 2010.

Although we are enthusiastic about moving the implementation process forward, we remain quite concerned about issue (2), which bears on the question of what staffing arrangements are “satisfactory.” The long-term solution here is, of course, to grow the faculty. But in the interim the issue will be more difficult to resolve. Though it is possible in principle to cover courses by hiring adjunct faculty, we see this as being undesirable in many specific instances and certainly to be avoided as a large-scale solution to the staffing problem. We share the concerns we have heard voiced in some departments about over-reliance on adjuncts, and we would favor slower implementation of the core revision over faster implementation facilitated by the large-scale use of adjuncts.

Appendix A

Sample Writing Course: "Cryptography and Privacy"

Ran Libeskind-Hadas

This document proposes an example of what a seven-week writing core course might look like. It is intended solely as a thought experiment to examine the viability of addressing the eight course objectives outlined in the body of the Writing Course Subcommittee's report in a seven-week course.

For completeness, the eight course objectives articulated in the committee's report are:

1. Use informal writing to develop their thinking at different stages of inquiry.
2. Deploy some main elements of persuasive and expository writing (see next section) in formal papers.
3. Recognize and use rhetorical purpose, voice, and audience analysis in academic reading and writing.
4. Write clear, coherently structured essays that use appropriate evidence and diction toward forceful intellectual discourse.
5. Demonstrate understanding of some of the cross-disciplinary similarities and differences in conventions of expression and article formats.
6. Develop an effective writing process that includes repeated revision of writing.
7. Make use of the feedback process, both as reviewers and recipients.
8. Identify passages in their writing which call for citation, attribution, or acknowledgment, and apply appropriate forms of citation where needed.

Additionally, the committee's report lists the following types of assignments to support the above learning objectives:

- a. articulating the results of a line of inquiry
- b. cogently defending a conclusion or point of view on a debatable topic
- c. describing an object or process relevant to a topic of study
- d. explaining difficult concepts
- e. explaining why a project was or should be undertaken
- f. synthesizing material toward a new conclusion
- g. critiquing a scholarly paper
- h. summarizing a body of work (for example, writing an abstract)

The "Cryptography and Privacy" Writing Course

This course is organized around the theme of cryptography and its impact on society, specifically in relation to privacy.

The organization below is week-by-week. For each week, we describe the content of the classtime discussion, **giving numbers** to associate the content with the eight objectives

listed above. In addition, we describe the assignment for that week **using letters** to associate the assignment to the types of assignments indicated in the list above. **Final versions of assignments also appear in bold.** This course has a total of 14 pages of work that has undergone one or more cycles of peer and/or instructor review before the final draft and some additional pages of first draft documents.

Week 1:

Addresses learning objectives addressed 1, 2, and 6.

Class time: Introduction, nuts-and-bolts of writing. Students will be given a poorly written essay to read and we will critique it in class for organization, grammar, and style. This will be used to motivate a discussion of some good basic universal writing skills.

Assignment 1: Write a 2-page position paper addressing the question: "Should all e-mail be considered entirely confidential? If so, why? If not, why not and what are the appropriate boundaries?" This assignment aligns with item b in the assignment list above.

Week 2:

Addresses learning objective 1, 2, 6, and 7.

Class time: Discussion of positions taken in the papers. Discussion of peer review and editing. Students read and critique each other's writing.

Assignment 2: Rewrite original thought paper based on deeper appreciation of the issues from discussion in class and peer feedback. Resulting paper is expected to be approximately 3 pages long. This assignment aligns with items b and f in the assignment list. Paper now goes to instructor for comments (and initial grade).

Week 3:

Addresses learning objectives 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8.

Class time: Discussion of attribution and citation. Students receive several pre-selected academic papers with a spectrum of positions on the privacy of e-mail. Class critiques these papers for quality of presentation and uses these papers (and one additional source found by student) towards a third revision of their position paper, this time using external scholarly sources to support and/or refine their position.

Assignment 3: Third rewrite of original paper, with citations to external literature. This assignment aligns with items b and f in the assignment list. **Final paper is approximately 5 pages long.** Paper now goes to instructor for further comments and final grade.

Week 4:

Addresses learning objective 3 and 5

Class time: Students critique one or more short badly written technical paper(s) in class (perhaps "fake" technical papers written by the professor for pedagogical purposes) and contrast it with well-written technical paper(s).

Assignment 4: Students rewrite the provided badly written technical paper and write the abstract. This assignment aligns with items g and h in the assignment list. Resulting rewritten paper (with abstract) is approximately 5 pages long.

Week 5:

Addresses learning objectives 3, 4, and 5

Class time: Peer review of Assignment 4. (Paper now goes to instructor for initial comments.) Students examine several short articles explaining scientific/technical topics to a lay audience (e.g. Scientific American articles, Technology Review articles, etc.). Class critiques these papers for writing, content, style, and appropriateness for the targeted audience.

Assignment 5: Students select a topic in cryptography and read a small number of technical papers on this topic (possibly preselected by the instructors for appropriateness). Students work on final version of **4 page** technical paper (relatively minor revisions at this point) and begin work on an article explaining their "hard concept" to a less technical audience. This assignment aligns with items c, d, and h in the assignment list. Technical paper goes to instructor for further comments and grade.

Week 6:

Addresses learning objectives 3, 6, 7, and 8

Class time: Peer review of first drafts and discussion of several selected examples. Examine, compare, and contrast different modes of writing appropriate to different disciplines (technical and non-technical).

Assignment 6: Students rewrite and submit final draft of their **3 page article** for a non-technical audience. This aligns with items c, d, g, and h.

Week 7:

Addresses learning objective 5

Class time: Examine different modes of writing appropriate to different disciplines (technical and non-technical). Students sit on a mock grant review panel. Short real or mock grant proposals (in several disciplines) are read and discussed.

Assignment 7: Students write a **2 page** review of a grant proposal, assessing the merits of the proposal and writing a justification for why the proposal should or should not be funded. This aligns with items b and e.

Appendix B

Sample Writing Course: "Energy Use and Generation"

Theresa Lynn

The numbering/lettering scheme of Appendix A is used again here to point out the learning objectives and assignment types week by week.

The eight course objectives articulated by the committee are:

1. Use informal writing to develop their thinking at different stages of inquiry.
2. Deploy some main elements of persuasive and expository writing (see next section) in formal papers.
3. Recognize and use rhetorical purpose, voice and audience analysis in academic reading and writing.
4. Write clear, coherently structured papers that use appropriate evidence and diction toward forceful intellectual discourse.
5. Demonstrate understanding of some of the main cross-disciplinary similarities and differences in conventions of expression and article formats.
6. Develop an effective writing process that includes repeated revision.
7. Make use of the feedback process, both as reviewers and recipients.
8. Identify passages in their writing which call for citation, attribution, or acknowledgment, and apply appropriate forms of citation where needed.

Additionally, the committee lists the following types of assignments to support the above learning objectives:

- a. articulating the results of a line of inquiry
- b. cogently defending a conclusion or point of view on a debatable topic
- c. describing an object or process relevant to a topic of study
- d. explaining difficult concepts
- e. explaining why a project was or should be undertaken
- f. synthesizing material toward a new conclusion
- g. critiquing a scholarly paper
- h. summarizing a body of work (for example, writing an abstract)

Numbers below associate the content with the eight objectives, while letters describe the type of assignment (a-h).

Week 1

Goals 1,3,6,7, assignment types b,c,e.

***Class 1:** Begin with an in-class writing assignment: Describe how you rely on electricity

in your daily life (15 minutes). Exchange writing and discuss differences in product when audience/purpose is not given in prompt. Importance of audience in all writing - writing as communication of ideas for a purpose.

***Assignment:** Rework your 'electricity reliance' description to serve as the introduction to two different newspaper articles: (1) an article on the impact of rising energy prices, and (2) an article on historical trends in energy use. Not more than 300 words each.

***Class 2:** Discuss writing process. Students draw/diagram their own writing process, and exchange with each other for discussion. Share examples of instructor's writing process, and/or video of faculty discussing their writing processes. Introduce idea that pre-writing and editing are part of writing. Elements of a position paper/ persuasive essay.

***Assignment** (due week 2): Write a 2-3 page persuasive essay on the following prompt: "Should Americans resign ourselves to dramatic lifestyle changes over the next 50 years in order to reduce our consumption of fossil fuels? Why or why not?"

Week 2

Goals 2,4,6,7, assignment types b,e,g.

***In class:** Writing mechanics, especially for clarity, flow, and appropriate emphasis. In class, distribute examples of writing in need of improvement and critique these during class time. Peer review of persuasive essay drafts.

***Assignment:** Read article 'Provocative Revision,' T. Fulwiler. Revise persuasive essay (draft 2 finished by beginning of Week 3).

Week 3

Goals 2,4,6,8, assignment types b,e,f.

***In class:** Synthesizing material from diverse sources. Attribution and citation. More mechanics and clarity, more in-class examples of critique and revision.

***Assignment:** Read several technical and/or op-ed articles on energy use and generation. Revise persuasive essay, incorporating material from external sources as relevant. Turn in for instructor feedback (essay at this point may be 3-4 pages).

Week 4

Goals 2,3,4,6,7, assignment types b,d,f.

***In class:** Explaining a difficult concept: importance of audience/purpose again. Critique several pieces of science writing for the general public (at the level of Scientific American, Physics Today, Best American Science Writing of 2008, etc.).

***Assignment:** Final version of persuasive essay is due at end of week. Assigned technical reading on an alternative energy technology (choice of several technologies; for each technology, instructor preselects several appropriate papers). Begin to draft a 4-5 page article for the general public, explaining the alternative energy technology you chose to read about ('difficult concept' essay) -- draft due early in Week 5.

Week 5

Goals 2,3,4,6,7, assignment types c,d.

***In class:** Importance of audience. Each piece of writing has a purpose as opposed to a subject matter (is an explanation ever entirely value-neutral?). Avoiding jargon. Deciding what content to include and what to leave out. Peer review of difficult concept essay.

***Assignment:** Read American Scientist article on clarity and revision in scientific writing (before in-class revision activity). Revise difficult concept essay for instructor feedback.

Week 6

Goals 5,6,7, assignment types c,d,g.

***In class:** Analyze structure/convention of well-written scholarly articles in several fields. Identify elements of good writing which these articles have in common, as well as structural aspects which vary from field to field. Revise one or more poorly-written selections from technical articles.

***Assignment** (some in class): Read several well-written articles on energy use / energy technology from journals in two different fields (physics / engineering / chemistry / geology?) Summarize commonalities and differences in structure and convention. How would you reorganize one of the articles from field x to appear in a journal for field y? Revise difficult concept essay for the beginning of Week 7.

Week 7

Goals 1,2,6,7, assignment types c,d,h.

***In class:** Diagram your writing process again (see Week 1); exchange and discuss. Summarizing a piece of writing with an abstract. Draft an abstract for your general concept essay. Final peer review of difficult concept essay.

***Assignment:** Complete final revision of your difficult concept essay, including abstract.

Appendix C

Some Sample Course Topics

Following (in no special order) are some of the many topics that might work within the framework envisioned above for the new writing half-course:

- funding of basic vs. applied sciences
- nuclear energy uses and abuses
- science, religion, and proof
- genetically engineered foods
- human reproductive technology and ethics
- mathematics and science education
- scientific ethics
- "eastern" vs. "western" concepts of science/religion
- nurture vs. nature in human behavior: are we products of our genes or our environment?
- civil rights in and through mathematics
- pure vs. applied: the impact of mathematics on society
- mathematics and music
- mathematics as metaphor
- technology and politics of water use and clean water supplies
- political, economic, and technical aspects of alternative energy sources
- transportation in urban form (e.g., are the poor served better by public transportation or by inexpensive cars?)
- the politics of engineering design
- technical, environmental, and economic impacts of biofuels