

Using a Survey of Writing Assignments to Make Informed Curricular Decisions

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Because almost every member of an English department teaches freshman composition, all too often the course is shaped by the diverse theories and inclinations of those who teach it. Many English faculty, especially those trained in literature, still believe that freshman composition should teach students how to read and write about literature. Others see its purpose as teaching students to write about themselves. Still others insist that freshman composition should give students traditional instruction in the rhetorical modes. But increasing numbers are convinced that freshman composition, if it is to survive as part of a college's or university's core curriculum, must prepare students for majors in other disciplines. In fact, the academic community accepts the usual composition requirement because it assumes we are providing students with generally useful writing skills—not only those that students need in their academic lives but also those they will later need in their professional lives.

In order to discover the writing skills needed by students, we must move beyond the confines of our own discipline and into the academic community at large. Although much has been written about our obligation to extend writing instruction across the curriculum, very little attention has been given to an equally important obligation: our responsibility to incorporate the writing assignments of other disciplines into our own curricula. As Arthur M. Eastman suggested in a paper presented at the 1981 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, our mission to teach literacy is two-fold. In addition to encouraging other teachers and administrators to include writing instruction in their courses, we must be willing to modify our own curricula to reflect the writing tasks required of students in these other disciplines.

English departments in general and composition programs in particular are increasingly aware of this dual nature of writing across the curriculum programs. As a result, many composition programs are now predicated on the assumption that freshman English should provide students with the writing and reading skills required of them in other disciplines. In 1982, we resolved to restructure our freshman composition program so that its goals conformed to this broadened perspective.

In addition to promoting "critical reading and thinking" and producing "flexible, capable writers," the freshman courses were now seen as an introduction to "university work in general." This decision necessitated a reevaluation of our existing curriculum.

Freshmen at Texas Tech are required to take a two-course sequence, Essentials of College Rhetoric and Advanced College Rhetoric. For several years, the first course had been an introductory course in composition based primarily on a rhetorical modes approach that emphasized narrative, descriptive, and expository writing. Although the second course was originally an introduction to literature, it was changed in the late seventies to a composition course that emphasized logic, persuasive writing, and research. In order to collect the data needed to broaden the concepts of these two courses, we conducted a survey during the spring term of 1983 to determine the types of writing tasks assigned by our colleagues in the university community.¹

Selecting at random three faculty members from each of the academic departments at Texas Tech, we sent each a questionnaire that listed thirteen different writing assignments. We asked our respondents to indicate which of these assignments they usually included in courses they taught and to list additional writing assignments typically made by them that we had not included on the questionnaire.² Of the approximately two hundred questionnaires that we distributed, one hundred and twelve were returned, many with sample assignments attached.

The table below indicates the results of our survey.

TABLE 1. Results of Faculty Survey.

Writing Assignment	Number of Respondents Who Indicated Assignment	Percentage of Respondents Who Indicated Assignment
Short Research Paper	75	67%
Essay Exam	69	62%
Report	63	56%
Review or Critique	39	35%
Abstract	37	33%
Long Research Paper	34	30%
Proposal	30	27%
Summary	24	21%
Annotated Bibliography	22	20%
Essay or Theme	19	17%
Journal	17	15%
Research Notebook	17	15%
Correspondence	14	12%
Other	11	10%

Survey consisted of 112 completed questionnaires representing six colleges and fifty departments at Texas Tech University.

You will notice that the three assignments most frequently cited were short research papers (fewer than fifteen pages), essay exams, and reports. We were especially interested in the fact that these three assignments were mentioned much more frequently than were any of the others listed. The fourth most frequently mentioned assignment was the review, or critique, which was mentioned by only 35% of the faculty surveyed as opposed to the 67, 62, and 56 percentages of the top three assignments.

As a supplement to our study, we also surveyed 85 students who visited the Writing Center, asking them to indicate on a similar questionnaire the types of writing tasks they had been assigned during the semester. Since all of these students were enrolled in English courses, we were not surprised that the writing assignment mentioned most frequently (by 76 out of the 85 students) was the essay, or theme. But essay exams and short research papers ranked second and third respectively, corroborating the results we had obtained on the faculty questionnaire.

TABLE 2. Results of Student Survey.

Writing Assignment	Number of Respondents Who Indicated Assignment	Percentage of Respondents Who Indicated Assignment
Essay or Theme	76	89%
Essay Exam	68	80%
Short Research Paper	63	74%
Review or Critique	53	62%
Journal	48	56%
Summary	36	42%
Report	35	41%
Correspondence	30	35%
Proposal or prospectus	23	27%
Annotated Bibliography	20	23%
Research Notebook	14	16%
Abstract	12	14%
Long Research Paper	10	12%

There was no discernible difference between assignments made by instructors in the College of Arts and Sciences and those in other colleges. However, considerable diversity was evident within colleges and even departments. For example, of the three chemistry professors who responded, one indicated that he made none of the assignments listed; another checked four different writing assignments but made no comment; and the third checked seven assignments and wrote a note saying that all seven were "important to chemists and must be faced by the students at various times."

This survey accomplished two goals. First, it brought to the attention of faculty members from other departments our willingness to cooperate

with them in teaching students to write and our interest in the type of writing demanded in their disciplines. Second, and even more important, the survey provided us with the information we needed to modify our existing curriculum to include the writing tasks students face in other courses.

Having acquired the information we needed, we turned our attention to the curricular implications suggested by our data.

Research Paper

The short research paper, the most common writing task reported in our survey, is assigned in many disciplines, yet few instructors take the time to teach research processes and library skills. Increasingly, English teachers are expected to provide research paper instruction as a service to other departments. In fact, a recent survey conducted by James Ford and Dennis Perry at the University of Nebraska indicated that research paper instruction is offered in 84.09% of freshman composition programs and required in 78.11%.³ Yet, it is not always clear that the instruction students receive is the kind they need. As a Writing Program Administration team commented in their review of the writing program at Texas Tech, "It may be that the research paper, as now taught, does not address the appropriate skills of academic writing that Texas Tech students need to know."

Our survey indicated, however, that research papers are perceived to be important by others in our university community; consequently, we decided that a research project should continue to be a major component of our second semester freshman course. However, the WPA report raised an important question. Was the research paper, as traditionally taught, really providing students with appropriate skills for academic research writing, especially the research writing in disciplines other than English?

Research paper instruction at Texas Tech in the past has been quite traditional. Teachers used a guidebook that emphasized almost exclusively library resources and the format and documentation of research papers in the humanities. Many teachers assigned only literary research topics and insisted on MLA documentation and format rather than allowing students to research subjects in their major disciplines and to employ the documentation and format of their specific field of study. To make the research paper component of freshman English more relevant to the needs of our students as they research and write in other disciplines we made the following decisions:

- We need to teach research processes representative of various disciplines—the social sciences and sciences as well as the humanities. As part of interdisciplinary research, we need to assign

projects and exercises that include primarily research methods, for example, interviews, case studies, and surveys. Students need to be introduced to certain discipline-specific library tools such as the citation indexes, which are important to research in the social sciences and sciences but rarely used in the humanities. Furthermore, students should be introduced to the format and documentation used in various disciplines, including both the MLA and the APA style manuals.

- We need to teach research as a process as well as a product. Like teaching writing in general, teaching research writing needs to be refocused to begin at the beginning rather than at the end of a very complicated process. For example, students need to begin a research project by discovering and defining for themselves a real question to investigate, as opposed to beginning with a "pre-packaged" research topic. A student who is taking a psychology course might be interested in finding out the effects of prolonged stress on health, or a history student might be interested in discovering what the Great Depression was really like for those who lived through it. Once a real question has been posed, a student needs to outline a research strategy which may include both primary and secondary research tools. The student investigating the Depression may want to interview his grandfather who lived through it, and the student interested in stress might want to survey others in her dorm. Secondary research will include library sources relevant to the question posed. In order to answer a real question, a student must learn to use library tools to gain access to sources. Such a research project moves the focus away from the mechanics of note-taking, documentation, and format and puts the emphasis on the actual research process.
- We need to teach general reading and writing skills which are crucial for effective researching. Such skills include summarizing and paraphrasing information from books and articles, synthesizing data from a variety of sources, and reading critically in order to evaluate the usefulness and relevance of sources to the research question posed.

Essay Exams

According to our survey, the second most common writing assignment was the essay exam. The essay exam can, of course, be related to traditional instruction in essay writing since essay exam skills can be developed through more general instruction. Our composition courses had traditionally included essay writing as a major curricular component. Instruction in taking essay exams, however, had not been specifically included in the curriculum. Since students are asked to write essay exams

repeatedly during their academic career, it seems that we should pay explicit attention to teaching the component skills necessary for success in writing essay exams. We identified two ways in which instruction in essay exam writing could be incorporated into our composition courses:

1. The instruction that students need to become skillful in taking essay exams is already included in most composition courses. However, students need to be reminded frequently that what they are learning about writing essays also applies to taking essay exams. For example, students who are learning how to analyze a writing task—how to narrow a topic and develop a thesis for an essay—can easily be led to see how these skills also apply to answering a question on an essay exam. Likewise, as students study paragraph structure, they can learn to structure answers to essay questions. Although teachers understand the close relationship between essays and essay exams, students often fail to perceive this relationship. We need to point out to them that the skills they are developing in the composition class can be used to advantage in any class in which they must write essay exams. Making this relationship explicit helps students to use the skills and concepts we teach them as they take essay exams in other courses.
2. Central to most writing programs is the idea of writing as process—the understanding that writing is a recursive but ultimately sequential series of steps that results in a finished product. Inherent in this concept is the assumption that this process, in order to work effectively, requires time—more time than is provided in the typical one-hour, or even one and one-half hour class period. Therefore, most composition teachers now make writing assignments that allow students sufficient time for discovering, planning, incubating, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. But there are situations in which students must write on demand, must write on a given topic in a given period of time. The essay exam is probably the most common example of this type of writing task. It is in the students' interest to require them on occasion to write in-class essays which will provide us with opportunities to teach students how to write efficiently and effectively under pressure—how, in effect, to abbreviate the process. At the beginning of a semester, for example, we ask our students to write an in-class diagnostic essay. This essay is not graded by the instructor, but it gives him or her valuable information about the students' skills. It can also provide an opportunity for instruction in how to write under pressure, in other words, how to take essay exams. Because the essay is not graded, students can learn in a non-threatening situation. Comments on the essay can suggest how the student might have focused more narrowly on the subject or have developed the ideas more clearly.

Class discussion before or after the essay can include suggestions for condensing the normal writing process and can also emphasize the importance of following the process even though it is abbreviated since many students omit any pre-writing strategies or planning when writing under pressure. In addition to the diagnostic essay, teachers may require students to write in-class essays for midterm and final examinations, thus providing students with valuable instruction in writing under pressure at the same time as they elicit from students essential assignments for evaluation and placement purposes.

Reports

The third most common writing assignment on our survey was the report. As a specific category, the report is hard to define. In general we made the distinction that reports are less comprehensive and more objective than research papers since report writing involves describing what you have learned or seen while research writing involves answering a real problem or question after formulating a hypothesis. Reports have not generally been included in freshman English courses; however, including several reporting assignments encourages students to use a format and presentation that is slightly but significantly different from that used in essays. We decided that instruction in report writing could be incorporated into the curriculum in the following ways:

1. Although reports seem more appropriate for the second semester course in which the research paper is taught, they can also be introduced as one of the writing tasks in the first semester course. A report can be used as an alternative to one or more of the typical essay assignments. A teacher can vary the usual thesis/support essay with at least one report, the purpose of which is to write an objective account rather than to defend a position. For example, students can be asked to report on a book, play, concert, or movie that they have seen. Or, in lieu of a descriptive essay, they can be required to observe a certain location or situation and then to describe it objectively in a report. Likewise, a process, definition or cause and effect paper could be a report rather than an essay.
2. In the second semester course, report writing is an important complement to research writing. As a rule, students find reporting much easier than researching. When researching they use their critical and evaluative skills whereas in reporting they draw mainly on their summarizing and synthesizing skills. Report writing can and should be incorporated into the early stages of a research paper project. For example, students can be asked to conduct a survey or interview and report on it. Also, a review of the literature and subsequent report are a necessary part of researching and thus should be included in each research project.

Conclusion

If we are to transform the phrase "writing across the curriculum" into a workable reality rather than a mere slogan, we must see our work in English departments as part of a larger context; we need to restructure our curricula to reflect the type of writing required of students in other disciplines. Although many English faculty fear that freshman composition will be relegated to a service course if its purpose is to prepare students for writing tasks in other departments, others are beginning to realize that this expanded view can be a healthy, even revitalizing, influence. As James Kinneavy observes, the "writing-across-the-curriculum movement could, if properly pursued, place the English department at the center of the entire university community."⁴ But in order to assume this position of centrality, we must be willing to communicate with our colleagues about the writing requirements of their courses and be prepared to restructure our curricula to accommodate those requirements.

Notes

¹A similar survey was conducted by the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) program at Educational Testing Service. As reported in *Written Communication* (April 1984) by Brent Bridgeman and Sybil B. Carlson, this survey of 190 academic departments at 34 universities was used to determine the types of writing tasks typically required of beginning undergraduate and graduate students. This information was then used to design an appropriate writing assignment for the entrance test that is administered to non-native speakers of English. Bridgeman and Carlson also cited several less ambitious surveys of writing assignments related to ESL research or to research concerned with the types of academic writing required in specific programs, such as engineering.

²Additional assignments listed by respondents were not always clearly defined. No additional assignment was mentioned by more than two respondents. Those listed included the following: mini-project, radio script, case notes and write-ups, computer programs, and graphics.

³James E. Ford and Dennis R. Perry, "Research Paper Instruction in the Undergraduate Writing Program: A National Survey," *College English*, in press.

⁴James L. Kinneavy, "Writing Across the Curriculum," in *Profession 83*, edited by Phyllis Franklin and Richard Brod (N.Y.: *Modern Language Association*, 1983), p. 20.

