

# SPU Writing Task Force Report to Faculty Curriculum and Assessment Committees

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## Introduction and Overview

The Writing Task Force was convened in the spring of 2012 by UPEC in response to their audit of all Seattle Pacific University writing instruction (see report, appendix pages 4-16). UPEC gave the task force our charge **“to envision and subsequently develop a comprehensive writing program at SPU that includes clearly articulated goals and assessment strategies”** (see task force charge document, appendix pages 1-3).

By way of background, it may be surprising to learn that there actually hasn't been a universally-required, standard writing curriculum at SPU at least since the 1974-76 catalog, as University Archivist Adrienne Meier's research shows (see appendix pages 34-44). But this historical curricular shift away from earlier catalog requirements was not done for pedagogical reasons but rather for resource ones, as former SPU faculty members and administrators have helped us understand.

In the early 1970s, in response to pressures to increase SPU's academic rigor, hard choices had to be made about the allocation of limited faculty teaching resources for writing instruction. Many universities across the country, under similar academic and financial pressures in that generation, shifted to adding a large cadre of dedicated part- or full-time writing specialists to their campuses -- teachers who were not regular, tenure-track faculty members but rather ongoing Instructors or Lecturers in order to continue offering the standard college writing courses. This staffing solution was not ideal, of course, but the move was made so that those colleges would not lose universal writing instruction for all the students, one traditional backbone of the liberal arts curriculum. (Seattle University, University of Puget Sound, and PLU are local examples of this decision – see appendix pages 45-47.)

SPU, however, made different curricular choices in response to that same resource pressure but, as a consequence, gave up universal writing instruction. Open-ended expectations for writing instruction were instead spread across the General Education program into varying courses and requirements over the years (including shifting elements of the Core and “W” program, see appendix pages 34-44 for details). And SPU’s only form of assessing writing competency necessarily tilted toward seeing it as an incoming high school student placement threshold alone (emphasizing “college readiness”) rather than as a college graduation standard.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the only required writing class at SPU (English 2201) came to be seen as “remedial” since only those students who weren’t “up to incoming college level” were ever required to take it (and they made up only a percentage of any given freshman class). Just to make matters even more complicated, the University Scholars faculty have alternately developed a much more focused, robust emphasis on writing in the honors core curriculum thereby inadvertently creating a two-tier, “haves and have-nots” situation where University Scholars now receive a markedly more effective writing curriculum than SPU students as a whole.

We can certainly understand and appreciate the efforts of our earlier colleagues to somehow hang on to writing instruction at SPU without the resources or staffing to teach it in the curriculum or comprehensively assess it as part of student learning. But it has been long enough now that we can see the unintended consequence of those hard choices. By moving from required writing instruction for all students to our current uneven assemblage of courses, choices, assignments, and requirements, SPU has inadvertently continued to conflate incoming high school placement with college graduation proficiency ever since -- and with little or no ability to assess and track learning. There is a reason so many students seem to struggle with writing – and learning – at SPU. We have not taught them how to do it at the college level.

Our task force’s charge is therefore a timely and important one. National higher education leaders of many kinds are also finding that increased college writing instruction is one of the single most effective ways to foster **all** learning in students. Several prominent leaders (such as Vincent Tinto) and several recently prominent books (such as *Academically Adrift* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa) articulate this need in clear and compelling language:

“[H]aving **demanding faculty who include reading and writing requirements in their courses** (i.e. when faculty require that students both read more than forty pages a week and write more than twenty pages over the course of a semester) is **associated with improvement in students’ critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills**. ....Even after we control for a range of individual attributes, including academic

preparation, students...still improved their skills significantly more than did students lacking those experiences.” (Arum and Roksa 93-94)

Now is an excellent time, in many ways, for SPU to revisit its writing curriculum.

Before moving on to new recommendations, however, we wish to recognize and applaud the many faculty members across SPU who already care deeply about the issue of effective student learning through writing and who adhere to high standards in both. In many cases, these faculty members have taken extraordinary measures – often at their own cost -- trying to help students learn to write while simultaneously teaching the content of their own discipline, all in the same class, and with predictably difficult results. But this *ad hoc* system based on individual faculty heroics is neither effective nor comprehensive for all SPU students, as the UPEC writing review clearly showed. Our recommendations seek to redress this serious curricular and learning deficit on our campus, based on our charge to “envision and subsequently develop a **comprehensive** writing program at SPU.”

In addition and fortuitously, recent advances in the cognitive sciences have dramatically impacted the field of writing pedagogy itself, leading to a new and much stronger academic consensus about writing’s role in effective student learning **across all majors on campus** (see appendix pages 49-50). This emerging consensus particularly incorporates “**transfer of learning**” cognitive data findings. In brief, this research has shown that students across all disciplines greatly benefit from freshman-year writing instruction that emphasizes rhetoric. These newly-framed classes teach students to see, through both reading and writing assignments, what counts as a *claim*, what counts as *evidence*, and how can we assess whether this information is *reliable*. Rhetorical instruction, the research has shown, “transfers” much more successfully into disciplinary learning for students than the old-fashioned days of “English composition class” as they move into major programs.

These new findings have also contributed to a virtual explosion in new college writing pedagogies, textbooks, and software programs that support this instruction as the key building block for teaching students “academic inquiry” itself – that is, in many ways, “how to be a successful college learner.” The importance of “transfer of learning” in the writing curriculum has also solidified the trend toward building on freshman-level introductory courses with systematic, discipline-specific writing training to follow through to graduation.

Much has changed in college writing since the old days of “freshman English” and yet some surprisingly traditional notions – such as the centrality of rhetoric -- have also returned with new vigor in light of these recent scientific advances. Our task force recommendations below incorporate many of these new “best practices” and teaching

tools in order to create a comprehensive and effective writing curriculum as the backbone for all successful student learning at SPU.

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### **Overview of current national writing pedagogy best practices**

(see appendix pages 17-33 for representative source materials):

- Instruction in college writing is foundational for teaching “academic inquiry” across all college disciplines and must be explicitly taught beginning with a universal, two-course freshman-level sequence.
  - Increasingly rigorous writing requirements must continue through the sophomore to senior years, embedded in both general education and major coursework, and leading to an assessable measure of competency at graduation (in many cases using a required senior essay/thesis and digital student portfolio).
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### **Specific SPU Task Force Recommendations**

We believe that the following curricular and program proposal achieves the important aims outlined above. It “envisions a comprehensive writing program at SPU” that will dramatically increase student learning, bring us into compliance with national best practices, and “includes clearly articulated goals and assessment strategies.”

### Summary of recommendations:

1. Implement a **required two-course sequence** (10 credits) in the freshman year for all incoming students, preparing them for university-level academic inquiry, critical thinking, and writing during the rest of their time in college. (The first course teaching the foundations of academic inquiry and writing, and the second one discipline-embedded research writing). However, we recognize that ten new credits cannot be simply added to our current General Education program without reducing credits elsewhere, nor without a thoughtful review of our early-college curriculum as a whole. We recommend instead that a special **faculty task force** be called to thoroughly investigate the possible implementation of these writing courses in the context of assessing the overall effectiveness of our first-year program.
2. Develop a **new, clearly-articulated “W” framework** for writing expectations across the SPU curriculum in general education and the majors, providing an assessable template for departments and degree programs, and showing increasing challenge and rigor from the sophomore through senior years. A final written work as determined by individual departments (such as senior thesis or essay) will be required for graduation.
3. Implement a university-wide **holistic, digital, portfolio-based assessment program**, incorporating evidence of student learning at all levels and in all expected **graduation outcomes**.
4. Hire a **full-time, disciplinary-trained, and experienced Director of Campus Writing** responsible for leadership, faculty development, oversight, and assessment of this program at all levels.
5. Return to staffing a **writing tutorial course** as a linked writing “lab” requirement for those students who need specialized academic support in addition to regular coursework (such as those from underserved populations and/or ESL students).
6. Increase professional staffing and hours, and, if possible, move the physical location of **the Writing Center** to a central, widely available part of campus (such

as the Library) in order to provide more effective and robust support for student learning across the campus.

## **Recommended Comprehensive Writing Program in Detail**

**FRESHMAN YEAR:** Two required courses (10 credits) for all SPU students.

### **“WRI 1000:” Academic Writing Seminar (5)**

#### **Explanation and Rationale:**

WRI 1000, required early in the freshman year, would provide the curricular backbone for all academic inquiry at SPU for all students. It would be taught by a combination of regular English faculty members (or interested others) and a cohort of regular Instructors/Lecturers with specialized training in writing pedagogy, as is standard at most colleges and universities nation-wide (see appendix pages 45-47 for examples of such writing faculty staffing at peer and comparable universities). Student enrollment limited to approximately 20, freshman only (or transfers, as needed).

Course goals and outcomes include:

- Understanding the basic elements of academic inquiry in both reading and writing at the university level -- identifying key ideas, formulating questions, evaluating evidence, and developing claims.
- Understanding writing situations, strategies, and conventions.
- Practice at deploying the elements of college-level composition, including the importance of revision for developing and deepening ideas.
- Summarizing and documenting sources (and avoiding plagiarism).
- Sentence- and paragraph-level writing conventions.

Example textbooks:

***Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*** (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014)

***Everything's An Argument*** (Bedford/St. Martin's, 6<sup>th</sup> ed, 2013)

***From Inquiry to Academic Writing: A Practical Guide*** (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012)

***Acts of Inquiry*** (UW custom textbook)

**“WRI 1100:” Inquiry or Research Seminar (5)**

Explanation and Rationale:

WRI 1100 is a research seminar course, helping students build on the basics of academic inquiry learned in WRI 1000 by incorporating the elements and standards of college-level research skills and writing (and therefore must follow WRI 1000 in sequence.) This content-rich course is also embedded in disciplinary learning, giving students specific practice in gathering and evaluating research materials along with using them appropriately in effective research writing. The SPU librarians will be asked to partner with faculty members to help develop each course's research curricula and learning outcomes. Student enrollment would be limited to approximately 20, freshman only (or transfers, as needed). See example courses and assignments from Seattle University and Pacific Lutheran University (appendix pages 20-33).

Course goals and outcomes include:

- Understanding the elements, situations, and conventions of research writing at the university level, deploying them effectively within the course's particular disciplinary framework.
- Finding and evaluating academic sources of all kinds (including textual, database, and field research) – including a required library component.
- Synthesizing research information accurately and effectively and summarizing from sources.
- Writing accurate and effective research papers of extended length.

Example syllabi and assignments (see appendix pages 22, 24-33):

“Freshman Inquiry Seminar” (PLU)

Seattle University Core Curriculum diagram

Seattle University sample writing assignment  
from “Inquiry Seminar in the Natural Sciences”

**Example textbooks:**

***They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*** (Norton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2012)

**NEW “W”**

A new university-wide outcomes and assessment framework for student writing, clearly articulated across the curriculum, and leading to expected graduation outcomes.

**AND**

**NEW PORTFOLIO REQUIREMENT**

Student-generated digital writing portfolio (required for graduation), must contain representative and assessable student writing from each academic year.

**Explanation and Rationale:**

The new SPU “W” program will be a well-understood and explicit set of writing requirements and developmentally-appropriate learning outcomes from the freshman through senior years. This new “W” program will track with the latest pedagogical research by explicitly moving students through a required series of courses and assignments -- from “novice” college writers at the freshman level to proficient graduating seniors capable of successfully deploying “expert insider prose” in their majors (see appendix pages 21 and 23).

In conjunction with these requirements, the e-Portfolio software will provide a holistic, assessable, and student-managed means to store and use all written materials. The portfolio also provides an easily managed digital template for both students and faculty members to track “W” progress through to graduation.

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**First year:** 10 credits of required coursework (WRI 1000 and WRI 1100) – which together make up the “W1” requirement.

**Second or third year:** “W2” requirement(s)

Each department will designate their own set of courses and/or assignments that meet the “W2” threshold in their discipline for second-year (or “early major”) mastery, in consultation with the Director of Campus Writing and after an appropriate period of

faculty development. To be more specific, some departments may choose to designate certain whole courses as meeting the “W2” requirement and others may opt to spread the requirement out across several designated assignments in two or more courses (which can be managed and tracked through the e-portfolio). The guideline expectation is that these courses and assignments operate at the 2000-3000-level only and could not be taken by students until all “W1” requirements have been met.

In addition, departmental advisors may freely substitute other assignments or coursework to satisfy the W2 designation as needed for transfer students on a case-by-case basis.

All “W2” designations in a department would be approved and subsequently assessed for effectiveness by the Director of Campus Writing

**Third or fourth year: “W3” requirement(s)**

Each department will designate their own set of courses and/or assignments that meet the “W3” threshold in their discipline for third- or fourth-year students, in consultation with the Director of Campus Writing and after an appropriate period of faculty development. To be more specific, some departments may choose to designate certain whole courses as meeting the “W3” requirement and others may opt to spread the requirement out across several designated assignments in two or more courses (which can be managed and tracked through the e-portfolio).

All “W3” courses and/or assignments build on the practices of “W1” and “W2” by expecting students to increase in the depth and sophistication of their written ideas and arguments at the “advanced major” level. The guideline expectation is that these courses and assignments operate at the 3000-4000-level only and could not be taken until all “W1” and “W2” requirements have been met. As before, departmental advisors may freely substitute other assignments or coursework to satisfy the W3 designation as needed for transfer students on a case-by-case basis.

All “W3” designations would be approved and subsequently assessed for effectiveness by the Director of Campus Writing.

**Final year (graduation requirement): Senior Essay or Other Written Project**

Each department will require a senior essay or other written project in the major as a measure of graduation proficiency. This written work will show that they have achieved successful mastery of both the content of their major as well as the appropriate skill in discipline-specific writing (“expert insider prose”). The senior essay or other written project will be assessed according to a rubric developed by each department in consultation with the Director of Campus Writing. This senior essay/thesis may be also used for departmental honors.

The guideline expectation is that this senior essay/project could not be submitted for graduation until all “W1,” “W2,” and “W3” requirements have been met.

## **NEW FULL-TIME DIRECTOR OF CAMPUS WRITING**

### *Explanation and Rationale:*

A new, comprehensive SPU writing program will require at least one full-time faculty member to lead faculty development, monitor and propose curriculum, administer the program, and assess student learning, as is standard at most universities. The Campus Writing Director will be a faculty member whose credentials incorporate both scholarly expertise in this field as well as robust practical experience in writing pedagogy and programs. The Campus Writing Director will teach W1000 and W1100 annually and will report directly to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

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## **WRITING TUTORIAL “LAB” COURSE**

### *Explanation and Rationale:*

In previous years, SPU has resourced, on an *ad hoc* basis, a successful program of linked writing “lab” tutorials (connected to a regular writing course) for those students who need specialized academic support (such as those from underserved populations and/or ESL students). These 2-credit sections paired an experienced writing Instructor/Lecturer working closely with two to three students on supplementary learning assignments,

greatly increasing student learning and academic success. This program should be made a regular part of the new writing curriculum and staffed appropriately and permanently.



**NEW WRITING CENTER**

*Explanation and Rationale:*

The current SPU Writing Center is staffed by dedicated part-time peer tutors and staff members who care deeply about student learning. However, the reality is that they have only a fraction of the resources needed to do so regularly and successfully. Specifically, SPU’s Writing Center currently has only five part-time student tutors, no full-time staff members or directors, and is housed in a shared space in the Moyer Hall basement. Contrast that with our sister school, Seattle University, which currently employs 23 peer tutors, a full-time director and assistant director, and has four full-time support staff members in their library-based (and therefore widely accessible) Writing Center.

We recommend that SPU do likewise and vastly increase the resources, professional and student staffing and hours of **the Writing Center**, as well as, if possible, move it to a more central and accessible campus location.

### **Proposed TIMELINE for implementation**

- April 2013** Writing Task Force Recommendations  
to Assessment and Curriculum Committees
- May 2013** Writing Task Force reports findings to Faculty Senate  
and New Implementation/First-Year Review Task Force convened
- Fall 2013 -  
Winter 2014** Writing Curriculum Implementation/Review Task Force at work  
Pilot program begins for new departmental “W” requirements  
Possible trial use of e-portfolio and Writer’s Help software
- April 2014** Implementation/First Year Review Task Force reports to faculty  
Faculty governance approval of new curricular program
- May 2014** New full-time Director of Campus Writing hired  
Newly-expanded Writing Center in the planning stages
- Fall 2014** Approved curricular changes to Catalog  
Hiring of new writing Instructors
- Winter 2015** Hiring of new writing Instructors, as needed  
Faculty development program begins
- Spring 2015** Faculty development program continues  
Final planning for full implementation of curriculum  
and full expansion of W and portfolio program
- September 2015**  
New universal writing curriculum for all SPU students begins

## **APPENDIX**

## **Table of Contents**

2012 Writing Curriculum Task Force Charge from UPEC.....	1
2011 Writing Program Evaluation.....	4
Sample Range of Other University Writing Requirements.....	17
Overview of National Writing Standards and Practices.....	18
UW Outcomes Document for Expository Writing Courses.....	19
Seattle University New Core Curriculum.....	20
Seattle University Writing Course Guiding Principles.....	21
Seattle University Sample Inquiry Seminar Assignment (Natural Sciences).....	22
Seattle University Best Practices on Writing and Deep Learning.....	23
Pacific Lutheran University Sample Syllabus, First-Year Inquiry Seminar.....	24
Carleton College Guiding Principles, Argument and Inquiry Seminars.....	32
Overview of SPU Catalog Requirements, Writing.....	34
Typical Writing Faculty Staffing at Peer and Comparable Universities.....	45
National Disciplinary Standards and Recommendations for University Writing Programs.....	48