

Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

May 24, 2010

Preparing for the WPE

The University Writing Center and the WPE

The University Writing Center has long been a key part of the university's use of the WPE as something more than an obstacle to student graduation. The WPE, ideally, identifies students in need of additional advisement and/or instruction, both of which they can receive through the Writing Center in the following ways:

- A student who fails the WPE can meet with WPE consultants to go over his or her exam and learn why graders did not see it as passing; consultants can also help students prepare for re-taking the exam by discussing alternative writing strategies.
- Students can attend WPE workshops usually offered during the second and third weeks of every quarter. At the workshops, students are introduced to the logistics of the exam and offered advice on timed writing, including such basics as read the question carefully, and set aside time for planning at the start and editing at the end.
- A student might be advised to consider enrolling in UNIV 401, the course alternative to the WPE available to students who have failed the exam at least once. Successful completion of UNIV 401 satisfies the GWAR.

The last Composition Conversation of the year focused on the role of ENGL 102 in preparing students for the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE). The WPE is how CSULA has elected to implement the CSU Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR), which requires all students to demonstrate competence in writing in order to receive a degree from a CSU campus. Ideally, prior to taking the WPE, students have taken ENGL 101 and ENGL 102 (or their equivalents), and countless general education classes in which they have had ample opportunities to write and revise. In theory, ENGL 102 is simply one of many classes students might take prior to attempting the WPE.

In practice, ENGL 102 might be for most students their most recent class that required writing or in which they received any writing instruction. Students are often encouraged by advisors to take the WPE as soon as possible after completing ENGL 102, a practice which makes obvious the central if not solitary role played by English department courses in addressing student writing at the university. So while the WPE is part of an all-university commitment to assessing and improving student writing, ENGL 102 instructors often feel a special responsibility for preparing students for the WPE.

All of the participants at the Composition Conversation devoted some class time to the WPE in their ENGL 102 classes. The range of strategies, however, was wide. One participant generally set aside about half a class period in either the eighth or ninth week of the quarter to respond to student questions about the WPE and to let students know about the WPE workshops offered every quarter by the University Writing Center. Another instructor offers "WPE alerts" throughout the quarter.

Whenever class discussion turns to a strategy useful for timed essay writing such as that demanded by the WPE, the instructor calls attention to the moment by referring to it as a "WPE alert."

Some instructors devote as much as one or more class periods to preparing for the WPE. Some instructors distribute the WPE scoring guide and help students understand how the rubric is used to score student responses. Some instructors use the sample essays found online (at the University Writing Center web site) to illustrate the scoring guide. Some schedule a practice WPE as the midterm for the course. On the day of the midterm, students are given 90 minutes (as on the WPE) to respond to a WPE-type topic. As with the WPE, students do not know about the topic until they sit down to write. The instructor then scores the essays using the WPE scoring guide, with the only comments referring to the language of the scoring guide. Those students whose essays are scored "5" or "6" (i.e. clearly passing) are asked to share their timed writing strategies with the entire class.

Regardless of the time committed specifically to preparing students for the WPE, all participants noted the importance of directing students to services and resources available in the University Writing Center. Besides offering workshops, advisement, and UNIV 401 (the course alternative to the WPE), the Writing Center also maintains materials online, including a "Ten Tips for WPE Success" handout, sample scored responses, and "retired" WPE topics. Most important, perhaps is the fact that the Writing Center is not part of the English department, which reinforces the notion that writing instruction and assessment are the responsibility of the entire campus and not just one department.