

Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

May 17, 2010

Writing at the University after 102

University Writing Requirements at CSULA

In order to promote writing, the University has a four-part writing requirement for all students:

- ENGL 101, Reflective and Expository Writing;
- ENGL 102, Analytic and Persuasive Writing;
- the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement, met by passing the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE) or University 401; and
- an upper-division writing course in a student's major.

In **ENGL 101**, students write thesis-driven arguments that make use of external evidence. In **ENGL 102**, students extend their ability to interpret and analyze a range of texts, write longer and more sustained essays, carry out independent research, and integrate multiple sources into their essays. Research involves training in information literacy skills often offered in partnership with library staff.

The **WPE** is offered each quarter. Students are allowed 90 minutes to write an essay on an assigned topic of general interest. The essays are scored holistically by faculty graders. Students who do not pass the WPE are permitted to enroll in **UNIV 401**, a course alternative to the exam.

Each major program must require all students in the major to take an **upper-division writing course**. This course usually focuses on writing in the discipline.

When students finish ENGL 102 are they finished with writing at the university? Of course, we hope not, but the answer depends on the student and the student's major department. After successfully completing ENGL 102, students are still required to take and pass the Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE) and an upper division writing course in their major program. Beyond this minimum, the university encourages faculty teaching both lower and upper division general education classes to incorporate writing assignments into their courses. In addition, students in some majors might have the opportunity to work on undergraduate theses and certainly in some majors students are expected to write in some, most, or even all courses in their major program.

That's the idea, at least. What individual students encounter varies significantly from class to class and from major to major. First, assigning writing in GE courses, both lower and upper division, has been more worthy goal than actual practice outside of a few stalwart departments such as English. While traditional "letters" faculty might be very comfortable assigning and responding to student writing, faculty in other disciplines might not be comfortable teaching writing outside of their discipline-specific conventions. This reluctance has undoubtedly been exacerbated by increasing class sizes, which of course make meaningful writing assignments a virtually overwhelming burden for conscientious faculty. For example, GE classes in critical thinking have grown from an average of 43 students in 2001-2002 to an average of 66 in 2009-2010. Average class sizes in applied science (GE B3) have increased from 44 to 61 in the same period. Upper division theme classes in the humanities, where one might

expect writing to be assigned, have grown from an average of 33 in 2002-2003 to an average of 48 in 2009-2010. And while there are useful strategies for reducing the workload of assigning writing (such as using more low-stakes writing and forgoing the marking (i.e. "correcting") of papers, those strategies are wholly inadequate to the crippling pedagogic limitations imposed by the present economic realities.

As for writing in the disciplines, the amount, kind, and frequency, of course, depend on the discipline. Students in some major programs, such as English, history, philosophy, and others, can expect to write in virtually every class. Students in other major programs might be required to write only in their upper division writing courses. And the amount and frequency of writing required even in these "writing intensive" courses might vary significantly from program to program. Most programs are somewhere in between requiring writing in every class and requiring writing in only one class. Regardless of the desire, however, the same anxieties and economics that have limited the assigning of writing in general education courses no doubt has had an impact on writing in the majors.

Universities have always been forced to struggle with imperatives that are at best contradictory and at worst dishonest. The emphasis now is on the short-term economics of efficiency and speed, which translates into more students and more degrees in less time and with less cost. Lost in this emphasis is the long-term value and usefulness of an education that adequately prepares one for life and work. Reading and writing are central to such an education, but as with so much right now short-term economics have triumphed over long-term value.