

# Writing Task Force Report

## To the Core Planning Committee

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### Introduction

In preparing this report, the Writing Task Force has read broadly in the literature, and gathered the opinions and recommendations of our colleagues. We have met with ENGL 121 instructors, with the English Department, and with the wider faculty in an open forum. We administered an email survey of instructors of W courses, and held informal discussions with many stakeholders.

From our research and deliberation a key first principle emerges: while there is significant room for improvement in how our Core teaches writing, we believe it is best to build on what we have, rather than start from scratch. USD already has a dynamic composition course, ENGL 121 *Composition and Literature*. And it already has a “writing across the curriculum” program, embodied in our W courses, which matches many of the interdisciplinary goals of Core revision. So we hope to improve and build upon these two courses. Our recommendations include the possibility of reshaping ENGL 121 and the W courses, as well as providing additional or alternatives classes.

A second principle is to avoid creating an overly complex system. We do not want to expand the Core, but rather find efficient ways to infuse writing into its many elements. Recognizing that the needs of writing must be coordinated with many other needs in the overall curriculum revision, we offer multiple solutions wherever possible, so that the Core Planning Committee will have maximum flexibility.

This report offers a list of issues which we take to be central to improving writing in the Core, and after each issue it offers possible solutions. The solutions have been put roughly in order of importance. The section on Issues and Solutions is followed by three appendices, meant to provide background. Appendix A describes ENGL 121. Appendix B describes W courses. And Appendix C is a short bibliography of texts that we found useful.

## Issues and Solutions

### Issue 1 – The Gap Between ENGL 121 and the “W” Courses

We do not presently have a strong developmental model for writing in the Core. There is a gap between ENGL 121 and the upper-division W courses, so students work on writing at the beginning of their careers and at the end, but not enough in the middle. Learning to write is a process, and for our Core to teach writing effectively, students must practice it consistently, in many settings, and throughout the curriculum. This is our most important and complex issue, and we offer a number of solutions to bridging the gap between ENGL 121 and the W courses. Possible solutions include:

- *Ensure that ENGL 121 is taken in the freshman year*

Many students delay taking ENGL 121 until their junior or senior years. Having freshmen and upper classmen together makes it harder to teach the course, and defeats the possibility of a developmental model. We strongly recommend that ENGL121 be required in the first year or first 3 semesters. This could be implemented in a number of different ways – by mandate, by making the course a prerequisite for further study, or by linking to the freshman LLC.

- *Revisit AP standards*

Further research might show that a large percentage of students place out of ENGL 121, and so are not exposed to the first step in the developmental curriculum. As the CPC addresses the larger issue of AP scores, we recommend that it consider ENGL 121 placement. AP scores could be raised from 4 to 5, or students could receive units, but still be required to take ENGL 121 at USD.

- *Require more writing in other Core courses*

Some universities mandate that Core courses include a writing component, so that students practice writing consistently and in many different disciplines.

- *Require a third writing course*

We could bridge the gap between ENGL 121 and the upper-division W course by requiring a 200-level W course, taught across the disciplines. Students would need to take ENGL 121, a lower-division W, and an upper-division W. This third course could simultaneously fulfill a Core requirement, so it would not add to the total core size. It would help spread writing instruction to departments besides English, and would add to the goals of writing across the curriculum by encouraging the use of writing as a teaching tool in many different disciplines.

- *Create writing labs*

Rather than add another W course, we could add 1-unit writing labs, on the model of science labs. A regular Core course in any department could have a writing lab attached. The lab would be taught by a writing instructor, possibly from the same pool of adjuncts that teach ENGL 121. The regular course instructor would coordinate with the lab instructor to blend the curriculum with writing assignments. Students could be required to take one or two writing labs.

- *Require students to submit a writing portfolio*

This is a model used at Carleton College, which could be adapted to our needs. At the end of year two, students submit a portfolio (not an E-portfolio) that gathers four or five papers from prior classes. They are allowed to rewrite the papers. They add a reflective essay which argues for having met certain learning outcomes, using the papers as evidence. Readers are hired to evaluate the portfolios, grading them as pass, fail or honors. Students with failing portfolios might be required to resubmit, or to take an additional writing course. This approach would encourage process writing through rewriting and reflection on past work. It would encourage interdisciplinarity and for students to become thoughtful about their studies. A portfolio requires a significant commitment of time and resources, but we offer the idea as an alternative to the creation of another writing course.

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## **Issue 2 – Fitting ENGL 121 into the Core**

A key goal of a developmental process is to give students practice in moving between discourses, so that they can apply what they learn in their writing classes to the rest of their course work. In its current configuration, ENGL 121 may isolate writing in the single discipline of literature. Without compromising the important commitment to teaching composition through the study of literature (see Appendix A), we believe ENGL 121 can be adjusted, in order to mesh more fully with the rest of the curriculum. Possible solutions include:

- *Link ENGL 121 to LLC clusters*

If Core revision includes the development of a Living Learning Community cluster, ENGL 121 could be a part of the LLCs. The course would function autonomously, but assignments could be connected to other courses. Students, for example, could be asked to write about how a key idea is handled in other areas of study. Students could bring in writing from other courses for review in ENGL 121. Or ENGL 121 could be used to develop a final project for the entire cluster. There are many ways to organize this, including creating an alternative composition course to ENGL 121 to serve the clusters. There are practical limitations, including that it would be very difficult for all first-year writing courses to be part of clusters – so this may only be an option taken by some students.

- *Require multi-disciplinary writing in ENGL 121*

It would be possible to mandate that every ENGL 121 course include writing assignments in multiple topics, beyond literature. Literature would remain a central concern – but a requirement for some breadth in kinds of writing and kinds of approaches could be useful. For example: the student could be asked to connect an idea from the course’s literary study to a concept or method learned in a science or business course.

- *Reconsider the D requirement within ENGL 121*

Currently ENGL 121 has a mandate that one third of the texts on the syllabus should engage with diversity. While we support the idea of infusing diversity in the curriculum beyond the D class, this mandate may distract from the focus on composition. Plus, assessment of ENGL 121 so far has shown the diversity learning outcome has the lowest level of success. Depending on how the CPC revises Diversity in the Core, it should reconsider the D mandate in ENGL 121.

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### **Issue 3 – Writing Placement**

Teaching ENGL 121 is made difficult by too much variation in student preparation. Not only are there too many upper-classmen (see Issue 1), but there are too many students who need more remedial instruction. Possible solutions include:

- *Sorting ENGL 100 and ENGL 121*

ENGL 100 *Intro to College Writing* is a remedial course for students who are not prepared for ENGL 121. According to many instructors, a significant number of students in ENGL 121 should really be in ENGL 100. We recommend that the university develop a more effective screening and placement technique. Students scoring under 500 on the SAT are supposed to take ENGL 100, but it seems this is not enforced. Furthermore, a writing sample or exam early in the semester could allow the English department to move ENGL 121 student back to ENGL 100. Proper placement will allow some students to get the remedial attention they need, and will allow ENGL 121 to accomplish its goals more effectively.

- *Create a writing course for international students*

In Fall 2007 USD had 119 international undergraduates; in Fall 2012 that number was 341. Many of these students need even more remedial instruction than ENGL 100 can offer. We recommend the creation of a writing course specifically tailored to the needs of international students and non-native speakers. And we recommend a strong placement system to sort them from both ENGL 121 and ENGL 100.

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### **Issue 4 – Improving writing mechanics**

Faculty have expressed concern that even advanced students make too many mistakes in writing mechanics such as grammar and syntax. This cannot be remedied by a single course – efforts to create a more developmental model (as in Issue 1) should be our main solution. Here are two additional approaches:

- *Clarify writing mechanics in ENGL 121 and W courses*

Writing mechanics are already part of ENGL 121 learning outcomes, but the committee has concluded that some instructors may not consistently give mechanics enough attention. W courses may be similarly inconsistent. We recommend that the training and direction given to instructors in all writing courses should emphasize that mechanics are a part of the course. This is not a call for extensive grammar lessons, which would undermine the more essential task of teaching a critical engagement with argument and ideas. But for USD students to become skilled in writing, we must give consistent, gentle instruction in mechanics.

- *A writing handbook at USD*

Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual* is a concise handbook on writing mechanics (including summaries of MLA and APA style), which can easily be consulted to solve local writing difficulties. We recommend that USD give every incoming freshman and every faculty member a copy of this, or a similar, handbook. In ENGL 121 students could be taught how to use the book. And then they would be expected to use it throughout their careers at USD. It would sit by their computers when they write papers. And in Core courses and in the majors, faculty could quickly refer to items in the book. This would be a simple but effective way to continue to teach writing mechanics, as well as to remind students that quality writing is a part of the entire USD curriculum.

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## **Issue 5 – Information Literacy**

Information literacy (IL) is the ability to recognize when information is needed, and the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information in an ethical manner. It is not currently well integrated into the Core. As a result, WASC recommended that USD consider how best to include library resource needs and information literacy in the academic program review process for each program. A possible solution is:

- *Integrate Information Literacy into the Core as a whole*

The Writing Task Force believes IL would best be addressed in an area other than writing. It is not something that can simply be attached to a composition class, but must be addressed developmentally, and as part of research in the disciplines. Nevertheless, we affirm the importance of IL to the Core, and recommend that the CPC consider how best to integrate it into the curriculum. IL would best be addressed by Copley Library faculty and faculty involved in the current IL Pilot Project.

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## **Issue 6 – Opportunities to enhance the Writing Center**

The Writing Center selects and trains top undergraduates as tutors, and offers free tutoring to students in all phases of writing. This is a very effective part of the existing writing curriculum, and there is room to build upon it. We recommend that in revising the Core we look for opportunities to expand the role of the Writing Center. Not only would this help with the teaching of writing, but it would provide greater opportunities for experiential learning for those students who are selected as tutors. Currently tutors sit in the center in Founders Hall and students come to them. Here are two ways to expand that model:

- *Create a satellite writing center in each cluster*

We could assign two or three writing tutors to each LLC cluster. Ideally, the tutors would have an office in the dorms and regular office hours, perhaps some late at night, creating a satellite writing center. The tutors could be included in the planning of the cluster and selected for expertise in the theme.

- *Writing fellows*

Rather than working out of the Writing Center, a tutor could be assigned to each W course, working with faculty on the model of Preceptorial Assistants. The Writing Fellow would be selected for familiarity with the material of the course, and could work closely with the professor to provide tutoring and instruction that meets the course's needs. This model is already working successfully on an experimental basis within the School of Business Administration, although SBA uses professional writers as tutors, and the Core would likely use undergraduates.

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## **Issue 7 – Develop more creative pedagogy in W courses**

As a manifestation of writing across the curriculum, our W courses are well poised to contribute to a developmental writing program that spans the disciplines. However, as an institution we have not paid sufficient attention to W courses over the years, and they may be hurt by inconsistency in the writing pedagogy. Our survey found current W instructors open to the idea of increased pedagogic support, and we offer this solution:

- *Create W course workshops*

In the past, W courses were accompanied by workshops to train faculty in writing pedagogy, and to encourage creativity. These workshops are no longer offered. We recommend that a system of workshops be reinstated in order to assure quality and creativity in the W courses. These should be required for first-time W teachers, and should be re-taken periodically. Both the workshop leader and its participants should receive stipends. Ongoing workshops could also provide improved oversight and assessment. If there is an expansion of writing courses in Core revision, these workshops could play a key role in developing pedagogy. Potentially, the workshops could involve other writing instructors.

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### **Issue 8 – Writing curriculum oversight**

Ideally, Core revision will construct a coherent, developmental model. This will require initially working out the details, and then overseeing the curriculum in the ensuing years. The committee believes such coordination requires systematic oversight of the entire writing Curriculum. Possible solutions include:

- *Develop new overall learning outcomes*

To ensure coherence, we will need to develop learning outcomes for the entire writing sequence. There are new, detailed outcomes and rubrics for ENGL 121 (see Appendix A). These could be expanded to structure the entire writing sequence in the Core, however it is ultimately designed. We recommend a committee be convened, including ENGL 121 instructors, to write outcomes and assessment language for writing in the Core.

- *Appoint a Director of Writing*

The W workshops disappeared because the administration never established a permanent position of oversight. The W courses, as well as the entire writing curriculum, would benefit from a Director. If we add a lower-division W requirement, such coordination would be especially important. While there are many ways the position could be conceived, some of the duties could include: organizing workshops, doing assessment, coordinating the Writing Center, training new instructors. The Directorship could be a full time position, or could be filled by a faculty member receiving administrative release from teaching.

## **Appendix A**

### **A Description of ENGL 121**

Every student is required to take English 121 *Composition and Literature*. Remedial students will take English 100 Introduction to College Writing, to prepare for ENGL 121. It is recommended in the bulletin that 121 be taken during the first four semesters. The bulletin describes ENGL 121 as “Practice in developing skills of close observation, investigation, critical analysis, and informed judgment in response to literary texts.” All instruction is based on process-writing pedagogies, such as multiple drafts and peer-reviews.

USD is unusual in designing its composition course with such a strong emphasis on literature. Most American universities study composition through rhetoric and the use of handbooks and non-fiction essays rather than literary texts. At USD composition is taught through the study of a wide range of novels, poetry, essays, plays, etc. The pedagogic argument behind the literary approach is that the study of literature, broadly conceived, provides a critical engagement with language itself. It is through the study of literature that students best gain experience with the ways that meaning is created in texts, the ways that language shapes social and political structures, and the ways that we deploy language when we write. Literary study uniquely makes us aware of how language works – and this awareness is indispensable as students develop their own writing, in any discipline.

Also unique to ENGL 121 is that it is supposed to contribute to the Core’s Diversity goals. Every ENGL 121 syllabus is required to draw one-third of its texts from the literature of U.S. people of color.

One of the great strengths of ENGL 121 is that instructors are given significant freedom in course design. With some general requirements, such as diversity and a reliance on process writing, instructors choose their own texts and their own assignments, and develop the kinds of literary discussions they value. As a result, the English department has a very strong adjunct faculty, both graduate students who are glad for the opportunity to design their own classes, and more experienced instructors who like that USD, more than other universities in the area, offers them the chance to teach what they love. Such freedom in course design, however, may need to be somewhat limited if we build a developmental model, which would require more consistency across the Core.

The instructors of ENGL 121 are hired and mentored by the English Department Chair, who gives a workshop at the beginning of each year, and observes their teaching. They are given informal directions about expectations, as well as the formalized learning goals and outcomes (below). It is the case that ENGL 121 is almost entirely taught by adjuncts. Tenured and tenure-track faculty only occasionally teach ENGL 121, because of staffing issues and out of preference. Currently we have approximately 50 sections per year. With 23 students per course, ENGL 121 serves approximately 1150 students per year.



## English 121 Student Learning Outcomes

- **Literary Skills**  
Demonstrates thorough understanding of a wide range of literary devices and conventions. Engages skillfully with texts of various genres, perspectives, and periods.
- **Writing Literary Analysis**  
Reads thoughtfully and develops strong critical analysis through essays and other forms of composition. Expresses ideas and formulates arguments that deepen understanding of literature.
- **Mechanics of Writing**  
Controls syntax to write with clarity and to communicate effectively with the reader, using detailed textual evidence to support ideas. Cites sources appropriately and writes with minimal errors.
- **Diversity**  
Recognizes the wide diversity of values and traditions represented in U.S. literature. Responds to the challenges and opportunities that arise from an engagement with underrepresented texts.

## Appendix B A Description of W Courses

The upper division writing requirement, the W course, calls for students to take an upper division course in their major which combines content in that discipline with writing instruction. It is based upon the widely accepted pedagogy known as Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).

New W courses are approved by both the Core Curriculum Committee and the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. All W courses must demonstrate an integration of writing, writing instruction, and content, and should include the following criteria: 1) frequent writing tasks with instructor feedback on the content of the paper and the quality of writing; and 2) a process-oriented approach to writing, rather than just assigning more writing. A process-oriented approach includes drafting, feedback, revision and editing, and final drafts.

The committee's survey of W instructors was not designed to yield empirical data. It had 15 respondents, however, and did fill out an anecdotal understanding of the current state of W courses which includes the following observations. Instructors overwhelmingly use process writing and integrate writing instruction into course material – both of these are primary objectives of WAC. Most instructors feel students are not adequately prepared as writers when they arrive at the W course. Most instructors feel they do not have enough

class time to teach writing. Instructors are evenly split on whether they receive enough training in writing pedagogy and enough direction in expectations for the course.

At USD, the idea of WAC was introduced about 1985. At the time, members of the English Department began holding a day-long workshop to guide faculty in other departments in the teaching of writing. At that point there was no WAC requirement. In about 1987, when the university revised its General Education requirements, the W requirement was added. This was accompanied by WAC seminars. Teachers of W courses were strongly encouraged to attend, and were recompensed with sizeable stipends. The seminars were taught by Mary Quinn of the English Department (who also was compensated). These seminars met several times and included syllabus design and training in process writing. After a number of years, however, WAC seminars were discontinued. It is unclear why, but possibly funding was moved elsewhere. Since then there has been no training offered to teachers of W courses, and little oversight.

## **Appendix C**

### **Select Bibliography on Writing**

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