Attached is a near-to-final draft of a report on undergraduate writing submitted to the University Council in spring 1994. The full report includes extensive appendices not included with this copy.

Report of the

# University Council Committee

# to Examine

# the Undergraduate Writing Program

1994

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Executive Summary

The ability to communicate clearly and concisely in writing is a primary characteristic of the educated person. If graduates of The University of Texas at Austin are to function well in the 21st century, their writing skills must be of the highest quality. The current UT faculty is challenged with creating an environment in which our students can become good writers in their chosen fields.

The consensus of the UT faculty who responded to our survey is that despite our current efforts, most of our students do not write well. Less than 10 % of the faculty think that their students write well (excellent or good). More than 90 % rate the writing of their students in the fair to poor range.

Good writing is a skill which can taught and learned. The goal of the undergraduate writing program at UT Austin should be to develop the writing skills of all of our graduates so that they are not just adequate writers, but are excellent writers. We are fortunate that the UT English Department has a good national reputation in the use of technology to teach writing. The knowledge base upon which this reputation is based is a resource that must be focused on developing student writing skills everywhere on our campus.

All of the recommendations presented in this report concern ways in which writing instruction with feedback can be integrated into SWC and non-SWC courses at UT Austin. Writing instruction and ample practice with critical feedback are essential in learning to write well. Good writing should be practiced at every opportunity in the education process, and the faculty should be the catalyst for this process. The challenge is to provide the resources (people, facilities, and funds) necessary to improve student writing at all levels across the campus without reducing the academic quality of our current efforts. The committee recommendations are

**Fully implement the University Writing Center (UWC) as soon as possible**

**Appoint a University-wide committee on writing quality**

**Train faculty to use writing to increase student learning**

**Train graduate students who assist faculty in SWC courses**

**Develop a library collection on the teaching of writing**

**Establish standing committees on writing quality in the Colleges**

**Identify and recognize faculty and graduate assistants who are especially effective in teaching writing.**

**Encourage programs within colleges that focus on the teaching of writing**

**Modify the course evaluations to include items on writing instruction**

**Strongly encourage more writing in non-SWC courses**

# Report of the
# University Council Committee to Examine
# the Undergraduate Writing Program

The members of University Council Committee to Examine the
Undergraduate Writing Program are Professors Floyd Brandt (Management),
Richard Cherwitz (Speech Communication), Melissa Collie (Government),
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## Introduction

Good writing is an essential skill in every field of study represented by
the Colleges and Schools at UT Austin. If the average graduate from UT Austin
had better writing skills, he or she would be better prepared for tomorrow's
world.

Good writing can taught. Writing instruction and ample practice with
timely and critical feedback are essential in learning to write well. However, the
amount of writing instruction available in required courses taught within the
Department of English here at UT Austin, even when augmented by writing
instruction in Substantial Writing Component (SWC) courses, is usually
insufficient to enable the average student to develop good writing skills. This is
the problem which this report addresses.

This report examines the current status of writing instruction at UT
Austin, both within formal writing courses and in courses in which writing is not
one of the primary course objectives. The report consists of an executive
summary, three main sections, and two appendices. The first section focuses on
the status of formal writing courses within the colleges with emphasis on basic
writing courses and Substantial Writing Component (SWC) courses. The second
section reviews status of writing in courses in which writing is not a primary
focus (non- SWC courses). The third section is a collection of recommendations
aimed toward improving writing instruction at UT Austin. Appendix A contains
a summary of committee activities. Appendix B contains copies of pertinent
sections of the report of the 1987 Committee to Examine the Basic Education
Requirement.

# Section 1: Substantial Writing Content (SWC) Courses

Published data plus additional data from an informal telephone survey were collected concerning the writing programs at major universities which have requirements comparable to our SWC requirements. The programs which have been most successful in improving campus-wide writing are characterized by institutional provision of focused resources to support courses in the writing program. Universities that have been less successful in improving writing campus-wide have a writing-intensive course requirement but offer no support of these courses.

Successful writing programs at major research universities have all or most of the following means of supporting writing-intensive courses. Two of the best programs are at the University of Michigan and Cornell University. They have:

- a standing university faculty committee that provides guidelines for SWC courses. An example of such from the University of Missouri at Columbia is attached as Appendix C.

- data collected and maintained on SWC courses. For example, outstanding course designs are identified and used as models for other courses.

- workshops on teaching writing in specific disciplines led by faculty in those disciplines. Faculty who give these workshops are compensated, and often faculty who attend are also compensated.

- workshops for graduate students who assist faculty in SWC courses.

- recognition of faculty who teach SWC courses well.

- a writing center that provides consulting and other services for students in SWC courses.

## Goals for SWC Courses

Students who take SWC courses should develop the following abilities:

- the ability to pose worthwhile questions;

- the ability to evaluate the adequacy of an argument;

- the ability to move easily and unconfusedly among facts, inferences, and opinions;

- the ability to understand how truth is established in a discipline;

- the ability to deal with ill-formed problems and quandaries;

- the ability to give and receive criticism profitably;

- the ability to agree or disagree by measure;

- the ability to extend a line of thought beyond the range of first impressions.

## Status of SWC Courses

The status of the writing instruction in SWC courses was discussed extensively in the Committee to Examine the Basic Education Requirement in 1987. The majority of the activities of this committee focused on SWC courses, their availability, how they were being taught, by whom they were being taught, etc. Many of the findings of this committee are still valid today. The appropriate portions of the report of the 1987 committee are reproduced in Appendix B of this report. The findings and recommendations of the 1987 committee have been revisited, modified as necessary. All revisited and modified recommendations are so annotated.

The SWC course requirement at the University of Texas is representative of a program with mixed success. The pattern described above, in which programs which focus resources experience success, is reflected on our own campus. Some of our colleges and departments focus resources to support writing courses (English, business, engineering), while others have experienced difficulties in identifying resources for this purpose. As a consequence the number, content and quality of writing-intensive courses varies widely across campus. The Committee to Examine the Basic Education Requirement in 1987 identified several problems associated with SWC courses which still exist. These include unbalanced distribution of SWC courses, wide variation in course content, adverse faculty attitudes, and lack of training and support for faculty and graduate students who teach SWC courses. These problems are discussed in more detail in a later section.

# Strengths and Weaknesses of Current UT SWC courses

1. SWC courses are decentralized and are taught at the college and/or department level. This contributes both to strength and weakness. The university criteria for such courses are widely interpreted. Quality control across the campus varies widely. Some courses are too large to allow the feedback necessary to develop good writing.

2. Many of the problems found in 1987 by the Committee to Examine the Basic Education Requirement were found to still be present. These problems are discussed in detail in Appendix B, where the findings of the 1987 committee relating to SWC courses are repeated. Specific problems still present are:

   A. *Unbalanced Distribution of SWC Courses Across the University*
   Some departments still offer many sections of SWC courses while others offer none. The situation is improved from 1987, but more SWC courses are needed across campus.

   B. *Course Format / Credit Guidelines* - SWC course guidelines still require that all SWC courses be 3 semester credit hours in length. A more flexible approach, requiring each student to have a total of six hours of SWC credit, but not specifying credit minima for specific courses, might be better. In such a system, for example, a three hour course might have one SWC credit.

   C. *Variations in SWC Course Writing Content* - These variations still exist across campus, but are not as pronounced as they were in 1897.

   D. *Adverse Faculty Attitudes* - Many faculty remain reluctant to offer SWC courses. In 1987, faculty reported that the credit given for offering SWC courses was not commensurate for the amount of effort required to do it well. Many faculty required more writing than required in a SWC course, but did not want to have their courses listed as SWC courses. The issues of crowded classes, extensive grading, and the problems of teaching of uninterested non-majors just taking a course to fulfill the SWC requirement were all factors in this problem. These problems still exist.

   E. *Grading Questions* - Some faculty still refrain from teaching SWC courses because they feel that they do not know enough about writing or about composition instruction to do a good job.

   F. *Limited Resources* - The SWC requirement was imposed on departments with no reallocation of resources or allocation of new resources to meet the additional teaching requirements. Some departments and colleges still have not found the resources to do teach their own SWC courses and rely on courses taught in other departments..

# Section 2: Writing in Non-SWC Courses

The committee members think that enhancement of the writing instruction in non-SWC courses offers the greatest opportunity to improve student writing quality at UT Austin. Graduates from many colleges currently take only three or four courses in which writing is emphasized out of forty or more in their degree plans. There exist many opportunities to enhance writing skills in the 90% of their degree plans which do not directly involve writing instruction. A key to getting the faculty to adopt any such program is to show, through example, how writing instruction can be enhanced without taking much time from current course subject matter and how student writings can be effectively evaluated without requiring significant new resources (faculty time, teaching assistant time, funding).

The committee adopted the philosophy that good writing is vital to every field of study at the university level. The recommendations and classroom techniques suggested in this report are based on the following guiding principles:

1. **More writing should be required in every course at the university.** We should recognize that, in a sense, the distinction between SWC and non-SWC is partially arbitrary, perhaps even a matter of convenience. By maintaining this distinction, we mistakenly communicate the idea that writing is important and relevant to some subject matters but not to others. While there may be pedagogical and practical differences for maintaining this distinction, writing must be encouraged in all classes; it is important and germane to all academic areas of study.

2. **Writing is not a separate act from reading, understanding, or critical thinking; indeed, the act of writing should be viewed by faculty and students as a means for enriching and better understanding all aspects of the course.** Writing (like speaking) should not be viewed primarily as a mode of communication or a method of transmission. One of the academic lessons learned in the last century is that the content and form of discourse cannot be segregated entirely. Writing is an essential part of the way we create and discover; therefore, the act of writing must be conceived of and taught as more than a separate act or as a set of additive skills developed subsequent to learning a subject matter.

3. **Students have a responsibility to learn.** That is, students should be held accountable for valuing the process of writing, for completing all writing assignments, and for seeking to improve their writing skills. As in all academic pursuits, a large part of the responsibility for learning to write belongs to students; instruction is only one part of the learning process. Hence, the burden to improve writing must be shared by students. We must acknowledge that the goal of improved writing cannot be accomplished entirely through formal instruction and feedback. Faculty can only facilitate effective writing. To become effective writers, students must oftentimes learn to create writing opportunities and to nurture their writing

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skills independent of the classroom. In short, the onus for finding ways to improve writing must be shared by students and faculty alike; it is a matter of mutual accountability.

Mandating more writing in every course is one seemingly simple solution to the problem of improving student writing. Implementation will require a faculty focus on writing in addition to their focus on traditional course material. Many courses offer unique challenges for which innovative solutions will be required. Problems such as large class sizes, how to evaluate student writing, and how to integrate writing into classes which traditionally do not focus on writing skills (e.g., mathematics, engineering, physical education) will have to be addressed. Specific recommendations concerning how some of these problems might be addressed are provided in Section 3: Recommendations.

We present a final observation before moving to recommendations. Though we recognize that certain fiscal and logistical limitations prohibit sweeping changes in curriculum and course structure, we nevertheless feel a strong argument should be made for lowering the student-to-faculty ratio in all classes to facilitate more careful interaction between professor and student (concerning the writing process **and** the course material). Concomitantly, attention must be given to lowering student numbers in intensive writing classes in order for more individualized instruction to take place.

# Section 3: Recommendations

A university culture must be fully dedicated to nurturing quality writing from its students. The recommendations presented focus on the most important of issues framing this discussion: quality student / professor interaction about the improvement of writing. The recommendations are proposed to stimulate thought concerning how to improve writing across campus. They are action oriented and if implemented, will require faculty time and input plus institutional resources. The committee strongly urges the University Council to use these recommendations as the starting point for an innovative program to improve the quality of writing done by all of our students.

*Recommendations Associated with the University Writing Center*

1.  **Fully implement the University Writing Center (UWC) as rapidly as is consistent with available resources and good academic program design.** Specifically, provide resources to support one-to-one tutoring and electronic consultation services offered to all undergraduate students through the UWC. The UWC opened on September 15, 1993, in a temporary location and is now offering help to students in Division of Rhetoric and Composition courses. The UWC plans to assist all undergraduate students beginning in Fall 1994. The Writing Center is an important means of making the SWC requirement live up to initial expectations.

2.  **Appoint a standing university committee to oversee campus-wide efforts to improve students' writing abilities.** This committee should monitor student writing quality and recommend actions designed to enhance the quality of student writing to the University Council. Specifically, the committee should be charged with:

    A.  acting as an advisory board for the University Writing Center (UWC).
    B,  developing a set of goal statements concerning writing quality for graduating students, outlining a writing standard which addresses levels of valid persuasive argument for university students. Importantly, goal statements also should be developed at departmental levels, giving credence and form to the specific writing issues of the discipline.
    C.  recommending guidelines for SWC courses and revised procedures for approving SWC courses.
    D.  recommending procedures for collection and dissemination of successful SWC course syllabi and writing assignments.
    E.  developing and recommending a plan to assess the success of the SWC requirement.

3. **Offer workshops for faculty on using writing to increase student learning.** These workshops would be organized by the Center for Teaching Effectiveness and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, and they would feature veteran SWC faculty. Faculty would be nominated by their department chairs. First-time faculty and presenters would receive a $300 development grant. The Center for Teaching Effectiveness and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition should be charged with regular informal discussions on writing and ongoing consultation with instructors of SWC courses.

4. **Offer training in using writing to enhance learning for graduate students who assist faculty in SWC courses.** This training might take various forms, such as a module for 398T courses, an apprenticeship for TAs and AIs in the Undergraduate Writing Center, or workshops similar to those offered to faculty.

5. **Develop and maintain a library of materials concerning the teaching of writing at the university level.** This library should reside in the new Division of Rhetoric and Composition and be available all faculty who want to improve the quality of writing in their courses as well as to Division faculty and staff.

*General Recommendations*

6. **Request that each College to establish a standing committee to define writing standards and monitor the quality of writing instruction within that College.** Each college committee should produce standards and objectives for writing within its fields. The chairs of the College committees might form the University Council Standing Committee on Student Writing Quality recommended above.

7. **Develop a process to identify and recognize faculty who are especially effective in teaching writing.** Two categories of writing instruction should be recognized; writing instruction in courses in which writing is the primary focus, and writing instruction in courses in which writing is not the primary course objective. Recognition for high quality writing instruction within the various Colleges should also be encouraged. Such recognition might come in the form of teaching awards, merit pay increases, and possibly a course off after so many SWC courses have been taught if the present teaching load credit system can be adjusted. The university should explore the possibility of awarding additional teaching load credits for SWC courses.

8. **Develop a process to identify and recognize adjunct faculty and graduate students who are especially effective in teaching writing.** As in

the item above, two categories of writing instruction should be recognized (writing instruction in courses in which writing is the primary focus, and writing instruction in courses in which writing is not the primary course objective). Recognition for high quality writing instruction within the various Colleges should also be encouraged.

9. **Encourage programs within colleges (Teaching Days) which focus on the teaching of writing within specific disciplines.** Our committee has found that the examination and discussion of the writing problem itself has changed our focus on writing. We agreed immediately that writing is an extremely important component of any college education which is worthy of special attention. Moreover, each of us has examined the writing instruction in our courses as a result of serving on this committee. Awareness of the problem by more faculty is a key to its solution.

10. **Modify the course evaluations so that they address the writing instruction within specific courses.** The current course instructor surveys do not address writing quality directly, even for writing courses. All course evaluations should ask one or more specific questions about writing. We recommend that the Center for Teaching Effectiveness be consulted when formulating the item(s) for the evaluations.

*Recommendations to increase writing quality in non-SWC courses*

The following recommendations serve as a collection of specific classroom ideas which address logistical considerations for making writing a stronger part of all curricula. Each idea should inspire a longer list of ideas suited to specific disciplines and situations.

11. **Share personal writings with students** -- Professors who share their own writing in class offer a personal investment in class material and class assignments. A teacher's writing can be shared as such or simply offered as one of many papers offered for class evaluation. Students must realize that professors place a high value on their own writing skills and seek to improve them even as professionals.

12. **Use alternative methods of feedback** - - One student can read and evaluate another's writing, a technique which strengthens editing and evaluation skills. Selected students can edit via overhead in front of the class to show their approach and editing technique. Writing assignments can be displayed--both edited and non-edited versions--in the classroom for public viewing.

13. **Use nontraditional evaluation methods** -- Not all student writing need be graded by traditional methods; some writing might be reviewed for content, other assignments for critical analysis, organization, or creative perspective. Another possibility is grading a random 20% of the student

work, providing carefully detailed feedback for a few students on each assignment.

14. **Support course content with writing assignments --** Writing in every class session would be an ideal goal for most courses. Five minute exercises to clarify concept would aid the instructor in determining if material is understood by students. Possible assignments: summarize the reading assignment, summarize the lecture, summarize the lecture at the 25 minute point in a 50-minute class. Asking students to write abstracts of lectures or reading material underscores the need for succinct, critical writing in scholarly and professional work.

15. **Exploratory writing --** Journal writing can be assigned to more fully explore readings, question theories and methodologies, or judge practical application of abstract material. Autobiographical writing fosters clearer understanding of self and relationship to the class material; such personal perspective can be included in classes usually dedicated to empirical exploration, as well as other courses. Students writing a journal could be constrained to two or three pages per day.

16. **Specific topic writing assignments --** Have students write short one to two page papers on specific topics each day. Collect all of the papers each day and give up to ten papers each to selected students. These students might be given a week to read and evaluate the writing quality and content of each paper, also using the information contained in them to write a short summary document on the assigned topic. Summary documents might then be made available to the class.

17. **Writing for peers --** Have each student write a paragraph or two and have a neighbor evaluate the writing. Such exercises have double value since students write and evaluate writing soon after. Such exercises can be done during class, or as homework.