



# A Review of Writing Intensive Course Syllabi at Mason: Reflections on Disciplinary Writing Instruction

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## BACKGROUND

Established in 1993, the Writing Across the Curriculum Program at Mason was designed to develop both our students' understanding of their disciplines and their ability to communicate as professionals in those disciplines. The curricular approach is based on the following beliefs:

- writing is an important tool for learning and discovery,
- students gain proficiency as writers when they are given frequent opportunities to write for various audiences and purposes,
- faculty across share responsibility for helping students learn the conventions and writing practices of their disciplines,
- students benefit from revising their writing based on meaningful feedback from their instructors,
- and writing instruction must be continuous throughout a student's education.

The frequent opportunities for writing, receiving feedback, and revising help students to think more creatively and critically, engage more deeply in their learning, and transfer their learning from context to context.

## DATA AND COLLECTION

In order to review the syllabi, the program developed a rubric to focus on 12 criteria, which were comprised of WI requirements and best practices for teaching writing. The rubric was tested and redrafted several times in order to ensure a more consistent data collection. The following numbers represent the summary of data collected on the 12 criteria.

Rubric Criteria	Present	Absent	Unclear
2 Assignments	106 (98%)	2 (2%)	0
3,500 Words	87 (81%)	3 (3%)	18 (17%)
WI Statement	87 (81%)	21 (19%)	0
Multiple Instructional Sessions	60 (56%)	48 (44%)	0
Specific Strategies	62 (57%)	46 (42%)	0
Writing Resources	62 (57%)	46 (42%)	0
Prompt Rationales	60 (56%)	48 (44%)	0
Assignment Descriptions	80 (74%)	28 (25%)	0
Grading Criteria	38 (35%)	70 (64%)	0
Deadlines	80 (74%)	28 (25%)	0
Feedback	75 (69%)	33 (31%)	0
Revision Time	71 (66%)	37 (34%)	0

## SUGGESTIONS

Based on these findings, we offer a few suggestions for thinking about how to make our students more reflective writers. These suggestions focus on giving student writers opportunities to revise and reflect on their writing, in order to improve their writing products and processes.

### Craft effective assignments by

...**creating more authentic writing situations**, based on the genres and writing situations present in your field of study.

Ex. In John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, he offers different options for the standard research paper, such as one on a controversial alternative medicine sometimes used in nursing (92). These assignments have a realistic context, while still requiring students to read and think critically about nursing literature and the alternative method.

Alternative 1: Research nursing literature on this alternative method, then write the "review of literature" section of a grant proposal.

Alternative 2: Should nursing schools support alternative medicines? Write a personal reflection on your wrestling with this question, using scholarly articles and your thinking on the question.

Alternative 3: Write a critical review of an empirical study on this alternative medicine method, including a summary and your own analysis of its scientific reliability.

...**breaking those assignments into chunks** in order to increase the amount of student revision. A published schedule will also clarify deadlines and help reduce the chance of procrastination and plagiarism.

Ex. Consider breaking down a research project into chunks, and including formal (written) or informal (written or conversational) student reflection after some or all. Here is one such schedule for a research project that takes 9 weeks:

- Weeks 1-2 question development
- Weeks 2-3 working thesis (with reflection on topic development)
- Weeks 4-5 annotated bibliography (with reflection on finding sources)
- Weeks 6-8 drafting (with reflection on desired feedback)
- Week 9 final draft (with reflection on successes and challenges)

**Schedule a feedback-revision loop synchronized with the drafts and/or assignment chunks.** In feedback, model the way you would develop and revise your own writing, in order to model your own thinking and writing process. Give students an opportunity to respond to feedback (in writing or in conference) and either revise drafts or build projects based on the feedback.

Ex. When giving students feedback on research questions and working thesis statements, discuss your thoughts on how well those questions might lead to successfully locating sources and developing research projects.

Number of Syllabi Reviewed	108
from Fall 2015	55
from Spring 2015	33
from pre-2015	20
Number of Courses	81
Number of Academic Units	62
Number of Courses in Alignment with Core Criteria	60 (56%)

## INTRODUCTION

During the 2015-2016 academic year, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program contacted departments and faculty members who teach writing intensive (WI) courses to request the most recent syllabus used for each WI course offered at the university. As a result of this outreach, the program was able to collect 108 syllabi, accounting for at least one syllabus from each program offering a WI course. The 62 academic units that responded represent all colleges and schools offering undergraduate majors.

The program reviewed these syllabi to learn how many of them communicate information about the core criteria of a WI course. These core criteria include:

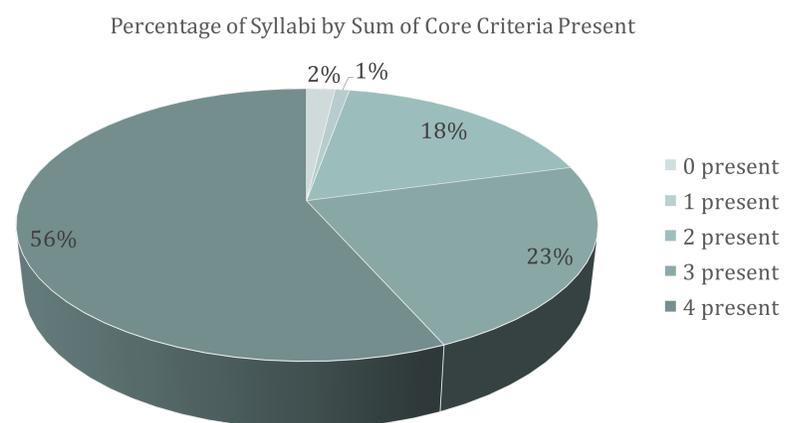
- WI syllabi should explicitly state that the course fulfills the WI requirement
- Students will write at least two essays totaling 3,500 words
- Students will receive feedback on their writing from their instructor

The program discovered that 56% of the syllabi reviewed included information about all of these criteria. The remaining 44% omitted information about one or more of the core criteria.

The program also reviewed the syllabi to glean information about best practices for writing pedagogy. Based on the review, the program is developing teaching resources available on our website and offers some suggestions for developing our support of student writers.

## RESULTS

As a result of the review, the program learned that 60 syllabi contained information about all of the core criteria. The chart below details the number of syllabi by the number of criteria present.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

Since completing the WI course review, we have created a sample syllabi and assignment bank, updated our WI course FAQs, and continue to provide writing curriculum resources on our blog, Facebook, and Twitter pages. Visit our website, <http://wac.gmu.edu>, for all these resources.

Works Cited:

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. Jossey-Bass, 2011.