

Guidelines for Writing Intensive Courses

The Campus Writing Board is looking for classes that use writing as a vehicle for learning, classes that require students to express, reformulate, or apply the concepts of an academic discipline. The emphasis on writing is not intended primarily to give students additional practice in basic composition skills but to encourage students to think more clearly and express their thoughts more precisely — to think critically and communicate effectively. The Board approves Writing Intensive courses that follow two important learning principles: 1) students will comprehend content better through writing, and 2) professors will improve the quality of students' performance by giving feedback and requiring revision. "Writing Intensive" status is conferred on a by-instructor, by-semester (up to academic-year) basis.

Instructors teaching a course as writing intensive for the first time (whether their first time teaching a previously existing course, or the first time the course is held) need to submit a [New Course Proposal Form](#) to the Campus Writing Board. Returning instructors teaching a course previously approved writing intensive *for them* need to submit a [WI Update Form](#).

The success of a Writing Intensive course depends far more on the teacher's professional commitment to this style of teaching than it does on adherence to any particular formula. Because of the importance of this commitment, the Campus Writing Board encourages courses from willing faculty participants.

The guidelines below are not inflexible, but they give applicants a picture of the sort of course the Board envisages. Alternative means to the same end will certainly be considered.

These guidelines apply to all courses eligible for the designation of Writing Intensive (WI), including those considered "non-traditional" such as Summer, Evening, Online or Distance courses.

WI assignments may be traditional, individually-written, printed-page papers, or may take the form of group work, oral, multi-media and/or electronic communications.

1. Writing Intensive courses should be designed and taught by faculty members, at a 20:1 student-to-faculty ratio. This recommendation precludes consideration of graduate students as primary instructors. (See Guidelines 7 and 8 for classes larger than 20.)

The Board prefers that WI courses be taught by MU faculty. If asked to approve other categories of instructors for WI teaching, the Board may ask for a letter from the sponsoring department's chair addressing the rationale for this particular WI teaching assignment and the nature and duration of the WI proposer's appointment. Faculty members' WI course proposals, including a syllabus, should reflect a personal understanding and commitment to WI pedagogy. The faculty member can count on support from Campus Writing Program staff throughout the course and are encouraged to attend a CWP workshop prior to teaching the WI course.

2. Each course should include multiple assignments that are complex enough to require substantive revision for most students. Students should submit a draft or other preliminary writing, consider responses from a teacher (and, whenever possible, from other students), revise, and finally edit. The final versions of these assignments should total at least 2000 words (8 pages).

Writing Intensive courses usually include some assignments so demanding that only a few students will do a completely satisfactory job in a single draft. The first draft or preliminary writing then becomes a testing ground for the student's ideas and reasoning, and the professor's or peers, responses to the writing are an integral part of the instruction in the course. Clearly, the sort of revision the Board has in mind involves rethinking and rewriting, not merely the correcting of grammatical and stylistic errors.

3. Writing for the entire course should total at least 5000 words (20 pages). This writing may take many forms and includes the drafts or preliminary writing and final versions of the assignments in Guideline 2.

In allowing preliminary drafts to count toward the 5000-word total, the Board assumes that revision of these drafts will mean substantial rewriting for most students (see #2 above). When the professor's expectation is that the final draft will be merely a "cleaned-up" version of the preliminary draft, we ask that the words in the preliminary draft not be counted as part of the 5000-word total.

4. Each course should include at least one revised writing assignment addressing a question for which there is more than one acceptable interpretation, explanation, analysis, or evaluation.

A Writing Intensive course, because it exposes students to "live" questions in an academic discipline, provides an excellent opportunity to develop critical-thinking skills. The Campus Writing Board, therefore, encourages WI teachers to use assignments that require students to accept the burden of proof and to understand what types and amounts of evidence are necessary to proving an assertion in the discipline. The Board realizes that in many scientific, technological, and quantitative fields, introductory students are in no position to challenge the axioms of the discipline or to take a stand on unsettled questions. In such fields, however, the Board encourages assignments that require students to explain the reasoning they use in solving a problem, to justify their answers by referring to expert opinion, or to articulate the distinction between elegant and inelegant approaches to a project (e.g., designs for an experiment to prove a given hypothesis).

5. Writing for the course should be distributed through the semester rather than concentrated at the end.

If writing is being used as a mode of instruction, then it is clearly not appropriate to have written assignments concentrated at the end of the semester. The best WI courses tend to contain a series of short papers distributed through the semester rather than one or two major projects. Some successful courses use only two papers but take these papers through a multistage revision process.

6. Written assignments should be a major component of the course grade.

In perhaps two-thirds of WI courses, out-of-class papers account for 70% or more of the semester grade. It is very unusual for papers in a WI course to account for less than 30% of the course grade. When a portion of the course's writing component is met through group work, the Board may ask instructors to elaborate on their methods of assessing individual student contributions (and thereby group-work grades).

7. Faculty members may use graduate teaching assistants to bring the student/faculty ratio down to a manageable level.

The Board prefers courses with a maximum student/faculty ratio of 20 to 1. Effective Fall 2003, the Board implemented a new funding system for WI courses with enrollments over 20. Departments will receive OTS funding, as a departmental transfer of funds, based on the total number of WI students enrolled. Under this OTS plan, the departmental allocation is \$110 per student beyond the first 20 students in a class. See the [Suggestions for Large Enrollment Courses](#) for additional information.

8. In classes employing graduate teaching assistants, professors should remain firmly in control not only of the writing assignments, but of the grading and marking of papers.

The most common practice in courses with enrollment below 50 is to have the professor read every major written assignment and either assign a grade or approve the GTA's grade. In such courses marking and commenting on papers is usually a responsibility shared by the graduate teaching assistant and the professor. As courses get larger, the professor's role becomes increasingly managerial: he or she may train GTAs in "standard-setting" sessions such as those featured in Campus Writing Program workshops and then entrust the actual grading to the graduate teaching assistants. In such circumstances, the Board needs to be assured that the GTAs assign essentially the same grade the professor would, for essentially the same reasons. Professors are, therefore, encouraged to read a large enough sample of the papers to verify the accuracy of the GTAs' evaluations. This sampling will also help the professor assess the effectiveness of the assignment and the need the class may have for additional instruction.