

# WAYS OF KNOWING THE WRITING INTENSIVE REQUIREMENT

Elizabeth Karlsgodt  
History  
2008

My initial goals for this brief article were overly ambitious. Inspired by Michael Carter's article "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines" (CCC 58:3, February 2007), I had planned to analyze DU's mission for undergraduate student writing – the skills we expect students to develop by the time they graduate – and how University requirements help them acquire those skills. Next I would analyze writing assessment rubrics from several different DU academic departments, comparing criteria across what Carter calls academic "metagenres." This awareness of other departments' "ways of doing" would enable me to explain how my writing intensive core course would achieve interdisciplinary writing objectives. Feeling like a student again myself, I dutifully set about gathering this information which, I imagined, surely would be available on the DU Web site. Full disclosure: I am entering my third year as a DU faculty member so my relative lack of experience may help to explain my naiveté.

## Undergraduate Writing at DU

It didn't take long for me to reach my first stumbling block. I was surprised to find that there is not a clear statement on the Web site or in the undergraduate bulletin about how writing fits into the University's general requirements. Although I am a relatively new faculty member, I am familiar with the University's recent initiatives that emphasize the importance of writing – the creation of the Writing Center and expansion of its services, more systematic training of faculty teaching writing intensive core courses, and stipends offered to faculty for teaching and training. Yet I could not find a clear statement summarizing why all of these things are fundamental to undergraduate education at DU.

Ok, so there's no overarching statement on the importance of writing – or not one that I could find. At least I would be able to evaluate

the University's clearly defined objectives related to writing intensive core courses. Again, I was surprised by a lack of information. According to the *Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2009*, students must take three core courses, one of which must be writing intensive. (p. 62) Yet there is no explanation as to why the University created the writing intensive requirement. The core curriculum web site, moreover, does not even mention the writing intensive requirement. (<http://www.du.edu/Core/index.html>) This contradictory information must be confusing for students and faculty alike. I imagine that some faculty who are advising juniors and seniors are not aware of the writing intensive requirement. Is it possible that the *Bulletin* is incorrect?

Well, fine. I could still find the departmental assessment rubrics on Portfolio. I had helped out with the history department's assessment process this year, so I knew how to find the rubrics and I would be able to gauge the importance of writing and assessment criteria across various majors. Unfortunately, there were not as many departmental rubrics as I had thought, and only a few seemed sufficiently thorough for the analysis I wanted to carry out. Yet all of this searching was not fruitless; it raised some interesting and important questions. Has the University defined the importance of writing in the undergraduate general requirements? If so, why isn't this information readily available to students, advisers and faculty? Why has the University made a financial commitment to support writing? Why am I being paid rather generously to create a writing intensive course, receive training, and write an article on my use of writing assignments? What is the reasoning behind the resources?

I have my own reasons for teaching a writing intensive course. I use rather extensive writing assignments anyway because I believe they are the best way for students to learn history and develop key analytical skills. I also like the idea of

teaching a smaller class so I can devote more time to discussing the assignments, and working on the mechanics and process of writing. I also will happily accept the stipends, of course. But how should I explain the intensive writing requirement to my students and advisees? As a newly elected member of the core faculty committee, I also would like to have a better sense of why the requirement was created so that I am able to evaluate proposals fairly. (Come to think of it, this would have been useful information as I was preparing my own core course proposal.)

### Departmental Writing Assessment Rubrics

In the Carter-inspired section of my article, I had hoped to compare writing assessment rubrics from the disciplines that figure prominently in my core course on the French Revolution, namely history, art history, philosophy, sociology and theater studies. As with any research project, the information we expect to find often isn't available (sometimes historians figure this out only after travelling thousands of miles to archive centers), and we modify our projects accordingly. My new goal: to address how my writing intensive core course will benefit students in various majors, not necessarily in the disciplines directly related to my core course. I located several departmental writing rubrics that would fit into most of the "metagenre" categories defined by Carter. In the "problem solving" category, the engineering department has a rubric for a "final design project" in which students are evaluated according to their ability to "solve computer problems, monitor performance of engineering systems and/or to create computer engineering designs." Unfortunately, the assessment criteria are not defined beyond "below expectations," "meets criterion," exceeds criterion." From the rubric, it's not clear to me how the project is evaluated and I'm not sure how writing could provide a bridge between my core course and this area of problem solving.

The math department, arguably also a "problem solving" area, has a writing rubric that assesses the following skills:

- Understands and appreciates connections between different areas of mathematics and with other disciplines
- reasons vigorously in mathematical arguments

- engages effectively and efficiently in problem solving
- communicates mathematics clearly and effectively
- thinks creatively at an appropriate level

In each category, the assessments are simply "minimum/two/three/maximum." Again, it is difficult to see a direct link between these assessment criteria and writing assignments in my core course. Perhaps students who are majoring in the "problem solving" metagenre will benefit by simply honing their writing and analytical skills – key abilities for students entering any major or professional field.

Comparisons come more easily from departments that seem to fit into Carter's categories of "performance" (School of Communication) and disciplines that use "research from sources." (History, religious studies, international studies, English, political science. Carter placed political science in the "empirical inquiry" category, but DU's political science department does not appear to be testing hypotheses in an empirical way. Its rubric thus seems to fit better into the "research from sources" category.) There are common elements in all of these writing rubrics: Students are evaluated according to their ability to argue a central idea that is supported by evidence. A paper's organization must be coherent with clear transitions. Grammar, punctuation and spelling must be correct, and external sources must be credited and integrated appropriately.

Language variations in the rubrics reveal some important disciplinary priorities. The English department looks for voice and style. The history department requires use of both primary and secondary sources, and a clear understanding of historiography. Religious Studies assesses the ability to "recognize and bring to bear the interdisciplinary assumptions and strategies that are relevant to religious studies." Political science requires students to address "relevant concepts, events and debates" in the discipline. Yet the common elements are more significant than the differences. In all cases, student writing should be organized, clear, nearly free from grammar and spelling errors, have a central argument supported by evidence from integrated and credited sources,

and reflect an understanding of important works in the field.

### **Writing in My Core Course**

So how does this information influence the way I am planning the writing assignments in my core course? Although I have a relatively small sampling of departmental writing rubrics, this exercise has validated claims I have made to students in all of my courses: the skills they develop will serve them well in any major they might choose. My core course on the French Revolution will require a combination of informal and formal writing assignments. For example, students will post weekly reading responses to a Blackboard discussion board. They will submit a 400-word essay plus a 100-comment on another student's essay. This assignment requires students to reflect on one another's writing and argumentation, while encouraging them to learn from one another. The use of the discussion board also will enable me to identify writing problems or challenges early and consistently. I will grade the postings, placing more emphasis on argumentation and clarity but marking down postings that contain too many spelling and grammar errors. The writing workshop helped me realize that in the past I have spent too much time correcting students' mistakes. I now plan to indicate in the margins which lines contain errors, and encourage students to find the mistakes themselves.

In another assignment I will require students to write or modify a Wikipedia entry. This is not a new idea – history professors have been using it for years – but it will be the first time that I have required it. Students will read the main French Revolution entry and either correct an erroneous passage or add some new information to the entry. This assignment will require them to demonstrate knowledge of the Revolution, and learn to read online sources critically. I hope to tap into their interest in the Internet and provide a way for them to make Wikipedia a more credible and reliable resource. Students will read and critique other students' draft contributions, creating a community of knowledge within our classroom first, and then among Wikipedia users.

The main formal writing assignment will be a 10- to 12-page research paper. I plan to

invite the Writing Center staff to assist students in two phases: first, when they are formulating their central arguments, and again when they have completed a rough draft. I will schedule deadlines throughout the quarter to help students plan ahead and think about their paper topics. Initially, I had planned to ask students to select their own topics, but after discussing assignment strategies in the workshop, I have decided to define the topic myself, or at least narrow the options to a few topics. I consider the research paper an important assignment that will help students learn how to write effectively across the disciplines – in those common areas repeated in the various writing rubrics. We will spend time discussing how one uses, integrates and cites sources. They will work with partners or in small groups to discuss the central arguments they are developing. I will grade a rough draft of the paper, providing extensive comments and giving them time to correct errors and strengthen their prose. I will provide a grading rubric so they know the relative importance of argumentation, source citation, clarity, syntax, correct spelling and grammar.

This modest project has made me wonder if the Writing Program could partner with relevant administrations and/or faculty committees to define a mission for undergraduate writing, one that is clearly stated in degree requirement descriptions. The writing intensive core requirement also could be more clearly explained. Regarding student assessment, it is my understanding that all academic departments should have some kind of rubric in place, similar to the ones that are already on Portfolio. If additional departments were encouraged to create rubrics, perhaps with the mission for undergraduate writing in mind, the Writing Program would have a better sense of faculty expectations and tailor services and training accordingly. As Carter argues, “Having faculty identify disciplinary ways of doing and then assess them through students' writing is a step toward situating writing in, not outside, the disciplines.” (“Ways of Knowing, Doing and Writing,” 391) It could be a positive step for DU students and faculty alike.