

Introduction

Issues in Undergraduate Writing at DU: First Year Seminars, Advanced Seminars, and Points Between/Beyond

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In June 2013, a group of eighteen University of Denver professors gathered for an institute devoted to writing in the university's First Year Seminar (FSEM) and Advanced Seminar (ASEM) programs. Responding to a campus-wide call, all participants were veteran teachers of one or both courses, and they were scheduled to teach again during 2013-14. In concert with extended conversations, everyone completed a short article about a writing issue—in the compressed stretch of a single week. This volume presents the results.

It also maps the terrain of undergraduate writing at DU since 2006, the red-letter inception of an ambitious new campus writing initiative. My introduction, then, is part history and context, part overview of the issues that my colleagues addressed and the essays they wrote in response.

Sites of Undergraduate Writing at DU: A Low-Resolution Map

A comprehensive writing program was perhaps the most visible component of an ambitious and progressive revamping of general education impelled by a gift from the Marsico Foundation. Beginning in 2006, all undergraduates were required to complete a First Year Seminar, two writing courses (one each in winter and spring), and an upper-level writing intensive core course, all in

sections capped at 15 students. Supporting this effort was a permanent and full-time professional writing faculty consisting of (by 2013) 25 lecturers hired in national searches; a state of the art writing center offering consulting to undergraduates, grad students and faculty; and over 20 new tenure-line positions across campus to build capacity for the seminars.

Writing in FSEM: Brief History

First year seminars were piloted at DU in the mid 2000s, before becoming a universal requirement in 2006. From the outset they were imagined as thematic, content rich courses, taught in small sections of fifteen to create an inquiry-based introduction to college. The catch phrase, even before I came to DU and continuing now, was that the course would focus on a subject of the professor's passion—and, one hopes, the students' as well. Students received a menu of seminars, with brief descriptions, in the summer before they arrive and selected their top choices. While there's a small "introduction to college" component, marked by the FSEM professor being first year advisor to his or her students, and while there's a socializing and bonding component, marked by the each seminar's having a budget for outings and activities, the clear focus is on the topic.

The small course caps were designed to facilitate discussion and active learning—and, in the minds of many people—writing. Indeed, curricular space for FSEM was opened by reducing the former three-course first year writing

sequence to two courses. The idea was that students would still have a full-year sequence of small, intensive courses. Starting with FSEM would steep them in a subject matter straight away and introduce them to college writing. There was a reasonable notion that students would perceive that writing was important in college, that it differed from the kinds of writing they'd done in high school, and that they needed to develop more skill and facility with it. As a result, they'd be more receptive to the WRIT 1122 courses in the winter and WRIT 1133 in the spring. The seeds of instruction in rhetoric and writing would fall on more fertile grounds. Or so many of us imagined.

There were a couple of wrinkles in this plan. First, not all faculty were convinced that FSEM needed to be writing-intensive. Some faculty, including a few based in mathematics and the natural sciences, suggested that their course might emphasize other kinds of activities, including symbolic manipulations. The compromise language was that the courses would focus on engaged learning; students were to produce knowledge, not simply receive it. (I've included the broad goals and requirements of FSEM as Appendix A.) Writing was promoted as perhaps the most obvious means of engagement and the likely default for the majority of sections. However, it was not obliged. Still, according to student reports each January, the large majority of FSEMS include writing.

The larger wrinkle for the new first year sequence, at least regarding writing, was that the nature and purpose of writing in the FSEMs was not specified. How much of the writing was to be formal, and how much informal? In terms of "formal" pieces, what was the target discourse: Disciplinary writing? Popular writing for general educated audiences? Some kinds of assumed "general academic writing?" Furthermore, what responsibilities did

FSEM faculty have for teaching writing? Were they to provide instruction? Teach concepts and strategies about writing? Read and respond to drafts?

Writing in ASEM: Brief History

Bookending FSEM is ASEM, the Advanced Seminar. ASEM similarly grew out of a pilot program located in the previous incarnation of general education at DU. In that version, students completed a series of three Core Courses, with one of them required to be writing intensive. When I arrived at DU in 2006, one of my earlier tasks was to get the Writing Intensive Courses established. Unfamiliar with how curricular changes happened here, I asked how to define and implement those requirements and was told, essentially, "We hired you as the expert. Just tell us." Tantalizing as this power was, it was also dangerous in terms of campus investment and legitimacy. I was appointed to the Faculty Core Committee, which approved courses and distributed some professional support funds, and chaired a small subcommittee of that group. This was in October, and we worked quickly. After surveying what constituted "writing intensive" at a number of campuses around the country, we decided on four requirements:

1. Students will write a minimum of 20 pages (about 6000 words), some of which may be informal, but some of which must be revised, polished, and intended for an educated readership.
2. Students will complete a minimum of three writing projects that are distributed over the quarter; exceptions might include a cumulative project completed in multiple stages.
3. Students will revise some of their work based on feedback from their professor.
4. There will be some instructional time devoted to writing.

The whole Core Committee approved them, and we put out a call for proposals. By the spring of 2007, DU was already teaching Writing Intensive Core classes, a pace of implementation that would have been

impossible at most schools. The striking thing to me was that “Writing Intensive” was defined entirely in terms of instructional requirements and features, not at all in terms of goals or outcomes. While I don’t remember consciously having this debate, one underlying assumption might have been that, given the wide variety of WI courses, any specific goals would have been impossible to create.

DU undertook a sweeping general education change in 2009, with one upshot being that the Core Courses disappeared and ASEM replaced the Writing Intensive Core requirement, with the slight modification that ASEM was imagined to be taken during the senior year or at least the late junior, after all other Common Curriculum requirements were completed. Previously approved WI Core courses were grandfathered in, provided their professors proposed outcomes and assessment processes. The previous requirements for writing were rolled over. The Core Review committee generated a new, minimal description of the course that included goals for the first time, namely, that students will

1. Integrate and apply knowledge and skills gained from general education courses to new settings and complex problems.
2. Write effectively, providing appropriate evidence and reasoning for assertions.

Both goals proved challenging both for implementation and assessment. The first goal, while emphasizing the “multiple perspectives” and “integrating knowledge” focus of the course, characteristics that differentiate it from capstone majors, for example, explicitly privileged general education courses. This proved impossible both to teach and to assess. With many complex and varied paths through general education to arrive in the advanced seminar, students would reasonably have quite different bodies of knowledge and, likely, skills, so faculty would have difficult time

planning particular assignments that drew of particular prior knowledge. Furthermore, even when student artifacts provided evidence of integrating prior knowledge and skills, it was impossible to discern whether they gained them from “general education course,” from majors courses, from self-sponsored reading or so on. As a result, we didn’t try to assess that goal until the spring of 2013; in January of that year, the ASEM committee revised the goal to read, “Demonstrate the ability to integrate and apply content from multiple perspectives to an appropriate intellectual topic or issue.”

The writing goal, while less problematic, was—and is—hardly uncomplicated. It privileges a certain kind of writing, generally argumentative, that makes assertions and provides evidence and reasoning for them. Despite these being reasonable goals for academic writing, one could imagine advanced seminars that prized different kinds of writing. Moreover, the goal is silent about matters of genre and audience for course writing. To some large extent, this is desirable leaving faculty considerable leeway to define the kinds of writing they wanted to assign and teach. Still, it provides little guidance to faculty designing courses and leaves open the broader question of what, in terms of writing, we hope ASEM might achieve.

There has been a faculty development component required of anyone teaching ASEM. Professors attend a three-day workshop, with assigned reading and writings, for which they receive \$1000 (and which accompanies another \$1000 for designing the course the first time). These workshops focus on writing as a mode of learning, developing and sequencing writing assignments, the nature of writing development during college years, responding to writing, writing-related activities during class time, grading, and so on.

WRIT 1122 and 1133

All students¹ complete a two-quarter writing sequence. WRIT 1122: Rhetoric and Academic Writing has six goals. Upon completing 1122, students will

- Demonstrate practical knowledge of the concept “rhetorical situation,” through the abilities both to analyze and to write effectively in different kinds of situations.
- Demonstrate proficiency with basic elements of rhetorical analysis (such as logos, ethos, and pathos) in a range of texts, and the application of that facility in their own writing.
- Demonstrate the ability to produce writing that effectively provides evidence and reasoning for assertions, for audiences of educated readers.
- Demonstrate the ability to incorporate and attribute or document source material in rhetorically effective ways.
- Demonstrate the ability to use feedback to revise their own writing and the ability to provide useful feedback to others.
- Demonstrate the ability to edit and proofread their writing.

WRIT 1133: Writing and Research has four goals. In addition to continuing to master the goals of WRIT 1122, students will in 1133 will:

1. Demonstrate practical knowledge of academic research traditions (for example, text-based/interpretive; measurement-

based/empirical; and observational/qualitative) through effectively writing in at least two of those traditions.

2. Demonstrate understanding of rhetorical/conventional differences among various academic disciplines or groups of disciplines.
3. Demonstrate practical knowledge of rhetorical differences between writing for academic audiences and writing for popular audiences, through both analysis and performance.
4. Demonstrate proficiency in finding, evaluating, synthesizing, critiquing, and documenting published sources appropriate to given rhetorical situations.

For a detailed elaboration of these goals, please see Appendix , which also details course features (how much writing, drafting, etc.) and policies.

Writing in the Majors

A significant amount of writing obviously happens in courses in students’ majors. DU has no formal requirements or guidelines for such writing, but two initiatives have focused some attention on writing at the departmental level. One was the Writing in the Majors Project or WIMP. Departments were invited to request funds and expert help to research the amount, kind, and quality of writing in their programs. A research team consisting of 2 or 3 professors, 2 or 3 undergraduate students, and 2 writing program faculty gathered data and completed a quick and dirty report on the state of writing. More information about WIMP is in Appendix D. The second major initiative looking at writing in the majors was the Denver Longitudinal

¹ About 10% of students earn credit for one writing course through Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams, and several students also transfer credit from other institutions.

Study of Writing. We followed 59 students through their entire undergraduate careers, collecting and analyzing every piece of writing they completed, surveying, and interviewing them.

Issues and Ideas for Writing in FSEM and ASEM Courses

Prior to the June 2013 workshops, I'd offered six foci for writing. Faculty were free to choose one of these or to select their own topic—and they did:

1. What kind of writing should students do in your class? (Or in FSEM or ASEM?) This is a richer question than it might seem. Consider the matter of audience. Should students be writing to scholarly readers—members of academic or disciplinary communities—or to educated general readers? Or consider place of publication. Should they write as if for academic journals, as if for public periodicals (*Harpers' The New York Times?*), for web spaces, for you as the professor?

2. What should be the purpose of the writing? Consider the conventional distinction between “writer-based” or “writing to learn” pieces and “reader-based” or “learning to write” works imagined for polished publication? What genre? My point is that the target writings we posit for a course, consciously or unconsciously, have a lot to do with how students experience writing and how we teach. Arguments can be made for all sorts of approaches.

3. What can you learn by analyzing how students perform on a “typical” assignment in your class? This option would involve your doing some close reading and analysis of a few student papers, treating them like significant and revealing artifacts. What strategies do

students use? How do they compare with strategies that you or other expert writers might use? What are comparative strengths and weaknesses? What could you change about assignments or how you teach them that might result in stronger papers?

4. What role should multimodality play in your course—or more broadly in FSEM or ASEM? Clearly, writers today have access to all sorts of modes of production and circulation that would have been exotic twenty years ago—sound, image, video, and so on. What's the relationship between traditional prose texts and all of these multimodal options? How should we deploy attention and time?

5. What do you see as your main challenge as you assign writing in your ASEM or FSEM course? Can you explain and analyze that challenge in detail? How have others wrestled with this issue? How might you?

6. What is the difference, if any, between your expectations for writing in FSEM or ASEM, and your expectations in a course you teach for majors? What similarities and differences do you perceive between the kinds of writing that students do in your course and the kinds of writing they do in other courses—especially prior to your course?

In many respects, the first questions are most fundamental, their answers complicated by two factors. First, FSEM and ASEM are designed to feature and include writing—extensive writing, in the case of ASEM—but they are not writing courses per se. That is, their focus is on addressing an issue or topic, not centrally on the development of student writing skills. To be sure, writing skills do develop through practice, with well-crafted assignments and strategic instructor feedback, but extended direct instruction in writing is not a feature of these courses—at

least not nearly to the extent that occurs in writing courses per se, that is WRIT 1122: Rhetoric and Academic Writing or WRIT 1133: Writing and Research.

Second, FSEM and ASEM by design are multi-perspectival, intended to examine a particular subject matter or focus through content best suited to the enterprise, not intended to introduce a discipline. ASEM is particularly interesting and vexed in this regard. Senior capstone seminars that exist in many programs or follow the trajectory of the major; students complete projects—or one major project—that somehow applies and embodies accumulated disciplinary knowledge, in the company of fellow majors, with departmental professors as a large context and audience. However, ASEM is intentionally and defiantly not a capstone in a discipline. It interrupts the usual flow of American general education whereby students get basic requirements out of the way en route to specialization. We know, by the way, from the University of Denver Longitudinal Study of Writing that many students relish ASEM and the opportunity, late in their studies, to step outside their majors courses and into a fresh topic of personal interest.

Several institute participants pursued a version of this issue. Before introducing their work, however, let me map the general terrain of undergraduate writing at DU.

The Contents of this Volume

The brief essays that follow are organized into four broad groups.

The first focuses directly on the issue of writing to learn vs. learning to write; at stake is the degree to which the primary focus in FSEM and ASEM courses should be on writing that promotes student learning—that is, whose purpose is explorative and, perhaps, writer-focused—or on writing designed to meet

reader expectations—that is, whose purpose is designed to display demonstrate conventions and, thus, reader or discipline-focused. **Hillary Hamman** (Geography and the Environment) explores this in the context of her FSEM, *Colorado Rivers*, explaining how the course does both, even as she considers more writing to learn opportunities. **Kateri McRae** (Psychology) develops a matrix of goals and perspectives for her ASEM course, “Emotions in Theatre and the Brain.” One dimension of that matrix is knowledge that is “objective” v. “subjective.” Another is a set of goals, including content (empirical measures v. personal insight) and writing skills (third person, technical v. first person, narrative). **Hava Gordon** (Sociology and Criminology; Gender and Women’s Studies) asks a tough question of students in her ASEM course “Globalization from Above and Below:” Do students actually become better writers? The question is especially complicated because writing brings a third dimension to the content and process concerns that mark ASEM. A brief essay by **Doug Hesse** (Writing Program and English), sets these issues in the historical context of American Writing Across the Curriculum movements.

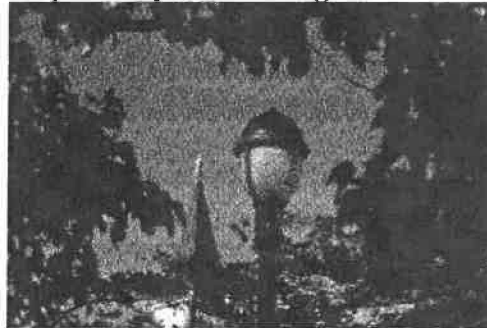
A second group focuses more specifically on issues their authors have identified with FSEM courses. While issues of the type and purpose of writing shoot through pieces in this section, too, the essays foreground the first-year element. In “Genre-Hopping: Teaching Writing Reflexivity in First Year Seminars,” **Pavithrah Prasad** (Communication Studies) explains how having students adhere to parameters of specific and varied genres can work in concert with self-reflexivity and evaluation. **Blake Sanz** (Writing Program) explores “Assigning Multiple Genres of Writing in an FSEM Course,”

in this case, his focusing on “Literary Depictions of Madness.” **Jennifer Hoffman** (Physics and Astronomy) discusses “Integrating Writing with Content in a Science-Themed FSEM,” which in 2012 was called “Measuring the Milky Way.” **Sarah Morelli** (Music) discusses “Writing as a Tool for Shifting Focus: From Content- to Process-based Teaching in FSEM.”

A third cluster of essays explores various issues emerging from faculty experiences teaching ASEM. **Lindsay Feitz** (Gender and Women’s Studies) rethinks “Feminist Pedagogy and the Question of Audience in ASEM,” using her course “Sex and Globalization” as the case. **Sandra Lee Dixon** (Religious Studies) uses her course “Do the Wicked Prosper?” as the basis for “Liberal Arts and Essays in Advanced Seminars.” **Ermitte Saint Jacques** (Anthropology) explains how she addresses the challenge of incorporating instructional time for writing in her ASEM course “Muslims and Identity in Europe.” Finally, in “How Far is too Far? Music, Consciousness, and Mind-Altering Substances in ASEM,” **Kristin Taavola** (Music) narrates and analyzes a particularly challenging set of events in her ASEM “Music and Consciousness.”

The final set of essays here explore broader issues of writing in these courses. In “Multimodal Writing in an FSEM Context,” **John Tiedemann** (Writing Program) explains how he has students create graphic novellas in his course “Graphic Writing Across Cultures,” making the case that having students compose in modes other than writing helps them become more purposeful, attentive, and imaginative writers. **Lydia**

Gil Keff (Languages and Literatures), makes a related call for multimodal writing, in this case to the serve the needs of international students she teaches in her hybrid iFSEM, “Immigrant Stories: Theirs and Ours.” The gist of her essay, which explains both why and how to, is captured in her title, “Multimodality in the FSEM Classroom: Digital Storytelling and ESL Students.” The needs of international students figure prominently in “Reflections on My Use of Writing in ASEM and FSEM Classes,” by **Jing Sun** (Political Science). Sun also notes a significant difference between his ASEM (“Politics of Reconciliation”) and his iFSEM (“Pacific Century: American, China, and Competition for Global Leadership”), writing in the former being more content-based and in the latter more process-based. **Kara Taczak** (Writing Program) offers three strategies for helping students embrace both the “ugly” aspects of their writing experiences and the possibility for becoming better.



Finally, in “Fundamental Problems in Structure: IDEAS ARE ALL THAT MATTER,” **Tyrone Davis** (Media, Film, and Journalism Studies) develops three concepts that he argues are vital to every meaningful writing.