Writing in the Disciplines (WID): An Overview

Background and Introduction

This statement was produced by the campus Writing Board in an effort to help educate faculty on Writing in the Disciplines (WID). As part of its overhaul of the General Education program, around 2011, RIC created its first WID requirement:

> **Writing in the discipline (one or more courses)**
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> Writing in the discipline - each department will identify the course(s) at the sophomore level or above in which students learn to write for that discipline. This may be a new course or an existing course; writing instruction need not be the sole content of the course but writing instruction must be a portion of the course's requirements. This course must be required in the major and is not included in the 40 credit hours of General Education courses. COGE will maintain a list of these courses.

In what follows, the Writing Board offers answers to some common questions about WID.

How are WID Courses Different From More Traditional Courses?

The difference between WID and non-WID courses often comes down to the ways faculty and students spend time together engaging with writing. If we think about how writing is usually handled in college classes, we might say that writing is often *assigned* and almost always *evaluated* but not always *taught*. At a minimum, then, WID courses differ from more traditional courses in that they go beyond *assigning* and *evaluating* writing in order to *teach* students disciplinary and/or professional forms of writing. This process typically involves guiding students through the various stages of the writing process (i.e. brainstorming, drafting, seeking and receiving feedback, revising, and publication) and/or offering practice in writing via low-stakes or "write-to-learn" activities.

How Should One Teach Writing in WID Classes?

There are many different ways to teach writing in WID classes and many different kinds of teaching practices upon which one can draw. Here are some examples:

1. **Assign Low-Stakes/Informal Writing:** So-called "low-stakes" or "write-to-learn" assignments help students learn new content and help faculty members gauge student learning. Examples include learning logs, journals, one-pagers, think-alouds, problem-sets, etc. Such writing is considered "low-stakes" in that *what* is written is less important than what is learned *by* writing. Some faculty members factor low-stakes writing into students' course grades, others leave such writing ungraded.

2. **Break High-Stakes/Formal Writing Assignments into Smaller Pieces:** Many formal writing assignments can be improved by breaking them down into smaller pieces and building them in stages over multiple days or weeks. Of course, this approach takes time, but it usually pays dividends in the quality of work students produce. Faculty report that when they help students build assignments piece-by-piece on the front end, they usually spend less time evaluating the work on the back end.

3. **Distribute and Discuss Models of Student Writing:** Providing students with models of the kinds of writing they have been asked to produce can help them better understand the assignment. Further, discussing models with students *before* a project deadline can help them to identify aspects of an assignment they don't understand so they can seek assistance and/or feedback.

4. **Create Opportunities for Students To Share and Discuss Work-in-Progress:** Left to their own devices, many students procrastinate when it comes to formal writing assignments, waiting until the last minute to begin and subsequently producing poor-quality work. Peer review workshops, where students provide feedback to one another in small groups, require students to begin the writing process earlier and to return to their work multiple times in order to improve it. Peer review also provides an opportunity for students to compare their work with that of their peers, which can help them determine if they are on the right track.

5. **Use Rubrics To Help Students Understand Grading Criteria:** Rubrics are tools faculty can use to provide students with valuable information about how an assignment will be evaluated. Imagine an assignment where a faculty member gives students a set of specific and detailed guidelines and the rubric she will use to grade the work. She then has students participate in a peer-review session

using the rubric to reinforce the guidelines. Finally, she uses the rubric to evaluate the work and provide feedback. Connecting the dots in this way can go a long way towards clarifying the purpose(s) and evaluative criteria of a given assignment.

6. **Reassign Class Time to Meet With Individual or Small Groups of Students:** Many writing teachers will tell you that there is no better practice for teaching writing than meeting with individual students (or small groups of them) to discuss work-in-progress. While this kind of teaching may be difficult with large classes, when teaching smaller or even middle-sized classes it can be managed by "flipping the classroom" or off-loading content instruction to learning-management systems (LMS). Conferences can be conducted in-person or online, via the LMS.

The brief list of teaching practices above is drawn from years of research on writing pedagogy and from the testimony and experience of many thoughtful college faculty. We provide this list not to be prescriptive, as we understand that the practices we've described above are not appropriate in all classrooms. They are, rather, examples of the kinds of practices faculty across the disciplines might use and adapt to their own purposes.

Who Should Teach WID Courses and What Kind(s) of Training Should They Have?

There is no requirement that RIC faculty who teach WID courses have specialized training in writing pedagogy. Departments are advised to encourage faculty who teach WID classes to participate in the many professional development opportunities offered by the [Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning](#) (FCTL) and the campus [Writing Board](#), including and especially the annual Faculty Development Workshop (January) and the Summer Seminar for Teaching Writing (May).

How Much of Students' Course Grades in WID Classes Should Come from Writing?

Departments/programs are encouraged to discuss this question among themselves and to work to find solutions that make the most sense to them. As a starting point for such conversations, departments/programs should know that, generally speaking, WID classes frequently specify that 30-50% of students' course grades come from grades on informal or formal writing assignments.

Should WID Classes Have Lower Course Caps?

There is no requirement that WID classes be capped at any specific number. Departments should consider how to create environments in which writing can be taught effectively. Here at RIC, the required First-Year Writing course is capped at 20 students. While this may not be possible in WID courses, departments/programs should bear in mind, when identifying WID courses, the added work that assigning, teaching, and evaluating writing effectively entails.

How Will Departments Know if They Are Teaching Writing Effectively in WID Courses?

Departments are encouraged to build regular assessment mechanisms into their WID programs and to gather data on how well their courses are accomplishing their WID goals.

How Many WID Courses Should a Department Have?

There is no specific number of courses that should be designated by departments as WID. A glance as existing WID plans shows that, on average, departments tend to identify 2-4 courses as meeting their WID requirement.

Created By: RIC Writing Board (Spring 2018)