

Writing Program Rationale

The John Jay Writing Program Curriculum guiding principles:

- To serve a writing community largely comprised of English-as-second-language and English-as-second-dialect students who need extended periods of instruction and practice to master composition skills.
- To address the writing needs of a primarily sociologically and scientifically-oriented (mission-related) curriculum, while still providing the rhetorical sensibilities for a well-rounded liberal arts undergraduate.
- To approach writing as a means of inquiry and analytical thinking rather than mere tabulation of information.
- To present a scaffolded sequence of manageable, interrelated tasks.
- To incorporate resources (i.e., Center for English Language Support (for ELL students), Writing Center, and library orientation) to reinforce the activities that occur in the writing classroom
- To emphasize (and consistently reinforces) the habits, techniques, and strategies necessary to compose a college-level piece of writing.
- To introduce students to the cross-disciplinary aspects of writing which teaches them how to apply their writing skills in a variety of academic and rhetorical writing situations.
- To increase students understanding of their own writing ability and learning through reflective practice.

The John Jay writing curriculum scaffolds large, complex, college-level writing projects (such as creative non-fiction, annotated bibliographies, research-based essays and rhetorical analysis) into manageable interrelated tasks. Taken together, the courses act as an introduction to a college writing life, as students complete assignments across a variety of genres, strategies, and forms that provide opportunities to rehearse their composing skills so that they can be adapted to any number of rhetorical situations.

This curriculum works under the belief that a college-level writing program should offer students a sense of coherence and pertinence as they move from one course to another in the sequence, and as they face writing situations in courses outside of the writing program. Furthermore, while in content-based courses faculty may assign a research paper with very little guidance, these composition courses guide students through incremental steps of research and writing. These composing strategies and research devices then help them negotiate the assignments that they encounter in other courses. In this democratizing and familiarizing spirit, curriculum guidelines have been developed for specifically-prescribed assignments in its first-semester course and content guidelines for its second-semester course. The assignments and guidelines ensure that all students receive a relatively consistent experience no matter what instructor they have or in what course section they enroll—what we deem an “equal opportunity composition curriculum.” Additionally, the new curriculum allows instructors to choose the content of their course as not to squelch the pedagogical creativity and expertise they bring to the classroom.

English 101: Exploration & Authorship --The Inquiry-based Research Genre

Our first-semester writing course offers students strategic points of departure for research and writing, relying on their already learned writing sufficiencies as well as identifying their literacy “misbehaviors” which may be counterproductive to their success at college-level writing. The prescribed assignments allow ample opportunities for instructors to identify students’ writing strengths and stumbles. In each course section, instructors choose a theme that they and their students investigate throughout the semester. While instructors are free to choose the theme and readings for their courses, they follow a prescribed series of assignments that each student completes for a final portfolio. Instructors choose the content and readings that interest them in hopes that they will instill this same investment in their students.

Throughout the semester, the instructor presents techniques and strategies that will help students both decipher texts and well as compose their own. The inquiry-based paper (a. k. a., the research paper) is the semester-long endeavor of this course. In lieu of assigning this specifically academic genre three weeks before the end of the semester and saying, “Get ready, get set, go,” instructors assign a mandated sequence of step-by-step writing tasks that collectively inform the essay-composing process as well as motivates students to explore the topic and its formulation into words. In other words by composing a sequence of interrelated assignments, students explore how the contents of written academic papers are invented, organized, researched, articulated, and presented. They then compile these various pieces of writing plus a final culminating inquiry-based project into a portfolio; they earn their grade based on the contents of this writing portfolio.

The list of ever-building assignments that students compose is (a more detailed explanation of these assignments can be seen in Addendum 1):

- A *Descriptive Letter* or piece of *Creative Non-fiction* that addresses the theme of the course.
- A *Proposal* that opens up an investigative question
- An *Annotated Bibliography* that identifies the expert discourse that has been previously studied by other authors and resources
- A *First Draft* that messily lays out students’ ideas about their proposed topic
- A *Working Outline* that designates the organization of their developing paper
- A *Scripted Interview* that asks students to choose two authors they cite in their essay and compose a hypothetical interview. Acting as a participating interviewer, students must pose questions that both ask these expert voices to inform questions about their topic as well as elicit discussion between the two expert authors
- *Redrafts* of their inquiry-based paper that accumulates evidence, organizational strategies, and synthesis of ideas that they have deduced/induced from their work on the various scaffolded assignments.
- A *Cover Letter* written to their second-semester composition instructor which explains their profile as a writer: what were their writing aptitudes like when they entered the first semester course, what they learned/improved about their writing, and what challenges they plan to work on in their upcoming writing course.

This sequence of assignments instructs students in a variety of processes, behaviors, and strategies of writing that intermix both creative and academic styles of writing. Students encounter different modes of description, summary, definition & categorization, persuasion, argument, and self-reflection.. The prescribed assignments of the course make certain that students practice diverse genres: letters, creative non-fiction, précis, scripts, interviewing, and prose.

Additionally, the composing purpose of these assignments helps students explore the thematic topic from different perspectives, discourses, and strategies. The individual pieces of writing may change their thinking, and thus their writing (and vice versa); writing-to-learn and learning-to-write become concurrent and interconnected goals. As they compose new assignments in the sequence, they must return to prior assignments to revise and update them to reflect their current stage of their research-project's evolution. In requiring students to reflect upon their different stages and return to previous pieces of the writing sequence, students gain a recursive sense of the writing process rather than the one-shot attempt which often sends a simplistic, linear message about composing. If composition courses do not stipulate these intensive practices of revision, there are few other places in their coursework where their composing aptitudes will receive such concentrated (re)examination.

English 201: Disciplinary Investigations—Exploring Writing Across the Disciplines

The second semester of freshman writing at John Jay emphasizes writing-across-the-curriculum curriculum, introducing students to the diverging rhetorical approaches of different disciplines. As Susan McLeod reminds us in “Translating Enthusiasm into Curricular Change”:

The first of these areas [where WAC work takes place] is easy to overlook in any WAC effort because it is so close to home. Writing across the curriculum is usually an outreach effort, missionary work in unexplored territory, working with the “other” rather than the “self.” But our introductory composition courses are usually the ones we have the most control over and the ones that most (sometimes all) freshmen have to take. Making freshman composition a WAC course means rethinking our assumptions about its content. (6)

English 201 familiarizes students with introductory lessons about WAC so that they may be aware of disciplinary expectations of writing and avoid composing pitfalls when they encounter them.

Despite research that argues that students can only learn disciplinary writing in the field itself, Linton, Madigan and Johnson support the idea that composition classes should be the venue where students are acquainted with WAC ideas. In “Introducing Students to Disciplinary Genres,” they write:

We suggest that in the process of introducing students to disciplinary genres, the roles of faculty in composition and faculty in the disciplines are distinct but complementary. English faculty can prepare the ground for acquisition of disciplinary style [...] even if “all” that general composition courses can accomplish is to introduce students to formal differences in the writing characteristic of different disciplines, that introduction is nevertheless a crucial stage in their acquisition of disciplinary style [...] and] a focus on the acquisition of disciplinary

style is desirable at the undergraduate level because of its pedagogical role in fostering students' enculturation into their chosen fields. (62-63)

Admittedly, many composition instructors would be hard-pressed to teach the intricacies of most disciplinary writing styles. However, they certainly can expose students to a variety of texts from different fields and have students identify the rhetorical, terminological, evidential, and presentational differences of a variety of disciplinary documents. Rather than producing the harmful effects of misinformed explicit teaching of disciplinary writing, the aforementioned researchers propose that "it makes sense to incorporate explicit attention to writing at [the freshman composition] level" (65).

In English 201, each instructor again chooses the theme of their course and their own readings. Rather than prescribed assignments such as occur in English 101, in this second-semester course, instructors must choose their topic-based readings and writing assignments from a variety of disciplines. By explicitly drawing attention to the preferred genres, research conventions, and specialized organization and formatting of different disciplines, we can help students more easily adapt their writing throughout their educational careers.