

RWS 100: The Rhetoric of Written Argument

RWS 100/101, The Rhetoric of Written Argument, satisfies the composition component of the university requirement in Communication and Critical Thinking. Other courses which satisfy this requirement are Africana Studies 120, Chicana/Chicano Studies 11B, and Linguistics 100.

RWS 100 is an introduction to writing and reading as critical inquiry, focusing on the rhetoric of written argument. The course is designed to help university students successfully undertake writing projects that have the depth and complexity of university-level work. By the end of the course, students should be able to identify and analyze features of written arguments and to write an argument about problems or questions addressed in the course. They should be able to write and revise papers in which they address complex questions effectively, use source materials responsibly, and make sound decisions about structure, cohesion and conventions of correctness.

Instructors usually require 4–5 pages of writing each week during the semester. This writing includes responses to readings, drafts and revisions of papers, and timed writing done during class. The writing leads to a collection of four finished papers. These include one of each of the following types of assignments: (1) argument analysis; (2) gathering information and managing sources; (3) proposing an explanation; (4) reading in new contexts. The final exam may be (5) a reflection or critical analysis of the student's own writing over the course of the semester. (A description of these assignment types follows the course criteria.)

RWS 100 is built on the following premise: when writing provides occasion for inquiry, it helps to improve a writer's understanding of the information being investigated. As John Gage has said, "This is the most significant sense in which writing is a way of learning." Writing, he suggests, "causes one to need to clarify information," to put ideas into relationships, and "to explore reasons for saying what one has decided to say" (730). In this sense, writing and reading are mutually dependent activities. It should not go without saying that good writers are also good readers—of their own and others' texts.

Given these starting points, and because RWS 100 reflects the demands of writing in the university, students are asked to write frequently and on issues of complexity and interest. They are asked to do a significant amount of reading, to explore that reading in writing, and to write about problems and themes that the class is investigating together.

The recommended textbooks for teaching RWS 100 include writing assignments based on complex readings from a variety of disciplines. The books were chosen very carefully not only for these readings, which provide appropriate themes around which to organize the writing course, but also for their assignments, which support the goals of RWS 100 classes. Instructors will notice that the textbooks offer sequences or clusters of activities. These sequences establish relationships among the readings and provide incrementally complex writing tasks which ask students to re-think earlier material in the light of later readings. The books offer instructors the opportunity to

select and focus on particular themes, and they model how to design classroom activities and writing assignments around those themes. In other words, it is not necessary for instructors to invent classroom activities, reading assignments linked to writing, or paper topics *ex nihilo*. The best instructors are careful readers who use and adapt the assignments in the book. Instructors hand out a written copy of the assignment to the class rather than relying on oral instructions.

RWS 100 requires students to write every week, both in class and outside of class, in a variety of ways—making notes, working at difficult ideas, drafting and revising, amplifying, and recasting. Students are encouraged to discover in their reading the claims and reasons of other writers, and to be able to articulate them, as Kenneth Burke says, "without heckling." They are also encouraged to discover what they think and how they have read by putting words on paper, and to see that writing enables them to examine the text of their thinking (Bartholomae and Petrosky 3). They practice informal and exploratory writing as they inquire into issues about which they subsequently write polished analyses and arguments. They practice translating and reformulating what a text is saying and extending its argument by relating it to something familiar. They practice revising their writing in the light of their own re-reading as well as in response to feedback from the instructor and others in the class. One goal of the course is for students to learn that they can write with clarity and force when they take responsibility for relating their own interests to the material explored in the class.

RWS 100 presents writing as an occasion for inquiry and expression: students respond in writing to others' arguments with their own ideas, and investigate how ideas may be related to one another. Focused research tasks are very appropriate to the course. Students may be asked to research specific questions, using the library or other sources, in order to enrich course readings. They learn to determine when and where a source was published, who wrote it, and whether it was reprinted or edited. They learn to examine practices of citation in course readings and to cite, contextualize and comment on sources in their own work. (See Part C, Designing RWS 100 Library Research Assignments.)

The course emphasizes that rhetorical analysis includes issues of organization. It teaches that determining the relationships among ideas and organizing material are some of the decisions that a writer makes. Ordering ideas affects both what one is arguing and how well one communicates it to others. Students are asked to examine and articulate ways that writers have ordered and connected ideas—how writers sometimes add, contrast, subsume, draw conclusions from, separate, and so on—and to see that boiler-plate organization models seldom work well to formulate complex arguments.

In RWS 100, students begin to un-learn the five-paragraph theme and simplified thesis statement, and to understand that writers make decisions about the structures that are effective for their purposes. They see that professional writing often does not contain easily identifiable theses, but rather sets up problems and

solutions, or ways to re-see or call into question common ideas. Instructors may thus ask students to translate complex passages into their own words or to write abstracts of the arguments they read rather than simply to look for a main idea or thesis statement.

RWS 100 stresses the influence of audience and social context on every piece of writing. Instructors teach students to examine the arguments they read for clues about the situation, community and culture in which these texts were written. Instructors encourage students to recognize strategies for appealing to audiences, including what ancient rhetoricians called *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Writing assigned in RWS 100 can be both public—intended for an audience—and private—composed only for the writer. Students are asked to explore how private writing frequently leads to public work and is also valuable as a form of self-expression and inquiry. They begin to learn that the self that a writer represents on the page has been “composed.” Each writer can therefore speak with many voices (depending upon the writing situation), and cross boundaries and roles.

The course teaches that most kinds of public writing require careful attention to conventions of correctness. Students investigate how grammar, syntax, usage, and punctuation serve rhetorical and communicative functions. They begin to learn how language and purpose interact. The course stresses that writers take responsibility for revising and editing their own work, at both discourse and sentence levels.

In confronting grammar questions, “The challenge,” as Margaret Marshall has said, “is to learn to read ‘error’ not as a violation of rules akin to sinning, but as a sign of a newly developing, though not yet controlled, type of literacy” (243). By developing this kind of understanding, instructors can replace a negative, remedial approach with the view that grammar is a rhetorical tool for writers. While RWS 100 is not a grammar course, it is appropriate for instructors to address issues of grammar in the context of students’ writing and reading (see Elise Miller’s article on Grammar Instruction in this guide).

Students are asked to consult a writer’s handbook regularly. The recommended handbook for both RWS 100 and 200 is Ann Raimés’ *Keys for Writers: A Brief Handbook* (Houghton-Mifflin).

Students are asked to take responsibility for their own words, both spoken and written, and to investigate and acknowledge the power of language.

In RWS 100, students read and respond in writing to a variety of texts. The course models reading for different purposes: reading for information; reading for strategies of argumentation; reading for access to new ways of framing issues; reading to inquire into a problem. It emphasizes that mature writers habitually consult dictionaries and reference materials. The course helps students work at and construct an understanding of content by writing about it—in response to prompts that show them what to do. Instructors emphasize that confusion during reading is not a deficiency in the reader, but an opening for examining and questioning content, argumentation, ordering devices, and so on. Because readings take on added significance in relation to one another, assignments are carefully sequenced, and

students are encouraged to re-read previous material, and re-envision their interpretations and analyses. It is the passage of time and the exposure to more ideas and methods that allow a writer to come back to a former topic and re-envision and write about it with new perspective and depth.

RWS teaches that no text is autonomous and that all writers draw upon other texts, including the texts of their own histories and cultures, either directly or indirectly to create new texts. Stated theoretically, this point may seem overly complex. But it is intended to encapsulate the lively and messy process of real writing, recalling that however a piece of writing develops, it is not something utterly new, but a use of and response to language that has come before it. This is true of “creative” writing as well as “academic” and “real-world” writing, distinctions which students and instructors may well call into question.

By the end of the semester, students should begin to understand—through practice—ways in which the arguments of one author may be used as a frame for interpreting and writing about the work of another author or about their own experiences and observations. Because this activity is fundamental to sustained inquiry and research, it forms the bridge between RWS 100 and 200. RWS 200, with its focus on intertextuality, returns to and expands this kind of work. All of the recommended textbooks include assignments which call on students to find relationships among the readings, to extend a writer’s ideas or terms or ways of seeing things to new situations or questions, and to compare the methods of professional writers with their own ways of writing. A glance at the assignment sequences in the textbook *Literacies*, for example, will show this feature of RWS 100.

The department also offers **RWS 101**, which follows the prescribed Rhetoric and Writing Studies 100 curriculum for students who have obtained a score of 146 or better on the EPT and 8 or better on the EPT essay. In addition, students are required to attend eight individual tutoring sessions throughout the semester.

Works Cited

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“Introduction.” *Reading the Lives of Others*. Boston, St. Martin’s, 1995. 1–15.
- Gage, John. “Why Write.” *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries*. Ed. William A. Covino and David A. Joliffe. Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1995. 715–733.
- Marshall, Margaret. “Marking the Unmarked: Reading Student Diversity and Preparing Teachers.” *CCC* 48.2 (May 1997): 213–248.

—*Course descriptions of RWS 100 and 200 were written by the Task Forces on RWS 100 and 200 Curriculum in 1995: Ellen Quandahl, chair. Holly Bauer, Jane DeRoche, Cynthia Dudley, Laura Headley, Ann Johns, Melody Kilcrease, Coco Logan, Virginia Maggio, Elise Miller, Kathleen Nelson, Laurie Okuma, Debbie Poole, Bill Reed, Roberta Stagnaro, Carol Sweedler-Brown.*

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