

ADDENDUM TO WAQ PATHWAYS PLAN REGARDING “W” WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

Current “W” Writing Intensive Requirements

Our W courses are the place where we extend our writing curriculum beyond the freshman year required course ENG 110. Students take three W courses throughout their career, and these courses also satisfy other Perspectives requirements. In Spring 2012 there were roughly 300 sections of W courses offered by 35 departments. All W courses must fulfill the following four requirements:

- 1) 10-15 pages of evaluated writing in three or more assignments (either separate papers or one term paper done in stages) so that students have the opportunity to develop and improve.
- 2) Attention to writing in class, in one or more of the following possible forms:
 - discussion of papers before they are written and after they are returned.
 - reading aloud of successful papers or models.
 - discussion of the rhetorical strategies or writerly qualities of course readings.
 - the occasional use of informal, ungraded writing to stimulate class discussion
 - peer editing: opportunities for students to give each other feedback on first drafts.
 - discussion of goals for student writing and evaluation criteria.
- 3) Exams (if given) that include essay questions.
- 4) Maximum class-size of 25 students.

Strengths of Current W System

- The limited class size allows instructors to attend to matters of writing during class time (the second requirement listed above).
- Transfer students, regardless of number of previous “Writing Intensive” credits, must take one W course in residency. This shows a commitment to a coherent writing curriculum at Queens.
- It is attractive for departments to offer 100- or 200-level W courses that help introduce students to the major or discipline.
- Senior seminars or capstone courses can make use of the W requirement to ensure their graduating majors are continuing to practice disciplinary writing before they graduate.

Weaknesses of Current W System

- Courses can be offered as “always W” or “sometimes W,” resulting in student confusion over the requirement. Likewise, faculty often exceed the minimal W requirements in non-W courses. We do not want the W requirement to be perceived as “checking off boxes.”
- There is a clutter of W courses that weakens the requirement.
- Many majors do not offer W courses or have difficulty offering W courses. This is either because of staffing issues related to the smaller class size or because of perceptions that content courses don’t have “room” for class time devoted to writing (the second requirement listed above).

- While the Writing Intensive Subcommittee of the Academic Senate (WISC) is responsible for approving new W courses, they have less ability to oversee the current W inventory or to ensure that W courses meet the requirements and aims of the program.
- Without an ongoing inventory and evaluation of the current W courses, it is difficult for WaQ to provide appropriate faculty or course development to these courses.

Options for “W” Courses under Pathways

The CUNY-mandated implementation of Pathways has raised significant problems for Queens College. We hope that despite the unwanted new requirements, we can find ways to strengthen the writing curriculum at Queens College within the new framework. English Composition I and English Composition II (discussed in the above document) are the minimal CUNY-wide requirements; our task is to keep those requirements from overshadowing our larger writing curriculum, in particular the already established W courses at Queens College.

However we adapt the current W courses to Pathways, we should satisfy these three aims:

- Present a clear and uncomplicated curriculum to current and prospective students.
- Create a mechanism for better oversight and coherence within the writing curriculum.
- Integrate writing, quantitative, and oral skills more deeply into the larger curriculum.

We see three possible options for how to proceed: 1) Do away with a specific Writing Intensive requirement, 2) Use the “overlay” allowance to recreate our current W courses under Pathways, 3) Replace the W system with a more efficient model that achieves our goals for student writing.

1) Do away with a specific W requirement

This would be disastrous from the point of view of a coherent writing curriculum. While there may be problems with the current W courses, they do provide a clear framework for students and faculty to discuss how writing is integral to a student’s general education regardless of major. Without a specific W requirement, departments or divisions would also have less incentive to develop and offer discipline-specific writing courses; this would have an especially detrimental effect on departments that offer few or no W courses but have a large number of students (such as Psychology or the Natural Sciences). Also, while writing would ideally be integrated into as many classes as possible, it is pedagogically important that classes be specifically labeled as “writing intensive” since the writing process is not a natural given for any course or topic. Last, without a specific writing requirement, Queens College will be in the minority in relation to the competitive colleges in our tier that do have designated writing intensive programs.

2) Use the W overlay

The initial plan presented by the Pathways subcommittee was to use a W “overlay,” whereby students would continue to take three W courses, where the required English Composition II would count as the first of those. This plan has the advantage of keeping the writing requirement essentially the same as it is now--four writing intensive courses spread out over a student’s college career. Furthermore, since these W overlay courses must also satisfy other Pathways requirements, they could be used towards the learning outcome of the Flexible Common Core: “to produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions.”

Last, as many departments will likely revise their current 100- or 200-level W courses in order to offer them as English Composition II, the W overlay option could provide a simplified way for departments to restructure their course offerings toward the writing requirement.

3) Replace the W system

Rather than continue to use the W designation, which bears little relation to students' progress towards degree, we might more deliberately reorganize the writing curriculum around students' progress, so that they experience the writing process in intentional stages throughout their careers. Since Pathways mandates much of a student's "timing" through the early part of their degree, a logical place to focus on a revised writing requirement is near the end of the Flexible Core, during a student's second and third year. Focusing our W classes on those years would also allow us to make more visible connections between the work they did in EC I and EC II, and to make more targeted efforts at retention in the sophomore and junior years, after students have completed Freshman Year Learning Communities.

Some specific Pathways requirements that pose difficulties to this idea are:

- Any local writing intensive course must also fulfill a Pathway requirement.
- The Flexible Core is likely to be completed in the sophomore year.
- Pathways courses are restricted to three contact hours/credit hours.
- Most Pathways courses seem likely to be jumbo courses, which cannot support writing instruction. Any writing intensive course would need to have at maximum 25 students.
- All Flexible Core courses must meet the following three learning outcomes. A student will: (1) Gather, interpret, and assess information from a variety of sources and points of view, (2) Evaluate evidence and arguments critically or analytically, and (3) Produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions.

Working within these restrictions, however, leaves the possibility for a 3-credit **Sophomore Seminar** that provides a bridge between EC I/EC II and either a writing-intensive capstone major course or a course that is part of the College Option (for students not completing majors with writing-intensive capstone courses). The Writing Curriculum at Queens would thus consist of four 3-credit courses:

- **English Composition I:** an introduction to evaluating and producing academic argument through writing, taught through the study of a particular topic in the liberal arts (a revised version of our current ENG 110).
- **English Composition II:** an introduction to evaluation and analysis of evidence in a particular discipline through analysis of that discipline's written production of knowledge (a disciplinary writing class taught by a range of departments/divisions).
- **Sophomore Seminar:** a content-driven general education course that provides a focused, writing-intensive exploration of disciplinary writing methods in a seminar format (a discipline-focused class that uses writing to assess, evaluate, and produce arguments). Either a writing intensive **Capstone course** in a student's major (similar to our current W courses) or a **College Option** course (perhaps satisfying the Literature requirement).

What a Sophomore Seminar on “Writing in the Disciplines” would look like:

A **Sophomore Seminar** would consolidate current W offerings and be the logical place for departments/divisions to offer a revision of their unused W courses. This course might also be used as a gateway course or a prerequisite to a major. As with EC II, a Sophomore Seminar could be offered by either departments or divisions, so that we ensure the writing curriculum is comprehensively woven throughout the college. What distinguishes a Sophomore Seminar from EC II is that while EC II is a writing-driven course that analyzes the written conventions of a particular discipline, the Sophomore Seminar is a content-driven course that investigates a discipline through writing. In other words, in EC I and EC II the topic or discipline is a means to introduce students to the rhetorical and writerly aspects of disciplinary knowledge, while in the Sophomore Seminar students extend their practice with writing towards a focused examination of how knowledge is assessed, analyzed, and produced in a particular discipline.

Emphasizing the **seminar format** is crucial to this course’s success. Faculty should be chosen who are eager to engage with their students’ writing in a small class format. Regular contact and interaction between students and faculty should be built into the course, whether this takes the form of extracurricular activities, events, workshops, conferences, or presentations. While having a coherent framework, each Sophomore Seminar might also be taught as a “variable topic,” with the aim of encouraging faculty to share with students their own disciplinary writing in progress.

Pathways requires that we offer courses toward the Flexible Core irrespective of our own local writing requirement; thus we would need to mount large courses to satisfy the Flexible Core as well as smaller courses, capped at 25 students, that can serve as our Sophomore Seminar local writing requirement. Pathways provide five areas for the Flexible Core: World Cultures and Global Issues, U.S. Experience in its Diversity, Creative Expression, Individual and Society, and Scientific World. We could easily develop a number of seminars in these areas, most simply by creating more focused, writing-intensive “variable topics” sections of the larger courses.

Along with the current W requirements and Flexible Core outcomes, requirements of a Sophomore Seminar should include the following:

- Study models of good writing in the discipline
- Develop and consistently use a discipline-specific vocabulary about writing
- Conference with faculty
- Reflect on their writing progress as they revise their work
- Make use of low-stakes pre-writing techniques in addition to formal assignments
- Develop ideas and language through a staged process of drafting and revision
- Conduct research and evaluate and synthesize results
- Gain an awareness of audience and use language appropriate to the discipline
- Engage in peer critique by workshopping drafts
- Identify audience and orient readers accordingly
- Articulate ideas within disciplinary conversations or debates
- Develop discipline-specific research methods and information literacy
- Integrate appropriate visual, graphic, or numerical information
- Use appropriate citation conventions and styles