

## **A Proposal for English Composition Under Pathways**

From First Year Writing and Writing at Queens

### **Background: Topic-Based English 110s and FYI**

The new curricula for English 110 are designed to integrate writing instruction with the General Education curriculum. Now, **each section of English 110 focuses on a topic** of broad intellectual significance (e.g., Reading Film; The Planet; Writing Our Economy), which enables students to practice the conventions of scholarly argument in a context that is meaningful to them.

To ensure that students have the evidence they need to make those arguments, **each section of English 110 is scheduled in a “learning community” with a thematically related course in the General Education curriculum** (e.g., Media Studies 143; MNS 113; Political Science 101). Students who register for their first semester at Queens select a thematic Community (e.g., “Reading Film”; How Scientists See the World”; “The Economics and Politics of Change”) that includes a topic-based section of English 110 and a related a course that satisfies a General Education requirement. They travel through those two courses as a cohort through the Freshman Year Initiative (FYI).

Instructors who teach English 110 attend regular workshops with the Directors of First Year Writing to put the insights of recent writing pedagogy to work in our classrooms. Building on that scholarship, **instructors use class time to walk students through the processes that more experienced writers take for granted**—selecting a quotation from a course reading, for example, and quoting that source accurately for use in service of an argument.

The question for First Year Writing is: **How can we continue the work we have begun to integrate writing instruction with General Education in the era of Pathways?**

### **Assessment: The Progress So Far Tells Us What To Do Next**

The thematically linked Communities have been largely successful, and the topic-based curriculum is in use in virtually every section of English 110. This semester, **faculty in First Year Writing are revising all of the topic-based syllabi to create an archive** that helps the adjuncts and graduate students who teach most sections of English 110 maintain unswervingly high standards of writing instruction. Those syllabi were developed through intensive workshops that draw on recent scholarship in writing pedagogy, and we are revising them to maximize their strengths for students and instructors to come.

We can name **the conditions under which the “learning communities” work best**. Under these conditions, students deploy the discipline-specific evidence that they gain in their Gen Ed course to formulate strong arguments in English 110, which teaches them the scholarly conventions they need to succeed in Gen Ed.

This kind of coherence is most likely when **the two courses are of roughly equal size**, which enables faculty to work together to make the intersections between their courses visible to the students they share. When the General Education course has a much larger enrollment than the section of English 110 (which is capped at 20), the English course risks functioning like a discussion session for the General Education course, which undermines the learning goals of both courses.

The Communities also work best when **the themes that define them are clear and interesting to the students who choose them**. In less successful cases, incoming students have not fully understood how the Communities work, so they have selected their sections of English 110 by the criterion of the schedule, ignoring the topic as a deciding factor.

The links between the two courses also depends upon **the full engagement of faculty members in Gen Ed and English, which means that the topics should grow out of genuine intellectual work**, not be imposed administratively or one-sidedly. This problem is particularly insoluble for English faculty, since most instructors of English 110 are pursuing scholarly careers in literary study, so few choose to teach writing courses on the topics that are farthest from the humanities (e.g., “The Planet” and “Evolution”). Consequently, some have been compelled to teach those topics, which are well represented in Gen Ed and the Common Core.

### **The Challenges of Converting ENG 110 to English Composition 1**

As English 110 becomes English Composition 1, **its credit hours are reduced from three hours per week to four**. Consequently, students will have less time to do the workshops that are. Despite that reduction, the English Department strives to protect the most essential features of the course, and, primarily, to continue to teach our students how to develop a scholarly arguments through appropriate reference to sources that vary from historical documents to empirical data.

### **We foresee challenges to this in four primary categories:**

**Time:** The loss of 25% of English 110’s credit hours compels First Year Writing to abridge the in-class workshops that are essential to our pedagogy. We plan to focus the existing curricula tightly around the writing lessons that students won’t learn in other classes (e.g., proper citation of sources; organization of arguments; the development of arguable theses), and we trust that students will still learn these lessons summarily, but they won’t get the practice and reinforcement they need.

**Class Size:** It seems inevitable that more General Education courses will become “jumbo” courses as part of the Common Core or College Option, which will make it difficult or impossible to schedule 20-student sections of EC 1 with similarly proportioned courses in other disciplines. That would also reduce the total number of Communities from the seventeen that we had in Fall 2011 to between five and ten, as the freshman class takes more jumbo-courses.

**Faculty Autonomy:** If we link EC 1 courses with larger courses through the FCC or College Option, more English faculty will be compelled to teach topics that are not of their design or choice. To teach a freshman class that has five Communities rather than seventeen, the number of topics that English faculty can opt to teach diminishes accordingly. Moreover, the instructors of those five General Education courses become less able to work collaboratively with each English instructor, rendering each link inherently less flexible by virtue of the class size.

**Faculty Compensation:** The part-time faculty who teach English 110 will see their salaries reduced by 25% as the course becomes EC 1, so they will need to teach more classes to earn the same pay. Each course will undoubtedly receive a reduced quantity of attention from its instructor.

### **We Might Use English Composition II to Address These Challenges**

While First Year Writing loses a credit hour of ENG 110, the College gains three credit hours of writing instruction in EC II. To adjust our curriculum accordingly, **we propose moving some of the interdisciplinary work that students currently do in ENG 110 from EC 1 to EC 2.** The faculty who teach EC 1 will still teach writing instruction around a topic that highlights disciplinary, but the course need not be linked thematically with a Gen Ed course, and, therefore, the instructor need not teach a designated topic. Using any of the topics in First Year Writing's archive, the instructor would prepare students for the more discipline-specific writing instruction they receive in EC 2.

**EC 1 might be linked in a learning community** with one or more courses in the FCC or College Option **through the First Year Initiative, but the thematic links between the courses should not remain a priority for scheduling.** Any EC 1 topic might be linked with any FCC/College Option course, and the students would travel as a cohort through that part of their schedule. Faculty members would be encouraged but not obligated to note the intersections among their courses in a curricular way, trusting that students will continue to practice writing across the curriculum in their second semester. They would also be encouraged but not obligated to participate in the Community through FYI as they currently do, and they would receive a stipend for that optional participation.

### **How to Maintain Continuity and Rigor in EC 1 and EC 2**

**The success of this proposal depends, however, on the continuity and rigor of the writing instruction that students receive in EC 1 and EC 2,** and also in the writing-intensive courses that are crucial to their growth as writers over the course of their scholarly careers. To make that guarantee, we propose that:

- **Every section of EC 1 will be organized around a topic,** as it is now, but the instructor may choose freely from the archive of topics maintained by First Year Writing.

- **Every EC2 course will be developed through workshops run by Writing at Queens**, which will help faculty across the disciplines teach students how to use the conventions of scholarly writing in their field.

-**First Year Writing and Writing at Queens will collaborate to ensure that EC 2 builds on EC 1.** For example, we will assemble a handbook that guides faculty across the disciplines to the best practices of writing pedagogy, with examples and illustrations that are unconfined to the humanities.