Assessing Writing and Research Across Upper Division English Courses

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The Program Learning Outcomes: Writing Studies and Research.

The **Writing Studies** PLO:

- Students will understand writing processes and use their understanding of rhetorical concepts to produce effective writing.
- Students will be familiar with multiple literacies and discourses, recognizing the various ways in which people communicate depending on different rhetorical and sociocultural contexts.

The **Research** PLO:

- Students will understand processes of inquiry and be able to locate and appropriately reference and evaluate scholarly sources while practicing ethical reasoning.
- Students will be able to effectively synthesize this research into their analysis and writing.

Assessment Measures and Data Set

- Focused on **course syllabi and a signature writing assignment with a research component** from five of the designated Upper Division, General Education (GE) courses in the English Department, which were taught during the academic years: 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.
  - ENGL 3810 - Literary Explorations of Racism and Justice (also listed as PAS 3810)
  - ENGL 3825 - Psychology in Fairy Tales and Fantasy Literature
  - ENGL 3830 - Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture (also listed as TVF 3830)
  - ENGL 3850 - Violence, Ethics and Literature
  - ENGL 3855 - Crimes, Scenes, Interpretations: Literature and the Law

Assessment Measures and Data Set

- Collected **syllabi** (from the English department repository and voluntary submission of the documents by the faculty) of **10 different sections** that matched our criteria.
  - The syllabi provided us with the opportunity to understand the research and writing focus in all these classes.
- Received **students' assignments** from only five sections of only three of these courses.
  - Three sections of ENGL 3830 – Gender & Sexuality in Popular Culture;
  - One section of ENGL 3825 – Psychology in Fairy Tales & Fantasy Literature;
  - One section of ENG 3855 – Crimes, Scenes, Interpretations: Literature and the Law.
- Decided to review **only one signature assignment from each of these sections,** and when materials were available, to review up to five randomly selected assignments for scoring.
- **This process resulted in a review of 21 student papers completed in five sections of ENGL 3830, ENGL 3825, and ENGL 3855.**

Rubric to Evaluate Syllabi

	Intensive 4	Significant 3	Moderate 2	Not Intensive 1
Writing studies	The course is writing intensive, requiring students to write at least 5,000 words, of which at least 2,500 words are polished and revised based on feedback in genres appropriate to the discipline.	The course has a significant writing component, requiring students to write between 3,000 – 4,000 words, at least some of which are polished and revised based on feedback in genres appropriate to the discipline.	The course has a moderate writing component, requiring students to write 1,000-2,000 words, including some formal academic writing.	The course does not incorporate any formal academic writing.
Research	The course is research heavy accounting for at least 50% of the class grade, requiring students to engage in research activities by utilizing scholarly sources to write about disciplinary topics relevant to the class	The course significantly engages students in research activities, accounting for 25-50% of the class grade, requiring students to engage in research activities by utilizing scholarly sources to write about disciplinary topics relevant to the class	The course moderately engages students in research activities, accounting for up to 25% of the class grade, requiring students to engage in research activities by utilizing scholarly sources to write about disciplinary topics relevant to the class.	The course minimally engages students with research or has no research component.

Rubric to Evaluate the Writing Studies PLO

	Capstone 4	Milestones 3	Benchmark 2	Emerging 1
Context of and purpose for writing ***Includes considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s).***	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.	Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context).	Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions).	Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience).
Content Development	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work.	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some parts of the work.

Rubric to Evaluate the Writing Studies PLO

	Capstone 4	Milestones 3	Benchmark 2	Emerging 1
Genre and disciplinary conventions ***Formal and informal rules inherent in the expectations for writing in particular forms and/or academic fields (please see glossary).***	Demonstrates detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task (s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices.	Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s), including organization, content, presentation, and stylistic choices.	Follows expectations appropriate to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) for basic organization, content, and presentation.	Attempts to use a consistent system for basic organization and presentation.
Control of syntax and mechanics	Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free.	Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language has few errors.	Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors.	Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage.

Rubric to Evaluate the Research PLO

	Capstone 4	Milestones 3	Benchmark 2	Emerging 1
Citing scholarly sources	The paper cites scholarly sources consistently in a manner (e.g., MLA and APA) appropriate to the discipline. (e.g., placing quotation marks around quoted material; using a nuanced reporting verb to introduce relatively long quotes; identifying the author and/or article/chapter/book title; using in-text or parenthetical citations; and preparing a references page at the end of the document)	The paper cites scholarly sources but may lack some consistency in following a style appropriate to the discipline. Proficiency in specific practices (e.g., placing quotation marks around quoted material; using a nuanced reporting verb to introduce relatively long quotes; identifying the author and/or article/chapter/book title; using in-text or parenthetical citations; and preparing a references page at the end of the document) is just enough.	The paper uses scholarly sources but does not consistently follow the disciplinary conventions or citation style. The style may not be recognizable.	The paper minimally cites scholarly sources or cites none. The citation style (if there is any) is not recognizable. The references page might be missing.
Integration of scholarly sources	The paper shows **excellent** integration of scholarly sources into analysis and writing. Examples: Using quotes, summarizing, and paraphrasing as appropriate; integrating the quotes into their own sentences; Using sources that are relevant to the argument/s and builds/advances the argument/s.	The paper shows integration of scholarly sources into analysis and writing. There could be some inconsistency in the following practices: Using quotes, summarizing, and paraphrasing as appropriate; integrating the quotes into their own sentences; Using sources that are relevant to the argument/s and builds/advances the argument/s.	The paper may show little to no integration of scholarly sources into analysis and writing. Examples: may show long quotes. Some quotes might be dropped quotes; quoted materials lack contextualization.	The paper does not cite any scholarly sources to write the paper.

Assessment Findings:
Writing Studies and Research Focus in Course Syllabi

- A total of 10 syllabi for the 38XX courses that were taught during 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years were collected and evaluated.
- The mean score for the Writing Studies component in the syllabi studied is **1.70**, placing the courses on a rather lower end of a writing intensive scale.
- The mean score for the Research component in the syllabi studied is **1.60**, again placing the courses on a rather lower end of a research heaviness scale.

Assessment Findings:
Students' Engagement with the Writing Studies PLO

- An evaluation of the student assignments shows that in four categories of Writing Studies performance indicators, the mean scores (on a scale of 4.00) are:
  - 2.90 (for context of and purpose for writing);
  - 2.95 (for content development);
  - 2.61 (genre and disciplinary conventions); and
  - 2.66 (control of syntax and mechanics).
- The results leave all scores here closer to 3.00, showing the students almost achieved the **"milestones"** for writing performance in these classes.

Assessment Findings:
Students' Engagement with the Research PLO

- Evaluations of the student assignments also show that in two categories of research performance indicators, **the mean scores** (on a scale of 4.00) were
  - 1.52 (for citing scholarly sources)
  - 1.61 (for integration of scholarly sources).
  - Roughly midway between 1 and 2, showing the students' performance in research are either still "emerging" or closer to the "benchmark" in these classes.
- **The mode** of these data points is 1, which refers to the "emerging" ability of most of the students in citing and incorporating research into their writing in a manner appropriate to the discipline.

Summary of the Findings and Interpretations

- Overall, this assessment initiative paints **a complex picture** of how our instructors and students engaged with the Writing Studies and the Research PLOs in 38XX level Upper Division GE classes in English during 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years .
- An evaluation of the course syllabi suggests that **these courses are neither writing intensive nor research heavy**.
- But evaluations of the student assignments in these courses indicate that **our students are advancing towards the "milestones" in all four areas of the Writing Studies PLO.**
- However, our findings also suggest that students' assignments are not showing significant engagement with the Research PLO.

Recommendations and Future Directions

1. Develop formal mechanisms that will facilitate smooth sharing of course plans and student assignments so that future assessment project have more substantial size of data to work with.
2. Articulate the Writing Studies and the Research PLOs more explicitly in course plans to align the course with the English Department's overall goals and PLOs. Several of the syllabi we studied displayed this need.
3. Consider increasing the incorporation of scholarly, peer-reviewed sources into their assignment design.
4. Provide structured instruction and targeted feedback on how to cite and integrate scholarly sources into their writing to build and advance their argument.

Recommendations

1. Compile a repository of rubrics from the past assessment projects to inform their future assessment initiatives.
2. Given that the Upper Division GE classes in English serve a lot more students beyond the English majors and that the courses are often cross-listed and taught by faculty from other departments, the English department needs to have a conversation about whether we would like to have a common set of expectations or develop some guidelines to better serve diverse audience/majors.
3. Acknowledge that some of the courses are writing intensive while others are not. The varying scores in our results reflect that orientation. The Department of English needs to have a conversation about whether we will teach these classes as writing and/or research intensive.