

# Chapter 5. People, Programs, and Practices: A Grid-Based Approach to Designing and Supporting Online Writing Curriculum

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**Abstract:** Negotiating instructor autonomy, course consistency in student experiences and programmatic outcomes, and best practices for both instructional design and writing pedagogy can prove challenging in face-to-face classes—and these challenges are compounded in online writing instruction environments. In this chapter, we describe our strategic approach to balancing people, programs, and practices: a grid-based approach to scaffolding and customizing assignment sequences for online writing instruction at a large state research university. We share a  $3 \times 3$  grid for structuring the learning progression in a 16-week online first-year writing course. By tracing the history of this grid's development, we provide insight into the collaboration between writing instructors, program administrators, and curriculum designers, demonstrating how educational stakeholders are balanced in the design of online writing curriculum. Providing the theory and best practices behind the design of this grid approach builds a model for other programs to adapt to their own institutional and pedagogical contexts. We then describe the grid's application for assessment and professional development in our writing program, explaining the benefits this approach provides for instructors and administrators. We conclude by suggesting how writing program administra-

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tors could modify the grid approach to fit their own curricula—in two-course sequences or themed syllabus approaches, for example—affording transfer of these practices across institutional and programmatic contexts.

Keywords: adaptable course shells, content management, curriculum design, flexible pedagogy, professional development, scaffolding, templates

Balancing instructor autonomy and curricular standardization has long been a concern for writing programs (Carter-Tod, 2007). The demands of online writing instruction mean student success and instructor professional development must simultaneously be considered as well (Stewart et al., 2016). In this article, we share an approach to curriculum design created and led by a team of instructors from Introductory Composition at Purdue (ICaP) that balances these concerns and implements the PARS (personal, accessible, responsive, strategic) best practices for online writing instruction (OWI). Using an adaptable assignment sequence, visualized in a  $3 \times 3$  grid, has helped online instructors approach OWI using the PARS elements of responsiveness and strategy and has made the standardized curriculum more accessible for both instructors and students. We present the assignment grid, trace its history, describe its applications, and suggest how other programs can develop their own variations modified for their institutional and programmatic contexts.<sup>2</sup>

## Context for Course Development

ICaP is a unit of Purdue University's Department of English, directed by a professor in rhetoric and composition, with a full-time assistant director and a large team of graduate research assistants actively involved in program administration. Until recently, instructional staff were primarily English graduate students, teaching a 1:1 load of our unique four-credit course, English 106. Most undergraduates take only 106 or an equivalent; Purdue has no WAC or WID program, and only one writing course in the general education core.

Multiple changes that began in fall 2016 prompted the development of an online version of English 106: a well-publicized restructuring in the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) that introduced a competing class based on reading "great books," at the same time that CLA radically reduced the size of the Graduate Program in English (Cassuto, 2019); the resultant increase in adjunct and one-year in-

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2. The authors would like to thank instructional designer Debbie Runshe (Purdue Teaching and Learning Technologies) for her guidance and mentoring throughout the course design and assessment process. Thanks are also due to Rachel Atherton (who helped shape the form of the course when she taught one of the first sections in fall 2017 with Allegra and Libby), and Ola Swatek (who developed the course with Allegra in summer 2017). The design of ENGL 106-DIST was supported by the Department of English, the College of Liberal Arts, and Digital Education at Purdue University.

structors teaching for ICaP; and undergraduate enrollment rising so quickly that scheduling classrooms became difficult. The rapidly changing contexts of writing instruction underscored the need for flexible approaches that would respond to changing expectations, afford strategic partnerships, and create a curriculum highly accessible to both ICaP instructors and students. Thus, the then-director of ICaP (Bradley) met with Purdue's Digital Education division to propose building a fully online version of ENGL 106. He convened a team of graduate student research assistants to design a course template for piloting in fall 2017.

### Developing the 3 × 3 Grid

Initially, the graduate student online course developers (Allegra and Ola) created a single master course template, with help from an instructional designer (Debbie) and the writing program administrator (Bradley). They knew that they wanted to give instructors options to assign different projects in the future—to be responsive to the diverse needs and teaching strengths of the various instructors in the introductory composition program, which included graduate teaching assistants from a variety of programs (M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D.), adjunct instructors, continuing lecturers, and tenure-line and tenured faculty. So before designing the grid, online course developer Allegra mapped a learning progression for the first version of ENGL 106-DIST, based on a digital rhetorics theme. This learning progression included objectives for each of the three major course projects, broad themes that projects could fall under, and a preliminary list of alternative assignments that could be pursued after the first course template was tested. (See Figure 5.1, Learning Progression.)

This initial course design and learning progression moved students along a continuum of writing skills and audiences: from observing and reflecting upon their own experiences, to researching and analyzing a concept or phenomenon for a select group of like-minded readers, to finally remixing and presenting that research for an unfamiliar audience. After applying this progression and testing its fit with both the instructors and students of ICaP, the objectives have been revised into the form that the grid takes now. (See Table 5.1, Assignment Grid.)

The grid provides three units, each with three project options for instructors to choose from. These projects were shaped over time in response to feedback from instructors, fixing the three-assignment approach both for standard 16-week semesters, as well as for shortened eight-week terms (in summer and the first and second halves of full semesters). The team experimented with four-unit sequences because they were common across ICaP already, but quickly came to a consensus that a three-unit grid with more granular scaffolding was better for both instructors and students. These three units have changed slightly since the initial course design, to match programmatic outcomes and ensure consistency of objectives across sections of 106:

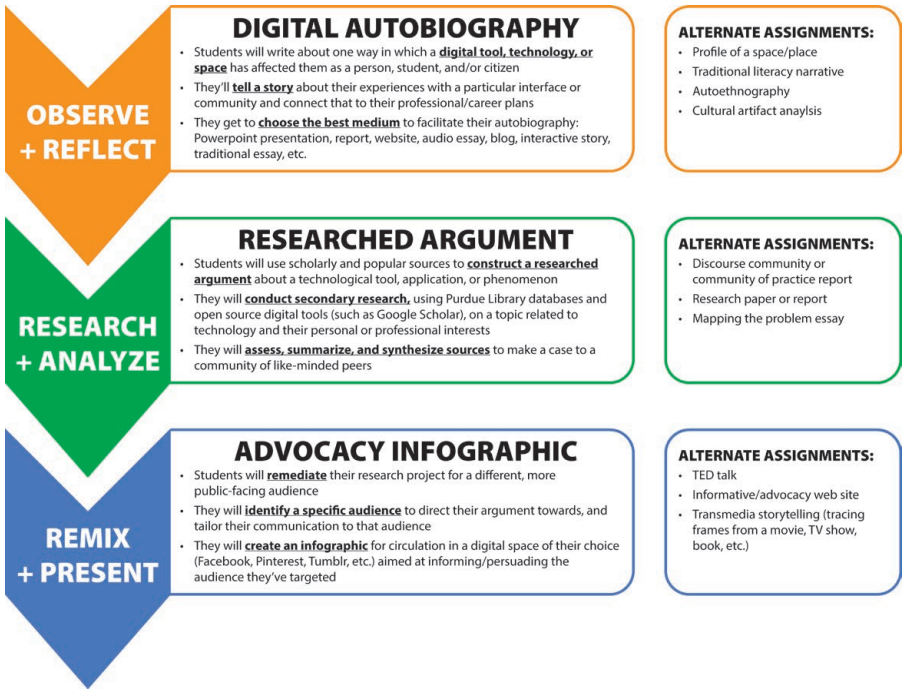


Figure 5.1. Learning progression for ENGL 106-DIST, showing the original design later expanded into the 3 × 3 grid.

These alterations to the learning progression foreground rhetorical thinking across all assignments, demonstrating ICaP’s commitment to rhetorical education as a foundation of all first-year writing courses—and, indeed, of all *writing*. This ensures that the work in ENGL 106 courses—regardless of theme or approach—is grounded in the theory and research of rhetoric and writing studies, and builds a similar toolkit for students across sections.

Table 5.1. Assignment grid

ENGL 106-DIST Assignment Grid			
Instructor chooses one project from each row.			
Unit	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Unit 1: Rhetorical Thinking + Analysis	Digital Interface Analysis	Rhetorical Analysis	Scholarly Article Analysis
Unit 2: Research + Argument	Primary Research Report	Mapping the Problem Essay (Lit Review)	Researched Argument
Unit 3: Remediation + Multimodal Rhetoric	Podcast	TED Talk	Research Poster or Infographic
Unit 4: Reflection	Portfolio		

**Table 5.2. Changes in grid units over time**

Version 1	Version 2	Rationale
Observe and reflect	Rhetorical thinking and analysis	Match ICaP's first learning outcome, "demonstrate rhetorical awareness of diverse audiences, situations, and scenarios"
Research and analyze	Research and argument	Respond to instructor feedback about the program's fifth learning outcome, "perform research and evaluate sources to support claims"
Remix and present	Remediation and multimodal rhetoric	Align strategically with disciplinary research on remediation (Davis et al., 2010; DePalma, 2015; Fraiberg, 2010; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Shipka, 2005); highlight the multiple modes that students practice throughout the course

The grid provides three assignment options for each of these three units: some more "traditional" in nature, like a primary research report or analysis of a scholarly article; while others engage more deeply with concepts of digital rhetoric and user experience (UX), like a digital interface analysis that asks students to break down components of the audience and purpose for a technology, or a podcast that presents their research project. These options support instructors by giving them a choice: a new instructor can stick with a familiar genre to test the waters of online teaching, or an experienced lecturer who's getting bored with reading the same old papers can try out a new assignment to add to their repertoire.

ICaP also uses a common assignment across all sections, regardless of theme or modality (face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online), for the purpose of standardizing programmatic assessment. All students assemble a final portfolio of their work, as well as an overall course reflection, for submission at the end of the semester. This final portfolio serves as a fourth unit to the grid, highlighting students' reflective work and metacognition about their growth and skill development over the course of the semester (Jenson, 2011; Shipka, 2011; VanKooten, 2016; Yancey, 1998). The incorporation of the portfolio was also a response to instructor wishes for flexibility, in that it can be used with any assignment and the approach to reflection can be varied.

## People: How the Grid Supports Instructors and Students

While the assignment grid itself gives instructors pedagogical autonomy over course design within the bounds of best practices for OWI, structuring the grid into units ensures course objectives are being met. Each unit and its associated assignments target two course outcomes specifically as unit objectives. These objectives remain the same, regardless of which assignment from the grid is selected for each unit. Units and assignments are taught sequentially, maintaining a strict learning progression that scaffolds student learning consistently. That is, students always receive grounding in rhetorical thinking and analysis before moving on to

research and argumentation, advancing to remediation and multimodal composing in the third unit. While instructors may emphasize different aspects of rhetorical thinking, research, or multimodality according to the assignments they choose, student learning is scaffolded according to the overarching unit structure.

There are also programmatic benefits to the scaffolding provided by a unit-framed grid structure. If substitutes must be found for an online course, experienced online instructors will be able to more easily situate themselves in another instructor's course, thanks to the linear progression established by the unit structure. In addition, maintaining and revising course materials is more manageable when curriculum developers can work on each unit in turn, rather than considering each assignment in the grid independently. For example, a single rubric is managed for each unit, rather than for each individual assignment.

Much of online writing instruction scholarship speaks of student-users, and the need to carefully design and scaffold material for student accessibility and success. The grid approach we present here establishes a consistent rhetorical trajectory across all of the courses in the program, ensuring the achievement of established learning outcomes and a consistent learning experience for students across all sections of first-year writing. Further, the grid approach takes into account *instructor*-users, and how instructor experience and course design impacts success from their perspectives alongside those of the students.

The grid approach also embeds the work of instructional designers in curriculum, which helps manage the administrative workload. This strategic implementation in design and administration focuses primarily on instructor support and professional development, extending the PARS emphasis on enhancing the student experience in OWI through strategic administration (Borgman & McArdle, 2019). The use of a "grid approach" in online first-year writing fits with existing research that suggests template courses are a best practice for OWI (Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017), but that writing instruction should be "personal" (Borgman & McArdle, 2019). A grid allows some standardization across a writing program—as well as the ability to work within a pre-established template for instructors who are new to teaching online—while also giving all instructors flexibility to choose and customize. This approach not only provides a consistent and well-implemented curriculum but also helps writing program administrators ethically and sustainably support instructors, providing "reasonable control over their own content and/or techniques" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013), and facilitating the PARS element of access through access to professional development. This flexibility supports a variety of instructors, providing space to customize based on different needs while preserving consistency across program curricula.

Context is important for designing content and approaches in OWI development (Blythe, 2001; Sullivan & Porter, 1997), but context extends beyond students and must be considered from programmatic and institutional perspectives as well. The strategic development of grid modules that can be mixed and matched according to instructors' strengths and interests, as well as accompanying flexible rubrics

that can apply to multiple different projects that satisfy the same learning goals, has been developed with inexperienced graduate students and contingent faculty who teach multiple sections in mind (Bourelle, 2016). Instead of having to figure it out on the fly when creating an online writing course (OWC) from scratch, instructors can choose ready-made items from the grid, reducing their workload so they can instead focus on establishing a teacherly presence in their online class and providing valuable feedback to students. This strategic intervention into course design allows instructors to select assignments they are comfortable with, then be supported with templates and other materials designed in a manner consistent with course outcomes, program goals, and best practices for online instruction.

Adapting and designing strategies for success in OWI cannot stop with considerations of student success. Instructor success is an essential component in developing OWI. New OWI instructors often feel hesitant to make direct changes or adaptations to template course shells, for fear of “messing them up” or going against established standards (Stewart et al., 2016). On the other hand, allowing complete design freedom or a very loosely structured “bare bones” course fails to provide the necessary scaffolding to ease new instructors into the digital learning environment and can cause issues of workload exploitation for otherwise vulnerable graduate instructors and untenured faculty. Thus, the flexible grid approach provides a responsive middle ground between unrestricted curriculum and rigid standardized templates, empowering instructors to personalize the curriculum, while still providing a safety net (emphasizing the “responsive” and “personal” elements of the PARS approach). A flexible grid approach, rather than cookie-cutter templates that do not allow for customization, ensures that curriculum achieves programmatic outcomes and reflects instructional design best practices, while still providing instructors autonomy over the courses they teach.

## Practices: Putting the Modular Grid to Work

The grid is introduced to instructors in the training materials and resources they receive when teaching online for ICaP for the first time. The modular grid and associated units are presented as the foundational course structure, which instructors are expected to modify minimally, especially if they have not taught online previously. The work of presenting the grid and course structure to instructors is accomplished through face-to-face training (when possible), a formal instructor manual, and an online, asynchronous instructor training course that relies heavily on the PARS elements.

Additional resources and materials instructors are given refer back to and support the grid structure in order to make personalized course design manageable. The materials provided include:

- Syllabus and course calendar templates
- Assignment sheets for each project in the grid

- Outcome-based analytic rubrics (one for each unit, to be used for any assignment option in that unit)
- List of suggested readings from program-approved primary textbooks for each assignment
- Example syllabi and course calendars featuring different sequences of assignments from the grid
- LMS course shell with pre-built units that mirror the grid structure

By using program-provided materials and resources built around the grid structure, instructors are able to personalize their online course design. In asking instructors to use pre-built materials to teach online, we find it necessary to take the time to introduce and explain the grid and the course structure it supports so that instructors can make best use of the materials we provide. In addition, we strive to make clear the connections between the materials provided and best practices for OWI.

Once instructors are introduced to the grid and its supporting materials, they are asked to select their sequence of course assignments, which will form the basic structure of their online course. As mentioned previously, all supporting materials are designed with the grid in mind, giving instructors the freedom to choose an assignment from each unit that is most appealing or familiar to them.

Instructors who have taught the course previously are encouraged to try new assignments from the grid. Swapping out one assignment for another typically involves some changes to supplementary course materials and activities, but because the assignments from each unit of the grid target the same outcomes, the course structure and course calendar can remain relatively unchanged.

Responsive pedagogy is autonomous pedagogy—for both students and instructors. Just as students should be able to choose topics that fit with their professional and personal interests, so too should instructors be able to choose assignments and approaches that fit with their pedagogical values and goals. While research suggests that template courses are a best practice for *strategic* administration of online writing programs (Rodrigo & Ramirez, 2017), allowing flexibility that empowers instructors to assign projects that they care about lays the groundwork for *responsive* pedagogy. When instructors have a choice between projects, they can select the one that best aligns with their teaching style and commitments, so students create work that they are actually interested in reading and providing feedback on. The grid supports instructors, who in turn support students through their direct instruction and feedback.

## Programs: Strategies for Adapting the Modular Grid to Diverse Institutional Contexts

When developing the English 106-DIST grid, the ICaP administrative team formally requested instructor feedback through a focus group discussion, where



instructors and course developers talked specifically about assignments the instructors had taught and would like to teach. One way we responded to instructors was by removing assignments that they found difficult to teach online, especially in the accelerated versions of the course taught during the summer and partial semester terms (first or second eight weeks). In addition to meeting with instructors to pick their brains about how they could personalize the units through integrating their own expertise, the ICaP staff who developed the curriculum—first Allegra, then Bianca, then Libby—also taught the course itself. Thus, the individuals driving the curriculum changes and development responded to their own firsthand experiences with online writing instruction to create a better learning experience.

In the next section, we suggest ways to adapt the grid course to local contexts strategically, based on our experience at Purdue and another institution.

### Adapting the Curriculum for Multilingual Writers

As ICaP is currently piloting its first version of online composition for multilingual writers, we selected an assignment sequence from the grid that experienced 106-INTL instructors agreed would help most international students acculturate to academic writing at Purdue. The instructors then collaborated to modify the assignments and added activities to provide the scaffolding necessary to support multilingual learners. Extensive use of group and individual conferencing, the hallmark of 106-INTL, was integrated into the scaffolding of assignments.

### Expanding Assignment Options to Integrate Local Practices

The grid need not be  $3 \times 3$  and can be expanded if more variety is desired given local cultures. For example, Bianca, currently a Brittain Fellow at Georgia Tech, worked with the GT Writing and Communication Program (WCP) during the spring and summer 2020 terms to develop infrastructures for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bianca and WCP leadership drew from ICaP's modular grid approach to develop ideas for assignment sequencing for instructors teaching English courses at Georgia Tech. The local culture of the WCP at Georgia Tech is one that requires instructional flexibility, especially because instructors in the program are asked to develop their own assignments and course themes. (This is another way the grid can reflect a UX-influenced approach to administration.) WCP courses also emphasize WOVEN (which stands for written, oral, visual, electronic, and nonverbal) communication. The WCP's learning outcomes also take a slightly different approach to those of ICaP and require all English instructors to teach assignment sequences that include multimodal and collaborative projects.

To account for this flexible, multimodal pedagogy, the WCP provided summer instructors with a more extensive modular grid that provides ideas for mul-

timodal projects that build off each other and collectively emphasize different modes of WOVEN communication. This modular grid also included ideas for scaffolding within assignment sequences, such as peer review, storyboards, outlines, and usability tests; this allowed WCP instructors not only to garner ideas for assignment scaffolding but also to have flexibility throughout the process of their course design. In all these ways, the WCP at Georgia Tech built off the modular grid approach because doing so allowed Bianca and WCP leadership to efficiently prepare instructors to teach online during the pandemic (Burnett et al., 2020).

**Table 5.3. 10 × 5 Grid Adaptation**

<p>10 × 5 Grid Used by Georgia Tech Writing and Communication Program (WCP)</p> <p><b>Guidelines: You can create an assignment/project sequence by mixing and matching (from the columns below) in ways that reflect the outcomes of your course, the pedagogical style you want to emphasize, the technology you want to use, and/or the community partners with whom you'll work. In your short remote summer course, a single session assignment/project sequence may be sufficient-in whatever sequence supports your course.</b></p>			
Select project emphasizing W (but with OVEN in the process)	Select project emphasizing O/N (but with WVE in the process)	Select process emphasizing V (but with WOEN in the process)	Design scaffolded feedback/review
Feature article	PPT with voiceover	Infographic	Peer reviews
White paper	Radio PSA	Comic strip	Checklists
Wiki article	TED talk	PSA video	Sketches
Annotated bibliography	Podcast	Poster	Storyboards
Analytical essay	Radio drama	Data visualization	Annotated drafts
Manifesto	Record an interview	Website	Outlines
Children's book	Record a discussion	Maps/story maps	Audio/video clips
Tech pamphlet	Panel presentation	Book covers	User/usability tests
Review/commentary	Museum guide tape	Visuals for lit/poetry	Track changes
Your own choice	Your own choice	Your own choice	Your own choice

### Adapting the Grid to Multiple-Course Sequences

The WCP also needed to consider its two-course sequence when developing online infrastructures. Students at Georgia Tech take a two-course sequence—English 1101 and English 1102—during their first year. Instructors often develop and use different texts, assignments, and course themes depending on which English course they are teaching. This two-course sequence also contributed to Bianca and WCP leadership's decision to provide instructors with a more extensive modular grid; instructors benefit from additional assignment sequenc-

ing ideas because they make use of different assignment sequences in the different courses they teach during the academic year. Bianca further adapted these materials to prepare incoming fall 2020 instructors for a full, 16-week semester of remote teaching, and she is interested in developing multiple grids to more strategically address the needs of the different English courses WCP offers at Georgia Tech.

## Integrating the Grid into WAC or WID Programs

Even though the WCP is not an explicitly WAC or WID program, their recent development of online course structures demonstrates areas that WAC and WID programs must consider when leveraging the modular grid approach; because Georgia Tech is a STEM-oriented institution, the resources that Bianca and WCP leadership developed for online and remote instruction have also had to retain the program's mission of teaching and learning communication across disciplines and curriculums. The assignment sequences represented in the program's modular grid and other instructional resources thus maintain the program's objectives in teaching writing and communication in ways that emphasize research, process, and rhetorical awareness.

The handbooks, workshops, assignment sequences, and other materials developed for WCP remote instructors have leveraged lessons learned from Bianca's work with ICaP's online students and instructors. Indeed, the development of these materials was undergirded by the same theory and praxis that informs ICaP's modular grid. The modular grid's visualization of adaptable assignment sequences provides instructors with models and frameworks to help with their course design and development—which helped WCP instructors adapt more easily to teaching online during the pandemic—while also preserving instructors' autonomy and flexibility when choosing assignments to teach. With more and more institutions and programs, like the WCP, realizing the urgency of strengthening and expanding online course offerings that respond to student and instructors' needs both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing the modular grid approach can provide programs with a strategic solution for online course design.

## Final Thoughts and Application

We hope that our experiences using the PARS approach to design a grid that responds to instructor and student needs can help guide your own online curriculum development, teacher training, and program administration. To review, here are some key takeaways from the  $3 \times 3$  grid design and implementation process:

- Personal: Providing instructors with the opportunity to select from a suite of ready-made assignment options helps them to customize the courses

they teach, while reducing the cognitive load of building an entire syllabus and calendar from the ground up.

- Accessible: Having multiple pre-designed options for course projects enables instructors to match the writing tasks they assign to the wants and needs of their students, removing barriers to learning and success in the course.
- Responsive: Implementing a flexible grid approach responds to the needs of a diverse body of instructors—offering a middle ground between cookie-cutter templates and unrestricted curricula.
- Strategic: Building multiple assignments—with their accompanying readings, lesson plans, rubrics and assessment tools, etc.—ensures a cohesive curriculum and learning experience across sections in an online writing program that is closely linked to standard learning outcomes.

We see OWI as an opportunity for instructors—particularly graduate students and postdoctoral fellows—to grow as educators and professionals. For this reason, the grid-based curriculum is presented not only as a required tool for effective instruction, but also as a resource that was developed strategically and responsively with instructor input. When training instructors in the use of the grid and other course resources in our online training site, we not only discuss the practical how-to of the grid, but the *why*. Instructors are required to read the *PARS* text in its entirety, moving chapter by chapter through asynchronous training modules based on each aspect of OWI: personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic. In addition, we explicitly address how the curriculum ICaP has developed employs and follows the *PARS* elements through module videos recorded by ICaP staff. By working through personal reflections and engaging in online discussion boards with fellow instructors, instructors learn more about best practices for OWI in ways that will hopefully enable them to extend these skills beyond their time as an ICaP instructor.

The training materials developed for ICaP's online instructors speak to the same pedagogical values that undergird our implementation of the modular grid. That is, because we want our instructors to learn the value of implementing personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic online writing pedagogy, we have made efforts to model those same principles when developing materials for instructor use. Programmatically, ICaP seeks to model the *PARS* approach in all the materials we have developed, and the modular grid is a particularly tangible representation of such modeling; just as we want students in ICaP courses to have access to *PARS*-driven modes of learning, so too do we hope to provide instructors with resources that will help them better develop and understand their own *PARS*-inspired pedagogical values. In other words, the materials we have developed—from the modular grid to our training resources—allows ICaP instructors to implement OWI best practices and allow our program to implement forward-thinking praxis that gives instructors agency over their own pedagogies as well.

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