

CHAPTER 39.

**WRITING AT UC DAVIS:  
WRITING IN DISCIPLINES  
AND PROFESSIONS FROM  
THE UNDERGRADUATE FIRST  
YEAR THROUGH GRADUATE  
SCHOOL**

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*Writing at this public research university—the largest among the ten campuses of the University of California—is taught in ways that reflect the university’s “land-grant” mission. Our academic writing courses and writing-support activities serve tertiary and post-graduate students from more than 100 disciplines and from highly-diverse language and cultural backgrounds. While this profile describes ways that most academic departments contribute to our students’ writing development, we pay particular attention to the several roles, some long-established and some new, of the University Writing Program (UWP), an independent department devoted to academic writing across disciplines and professions. We illustrate how UC Davis has re-interpreted the US model of “general education” to spread attention to student writing not only across disciplines but also vertically throughout the tertiary years and into services for PhD students from the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, and agriculture. A PhD research emphasis in writing studies is also described, as is the Writing Minor for baccalaureate students.*

The University of California goes back to the early years of the new state on the US Pacific coast. California became a state in 1850, just two years after the discovery of gold in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada had lured people from the eastern states and around the world to this rugged land. The closest port to

the gold fields became in a few years a thriving city, San Francisco, with sudden pretensions to East Coast and European culture.

Just across San Francisco Bay, in the town of Berkeley, the University of California was launched in 1868, seen by civic leaders as an essential part of this cultural rise and by the US government as California's "land-grant" university. An essential part of the land-grant university's mission in the nineteenth century was to train new generations of agriculturists in the latest technologies and to redefine higher education as both "practical" and "classical," hence open to a broader swath of society than had had access to the older colleges on the East Coast in the US. Since California's richest agricultural lands lay across the coastal mountains from Berkeley, the state government was eventually convinced to establish a "University Farm" in the 500-mile-long Central Valley, the farming and ranching heart of the state (Scheuring, 2001, p. 20).

Thus came into being in 1906 the tiny branch of the University that would become the University of California (UC) at Davis, now in 2012 the largest of the ten campuses of the UC system. UC Davis, with more than 33,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, offers more than 100 baccalaureate degrees, more than 80 PhD degrees, and degrees in law, medicine, veterinary medicine, and business management. The majority of students concentrate in the life and physical sciences, agriculture, and engineering, but robust baccalaureate and doctoral degree programs also flourish in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

## WHAT WRITING AND LITERACY MEAN AT UC DAVIS

Understanding the place of writing at UC Davis begins with acknowledging three factors:

1. the emphasis of the campus on a wide variety of tertiary degree and graduate programs, and how this variety has been interpreted in terms of "core literacies" to be achieved by all undergraduate students (as described later in this profile);
2. the American model of undergraduate studies, with "general education" a prime component; and
3. the cultural and linguistic diversity of the university, with more than 50% of all students coming from homes where English is not the first language—though the great majority of these students were born in California (Ferris & Thaiss, 2011). This diversity reflects not only the Spanish-speaking heritage of California, but also the waves of immigration over 150 years from the Pacific Rim nations, from the rest of the US, and from many other cultures across the continents.

## WHO CARES ABOUT STUDENT WRITING AT UC DAVIS?

*US News and World Report*, a public affairs magazine with international circulation, publishes annually “America’s Best Colleges,” a guide for prospective college students. Among its many categories for ranking US colleges and universities is “Writing in the Disciplines”: according to the journal, “These colleges typically make the writing process a priority at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum. Students are encouraged to produce and refine various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines.”

Since 2007, UC Davis has been listed as one of only 20 or so institutions considered distinguished in this category, as voted by a broad cross-section of higher education administrators. The institutions in this short list represent small privately-funded colleges, large private universities, and large public universities such as UC Davis. How each of these institutions enacts this commitment differs. (See McLeod et al., 2001; Thaiss & Porter, 2010; and the WAC Clearinghouse for examples of this variety.) In the case of UC Davis, the idea of “care” for student writing means a multi-stage curriculum and tutorial opportunities serving all students, from newly-admitted undergraduates to doctoral students writing dissertations.

Some of these courses and services are specifically for students whose first language is not English and are intended to help students achieve academic English proficiency. Other courses and services are specifically for graduate students, and these services focus on genres—journal articles, qualifying papers, dissertations—central to doctoral education. The largest portion of courses and services are open to all undergraduate students across all disciplines. Indeed, all undergraduate students are required to complete several courses devoted to text types and genres of academic writing. These various courses and services are outlined below.

In short, “care” for student writing is a cross-disciplinary commitment, with several offices and one academic department focused on this commitment, but with research and teaching faculty from many disciplines consciously developing student fluency, practice in writing processes, and genre literacy.

## WHERE AND WHAT STUDENTS WRITE AT UC DAVIS— REQUIREMENTS, OPTIONS, DISCIPLINES, GENRES

This profile will describe requirements, programs, and services that have been tentatively begun, then grown and changed over thirty years. We look at these in terms of local and national contexts, changes in character and scope,

and ongoing challenges. Brevity allows only minimal analysis; we include links to sources that we hope will give a fuller picture. We will close by describing one of our most recent new programs, the Writing Minor.

### ADMISSIONS TESTING FOR ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH

Applications for undergraduate admission to all branches of the UC are accepted from the top 12 1/2% of graduates of California secondary schools and from qualified students from outside the state and the US For over 100 years, most admitted students, despite their high academic standing in the secondary schools, have been required to take the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (AWPE), a timed essay examination used to determine placement in the appropriate first-year course dedicated to building awareness of and strategies to accomplish university-level writing. Each campus determines this configuration of courses differently, but all make distinctions based on AWPE scores. Leonard (2011) has written the most comprehensive history of the growth and changes in how this state requirement has been applied at UC Davis.

The range of placements is complex: the highest level of exam scorers (about 60%) may choose a course from several that introduce them to genre expectations either across disciplines or more focused on specific academic writing tasks, such as analysis of literary texts. The most popular of these courses is the introduction to academic writing across disciplines (UWP 1) offered by the University Writing Program, the autonomous department dedicated to teaching and scholarship in composition and rhetoric. The second level of AWPE scorers (about 30 %) is placed in a course that does not receive academic credit and is therefore considered remedial. This course is not taught by UC Davis faculty or graduate students, but is outsourced to another institution, Sacramento City Community College. These students must satisfactorily complete the non-credit course before being admitted to UWP 1 and similar courses. A third group of AWPE scorers (about 10%) are non-native speakers of English whose language skills are considered not yet adequate for the higher two levels. Each of these students is placed into one of three sequenced courses (all bearing academic credit) taught by ESL specialists in the Linguistics Department. Thus, a student placed into this developmental sequence may take as many as four ten-week courses before being eligible for the first-year academic writing course, such as UWP 1.

Because of budget restructuring in the current economic recession, this multi-step curriculum for the lowest group of AWPE scorers—now in place for more than 20 years—is being reconsidered. One possible proposal would bring the entire curriculum under the management of the University Writing

Program, so that placement and teaching could be coordinated and curriculum revision made easier.

### **THE REQUIRED FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSE (E.G. UWP 1)**

Typical of tertiary education in the US for more than a century (see, e.g., Brereton, 1996) is some form of mandatory first-year course (or courses) in academic writing, the primary goal of this course to prepare students for the assignments they are likely to receive in their major disciplines and in elective courses outside the major. Indeed, so common is such a course that the US Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) has published a widely-used list of “student outcomes” for first-year writing, including objectives in five categories: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Writing Processes; Knowledge of Conventions; and Composing in Electronic Environments (<http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>). Because the common US model of undergraduate education dictates that prospective students apply to the university, not to a department or a faculty, such “general education” courses usually are populated by students representing a broad variety of degree programs, from the arts and humanities to the sciences and engineering.

Hence, assignments in these courses often give students freedom in choice of subject, but evaluate student writers on academic criteria that cross disciplinary boundaries. For example, one outcome from the CWPA list is to “understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources.” The typical US first-year writing course, including UWP 1 at UC Davis, expects students to learn these critical processes as they apply them to a range of topics that will differ by discipline and student interest.

### **REQUIRED WRITING IN THE UPPER DIVISION**

However, where writing at UC Davis differs from typical US structure is in the portion of the general education writing requirement for the “upper division” (third-year students and above). The great majority of US universities place required general education writing courses in the first year only. At Davis and a growing number of other universities, this requirement is split between the first year and either the second or a later year (see Shamoan et al, 2000; Thaiss & Porter, 2010). When configured this way, the goals of the two levels differ. As we have theorized the difference here at UC Davis, the first-year course acclimates the student to university-level writing in general, while the

upper-level course, taught in various versions, (1) focuses on discipline-specific genres and ways of thinking that students experience in their majors and (2) prepares students for rhetorical and genre expectations they are likely to encounter beyond graduation—in post-graduate education and professions. The high regard in which most students hold these courses, as expressed in course evaluations, reflects the importance to students of this dual aim.

In the upper division at UC Davis, students select from a broad and growing list of courses “in the disciplines and professions” (<http://writing.ucdavis.edu/about-uwp/about/>): to name a few, writing in science, writing in the health professions, writing for engineers, business writing, professional and technical writing, writing in history, writing in human development, writing in film studies, and writing in legal studies, as well as introductory and advanced courses in journalism.

All of these courses are taught in the University Writing Program, by faculty hired, reviewed, and promoted by the program. That the Writing Program has its own faculty, most of whom (30+) are tenured in the program or on tenure-like continuing appointments, is another difference from all but a few other US institutions. In most colleges and universities, general education writing courses are housed in the English department. Although how the independence (2005) of the Writing Program at Davis came about is to some extent unique (see <http://writing.ucdavis.edu/about-uwp>), what the emergence of the autonomous program shares with that of other similar US departments is the university’s recognition that (1) “composition and rhetoric” is a research field distinct from most research concerns of US English departments and (2) the teaching of writing is relevant to all disciplines in the university (see O’Neill, Crow, & Burton, 2002), hence worthy of autonomy from any other single department.

### **THE “WRITING EXPERIENCE” REQUIREMENT AND WID STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

“General education” at UC Davis, as at more than 400 other US institutions (Thaiss & Porter, 2010) also requires that undergraduate students complete a small number of courses, usually in their major degree programs, that demand a substantial amount of writing in appropriate academic genres—and that provide written feedback to student writers and the opportunity to revise for resubmission. Such courses, often labeled “writing intensive” or “writing emphasis” in the US, primarily focus on learning disciplinary content and methods, but writing is an important means of student thinking and expression in these courses (Townsend, 2001). At Davis, we use the term “writing experience” for such courses, and some 1,500 courses across more than 80 de-

partments have been approved by cross-disciplinary committees to meet more stringent criteria beginning in 2011 (see <http://ge.ucdavis.edu>). Large lecture courses, advanced seminars, and senior “capstone” courses are all included as “writing experience” courses, as long as they meet the specified criteria for (1) number of graded words, (2) feedback on drafts and/or on scaffolded shorter assignments, and (3) the opportunity to revise. This breadth means that, in many departments, students are encountering process-based experience with disciplinary genres in lower-level, more advanced, and final-year courses in their fields.

The “writing experience” (WE) requirement, along with the required first-year and upper-division courses taught by the UWP, represents “literacy in words and images,” one of the several “core literacies” that comprise the general education requirements for all UC Davis baccalaureate students (see <http://ge.ucdavis.edu>). The other core literacies include oral communication; visual literacy; scientific literacy; quantitative literacy; the “literacy” (critical understanding) of American history, culture, and governance; and the “literacy” of world cultures. Many of the courses that fulfill the WE requirement also fulfill one or more of the other core literacies (although each student may count a given course toward fulfilling only one of these core requirements; this rule means that students must take a number of courses across disciplines to meet the entire core).

Unlike teachers of the UWP first-year and upper-division courses, the faculty and graduate students who teach these “writing experience” (WE) courses in all those departments have not been formally trained in composition pedagogy. (In comparison, the graduate students who teach UWP 1 must complete two pedagogy seminars and be observed by program administrators in a later term.) What the many “writing experience” teachers have available to them are short-term workshops, consultation opportunities, and web-available materials, again offered by the UWP (<http://writing.ucdavis.edu/programs-and-services/the-workshop-program>) or by the university’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL: <http://cetl.ucdavis.edu>). While it would be ideal for all WE teachers to be certified for this pedagogy, the number of teachers far exceeds the resources of the UWP and CETL to reach them systematically, try as our UWP consulting faculty and the CETL staff do.

### **WRITING TUTORIALS AND WORKSHOPS AT THE STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER**

All undergraduate students can also call on the tutoring services of the Student Academic Success Center (SASC) (<http://lsc.ucdavis.edu/writing.html>).

The full-time professional tutors and many trained undergraduate peer tutors review drafts of assigned writing from any UC Davis discipline for such features as focus, organization, coherence of argument, and English syntax and punctuation. Congruent with writing center tutorial philosophy in the US, the function of the tutor is to converse with the student about the draft so that the tutor can offer suggestions for improvement (Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet, 2006). In 2010-11, the UC Davis writing center gave almost 10,000 tutorial sessions to students from more than 100 degree programs.

The SASC also offers hour-long workshops for groups of students preparing for certain high-stakes essay examinations (e.g., for the L2 courses in Linguistics) and on other general topics of writing proficiency. Workshops for English L2 students are frequent.

### TUTORING AND WORKSHOPS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Since the SASC focuses its tutorials and workshops on the 25,000 UC Davis undergraduates, similar services for graduate students across disciplines have become a further interest of the University Writing Program, in cooperation with the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS). Over the past eight years, gradually more of the time spent by the UWP on training opportunities for faculty to assign and “care for” the writing in their classes, as well as on services to the students themselves, has been given to the graduate level. To illustrate, the fall 2010 schedule of UWP/OGS workshops included (<http://iccweb.ucdavis.edu/graduates/pds>):

- Writing Scientific Papers
- Writing a Curriculum Vitae
- Revising and Organizing for Grad Students & Postdocs
- Overcoming Writer’s Block
- Enhancing Your Use of Endnote
- Grammar and Sentence Crafting
- Writing a Research Statement in the Sciences & Engineering: Academic Job Search Series
- Articulating Your Research in the Humanities & Social Sciences: Academic Job Search Series
- Dissertation Writing Workshop and Retreat
- Grant Writing in the Sciences

Since 2007, the UWP has also staffed a Grad Writing Fellows tutoring service with PhD students trained in writing pedagogy. This service began with volunteers who had worked in writing centers at other universities; in 2009, the OGS began to provide funding for the tutors and in 2010 a permanent work-



space. That tutorial services for graduate students across disciplines are far more recent at UC Davis than those for undergraduates reflects the (1) long-time acceptance by US tertiary education of responsibility for literacy development by undergraduates (e.g., Russell, 2002), (2) the scope and expense of undergraduate operations, and (3) only gradual realization by US graduate schools that lack of such assistance has kept retention and degree completion rates at disappointing levels.

## **TOWARD FULFILLING FURTHER AMBITIONS: THE PHD “DESIGNATED EMPHASIS” AND THE WRITING MINOR**

Over the past three decades, close to one hundred US universities have developed PhD specialties in composition/rhetoric. Most of these programs are attached to English departments, given the historical placement of required English composition courses in these departments, as noted earlier. Some of the existing PhD specialties are free-standing programs that draw students from a number of disciplines. An annual issue of the journal *Rhetoric Review* provides descriptions of the various programs and their locations within institutions.

At UC Davis, the PhD “designated emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition Studies” (WRaCS) was conceived in 2006, approved by the Graduate Council in 2008, and first offered to students that same year, with five to eight new students per year. Current students’ research focuses in such areas as WAC/WID program design, writing placement theory and practice in higher education, adolescent literacy development, L2 writing methodology, and cultural rhetorics. Administered by the UWP, the designated emphasis has more than thirty affiliated faculty, from the faculties of Education, Linguistics, English, Cultural Studies, Techno-cultural and Film Studies, Performance Studies, and Spanish, as well as the UWP (<http://wracs.ucdavis.edu>).

Establishing an independent UWP also allowed the development of an undergraduate minor in writing, which began in 2009 ([http://writing.ucdavis.edu/programs-and-services/uwp\\_writing\\_minor](http://writing.ucdavis.edu/programs-and-services/uwp_writing_minor)). Within the first year, more than 50 students graduated with the credential and 100 more declared their intentions to complete the minor. By the end of 2011, more than 150 students had completed the Minor. Like all minors at UC Davis, this minor allows students to concentrate study (20 units or five courses) outside their major; writing minors earn a credential that shows their concentrated work in writing. While the most common majors represented among our minoring students are Communication and English, many minors come from Political Science, International Relations, Psychology, Sociology, and various sciences.

The writing minor gives students advanced instruction and opportunities for practical experience. Students learn diverse genres in disciplines and professions; they learn to modify styles for varied audiences and formats. All courses for the minor are “upper division,” although students also take the prerequisites for those courses. The curriculum includes four areas: writing in academic settings; writing in the professions; history, theory and design; and a writing-intensive internship outside the academy.

Many students choose internships in journalism: as reporters and editors of the student newspaper, *The California Aggie*, or for *UC Magazine*, local newspapers, radio and television stations, print magazines, and online publications. Internships in marketing and public relations are common, including work for University Communications and other campus organizations, for local visitors’ bureaus, for local businesses and wineries.

Some enterprising students have gained writing experience in other professions through their internships: research and writing for law firms or district attorneys’ offices, technical writing and editing, writing for political offices or campaigns, or grant-writing for the university, for specific scientific research projects, or for non-profit organizations.

While many students in the minor already have excellent writing skills, a significant number have chosen the minor because English is their second language or because they consider their writing poor.

I never considered myself a writer. I did the minor because I knew writing was one of my weakest skills. Now I don’t feel like that. I know how to write various forms, such as press releases. I never thought I had a strong grammar background, but this is an area in which I’ve also seen improvement. I believe this is because I was put in charge of editing the writing of others. I feel able to write on the job when I leave UC Davis. *Justin Chu, Nutrition major*

Because of the range of upper division courses in the disciplines and professions, students use the writing minor to prepare for careers in journalism, public relations, marketing, technical writing, editing, grant writing, and public policy analysis. Certification of the minor on students’ transcripts establishes their credentials for writing-intensive jobs immediately after graduation, in non-profit organizations, businesses, and other fields.

The minor is perfect toward preparing me for my dream

career as a book editor or publisher. To have the Writing Minor started during my second year seemed like a miracle, as it involves internships and certification of writing expertise, which I will definitely need as an advantage. *Elizabeth Orfin, English major*

The minor also enhances critical thinking skills and writing proficiency required for success in postgraduate programs and professional schools.

Writing is an essential skill in science. I think how you convey your research, your findings, and your observations greatly determines how professional you are. *Tacita Vu, Biological Science*

My writing has improved significantly. Critical and analytical writing not only helps you better convey your ideas to an outside population, but also trains your mind to be more analytical. *Enkhee Tuvshintogs, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology major*

## CHALLENGES

As this profile shows, UC Davis's commitment to student writing and to research in this interdisciplinary field has grown over many years, with dramatic steps, such as creation of the independent UWP, to enhance its range and help ensure its future. Ambitions remain: e.g., for the Writing Minor to be built into a major degree program, for the PhD "designated emphasis" to become a free-standing degree, for funding to lower class sizes in required courses and workloads in "writing experience" courses. The main threat to this future, as in most places profiled in this book, is the ongoing financial crisis, which has forced a dramatic decline in public support and huge rises in student fees. In the midst of this crisis, the many cooperating faculty and staff across disciplines at Davis have maintained their imaginative devotion to student learning. Sustaining this ambition despite fewer resources will be our continuing challenge. However, as the student comments above illustrate, maintaining that commitment to growth in student writing and critical thinking will produce the next generation of thinkers and communicators to productively confront and, we hope, resolve crisis.

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