



The Brigham Young University Advanced Writing Program

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History and Philosophy

In the mid-1970s, Brigham Young University began to change its composition program from a traditional two-semester sequence in the first year, the second semester of which was devoted to research writing. The new “vertical” program, which was phased in gradually starting in 1976, required a one-semester writing course in the first year and an advanced writing course in the junior year. The thinking behind this change twenty years ago was that students would profit more from a research writing course after having taken several courses in their major than they did in the first year when, often, they hadn’t even chosen a major. At first, there were only three advanced courses, all offered in the English Department and organized by what were then thought to be important modes of writing: technical writing, advanced expository writing, and critical and interpretive writing. Over the years since 1976, these three advanced courses have evolved and two more have been added.

There are now five advanced writing courses offered in the English Department, most of which are designed to meet the needs of different groups of majors and organized around the idea of writing in the genres of various discourse communities. In addition to these five, there are advanced writing courses offered by the Art Department, the School of Business, the College of Engineering, the School of Music, the Chemistry Department, the History Department, the Philosophy Department, and the Political Science Department for their respective majors. These new courses are indicative of a slow but persistent trend toward “true” writing-in-the-disciplines courses rather than a program based solely in the English Department. This description will focus mainly on the advanced courses offered in the English Department, however, since most students at BYU still earn the required credit in these courses.

The English Courses and Students

At present the five advanced writing English courses are Technical Writing, Writing in the Social Sciences, Writing about the Humanities,

Writing for Elementary Education Teachers, and Persuasive Writing. Approximately 4,500 students per year are taught in about 200 sections of these five courses. More than fifty percent of the sections are offered in Technical Writing and Writing in the Social Sciences. As can be seen in the titles of the courses, Persuasive Writing retains the venerable approach of teaching writing that falls in the rhetorical tradition, preparing students to participate in public discourse about civic issues. (It is also the course that serves the smallest number of students.) The other four courses prepare students to do research and write in genres that are typical for the fields they are majoring in and the careers they are preparing for. The course for future elementary school teachers is decidedly unique in being aimed at only one narrowly defined group of majors. It was created over ten years ago at the request of the School of Education, which wanted a course to help future elementary teachers learn not only write well and confidently themselves but also learn about successful methods of teaching children to write. Administration and Teachers In 1994, the university established a University Advanced Writing Committee, composed of professors from each college, that sets standards for all advanced writing courses, whether they are taught in the English Department or elsewhere. The Committee periodically reviews all courses, and it offers annual preservice and inservice training to teachers. The review standards include the following:

- Instruction in writing, not mere assignment of writing, as a primary emphasis in the course.
- Teacher certification through documenting past experience teaching writing, taking an approved course or seminar, or completing an approved internship with an experienced teacher.
- Evaluation of student writing primarily by the professor, not teaching assistants.
- Focus on writing processes used within the discipline, not just on products.
- Writing for audiences inside the discipline, using the genres, forms, styles, and documentation conventions of the discipline.
- Writing for audiences outside the discipline.
- Significant emphasis on research writing, including gathering data from primary and secondary sources, evaluating data critically, and synthesizing information.
- Class size of 20 students or fewer per certified teacher.

Courses proposed for advanced writing are reviewed by the University Advanced Writing Committee and, if they meet the standards, recommended for ratification to the Dean of General Education. Departments that sponsor the courses are then responsible to see that the courses

continue to meet the criteria in their curriculum and in the selection of teachers.

The five advanced courses in the English Department are under the supervision of a Coordinator of Composition and Associate Coordinator, who are appointed by the English Department Chair. These two coordinators, both full-time faculty with credentials in rhetoric and composition, select most of the teachers for the courses. But each course also has a faculty member assigned to lead the teachers of that course in coordinating the ordering of textbooks, scheduling and holding meetings or otherwise communicating with teachers about the course, visiting classes if asked to, and generally charting the direction of the course.

Between 10 and 15 percent of the sections of English advanced writing each semester are taught by full-time faculty. About 75 to 80 percent are taught by part-time faculty. The remaining sections are taught by a few highly selected MA students (BYU has no PhD program in English). Although a few part-time teachers have been a part of the advanced writing faculty for more than 20 years, in about 1985 the number of new part-time hires really began to grow because the number of students majoring in English soared, and full-time faculty had to devote more and more of their time to teaching courses in the major, rather than general education writing courses, as they had once done. The number of part-time faculty is now above 30 regularly employed teachers, each of whom generally teaches two sections per semester (their assignments sometimes include other courses than advanced writing).

Professional Development

The part-time faculty generally hold MAs in literature, and many of the older ones did not receive any special training in the teaching of writing as part of their graduate education. Concerned that they might remain ignorant of the exciting developments in the field of rhetoric and composition, as the Coordinator of Composition in 1990, I sought funding for a month-long summer seminar to give the part-time faculty a crash course in the history of rhetoric and new developments in composition pedagogy (see Hansen). Funding for this seminar was provided by the Dean of General Education with matching funds from the English Department and College of Humanities. This seminar became the first of many professional development seminars, as the same funding sources were again successfully tapped for professional development seminars in subsequent years. Finally in 1997 a regular budget was established to ensure the longevity of this professional development seminar. The funds have been used mainly to pay the part-time faculty stipends for participating, to purchase books and journal subscriptions, and, on occasion, to bring speakers to campus. Recent seminars have focused heavily on using

computers and other technologies in the teaching of writing. These seminars have greatly enhanced the knowledge, professionalism, and morale of the part-time faculty and done much to make them feel they are valued colleagues in the English Department. Besides continuing to sponsor the seminars, the current coordinators of the composition program have created printed guides for teaching the various advanced writing courses and for teaching in the computer classrooms. They have also led the part-time faculty in developing teaching portfolios.

Besides part-time faculty, a few students from the MA program in English teach advanced writing. Normally MA students support themselves by teaching first-year composition, but some desire the experience of teaching advanced writing to broaden their knowledge and experience prior to applying to graduate school or for jobs as teachers and writers. The current system of training MA students to teach an advanced writing course is to assign them to intern with an experienced mentor teacher in one of the five courses. During the time of the internship the MA student is also enrolled in a graduate course on theory and methods of teaching advanced writing. Following this semester of practical and theoretical training, each graduate student usually teaches one or more sections of advanced writing alone, though each generally seeks advice and help from the mentor teacher as questions and problems arise.

Works Cited

Hansen, Kristine. "Face to Face with Part-Timers: Ethics and the Professionalization of Writing Faculties." *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Ed. Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995. 23-45.