



# Anchoring WAC by Focusing on Rhetorical Analysis in First-Year Composition

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At the University of Arizona, we are orienting undergraduate writing toward academic inquiry and the social construction of knowledge through the written conversations among researchers and scholars. To provide coherence in the sequence of undergraduate writing experiences, we are revising four structural components: 1) a first-semester composition course that focuses on teaching rhetorical analysis using an anthology of readings by our faculty across the disciplines, 2) an increased writing component in each general education course, showcased in a student academic conference from across the first tier curriculum, 3) a mid-career writing assessment that requires students to demonstrate interdisciplinary thinking skills on the content and theoretical principles taught in the general education core curriculum, and 4) a revision of writing emphasis courses in the majors, focusing on discourse analysis of writing in disciplines building on students' first-year experience in rhetorical analysis. Through these structures, writing across the curriculum becomes firmly situated in both the first-year composition course and the disciplinary curriculum.

In the revised first-year composition course, we teach rhetorical analysis as the "portable" skill students can take with them from their composition course into their other writing situations at the university. This approach has two advantages: it provides students with 1) a theoretical approach to performing the diverse writing tasks they will encounter at the university and 2) experience in performing thinking skills highly valued by faculty across the curriculum: analysis, interpretation, synthesis, application, and invention, which we teach overtly in our revised course. The first caveat in promoting this focus to both writing and disciplinary faculty is to emphasize that writing is demonstrated *thinking*, thinking in progress made visible and subject to feedback and revision, as opposed to demonstrated linguistic knowledge and skills applied to thinking already accomplished. We thus promote writing to think and learn as the WAC focus in the lower division and composition as the theoretical site where students learn how to do it.

The University Composition Board has run a series of short and long-term faculty development workshops to articulate the thinking that faculty want their students to do and writing tasks that elicit and demonstrate it. What they originally believed was thinking peculiar to their separate fields, they came to see as *common* thinking that was demonstrated in conventional discipline-specific ways. They also discovered they had usually failed to specify, in clearly worded assignments for their students, either the particular thinking demanded by the task or the disciplinary rhetorical conventions for the text they expected. In the first-year composition course, therefore, we teach the terminology for the thinking skills and raise students' awareness to them for texts they will write for disciplinary faculty, using models of faculty writing.

As we work with the general education faculty, we help them with the terminology of rhetorical analysis so that they can talk to their students about writing assignments in ways that reinforce what students are learning in composition. We show them how to frame their assignments rhetorically by specifying the thinking they want to see demonstrated; why this kind of thinking is valued in their assignment, course and discipline; and what the expectations of the readers may or may not be in terms of the assignment's purpose, situation, and stance.

Analysis thus becomes the fundamental thinking skill taught in the composition curriculum. But it also encompasses all the critical and creative thinking skills valued by the students' other academic contexts. In composition, we frame thinking in writing as the way scholars conduct inquiry and construct new knowledge in their fields. We then supply students with the categories for the analysis of texts and contexts in order to help them see how scholars and researchers report and refine their problem solving process through conversations with audiences they expect to respond.

Composition students pursue a research question in the disciplinary area of their interest; engage the articles from their anthology written by faculty in this area; converse with the authors themselves if possible about their thinking, writing processes and strategies; and write their own position papers presenting their conclusions about the issue or intellectual problem they have researched. We encourage students to attend to disciplinary textual conventions by examining their faculty models for such things as typical research problems, methodology, unwritten assumptions, and textual formats, tone, style, and language.

The student conference at the end of the first year introduces students to the role of writing in all academic inquiry via an authentic context that emulates the way scholars construct disciplinary knowledge. Individual student presentations or panels of related presentations from across the Tier One general education curriculum occur throughout an entire day

of concurrent sessions. All Tier One faculty and students are invited to participate and attend the conference, which is co-sponsored by the Office of Undergraduate Education and the English Department.

We are refocusing our mid-career writing assessment on the thinking and concepts of the core curriculum with the help of Ed White, who has been hired as a consultant for the new instrument. Ed chairs a committee representing the principal stakeholders in writing from across the campus – the Office of Undergraduate Education, faculty from the general education curriculum, members of the University Composition Board, college deans, and members of the Intercollegiate Writing Committee. We are considering not only a timed writing exam, but an exit portfolio from the general education curriculum.

Originally, this assessment's purpose was to evaluate students' readiness to perform written work in the upper division. But students have avoided taking it until too late to serve this function, so the committee is debating ways to make it a requirement for student progress beyond Tier One and an instrument for assessing the effectiveness of the Tier One writing component.

This new exam will have a decided impact on the nature of the writing emphasis courses in the majors, which have no longer been able to rely on the test to indicate the curricular and writing readiness of the students enrolling in these courses. The Intercollegiate Writing Committee is thus articulating more specific criteria for student outcomes and writing pedagogy for these upper division writing courses and implementing ways to approve and monitor them. The University Composition Board will undertake the faculty development workshops for the disciplinary faculty who teach them. The thrust of these faculty workshops will be, again, introducing faculty to the terminology and rationale for rhetorical analyses and providing heuristics to help faculty overtly teach disciplinary textual conventions. Students will be able to apply what they learned in first-year composition to more in-depth analyses of discourse communities as the contexts and typical audiences for academic writing in their own fields.