

Toward a Unified Writing Curriculum: Integrating WAC/WID with Freshman Composition

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THE RELATION BETWEEN WRITING across the curriculum and freshman composition is both complex and sometimes controversial. While a few institutions have eliminated composition requirements in favor of courses taught by faculty in all disciplines, most have retained freshman composition in some form.¹ All too often, though, the freshman writing program and the writing courses in the disciplines have operated with little or no coordination, as though they were taking place at different institutions. Sometimes WAC has been conceived as basically an advanced extension of composition, but as research has revealed the complexity of a student's inculcation into a particular disciplinary community—its forms of knowledge, its procedures of verification, and its generic conventions of discourse—the pendulum has shifted in the other direction, as advocates have begun describing “WAC-oriented composition” (Sidler) or “anchoring WAC by focusing on rhetorical analysis in first-year composition” (Merrill). My concern here is not primarily with the administrative challenges raised by the separation of freshman composition from WAC/WID, but rather with describing a possible curricular model for pedagogical integration.

What I want to suggest is that it's not so much that freshman composition needs to become more like WAC courses, or that WAC courses need to become more like freshman composition. Rather, instructors at each of these levels need to be aware of how a particular course fits in to the big picture of a student's

academic writing development. This essay will propose a “Unified Writing Curriculum,” designed as a continuous scale of goals for student competencies, that progresses from the entering freshman right through the graduating senior. Thus I will address the crucial segue from freshman composition to discipline-specific writing courses from both sides of the divide:

- 1) For freshman writing programs: How can composition instructors best prepare students for that transition?
- 2) For WAC faculty: All discipline-specific writing courses cannot be taught on the same level, and so a hierarchy of expectations must be described, regarding student preparation in critical thinking, reading, writing, and research. Such a scale will provide guidance for faculty in the disciplines as they produce appropriate assignments for students with various levels of preparation and experience in writing in the discipline.

In a unified writing curriculum, every instructor at every level—from “basic writing” developmental courses to freshman composition to senior seminars that function as capstone writing courses in a particular discipline—would have a clear idea of the writing competencies and outcomes that should be set as a goal for the course. The result, for the student, should be a more seamless sequence of writing instruction, not merely a collection of random courses in which some writing is assigned.

I. Distinguishing Between Advanced, Intermediate, and Introductory Writing Intensive Courses

The “Across” in “Writing Across the Curriculum” does not merely signify that the doing of writing and the teaching of writing are going on everywhere in the university, in every department—although that’s part of it. The further implication is that writing instruction should be linked and coordinated across the campus. If an institution develops a common approach, then instructors in various departments and at various levels will be on the same page in terms of expectations of student writing and standards for evaluating it. WAC must be concerned not only with the horizontal breadth of writing instruction (the fact that it’s happening simultaneously in the social sciences, in the humanities, and in the natural sciences), but also with the vertical integration of writing instruction at various levels and at various times throughout the whole period of a student’s undergraduate career.

By its nature, a program that depends on Writing in the Disciplines, taught by faculty attached to every academic department in the university, will be somewhat decentralized. It is neither possible nor desirable to impose a rigid, centrally-controlled template on the far-flung diversity of courses offered in so many different subjects in such varied modes by so many idiosyncratic instructors. There are many roads by which a good teacher can guide students to the same destination. What is necessary, however, is to define that destination as specifically as possible, so that both students and instructors at every level will be aware of the expectations and goals in a given course in terms of student writing, reading, research, and critical thinking.

Our WAC approach at Rutgers-Newark is really a hybrid of two important models for program structure. This is partly an accident. The original plan was to require two “writing intensive” courses for each student within the department of the major, which would have been a pure version of a “Writing in the Disciplines” program, whereas the final version, which envisions that many students will get their second writing intensive course from a general education requirement or from an elective outside their major, invokes elements of a classic “Writing Across the Curriculum” approach. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably or linked acronymically (WAC/WID), but Jonathan Monroe argues that they’re really quite different animals: “While WAC emphasizes the commonality, portability, and communicability of writing practices, WID emphasizes disciplinary differences, diversity, and heterogeneity” (2). WAC, that is, believes that it is teaching transferable writing skills, and aims for a general academic analytical language, while WID suggests that there is no such thing as a single scholarly language, only the various specific languages indigenous to particular disciplinary communities.

Our current criteria make no distinctions between levels of post-freshman courses—they’re all just “writing intensive”—but all discipline-specific writing courses are not created equal. The best place to begin the process of building a unified discipline-specific writing curriculum is at the top, with a definition of what is expected from graduating majors in a particular field. Each department needs to articulate a clear idea of the ultimate goal of its undergraduate writing curriculum, a goal that will vary widely since each will be making different kinds of writing demands upon its students depending on the nature of the discipline.

Key Questions for Reviews of Writing Curriculum in All Disciplines

Articulating Goals: What, exactly, should our graduating majors be able to do, in terms of reading, writing, critical thinking, and research?

Assessment: Does our current program of courses that assign writing take our students progressively from where we can expect them to be after freshman composition to where we need them to be by graduation?

Curriculum Development: If assessment revealed any gaps in our writing offerings, what adjustments do we need to make to departmental curricular requirements or particular course designs?

Support: When students need extra help to meet our goals for reading, writing, critical thinking, and research, what is our department-specific plan for getting them extra help? (This might include referring students to WAC tutoring or WAC workshops, developing discipline-specific WAC workshops, embedding tutors in specific courses, etc. The key is to front-load support by making referrals early in the semester on the basis of, for example, a first-week diagnostic essay.)

Professional Development: What does our department faculty need to learn to make us comfortable with the pedagogical challenges of writing instruction, and what is the most effective way to learn it? (This might include encouraging faculty to attend colloquia sponsored by the WAC Program, or developing a department-specific training program.)

One approach to a WAC requirement is to designate a “capstone” course—often a majors-only advanced “Senior Seminar” or an individualized “Senior Project”—as writing intensive. Such advanced courses, in which all the students have significant background in the discipline, can provide opportunities for critical reading and writing at the highest level reasonably required of undergraduates. Different departments structure these courses in different ways, but I think that it is safe to say that most such courses incorporate some variation on the principles described in “Advanced Level Discipline-Specific Writing Course” (see Part II below).

If such a high-level discipline-specific writing course were to become a standard practice across the campus, then it would become possible to speak of a “writing capstone course” as the highest level of WAC instruction—and of undergraduate student writing achievement. Such decisions should not be imposed from the outside, but must be made internally, since the designation of final expectations for graduating majors is very near the heart of a department’s undergraduate curriculum and even its professional identity. But a general model, which can be adapted for local circumstances, has the advantage of offering clear guidelines for instructors. A unified writing curriculum calls upon all departments to expect and to demand an ambitious—but attainable—level of writing proficiency from their graduating majors.

Once this final standard has been established, everything in the undergraduate writing curriculum can be calibrated backward from there. A description of an undergraduate “writing capstone” course in the major discipline can be used as a basis for describing the goals and expectations of all courses that involve writing instruction across the curriculum, at all levels. A clear definition of what students should be able to do by their last undergraduate semester will make it possible to construct a better paradigm for all earlier writing courses. Everything from developmental writing through freshman composition through earlier levels of discipline-specific writing courses can be described as variations on these final goals, a set of graduated steps designed to allow students to progress incrementally toward where they need to end up.

If the Advanced course describes the final destination for an undergraduate writer, the Intermediate discipline-specific writing course marks a crucial transition in the life of a student writer. It is at this level that students may first begin to think of themselves as members, however provisional, of a particular disciplinary discourse community. These courses are intended primarily for majors in the field, or at least for students with more than a passing interest in the subject matter. The demands, in terms of content, may be accelerated, but the key change is that students are now being asked to begin to write in an approximation of the way that real biologists or sociologists or historians do. The “approximation” is critical: these are students who are only beginning an initiation into the community, and cannot be expected to write fully professional-level disciplinary documents as yet, although the progression toward that goal is beginning in earnest. Our Rutgers English Department, for example, offers a course called “Foundations of Literary Study” that is required of all English majors, who are supposed to take it relatively early in their college careers. It provides a systematic introduction to the basic concepts and tools that they’re going to need

as English majors—a level of detail that wouldn't be appropriate for a course which included a lot of non-majors. A lot of departments have similar courses, many of which feature extensive writing, and in general I believe they could be said to approximate the pedagogical principles described in "Intermediate Level Discipline-Specific Course" (see Part II).

All courses offer a process of initiation into a particular disciplinary community, but for many students in introductory-level courses, they're only going to be visitors, not permanent members of that community. At my institution, and I suspect at many, the most frequent type of course to be designated as "writing intensive" is a sophomore-level course that fulfills a general education requirement: students typically take this type of course immediately after completing freshman composition, and so it offers the first opportunity to transfer their newly-developed critical reading and writing skills. (See "Introductory Level Discipline-Specific Course" in Part II.) It is at this introductory level that the continuity between freshman composition and WAC/WID either does or does not mesh; this is the crucial segue in the whole unified writing curriculum. Departments in the disciplines, calibrating downward from the capstone course, offer this level of discipline-specific writing instruction for the general student population, who are emerging from the writing program courses, which have been calibrated upward from developmental writing through freshman composition. In an introductory discipline-specific writing course, instructors ought to be able to assume a certain level of competence, yes, and a certain level of familiarity with using analytical style and making interpretive arguments. But the discipline-specific writing teacher at the introductory level has to be willing to go back to composition-level skills, on occasion, for review, just as intermediate-level instructors need to spend some class time going back over introductory-level skills, and advanced-level instructors need to refresh intermediate-level expectations.

These distinctions between levels of discipline-specific writing courses already exist in practice, though they are not usually recognized or distinguished in most versions of writing intensive criteria. Students must be invited into research communities gradually, in a way that makes clear to them at every step that knowledge is produced by groupings of people, who interact principally by means of texts. John Swales suggests that a discourse community has six defining features: "common goals, participatory mechanisms, community specific genres, a highly specialized terminology, and a high general level of expertise" (29). Even introductory-level students are not just taking a course; they are visiting a community, one which they

may wish later to join as a full member. A unified writing curriculum can help to provide a road-map for the new kids in town.

II. Model of a Unified Writing Curriculum: Competencies in Reading, Writing, Critical Thinking, and Research from Freshman Composition through Three Levels of Discipline-Specific Writing Courses

In April 2000, the Council of Writing Program Administrators adopted an “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” which attempted to articulate “the common knowledge, skills, and attitudes sought by first-year composition programs.” In setting goals for “rhetorical knowledge,” “critical thinking, reading, and writing,” “processes,” and “knowledge of conventions,” the statement follows a two-part formula: first, “by the end of first year composition students should ...” and then, “faculty in all programs and departments can build on this preparation by helping students learn ...” The announced rationale for this approach was this:

As students move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, students’ abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge.

Freshman level writing is conceived here as relatively unitary, standardizable; the statement seeks what student writing should have in “common” at the end of first-year composition. Upper-level writing, by contrast, is seen as more divergent, multiplicitous, and more difficult to describe. In most institutions, the freshman program is taught by a fairly coherent group of instructors, under a single administrative structure, as opposed to the decentralized nature of the WAC experience. At the freshman level, the job of the writing instructor would seem to be not so much to induct student writers into a specific disciplinary community as to invite them to become part of a more general academic community.

The upper levels of the following model curriculum, therefore, have been described in fairly general terms; as part of its internal program review of their writing curriculum, each department would need to compose a discipline-specific version of these standards, substituting its own language for the generic descriptions. This process of articulation is perhaps the most important aspect of the curriculum development process: once departments have decided *what* they want their students to be able to do, all the rest becomes a matter of *how*.²

MODEL CURRICULUM

<i>Advanced Level Discipline-specific Writing Course:</i> Any Department's Highest-Level Undergraduate Writing Course: Senior Seminars, Honors Seminars, Senior Projects, Advanced Independent Study or Internships	Critical Thinking: Actively Contributing to the Process of Making Knowledge Students should strive to interact with their sources and their instructor in a way that demonstrates provisional membership in the disciplinary community, and an attempt to contribute, at however minimal a level, something valuable to current debates and issues within the field.
Population: All students have significant familiarity with the discipline; they probably seniors or at least juniors majoring in the department.	Reading: Advanced discipline-specific critical reading skills. Students must be able to read, analyze, understand, and respond in writing to complex, professional-level documents in their chosen field of study. At this level the instructor should feel free to assign, for example, current articles from specialized peer-reviewed journals, in the expectation that, with the aid of the instructor's guidance in class and in office hours, these graduating seniors will be able to gain a reasonable comfort with and understanding of this level of discourse.
General Goals: This is the highest level of writing achievement at the undergraduate level.	Writing: Ability to produce near-professional quality documents in discipline-specific genres using appropriate specialized language and formats. It is, of course, only the very rare undergraduate senior thesis that is readily "publishable" as is, but that is the ideal toward which we should strive. At minimum, a graduating senior should be familiar with the types of writing customarily produced by professionals in the field, and be able to produce something that at least approximates the diction, the conventions, the structures, and the ways of thinking that are endemic to the discipline.
	Research: Ability to conceive, propose, carry-out, and write a specific self-defined research project within the context of the course and the standards and procedures of the particular disciplinary field. Students are encouraged to pursue their own intellectual interests, within the purview of the particular course. The canned "writing assignment" that might be necessary at earlier levels should be avoided here. Students are now assumed to be "self-starters," having internalized the ways of thinking and codes of behavior expected of professionals in the field, and within the limits of available time (one semester, or sometimes two), they propose a topic or set of experiments or method of inquiry, which is then approved by the instructor, and carried out by the student under the instructor's supervision.

<i>Intermediate Level Discipline-specific Writing Course:</i> Courses intended primarily for majors, but not "capstone" Population: Generally these will be students who are either already majors or strongly considering majoring in a subject area, but it is a course that they will be taking relatively early in their college careers. General Goals: Students need to be initiated into the discipline; the presumption is that they will be staying awhile, perhaps the rest of their lives. Foundational ideas and professional procedures of the discipline.	Critical Thinking: Awareness of the Making of Knowledge. Ability to make specialized distinctions within key concepts, and to identify ongoing issues/areas of tension within the discipline.
	Reading: Intermediate Discipline-Specific Critical Reading Skills Students should be able to read scholarly review articles describing the state of knowledge in the field, as well as articles distilling specialized knowledge for a general audience.
	Writing: Ability to produce non-technical but discipline-informed mixed-mode documents. Ability to make an informed argument about current issues in the field using appropriate analytical language which incorporates some specialized terminology along with the student's own voice.
	Research: Becoming familiar with the current state of knowledge on a particular topic. With the guidance of the instructor and the librarian, students should be able to describe what is known, what is not known, and what is in dispute about a particular assigned topic.

<i>Introductory Level Discipline-specific Writing Course:</i> Courses with minimal prerequisites and many non-majors registered: Population: Generally these will be students without an extensive background in the field. Some may be potential future majors, but most will only be looking for a one-semester visit to the disciplinary community. One should generally assume that they have passed freshman composition, but no more—and even then one needs to keep an eye open for students who need additional support services. General Goals: Build on, reenforce, and extend the skills gained in freshman composition, flavoring its generalized analytical language extensively with the content and terminology of a particular academic discipline.	Critical Thinking: Absorbing Knowledge and Making It One's Own. Students need to actively master the material of the course, and be able to put it together in different formats, not just reciting memorized facts on exams.
	Reading: Elementary Discipline-Specific Critical Reading Skills. Students must demonstrate ability to understand key basic concepts of a field, and manipulate them in different intellectual contexts.
	Writing: Ability to express and explore key basic concepts of field. Students must use their own words, appropriate analytical language, and carefully defined technical terms to write about their understanding of course material.
	Research: Tracing Knowledge Back to Original Sources. Students should get beyond the textbook presentation of the field and demonstrate a familiarity with some of the key historical sources upon which modern distillations of specialized knowledge are based

Freshman Writing Population: Students who have successfully completed the first level of freshman writing—either second-semester freshmen, or students who have previously completed one or more courses in developmental writing before taking freshman composition. General Goals: Familiarize students with variations in discipline-specific writing conventions, and equip them with tools to adjust to the rhetorical demands they will face in upper-level writing courses.	Critical Thinking: Accommodating complexity and ambiguity.. Students need to develop the ability to hold complex or ambiguous ideas in the mind long enough to explore their ramifications in a nuanced way, without prematurely oversimplifying them. Reading: Intermediate "Culturally-Aware Citizen" Lifetime Critical Reading Skills. Students can demonstrate through close textual readings an awareness of ambiguous levels of meaning in language; can articulate a critique of a current movie or book more sophisticated than "liked it"/"hated it"; can profitably read representative genres from the disciplines, or popular approximations of them. Writing: Ability to produce essays that analyze complex texts, and defend a student's own interpretation of ambiguous layers of meaning. Students should develop the ability to articulate how various sources disagree with, partially agree with, build upon, take off from, re-apply the insights from other sources, and to do the same in their own writing. Students may be writing about expository prose from any field, but they will always be supporting their own interpretive points with appropriate evidence. Research: Synthesizing Multiple Voices: Students should be able to find and apply appropriate sources to supplement their assigned readings, and to gain a deeper understanding of their assigned subject matter using the insights of various disciplinary communities. Students must consider and interact with alternate interpretations of their chosen texts, or with sources that provide historical or other context.
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III. Before the Segue: Models for WAC-Preparatory Freshman

Composition

Under a unified writing curriculum, WAC and the freshman composition sequence are intimately intertwined. WAC proponents are constantly and justifiably re-asserting the principle that writing instruction is not only the responsibility of the writing program or the English department. It is essential that faculty in all disciplines let go of that displacement of responsibility, and take up full ownership of their charge as writing instructors in the disciplines: yes, teaching writing is your job, too, and it is essential that all departments have a carefully articulated writing curriculum.

Salutary as that reminder of shared responsibility may be to the overall purposes of WAC, it remains equally inarguable that the composition sequence forms the indispensable foundation for a student's success in upper-level writing courses. Linda H. Peterson describes the central role of freshman composition in the student's university writing experience:

The practical reality, at many institutions, is that freshman English is the one required course in writing, one that all students hold in common. What freshman English requires often defines for students what "writing" is. If freshman English is a course that asks students to read literary texts and write about them, then it represents "writing" as training in literary criticism. If freshman English instead asks students to read and write contemporary prose forms (the autobiographical essay, the character sketch, the cultural critique, and so on), then it provides an introduction to non-fiction writing. If, however, freshman English asks students to read and write various academic genres, then it may provide a foundation for writing in the disciplines. (43)

Peterson here briefly articulates three models of freshman composition that are widely practiced today, which may be designated in shorthand as: the introduction to literature model, the rhetorical forms model, and the WAC-preparatory model. Obviously the third approach will be my primary focus here, but it is worthwhile to note that these are not mutually exclusive forms. In fact, some approaches to WAC-oriented composition stress rhetorical analysis and generic competency, while the literature-based model could be conceived as part of a discipline-specific approach—the discipline in question being, of course, literary criticism.

If writing intensive courses need to be defined from the top downward, with the advanced course serving as the paradigm of which the intermediate and introductory courses are variations, the freshman writing program has to work from the bottom up, taking students from where they are as they enter college from their different backgrounds, with uneven levels of academic preparation and diverse language backgrounds. All students, regardless of their eventual major, need to reach, by the end of the second composition sequence, a relatively standardized level of achievement, what has been called “generalized academic writing concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting other’s opinions, and learning to write with authority” (MacDonald 187).

The goal, then, is to define a WAC-preparatory version of freshman composition. This involves accepting rather than contesting, for the most part, “the ‘service course’ concept of first-year composition—the idea that the course, in part, helps to prepare students for the writing assignments they will later receive in other academic disciplines” (Sutton 46).³ A further assumption would be that such upper-level WAC/WID courses already exist at a particular institution. From the perspective of the composition instructor, the primary goal then becomes to “prepare the ground for acquisition of disciplinary style—which typically takes place gradually throughout the period of undergraduate and graduate study” (Linton, Madigan, & Johnson 64). How can this “preparation” be conceived?

A good place to start is with Susan Peck MacDonald’s four stages describing a student writer’s journey from outsider to full membership in a disciplinary discourse community:

1. Nonacademic writing
2. Generalized academic writing concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting others’ opinions, and learning how to write with authority
3. Novice approximations of particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge
4. Expert, insider prose (187).

At many institutions, the first semester of freshman composition is typically concerned with what either MacDonald’s stage 1 or Peterson’s “contemporary prose forms,” or possibly with MacDonald’s stage 2, “generalized academic writing.” Bruce Sutton asks the question “does such a thing as ‘generalized academic

discourse' exist?" He concludes that it does, and argues that it is not incompatible with an insistence on "disciplinarity" (49). The second semester of freshman composition (for those institutions that require it) is the crucial transition point for students' preparedness for success in academic writing. From here, they need to be able to move ahead smoothly into introductory level discipline-specific writing courses. And yet it seems almost impossible that the transition will be smooth: so much knowledge, both explicit and tacit, will need to be absorbed before they can even begin.⁴ There are two basic strategies for that necessary preparation, for defining a composition course as WAC-preparatory: they might be called the "exemplary discipline" model and the "multi-disciplinary" model.

The exemplary discipline model (sometimes called "freshman seminars") begins with the supposition that all writing is local, situated in a particular rhetorical context, and, in academia, within a disciplinary discourse community. To pretend otherwise, to suggest that students can acquire a generalized academic language or a common linguistic competency, is, according to this view, untenable, even at the introductory level. Students thus need to pick a discipline, and stick with it for at least a semester, becoming a beginning apprentice member of that community. Thus the freshman level course, rather than remaining at MacDonald's stage 2, seeks to move toward stage 3, "novice approximations of disciplinary genres." Jonathan Monroe argues that "a first-year writing requirement embedded in the disciplines signals that all writing takes place in particular contexts, for particular purposes and audiences" (5).

The same rationale that would justify freshman seminars could also be used in partial defense of the introduction to literature model, which has been criticized as too narrow, a by-product, perhaps, of composition being housed in the English Department. But if students at the freshman writing level need to be introduced to the specific language of a discipline, then that discipline might just as well be literary criticism as anything else, especially if there are a number of other choices. Many second-semester composition courses also have a research component: students have to be introduced to the practice of writing from multiple sources that will be a key skill in their upper-level courses. Assignments that require students to seek out sources which supplement their experience of the literature by shedding light on historical context can lend a multi-disciplinary flavor.

The multi-disciplinary model of second-semester WAC-preparatory composition would call for extensive analytical writing based on texts drawn from several academic disciplines. By the end of the course students should be able to artic-

ulate the differences between the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences—what counts as knowledge in each, how each structures its written communications, what it means to be a member of a disciplinary community. Instructors could choose to structure the course around a particular theme as seen by various disciplines (e.g., dreams as interpreted by psychologists, by literary critics, by neurologists), or they might present a series of discrete units, each of which would introduce students to texts exhibiting common traits of writing in a particular field, and addressing issues important to members of that disciplinary community.

If freshman composition were a vacation to Europe, the exemplary discipline model might spend all its time in Spain, aiming at a feeling of immersion and belonging, if only for a short visit, while the multi-disciplinary model would attempt something more like a grand tour of many nations, offering only a tantalizing glimpse of each, while hoping to whet students' appetites for a more in-depth visit at a later time. The hope, of course, is that this would not turn into an "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium" confusion of genres, but rather a systematic effort to help students recognize the distinguishing features of various discipline-specific rhetorical forms. One approach would be to ask colleagues in the disciplines for examples of good writing in their fields and structure the semester around a rhetorical analysis/imitation of them (see Peterson, Merrill).

Whatever the chosen approach, the freshman writing program needs to see its mission as enabling students, at the end of the composition sequence, to make as smooth a transition as possible to the demands of disciplinary-specific writing at the introductory level. But just as crucially, discipline-oriented faculty must calibrate their writing assignments to the abilities of the post-composition student. This implies a mutual, two-way responsibility: the freshman writing program needs to ascertain exactly what kinds of writing will be assigned in these introductory disciplinary courses, while the instructors in these courses will need to be versed in what they can reasonably expect from students emerging from the composition sequence. The Unified Writing Curriculum thus can serve as a common point of reference for faculty at all levels, from developmental writing faculty teaching "basic writing" through freshman composition specialists, through faculty in the disciplines teaching specialized courses that are part of their department's writing curriculum at all levels up through the capstone course.

The process of constructing a unified writing curriculum in a university needs to proceed from both ends, both upwards and downwards at the same time. I have discussed the responsibilities of individual departments to articulate their writing goals

for their graduating majors, with introductory and intermediate courses in the disciplines building on what was accomplished in freshman composition, and creating a terraced structure of their own: sophomore-level writing courses can introduce students to the practices and conventions of a particular disciplinary community at a fairly elementary level, but still much more specifically than is possible in freshman composition; intermediate courses for majors can encourage students to deepen their understanding of what it means to function as an effective participant in an ongoing disciplinary conversation, while advanced “capstone” courses (such as senior seminars) present opportunities for students to become active contributors to the making of knowledge, operating now at a near-professional level.

Needless to say, this portrait of a unified writing curriculum is not an accurate description of the typical pedagogical situation at most institutions—in fact, it may not describe any existent curriculum. Traditional frictions continue to apply: faculty in the disciplines guard against what they view as encroachment by the composition specialists who may try to export their humanities-based notion of academic writing to places where it doesn’t belong,⁵ while the compositionists, for their part, resent the implication that they are only teaching a “service course” to prepare students for disciplinary writing, with some arguing very strongly for a more distinct and central role for the freshman writing course. (66) The entire process of constructing a Unified Writing Curriculum depends on the articulation, in conference rooms across the campus, of an internal writing curriculum for each department—and this depends on the recognition that a department needs to think of itself as actually having a writing curriculum. In such discussions, the segue with freshman composition is seldom directly thematized as a conscious concern. The goal of a unified writing curriculum may perhaps be useful principally as an ideal toward which we can aspire. But it is the absence of such an integrated progression of writing instruction that makes the development of many students’ writing ability a chancy proposition. My purpose here has been to articulate what such a unified writing curriculum—or at least one model of it—might look like.

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Notes

1. David W. Chapman traces the development of this trend from the 1980s through the 1990s, including the rise of the “freshman seminar” (54-56), and argues that freshman composition instruction remains necessary because it provides an indispensable introduction to the basics of academic discourse (57).
2. The model of the Unified Writing Curriculum included in Part II of this essay was originally developed as part of my review of our WAC program at Rutgers-Newark. That version includes specific goals for several additional levels not included here: two levels of developmental writing, and a first level of freshman composition. The full scale may be found at http://wac.newark.rutgers.edu/Administrators/Report_WAC_at_R-N.htm#Unified.

The developmental writing and freshman composition levels of the unified writing curriculum were later elaborated, revised, and adopted by an English Curriculum Review committee and are now being implemented in the Rutgers-Newark Writing Program. That version may be found at http://english.newark.rutgers.edu/01_undergrad_09_writing_program_handbook.htm#COURSE_DESCRIPTIONS.

I have retained for purposes of this essay the original “Freshman Writing II” language from the WAC report, just slightly revised, because it is both more compact and more clearly calibrated to show the differences from the various discipline-specific levels.

3. Sutton at least partially defends the “service course” concept against those (Sutton cites Kurt Spellmeyer, among others) who argue that a focus on disciplinary conventions will obscure a student’s “authentic voice.” Sutton argues persuasively that this is a false dichotomy.
4. For a summary of research on the “hidden curriculum” or “tacit knowledge” see section IV of Hall (2005).
5. See the opening pages of Waldo for a discussion of how such initiatives sometimes appear to discipline-based faculty.
6. See Sutton (52-54) for a spirited refutation of Kurt Spellmeyer’s argument that “discipline-specific writing instruction encourages both conformity and submission.”