A SURVEY OF GRADUATE WRITING COURSES

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Summary

The present survey was undertaken to discover the extent and range of graduate writing courses nationwide and the rationale for offering them, as described by deans and faculty of our population schools. The survey was modeled on two previously conducted studies of writing courses and programs, one of medical writing courses, the other of undergraduate writing programs. Our population consisted of 213 universities from the 228 included in the National Research Council Commission on Human Resources' 1982 assessment of research and doctoral programs in the United States.

One hundred and forty-four universities responded to our questionnaire. Fifty-one schools reported a total of 78 graduate writing courses; 93 schools reported no such courses. Most of the courses described are aimed at beginning graduate students, and most are optional or recommended rather than required. However, they are legitimate components of their respective programs, offered on a regular basis and involving the same amount of class time as other courses. The courses generally emphasize professional or a combination of professional and scholarly writing rather than scholarly writing alone, and are most frequently taught by full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty within the department offering the course.

Of the remaining 93 schools, 41 gave a number of reasons why they do not offer graduate writing courses. The largest single group grants some importance to writing instruction at the graduate level, but would rather this instruction were accomplished through means
other than fully enfranchised writing courses. The second largest group feels that writing instruction should not be a major area of concern in graduate programs. Implicit in the negative responses is the assumption that writing instruction properly belongs in the earliest stages of a university education. This view, often deeprooted, may nonetheless be changing in the face of the great amount of attention recently directed towards writing and communication skills at all levels of education.

**Background and Purpose of Survey**

Since its inception in 1980, UCLA Writing Programs has offered a number of graduate-level writing courses in various formats—full quarter courses, one-day workshops, brief presentations—and in various departments and professional schools: History, Library Science, Architecture and Urban Planning, Dentistry, Military Science, Business Management, and Social Welfare. These courses were designed to meet a need identified by graduate faculty, who felt that many students needed help in meeting the rigorous demands of writing a Master's or Ph.D. thesis or reporting on highly technical research.

We undertook this survey primarily to discover how much and what kinds of writing instruction at the graduate level were available at universities nationwide. We also wished to gather general information about how existing courses had been established and to discover if there were characteristic objections raised against such courses. If there were, then the survey might establish a common ground for discussion and resolution of those objections. We see the survey as a reconnaissance mission into uncharted territory—territory for which many teachers and administrators have expressed the desire for a map. The authors of the University of Texas National Survey of College and University Writing Program Directors (1981) report that many directors of undergraduate writing programs felt that "questions addressing specifically graduate-level offerings in composition and the teaching of writing might have yielded additional useful information" (p. 119). Frequently respondents to that survey expressed their need for information about other institutions, and respondents to our survey expressed the same need: 125 out of 144 respondents wanted to see the survey's final results.
Survey Method and Population

We followed two models for the survey's format and content: a form used successfully by our colleague, Dr. Robert Bjork (1983), to survey writing courses in American medical schools, and the University of Texas National Survey of College and University Writing Program Directors. As our survey population we used the 228 universities included in the National Research Council Commission on Human Resources' 1982 assessment of research and doctoral programs in the United States. From this 228 we excluded the 15 medical schools from which Dr. Bjork had received information about writing courses. In June 1983, then, we contacted 213 schools, sending them the survey form contained in the Appendix. In November 1983 we sent a follow-up letter to those schools that had not yet responded.

Limitations of the Survey Format

In conducting their survey of undergraduate writing programs, the University of Texas team received many objections to the length of their form and the time it took to complete. We elected to use a much shorter form, feeling that the virtues of brevity outweighed the risks. Rather than attempting to control response strictly by asking a large number of questions, we sought a combination of quantitative and discursive data. The survey's brevity may reduce its validity and reliability somewhat. But since our purpose was descriptive, since we were gathering information rather than testing a hypothesis, strict statistical validity seemed a secondary concern.

Some of the data we gathered—on course rationales, on the differences between undergraduate and graduate writing courses—can only be paraphrased, not quantified or tabulated. In other cases we found that our question design did not result in a set of tenable categories. Many courses, for instance, could not be categorized according to the department or division in which they are offered. They cut across disciplinary boundaries, or they are offered by one department (frequently English) for students in other departments. And sometimes respondents did not answer one or more questions. This accounts for discrepancies where the number of courses analyzed in a particular sub-section does not match the total number of courses surveyed.
Results From Schools Offering Graduate Writing Courses

We received 144 responses to our questionnaire. Of these respondents, 51 reported offering graduate-level writing courses, and they supplied details of 78 separate courses. For the purposes of the survey, we defined "graduate-level writing course" as a course that focuses primarily on writing for an academic or professional field. We did not include in our definition courses in bibliographic or research methods, in creative writing, or in writing for the media.

Population for Which the Courses are Designed

Some respondents did not provide specific information on the level of student that the courses are designed for. The courses for which we did receive that information can be broken down as follows:

- 24 courses are designed for all levels of graduate student.
- 18 courses are designed for Master's students.
- 5 courses are designed for doctoral students.
- 1 course is designed for postdoctoral students.
- 2 respondents indicated that faculty also took their writing courses; and
- 1 course is offered to undergraduates and Master's students simultaneously.

These responses show that most courses are designed either solely for beginning graduate students or for graduate students at all levels. Very few courses are designed specifically for advanced graduate students. This emphasis could suggest one of two things: either many graduate schools find that the undergraduate degree has prepared their students inadequately for more demanding written work, and they wish to correct that problem; or the schools feel that graduate work requires a particular kind of writing in which they have a responsibility of offer instruction. Either conclusion, however, seems to represent a sound rationale for offering writing courses at the graduate level.

Course Status: Required or Recommended?

31 courses surveyed are "optional" or "elective" but recom-
mended; 15 are required. Only tentative conclusions can be drawn from these results. The smaller number of required courses could result from lack of perceived need, lack of funds, or from a reluctance to impose further required work on already busy students. Most courses appear to be advanced courses in a wide range of fields: Public Administration, Law, Business, Technical Communications, Physics, Chemistry, Entomology, Urban Studies, Computer Science, Sociology, Anthropology, English. Only 4 of the respondents report that their required courses could be called "remedial," in the sense that they are required for students who fail a diagnostic test.

Course Structure

This list summarizes (1) the number of hours per session that the courses surveyed meet; (2) the number of sessions per week; (3) the length of the course; and (4) the number of times per year it is offered.

(1) Hours per session that course meets
- 15 courses meet 3 hours or more per session.
- 28 courses meet 1-2 hours per session.
- 1 course meets 2 and 1/2 hours per session, and another varies.

(2) Number of sessions per week
- 30 courses meet once a week.
- 4 courses meet 2-3 times a week.

(3) Duration of course
- 43 courses meet for a full school term—either a full semester, trimester, or quarter.
- 2 courses meet for 6 weeks.

(4) Frequency with which course is offered
- 23 courses are offered once a year.
- 15 courses are offered more than once a year.
- 3 vary in their frequency; 2 are offered biannually.

In terms of class hours, all the courses surveyed are considered full-time courses by their institutions. They meet as frequently and for the same number of hours as any other class, and usually run throughout the school term. The courses are also considered important enough to be offered regularly: at least once a year, in 38 out of 43 cases.
Course emphasis

Courses are split almost equally between stressing professional writing and a combination of professional and scholarly writing. We define professional writing as any kind of writing that a student will do in a non-academic career. We define scholarly writing as writing required solely for training as a scholar. While we acknowledge areas of overlap—academic physicians, for instance, produce both medical scholarship and non-scholarly, "everyday" prose—these definitions remain useful for categorizing the courses surveyed.

Course emphasis broke down as follows:

- 22 courses emphasize non-scholarly professional writing.
- 16 courses emphasize a combination of professional writing and writing for scholarly publication.
- 9 courses emphasize writing for scholarly publication.

Interpreting these results, we can see that most courses surveyed have an exclusive or at least strong orientation toward what we have called professional writing: 38 of 47 courses either stress or include such a component.

Course rationale

Of the 51 descriptions of course rationales that we received, 2 were cryptically phrased and could not easily be categorized: their only stated rationale was the vague one of helping students to write better. The remaining 49 can be divided into four groups, on the basis of what we understand to be the course's main focus. Naturally a number of courses cut across these boundaries and may have a twofold or threefold purpose; these figures represent our interpretation and categorization of each course's primary focus.

In the largest group, of 21, courses stress advanced written and oral communication skills for prospective technical, legal, and business professionals. In the next largest group, of 14, writing for scholarly and professional publication is stressed. Thirdly, 9 courses focus on improving students' writing for graduate work in their selected disciplines. The smallest group, of 5, comprises courses that are designed either for underprepared or for second-language students. These results confirm the orientation toward professional writing that our question on course emphasis revealed.
Course format and size

Forty-six respondents provided information on course format and size. Sixteen courses use primarily a workshop format, 24 a combination of workshop, lecture, and discussion. Only 6 stress a lecture/discussion approach. With a few notable exceptions, courses have between 10 and 20 students. The exceptions: one class is offered for 120 students, three others for 30, 30, and 35 respectively, and two more, at the opposite end of the scale, for 6 and 7. The average number of students per course is 16.3.

Who teaches the courses?

Forty-eight of 61 courses are taught by faculty within the department or program that offers the course. Of these 48, 25 are taught by fulltime tenured faculty, 13 by fulltime tenure-track faculty. Ten are taught by faculty below the rank of assistant professor. The 13 courses not taught by faculty within the program offering the course are covered by a variety of faculty: fulltime tenured and tenure-track faculty, fulltime non-tenure-track and parttime faculty, outside consultants. These results show clearly that most institutions are willing to devote tenured or tenurable FTE to their graduate writing courses.

Instructors' Background

Of the 44 instructors who discussed their professional background, 28 had been trained in a Department of English, and most hold a Ph.D. in a literary field. 12 of this group specified, however, that they also had various kinds of training or experience in technical or professional writing—as publishing writers, as editors, as consultants. The 16 faculty with non-English backgrounds who teach writing courses come from a variety of fields: Law, Biological Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Education, Music History, Psychology, Linguistics, Organizational Behavior, Botany. They share, however, extensive experience as publishing scholars, journal editors, and business and government consultants in their respective fields.

These results show that graduate-level writing courses typically are taught by faculty with two kinds of background: faculty who
have been trained as literary scholars but who have experience in other kinds of writing, or specialists in a given field who are also active publishing scholars and editors. Although most courses—33 out of 37—are field-specific and not offered to a campus-wide audience, many schools consider faculty with an English background competent to teach the discourse and conventions of another field if they have some experience in that field.

Comparison of undergraduate and graduate writing courses

Forty-two instructors responded to the question "Do you also teach any undergraduate writing courses?" Of that number, 22 do teach undergraduate writing courses; 14 do not; 6 have done so until recently. Twenty-eight of the 42, then, are qualified by experience to comment on the differences between undergraduate and graduate writing courses; and 26 did indeed comment on these differences.

Perceived differences between undergraduate and graduate courses usually come down to differences between the two kinds of student, and can be summarized as follows:

1. Graduate students are more motivated, more serious, and work harder.
2. Because they know a field in some depth, they have more to say in their writing.
3. They accept criticism more readily.
4. They see more clearly than undergraduates the value and relevance of a writing course.

The differences between the students translate into these commonly repeated differences between the courses:

1. In graduate courses faculty tend to move faster, deal with their course material in greater depth and complexity, and are more likely to incorporate difficult theoretical material.
2. Graduate courses are often more oriented toward producing work publishable in a scholarly or professional journal.
3. Faculty have higher expectations of graduate students.

Interestingly, only three faculty see little difference between undergraduate and graduate writing courses. The majority see the graduate writing course as definably different from any undergraduate courses.
Results From Schools Not Offering Graduate Writing Courses

Ninety-three respondents reported no graduate writing course offerings that fit our definition. We had asked them to describe briefly their reasons for not offering graduate writing courses, and to tell us whether they foresaw a need for such courses. Responses to this question ranged from a curt "no courses offered" to a statement of a particular dean's or university's philosophy of education.

To begin with the later half of our question, 16 of these 93 respondents saw a clear need for graduate writing courses, either at present or in the near future. The reasons why these 16 schools nonetheless do not offer these courses are:

- Budgetary restraints: 6 schools.
- Lack of qualified faculty: 2 schools.
- Lack of faculty or student interest/support: 7 schools.
- Difficulty in defining such courses: 1 school.

Four of the above 16 respondents, however, mentioned definite plans to introduce graduate writing courses.

The remaining 76 respondents either did not mention whether they foresaw a need for graduate writing courses, or specifically stated that they foresaw no need for such courses. These respondents described a variety of reasons why their institutions did not offer any graduate writing courses. Although 35 respondents gave no reasons, the remaining 41 mentioned a range of reasons that may be grouped into the following categories:

1. 17 respondents who see some form of writing instruction as important to graduate work, but who see no need for writing courses per se.
   - a. 11 respondents described alternative methods for providing writing instruction (usually individual advisors, tutors, or writing labs).
   - b. 6 respondents described non-credit, department-specific offerings that provide some writing instruction (thesis seminars, research methods courses, seminars, etc.).
2. 13 respondents who think writing instruction should not be a major area of concern in graduate programs.
   - a. 5 respondents believed that writing instruction should occur only at the undergraduate level.
   - b. 8 respondents assumed that students accepted to their graduate programs were proficient writers.
Four respondents concluded that there was no need for graduate writing courses at their universities because no one had expressed such a need; 3 others reported that their institutions' programs are too "specialized" (either in scientific or technical fields) to require the kind of broadly conceived courses that we outlined; 4 respondents reported that graduate-level writing assistance at their universities is aimed exclusively at remedial and/or ESL students.

Conclusions

It seems fairly clear that many of the respondents who see no need for graduate writing courses base their positions on what may be called a traditional view of the university curriculum. They believe that formal writing instruction properly belongs in the earliest stages of a university education. Any subsequent writing instruction that may be necessary should be informal, individualized, and ideally should take place in a practical context, such as during the actual writing of a thesis. Proponents of this view may admit an occasional need for a more formal context in which graduate writing instruction can occur—thesis workshops or research colloquia—but these quasi-courses are not held to be fully legitimate components of a graduate program. These respondents, then, do not believe that writing instruction offered through a formal course should be a standard part of a graduate student's program of study.

This view implies not only that writing should be learned early but also that it should be learned only once. Respondents often assume that any attention to writing skills beyond the standard undergraduate composition class constitutes "remediation." And "remediation" is not the goal of graduate instruction. This last assumption we would accept. We would add two points, however. Firstly, no satisfactory definition of "remediation" exists. For example, does the second-language instruction needed by many foreign graduate students represent "remediation?" Many institutions will insist not. And secondly, whatever definition they choose to employ, most schools surveyed emphatically do not regard the graduate writing instruction that they offer as "remedial." A number say explicitly that remediation is not their goal: "Graduate writing courses assume some competence in writing (or the student should be referred back to an undergraduate course)." Most graduate writing courses surveyed
cover professional and scholarly subject matter not dealt with at the undergraduate level, and most faculty have higher expectations of their graduate students than of their undergraduates. At the same time, very few say that their graduate students write much better than their undergraduates; rather, the graduates know more, work harder, and think better. This set of data suggests that while faculty agree that many graduate students do need to improve their communication skills, the courses designed to meet that need should and typically do go far beyond anything usually offered at the undergraduate level.

The belief that advanced courses in writing can address the specific needs of graduate students is in keeping with recent research in composition theory. In particular, research on the cognitive dimension of the composing process has yielded results that pertain directly to the issue of advanced writing instruction. A student learns complex subject matter better by writing about it—by having to summarize it, synthesize it, and use it to solve research problems. The processes she goes through as she plans such discourse and the linguistic choices she makes as she commits it to appear have received a good deal of study, and these studies have important ramifications for instruction. (See, for example, Britton et al, 1975; Emig, 1977; Flower and Hayes, 1979, 1980; Nystrand, 1982.)

Hence, even though writing instruction at the graduate level has traditionally been considered remedial, these recent trends in composition theory indicate that we should reexamine our old notions and view such instruction as analogous to traditional instruction in research methodology; both should be considered essential for advanced work in any discipline. There should be a forum for the transmission of these developments in writing theory and style as they apply to a student's particular discipline; many graduate students have not had formal training in writing since freshman English, a course whose purpose is not to serve as an orientation to professional publication. Specific format and writing conventions vary from discipline to discipline, moreover; to write successfully in their field, students need instruction in these conventions as surely as they do in field-specific research techniques.

These practical and theoretical reasons for teaching writing at the graduate level have one clear implication: writing is an integral part of advanced research. Instruction in writing is instruction in thinking. Thus, like traditional instruction in research methodology, making students aware of the conventions of writing in their field will
contribute to their ability to engage in significant research. Keeping students abreast of new developments in writing theory and style will enhance their ability to report their research efficiently and reach audiences effectively. In short, writing instruction at the graduate and pre-professional level should not be seen as remedial but rather as a central part of a student's professional training.

Although numerous respondents to the survey show an often deep-rooted resistance to the idea of offering regular graduate courses to teach advanced, frequently specialized writing techniques, they also recognize the emergence of this countering view. One graduate dean, whose response perhaps epitomizes the traditional view we have described, "assumes that the ability to write the processes and results of research is a natural by-product of a thorough education," but acknowledges the importance at least of keeping abreast of "what others perceive to be the needs in this area, and what they are doing." Hence, 69 of those 93 submitting negative responses still requested a copy of the survey results, confirming what emerged from our data as probably the central conclusion: "Attention should be paid nation-wide to the need for graduate composition courses and the attendant need for cross-disciplinary interest in the teaching of such courses."

University of Mississippi
Oxford, Mississippi

University of California
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Works Cited


