


The Role of First-Year Seminars in College-Level Writing Instruction

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 **National Resource Center for
The First-Year Experience®
& Students in Transition**
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA



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Session Agenda

- Brief literature review
- What we know about writing and first-year seminars
- Discussion
 - Role of writing in a range of seminar types
 - Faculty development
 - Connection to institutional writing goals /program

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Inquiry-Based First-Year Seminar

The focal point of the first year should be a small seminar taught by experienced faculty. The seminar should deal with topics that stimulate and open intellectual horizons and allow opportunities for learning by inquiry in a collaborative environment. . . .it should enable a professor to imbue new students with a sense of the excitement of discovery and the opportunities for intellectual growth inherent in the university experience. (Boyer Commission, 1998, qtd. in Brent, 2005, pp. 256-257.)

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Writing Instruction in the First-Year Seminar

Possibilities

- Avoids perception of remediation
- Changes faculty & student views about writing and education in general
- “excellent vehicle for introducing students to academic discourse in a research-intensive context” (Brent, 2005, p. 263)

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Writing Instruction in the First-Year Seminar

Possibilities

- Method for accomplishing WAC goals “in a WAC-resistant environment” (Brent, p. 264)
- Enhance faculty development opportunities

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Writing Instruction in the First-Year Seminar

Problems

- More expensive
- Better suited to “private baccalaureate liberal arts schools” and “more selective private schools” (Moon, 2003, p. 107)
- Writing taught by those not trained to teach writing

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Writing Instruction in the First-Year Seminar

Problems

- Emphasis on content rather than rhetorical competence or skill development may put some students at a disadvantage

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Writing Skills as a Seminar Goal

Academic w/ Variable Content

- “Seminars introduce students to the critical thinking and writing skills required in college and include a particular emphasis on intercultural understanding in keeping with the international focus of the college.” (Kalamazoo College, p. 75)
- “Seminars are intended to help students find and develop a voice through writing, speaking, analytical reading, discussion, and critical thinking. They integrate collaborative and group work, peer review, and effective discussions.” (Kalamazoo College, p. 76)

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Writing Skills as a Seminar Goal

Extended Orientation/Linked Course

English faculty's goal for program:

- Ability to write effective thesis statement
- Ability to write convincing argument with acceptable grammar, punctuation, and mechanics
- Develop skills in critical reading (p. 128, Rocky Mountain College)

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Writing Skills as a Seminar Goal

Extended Orientation

Most instructors stress a set of 7 common goals, including “incorporate a variety of skills essential to academic and personal success (i.e., written communication, oral communication, self-reflection, organization, critical thinking, and the ability to synthesize ideas and information)” (p. 176, University of North Carolina at Charlotte)

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Overview of Respondents

2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (N = 892)

	Number	Percentage
Extended Orientation	354	39.7%
Academic (Uniform)	139	15.6%
Academic (Variable)	135	15.1%
Basic Study Skills	42	4.7%
Pre-Professional	32	3.6%
Hybrid	132	14.8%
Other	30	3.4%

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Writing Skills as a Seminar Goal

Writing as an Important Course Goal by Institution Type (N = 107)

	Number	Percentage
Two-Year (n = 237)	15	6.3%
Four-Year (n = 655)	92	14%
Public (n = 465)	27	5.8%
Private (n = 369)	75	20.3%
For-Profit (n = 58)	5	8.6%

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Writing Skills as a Seminar Goal

Writing as an Important Course Goal by Seminar Type (N = 107)

	Number	Percentage
Extended Orientation	11	3.1%
Academic (Uniform)	27	19.4%
Academic (Variable)	51	37.8%
Basic Study Skills	6	14.3%
Pre-Professional	1	3.1%
Hybrid	9	13.3%

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Writing Skills as Course Topic

	2003 (N = 621)	2006 (N = 821)	2009 (N = 892)
All Seminars	30.9%	21.7%	17.0%
Extended Orientation	12.9%	5.1%	5.4%
Academic (Uniform)	45.0%	37.3%	28.8%
Academic (Variable)	73.5%	56.5%	51.8%
Basic Study Skills	32.4%	8.9%	9.5%
Pre-Professional	17.6%	8.3%	3.1%
Hybrid*	---	16.0%	12.9%

*Hybrid category introduced on 2006 survey.

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Connection to Innovative Course Practice

	Writing Skills as Goal/Topic	Writing Skills Not Identified
Extended Orientation (n = 21)	3	18
Academic (Uniform) (n = 23)	12	11
Academic (Variable) (n = 23)	19	4
All Other Types (n = 16)	5	11

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Writing Assignments Offered

Assignment	EO (n = 14)	AUC (n = 34)	AVC (n = 59)
Research Papers	2	7	18
Formal Essays	0	9	20
Process Approach	1	5	21
Journals	2	5	11
Reaction/ Reflection Papers	7	4	7
Personal Writing	3	10	4
Informal Writing	2	5	8
Peer Review	0	2	10

Note. 131 respondents provided descriptions of writing assignments in the seminar.

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Links to Writing-Intensive Courses


	English	Developmental English	Composition
EO (<i>n</i> = 129)	13	8	15
AUC (<i>n</i> = 43)	4	3	6
AVC (<i>n</i> = 40)	4	3	4
All Other Types (<i>n</i> = 64)	6	5	8
Total	27	19	33

Note. 284 respondents provided descriptions of learning community structures.

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Is Writing Improved?



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Discussion

- What role might writing play in a variety of types of seminars—not just the academic seminar?
 - Learning to write vs. writing to learn
- How might students benefit from its inclusion?

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Discussion

- What are some of the obstacles to incorporating an emphasis on writing in the seminar?
- What kinds of faculty development initiatives are needed to support writing instruction or the use of writing in the first-year seminar?

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Discussion

- How does or might the seminar support larger institutional goals related to student writing?
- How might the writing program administrator support writing instruction in the seminar, especially in non-academic seminar models?

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Thank you!

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