

**Date:** January 12, 2017

**To:** Writing Across the Curriculum Committee Members

**From:** Michelle LaFrance, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum

**CC:** Bethany Usher, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education  
E. Shelley Reid, Director Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence

**Subject:** **Reading Assignments in WI Courses**

In fall of 2016, as part of its on-going Re/View project, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program staff conducted a review of syllabi from all WI courses on record in all colleges and schools offering undergraduate majors (62 academic units in total). This process entailed the review of 107 syllabi from 86 different WI courses collected during the spring 2015, fall 2015, and a few previous semesters.

Our review of syllabi focused on answering one question: What types of texts are students assigned to read in WI courses? In order to answer this question, WAC Program staff recorded reading assignments into several major categories.

Following is a report of our main findings.

### **Detailed Report**

We faced some constraints in using syllabi to determine the type and amount of reading students would be exposed to over the course of the semester. For this review, the WAC Program did not include readings that were designated as optional. We did, however, consider writing assignments that required research from scholarly sources to equate to the assigning of academic articles. That is, we considered any class that assigned a research paper involving scholarly sources as also assigning the reading of academic articles.

Additionally, the “other” category was largely comprised of reference materials (e.g. the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* or *The Bedford Handbook*). This category also included such texts as films, course packets, and unidentified readings.

For this review, we did not count the number of readings assigned because of the inconsistency with which readings were discussed in syllabi. Syllabi often adopted one of two approaches to describing the course readings: either the readings were explicitly described in a semester schedule or the readings were simply described by type (e.g. “this semester, we will be reading newspaper and journal articles.”). The variability of description precluded our ability to consistently count the number of readings assigned.

### ***Results of Syllabi Review***

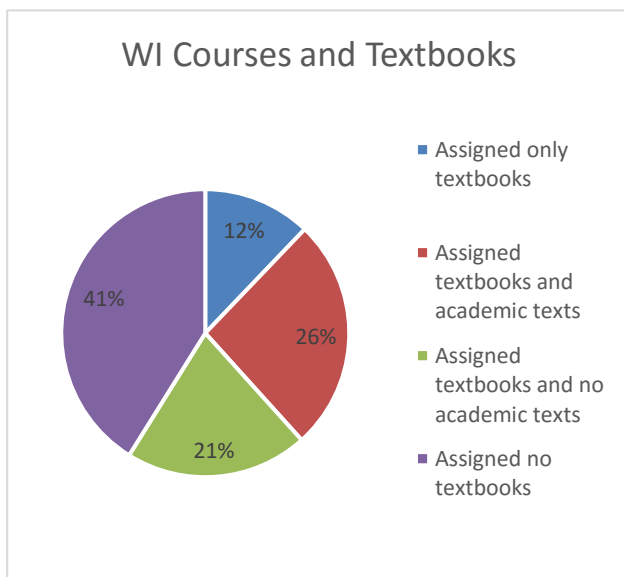
106 (99%) of the 107 syllabi reviewed clearly assigned some type of reading. The following table displays a breakdown of the type of reading and how many courses assigned that type of reading:

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| Textbooks                                    | 63 courses (59%) |
| Academic Articles (journals and books)       | 63 (59%)         |
| Academic Books and Monographs                | 27 (25%)         |
| Journalism and Popular Media                 | 10 (9%)          |
| Creative Writing                             | 10 (9%)          |
| Other (reference materials, handbooks, etc.) | 48 (45%)         |

75 courses (70%) assigned two or more types of readings, but no course assigned all types of readings. Courses most frequently assigned two types of readings (44 courses or 41%).

### Conclusions

The WAC Program’s interest in reading is based on students’ learning the language and genres of their disciplines and the ways in which professionals engage language practices in their disciplines. For this reason, WAC is particularly interested in the use of academic texts and how instructors can develop our students’ facility with their respective academic languages. Thus, we are encouraged to see that a majority of WI classes are assigning academic texts; 70 courses (65%) assigned at least one of the *academic articles* or *academic books* categories that we used to code our data collection. It should be noted, however, that texts not classified as “academic” can be treated in an academic way. For instance, students in some courses were assigned both creative writing texts and films. For these courses, we can assume that the treatment of these texts would be academic or critical in nature.



With that in mind, we find the frequency of textbooks assigned surprising. 63 (59%) WI courses included in this review assigned a textbook; 28 (26%) WI courses assigned a textbook with at least one other text that was an academic text, 22 (21%) WI courses assigned a textbook with at least one other text type that was not an academic text, and 13 (12%) WI courses assigned only a textbook with no indication of additional readings. While textbooks provide valuable information, some may limit opportunities for students to interact with disciplinary

language practices and scholarly conventions.

Finally, we are encouraged by the fact that a majority of courses require students to interact with multiple types of texts. Writing and literacy scholars generally advocate that students' literacy matures more fully when they are exposed to multiple types of language use. Diversity in the types of texts students read can provide faculty an effective way to discuss language in general and the differences between academic and nonacademic language practices more specifically.

### ***Recommended Actions***

Based on this review, the WAC Program will encourage faculty to follow these best practices for teaching with writing:

- Continue using or consider adopting more academic texts as models and sources of information
- Continue requiring students to read a variety/types of texts

Based on the types of reading identified in this WI syllabi review process, we make the following recommendations to departments:

- *Offer explicit support for and encouragement of faculty development in how explicit reading instruction supports student writing development*, which can be achieved at the department level through short workshops on, for example, reading assignments and support, assignment design and developing "writing situation" awareness through assignments; through departmental writing assessment workshops; and, more generally, through venues such as the Innovations in Teaching and Learning Conference sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence.
- *In annual reviews, acknowledge and reward faculty who consistently demonstrate their willingness to teach WI courses because they are committed to helping students learn to read and write well in the major*. This is particularly important given studies that show that course evaluations tend to be lower for faculty in the disciplines when they take student writing seriously in their courses.
- *Encourage departments to standardize their WI course syllabi*. When a course is taught by a new faculty member each semester or offering, the requirements and the expectations of the course can drift away from the original descriptions approved by the WAC committee. Even small changes can make a substantial impact on the writing instruction that takes place within a course. Departments that standardize the WI syllabus could prevent some of the drift when the course is taught by a new faculty member each semester.
- *Encourage departments to assign WI courses to full-time professors*. If this is overly difficult or not possible, departments should consider assigning a full-time faculty member to coordinate WI courses and mentor new or part-time instructors.

To increase awareness about the gains for students who undertake low stakes writing tasks and that come of exposure to multiple, quite different writing situations, the WAC director will undertake the following actions:

- Send pre-semester emails to all faculty teaching WI courses providing resources for support for student reading development, including attachments on low stakes writing, responding to writing, and support for research activities.

The WAC committee extends its thanks to all faculty members who are committed to teaching effectively with writing and to helping students achieve the learning and writing goals valued in the course and the curriculum.