

**Date:** January 10, 2017

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

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**CC:** Bethany Usher, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education  
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**Subject:** **Types of Writing 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 writing are being assigned in WI courses? In order to answer this question, WAC Program staff recorded writing assignments as listed on syllabi into two major categories (high stakes and low stakes) and several subcategories (different genres).

Following is a report of our main findings.

### **Detailed Report**

Since the mid-1970s, genre has become a central concept in the field of writing studies. Traditionally classified through the recurrence of formal features or conventions, genre has come to be defined as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller, 1984, p. 159).<sup>1</sup> That is, writing studies scholars associate the formal features of genres with the roles the specific texts play in performing different aspects of situated social action. An attention to genre is important for students and faculty in WI courses as effective writing entails refining and revising the recurring features of a text, aligning that text’s elements with a variety of rhetorical features (purpose, audience, and conventions).

For this report, we identified genres largely through the basic function or purpose the writing is expected to perform. Therefore, our categories reflect actions (analysis) more than documents (a lab report). In some cases, categories are identified by document type because the assignment descriptions either lacked sufficient details (e.g., the “generic” categories) or were very specific documents (e.g., essay exams). This report also includes “presentations” and other orally-performed genres (such as leading discussion), because these genres typically include a large amount of written preparation and interaction with disciplinary language.

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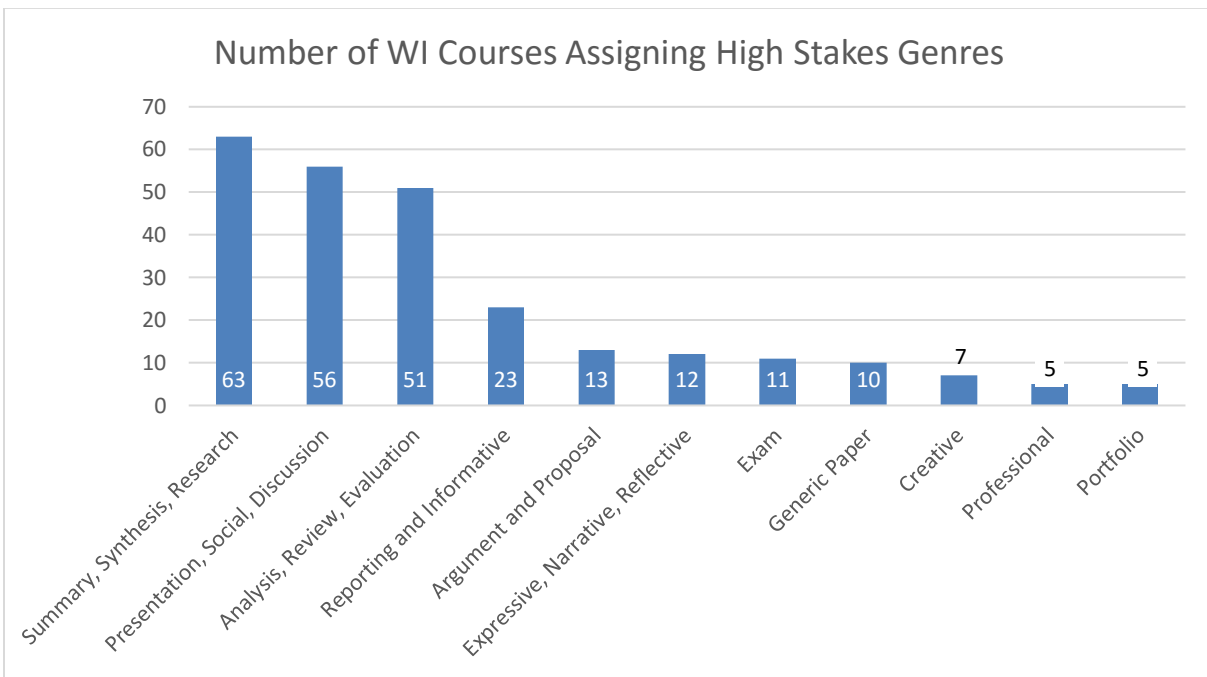
<sup>1</sup> Miller, C. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-167.

We classified the genres we identified into two broad categories: low stakes and high stakes writing. Low stakes writing is defined as writing that is assigned to perform a formative and developmental role in the classroom (writing-to-learn or writing with minimal impact upon a student’s final score in the course). High stakes writing was defined through its summative and “weighted” characteristics (often occurring outside of class, demonstrates learning or “mastery,” was not revised, and generally had an impactful weight on the final grade). All of the assignments in a scaffolded project (e.g., a research project divided into a proposal, annotated bibliography, and one or multiple drafts) were considered high stakes assignments.

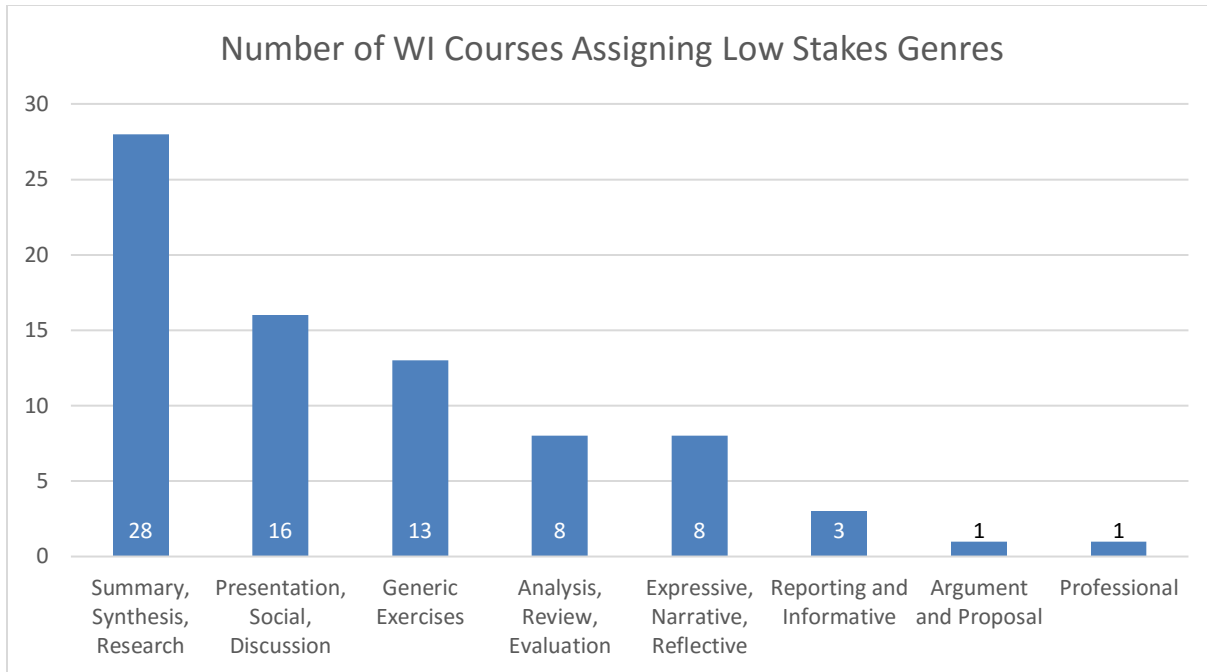
**Results of Syllabi Review**

*Percentage of High Stakes and Low Stakes Writing*

- 105 (98%) of the 107 syllabi assigned high stakes writing assignments.
- 53 (50%) of the syllabi indicated some form of low stakes writing.



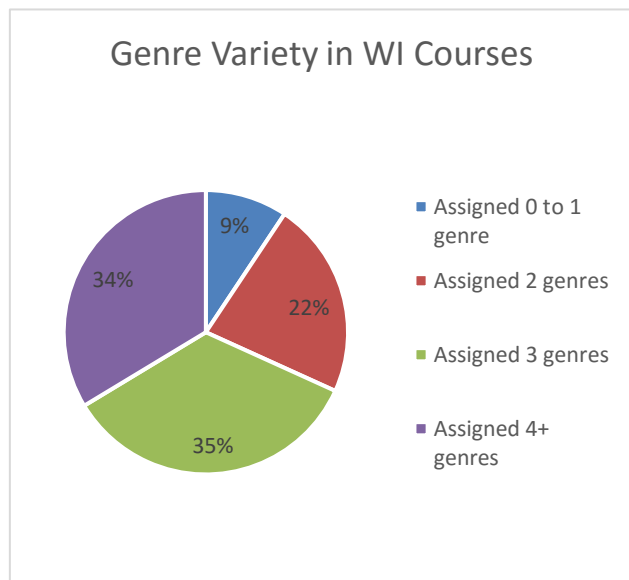
*\* A table listing numbers and percentages is appended to this report.*



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The average number of high stakes writing assignments per WI course is 3.9 (ranging from 0-11), and the average number of low stakes assignments is 2.9 (ranging from 0-23). This creates a 1 to 0.74 average ratio of high stakes to low stakes writing assignments. The most frequent number of high stakes writing assignments per course was 3 (34 courses or 32%), and the most frequent number of low stakes assignments was 0 (54 courses or 50%).

Finally, 97 (91%) of the reviewed syllabi describe 2 or more types of writing assignments and 73 (68%) WI syllabi assign 3 or more different types of writing. WI courses most frequently assigned 3 different types of writing assignments (37 courses or 35%) with a range of 0 to 7 different types of writing assignments.



### **Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of the findings presented in this report. First, a syllabus does not equate to the full curriculum a student experiences in the classroom. As educators, we recognize the amount of work and teaching that occurs in a classroom that might not be listed on a syllabus. We believe that this is particularly important to our data collection of low

stakes writing. Many instructors would not describe at length in their syllabi all of the low stakes writing that they assign in a semester; we do believe, however, that most instructors would indicate some kind of low stakes writing activity during the semester. While our numbers might not represent the total number of low stakes writing assignments in each course, we do believe that a syllabus can provide a good indication of the use of low stakes writing as a pedagogical tool.

Additionally, the decision to place documents described on a syllabus into our categories might differ if performed by other reviewers. This is largely derivative of the hybridity of many writing assignments which ask students to perform multiple functions in one document. The most obvious example would be an analysis that requires research; this could potentially fit into two different categories that we used for this review. We decided to categorize any writing that included research into the “Summary, Synthesis, and Research” category, but other reviewers might choose differently.

### ***Conclusions***

While reviewing a syllabus may not provide the most accurate or complete picture of the writing that occurs in a WI course, it does provide some valuable insight. WAC Program staff are encouraged that WI faculty frequently assign multiple formal writing projects: 91 of the reviewed syllabi (85%) mentioned 3 or more formal writing assignments. We are also encouraged by the variety of writing occurring in WI courses. Writing researchers advocate that students should interact with and produce a variety of genres in order to develop a broader and more flexible facility with writing.

Furthermore, the number of formal, oral presentations is a good sign. For this review, we categorized any assignments that required students to orally present course information (including their own research) to their classmates as a presentation. We also included in this category assignments that required students to lead class discussions or interact with classmates through some type of communication network, like a discussion board or blog. This type of writing provides students with the opportunity to communicate with a more immediate and concrete audience. The tangibility of this audience stands in contrast to the audience established in most writing assignments that appear directed toward professors as generic readers.

A concern for the WAC Program staff, however, is the low frequency of low stakes writing. WAC pedagogy strongly endorses low stakes writing as an effective strategy to help students learn both disciplinary content and communication. The data collected here demonstrates that students more frequently write in high stakes, evaluative situations and less frequently in situations that might provide opportunities for students to explore, experiment, or reflect on course content.

### ***Recommended Actions***

Based on this review, the WAC Program will encourage faculty to incorporate into their WI courses the following best practices for teaching with writing:

- Increase the number of low stakes writing assignments.
- Increase or continue to assign a variety of writing types.
- Create audiences and writing contexts that expand beyond the traditional assignment design of writing to the professor as generic reader.

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

- *Offer explicit support for and encouragement of faculty development in teaching with writing*, which can be achieved at the department level through short workshops on, for example, 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 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 WI course and writing assignment design, including attachments on low stakes writing, responding to writing, and writing in large classes.

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.

## **Appendix**

### Numbers and Percentages of WI Courses Assigning High Stakes Writing Projects

Summary, Synthesis, Research	63 syllabi (59%)
Presentation, Social, Discussion	56 (52%)
Analysis, Review, Evaluation	51 (48%)
Reporting and Informative	23 (21%)
Argument and Proposal	13 (12%)
Expressive, Narrative, Reflective	12 (11%)
Exam	11 (10%)
Generic Paper	10 (9%)
Creative	7 (7%)
Professional	5 (5%)
Portfolio	5 (5%)

### Numbers and Percentages of WI Courses Assigning Low Stakes Writing Projects

Summary, Synthesis, Research	28 syllabi (26%)
Presentation, Social, Discussion	16 (15%)
Generic Exercises	13 (12%)
Analysis, Review, Evaluation	8 (7%)
Expressive, Narrative, Reflective	8 (8%)
Reporting and Informative	3 (3%)
Argument and Proposal	1 (1%)
Professional	1 (1%)