



University of Washington
Office of Educational Assessment

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97-2

**The Freshman/Sophomore Writing
Experience 1994-96**

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February, 1997

The Office of Educational Assessment is an agency of the University of Washington which provides a variety of services related to educational research and assessment. The following are programs within which these services are provided:

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“I am definitely a better writer now. I’m more versatile. I’ve written more. I know how to write better from all of the writing experiences I’ve had, the cumulative experience, all of the classes I’ve had to write in. And some classes where my writing took big jumps, like in anthropology last year and in international studies and my writing link this fall. And English comp my first quarter of college. Geography in the second quarter, where I had to change the way I wrote; it was totally different from any way I’ve written before. Every class I had to write in made a difference. Just having more demanded of me and having to adapt and learning what good writing is have made a difference. I’m a better writer than I used to be.”

UW Sophomore, 1996

“No, I’m not a better writer than I was two years ago. I think I have sort of slipped a little by not having a writing course in a long, long while.”

UW Sophomore, 1996

THE FRESHMAN/SOPHOMORE WRITING EXPERIENCE 1994-96

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report's purpose is twofold: to present results of the second Freshmen/Sophomore Writing Study (FSWS2), a project that tracked the writing experience of about 45 UW students between 1994-96, and to compare those results with results of the first Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study (FSWS1), which tracked the writing experience of about 100 UW students between 1989-91.

Results were as follows:

- Students in the FSWS2 wrote more arguments about non-literary topics as high school seniors than did students in the FSWS1, but there was still a gap between the types of papers assigned in high school and those assigned in college.
- As in the FSWS1, high school paper topics in the second study were very different from college paper topics, particularly in history and social science courses. Specifically, the high school topics lacked the disciplinary purpose and focus that were often embedded in the college topics.
- Most of the students in the FSWS2 (80 percent) felt that they were better writers as spring quarter sophomores than they had been as entering freshmen, as did most of those sophomores who entered the UW in 1989 (83 percent). Both the 1994-96 and the 1989-91 groups attributed the cause of their success to the same two factors: frequent opportunities to write and increased general knowledge and maturity.
- The writing experience of students entering the UW as freshmen in 1994 was nearly identical to that of students who entered in 1989. The 1994-96 group wrote about 14 papers in 35 percent of the courses they took over the two year period; the 1989-91 group wrote about 13 papers in 28 percent of their courses. More than half of the papers for both groups were arguments about issues, events, and ideas, followed by informative papers (26 percent in 1994-96; 27 percent in 1989-91). Nineteen percent of the papers UW freshmen and sophomores wrote in 1994-96 and 17 percent of those written in 1989-91 were literary arguments--the type of paper most frequently assigned for both groups when they were high school seniors. A very small percent of the UW papers for both groups were evocative or creative writing.

The close similarity between the two study groups was unexpected because of the changes the UW has made in the undergraduate curriculum over the last five years. This report briefly explores two possible causes for the similarity of the two groups' writing experience:

- the possibility that there has been an increase in the use of short pieces of writing in 100- and 200-level courses, which would not have been tracked in the study as "papers"
- the likelihood that changes in the W-course requirement that took effect in 1994 did not bring new W-courses into being but merely conferred W-course status on large-lecture courses, which were already assigning papers to freshmen and sophomores in 1989-91 but which were not permitted W-course status at that time.

Results from this study suggested recommendations very similar to those reported in *The Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study, 1989-91* (C. Beyer and J. Graham, February 1992). Recommendations are as follows:

- Courses at the 100- and 200-level should provide students with more opportunities to write papers than they currently do. At present, papers are required in about one-third of the courses freshmen and sophomores take, and one third of the papers they write during their first two years at the UW are usually written for freshman composition courses.
- Because of the gap between high school and college writing assignments, UW professors should use class time to teach students to write the kinds of arguments they assign, particularly in history and social science courses.
- The W-course requirements currently in place neither encourage the writing of papers nor writing instruction across the disciplines at the 100- and 200-level. The UW should empower a committee of faculty members who understand writing issues to revise the UW's W-course requirement once again, so that it is consistent with what research tells us about writing, thinking, and learning in college and is more in line with the practices of other institutions of higher learning. Such a committee should design W-course requirements that would foster writing instruction across the curriculum.

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February, 1997

From 1989-91, the University of Washington conducted a study of the writing of freshmen and sophomores. The Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study tracked the writing of approximately 100 students during their first two years of college, the years when they were said to be getting a general education. Students participating in the study were interviewed quarterly; they turned in all syllabi and papers² they had written for all courses that assigned papers; and they completed two reflective essays³, one at the end of the first year of the study and one at the end of the second year. In addition, we collected transcripts for all students. The results of that first Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study (FSWS1) were reported in February 1992.

Between that study and today, like other colleges and universities across the country, the University of Washington has instituted policies and programs that were designed to improve undergraduate education. For example, the University of Washington embarked on a wide range of assessment projects, centered for the most part in departments and designed to examine undergraduate majors. The Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study begun in 1989, as well as several other writing studies that followed, were part of that assessment effort. In addition, the Entry Level Initiative provided funding to enrich teaching and learning in several popular, large-lecture undergraduate courses. A college-wide task force changed existing requirements for writing-intensive courses (W-courses), and new importance was placed on teaching in determining faculty promotions. Finally, ongoing programs designed to train new and current faculty were put in place.

Have these changes affected the writing experience of the average freshman entering the University of Washington? The second Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study (FSWS2), begun in 1994, was conducted to answer this question. This second study followed the same method as the first but with fewer students.

This report has two purposes: to present results of the second Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study and to compare the first two years' writing experience of freshmen

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² Papers were defined as more than two pages of graded writing.

³ Reflective essays asked students to select the best and the worst papers they had written, and the one that they had learned the most from writing, if that differed from their best and worst, and to write a five-page paper explaining and supporting their choices.

entering the UW in 1994 with that of freshmen entering in 1989 in order to determine the effect of changes in the undergraduate program in the last five years, a time ripe with talk about the importance of undergraduates in higher education across the country. In general, findings from this second study show that the writing experience of freshmen and sophomores attending the UW from 1994-96 was nearly identical to that of freshmen and sophomores attending from 1989-91.

The report is divided into seven sections as follows:

- Students' writing experience senior year of high school
- Students' writing experience freshman year (1994-95)
- Students' writing experience sophomore year (1995-96)
- Student perceptions about their writing experience
- A comparison of students' writing, 1989-91 and 1994-96
- Recommendations

METHOD

A randomly-selected sample of freshmen regularly-admitted to the UW in 1994 was invited to participate in the FSWS2. They were offered 10 general studies credits to complete the two-year study. Forty-eight students completed the first year of the study, and 35 completed both years. Students were interviewed every quarter about courses they had taken the previous quarter, and their responses were entered directly into a database during the interviews. In addition, students turned in copies of syllabi, the graded papers they had written, any instructions they received for completing writing assignments, and, in some cases, copies of shorter writing assignments and drafts of papers. Students also completed reflective essays on the papers they had written at the ends of the first and second years (described earlier in this report), and we collected student grades at the end of the study.

HIGH SCHOOL, SENIOR YEAR

The writing experience of high school seniors who entered the UW in 1994 was markedly different from that of seniors who entered in 1989. Figure 1 compares the kinds of papers⁴ students wrote in 1989 with the kinds they wrote in 1994. As the Figure shows, most of the papers students entering the UW in 1994 wrote as high school seniors were

⁴ Though our categories shifted somewhat, we categorized papers as **literary arguments** if their purpose was to persuade readers to accept the student's interpretation of a literary work; **arguments** if their purpose was to persuade readers to accept the student's analysis of a public issue, event, or idea; **informative papers** if their purpose was to present information, for example by summarizing a book or describing an event; and **evocative papers** if their purpose was to touch readers' feelings or imaginations in an artful way. In the FSWS2, we divided **evocative** into **evocative** and **creative writing**, so we could distinguish more carefully between narrative essays, for example, and short story writing. For the purposes of this report, however, we have combined these categories, as they were in the FSWS1.