

**Psychology Writing Center
University of Washington
Annual Report (2004-2005)**

Patti Loesche, Director
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The Psychology Writing Center was established in 1991 to help psychology majors to use scientific writing to reflect their understanding of the scientific method. We are the only resource at UW outside of the classroom whose sole purpose is to help students with scientific writing. The Psychology Writing Center's mission, aims, staff, funding sources, and resources are summarized in the Appendix. Below we discuss the services that we provided in 2004-2005 and propose future directions.

Student Composite

We serve psychology students from four main groups of courses: Psych 209 (Research Methods in Psychology), which is an entry-level course into the major, lab/W courses (Psych 330, 331, 332), 300-level core courses for majors, and upper-division electives. The types of writing done at different levels of the major varies, as was documented in a recent survey of writing practices in the major, discussed below.

Of the students who used the writing center this past year, 112 (26%) reported that they wrote more comfortably in a language other than English. Most writing center students are self-referred, so this percentage is probably an underestimate of the number of ESL students in psychology who could benefit from help with writing in the major.

Psychology students are expected to become familiar with the basics of reading, writing, and speaking scientifically. The most pressing needs of undergraduates writing in the major, then, involve learning the language of science, including proper citation of sources. Scientific literacy is not possible without practice, and the ongoing challenge for instructors who use writing in their courses is to provide such opportunities for practice in the context of course content.

Regarding proper citation of sources, almost all of the plagiarism of which we are aware occurs unintentionally, because students often lack adequate opportunities to practice acceptable, effective ways of framing ideas in their own words.

Tutorial Services

Students and appointments

We had another outstandingly successful year, serving 430 first-time students from 61 psychology courses with writing, who scheduled 754 appointments (Table 1, Figs. 1, 2) – far more students and appointments than ever before (Figs. 3, 4). We suggest two main explanations for this remarkable increase in writing center students, one based on simple arithmetic and one based on history. First, the number of instructors who offer writing in their courses has increased since 2002-2003 (Fig. 3). Second, after 15 years, the writing center has become well established in the undergraduate culture in Psychology as a solid resource for help with writing in the major.

Graduate tutors

Many psychology undergraduates have come to appreciate that the graduate writing assistants, quarter after quarter and year after year, are consistently outstanding. The tutor-student interaction greatly affects the value of the tutoring assistance for the student; a student is much more likely to absorb feedback and return for future help if s/he feels that the tutor understands and has helped to resolve his or her writing dilemma. Prerequisites for working at the writing center are that the TAs have both excellent teaching credentials and strong scientific writing skills. As an example of how these teaching and writing skills combine effectively at the writing center, the TAs establish rapport with their students, quickly identify the student's immediate writing need and level of writing ability, effectively defuse anxiety about writing, explain the unique rules of scientific writing and make sure that the student understands them, and ably detect unintended plagiarism and address it constructively on the spot. Furthermore, although tutoring is the essence of the TAs' work, they also competently discuss writing issues with faculty and course TAs, and they are invaluable in helping to collect, manage, analyze, and interpret information from our extensive database on writing center use.

Support for Instructors

In support of our primary purpose, to facilitate the development of the scientific writing skills of psychology undergraduates, we offer writing resources not only to undergraduates but also to instructors. We have collected a large repertoire of writing assignments at different levels of the major (primarily Psych 209, the 300-level lab and core courses, and the upper-division electives). Our experiences with helping students with these assignments over the years has led to some clear rubrics for what kinds of assignments work well in different types of classes. These experiences inform our discussions with instructors about the kinds of assignments that are likely to engage students and help to meet course goals as well as what are clear and reasonable grading criteria. We have also developed over 20 writing guides (<http://depts.washington.edu/pswyc/handouts.shtml>), most on aspects of scientific writing, that many instructors include as part of their course readings.

Contributions to the Psychology Curriculum

Colloquium on writing-integrated courses

In last year's annual report, one of our goals for the coming year was to promote more writing-intensive opportunities for psychology majors. We made some progress towards this goal. In May, Beth Kerr, Associate Chair, and I co-sponsored a well-received departmental colloquium with John Webster, Director of Writing for the College of Arts and Sciences, on approaches to offering writing-integrated courses in the psychology curriculum.

Writing assessment survey

In June, Beth Kerr, graduate student Sonia Savelli, and I conducted a survey of writing practices in the department (*Writing in the Psychology Major: A Survey of Upper-division Courses*, <https://depts.washington.edu/psych/department/reports/pdfreports/writingreport063005.pdf>). This survey updated findings from a similar, more comprehensive study that the writing center conducted in 1994. The two main aims of the current survey were (1) to define objectives for teaching the communication skills (speaking and writing) expected of psychology majors and (2) to identify a 'literacy path' for teaching those skills. We identified which courses included

writing, the nature and goals of those assignments, and instructor satisfaction with using writing in their courses. Instructors' responses made clear that writing is widely considered to be fundamental to the psychology curriculum. Most courses for psychology majors have writing assignments. Not surprisingly, the type of papers that students write vary with type of course and course level, from short, general assignments to formal scientific papers. For example, students write less, and less formally, in core courses than they do in the lab courses or in upper-division electives. Instructors reported the following barriers to effective writing in their classes: inadequate grasp of the scientific method, class size, insufficient background in the content area, inadequate college-level literacy, and students who are non-native speakers of English. In brief, the survey results indicate that most psychology instructors are highly motivated to give students meaningful writing experiences in the major, but some obstacles interfere with their doing so. Some of these barriers occur at the level of the assignment, others at the curriculum level, and still others are common to undergraduate writing experiences across the university.

Future Directions

On-line scheduling

At a practical level, we badly need to move from our inefficient paper-and-pencil-based scheduling system to on-line scheduling. Students now schedule appointments by signing up in the Psychology Department office, which is inconvenient for both students and tutors and causes students to miss opportunities to schedule appointments when such times are in high demand. Finding the means to implement on-line scheduling will be one of our first priorities for autumn quarter 2005.

'Literacy path' for psychology majors

In the coming year, the department intends to move towards formalizing communication goals for undergraduate psychology majors and determining ways to help students to meet these goals. In support of this effort, we will follow up on areas identified in the spring writing assessment survey. Specifically, we will help to specify the proposed literacy path for psychology majors. Following instructor recommendations identified in the survey, we will give particular attention

to the writing done in required lower-division courses (e.g., Psych 209/Research Methods, Psych 202/Biopsychology), the 300-level core courses for majors, and the laboratory courses.

Stable funding and additional support

To fully realize these goals, our primary needs are unchanged from those stated in last year's report. First, we need more stable funding to allow long-term planning, which is not now possible, and to maintain our ability to recruit the highly qualified graduate writing assistants who have been critical to the writing center's long-term success.

Second, the department would benefit from additional writing assistants (TA or hourly), so that we can work more intensively on defining and meeting the department's literacy goals and expand our tutoring services in response to heavy and increasing student demand, specifically by increasing office hours, offering more in-class workshops, and enhancing our heavily used Web-based writing resources. Although we saw more students this year than ever before, we still are not meeting demand and must turn many students away. Furthermore, most of the students whom we now see are self-referred, but many more would also benefit from our services. Additional writing assistance would allow more in-class involvement and hence create opportunities to reach many more students than we do now.

Finally, despite the thousands of majors in the life sciences at UW, the Psychology Writing Center remains the only resource outside of the classroom that supports students who are learning scientific writing. Given growing concerns about the inadequate level of scientific literacy, not only in this student population but also among other science majors and postgraduates as well as the general public, we suggest that making more resources available to improve scientific literacy at UW would be an investment that would yield excellent dividends, and would be concordant with university-wide goals.

Appendix: About the Psychology Writing Center

Contact information

Psychology Writing Center
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<http://depts.washington.edu/psywc/>

Mission

- To help psychology undergraduates use scientific writing as a way to understand the scientific method
- To promote writing opportunities for majors within the psychology curriculum

Specific Aims

In general, instructors in psychology expect student writing in the major to do the following things competently:

- *Evaluate a theoretical argument* by weighing objective evidence over opinion
- *Document sources* for that evidence accurately and ethically
- *Appreciate the relevance of a scientific result* in the context of a particular area of psychology

These broad aims reflect expectations that psychology majors become proficient in a number of specific skills. We support these expectations by helping students in the following areas:

- *Articulating goals.* Identifying for students just what skills are expected of them.
- *Collecting evidence.* How to conduct meaningful searches of the scientific literature.
- *Reading research articles.* How to recognize and interpret relevant information.
- *Synthesizing evidence* in speaking and writing.
- *Writing scientifically.* Understanding the structure and conventions for writing scientific papers (lab reports, literature reviews, research proposals) and, more importantly, the rationales that underlie these rules.
- *Documenting evidence.* Using citations appropriately and accurately.

Background, Staff and Funding

Established in 1991

Only resource at UW outside of the classroom whose sole purpose is to help students with scientific writing

Half-time faculty director (Loesche), funded by department

Graduate TAs, funded by Office of Undergraduate Education and department

- Recruited and trained by director
- Solid background in scientific writing
- Outstanding teaching credentials (four writing TAs have received department's Distinguished Teaching Award)

Resources

Tutoring. Open 20 hours per week for 30-minute individual conferences with undergraduates

Course writing assignments

Honors theses

Statements of purpose for graduate applications

Undergraduate Research Symposium posters

Research publications

On-line writing guides (depts.washington.edu/psywc/handouts.shtml)

One of the most widely used Internet resources on scientific writing in psychology

Required reading in many psychology classes

Consulting with instructors on developing and evaluating writing assignments

Lectures, seminars, workshops

Basics of and rationale for scientific writing

Analyzing a research article

Reading and writing results sections

Writing literature reviews

Style conventions in scientific writing

Avoiding plagiarism

Participating in peer review

Developing and evaluating effective writing assignments (graduate seminar in Psychology; Howard Hughes Medical Institute postdoctoral seminar in Biology)

Relationships with other campus units

Consult with Odegaard Library reference staff (e.g., on improving access to databases in psychology; share resources for preventing plagiarism)

Participate in campus writing centers coalition

Advise other writing centers upon request on best practices

Table 1. Psychology courses served by Psychology Writing Center, 2004-2005 (n=61; some courses taught more than once)

Nonmajors, premajors	Core courses (majors only)	Upper-level courses
198	303	400
202	305	403
207	306	407
209	330	409
357	331	414
	332	415
	333	420
	335	428
	345	430
	350	432
		450
		452
		462
		470
		489
		497
		498
		499

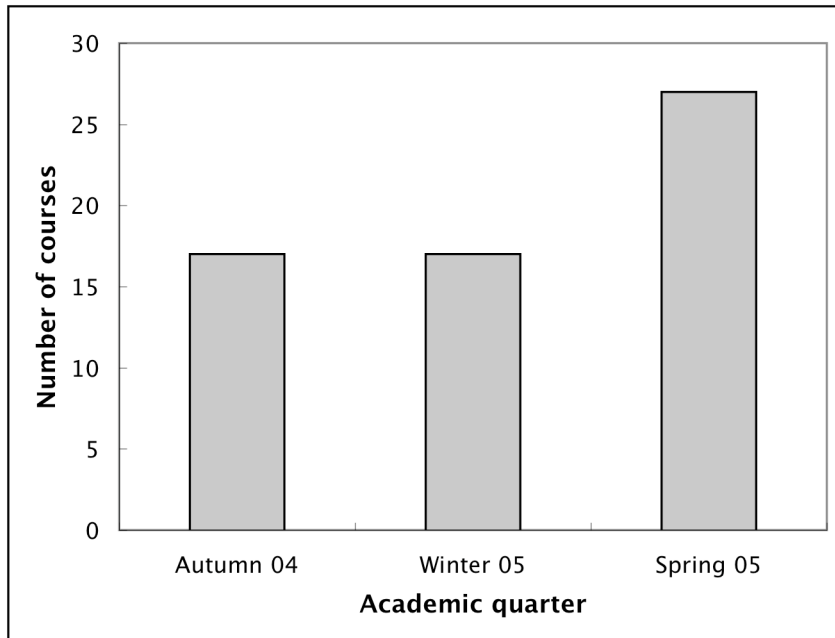


Figure 1. Psychology courses with writing in 2004-2005, by academic quarter (n=61).

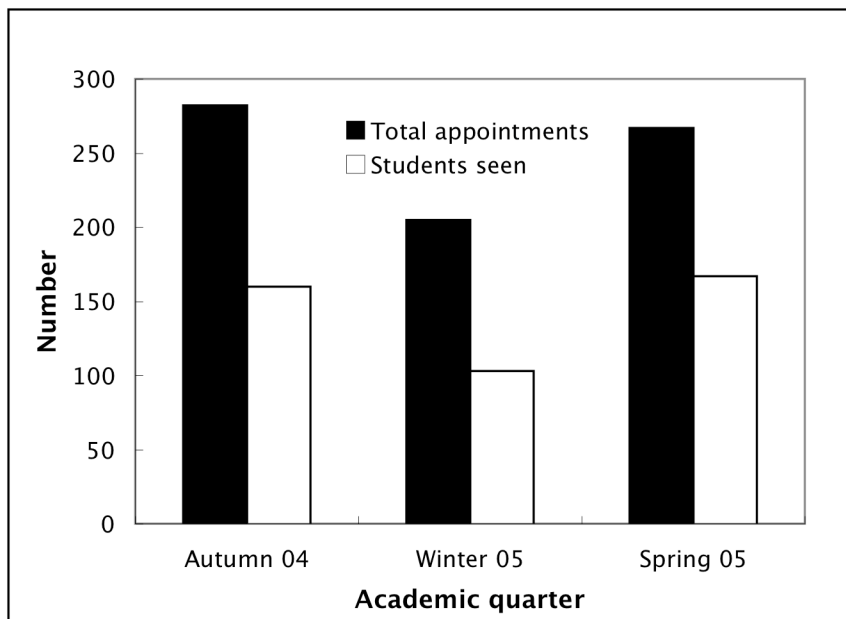


Figure 2. Student use of the Psychology Writing Center in 2004-2005. Total appointments: 754; number of individual students: 430; average appointments per student: 1.8.

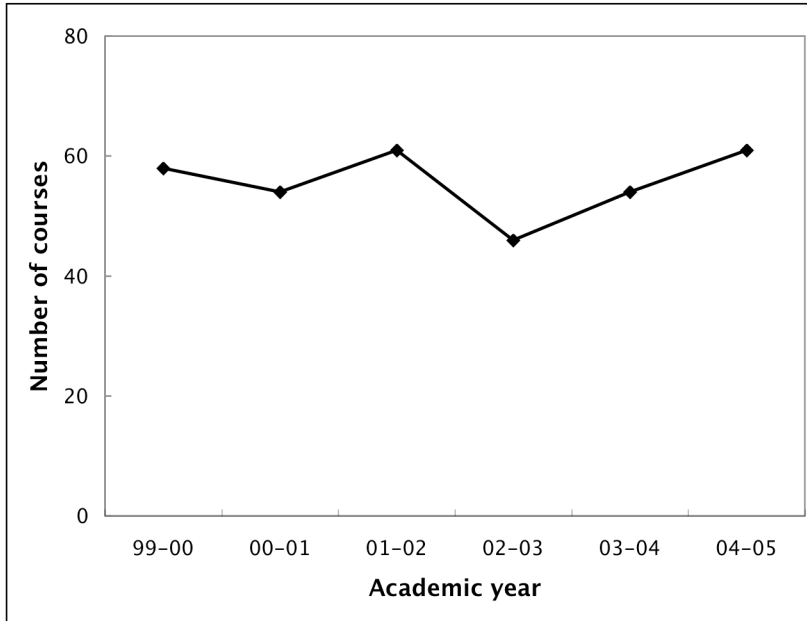


Figure 3. Trends in number of psychology courses with writing from 1999 to 2005 (range=46-61, average=56).

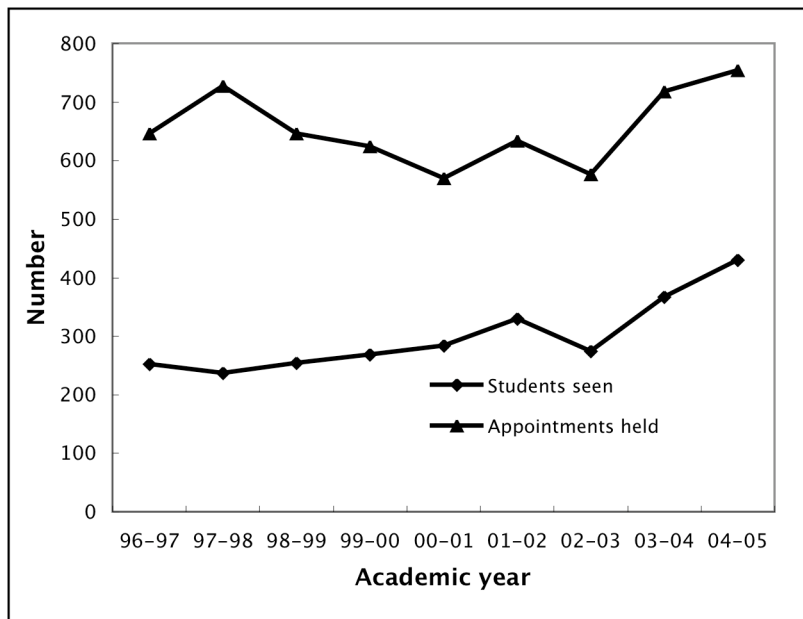


Figure 4. Trends in student use of the Psychology Writing Center. In 2004-2005, we held 754 appointments with 430 students (1996-2005 medians: 640 appointments, 271.5 students).