

A Proposal to Modify the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement

History

The University Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) requires upper-division students to demonstrate competency in writing skills as a requirement for graduation. The 1976 CSU Trustees' mandate describing how this requirement should be implemented includes the following important guidelines:

Writing skills proficiency requirements for graduation, distinct from lower-division curricula and tests, should be made known to students as soon as possible. Certification should be made available for students as they enter the junior year, and requirements ideally should be completed before students enter the senior year (for graduating students, before advancement to classified standing).

Attention to the issue of student writing skills is an all-campus responsibility. Individual campuses may find it desirable, if possible, for this certification to occur at the department level including all disciplines. On the other hand, it may be that campuses would prefer to institute or reaffirm schoolwide and campuswide certification procedures.

Certification may rely upon evidence of writing ability as demonstrated in written coursework, essays, subjective examinations, and similar materials produced by students. It is expected that any such measures will be developed to fit local student needs and campus situations. (EP & R 78-27, Office of the Chancellor, Guidelines 3-5)

Currently, on this campus students can fulfill the Graduation Writing Requirement by successfully completing one of four courses offered in the English Department: English 3000, 3004, 3007, or 3009.

In 1986, the following principles for revising the existing GWAR Program were proposed by the Department of English, Foreign and Philosophy and subsequently approved by the Educational Policies Committee:

The University GWAR: General Principles

1. All upper division students could benefit from having writing assigned and commented upon.
2. Only those who pass a placement exam should take GWAR courses.
3. All but those who score highest on the placement exam must pass a GWAR course.
[Note: This principle will not apply in the revised GWAR program described below.]
4. Staffing for the GWAR courses (and any support programs or courses) should be the responsibility of the University.

In 1988, two years after these principles were approved by the EPC, a published report describing the systemwide practices related to the GWAR affirmed the value of involving faculty across the university in the GWAR process:

On the whole, campuses which involve the entire faculty in the GVAR process reap the greatest benefits in promulgating a universal response to writing proficiency and literacy. Efforts at developing interdisciplinary courses in writing or in content areas and in initiating or strengthening the concept of “writing across the curriculum” have greatly benefited from the GVAR mandate. The responsibility for producing literate and articulate graduates across the CSU is no longer viewed as the exclusive domain of departments on English or communications. (Pathways to Quality through Diversity: The CSU GVAR in Transition by Dr. Edward J. Borowiec, pg. 35)

The following proposal to revise the current GVAR Program is based on the four principles listed above and takes into account the findings of the 1988 systemwide survey of GVAR practices.

Proposal for the Revised GVAR Program

The revised GVAR program will consist of a two-part requirement:

1. Students must first pass a GVAR screening test;
2. After meeting this prerequisite, students must complete a specially designated, upper-division WP (Writing Proficiency) course with a minimum grade of C-. These WP courses will be part of the regular curriculum in a range of disciplines, including English.

1) The GVAR Screening Test

Plans for developing and administering the GVAR Screening Test are based on the successful screening test developed as a part of the GVAR at CSU Chico. The GVAR Screening Test will follow these guidelines:

- all students will be required to take the GVAR Screening Test no sooner than the term in which they complete 60 units toward the baccalaureate degree; students must pass the GVAR screening test at least one semester before enrolling in a designated WP course.
- the test, a 90-minute essay, will be offered 2-3 times a year for a fee; the test must be taken until it is passed.
- pretrained readers will score the essays on a six-point holistic scale; each essay will be read by two independent readers who will assign it a score from 1 (low) to 6 (high). Because it is a screening test and not a proficiency test, the GVAR Screening Test will have a low passing threshold (at CSU Chico over 80% of students taking the writing screening test for the first time pass it). Students who receive a combined score of between 7 and 12 points on their essays will pass the screening test and be allowed to enroll in a WP course.
- the test will examine students’ ability to analyze a prepared passage and produce a clear, well-organized piece of first-draft writing that makes a point, develops it with specifics, and uses correct and varied language. Students who pass the screening test will not be viewed as proficient writers; instead, a passing score will indicate that with work and application, students have a good chance for success in a WP course.

- students who need help preparing for the screening test or need remediation because they have failed the test will be able to take advantage of two possible resources: 1) they can arrange for peer-tutoring through the campus Writing Center; 2) they can enroll in a non-credit workshop offered through the office of Extended Education before each screening test.

2) Upper-division Writing Proficiency courses

The WP courses will be part of the regular curriculum in a variety of disciplines. To be effective, the writing component of these courses needs to be carefully developed and fully supported by the respective departments. A University Writing committee will provide help and guidelines in planning WP courses and will monitor the courses by periodically reviewing course syllabi and examining writing samples to insure consistency in course content, writing performance, and grading standards. Students who pass a designated WP course with a grade of C- or better will have fulfilled the Graduation Writing Requirement necessary for graduation from CSU Stanislaus.

Recently, a systemwide GWAR review board has proposed that certification of writing ability shall be transferable from one CSU campus to another only when students pass a campus-wide examination or pass an upper division course focusing on the development of writing skills which includes a common essay examination written under controlled conditions and graded by at least two faculty readers. (Campuses may accept transfer certification which does not meet these criteria at their option.) In order to solve the problem of transfer certification for the GWAR, we propose to use the screening test as both a prerequisite for enrollment in designated WP courses and as a campus-wide essay examination. Those students who transfer to another CSU campus and wish transfer certification for the GWAR must receive a high score (between 10 to 12 points) on the GWAR screening test.

Timeline for Implementing the Proposed Changes

These changes to the GWAR will be in effect in the Fall of 1992-93. The screening test will first be administered during the Spring 1992 semester, so that students may enroll for the following Fall semester WP courses. Based on the results of the screening test, student will be able to register for WP courses in English and other disciplines for the Fall semester 1992-93.

In the meantime, members of the English department and the University Writing Committee will work with faculty from a variety of disciplines to design WP courses. Several faculty from both the Humanities and Sciences have already expressed an interest in expanding the use of writing in their upper-division courses.

1991

Approval of GWAR Program by UEPC	Spring
University Writing Committee formed	Spring

1991-92

Disciplines develop WP courses	Fall & Spring
University Writing Committee approves WP courses	Fall & Spring
University Writing Committee approves screening test	Fall
Screening Test Administered	Spring

1992-93

WP courses taught	Fall & Spring
University Writing Committee approves WP courses	Fall & Spring
University Writing Committee approves screening test	Fall
University Writing Committee oversees WP courses	Fall & Spring
Screening Test Administration	Fall & Spring

In order to implement the proposed GVAR program, a University Writing Committee will need to be formed. This committee, made up of faculty from English and other disciplines to ensure a representative character, will be responsible for overseeing the WP courses, responding to special appeals or petitions from students regarding the GVAR, and assessing the effectiveness of the program. The University Writing committee will forward a report of its activities and an evaluation of program effectiveness to the University Educational Policies Committee by April 15th each academic year.

4/AS/91/EPC

Approved by Academic Senate 4/16/91

Approved by President 5/15/91

WPST SCORING GUIDE

6 Highly competent, although it may have minor faults.

- Sustains an argument that acknowledges and develops the complexity of the issue.
- Displays fluent control over language.
- Uses sophisticated language.
- Has a structure which is strong, with all parts integrated into the discussion of the issue.

5 Competent.

- Is similar to a 6 paper, but is less strong in some area: organization, sentence structure and diction, or grammar and mechanics.
- Develops an argument that acknowledges and develops the complexity of the issue.
- Displays fluent control over language.
- May use less sophisticated language than a "6" essay.

4 Adequate rather than competent.

- Acknowledges the complexity of the issue.
- Displays adequate control over language.
- Uses language appropriately.
- Has a clear structure although there may be occasional lapses in focus.

3 Developing adequacy.

- Often develops only one aspect of the issue, or may distort the issue.
- Contains generalizations with little support rather than developing an argument.
- Displays general control over language although there may be an accumulation of errors.
- Has a structure which may be unclear or which may limit the author's development of the issue.

2 Inadequate.

- Exhibits any one of the following characteristics:
- attempts to address the issue, but does not provide adequate development.
- lacks control over language.
- has no apparent structure.

1 Incompetent.

- Exhibits at least two of the following characteristics:
- does not provide adequate development for any aspect of the issue.
- lacks control over language.
- has no apparent structure.

For ESL Papers: Readers should not penalize ESL writers excessively for slight shifts in idiom, problems with articles, confusion over prepositions, and occasional misuse of verb tense and verb forms, so long as such features do not obscure meaning.

Each WPST essay is read by two readers who keep their evaluation confidential so one reader's score does not influence the other's. The readers use a numerical evaluation rubric. Your score reflects the numerical sum on both readers. For example, the first reader scores an essay with a "4" and the second with a "5." The essay's total score would be a "9." The minimum passing score is "7", which is the sum of one score of "4" and another of "3." The maximum score is "12."