

Academic Writing Assessment Task Force Report July 2010

1. Introduction and Charge

In the spring of 2009, the Academic Senate working in collaboration with the Provost's Office created a task force to "explore best practices for writing assessment." The Academic Writing Assessment Task Force (AWATF) was charged with addressing the following questions:

1. What are the writing objectives and outcomes that constitute competence in upper-division academic writing at CSULB?
2. Are the objectives and outcomes appropriate and consistent with best practices and policies for academic writing competence?
3. How does the current curriculum support academic writing? How could it better support it?
4. What guidelines are appropriate for selecting academic writing assessments that are consistent with best practices for assessing academic writing?

The guidelines should be appropriate for all CSULB students (e.g. native speakers of English and multi-language users in all academic disciplines), and suitable for administration at CSULB (e.g. on-campus and off-campus administration, ease of administration, accessibility, and faculty acceptance).

The task force was asked to submit a report including recommendations for at least two academic writing assessment models. As the task force began its work, the Academic Senate amended the charge of the AWATF to include an analysis of two separate proposals previously brought before the Senate for revising the current GVAR Policy.

The task force was chaired by Lynn Mahoney, Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies, and included these faculty and staff:

- Rebekha Abbuhl, Linguistics, CLA
- James Coari, Information Systems, CBA
- Lethia Cobbs, Disabled Student Services
- Nancy Gardener, Biology, CNSM (2009)
- Gary Griswold, English, CLA
- Nathan Jensen, CIE
- Lawrence Maminta, Student, ASI
- Lionel Mandy, Africana Studies, CLA
- Eileen Pasztor, Social Work, CHHS (2009)
- Susan Platt, Testing & Evaluation Services
- Norbert Schürer, English, CLA
- Marshall Thomas, Learning Assistance Center, English, and Graduate Student

2. Initial Findings

The task force met regularly from Spring 2009 through Spring 2010 to discuss best practices in writing assessment and current practices at CSULB. The task force reached quick agreement that writing assessment at CSULB was not as developed as it should be. The following observations were made:

- It should be noted that “writing assessment” is a term that encompasses many layers. In the classroom, assessment can occur at the level of a single assignment and/or at the culmination of an entire course. On the program/department level, assessment can focus on multiple sections of a single course or a course sequence. Institutionally, writing assessment can be used for incoming student placement, for taking a “snapshot” of student proficiency at various levels, or for exit certification of proficiency. It is important to note that as the context moves from classroom, to program, to institution, conducting effective writing assessment becomes a more and more complex endeavor.
- CSULB is not assessing upper-division writing in any university-wide or coordinated way.
- Our campus lacks a high-profile definition of what constitutes a “writing-intensive” course nor does it have specific guidelines or oversight for how classroom, department, or institutional assessment of such courses should be conducted.
- There is a disjunction between the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) and curricula; the two exist almost independently of one another.
- The task force reached quick agreement that the Writing Proficiency Examination’s ability to assess a comprehensive list of desired writing learning outcomes is limited. The campus has for many years relied on the WPE to fulfill the GWAR (i.e., to assess minimum college-level writing proficiency). In current practice, the WPE mainly identifies students who lack that proficiency primarily due to non-native English usage.
- Throughout its deliberations, the task force was mindful of the campus population. In particular, any future models of writing instruction and assessment at CSULB should take into consideration the needs of disabled students.

3. Recommendations for Student Learning Outcomes for CSULB Writing-Intensive Courses

Next, the task force identified six student learning outcomes (culled from best practices across the country) that CSULB writing-intensive courses should teach and assess:

In their writing, students should

1. employ a process which includes invention, drafting and revision;
2. use conventions appropriate for particular audiences;
3. express and synthesize their own and others’ ideas;

4. demonstrate comprehension of texts by developing accurate summaries, reasoned analyses, and responses;
5. evaluate and incorporate source materials as appropriate to a given task; and
6. apply the conventions of standard written English.

4. Recommendations for Assessment in CSULB Writing-Intensive Courses

After reviewing best practices across the country and considering the desired student learning outcomes listed above, the task force recommends that, provided adequate support and oversight/guidance is available, the student learning outcomes defined above be assessed at all levels through a combination of the following:

1. Single writing assignment requiring multiple drafts
2. Essay Examination
3. Formal portfolio including these minimum components (totaling at least 5000 words of the student's work to ensure substantial writing):
 - A cover letter
 - Copies of all assignments and prompts
 - Two out-of-class essays with multiple revisions, at least one of which must be of some length
 - In-class timed writing assignment and in-class revisions of the assignment

At the classroom level, faculty in a variety of disciplines may wish to add other demonstrations of writing not addressed above (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, business correspondence, etc.). It is expected that these demonstrations will be additions to a combination of the three writing assessments stipulated above.

(See Attachment 1 for a table of these learning outcomes and assessments including a list of possible student writing activities.)

5. Findings on Curricular Support

After articulating student learning outcomes and assessment tools, the task force explored how to implement these outcomes and tools in the CSULB curriculum. First, the task force examined current curricular support for the development of students' academic writing.

At the lower division, academic writing is taught and assessed in Writing Skills and Composition courses. At the upper division, the university has largely relied on the GVAR to assess writing competency and as a result has not developed university-wide writing instruction and assessment plans. While many departments are engaged in writing instruction and assessment, writing has never been coordinated or assessed at an institutional level. GVAR courses support writing

instruction but are not generally part of the curriculum (with the exceptions of HIST 301, ENGR 310, LING 300 and FMD 450).

The CSULB General Education curriculum includes Capstone courses, which are defined in Section 8.1 of CSULB’s current GE policy as courses with a “substantial writing component.” We have highlighted below the passages of Section 8.1 relevant to writing instruction and assessment:

8.1. General criteria for Capstone courses:

8.1.1. All Capstone courses must demonstrably develop advanced college skills, including synthesis and application of knowledge, analysis, critique, and research. Capstone courses are intended to help students integrate knowledge and skills developed earlier in the curriculum, working at a more advanced level than in Explorations courses. Therefore, Capstone courses must require as prerequisites upper-division standing, completion of the entire Foundation, and one or more courses from the Explorations stage. **No section of any capstone course should have more than 35 enrolled students.**

8.1.2. **Instructors in all upper-division Capstone courses that carry General Education credit will integrate into the course a substantial writing component. This is usually interpreted to mean at least a total of 5000 words in the various assignments. The writing component either may be integrated throughout the courses or may be a cumulative report or project that has, as part of the report or project, ongoing evaluation and feedback throughout the semester. The writing assignments may be in whatever form the instructor deems appropriate to the subject matter and methodology of the course, but the assignments must be a factor in evaluating student performance.**

8.1.3. Faculty who teach these courses should refer students with serious writing difficulties to seek writing instruction, tutoring, or other appropriate assistance to improve their writing skills as early as possible. For this reason, **there must be early (first one-third of the term) feedback on student writing and further feedback throughout the term, including opportunity for revision where appropriate to the assignment.**

8.1.4. **Faculty may obtain guidance in the choice of writing assignments and information on evaluating writing through workshops and other supportive programs sponsored by the Division of Academic Affairs.**

An examination of current enrollment in Capstone courses across the university demonstrates that Section 8.1.1 is not widely followed (see Attachment 2 regarding Capstone class size). In Fall 2009, 61% of these courses exceeded the GE policy enrollment maximum of 35 (though, it should be noted that 74% of these courses had enrollments between 36 and 50 and could more easily be brought into compliance than the sections larger than 50). In Spring 2010 45% exceeded 35 (but again, 74% of these had enrollments of 50 or less). The size of enrollment in some of these courses strongly suggests that it would be difficult to fulfill effectively the requirement of including a “substantial writing component.”

6. Recommendations for Academic Writing Assessment Models

The AWATF was charged with offering at least two suggestions on how to improve writing assessment.

6.1. First Model

The task force recommends that the university draft and implement a Writing Policy that creates a coordinated program for writing instruction and assessment. This program should move students from Writing Skills and Composition through the GVAR and finally to a demonstration of upper-division writing competency in upper-division GE courses or in major courses. Just as we now use the freshman-level English Placement Test (EPT) to place students in appropriate lower-division writing courses, the WPE should be then used as a diagnostic tool for placement into appropriate writing opportunities.

This Writing Policy should define what constitutes a writing-intensive course and require the use of the AWATF-recommended student learning outcomes, writing activities, and assessment guidelines. It should also mandate the creation of an Academic Senate Writing Committee and the creation of a position for a full-time Upper-Division Writing Coordinator. This Coordinator should be charged with implementing the Writing Policy and with working with departments and colleges to create appropriate writing-intensive courses. Furthermore, the Coordinator should be charged with ensuring that writing-intensive courses continue to meet university requirements including the GVAR and GE policies and that large-scale, institution-wide assessments are meeting their intended purposes. The Coordinator should sit on both the GEGC and PARC.

In this Writing Policy, the GVAR should be just one part of the university's program for writing instruction and assessment. As such, the GVAR Committee would become a subcommittee of the Writing Committee and the current part-time position of GVAR Coordinator would be folded into the full-time Upper-Division Writing Coordinator position.

The AWATF realizes this option requires financial resources, but the task force believes strongly that effective writing instruction and assessment cannot be achieved without a significant financial commitment from the university.

6.2. Second Model

Alternately, the university could continue to have a part-time GVAR Coordinator who implements the GVAR policy and could use existing committees and faculty to coordinate writing instruction and assessment. With this alternative solution, PARC and the GEGC could monitor writing-intensive major and GE courses to ensure that they follow university policy and meet approved student learning outcomes. Colleges and departments could identify faculty writing coordinator(s) to oversee department- or college-based writing courses. The assessment of upper-division writing courses would become part of a department's regular seven-year program review processes. The writing coordinator(s) would be charged with ensuring that departments are following university policy in the intervening years.

This option may be easier to implement, but the AWATF also believes that it will not be as successful in helping students to achieve upper-division writing competency due to a lack of university-wide standards and coordination.

7. Findings on GVAR Policy

After its creation, the task force was charged with looking at the major differences underlying campus discussions about revisions to the current GVAR policy. In a careful review of suggested revisions to the current GVAR Policy, Gary Griswold, Norbert Schürer and Rebekha Abbuhl identified seven key areas of difference:

- definition of rigorous GVAR courses
- qualifications and training of GVAR course instructors
- number of portfolio evaluators
- role of instructor in portfolio evaluation
- selection, qualifications, and voting rights of GVAR Coordinator and GVAR Committee members
- GVAR requirement for students with graduate degrees from English-speaking institutions outside the United States
- alternatives to the WPE as prerequisite for GVAR courses

8. Recommendations for GVAR Policy

After much discussion, the task force recommends the GVAR Committee take the following conclusions into account as they draft a new GVAR policy.

8.1. Definition of Rigorous GVAR Courses

The AWATF recommends that the GVAR Committee should continue to be responsible for the certification of all GVAR courses. A rigorous GVAR course should include instruction in and assessment of common student learning outcomes. All GVAR courses should have students producing at least 5000 words to ensure substantial writing and conclude with a formal portfolio. At a minimum, this portfolio should include these items:

1. cover letter
2. Copies of all assignments and prompts
3. Two out-of-class essays with multiple revisions, at least one of which must be of some length
4. In-class timed writing assignment and in-class revisions of the assignment

8.2. Qualifications and Training of GVAR Course Instructors

The AWATF recommends that all GVAR instructors should have some previous experience in writing instruction and assessment. Training of GVAR instructors is critical and should be mandatory for all instructors every semester. First-time GVAR instructors should undergo a rigorous and lengthy pre-semester training. All instructors should meet regularly throughout the semester and undergo periodic classroom observation.

In addition, GVAR instructors should be expected to participate in portfolio readings as second readers as part of a benchmarking process that will ensure quality and consistency. The GVAR Committee and GVAR Coordinator should evaluate the effectiveness of courses using course syllabi, instructor evaluations (if available), student success data, and the committee's sampling of portfolios submitted for GVAR evaluation (both in terms of overall student improvement during a course and instructor accuracy in evaluation of the portfolios).

8.3. Number of Portfolio Evaluators

The AWATF engaged in lengthy debate about the best number of portfolio readers. While all agreed that the instructor should serve as the first reader and that fellow GVAR instructors make the best second readers, the task force was divided on when second readings should be required. Five members supported a second reading for all portfolios, and four members supported a second reading under certain circumstances, which could be articulated in GVAR policy (all failing portfolios, all portfolios for new instructors, for example).

8.4. Role of Instructor in Portfolio Evaluation

The task force recommends that the GVAR course instructor should always serve as the first reader. In the event that a second reader is required and his or her score does not agree with the instructor's, the task force suggests either 1) the GVAR Committee will assign qualified readers to review the portfolio and determine the results, or 2) the score of the instructor becomes the official score, and students can appeal the results to the GVAR Committee if they so choose.

8.5. Selection, Qualifications, and Voting Rights of GVAR Coordinator and GVAR Committee Members

The AWATF believes that the membership outlined in current policy is satisfactory but suggests the following changes:

1. The addition of a representative of the Center for International Education and possibly from the American Language Institute and Disabled Student Services.
2. A discussion with Enrollment Services about whether or not they require a representative on the GVAR Committee.

The majority of the task force (seven members) believes that all members of the GVAR Committee should be voting members. This ensures participation and rewards members for consistent attendance and participation. A minority (one member) expressed an interest in a more refined voting system which grants voting rights to particular members at specific times according to experience, expertise, and the matter being voted on.

The AWATF believes that the description of the GVAR Coordinator in current policy is satisfactory but would like to see the qualifications of the GVAR Coordinator specifically stated. While a majority of the task force (six members) believes that the Provost should appoint the GVAR Coordinator in consultation with the Senate Executive Committee and the GVAR Committee, a minority believes that the GVAR Committee should elect the GVAR Coordinator (three members).

8.6. GVAR Requirement for Students with Graduate Degrees from English-Speaking Institutions outside the United States

This is a very complicated issue. The AWATF has no specific recommendation but refers the matter to the GVAR Committee for further research and discussion. If the GVAR committee determines that prior degrees earned can be used for meeting the GVAR, we recommend that the policy should require that those degrees should only be from institutions located in countries where English is the primary language of discourse (not simply where universities officially have English as their language of instruction). An official list of these institutions should be maintained in the Center for International Education.

8.7. Alternatives to the WPE as Prerequisite for GVAR Courses

The AWATF recommends that the GVAR Committee consider the TOEFL and ALI coursework as alternative placement assessments for GVAR coursework for students required to take the TOEFL for admission to the university. The GVAR Committee may also want to consider revising the title of the WPE to better reflect its uses as a placement assessment.

9. GVAR Seamless Advising Pilot Program

In the fall of 2009, a group of faculty, staff and administrators met to discuss GVAR advising with the goal of creating “seamless advising” for students in need of fulfilling the GVAR. The group included representatives from the provost’s office, the CLA dean’s office, the English department, the Writers’ Resource Lab, the Learning Assistance Center, and Testing & Evaluation Services. Their work concluded with a proposal that creates a “seamless” path for students who fail the WPE.

The plan requires that students scoring an 8 or lower register for ENGL 301A and then take a GVAR course upon successful completion of ENGL 301A. Students scoring a 9 or 10 may register for a GVAR course the following semester or meet with a GVAR advisor, who will recommend that students either take a GVAR course or attempt to pass the WPE once more. If students fail to score an 11 or higher in a second WPE attempt, they must register for a GVAR course the following semester. The goal is to have students fulfill the GVAR within one calendar year from their initial WPE attempt (see attached flow chart).

The task force carefully examined this proposal as relevant to its amended charge in considering GVAR policy revisions. The AWATF unanimously endorses this pilot program being launched in the fall of 2010 as a means of facilitating GVAR completion in a timely manner. Given that neither the current GVAR policy nor any of the alternatives provide such a structured advising plan, the AWATF recommends that any future GVAR policy revisions take this plan into consideration.

10. GVAR Policy

The AWATF recommends that the GVAR Committee be charged with developing a new GVAR Policy, taking into account the above findings and the Seamless GVAR Advising Pilot Program.

Attachment 1

Student Learning Outcomes & Assessment Tools

Academic Writing Learning Outcomes	Possible Writing Activities	Faculty Assessment Tool
Employ a process which includes invention, drafting and revision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-Instructor conferences • Brainstorming • Workshops • Peer Review 	
Use conventions appropriate for particular audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examining texts unique to the genre or discipline • Identifying rhetorical strategies (language features, organizational strategies, format, etc.) 	<p>Academic Writing and the specific SLOs shall be assessed through a combination of any of the following:</p>
Express and synthesize their own and others' ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing assigned readings • Identifying main points of assigned readings • Writing chapter or topic summaries • Completing essay examinations • Completing English-usage examinations (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single writing assignment requiring multiple drafts • Essay Examination
Demonstrate comprehension of texts by developing accurate summaries, reasoned analyses, and responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewriting text for another purpose or audience • Revising a draft in response to others' comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal portfolio (includes multiple assignments)
Evaluate and incorporate source materials as appropriate to a given task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proofreading and editing a draft • Reading and responding to another's draft • Creating a parallel text following a model 	<p>In addition, other demonstrations of writing not addressed above might be appropriate to include in portfolio. These demonstrations will be in additions to a combination of the three writing assessments stipulated above.</p>
Apply the conventions of standard written English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rating sample texts using a class rubric • Creating a rubric for assessing a class writing assignment • Completing unfinished texts • Comparing texts with different purposes, audiences or structures • Analyzing an authentic text for patterns and features • Comparing academic and non-academic versions of the same text • Comparing texts that employ and do not employ a certain feature (e.g., hedges) • Revising flawed sentences, paragraphs or short essays • Engaging in collaborative writing of a paragraph or short essay 	

Attachment 2

2009-2010 Class Size for GE Interdisciplinary Capstone Courses

Class Size	Number of courses Fall 09	Number of courses Spring 10
Less than 25	44 (18%)	60 (26%)
25-35	51 (21%)	67 (29%)
36-50	112 (46%)	78 (33%)
51-75	20 (8%)	10 (4%)
76-100	8 (3%)	9 (4%)
101 or more	11 (4%)	9 (4%)