

University of Virginia  
Jonathan Schnyer, Associate Director,  
Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies (IAS)  
Writing 2008

**PART A: PLAN**

**1.0 Definition of Terms**

- 1.1: *The central purpose of the University of Virginia is to enrich the mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it. Activities designed to quicken, discipline, and enlarge the intellectual and creative capacities, as well as the aesthetic and ethical awareness, of the members of the University and to **record, preserve, and disseminate the results of intellectual discovery** (emphasis added) and creative endeavor serve this purpose. In fulfilling it, the University places the highest priority on achieving eminence as a center of higher learning.*

*The University of Virginia seeks to achieve its central purpose through the pursuit of the following specific goals:*

*To sustain liberal education as the central intellectual concern of the University, not only in the curricula of the College of Arts and Sciences, but also as a foundation for the professional undergraduate programs.*

Writing is an intellectual skill that is central to liberal education and the undergraduate experience at the University of Virginia. Through the First and Second writing requirements in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Schools of Architecture, Commerce, Education, and Nursing, and continuing through major courses, students are required to communicate extensively and effectively in writing. In the School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS), students take a series of required courses through the Department of Science, Technology and Society (STS) and gain further writing experience in their major courses.

- 1.2: The following standards have been established for graduating fourth-years for all University undergraduates:

40% of undergraduates are expected to be highly competent;  
85% competent or above;  
100% minimally competent or above.

Standards for the differences between first-years and fourth-years will be considered after this first administration of the assessment. The criterion that will indicate competence for fourth-years are mean scores on the writing rubrics established by the Writing Assessment Committees (see 3.1). The scale for the rubric is the following: 1 (not competent), 2 (minimally competent), 3(competent) and 4 (highly competent).

- 1.3: Upon graduating from the University, students in the College of Arts and Sciences and Schools of Architecture, Commerce, Education and Nursing who complete (or place out of) the First and Second Writing Requirements (FWR and SWR) should be able to:
- A. Create introductions that explain and propose to solve a problematic attitude, idea, or practice in their field and motivate reader interest.
  - B. Compose balanced arguments that make specific, debatable claims, supporting those claims with precise, authoritative, and varied evidence.
  - C. Acknowledge and respond to opposed arguments through dialogue rather than verbal combat.
  - D. Produce a cohesive, clear, and coherent document with correct grammar, diction, and spelling.
  - E. Choose a style appropriate to the goals, readers, situation, purpose, and structure of the argument.
  - F. Draw and communicate conclusions that are logical, clear, and consistent with those proposed in the introduction.

In addition to these outcomes associated with FWR and SWR, students in these schools develop additional skills from writing in their major.

Upon graduating from the University, students from SEAS should be able to:

- A. Produce prose that is correct with regard to grammar, diction, spelling, and sentence structure.
- B. Design documents that exhibit an understanding of audience, occasion, purpose, and structure.
- C. Frame introductions that quickly and reliably establish context and signal a document's purpose to its readers.
- D. Delineate methods, present results, and reach conclusions that are logical and clear.
- E. Produce coherent and cohesive document subsections and paragraphs.
- F. Integrate appropriate graphics into the text and document sources in a correct and consistent style.

## 2.0 Methodology

- 2.1 UVa's Writing Assessments will employ a competency-based approach to determining the competence of our fourth-years for all schools and cross-sectional approaches to discerning value added for graduating fourth-years. A "mini" assessment of the English Department's FWR curriculum will employ a pre-post approach to assessing student learning at the beginning and end of those courses.

It is important to recognize the central role that each undergraduate school and program play in developing curricula that focus on writing skills of undergraduates. These decentralized approaches are necessary to not only reinforce the basic writing courses offered in introductory courses but also to advance discipline-specific writing skills.

- 2.2 The following writing program description applies to the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Architecture, Commerce, Education, and Nursing:

The First and Second Writing Requirements, part of the College of Arts and Sciences Core Competencies (which apply also to the schools of Architecture, Commerce, Education and Nursing), focus exclusively on writing:

**First Writing Requirement (FWR):** Students must meet the FWR during their first year at UVa. Students may meet FWR in one of five ways:

- \* By successfully completing the two-semester Introduction to Academic Argument (ENWR 105 + 106).
- \* By successfully completing the two-semester ESL version of Introduction to Academic Argument (ENWR 105 + 107 in the fall, followed by spring ENWR 108). Note that this path is for students who are still developing their skills in English as a second language; students required to fulfill the first writing requirement in the ESL path will be identified by the Admissions Office, the Summer Transition Program, or the Professional and Academic Writing Program.
- \* By successfully completing Accelerated Introduction to Academic Argument (ENWR 110).
- \* By successfully completing Advanced Academic Argument (ENWR 210).
- \* By exemption.

Students may earn exemption in one of three ways:

- 1) Single-measure exemption: Students are automatically exempt from the first writing requirement if at least one of the following statements is true:
  - The student is an Echols Scholar.
  - The student scored 720 or above on the writing portion of the new SAT exam or the SAT II writing exam.
  - The student scored a 5 on the AP English language subject test.

- 2) Composite exemption: Students are automatically exempt from the first writing requirement if at least one of the following statements is true:
- The student scored 680-710 on the writing portion of the new SAT exam or the SAT II writing exam AND scored a 5 or above on the IB (higher level A 1) exam.
  - The student scored 680-710 on the writing portion of the new SAT exam or the SAT II writing exam AND scored a 4 on the AP English language subject test.
  - The student scored 700-710 on the writing portion of the new SAT exam or the SAT II writing exam AND scored a 4 or 5 on the AP English literature exam.
- 3) Portfolio exemption: If a student is not automatically exempt, he/she may be able to earn an exemption from the first writing requirement through portfolio review. Good candidates for portfolio review include those for whom at least one of the following is true:
- The student has experience writing argument papers at the college level.
  - The student scored 670 or above on the SAT II writing test.
  - The student scored a 4 or 5 on the AP English literature subject test.
  - The student scored a 4 on the AP English language subject test.
  - The student scored a 5 or above on the IB (higher A1) exam.<sup>1</sup>

**Second Writing Requirement (SWR): typically a 3-credit course.**

Students must complete an additional course, in any department in the College, whose written work in English meets the criteria for this requirement. The course may carry one or more credits. There are no exceptions to the second writing requirement. Courses elected under this heading may also be counted toward completion of other segments of the area requirements, as well as toward a major or minor. A course offered for the second writing requirement must carry a grade of C- or better and must be taken in the College. All students must satisfy this requirement at the University of Virginia by the end of the sixth semester, with the necessary form filed by the same deadline in the dean's office.

---

<sup>1</sup> From the Undergraduate Record, College of Arts and Sciences, Competency Requirements.  
[http://records.ureg.virginia.edu/preview\\_entity.php?catoid=11&ent\\_oid=584&bc=1#comp\\_requ](http://records.ureg.virginia.edu/preview_entity.php?catoid=11&ent_oid=584&bc=1#comp_requ)

In addition to these core competency requirements, students continue the development of their writing skills in their majors, adding specialized disciplinary approaches to argumentation, analysis and communication.

The following is a description of the writing program in SEAS:

In the School of Engineering and Applied Science, the Department of Science, Technology, and Society (STS) advances understanding of the social and ethical dimensions of science and technology. STS provides instruction in subjects that are essential to the education of professional engineers. This instruction forms the core of a liberal education and lays the foundation for ongoing professional development. All STS courses emphasize the relationships among science, technology, and society; ethics; and oral and written communication.

The following applies to SEAS:

#### First Year

Excepting those students who place out of the course, all entering first-year students are enrolled in STS 101: Engineering, Technology, and Society. This course is designed to strengthen writing and speaking skills with special attention to the challenges of professional communication in engineering and applied science.

#### Second and Third Year

In the second year or third year, all students take at least one 200-level course. Students who meet the prerequisites may elect to substitute one 300-level course for this requirement.

These courses examine the social and ethical issues of science and technology from humanities and social science perspectives. Each focuses on a topic area, such as Thomas Jefferson's interests in science and technology. Although writing and speaking skills continue to be stressed in these course, the focus shifts from skills to the course's content and the broader objective of improving students' grasp of the social and ethical issues of science and technology.

#### Fourth Year

Students in their fourth year enroll in a two-semester sequence, STS 401: Western Technology and Culture and STS 402: The Engineer in Society. This sequence combines focused study of the social, ethical, and professional issues of engineering and technology with the research and writing of the Undergraduate Thesis.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>From the Science, Technology and Society website, Undergraduate Program

- 2.3 For all schools and programs, norming and training sessions will be held prior to the evaluation workshops. An interactive online rubric tool, Waypoint, will be employed to facilitate more efficient and reliable ratings of student work, as the program's functionality allows for real time data analysis of the instructors' ratings, by learning outcome and overall.

For all schools except SEAS, the University is developing a skills-based, descriptive scoring rubric to evaluate the students' writing, based on the core learning outcomes expected from completion of the FWR, reinforced through the SWR, refined in the major and stated in Sec. 1.3. Developed from rubrics used extensively by instructors teaching the FWR, these rubrics have not been applied to fourth-year student work and thus the validity and reliability have not been verified. Appropriate tests of the reliability and validity of the instrument will be conducted. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the student papers will be evaluated by at least two faculty members—a third called in when the first two disagree substantially.

SEAS will develop a writing prompt for entering first-year students that will be made a part of the introductory STS 101 course. A descriptive, skill-based scoring rubric has been developed by the SEAS Writing Assessment Committee to measure the level of competence of entering first-year SEAS students, based on the learning outcomes described in Sec 1.3. Fourth-year student papers associated with the senior thesis, completed for STS 402 at the end of spring semester of 2009, will be the basis for the assessment of graduating students. Appropriate examination of validity and reliability will be conducted for this first use of both the prompt and the rubric.

- 2.4 For all schools except SEAS, samples will be drawn from several sources for several purposes. First, a prompt (assignment) will be given to approximately 225 students from a random sample of FWR sections early in the first semester of the FWR sequence. These assignments will be evaluated by reviewers separately from the normal course grading process and should indicate the incoming abilities of first-year students. Approximately 2100 first-year students participate in the FWR. A random sample of fourth-year students' writing (who took FWR), will be collected directly from approximately 400 students to compare with first-years, as well as to determine if the University is meeting its competency standards for fourth-years. In addition to these broadly representative samples, the University wants to examine the writing of students who place out of the FWR. Therefore an oversample of exempt students' writing (approximately 100 students) will be drawn to compare their competence with that of students' who took the FWR. Approximately 1,100 students place out of the ENWR program but still have to take the SWR. All efforts will be made to ensure that each sample is as representative of the population as possible, including

collecting and analyzing demographic information about the sample of participants to compare with the population. SAT scores and grade point averages will be used as control variables for this analysis.

For SEAS, a random sample of student work from 100 entering first-years will be collected and evaluated by SEAS faculty separately from the normal course grading process. The work will be collected from assignments completed as part of the requirements of STS 101. There are approximately 650 SEAS first-year students in this population. To compare with first-year scores, and to determine competence, a sample of 150 papers from fourth-year students will be collected from STS 402. The papers will be one component of the senior thesis that is completed by all SEAS students in their fourth-year. There are approximately 500 graduating SEAS fourth-years.

In addition to the above described assessments of undergraduate students' writing abilities, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies (IAS) is offered the smaller schools and programs (Nursing, Architecture, Commerce, Education, and the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies program in the School of Continuing and Professional Studies [SCPS]) the opportunity to design and implement separate, discipline-specific, tailored assessments of student writing within each school. IAS will provide consulting, logistical and analytical support to help each school further assess their students' writing beyond the institutional assessment described above. Because these results are discipline-specific and not institutional assessments, they will not be reported to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) or other external audiences, but they will be made part of the reports to the provost and deans.

- 2.5 For all schools student work will be taken from courses in which they are enrolled (a course-embedded approach). This type of high stakes work, where students know it is graded, helps to ensure the students are doing their best work.
- 2.6 Using a skills-based, descriptive scoring rubric, faculty evaluators from each school will score papers. The individual skills will be assigned a score of 4 (highly competent), 3 (competent), 2 (minimally competent) or 1 (not competent); an overall score for each student will be calculated by summing up and averaging the scores for each individual skill. Each paper will be scored twice and a third time if the first two overall scores differ by more than one point on the majority of learning outcomes being rated in the rubric. Results will be reported and evaluated for the individual undergraduate schools that are subject to the FWR and SWR (Architecture, Arts and Sciences, Commerce, Education and Nursing) as well as aggregated for the University as a whole. The results of the SEAS and BIS program within SCPS writing assessments will be reported separately since the learning outcomes are distinct.

- 2.7 The same measurement strategies will be employed for the fourth-year assessments.
- 2.8 All schools will utilize a cross-sectional value-added approach for AY2008-09. The University will be able to draw inferences about value added from the cross sectional comparison between first- and fourth-years in AY2008-09. Cross-sectional approaches can sometimes be problematic because the performance of fourth-years is inflated by the fact that low-performing students have dropped out of school before they reach their fourth-year. However, the University of Virginia has a very high retention rate, and because of this, the fourth-year sample's performance will not be significantly inflated. The 6-year graduation rate at the University for the entering class of 2001 was over 93%. The results of fourth-year transfer students will be analyzed separately because few of these students will not have completed the University's FWR. Fourth-year competence for these students can be ascertained. The University expects significantly higher mean scores when comparing first- and fourth-year students in all schools. Also expected is that fourth-year students will meet the competency standards established in section 1.2.

### 3.0 Process evaluation

- 3.1 Detailed reports, with analysis and recommendations, will be authored by the Writing Assessment Committees (one for all schools except SEAS and the BIS program within SCPS and separate committees for SEAS and BIS) in the spring and summer of 2009 and submitted to the Provost, deans of the undergraduate schools, department chairs and program and school assessment coordinators at the University (~60). A general report of results will be submitted to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia in September 2009. Written and electronic versions of these reports will be disseminated directly to pertinent stakeholders. A public website describing the process and the general results has been established.  
<http://www.web.virginia.edu/iaas/reports/subject/competencies/writing.htm>
- 3.2 Competency assessment results have been, and will continue to be, used to improve student learning at the University. While the vast majority of results from competency assessments have been positive, with the University meeting or exceeding its targets, there have been some areas targeted for improvement. Offering "instruction of the highest quality to undergraduates" is a central goal of the University, and core competency assessment results are part of the information stream that will inform efforts to meet that goal. If shortcomings are identified, the Assessment Committees will meet and discuss what the next steps should be taken at the institutional level, if any. Schools and departments will receive copies of a detailed report to consider in their own discussions. This report will include not only the results of the institutional assessment but also the breakdowns for each undergraduate school and major disciplines within the College of Arts and Sciences.



- 3.3 The University estimates the costs of the administration to assess approximately 1,200 students to be \$22,500. This estimate includes payments to faculty for training and overseeing the application of the rubrics and evaluating the student work. Not included in the \$22,500 is IAS staff time. The Associate Director expects to spend approximately 25 hours facilitating committee work, overseeing a staff member's work, and drafting this report; his time equals \$1,300 in salary and benefits. The staff member is expected to spend approximately 80 hours facilitating the evaluation workshops, communicating with faculty committee members, communicating with students, and tabulating and analyzing the data; her time adds up to \$2,400 in salary and benefits. The estimated total cost of this assessment is \$26,200.

**PART B: STATUS REPORT**

**4.0 Data Presentation (leave blank until data is due)**

- 4.1 Explain any challenges to data collection, and how they were addressed.
- 4.2 **Cross-Sectional, Value-added Results.** Fourth-year students significantly outperformed first-year students overall and on every individual writing learning outcome ( $p < .001$ ).

	<b>1<sup>st</sup>-Years Mean Score</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup>-Years Mean Score</b>	<b>Effect Size</b>
Introduction*	34.36	50.70	.11
Parts of Argument I- Claims and Subclaims*	32.77	55.96	.21
Parts of Argument II- Evidence*	34.54	60.52	.26
Counterarguments*	24.39	32.31	.02
Cohesion and Coherence*	41.71	64.32	.26
Audience and Tone*	34.82	61.50	.26
Conclusions*	35.01	58.26	.20
Final Score*	33.95	54.80	.25

\*Mean difference is significant at  $p < .001$

- Describe the value-added (or competency) information/data that was collected. This information should include, but is not limited to, quantitative or qualitative summaries of the differences between pre and post assessments or any performance data
- 4.3 Describe any additional evidence of value added (or competency); this might include faculty testimony, student retention, or post graduation evidence.