

## Reflective Essay 4b: Assessing Writing Competency and Proficiency

### Introduction

Writing provides one of the most informative, and most common, measures of student learning at the University. SDSU has refined the assessment of writing skills over recent years. In the past, freshmen either met a writing competency requirement – which demonstrates competency to begin baccalaureate-level writing – before admission or enrolled in and passed developmental writing courses before proceeding past their first year. Upon fulfilling the writing competency requirement, students moved into and completed the required General Education writing sequence. Transfer students met a writing competency requirement before enrolling in upper-division courses. In addition, all students completed an upper-division writing requirement to assure that student writing was proficient by the time of graduation. This essay will describe the changes that have taken place in demonstrating writing competency and proficiency at SDSU, the rationale for these changes, and how these changes facilitate a more timely assessment of writing proficiency that allows students opportunities for continued writing improvement.

### Changes in Writing Competency Requirements: Freshmen [CFRs: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 4.3, and 4.7]

Writing competency requirements are described in the SDSU [General Catalog](#) each year and can be found on the SDSU web site. Writing competency is demonstrated in two basic ways: receiving a specific score on one of a number of national or state tests [i.e., CSU English Placement Test (EPT), SAT verbal test, ACT English usage test, AP language and composition or literature and composition test, CSU English Equivalency Examination, College Board SAT II Writing Test]; or attempting but failing the EPT and earning credit in a developmental writing class.

While the requirements have been consistent, the time frame in which students must complete writing competency and the consequences of failure to complete this requirement have changed dramatically. In AY 1996-97 students had three semesters within which to demonstrate competency. This was reduced to two semesters in AY 1997-98. In AY 1998-99 students who were not exempt from the EPT because of test scores had to take the EPT prior to registration in any classes. Students who failed the EPT had to enroll in the appropriate Rhetoric and Writing Studies developmental course in the first semester. If they did not clear the requirement by the end of the second semester they lost registration priority. In AY 1999-00 the requirements remained the same, with the added stipulation that failure to complete the requirement by the end of the second semester resulted in disenrollment from the University. The following year students were required to complete both writing and math competency by the end of the first academic year or be subject to disenrollment.

### Change in Writing Competency Requirements: Transfer Students [CFRs: 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 4.3, and 4.7]

Similar changes occurred for transfer students. In the past, students could demonstrate competency by either receiving a specific score on one of a number of national or state tests, as described for freshmen; or passing with a C or better a transferable GE English Composition course and passing the Transfer Writing Assessment or earning credit in a developmental writing class.

Changes to the time frame for completion of writing competency for transfer students followed the same pattern as changes for freshmen. The primary difference was that the consequences of failing to complete the requirements resulted in loss of priority registration, rather than disenrollment. In addition, transfer students had to meet this requirement before enrolling in upper-division courses for which writing competency was a prerequisite.

### Upper-Division Writing Test [CFRs: 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 4.3, and 4.7]

All students, those who begin at SDSU and those who transfer in, must also satisfy the upper-division writing requirement, which is mandated through the CSU's Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement. In the past, in order to attempt to satisfy this requirement, students must have completed or be completing 60 units, have fulfilled the entry-level writing competency requirement, and have completed the General Education Communication and Critical Thinking requirement in Composition and Intermediate Composition and Critical Thinking. Students whose majors did not specify any particular course or procedure could demonstrate proficiency by passing either the University Upper Division Writing Test or passing one course from a specified list of courses with a grade of CR or C.

#### Rationale for Changes in Writing Requirements

The requirements described in the previous sections created three liabilities. One, considerable resources were devoted to the developmental writing needs of first-year students. For example, over the years 1998 to 2001 approximately 38% of freshmen were enrolled in these courses. Second, transfer students were treated differently than students who began as freshmen at the University on the assumption that the lower-division writing courses (and placement exams) at community colleges and other universities were not as effective as those at SDSU. Third, many students waited until their last semester to take the upper-division writing exam and only then learned that they did not write well enough to graduate.

Several factors brought about revisions in the writing requirements at SDSU. As described in essays for Standard 1 and Standard 3, enrollment management policies allowed the university to expect better academically prepared freshmen. In addition, the implementation of the dual admission program in fall 2002 meant that local students who did not meet SDSU eligibility requirements and who had developmental writing and/or mathematical needs began their education at a community college. These two policies reduced the need for developmental courses for freshmen. During 2003, 30.4% of freshmen students were in developmental courses. Beginning January 2004 the University eliminated the inequity of the Transfer Writing Assessment. Now, all students, transfers and those who begin as freshmen, take the new [Writing Proficiency Assessment](#) (WPA), which is scored using a 12-point [rubric](#), when they have completed 60 units. Students who write proficiently fulfill the upper-division writing requirement for graduation. Students with competent writing skills but in need of improvement are directed into upper-division writing courses. Students with inadequate writing skills are required to take a lower-division writing course (RWS 280 or 281 for ESL) to prepare them for the upper-division writing course appropriate for their major. RWS 280/281 are new courses and will be refined over the next two years based on student outcomes and instructor input. Requiring students to take the new upper-division writing requirement when they have completed 60 units prohibits postponing this task until the last semester and provides students with opportunities to take additional writing classes to ensure that they acquire the writing skills we require of graduates.

#### Summary

The changes described in this essay, and particularly the recent implementation of the Writing Proficiency Assessment, have created the opportunity for the University to assess more systematically the effectiveness of its writing programs as well as those of feeder institutions. All students will take the exam so different student preparations may be compared directly. The University plans to track these data with the goal of refining lower-division GE coursework as well as providing a measure of success for feeder institutions. In addition, the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies is currently studying the efficacy of the WPA and exploring additional ways to improve the assessment of writing at the upper division level. They are paying particular attention to the ways in which student learning outcomes related to writing may be better reflected in assessment. They note that, in its present state, the Writing Proficiency

Assessment measures the ability of our students to compose a timed essay on a general topic, but it is not specifically linked to many of the key learning outcomes of GE writing courses or W courses.