

## **Writing Our Course: Changing the First-Year Composition Course at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College**

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College writing instruction in a public, two-year college has its share of challenges: open enrollment, transfer agreements, credit for prior learning, basic writing instruction, and the wide variety of programs, certificate, and transfer paths that writing classes serve. Meeting these diverse needs becomes especially poignant in the first-year writing course, which we call English Composition at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC). In English Composition, students coming from or concurrently enrolled in basic writing programming, students enrolled in the General Education Transfer Certificate program, and students in programs as widely varying as nursing, criminal justice, marketing, and electro-mechanical engineering sit beside each other to build writing skills that they will use in a variety of academic, organizational, and business contexts.

### **English Composition at NWTC**

English Composition is required of a wide range of students in the college including all students in associate's degree programs and those enrolled in the college's General Studies Transfer Certificate. The course is taught in face-to-face sections meeting once or twice weekly, fully online, in a blended mode, and in accelerated format both in-person and online. The Course Outcome Summary states that in English Composition "learners develop knowledge/skills in planning, organizing, writing, editing. Students will also analyze audience/purpose, use elements of research, format documents using standard guidelines, and develop critical reading skills." Students must meet one of the following prerequisites:

1. NextGen Accuplacer Scores for placement into English Composition must be 250 or above in Reading and Writing
2. ACT Reading score of at least 16 AND English score of at least 15
3. Successful completion (B or better) of College Reading and Writing (for students not scoring the minimum Accuplacer Reading and Writing scores listed above; these students must complete both this course and the English Composition Prep course) AND/OR English Composition Prep (for students not scoring the minimum Accuplacer Writing score listed above; students may enroll in this course that is taught with an embedded Writing Coach concurrently with English Composition)

Course competencies from the Wisconsin Technical College System focus on these items:

1. Establish document purpose
2. Appraise audience
3. Differentiate essay parts
4. Construct topic sentences
5. Devise thesis statements
6. Compose paragraph types: Introductory, concluding, topical, and transitional
7. Employ rhetorical strategies
8. Apply revision skills
9. Prepare written documents
10. Establish critical reading skills
11. Investigate information sources
12. Integrate research techniques

The course is taught by full- and part-time faculty and by high school teachers who offer the course as NWTC transcribed credit. In the spring 2019 semester, full-time instructors taught twenty-five of the forty-four sections of the course offered with part-time faculty teaching seven sections and transcribed credit instructors teaching twelve sections.

## **Our Challenges**

Since the Spring 2019 semester, the Communication Skills team at NWTC has worked on revamping the English Composition course, and as the lead faculty member for English Composition, I have been tasked with much of that development. As a team, we felt the time was right for major change for several reasons. First, the afore-mentioned needs of a wide variety of students make the teaching English Composition at a two-year college somewhat different than its instruction elsewhere. Tinberg (2015) has argued that the “generalized” nature of the community college curriculum, its need to be everything to everyone, places unique demands on curricular design (p. 26). He also notes that much academic scholarship on the first-year writing course looks at it in terms of supporting academic majors in the university setting whereas in a two-year college, students often employ the learning and skills from the class immediately in business and organizational settings (p. 15). As instructors, we felt this important set of demands on the class. For instance, statements that students will use the research and documentation skills taught in the class in upper-level major courses are often met with blank stares by large portions of our classes. Still, some of our students do transfer the course to four-year universities, and those universities look for transferring students to have received instruction in critical analysis, information literacy, documentation format, and the expectations of academic writing. Overall, we needed a model to address the myriad ways the course is used.

We also identified needs in the area of contextualization, an ongoing effort of our college to match course content and instruction to specific programs. With the pairing of English Composition with other courses across the college since some sections are taught using the LinC (Learning in Community) model of paired classes and instruction, along with the desire of programs to enroll program students in specific English Composition courses for program scheduling needs, we felt the need for contextualization in our approach to English Composition.

Finally, some exigent considerations drove us to make changes to the course sooner rather than later. NWTC is moving to college-wide implementation of an eight-week scheduling model in academic year 2020-2021 for which a pilot including the English Composition course has begun in academic year 2019-2020. Coupled with the fact that we had decided to move away from our traditional textbook to an Open Educational Resource in academic year 2019-2020, the time was ripe to make curricular changes since we had important re-design work to do anyhow. We began the work of re-designing the class during the spring 2019 semester.

### **Our Design**

We have employed a writing process model focused on the modes or patterns of development (causal analysis, comparison and contrast, exemplification, etc.) for English Composition for roughly the past twenty years. We used Wyrick's (2017) *Steps to Writing Well* textbook since around 2010, and in recent years, we paired the book with MindTap, Cengage's online support for that textbook. However, in academic years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, I ran a pilot using an Open Educational Resource called *ENGL 101: Rhetoric and composition* (2017) as a textbook. This text still employs our previous models of writing process and the modes of development, but we like its readability and its chapters on the basics of paragraphing, topic development, and reading for comprehension, which we still need to cover given our course competencies. Hence, we are carrying this book into our re-designed course. We simply minimize the chapters on the modes of development. We offer the book as a link and an Adobe PDF document in the course Blackboard shell, but we also offer a spiral-bound printed copy to our students from our Print Services department for a cost of \$10.

In our thinking about the possibilities for a new course, we discussed our assumptions about writing, most of which come from Writing Studies and Rhetorical Genre Studies (see Table 1). As the Writing Studies model avers, writing classes have their own terms, threshold concepts, and skills, some of which center on the shared nature of texts, which the term "genre" conveys. We had come to see problems with our earlier model that

treated the modes of development as fixed and staid genres rather than as sites of social actions/expectations, as Rhetorical Genre Studies argues (Rinard & Masiel, 2016).

These assumptions prompted us to look for a model reflecting our assumptions about writing and its disciplinary integrity along with the needs of contextualization and flexibility already noted. Given the models for teaching composition currently on offer, the transfer model of writing instruction (see Table 1) seemed to fit our needs best as the basic model for our revamped course. In that model, focus is on building writerly identity and transferable skills, knowledge, and processes across academic, personal, and work contexts. We felt this malleable model would allow us maximum flexibility to address wide-ranging needs. Tinberg (2015) points out that with retention and persistence a perennial issue at two-year colleges, instructors need to think clearly about offering value for the diverse needs of students in a first-year writing course (p. 10). Transfer theory places those considerations of value and continued applicability at the forefront, guiding curricular design and assessment.

The Elon Statement on Writing Transfer (2013) offers some working principles of the transfer approach, advising explicit rhetorical instruction in areas like audience, exigency, genre, purpose, and style since with such instruction “students are more likely to transform rhetorical awareness into performance.” Another important aspect of the transfer model is “designing academic writing opportunities with authentic audiences and purposes” (p.6) and prompting repeated and meaningful opportunities for metacognition on the knowledge, skills, and processes at work in the class (p. 6).

We coupled the transfer model with a reading-centric model (see Table 1) with a course topic and questions that guide the course. This approach follows the suggestion of transfer theorists like Beaufort (2007, 2012) and Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) who argue for offering course topics and a shared set of readings/sources so that writing instructors can offer the rhetorical and genre instruction that the transfer theory centralizes in an intentional manner. For instance, we can ensure that students are summarizing effectively with a source we as instructors have already read. We can also model how a rhetorically-skilled, educated reader encounters texts and sources as readings unfold in

the course. We also believe there is a benefit in preventing plagiarism since we can rotate the readings that assignments are based on.

Table 1. *Compilation of modes, characteristics, and readings that impacted changes to curricular design for English Composition at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College*

<b>Mode/Approach</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Readings</b>
Writing Studies	Understand that composition-rhetoric is a discipline with its own terms, threshold concepts, processes, and skills	Adler-Kassner & Wardle (2015); Beard (2010)
Transfer	Induce students to move skills, knowledge, and processes across contexts	Beaufort (2007; 2012); Tinberg (2015); Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak (2014); Yancey, Davis, Robertson, Taczak, & Workman (2018)
Rhetorical Genre Studies	Identify typical characteristics of genres that students encounter	Bawarshi (2016); Rinard & Masiel (2016)
Reading	Teach rhetorical reading skills rather than reading comprehension alone; reading is valuable for genre knowledge and academic writing expectations	Carillo (2016); De Piero (2019)

We have initially offered the class to our part-time and transcribed credit instructors with a set of readings and sources on the course topics of (1) happiness and (2) work and human dignity, though we are developing course topics on grit, delayed gratification, imagination, nature versus nurture, empathy, and career choices. We offered the “Guidelines for assembling readings and choosing topics” below for all full- and part-time instructors to guide their topic and reading selections if they did not use the course topics and readings already prepared:

1. Class topics should be developmentally appropriate for a college freshman in terms of topic, complexity, and readability (aim for lexile levels around 1,200-1,400)
2. Create 3-4 essential questions to guide the course
3. Aim for coverage of the course topic from several angles and disciplines to provide opportunity to discuss disciplinary writing practices
4. Aim for multimodal diversity with text articles, videos, charts, graphs, podcasts, etc.

We also offered the following “Guidelines for writing course questions” to all full- and part-time faculty with a set of example questions on our happiness topic:

1. Aim questions at the personal level, at the discourse level, and at the cultural level
  - a. How do humans across time, cultures, genders, ages, and socioeconomic levels differ in how they talk about and represent happiness? (discourse)
  - b. What do cultural representations of happiness tell us about both happiness and those cultures? (cultural)
  - c. What are the most significant and best-supported claims about happiness from our readings? (discourse)
  - d. What would you say to someone who asked you the most important lesson you learned from your reading and reflections on happiness? (personal)

2. Prompt students to look at various genres and modes (online sources, books, art, music, academic research) through your questions

Our focus on reading in the course features a specific approach and not one of simple comprehension, though we cover basic annotation and summary skills early in the course with our OER text. De Piero's (2019) model of focusing on "rhetorical reading skills" in three areas guides us in our reading instruction since it dovetails so well with the transfer model. Those three areas, deconstructing genres, situating texts in discourse communities, and reading like a writer, provoke the kind of rhetorical instruction and reflection that the transfer model is built on. We see value in such reading in the course for things like academic vocabulary acquisition as well. Research by Krashen, Nagy, and Townsend (2012) has shown that readers can acquire more academic vocabulary through genuine academic reading than through direct instruction, and we believe the same extends to inculcation of awareness of academic genre and language expectations.

### **Implementation**

As we built the course, we sought to scaffold and repeat assignment types, taking Beaufort's (2012) admonition seriously not to teach too many genres or assign too many rhetorically-different assignments in a transfer-centered course. Since one of the main features of transfer theory is a focus on metacognition, we begin the course with two reflective assignments, the Discourse Community Map and the Literacy Autobiography (see the assignment descriptions in the Appendix, offered without their accompanying rubrics). We also sought to sequence knowledge and skill attainment by (1) building global skills before local skills, then (2) increasing complexity, and finally, (3) increasing diversity (Berryman, 1991). Thus, we build from metacognitive assignments early on before talking about items like topic sentences and thesis statements. Then, we move to summary and critical analysis skills in the Annotated Bibliography assignment which we assign in four separate entries on assigned course readings. Then, we move into a Textual Analysis Essay where the focus is on smooth integration of sources and a balance between paraphrase, quotation, and commentary on two of the sources already read and discussed

in class. Then, we move into the Synthesis Paper where students are invited to add another source of their own finding on the course topic to the seven sources that the class has read and discussed. In this paper, students address the course questions, bringing in sources to support their analysis. Students must bring multiple sources to bear on specific analytic claims they make. In other words, they must synthesize the sources to support claims. Finally, the course closes with another metacognitive assignment, the Theory of Writing Essay, an assignment that Yancey, Davis, Robertson, Taczak, and Workman (2018) argue is important for cementing the transferable knowledge, skills, and processes from the course for students as they move into other contexts for writing (p. 44). As a team, we have always united strongly around core shared assessments, so we require that all instructors use the same assignment descriptions and rubrics and a common percentage (70%) of the course grade must be built on those same core assignments, all of which are writing assignments. Each instructor builds 20% of the course with personally-designed assignments and activities, often journal entries, revision groups, discussion boards, and in-class activities. The remaining 10% of the course grade is based on the student's participation, engagement, behavior, and professionalism centered on the college's seven "Core Abilities": Demonstrate Personal Accountability, Demonstrate Community and Global Accountability, Value Individual Differences and Abilities, Communicate Effectively, Work Cooperatively and Professionally, Solve Problems Effectively, and Think Critically and Creatively.

### **Early Outcomes and the Future**

Though it is too early to fully report outcomes of the changes to the course since the Fall 2019 semester is the official kickoff to full implementation, we have received some initial feedback since we have completed a single summer offering of the course and two eight-week offerings just completed in the first eight weeks of the Fall 2019 semester, one taught by me and one by Kristin Sericati, the developmental reading and writing instructor on our team. Kristin taught the redesigned course paired with English Composition Prep in the Summer 2019 session and reports that the relative ease of getting into the course with more reflective, personal assignments and then ending with metacognition again in the

Theory of Writing Essay bookends the course in virtuous ways, prompting students to reflect on the skills, knowledge, and processes they have developed in the course and how they apply in other contexts. In the first eight week sessions just completed, Kristin and I both witnessed stronger student engagement with and reflection on course materials and sources than we had seen in the course before. Students engaged effectively with the course topic, questions, and sources overall. They also seemed to grasp the importance of transferring their hard-earned knowledge and skills across contexts. The Theory of Writing Essay in particular seemed to prompt that sort of reflection as students considered their individual takeaways from the course. Quantitatively, our course success rates saw a bump as well, though it is impossible to sort out the effects of the eight-week delivery mode on course success rate versus the effects of the overall course re-design. We hesitate to make any claims based on our limited early numbers. Still, in the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters, we had a 60.8% course success rate (out of 204 students) for students in English Composition who had taken or were concurrently enrolled in our basic education course sequence with English Composition, which is the same population of students taking the course in the three redesigned sections of the course just completed. By way of comparison, we enjoyed a 69.6% course success rate (out of 23 students) in the three completed sections of the re-designed course.

Other instructors teaching the course have also offered initial feedback to me as the course contact person. Several transcribed credit instructors have reported that the new course aligns more consistently with Advanced Placement (AP) writing expectations and design than what we had taught previously. Other full- and part-time instructors have reported deeper, more aware engagement with the core concepts of writing such as audience, purpose, tone, discourse communities, and genre than what they had experienced before. All told, we are excited about our early returns, and we have created an assessment plan for the course redesign. We will look at average scores for each assessment, student surveys, instructor feedback, and overall course success rates to guide changes and updates to the course as we continue to seek ways to serve our students' needs through high quality writing and reading instruction.

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## Appendix A

### *Discourse Community Map*

Writing professor Anne Beaufort defines a discourse community as “a social group that communicates at least in part via written texts and shares common goals, values, and writing standards, a specialized vocabulary and specialized genres.” For this assignment, you will need to identify the discourse communities that you participate in and comment on their rules and typical ways of communicating.

The purpose of this assignment is to examine how your writing is shaped by and shapes the various discourse communities to which you belong. Your audience for the assignment is your Instructor and peers.

Construct a discourse community map that outlines at least three discourse communities you belong to and the different literacies required for membership. As you begin to construct your map, look at various concept models to inspire a design. You can find examples online by using search keywords like “concept map templates.”

Write a 1 page reflection on your discourse community map. Comment on what is intriguing to you or unique to the various discourse communities you are part of. Did you have trouble learning any of the discourses? Have you ever broken the written or unwritten rules in some way? Is there a way to show you are in or out of the group by using certain language?

Your map should include the following:

1. **Name** of each discourse community
2. **Audience:** Who are the members of this community?
3. **Purpose:** What purpose do you write to members of this community? These include instructing, informing, entertaining, advising, persuading, etc.
4. **Genres:** In what ways do you communicate? (text messaging, email, etc.)
5. **Conventions/values:** What are the values of this community and the rules that you follow when you communicate with members of the community?

6. **Specialized language:** Provide a few examples of terms that would be used when communicating to members of this community
7. A 1 page written reflection
8. Good paragraph structure (topic sentence, supporting details and explanation, and a concluding sentence)
9. Grammar/spelling check before submission

## Appendix B

### *Literacy Autobiography Essay*

A literacy autobiography is your story of reading and writing and their development and place in your life. Introduce your autobiography with an overall statement on reading and writing in your life. You might choose to use sources, but there is no source requirement. It is an “essay” which means an attempt. Your attempt in this assignment is to share your ideas on the place of reading and writing in your life. Use *I*, *me*, and *my* as pronouns.

In the body, you might develop your favorite authors/genres; books/websites that have impacted you significantly; writing projects you have completed, are working on, or have planned; your ideas about and attitudes toward reading and writing; a significant person, experience, class, or other influence that has impacted you as a reader or writer; a snippet of a favorite poem or self-written piece that you want to share and an explanation of why it is important to you; or choose other ideas on reading and writing to develop that you think important and relevant. Often, an autobiography has a chronological aspect, so you might consider developing the body of the paper through with early memories of reading and writing, then move through your years of schooling, and then discuss the role of reading and writing in your current life. Then, finish with how reading and writing might change for you as you continue through academics and into your career.

You might conclude with your goals/interests in relation to reading and writing in the present and future, how you see reading and writing in your future, or some other method.

Feel free to include a multimodal aspect in your literacy autobiography. You might have images, links, charts, tables, graphs, sound clips, or linked videos in the document.

Make this your best writing. In the “personal essay” genre, writers often show off their writing skills and speak in their authentic voice. Don’t be stuffy and “academic”. Be you.

Include accurate topic sentences for your body paragraphs and conclusion and transition effectively between your paragraphs.

## Appendix C

### *Textual Analysis Essay*

This essay is about your ability to develop a clear interpretation of a text based on the text itself and balance your own views with those of your sources through smooth integration of quotes and paraphrases with appropriate context for your remarks.

This essay is based on two of the readings on your class topic that you have reviewed in the class so far. It asks you to examine a text and interpret what an author means and your reaction to it or interpretation of it. Good analysts question their own assumptions, ideas, and interpretations too—your identity, your values, your culture, the genre/approach of the text you are working with, your current health and mood—all these things and more might move you to interpret the text in a certain way. A good analysis does several things:

1. It breaks down a text and answers questions.
2. It reflects on how and why the text is constructed as it is.
3. It considers the appeals that the author makes—emotional, logical, a mix of both, a values-based approach, a cart-toppling anti-establishment approach, a fear-based appeal, and so on.

Take one of the following analytic approaches (you might end up doing more than one):

1. Agree or disagree with what the authors say in specific passages
2. Identify a theme that you see running throughout the texts and offer your personal take on the issue
3. Identify places within the texts where more or less is needed—clarification, evidence, explanation, emphasis, or whatever
4. Compare what the authors say to another source that you bring into your essay or other information/viewpoints on the topic
5. Compare the sources in several ways: differences in their presentation of information and arguments; differences or similarities in viewpoints on issues

- that they both discuss; or other ways that you think of comparing and contrasting them
6. Discuss how a change in genre or presentation mode would help or hurt the texts
  7. Talk about how the texts could be packaged and presented differently for a different audience that you identify; discuss what that repackaging would look like and comment on its anticipated effects on the audience
  8. Discuss passages from the texts that sparked your interest and explain why
  9. Offer a personal spin on a concept and/or argument from the texts

**Note:** You can mix a few approaches above; just use good topic sentences to tell the reader where you're going.

Whichever approach you take:

1. Make sure to quote from the original source that you are using. Introduce your readers to the authors/sources you're using. Use a signal phrase to set up each quote. Provide enough context from the original source for your analysis. Don't just jump into your discussion. Set the stage first.
2. Make sure to choose specific passages from the text. You cannot analyze each entire text in this short essay. Go deep rather than wide. Despite this narrow focus, realize that you need to have a strong grasp of each source to do an adequate job of analysis.

## Appendix D

### *Annotated Bibliography*

An annotated bibliography is a common college writing assignment. In it, you show your abilities as a reader, as a critical thinker, and as a writer. Show good summary skills and critical analysis skills.

The annotated bib begins with an accurate Works Cited entry, following MLA or APA format. A sample MLA works cited entry follows:

Jones, Christopher. *Drilling in the Arctic Wilderness: A Choice for Tomorrow*.  
Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

List the annotated bibliography entries alphabetically by the first word of each entry as they would appear on a Works Cited page (though no separate Works Cited page is required for this assignment). If an entry begins with the word “The”, ignore it and alphabetize by the next word. Indent the second and subsequent lines of each entry ½”, allowing the reader to see where a new entry begins.

The first paragraph is a summary paragraph, and the first line of the summary is indented five spaces. The summary must be objective, written from a third person perspective. The summary paragraph should highlight the main ideas from the source. Exclude your personal opinions of the text from this paragraph. Just report what is there. Aim for 6-12 sentences.

The second paragraph in the entry is a critical analysis of the source, which includes evaluating both the writing style (reading difficulty, organization of ideas, etc.), as well as critically analyzing the ideas presented by the author (including errors/strengths in logic; problems/strengths with evidence; qualifications of the author). Also, comment on how the source’s genre affects its language and presentation. Indent the first line five spaces. Comment on the quality of the source and its writing and the qualifications of the writer, not your opinion on the topic of the source. Aim for 6-12 sentences.

The Annotated Bibliography will end with four sources. You will do one at a time with different genres/types of sources. Three of the sources will be provided to you by your Instructor and will center on your class topic. You may do your own research and select your final source, again on the class topic. Continue to add each entry to the same document, which you will re-submit in the Annotated Bibliography folder in Blackboard four times. Correct errors and omissions from previous submissions with each new submission.

The annotated bibliography should be neat and well-organized. It should have complete sentences, proper paragraphs, and correct grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation/mechanics.

See examples of the assignment in the Annotated Bibliography examples folder in Blackboard.

## Appendix E

### *Synthesis Paper*

The Synthesis Paper is your opportunity to respond to the class topic and questions with the sources used in the class and any others you want to bring in. Speak in your own voice, but make sure your tone is professional, informed, and reasonable.

Use four sources with at least three coming from the class readings, though you can bring in other sources that you choose.

The paper is a 4-6 page "survey" or "argument" related to the class semester topic and questions.

If writing a survey, your purpose is to state how you think the sources in the course answered the course questions (they may not have answered each question so you will need to consider if and where they did answer the questions). Look at the major issues, opinions, positions, and/or personalities on your topic. Present the major ideas, opinions, or positions related to your topic in an objective, logical manner. Educate. Don't persuade.

If writing an argument, your purpose is to defend a position on the class topic and questions using the sources presented in class (and any others you bring into the paper). Present your position in a fair-minded, evidence-based manner. Persuade. Don't attack.

Provide a Works Cited page with your source citations documented according to MLA or APA standards. Provide at least one parenthetical citation for each source within the document wherever you use each source, whether you quote or paraphrase from it.

Integrate your sources smoothly by using a signal phrase to introduce quotes: According to one researcher on this topic, "Quote" (citation).

Feel free to bring in tables, graphs, charts, and visuals on your topic, though document your use of visuals according to MLA or APA standards.

## **Appendix F**

### *Theory of Writing Essay*

As this class closes, write a 3-4 page essay about your approach and attitudes toward writing and how they have changed; how you see writing in your academic, personal, and professional life going forward; general comments on skills and resources needed to be a good writer; and the expectations of discourse communities you are a member of or anticipate joining in the future. For instance, how will you need to write as a biology major in college in terms of language, use of research, genres, and tone? An engineering major? A professional in business? A member of an organization? And so on.

You do not need to use any sources for this assignment, though if you use any sources, cite them in MLA or APA format. Feel free to bring in visuals, pictures, charts, graphs, audio clips, website links, or whatever, though document them according to MLA or APA standards.