

Writing Plan Narrative, 3rd Edition

Please retain section headers and prompts in your plan.

Department of Psychology - Writing Plan Narrative, 3rd Edition
May 2023
Summarized by WEC Liaison, Professor Benita Jackson

Introductory Summary:

Briefly describe the reasons this department became involved in the WEC project.

The PSY department became involved with the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) program for several key reasons. One key reason is that in 2013 we overhauled the curriculum to more effectively sequence courses across introductory, intermediate, and upper-levels. This offered students both a better-scaffolded **academic progression** and smaller classes at the 200-level. Given that writing is a core skill for the major, engaging with the WEC process was a supportive next step toward developing and refining the larger curricular revision. A second reason for involvement with WEC is that, though writing is a skill that faculty in our department value, we could use support with the **mechanics of teaching writing** across the departmental curriculum. Writing is a fundamental tool for meaningfully contributing to the field, yet most PSY faculty learned writing through trial and error, neither receiving formal field-specific writing instruction nor formal training about methods for teaching writing within the major. We realized that developing common language among faculty would also help students understand the elements of what faculty implicitly mean by “strong writing in psychological science” beyond what they perceive as idiosyncratic whims of instructors. More broadly, as a department we value strong writing as a well-honed skill with two key impacts that transcend the discipline: strong writing is a **bedrock of liberal arts training**, and effective writing instruction can advance **social equity and inclusion** by ensuring that all of our students—regardless of background and preparation—are given rich opportunities to develop this key academic skill.

Key findings and what is new in the 3rd Edition. Key implementation activities proposed.

In Year 1, the key findings resulting from our department’s WEC process meetings were that we articulated five overarching areas of writing in psychology, and started a first-draft rubric operationalizing those ideas into measurable criteria that could be used and adapted in grading across courses at each level. This “flexible uniformity” in grading criteria for writing assignments is designed to facilitate clarity for both faculty and students in what constitutes good writing, and offer a specific way to diagnose and address places where students need to develop



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their skills—and where faculty need support to teach more effectively. In Year 2, starting from assessments conducted in Summer 2021 of 300-level seminars from Spring 2021, we developed the rubric into something more usable by refining the categories and dropping those (such as drafting and mindsets) that were not subject to grading.

Our key implementation for Year 3 was to pilot during Fall 2022 the newly-refined rubric across levels (introductory, intermediate, upper-level) and content areas (Mind/Brain, Health/Illness, Person/Society) of the curriculum. Importantly, we used the evolving rubric both for assessment and also prospectively as a teaching tool. That is, we used elements in the rubric to talk in some depth with students within the classroom about what constitutes strong writing.

Below outlines our process for Year 3.

- **September 2023** we met to review our fall term syllabi and discussed where we each might use the rubric.
- **December 2023** we discussed how well the rubric worked and further streamlined it, in particular simplifying the “Content” section to focus on “Summary” and “Evaluation.” The latest version of our rubric can be found [here](#).
- **January 2023** we brainstormed how we could make writing practices more legible to students. First, we discussed presenting the rubric to students, starting with our syllabi. Draft language to include on our syllabus can be found [here](#). Second, we commented on a draft public-facing brochure for PSY majors. Likely this will be finalized, printed, and shared for student use and feedback starting Year 4.
- **March 2023** our department explored ungrading as inspired by the college-wide faculty retreat on the topic January 2023. Though on the surface using rubrics and ungrading might seem like opposite approaches to writing instruction, we found that both are simply tools to communicate what we value and can actually productively complement one another. For example, rubrics can be used to specify elements of writing that students should work to develop, and ungrading can be used in whole or part to practice those elements (e.g., with lots of low-stakes writing).

In sum, Year 3 we refined the rubric itself; figured out ways to start sharing with students about it; and held the rubric in the context of other practices gaining popularity in this historical moment, namely ungrading.



Section 1: DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC WRITING CHARACTERISTICS

What characterizes academic and professional communication in this discipline?

- *There have not been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan.*
- There have been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan. (Discuss these explicitly.)

Section 2: DESIRED WRITING ABILITIES

With which writing abilities should students in this unit's major(s) graduate?

- *There have not been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan.*
- *There have been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan. (Discuss these explicitly.)*

Section 3: INTEGRATION OF WRITING INTO UNIT'S UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

How is writing instruction currently positioned in this unit's undergraduate curriculum (or curricula)? What, if any, course sequencing issues impede an intentional integration of relevant, developmentally appropriate writing instruction?

- *There have not been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan.*
- There have been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan. (Discuss these explicitly.)

Section 4: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

What concerns, if any, have unit faculty and undergraduate students voiced about grading practices? Please include a menu of criteria extrapolated from the list of Desired Writing Abilities provided in Section 2 of this plan. (This menu can be offered to faculty/instructors for selective adaptation and will function as a starting point in the WEC's longitudinal rating process.).

- There have not been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan.
- *There have been substantial revisions to this section of the Writing Plan. (Discuss these explicitly.)*

Assessment of student writing was the substantive focus of Year 2. Over the years, concerns around grading writing from students included the perception that students were writing for professors' idiosyncratic preferences instead of more objective criteria across the department that reflected the larger field. Faculty would like to disabuse students of this sentiment as well as—



independent of honorable intent—disentangle ourselves from acting in accordance with “grading by whim.” In particular, over the course of especially the 3 meetings we held Spring 2022 we developed and refined a working rubric.

A key “aha” moment in Year 2 came during our final meeting when we realized that not only might we use the rubric for assessment but also as a tool for teaching. The two broad categories for writing in the discipline that we distilled were “Content” and “Process.”

Year 3, we tested using the rubric in a handful of courses across years and tracks. After Fall 2022, we further simplified the rubric. The developed and refined rubric can be found [here](#) (this is the same as in the above section).

Section 5: SUMMARY OF IMPLEMENTATION PLANS, including REQUESTED SUPPORT and RELATION TO PREVIOUS IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

What does the unit plan to implement during the period covered by this plan? What forms of instructional support does this unit request to help implement proposed changes? What are the expected outcomes of named support?

Now that we have a pilot-tested rubric in place, possible next steps for Year 4 and Year 5 are as follows.

Year 4

Fall 2023, Student-facing workshops

- Open forum for psychology majors and prospective students to present the writing rubric, tentatively titled: *Why, What, and How? Becoming a Better Writer in Psychology*
 - Present the rubric; elicit feedback
 - Share the brochure
- Workshop on writing a statement of purpose for graduate school

Spring 2024, Faculty conversations

- Share a favorite writing assignment
- Develop shared department repository of assignments
- Bring Madga Zapedowska back for a follow-up on ungrading / assessment



Year 5

- Fall - Collect writing across class years and tracks
- Spring - Assess writing?
 - Year 1 assessment was with Sara Eddy [Jacobson Writing Center], Randi Garcia [PSY and SDS], and Shannon Audley [EDC])

Alternatively, we might decide to wait a while longer before another assessment. Eg., after another year or two of using the rubric (say Years 4-5), we could revisit whether student writing has improved by doing another formal assessment of student writing across the curriculum (Year 6?). This will allow a whole class to cycle through exposure to the rubric, starting from their first year. If we do an intensive assessment again, we could check with the Provost's Office for funding to support the raters.

Section 6: PROCESS USED TO CREATE THIS WRITING PLAN

How, and to what degree, were a substantial number of stakeholders in this unit (faculty members, instructors, affiliates, teaching assistants, undergraduates, others) engaged in providing, revising, and approving the content of this Writing Plan?

The content of this Writing Plan was developed across four WEC-designated meetings over the year with participation from a sizable portion of the tenure-ladder and contingent faculty. Similar to previous years, the strongest representation came from junior faculty. Impressively, all junior faculty participated in at least one WEC meeting and most in multiple, signaling collectively their strong commitment to developing writing pedagogy in psychology. Though senior faculty were constrained to a greater extent by administrative duties elsewhere, their sustained input in years following is always welcome, whether during WEC meetings or more informally.

Integration between meetings was led by WEC liaison Benita Jackson, with individual consultation from Randi Garcia (generously while on leave 2022-2023), Yael Granot, and Michele Wick, and especially WEC Personnel Sara Eddy. Undergraduates were not included in this phase, beyond those exposed to the working rubric in their courses and some ungrading practices (e.g., informal writing in-class, post-class reflections).

As mentioned above, faculty likely will start eliciting student feedback on the rubric and writing instruction more generally Year 4 and beyond. Year 3 the department was running on minimal staffing because of an especially high rate of leaves and likely will not have capacity for this until Year 4 or 5 because faculty bandwidth was taken with handling our heavy advising loads and a search for a tenure-track cultural/developmental position. Happily this search was



successful; we look forward to welcoming Esa Burson to the tenure-ladder faculty July 1, 2023. However, with the unexpected departure of Annaliese Beery, we will be searching again Fall 2024.

Of note: Year 3 was the third Covid pandemic year. Our department's advising load continued to be heavy (e.g., with many faculty advising 35 students or more), amplified by the unusually high number of faculty on leave; student burnout and faculty strain were palpable. While students and faculty were overall glad to return to in-person instruction, and many students were able to transition back functioning well, a notable portion of students could not complete work consistently or needed more support than in years past. Student satisfaction with college courses (across the country) hovered an all-time low hit last year, perhaps because of the strains of learning while back on campus for many was still burdened by the larger world situation. In that context, it is even more meaningful to reflect on the good we were able to accomplish.

Meeting 1, September 2022 - Syllabus Preparation Department Faculty: Katherine Clemans, Yael Granot, Benita Jackson, Eric McCurdy, Michele Wick. WEC Personnel: Sara Eddy

Meeting 2, December 2022 - Initial Writing Rubric Implementation Reflection Department Faculty: Benita Jackson, Brianna McMillan, Michele Wick. WEC Personnel: Sara Eddy

Meeting 3, January 2023 - Talking to Students About Writing: Randi Garcia, Yael Granot, Benita Jackson. WEC Personnel: None

Meeting 4, March 2023: All-Department Conversation on Ungrading, led by Magdalena Zapadowska - Department Faculty: Katherine Clemans, Patricia diBartolo, Lauren Duncan, Yael Granot, Benita Jackson, Eric McCurdy, Brianna McMillan, Stephanie Steele, Michele Wick. WEC Personnel: Sara Eddy

