Introductory Summary

The PSY department became involved with the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) program for several key reasons. One reason is that in 2013 the department overhauled the curriculum to more effectively sequence courses across introductory, intermediate, and upper-levels so students would have a better-scaffolded academic progression through the major in skill development, and smaller classes at the 200-level. Writing is such a core skill for the major that engaging with the WEC process was a natural next step in refining a larger curricular revision. A second reason for involvement with WEC is that, while writing is a skill that faculty in our department value, we could use support in developing and implementing our pedagogical approaches across the departmental curriculum. Though writing well is fundamental for being skilled enough to meaningfully contribute to the field, most of our faculty developed our own writing abilities through trial and error, and received neither formal field-specific writing instruction nor formal pedagogical training about how to teach writing within the major. 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 be a vehicle for advancing 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

In Year 1, the key findings resulting from our department’s WEC process meetings were our articulation of five overarching areas of writing in psychology (described in Section 2 below), and 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 will hopefully 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 their skills—and where faculty need support to teach more effectively.

Caveats

Our WEC Year 1 coincided with the extraordinary 2020-2021 COVID school year, and so the Writing Plan must be understood in that very strange context. Though we could have reasonably postponed the WEC process to start for another year or two, for better or worse we decided to stay the course. We reasoned that the global pandemic would only exacerbate various social disparities in academic engagement and achievement, and so our department decided to forge
ahead (best as we could) with the hopes that it is especially in times like these that faculty and students benefit from strategic support in this fundamental area of teaching/learning. That’s the “for better.” The “for worse” was that departmental participation was perhaps spottier and less focused than it would have been otherwise because of the sheer overload we all felt in one way or another, and for unrelated staffing issues. Compared to the recent few years, we were absent six full professors, which is roughly half (!) of the permanent lines, and so missed institutional memory that would otherwise have enriched the conversations with a longer historical arc. Indeed, there were two recent long-planned retirements (Peter deVilliers and Randy Frost, the latter of whom attended the first meeting), two faculty who left their positions on short notice (Fletcher Blanchard and Byron Zamboanga), and two faculty who were on year-long sabbatical (Lauren Duncan and Patty diBartolo). On balance, we were incredibly fortunate to have dedicated non-tenure-track members who took the care and time to participate in this process that affects them though is not mandatory to their appointments: Caitlin Shepherd, Katherine Clemans, and Michele Wick.

Section 1: DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC WRITING CHARACTERISTICS

What characterizes academic and professional communication in this discipline?

As part of the pre-determined WEC process, our department was asked first to identify five broad areas of skill development that characterize foundations for strong writing in psychology writ large. We identified four skill domains that upon graduation, PSY students ought to be able to demonstrate:

1) Describe
2) Summarize
3) Analyze
4) Craft content at both the paragraph-level and the sentence level

These skill domains can be applied to myriad forms of writing within psychology, such as:

- published research, as one might do in a PSY 100: Introduction to Psychology assignment integrating findings across multiple studies;
- analyzed data, as might be assigned in PSY 202: Research Methods for an assignment asking students to describe data from an in-class SPSS assignment;
- applications of published research, as might be seen in a 200-level colloquia policy memo; or
- a student-designed empirical proposal, such as those required for a 300-level research seminar.

Though it is not necessary for all four of these skill domains to be exercised in all types of writing, across a psychology student’s undergraduate major an ideal curriculum should provide
multiple opportunities to develop each. The PSY curriculum is organized by content areas that represent umbrellas of subfields—Mind/Brain, Health/Illness, and Person/Society—and thus by the time students complete the 10 required courses for the major, they should have been able to practice the skills across a range of psychological topics.

These four domains represent a high-level synthesis, and this synthesis is presented as an imperfect approximation rather than representative of something canonical to the field. The American Psychological Association does set forth some general guidelines for undergraduate communication skills that can be found starting on page 30 of this report (APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major version 2.0 - August 2013). However, the WEC process starts from the “ground up” rather than from the “top down” meaning that it begins with desired abilities identified within actual departments rather than adapted from general guidelines outside the department from “the field.” Across the meetings in Year 1, our department kept coming back to discussions about redundancies or confusion between terms (e.g. analysis vs. critique; summary vs. description).

Despite the still somewhat rough state of articulation—appropriate to the first year of this multi-year WEC process—of desired writing abilities for students in our particular department, one thing we all found agreement on is that context matters. Indeed “analysis” is different when we mean quantitative data analysis, qualitative data content analysis, or theoretical analysis where the unit of study is one empirical article v. multiple review articles. From the Writing Center liaison Sara Eddy’s guidance, it seems like the challenge of clarifying such terms to the point of departmental consensus is a challenge ubiquitous beyond our department. Indeed, the department’s currently imperfect approximation of desired student writing abilities validates the WEC process itself for bringing some awareness to the fact that just because a term is often-used (“analysis”) does not mean that is in fact well-defined with a universally-shared meaning, and exposes part of why students struggle with learning writing at the college level and within the discipline.

Section 2: DESIRED WRITING ABILITIES
With which writing abilities should students in this department's major graduate?

Building upon the content from Section 1, the next step of the WEC process was for us to translate those desired skill domains for the field of psychology generally to our department’s students more specifically.

Though the boilerplate labeling of this section was “desired writing abilities,” here we deliberately shift the phrase to “desired writing skills” so as to emphasize the point that these proficiencies are developed with deliberate practice over time. Furthermore, while some learning
happens with a sudden “aha!” the time scale of writing development is more appropriately years than semesters. Sharing this framing with students helps them set expectations about the nature of the project before them.

Our department came up with an extensive, hierarchical list of desired writing skills which can be found in this linked Google spreadsheet (also available in the PSY department’s shared Google drive under Curricular > WEC – Writing Enriched Curriculum > Year 1 - 2020-2021 > Meeting 2 – November 2020). While it might be best understood when viewing the spreadsheet which better visually conveys the nested nature of the categories, the list is also presented here.

Before discussing the desired writing skills, we acknowledged that there are two functional phases of writing. "Writing as Thinking" is developing one's own ideas through practices such as reflection, brainstorming, and drafting; this is often informal writing. "Writing as Expression" is conveying ideas with clarity and power, for academic and non-academic audiences. This is often formal writing for academic audiences, and somewhat more informal writing for lay audiences. Regardless of the phase (i.e., developing or conveying), desired writing skills fall into three general domains: drafting, reading, and applying. Note that most of the skills across these domains we identified as a department focus on the "Writing As Expression" category. The "Writing As Thinking" category shows up mostly in the sections (under drafting and reading—but perhaps are best characterized as cross-cutting—"Writing Mindsets")

The below sections briefly outline and describe these three general domains of desired writing skills.

I. DRAFTING SKILLS are about creating content, and more specifically involve summarizing, critically analyzing, and synthesizing. These skills can be applied in the context of multiple types of writing (e.g., their own or co-authored empirically-based manuscript; theory-based essay; honors thesis).

   a. Summarizing Students are taught to describe content within the structures found in the lettered points below, using APA style as warranted. Appropriate to the structure within which they are writing, students contextualize their claims by drawing upon and citing relevant evidence (whether gleaned from e.g., an article/abstract/chapter/film/essay). Students share descriptive detail at the appropriate level fitting the assignment. This is in contrast to analysis/synthesis in section b immediately below.

      i. Abstract

   1. Summarizing a manuscript they wrote, or summarizing a published article in abstract form, written by some other author
ii. Current State of Literature

iii. Methods

iv. Results

v. Discussion

vi. Research Plan

b. Critically Analyzing / Synthesizing. Beyond summarizing, using evidence for engaging in critical analysis/synthesis is to evaluate a point of view.

i. This can be at the level of text, theory, or data.

ii. Regarding the latter, data can be critically analyzed/synthesized using narrative, tables, or figures.

iii. In addition, students must be able to contextualize the work they are reporting within the wider sub-field. Students must be able to work with current literature as well as discern more “classic” texts. Unlike summation, synthesis additionally offers interpretation.

iv. A final piece of critically analyzing/synthesizing is offering innovative next steps. To do this, a student must be able to imagine and articulate what is needed within the context of their written piece (e.g., a next research step, data analysis, future applications).

c. Mechanics-Related Skills are critical for students to master within the major. Indeed, strong analysis, description, or synthesis of content is only as effective as how it is conveyed by the writing mechanics. Such mechanics involve attention to concision; content development and flow; writing structure; and references.

i. Levels We must teach students to organize and synthesize content logically at multiple levels: manuscript, paragraph, and sentence.
1. **Manuscript level** attention ensures that the piece contains: key structures as warranted (e.g., Intro, Methods, Results; a thesis paragraph); a consciously chosen voice; and appropriate tone. Students are taught to make each section of their manuscript follow naturally and logically from the previous section, and lead to the next.

2. **Paragraph level** attention ensures that paragraphs contains key structures (e.g., topic sentence, supporting evidence). Students are taught to make each paragraph of their manuscript follow naturally and logically from the previous paragraph, and lead to the next.

3. **Sentence level** attention includes editing of grammar, syntax, and usage. Students are taught to make a sentence follow naturally and logically from the previous sentence, and lead to the following sentence.

4. **References.**
   
a. Students know how and when to insert in-text.

b. Students are able to create a properly-formatted reference section.

c. This could also include training in reference manager software (RefWorks, Zotero) for the purpose of generating the above.

ii. Another mechanics-related skillset is the ability to **follow APA style**. This style changes with revisions of the APA manual (currently in the 7th edition), but students at least must be able to know how to find and follow the latest guidelines, if not have the particulars memorized.

   1. There was some discussion around the extent to which students should master APA style. This is likely a function of personal faculty preference as well as content area (e.g., some sub-fields of the discipline strongly cross over into other disciplines with different citation styles).
2. The larger point we could probably all agree upon is that faculty want students to have an awareness about the audience for which they are writing, which dictates stylistic concerns.

d. “Writing Mindsets” encompass mindsets and actions to persist through the writing process.

i. Viewing writing as thinking. Instead of waiting to write until they have worked out in their head what they want to say, the student uses informal writing processes (reflection, brainstorming, drafting) as a vehicle to develop their understanding of the material.

ii. Tolerating discomfort. Students persist in developing their writing from half-formed thoughts to more fully-formed thinking.

iii. Understanding that polished writing happens in multiple drafts. Students do not wait for "inspiration" to write, but plan and execute their drafting over time.

iv. Cultivating growth mindset. Students earning self-talk such as "Mistakes are stepping stones toward becoming a better writer. Feedback helps me improve. Critical feedback is not a reflection of my worth; it shows where my professor sees that I have potential to improve."

v. Understanding audience. Students imagine what the readers know and need to know, and adjust their level of detail/style/tone accordingly.

READING SKILLS
During our discussions in Year 1, as we began to explore in more and more granular ways what “writing” means for psychology students in our department, it became clear that a key foundation of good writing is strong reading skills. These reading skills can be characterized as mechanics and mindsets.

Reading mechanics include a few key skills. The first is pre-reading. That is, we want students to know what to digest before reading word-for-word (e.g., noting items including the journal [being able to contextualize what sub-field it’s in and how it’s regarded such as by knowing its impact factor], authors, title, abstract, noting major sections, discerning what and how to skim...
initially). After pre-reading, we want students to know it can help their comprehension to break their reading into sections. The larger point is for them to appreciate that reading is a process, and that it's ok and can even be desirable with dense prose to read part of a text and come back to it later. More broadly, as learners, we want students to be in the habit of taking initiative to improve their understanding. For example, when they encounter new vocabulary, rather than skimming it over they can develop a practice of knowing to look up words in a dictionary / thesaurus so they can become their own decoders, rather than expecting their instructors to explain everything to them. Some reading will warrant note-taking, but we would like to normalize the practice of taking notes, even if it is something as simple as "translating" notes to self in margins. One final key mechanical practice surrounding reading is for students to develop the habit of post-reading. That is, after having read, we would like to support students’ ability to step back with a bird's eye view to reflect on what they are taking away from the text and what lingering questions they have.

**Reading mindsets** are likely the ones for which we don’t grade students, but that are arguably the most important, because student mindsets act as a strong filter for information they absorb throughout the course of their studies. We identified three. The first is to cultivate willingness to develop as a reader. Many students believe that they are “naturally” good/bad writers and readers, and we want to disabuse them of this. The second is developing mindsets necessary to persist through the process of reading (growth mindset, frustration tolerance, focus, learning to use context cues to figure out the overall idea in the absence of understanding all the specifics, knowing when to ask for help). Finally, we want students to attend to understanding author perspective. In their reading, we want students to develop mindsets of curiosity, openness, cultural humility.

**APPLICATION SKILLS** Students are taught to apply their writing skills to various audiences by different means as needed. One key application skill is knowing how and when to modulate the writer's voice appropriate to the audience. Audiences include professional, lay public, clinical, and policy makers. The latter two could be more or less emphasized as a function of a student’s interests and goals, but hopefully all students will get at least some practice writing about psychological science while addressing professional and lay audiences alike.

Products for professional audiences are mostly in written forms, such as journal articles, but also include book chapters, conference posters, journal reviews, grant proposals, administrative applications and reports (such as those for the Institutional Review Board), and email
correspondence. We note that oral products, though not written, are an important and valued part of “Writing As Expression” and include speaking in class, whether in general discussion, or in more formal presentations. Oral skills are applied also to APA-style poster presentations and conference presentations. Most of our students will not produce formal academic writing as part of their careers, but will be writing for the lay public. Examples include science writing, press release writing, writing op-Eds, social media content (e.g., for audiences of blogs, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). A number of our students will apply their writing skills to the clinical encounter. Examples include connected to the clinical encounter such as a therapy session (case notes, prescriptions) or a counseling or coaching session (session notes, client homework). Finally, some students will go on to apply their writing skills to policy makers—or as policy makers—in the form of a policy memo, or an op-ed piece.

Section 3: INTEGRATION OF WRITING INTO DEPARTMENTAL CURRICULUM

How is writing instruction currently positioned in this department’s curriculum? What, if any, course sequencing issues impede an intentional integration of relevant, developmentally appropriate writing instruction?

To locate where across the curriculum writing skills were being taught explicitly, we had faculty fill in the courses they teach and which components of college graduate writing abilities they explicitly address. This grid is incomplete, as not all faculty were able to complete the ratings, but it offers a first look at obvious strengths and gaps in the curriculum.

Our current sequence of courses seems to support many general parts of writing identified in Section 3, though we need to better scaffold students as they move through the major. In particular, there seems to be a big instructional gap in the middle-level courses.

Section 4: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

What concerns, if any, have unit faculty and undergraduate students voiced about grading practices?

There were a few general concerns that surfaced from initial surveys of faculty and students. Generally, faculty were concerned with being able to assess students’ desired writing abilities efficiently and fairly. Students were concerned that each professor is idiosyncratic in their expectations of “good writing,” and seemed that they would benefit from being presented with a consistent framework throughout their time studying in the major for understanding the overall writing skills they are developing (e.g., content, reading, application).
We took the desired writing skills and operationalized them into a first-draft of grading criteria. The grading rubric we developed can be found at this link and its usability tested via assessing a sampling of papers from 300-level seminars.

Section 5: SUMMARY OF IMPLEMENTATION PLANS, including REQUESTED SUPPORT

What does the department 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?

In Year 2, the department will meet to figure out what workshops they most desire first, and what they might reserve for later in the WEC process. There was one particular area identified as low hanging fruit for supporting psychology major writing: hiring a psychology-dedicated tutor in the writing center, which as of academic year 2020-2021 had never happened. Happily, starting in fall 2021, there is now a psychology-dedicated tutor in the writing center. She is not yet trained in the model the department sees as important, but hiring her is a first step toward signaling to students that psychology writing has its own method and considerations.

Possible departmental initiatives, as discussed in Year 1 – Meeting 4

Early Fall 2021 departmental analysis and discussion of capstone rating results (this is part of the WEC process)

   Workshops/ Discussion sessions on written feedback and grading, with desired potential topics including:
      ● How to mark papers effectively, so as to encourage substantive revision
      ● How to grade papers to reflect criteria
      ● How to formulate & use grading rubrics
      ● How to practice equitable grading

   Workshops/Discussion sessions on particular in-class pedagogical strategies, with desired potential topics including:
      ● How to conduct and teach peer review
      ● How to teach specific elements of writing (introductions, methods sections, summaries, etc.)
      ● How to lead a brainstorming session
      ● How to design effective writing assignments
      ● How to design early semester “diagnostic” writing assignments
      ● How to more regularly incorporate writing into your teaching
Smith College Writing-Enriched Curriculum

Writing Plan Narrative

Workshops/Discussion sessions on how to best support multilingual students

Workshops/Discussion sessions on how to avoid linguistic discrimination when grading, and how to support writers whose academic language reflects a home dialect (code-melding)

Department meetings for norming sessions or just to look at student writing together

Department repositories/shared docs of:
- Papers that satisfy Writing Plan criteria
- Papers that do not satisfy Writing Plan criteria
- Grading rubrics for specific assignments
- Writing assignments in different sections of the same course
- Writing assignments for particular genres of writing
- Real-world documents (e.g., journal articles, session notes, case studies) that can form useful models for teaching

Creating a committee to conduct a curriculum map assessment to determine where more writing instruction is needed. As well, repetition and scaffolding to the next level are important aspects of instructional design, and we would want to determine where the repetition serves those goals and where it might be unnecessary. Concurrently, we might have an upper-level student collect syllabi and assignments throughout the department’s offerings as part of developing a repository to help establish shared writing norms and exemplars. Such a repository ideally would support faculty new to the department more easily acclimate to teaching expectations of the department, as well as serve as a yardstick over the years for the department in considering whether and where our instruction needs updating.

Classroom observations

Jacobson Center consultations for individual faculty members

Outside speakers with expertise on topics above

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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, students, others) engaged in providing, revising, and approving the content of this Writing Plan?

In the context of the COVID pandemic, that we held all four WEC meetings with at least six attendees speaks to the generally solid commitment of the department to this process. At all meetings, every depth within the major—Mind/Brain, Health/Illness, Person/Society—was represented with at least 1 member ensuring some measure of coverage across content areas. Still, a number of senior tenure-track faculty were unable to participate at all, whether due to leave or other commitments (DiBartolo, Duncan, Peake, Pole, Powell). In addition to participation in meetings, only about a third of those who taught upper-level seminars in the department shared student writing samples and so the data coming from these initial assessments must be understood in that context as well.

Meeting 1 - Annaliese Beery, Katherine Clemans, Randy Frost, Randi Garcia, Benita Jackson, Caitlin Shephard, Michele Wick, MJ Wraga

Meeting 2 - Katherine Clemans, Randi Garcia, Benita Jackson, Caitlin Shephard, Michele Wick, MJ Wraga

Meeting 3 - Jill de Villiers, Randi Garcia, Benita Jackson, Brianna McMillan, Michele Wick, MJ Wraga

Meeting 4 - Katherine Clemens, Jill deVilliers, Randi Garcia, Benita Jackson, Brianna McMillan, Caitlin Shepherd, Michele Wick

Moving into Year 2, with a newly-hired tenure-track member of the department (Yael Granot) as well as other senior participants who could potentially join the conversations (Lauren Duncan, Patty DiBartolo, Phil Peake, Nnamdi Pole, Beth Powell) with fresh perspectives to the WEC process, we can 1) further clarify the shared vision for our department’s desired writing skills and 2) map out faculty development and other concrete actions toward realizing the shared vision. In the spirit of attending to mindsets for success, it also seems important for us to keep in mind that this is a multi-year process, and our progress will likely be incremental and likely non-linear, but that this is very much an empirical project: we will try out interventions (e.g. around faculty development) and see what we learn from the failures and the successes over time.