Writing in the Liberal Studies Program

(Approved May, 2009)

The purpose of this document is three-fold: 1) to articulate the goals and purposes of incorporating writing into liberal studies program coursework at DePaul, 2) to identify effective ways that this can be accomplished, and 3) to establish a set of shared expectations around writing, both for instructors creating the assignments and for students responding to them.

Many instructors see writing as a way to assess what students have learned, whether through essay exams or long, end-of-term papers. While these pedagogical practices can be useful, they do not necessarily ensure that students are internalizing what they are supposed to be learning. Often, particularly in introductory and intermediate courses, the writing by students and the grading by instructors of multiple assignments is labor-intensive, but only marginally effective in promoting critical thinking about course content.

Reading and writing are extraordinarily complex activities and are clearly interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Successful reading strategies introduce student to new ideas, concepts, perspectives and information, and writing well allows students to integrate their thoughts and effectively communicate them to others. Such engagement with the world ideas is one of the hallmarks of critical literacy. This document focuses on writing, but connections to reading and thinking are assumed, and in fact considered crucial when inviting students to negotiate new intellectual terrain.

We encourage instructors to think of writing in two broad areas. **Writing- to-learn** involves exploring, engaging, and making sense of course content and critical ideas. **Transactional writing** (or writing-to-transact) has a more rhetorical purpose, where writers work to persuade or inform readers within specific contexts. In the introduction to their seminal work on Writing Across the Curriculum *(Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum)*, Toby Fulwiler and Art Young elaborate on these distinctions:

> Writing to communicate--or what James Britton calls "transactional writing"--means writing to accomplish something, to inform, instruct, or persuade. . . . Writing to learn is different. We write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary function of this "expressive" language is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding. (x)

A key component of writing- to-learn is reflection. In *The WAC Casebook,* Chris Anson writes that

> Reflection, or "reflective practices" is a process of thoughtfully interrogating what we do in a particular activity. Successful experts in various fields are constantly experiencing their work, standing back from it and assessing its effectiveness, thinking and hypothesizing about how to improve it, then applying these ideas and insights to their ongoing work. (xi-xii)

Guidelines from the WAC Clearinghouse (Colorado State University) suggest that decisions about what kinds of writing to assign should depend upon complex factors, including class size and course level. For example, in first and second year introductory courses, especially courses that typically have larger (40+) enrollments, **writing-to-learn** activities can help students work on synthesizing foundational concepts

and help instructors check students' understanding of the course reading, lectures, and discussion. For smaller classes in the major, students can undertake disciplinary writing (researched arguments, informative essays) that helps students learn write within disciplinary contexts -- in other words, **writing-to-transact**. This often approximates the traditional term paper that simulates the kind of authentic writing representative of particular fields or disciplines (as in articles for professional journals, for example). Clearly, these categories are not always discrete, but here are some ways to think about writing assignments:

➢ *What are typical writing-to-learn assignments?* Journal entries, discussion boards, blogs, observations, pre-reading writing (before reading an assignment), reading responses (can be in a variety of formats), discussion responses, quick writes, freewriting, reflection pieces. These tend to be short, informal pieces.

➢ *What are typical writing-to-transact assignments?* Opinion pieces, position paper, essays for potential submission to journals, annotated bibliographies, proposals, problem-solution papers. Note that all of these potentially have an audience beyond the teacher and are often nested in disciplinary contexts (e.g., philosophy, psychology, mathematics, biological sciences, commerce).

Stages of development and the role Liberal Studies plays in that process. The process of becoming a mature writer is complex and recursive – and it continues to evolve long after students leave college. To enhance a student's learning at the university, all instructors play a role—some greater than others, depending upon the nature of the course, class size and level of student development.

First Year Writing: WRD 103 and WRD 104

Because almost all students (including many transfer students) entering the university take at least two courses in the First-Year Writing Program, a familiarity with the learning outcomes of FYW courses may be helpful in understanding what students have undertaken in their first year at DePaul. Below is a list of the *learning outcomes* (approved by the LSC in 2008). These learning outcomes are drawn from national writing outcomes, sanctioned by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and shape the writing goals of first-year classes at many colleges and universities. Students in FYW classes are afforded ample opportunities to work on writing-to-learn and writing-to-transact, to lay a foundation upon which other university coursework can build.

Learning Outcomes/First-Year Writing
(Approved by the Liberal Studies Council, June 2008)

Taken together, the courses in the First-Year Writing Program at DePaul University seek to develop student competencies in five general categories: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading and writing; writing processes; and knowledge of conventions. Individual instructors will naturally incorporate these competencies into their courses in different ways, but all instructors in the program should be prepared to demonstrate that their courses include attention to these matters.

Rhetorical Knowledge

By the end of FYW, students should be able to demonstrate that they can:
- Define and focus on a purpose or purposes
- Interpret and respond to different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Apply conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Apply appropriate tone, diction, and level of formality

- Demonstrate how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres

Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing

By the end of FYW, students should be able to demonstrate that they can:
- Employ writing and reading for inquiry, thinking, and communicating
- Respond and evaluate texts in multiple genres and media
- Demonstrate that a writing assignment is a series of tasks that includes finding, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Interpret and explain the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Processes

By the end of FYW, students should to demonstrate that they can:
- Recognize and articulate the value of using multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Exhibit flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Demonstrate understanding that writing is an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Explain the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Critique their own and others' works
- Apply a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences.

Knowledge of Conventions

By the end of FYW, students should be able to demonstrate that they can:
- Demonstrate competency in using common formats for different kinds of texts.
- Apply a variety of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics.
- Correctly document their work.
- Correctly apply in their writing such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

First-year Writing Portfolio

All students in WRD first-year writing courses produce a final portfolio that consists of pieces that they have selected to represent their work over the course of the term. Accompanying this portfolio is a reflective essay that asks students to explain the connection between the work they have included and the FYW program learning outcomes.

Writing Across the Curriculum

The following learning goals for writing across the curriculum are summarized. Writing goals for both the core and learning domain requirements of the Liberal Studies Program are highlighted, as are the goals for writing in the student's major.

- **Chicago Quarter (CQ), Focal Point Seminar (FPS), and Quantitative Reasoning and Technological Literacy (QRTL): Responding to different kinds of information:** In these

courses, students work in response to several kinds of information: direct observation combined with readings (CQ), reading and responding to primary and secondary sources (FPS), and understanding and using numerical information found in data bases (QRTL). All of these materials and experiences can be seen as "texts" inviting reflection, analysis, and commentary. Thus these courses build on the lessons of WRD 103 and WRD 104 by inviting students to consider the wide range of "texts" that can contribute to their understanding of topics and issues in a range of subject areas. As a designated writing intensive course, the Focal Point Seminar requires at least one opportunity for students to revise and resubmit their work at least once during the quarter.

➢ **Sophomore Seminar on Multiculturalism in the United States: Using writing to facilitate comparative analysis and reflection.** In this course, where students learn about systems of inequality within the United States, they engage in comparative analyses and critical reflection as they write in response to a set of theoretical readings and a variety of historical materials.   The Sophomore Seminar is another writing intensive course, and thus requires at least one opportunity for students to receive feedback on their work with the goal of revising and resubmitting it.

➢ **Courses in the Six Learning Domains: Learning to understand and broaden perspectives via different areas of study.** As students sample courses from different areas of study on their way to choosing a major, they are introduced to both the content and the practices of those disciplines. Most importantly, they are invited to practice analyzing and interpreting whatever "texts" make up the content of each course: whether they are books, works of art, observations of nature, sets of data, etc. By fully engaging with these texts, students learn how people in different areas of study make a point, offer reasons and explanation, and marshal appropriate evidence to support it. The writing students do in these courses gives them experience in putting the practices of different areas of knowledge to work in their own writing.

➢ **Courses in the Major: Learning the subtleties of how the components of writing work in one particular area of study.** As students pursue a major, they have the opportunity to learn more about its ways of knowing, bodies of knowledge, theoretical underpinnings, and practices.   In course assignments, they gain experience in engaging in the kinds of analysis, research, and marshalling of evidence within the genres appropriate to that field. Over a series of courses, they become more adept at bringing their increasing knowledge to bear on particular topics in meaningful ways. These can and should include real writing tasks for audiences students will write to *as professionals* in particular fields.   Through reading and writing in multiple genres, students practice both thinking and communication skills typical of their chosen field of student and prepare themselves for a range of careers in that field.

➢ **Junior Year Experiential Learning: Connecting learning in and out of the classroom.** By the time students undertake the internship, study abroad program, community-based service learning course, or independent research project that comprises this requirement, they have usually had several experiences of writing within their majors, and, through their earlier Liberal Studies courses, they have had the experience of writing within several different areas of knowledge. The Junior Year Experiential Learning requirement now calls on students to bring their developing analytical abilities to bear on situations that invite them to think and write about real-world experiences in an academic framework. While many of these experiences will have their base within a student's academic major, these experiences, by their very nature, will inevitably cross disciplinary boundaries and call on students to draw on their full range of knowledge and approaches to communicating that knowledge in their writing.

➢ **Senior Capstone: Connecting knowledge in the major with knowledge outside it.** Ideally, students come to this final Liberal Studies course with considerable experience working with the

basic components of writing within their academic majors. They have engaged in both writing-to-learn and writing-to-transact activities and can use them effectively in critical thinking and communicating. The capstone then invites students to think about the relationship between their major and other areas of knowledge they have encountered through their Liberal Studies courses. This inquiry thus calls on students to combine and select among the genres that are meaningful within and across the areas of knowledge they might address (between science and ethics; politics and commerce; religion and technology; or history and the arts, to name a few examples).