

Form E-1-A for Boston College Departments/Programs
English Department: First-Year Writing (FWS): Core Writing Program 2021

1) **Learning Outcomes:** The FWS Program has had formal learning outcomes since 2004. They were most recently reviewed in 2018 and plans are underway for a review and revision starting in 2023. The FWS outcomes read as follows:

Outcomes for the Boston College First-Year Writing Seminar

By the end of First-Year Writing students should be able to do the following:

Rhetorical Knowledge

- Focus on a purpose in their writing
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations, including but not limited to academic rhetorical situations
- Write in several genres

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others

Processes

- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Learn to critique their own and others' works
- Learn to balance listening to and relying on others with responsibilities of doing their part

Knowledge of Conventions

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Composing in Electronic Environments

- Use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts
- Locate, evaluate, organize, and use research material collected from electronic sources, including scholarly library databases; other official databases (e.g., federal government databases); and informal electronic networks and internet sources
- Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts

2) These learning outcomes are published in our mentoring guidelines and on our website, listed under resources for faculty: <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/english/about/learning-outcomes.html>

3) Assessment

This year marks the beginning of transition and continued innovation within the First-Year Writing Program (FWS). In fall 2021, we welcomed Dr. Jessica Pauszek, a tenure-line assistant professor who will trade off directing duties for FWS with Paula Mathieu, starting in 2024 or 2025. As this year begins a time of transition, we are planning over the next three years to assess and revise our outcomes and rethink certain structures in our program, including staffing (including graduate students and part-time faculty).

A key aspect of this year has been unusually high turnover of faculty in the FWS program. By design, there is a good deal of faculty turnover every year, as our graduate Teaching Fellows (up to 22 people per year) teach only one or two sections of FWS for one academic year and require a great deal of training and support. Last May, due to the departure of several part-time faculty (to full-time jobs in the area and PhD programs, mostly) we hired **seven** new part-time instructors for 2021-2022. (Three of those seven stayed for fall-only before receiving full-time jobs; only one is returning next year.) The *great resignation* is making hiring more challenging at Boston College, especially due current rules that restrict adjunct faculty to teaching two classes per semester (when in the past it used to be three). FWS offers many more sections in the fall due to student demand (last year we offered roughly 65% of our classes in the fall and 35% in the spring), which makes offering two sections to adjuncts in the spring difficult. Repeated requests to allow our adjuncts to teach 3-1 have been turned down by the Dean on principle, but according to the Associate Dean would work financially/legally. Attracting, training, and retaining talented writing instructors is an ongoing challenge that the program works to meet. Typically, around 80% of all FWS classes are taught by either graduate students or adjunct instructors.

With so many new instructors each year, we realize how important our outcomes are and how necessary it is to see *how* they are being incorporated in the FWS assignment prompts. As a writing seminar, FWS centers on the assignments the students work to complete. As a result, assignment prompts are in many ways the key documents of our program. **This year, in preparation of our upcoming review of outcomes, we have started exploring how clearly our learning outcomes are communicated in assignment prompts and statements of assessment.**

In the graduate seminar that all MA and PhD teaching fellows (TFs) take prior to teaching FWS, all TFs draft an assignment sequence and syllabus that meets the above course outcomes. I and the FWS Mentors (Dacia Gentilella, Martha Hincks, Kristin Imre, and Brian Zimmerman) help the TFs revise their course documents to that each assignment has clear writerly goals that can be taught and assessed. We make design of [clear assignment prompts](#) central to teaching FWS. This year, we assessed that all TFs who taught FWS has clear writerly goals outlined in their assignment prompts that collectively met all the FWS outcomes. In 2022-2023, we will extend this assessment to our adjunct and full-time faculty who teach FWS to explore if writerly outcomes are being signaled in all FWS assignment prompts and to gather information about possible revisions to outcomes.

Past Assessments: We conducted an external review of the FWS Program in 2011 facilitated by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The assessment required an in-depth self-study and resulted in a detailed report from the evaluators (housed within FWS program). One of the recommendations from the external review is that FWS Directorship should be shared among two directors who trade on and off in 4- to 5-year increments. "No one should be director for life," the report stated. Paula Mathieu has been directing the program since 2009 without a break.

We conducted an internal assessment of student writing in 2013-2015, where we chose one outcome (critical reading and writing) to assess. We asked all instructors to submit three essays where all instructor and student names had been removed. We performed a two--step process: a norming session to determine what we meant by a 2, 3, 4 or 5 in each category. Then we randomly selected essays to evaluate. This assessment was completed by a committee of composition staff (the faculty director and three instructors and program mentors) performed the assessment: one selected a range of essays for the other three to norm. Then we all worked together to assess a random group of essays.

4) **Assessment Process:**

This year, we reviewed all of the graduate teaching fellow syllabi and assignment prompts. We found that, with our support and suggested revisions: 1. All course outcomes were being covered in the class; and 2. All course outcomes were made clear in the assignment prompts themselves. We conducted this review as part of our ongoing mentoring of our TFs. This year, through collection of course materials, we will assess how clearly our full-time faculty are announcing and teaching our course outcomes.

Our assessment process for the past two years has prioritized realizing the recommendation from the 2011 External Review that we hire another faculty member to take a turn directing FWS. In fall 2021, the English Department hired Dr. Jessica Pauszek who has been writing program director at UT-Commerce and a PhD from Syracuse University. Once Dr. Pauszek is settled into BC, we will plan to review and update our FWS criteria and collaboratively set new assessment goals and agendas.

5) **Results and Recent Innovations**

1. **Teaching Fellows Meet and Signal All Outcomes:** This year's focus on course outcomes and how they are signaled in assignment sequences responds to the ongoing demands of creating pedagogically sound and equitable courses amidst high instructor turnover. We have found that among TFs, due to the high level of mentoring and support, all instructors signal and meet all our outcomes. We will extend this assessment to explore all adjunct assignment sequences this fall (2022).
2. **Pilot Opportunities for Graduate Teaching Fellows:** Innovation is an important part of keeping the FWS program vital and a rich experience for students. In 2021-2022 we ran a pilot project inviting two TFs with English Language Learning tutoring experience to teach one ELL FWS section in the fall and a traditional FWS class in the spring. This pilot gives the TFs more pedagogical experience working with a broader range of BC first-year students. We will continue this pilot in 2022-2023 with two new TFs who have been ELL tutors. In 2023 we will conduct two additional pilot programs: one, allowing four TFs to teach two fall sections of FWS to meet our current staffing needs; and two, one TF will be working with Paul Lewis on a collaborative project teaching primary research, supported by a BC TAM grant.
3. **A Focus on Online and Distanced In-Person Pedagogy:** The Covid-19 pandemic required FWS support and resources be devoted to helping our faculty and students

adapt to the spring 2020 switch to online learning, the uncertainty of summer 2020, and then a 2020-2021 year with a mix of mostly in-person FWS classes and some remote courses. In fall 2021, the return to all in-person classes still meant accommodating students who were temporarily quarantined and attending remotely. Given that the vast majority of FWS classes are taught by graduate-student Teaching Fellows or adjunct faculty, our challenges were especially high. Our program created google docs of best practices, sponsored zoom meetings particular to FWS, stayed in close contact with our instructors, and our FWS mentors worked closely with our graduate teaching fellows to help them adjust to the changing needs of the moment, from remote pedagogy, to in-person, and sometimes back to remote pedagogy.

4. **Hiring Long-Term Faculty** In 2021-2022, two English Department Professors of the Practice retired from BC with short notice, and their lines have not yet been approved for replacement. Before these retirements, roughly 83% of FWS classes are taught by graduate-student Teaching Fellows or adjunct faculty, meaning only 17% of our students take FWS with an instructor who has a long-term relationship with BC. To better teach and support our students, the FWS Program will continue to request replacement and additional Professor of the Practice slots to work with First-Year students.
5. **Tracking Who Takes FWS When** We found that some students delay taking First-Year Writing until later in their undergraduate years. Having juniors and seniors in a class designed for freshman is not optimal. In spring 2020, we piloted a core writing course designed for upper-level students, where they could learn rhetorical awareness, critical reading and writing and, and revision, but apply them to their major area of study. We will look at these evaluations to judge this pilot, but might need to run it again due to the 2020 Covid-19 switch to remote teaching.
6. **Writing Center Pilot:** The BC Writing Center, in its third year of a pilot phase, doubled its visits and maxed out tutor availability, even with a switch to remote tutoring due to the pandemic. The Writing Center Pilot was co-created by the FWS Director, the Director of ELL Writing, and the Director of the Writing Fellows Program and tutoring begin October 1, 2019. We have received funding for one additional year of pilot funding to explore future options for the program. While this program is not directly related the FWS Program, the Writing Center and FWS share a common goal of encouraging students to be more effective, curious, and reflective writers—and it is a project the FWS Director supports with time and resources. We look forward to FWS and a BC Writing Center sharing resources and supports for student writers during and beyond this seminar.
7. **Enrichment Opportunities.** In May 2018 and June 2019, the Boston College First-Year Writing Program hosted the 7th and 8th Annual Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network (BRAWN) Summer Institute, which is a free institute, open by application, to teachers of college-level writing in the Boston area. The institute, which has been supported with funds from MIT, Boston University, Northeastern, and U Mass Boston as well as Boston College, annually hosted 100 teachers of writing for two days with two keynote addresses by prominent local scholars (Neal Lerner from Northeastern and Tamera Marko from Emerson College in 2018; Jessica Restaino from Montclair State U

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in 2019) and 16 workshops on topics ranging from anti-racist assessment practices to visual learning strategies and designing effective writing prompts. Seven BC FWS faculty took part in the 2018 Institute, and eight attended the 2019 event. There was no Summer Institute in 2020 but a 2021 institute will take place in June. The call has been circulated to all FWS faculty and Teaching Fellows, who have been encouraged to attend.

8. **Core Renewal** Through the Core Renewal Program, Paula Mathieu, FWS Director, taught an Enduring Questions paired course with Lisa Friedman in Educational Psychology, for Fall 2018 and fall 2019. The course, Writing for Social Action, pairs with social-science course on inequality in the US, to teach writing as a tool of inquiry and social transformation. Eileen Donovan-Kranz taught another pilot, Writing as Activism, open to students in the PULSE and other service programs. By reflecting on these pilot courses, the FWS Program will seek more ways that students might engage in meaningful writing and the course's relationship to the core overall. We will evaluate these core courses in 2022 and consider plan for moving forward.
9. **Revised Graduate Pedagogy** In Spring 2018, Paula Mathieu revamped ENGL8825, the graduate seminar to prepare new teachers of writing, to focus more directly on writing-to-learn activities and meaningful writing and to make the development of syllabi and assignments even more central to the work of the course. She invited both outside presenters to take part in the course and arranged for a highly effective graduate instructor (Mary Crane) to visit the class to offer feedback and support. It is an ongoing goal of the FWS program to continue to improve its preparation and support for all FWS faculty.
10. **Streamlined Mission Statement** In Spring 2017, working with Julian Bourg, Dean of the Core, the FWS Program wrote a new mission statement, to share the goals of the program widely:
The FWS Program invites students to explore why one writes, in order to help them see writing as an intellectual and personal tool for living that can be developed and honed. Writing-core courses ask students to write and rewrite in a variety of genres, discuss their works-in-progress in class, and receive individualized feedback from their instructors. Classroom activities center around the ways writing and revising help reveal new insights, orient ourselves to broader conversations, deepen our ability to communicate with others, express what is important to us, and create changes in service of the common good.
11. **Focus on Critical Reading and Writing.** In our 2013-2015 writing assessment, we found that students were engaging in critical reading and writing fairly well but could use improvement in putting themselves into conversation with sources and ideas of other writers. Since 2014, we have adopted new approaches to teaching and mentoring new instructors, drawing specifically on Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*, to focus on helping students work critically and creatively with the words and ideas of others. In 2015, we formally added a requirement to FWS: At least one assignment should ask students to work critically with an academic text and put it into conversation with other texts and ideas.

12. **Improving Our Mentoring of New Instructors** Thanks to a 2015 TAM grant, we completed a mentoring handbook, to help train FWS mentors, who play a key role in training graduate students in revising their syllabi and making lesson plans. They coach TFs throughout the summer before teaching, and during the year meet regularly and visit classes.

Form prepared by Paula Mathieu, Director, First-Year Writing. Associate Professor, English Department. Please email mathiepa@bc.edu with any questions.