

To Write is Right: The Implementation and Evaluation of a Writing for Psychology Course

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Abstract

Although faculty have been increasingly encouraged to engage in a “writing-across-the-curriculum” program format, we believe that a systematic plan for writing assignments in university-level psychology departments should include a required writing course as well. Data from four sections of a newly implemented Writing for Psychology course suggest that a standalone course is effective in improving the writing skills of sophomore-level students when pretest and posttest writing samples were evaluated by the CriterionSM Online Writing Evaluation, an independent testing company.

Until recently, universities delegated the responsibility of teaching writing skills to freshman composition courses. However, because faculty have continued to profess the lack of sophistication in students’ writing skills (e.g., Manzo, 2003; Whitehead, 2002), writing professionals have called for a movement of writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC; e.g., Lester et al., 2003; Radmacher & Latosi-Sawin, 1995; Stock, 2001). Proponents of this movement emphasize an increased focus on teaching both basic (i.e., mechanics, style) and technical (i.e., adherence to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association) writing skills. Specifically, the philosophy of WAC programs include these basic principles: a) “that writing is the responsibility of the entire academic community,” b) “that writing must be integrated across departmental boundaries,” c) “that writing instruction must be continuous during all four years of undergraduate education,” d) “that writing promotes learning,” and e) “that only by practicing the conventions of an academic discipline will students begin to communicate effectively within that discipline” (see <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/>). Unfortunately, when these writing requirements are dispersed across the curriculum, individual differences may reflect faculty preferences and a necessary focus on course content to overwhelm the need for consistent and meaningful writing-based (instead of just content-based) feedback. In fact, some research has suggested that professors may mark less than half of students’ writing errors on these assignments (Barksdale-Ladd & King, 2000; Conners & Lunsford, 1988).

Although Calhoun and Selby (1979) proposed the need for a specific course focusing on writing for psychology thirty years ago, few universities seem to have incorporated a separate course requirement for this purpose, often encouraging writing-based instruction in other low-level psychology courses (e.g., Fallahi, Wood, Austad, & Fallahi, 2006). In fact, although Goddard (2003) and others have shown the effectiveness of a stand-alone course, these courses are often one of many electives from which students can choose to complete a program requirement. These courses may be effective in improving the writing skills of the students simply because the students who have chosen to enroll in them are the most motivated to improve their writing skills. The faculty at the *University of Central Oklahoma* believed that this course, if important enough to be offered as a stand-alone module, should be a required component of the undergraduate program.

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Therefore, in 2008-2009, the department implemented *Writing for Psychology*, a semester-long three-credit sophomore-level course with two main goals: to focus on improving students' general writing skills and to teach them the specifics of the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2001) *Publication Manual*. We believed that by requiring students to write during every class period and by providing them with immediate and meaningful feedback, students' scores on an externally evaluated writing exam would significantly increase throughout the duration of the semester.

Method

Participants

In Fall 2008, there were 14,156 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO Office of Institutional Research, 2009). Of these students, 520 designated psychology as their major (making it the second most popular major on campus). Fifty-eight percent of the students enrolled were female and 42% were male. The average age of undergraduate students was 25 years ($M = 21$) with an average ACT score of 21.

UCO added *Writing for Psychology* as a required sophomore-level class that must be successfully completed before students are allowed to enroll in any junior-level courses. To enroll in the course, students must be psychology majors and have completed *General Psychology*. The department began with a pilot semester in Fall 2008. The course was originally designed to be taken concurrently with *Psychological Statistics* (the sophomore-level introductory statistics course in the department); however, we quickly realized that due to differing rates of attrition in the two courses, the advantages to this design were limited, and the concurrent enrollment requirement was dropped following the pilot semester. During the pilot semester, two faculty members taught four sections of the course (which included 53 students total) using a variety of methods and assignments. At the conclusion of the pilot semester, faculty involved in teaching the course, teaching assistants, and selected students participated in a debriefing session in which teaching strategies and specific assignments were reviewed. At that time, we planned all writing assignments, deadlines, and grading rubrics to be used in future sections of the course.

Following the pilot semester, we implemented the new course as a requirement for all newly enrolling students and all transfer students. Enrollment for each of the four sections (taught by three different instructors) was limited to 15 students to maximize feedback from the instructors and teaching assistants. Forty-five students completed the course and provided both pretest and posttest data for this study.

Course Content

Course objectives. The new *Writing for Psychology* course contained six main objectives. We believed that by the end of the course, student should be able to (a) create their own psychological writings using process-based writing behaviors tailored to the field; (b) evaluate their own and their peers' psychological writings in terms of referential discourse features and audience fitness; (c) analyze both published and peer-generated psychological writings in terms of empirical rigor, referential discourse features, and discipline topicality; (d) apply procedural knowledge of psychological discourse features to their own and peer-generated writings; (e) understand the primary functions of psychological discourse characteristics, from sentence- to complete manuscript-level features; and (f) remember basic features of psychological discourse, from APA documentation styles to typical content and modes of expression. To meet these lofty course objectives, we believed that students should be required to write as much as possible (which translated into a goal for each class period as well as at home) to receive the maximum amount of feedback possible.

Course structure. Our pilot (Fall 2008) semester quickly taught us that a necessary component of this class was access to computer technology. Therefore, each of the four sections was taught in a classroom computer lab in which each student sat at an individual computer. Each classroom was also equipped with a main computer terminal and projector to be used in classroom lectures and demonstrations. Each week, the course focused on one chapter from one of the two required texts: *The Concise Rules of APA Style* (APA, 2005) and *Undergraduate Writing in Psychology: Learning to Tell the Scientific Story* (Landrum, 2008). Classes typically consisted of part lecture/discussion (often including "good" and "bad" examples) and part application through individual writing assignments.

Course evaluation. To successfully pass the course, students had to complete four major components of the course. First, for the majority of class periods, there were writing assignments to be completed in-class. To receive credit, students had to be present for the entire class period. These assignments reflected the material currently being reviewed in the two texts and ranged from open-ended prompts (e.g., "Define psychology") to practice summarizing and synthesizing researching findings. For example, in one assignment, students were asked to "...[summarize] the findings of Simpson (1989), Tashiro and Frazier (2003), Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992), and Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto (1989) in one paragraph each." In a subsequent assignment, students were taught

to check for originality (for more information, see www.turnitin.com) and were required to synthesize the four paragraphs into one paragraph, maintaining a non-original content level of less than 15%.

Second, students were required to complete weekly take-home writing assignments designed to allow them to demonstrate their understanding of the material they learned in class. These assignments included developing persuasive arguments, identifying logical fallacies, and writing personal statements, as well as other relevant writing tasks. For example, one assignment asked students to "...identify a problem or area in which the knowledge is incomplete. Explain why this area of investigation is important within the context of previous studies and the unanswered question."

Third, students were required to submit four complete journal article reviews. The reviews were designed to help them become more familiar with the pieces of an APA style empirical journal article. That is, for each of these articles, students were required to identify the research questions, hypotheses, participants, materials, procedures, results, implications, strengths, limitations, and future directions of the research.

Finally, students were required to complete a comprehensive 10 to 12 page literature review. For this assignment in particular, we wanted to follow many of the recommendations suggested by Dunn (1994), including the use of rough draft feedback to produce a meaningful final draft report. Therefore, students were instructed to identify an original research question and review the relevant literature in the area identified. They were required to submit a complete draft of the paper halfway through the course. Both the course instructors and the student teaching assistants provided feedback on the initial drafts. Students were then required to submit a final draft of the paper within two weeks of the receipt of the feedback (to include edits made in response to the suggestions and comments they received).

Independent evaluation. In addition to the evaluation of the course assignments by the section instructors, students received feedback from two writing exams designed to assess their ability to critically analyze a topic and write about it in a timed session. These writing assessments were graded by an independent company, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) CriterionSM Online Writing Evaluation. According to ETS (2009; www.ets.org), CriterionSM provides both *holistic scores* that are "based on nationally recognized standards" as well as *trait feedback analysis* that "focuses on grammar, usage and mechanics; style; and organization and development..." [Providing] both a summary and in-depth analysis of errors in an effort to pinpoint areas that require attention" (see Attali, 2004; Burstein, Chodorow, & Leacock, 2003 for a full review of the CriterionSM program). The feedback from the CriterionSM program, which ranged on a scale from 1 to 6, allowed the instructors to effectively monitor the progress of the students throughout the duration of the semester. Thus, students completed a pretest writing assessment during the first week of class as well as a final writing assessment during the week of final exams.

Results

The pretest/posttest format of writing assessments evaluated by the CriterionSM program allowed us to evaluate the effectiveness of the new *Writing for Psychology* course. Although the lectures/discussions and assignments were prepared before the semester began and were similar for each section, instructor variations or student section preference may result in differential gain. However, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed no difference in the gains by course or instructor.

A two-dependent samples *t*-test was used to examine the difference in the independent scores of pretest writing assessments ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.94$) and posttest writing assessments ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.96$). There was an increase in assessment scores from the beginning of the semester to the end, $t_{(44)} = -3.95$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$, suggesting that the new *Writing for Psychology* course was effective.

Discussion

A self-study utilizing the benchmarks for evaluating psychology programs developed by Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, and Hill (2007) revealed a weakness in the writing skills of the students at the *University of Central Oklahoma*. According to Dunn and colleagues, a "distinguished" psychology program should include a systematic plan for writing assignments (such as requiring writing in all senior-level courses and offering several writing-related opportunities elsewhere). However, we believe that for these assignments (and a "writing-across-the-curriculum focus) to be effective, this systematic plan should involve a more direct approach early in psychology students' careers; that is, a required course in which students write (and write and write). We propose that this continuous exposure to writing in psychology (along with the valuable, detailed feedback from instructors and assistants) is necessary training for these blooming future psychology professionals. These data suggest that such a course is effective in improving students' writing abilities, even when they are assessed by an independent testing company. However, because this course was required for all students, there is no comparison group to which the results could be examined. It is possible that some of the achievement noted throughout the course is the result of maturation on the part of the students; however, we are encouraged by the amount of growth evidenced by the

students across all sections of the course and suggest that the course is an effective instrument for the development of students' writing in the psychological domain.

Thus, we propose several recommendations to departments considering the implementation of a similar course. First, departments should determine the curriculum level necessary to best meet the needs of the students. We inserted the course at the sophomore level to introduce psychological writing styles as soon as possible (and thus, prevent "bad habits" in writing that students may develop over the course of their college careers); however, departments may discover that a requirement later in students' educational careers is more beneficial for their particular needs. Second, departments should consider other requirements that may affect outcomes (such as the requirement to concurrently require a statistics course). Third, resources at the department and university levels must be considered. We are fortunate to utilize computer laboratories to teach the course; however, we realize that this is not an option for many departments. Although the use of computer technology is optimal for teaching APA style (especially regarding formatting and the creation of tables and figures), it is not absolutely necessary if the instructor is able to demonstrate the process. As an alternative, students could split time in class and at home (as a hybrid course) or could be asked to provide their own computers (i.e., only word processing programs are necessary). Finally, we recommend the solicitation of feedback from the students themselves. Although not formally collected, meetings with students informed us that they found the inclusion of the course beneficial in preparation for future courses. Moreover, students specified the most helpful assignments and provided additional recommendations for feedback and grading. To summarize, although we suggest that including a required writing course is beneficial to the preparation of students for higher-level courses, we recognize that this is a flexible process and requires the input of the most valuable stakeholders (that is, the students themselves!).

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