

# Assessing Student Writing and Writing Instruction at the University of Denver

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<http://www.du.edu/writing>

The Writing Program will use rich direct measures to assess the quality of student writing and writing instruction at the university. This assessment occurs at two levels: a portfolio of writings students complete during their first year, and a longitudinal study of approximately 125 students' writings throughout their entire undergraduate careers. The Program also has a comprehensive plan for assessing teaching.

## 1. Assessment of First Year Writing

As they complete the first year writing sequence each spring, all students will turn in an electronic portfolio of four writings, one from each of three courses plus an analysis of those texts. We will select a random sample of one-quarter of these portfolios (about 250 students, 4 writings from each of them), and during the summer and fall, rate the portfolios with a rubric derived from the goals of first-year writing (available on the program's website at <http://www.du.edu/writing>). The writing program lecturers and, I hope, selected faculty from across campus, will complete the rating, and the program will use these findings to modify WRIT 1122 and 1133 during the subsequent winter and spring quarters. This assessment loop will continue to open and close, and we will be able to compare successive iterations of these courses and the abilities of successive groups of DU freshmen. The portfolios will also allow us to pursue several research questions about features of student writing on campus.

Following are the directions given to students enrolled in WRIT 1133 in spring 2007:

At the end of WRIT 1133 (or 1633), you'll compile a portfolio of three writings. Ideally, these will include one selection from 1111, one from 1122, and one from 1133. If you don't have writing from 1111 (or even 1122), please substitute papers you wrote in another college course. As an introduction to your portfolio, write a reflective essay that uses your selections to illustrate your understanding of writing and your writing practices and to analyze your own writing ability. This 500-800 word essay (2-3 double-spaced pages) should respond to **two** of the following prompts:

- Explain how one or more of the portfolio writings demonstrates your understanding of rhetorical situations and strategies. To do this you might either discuss how you analyzed the strategies used by another author or discuss how you've used specific strategies to write an effective text of your own.
- Explain how one or more of the essays included demonstrates your understanding of how to locate, evaluate, integrate, and cite appropriate sources in your writing.
- Explain how one or more of the essays included demonstrates your ability to write for a specific academic or public audience by discussing how you tailored your writing in light of audience needs or disciplinary conventions.
- Explain your writing process by discussing the processes of invention, drafting, revision, and editing, using works in the portfolio as examples.
- Explain how two of the essays included demonstrate your understanding of different types of research—interpretive (analyses of texts or artifacts), qualitative (analyses based on

observation or interviews), or quantitative (analyses based on measurement)—and how those methods reflect disciplinary approaches to research.

A portion of your grade in WRIT 1133 (or 1633) will come from the quality of your reflective introduction. Please submit all four works (the reflective introduction and the three works from your courses) through the DU Portfolio system.

## 2. A Longitudinal Study of Writing in the Undergraduate Years

In spring 2007, the Writing Program will begin a four-year longitudinal study of undergraduate writing. This study will analyze the types and amount of writing that students complete; describe textual and rhetorical features of that writing, including how it develops over time; and analyze factors that contribute to (and perhaps inhibit) the acquisition of writing skills for various types of students in various fields of study, with various writing experiences. A random sample of 125 first-year students enrolled in WRIT 1133, WRIT 1522, and WRIT 1633 during the spring quarter 2007, will be invited to participate in the study, and receive \$50 per quarter, for 2-3 hours' contributions. Data collected will include copies of all the course-related writings that the students complete each quarter; copies of student-selected non-course related writings that students produce (include poems, fiction, or other self-sponsored writings; emails; writings for websites, blogs, wikis or other digital media; posters, brochures, journals, sketchbooks, and so on); an online survey to be completed once each quarter; a one-hour interview once each year. A research team consisting of writing lecturers and faculty from throughout the university will analyze the writings, paying attention to the development of rhetorical features and strategies over time, as well as creating a detailed picture of the amounts and kinds of writing DU students are asked to perform. We will Findings from this research project will have both local and national implications for curriculum and pedagogical design, as well as build basic knowledge in advanced literacy development and characteristics of undergraduate writing.

## 3. Comprehensive Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness

In concert with careful analysis of student writing produced in the courses, the writing program uses detailed multiple measures to evaluate teaching effectiveness.

### *Each quarter*

1. Student course evaluations, using university-wide questions along with some additional items that are especially pertinent to teaching in writing courses.
2. Comprehensive syllabi from each course that reflect in detail the course as faculty taught it, including all assignments and activities.
3. Copies of 3 students' papers from two different assignments (6 papers total), one set from the first half of each course, one from the second half, with faculty responses to the students.
4. Classroom observation. Either the program director or a peer will observe each lecturer every quarter. Each observation will result in a letter that describes what happened during the class and what seemed to be the goals of the class meeting, describe particularly effective moments in the class (including perhaps not only what the teacher did but also what the students did), and offer some suggestions for future class meetings like this one.

### *Annually*

5. Reflective statement on teaching, as part of teaching portfolio. Due July 1. Write a two-four page discussion of your teaching during the previous year. Comment on such things as your goals and approaches, challenges you encountered, and ways in which you were particularly successful in fostering student learning. Your statement will be most effective if you can point to specific artifacts that document your claims (assignments, student papers, classroom activities, etc.). These artifacts may be things that you've already gathered during the year, as part of the review process detailed above. Also, please include a discussion of what you have learned about teaching or student learning during the previous year and how you'll make use of this knowledge as you plan the next year. Optionally, you could also discuss some teaching and learning research questions that you find promising.