

# Seven Points of Distinction

The University of Denver Writing Program

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The University of Denver has one of only a small number of writing programs in the nation to have received the Certificate of Excellence from the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the premier professional association of university writing professors.

## 1. Our students get extraordinary attention.

While writing courses at most universities enroll 20 to 30 students per class, we cap each section at 15. In our small classes, students experience interactive teaching, receive timely and comprehensive feedback, and enjoy ample opportunities to share writing and ideas. Student writing is the primary focus of our courses, receiving as much respect as the expert texts we discuss and analyze.

Professors are amply accessible both inside and outside the classroom. All faculty offices are located at the heart of campus: the Anderson Academic Commons. Students can write in the library and then discuss a draft with their instructor, perhaps in the Front Porch Café. Beyond the usual office hours, writing professors encourage informal contacts through virtual office hours and meetings, texts, online discussions, or Skype. Most instructors schedule individual conferences that allow them to learn more about each student and his or her writing goals, track progress, and offer specific, personalized suggestions for improvement. No student gets lost; all students are challenged.

Writing faculty also help students beyond first-year writing. We mentor students in community service projects and publications, direct summer research, sponsor publications, and offer brief targeted workshops. For example, we help students design and publish research posters for campus and scholarly presentations.

## 2. Writing faculty have exceptional expertise and focus.

At many universities, writing courses are taught by “accidental” faculty, often teaching assistants, adjuncts, or professors who are obliged to teach writing although their hearts lie elsewhere. In contrast, our permanent and full-time professors are dedicated to teaching writing. It’s central to our mission, identities, and career goals.

All DU writing instructors have completed graduate work in rhetoric, composition, and writing, and nearly all hold a PhD or an MFA. We recruit faculty nationally, selecting colleagues from top graduate programs. Because of our commitment, we participate energetically in professional development. We meet as a faculty at least twenty times each year to share teaching practices and strategies, discuss current issues and scholarship, and share the research on writing that we’re doing ourselves. We enjoy learning from one another and sharing our insights.

Writing faculty engage in the national scholarly community as contributors, editors, conference presenters, and of course, as writers. In the past two years, our faculty have published 44 critical and creative works in journals; have had their work included in 16 edited collections and anthologies; have published 9 books; and have presented at 46 national and international conferences. These contributions to writing and research invigorate our teaching.



### 3. The DU Writing Center cultivates a strong culture of writing, both on campus and beyond.

The Writing Center provides intensive individual consultations to all writers, beginners to advanced, undergraduate to graduate and faculty. These free, collaborative, 45-minute consultations can focus on any stage of the writing process, from generating ideas to making final revisions. Writers may consult on any type of text from research essays to business memos, grant applications, resumes, Powerpoints, and multimodal projects.

Expertise comes from student consultants drawn from diverse major across campus, all of whom are professionalized through a graduate-level course. Writing Program faculty also lend their expertise as mentors. Our consultants achieve professional success in multiple fields. We've had several Fulbright winners, and some graduates have gone on to direct writing centers at other schools.

Each year, the Writing Center does over 4000 consultations with students, who report enthusiastic satisfaction. 100% plan to return after a visit. Writers also report that they easily transfer the knowledge they learn in sessions, with 93% feeling better able to handle similar assignments in the future. Writing Center students and faculty actively collect and analyze data, publish, and partner with other institutions to produce cutting edge research.

The Writing Center contributes significantly to literacy in greater Denver. We partner with two local nonprofits, The Gathering Place and the Saint Francis Center, to provide free writing consultations to people experiencing poverty and homelessness. Consultants also help the staff at both nonprofits with their own professional writing. These sites allow the Writing Center to contribute actively to DU's public good mission.

### 4. The Writing Program energizes writing across the whole campus.

We foster a campus atmosphere in which professors in every field see writing as essential to their classes.

#### *Writing Institutes and Workshops*

The Program hosts workshops that have reached over 250 DU professors. They include multi-day workshops for new and returning First-Year Seminar (FSEM) and Advanced Seminar (ASEM) faculty from nearly every department on campus. We publish two teaching resources. The handbook *Writing Beyond Writing Classes* offers practical techniques for supporting writing in any course. Three volumes of articles written by faculty from across campus (the most recent one *Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Denver*) have received national attention.

#### *Collaborations with Faculty in the Classroom*

Each term Writing Program faculty fan across campus to deliver some 90 writing workshops each year in specific classes, each workshop tailored in consultation with the course professor. Faculty members develop new approaches to their writing assignments and students receive direct instruction on writing in their discipline.

#### *Conversations About Writing*

The Writing Program hosts professional writers and faculty from diverse academic disciplines. Speakers discuss recent projects, research methods, and discipline-specific writing. The events showcase panelists' passions and underscore the central role of writing in the academy and beyond. These discussions draw large student audiences and have become signature academic events at DU.

#### *Research*

The Writing Program has become a national model for writing instruction in part because of its commitment to research. One notable example is an ambitious longitudinal study. We established a four-year relationship with 60 students in the class of 2010 beginning in their first year, interviewing about their writing experiences and attitudes, collecting and analyzing all of their writings—over 450 pages per student. We have presented findings at international conferences and in invited talks on other campuses. We also initiated shorter-term research partnerships with departments on campus, including Anthropology, Economics, History, Chemistry,

Philosophy, Religious Studies, Management, Political Science, Music, and Marketing, focusing on the kinds and quality of writing in different majors.

## 5. DU students master approaches that are vital for writing in school, work, and life.

While writing traditional academic essays remains vital, writing in professional and public life takes additional forms. We attend to the broad spectrum of writing, from reports and policy briefs, to blogs, professional communications, texts that integrate visuals along with words and so on.

Our students practice forms of analytic thinking and evidence-based reasoning that are fundamental to learning, professional growth, and participation as citizens. Students learn strategies for generating, revising, and presenting ideas in writing for different purposes, contexts, and audiences. Much of this writing is research-based, but research takes an expanded definition at DU. Students gain experience not only in library-based research but also in conducting fieldwork and gathering and interpreting empirical data.

In special service-learning sections of the WRIT sequence, students write to tackle important social issues and effect change. In fact, the DU Writing Program has won the University's Community Engaged Department Award, and individual faculty have received awards for community-engaged teaching.

## 6. DU Students Write for a Digital Age

The nature of writing in a digital age is changing, and our writing classes are changing accordingly. Writing is becoming increasingly multimodal, including visual and sound elements, and intended as often to read on a screen as on a page. This changes both *how* people write and *what* people write.

Digital environments allow writers to access a quantity and type of source materials that would simply have been impossible a generation ago. Additionally, digital tools allow writers to design documents with features that would have required professional expertise even twenty years ago, including images and graphics—perhaps even taking the form of recordings or videos. Finally, writers can publish their works to audiences both selected and broad. These wide possibilities require not only learning the tools and strategies available but also acquiring discernment.

Our students analyze a range of digital texts to consider how language, image, and sound shape and manipulate messages in online environments. Students also experience how to construct persuasive arguments of their own. They post blogs, splice together found and original video footage, collaborate on Wikis, and create documentaries about important issues in the local community.

Our students use digital technology to gather data. For example, students might study patterns on social media sites like Facebook and Craigslist or research interactions among online videogame players. They research through library and other online databases, and they distribute their own surveys or conduct their own interviews. Students publish research findings in a wide range of formats and media.

## 7. DU students are impressive writers.

We know the quality of writing across campus through extensive research projects. Each year we carefully analyze a hundred students' writing portfolios, and we sponsor faculty analyses of writing in Advanced Seminars. Even more ambitiously, our longitudinal study showed that students write frequently, extensively, and successfully throughout their years at DU.

We happily feature outstanding student work. We award thirty first-year students Certificates of Distinction each year. We produce an annual magazine of the best undergraduate writing at DU, and each issue is impressive. The Writing Program could easily showcase many times the number of students we do each year. Some students come to DU needing to develop their writing abilities; many others come as strong writers already. Every student leaves the university as a stronger writer, and many of them are truly extraordinary.