

Princeton Writing Program

www.princeton.edu/writing

Amanda Irwin Wilkins, Interim Director
Gloria Fisk, Associate Director for the Writing Seminars
Keith Shaw, Associate Director for the Writing Center
Judy Swan, Associate Director for Writing in Science and Engineering

Established in 1991, the Princeton Writing Program is dedicated to encouraging excellence in writing and the teaching of writing throughout the University. The Princeton Writing Program, a freestanding administrative unit overseen by the Dean of the College, fulfills its mission through four core initiatives: the Writing Seminars, the Writing Center, Writing in Science and Engineering (WSE), and Teaching Writing in the Disciplines.

The Writing Seminars

Each year, the Princeton Writing Program offers over 100 Writing Seminars of 12 students each on a wide variety of special topics, from environmental ethics and animal intelligence to consumerism and the Victorian supernatural. Every Princeton freshman, without exception, is required to complete a Writing Seminar in fulfillment of the University writing requirement.

The primary goal of the course is for students to learn the fundamentals of college-level inquiry and argument—how to frame compelling questions and problems, develop and organize ideas, make and substantiate claims, purposefully integrate a wide variety of sources, and revise for greater cogency and clarity. Through an extensive collaboration with the University library, Writing Seminar students also learn to use library research tools and navigate Firestone Library. Most Writing Seminars are interdisciplinary in nature so as to give students experience writing with a wide array of sources. But even in Writing Seminars with a clear disciplinary bias, the emphasis is on transferable reading, writing, and research skills.

Students enroll in Writing Seminars by logging onto a special website and ranking their top 8 choices. The data are then captured by an optimization software program, which seeks to fill seats while giving students their highest possible choice. The fit is usually extremely tight, but each term we place between 96% and 97% of students in one of their top three choices.

Writing Seminar faculty number 40-45 each year and include post-doctoral lecturers recruited in a national search effort to teach full-time in the Program, as well as Princeton professors from a range of academic departments, qualified Princeton administrators and staff, and Princeton graduate students who are in the final stage of dissertation-writing. For full-time lecturers, the course load is two seminars per term, typically on the same topic; for graduate student fellows, it's one seminar per term; for all others, it's one seminar per academic year. The teaching staff is among the most disciplinarily diverse of any writing program in the country.

Writing Seminar faculty design their own Writing Seminars according to shared curricular guidelines, as follows:

(1) Unlike most other courses, which are organized primarily around readings, Writing Seminars are organized primarily around writing, totaling about 30 finished pages. The major assignments include (i) a short paper (usually 5-6 pp.), (ii) a slightly longer paper (usually 6-8 pp.), (iii) a research paper (usually 10-12 pp.), and (iv) a short, flexible final assignment due the day before Dean's Date (the last day of Reading Period) and therefore known as the Dean's Date Assignment. Students prepare for the first three assignments through brief pre-draft assignments as well as a draft, which faculty comment on in writing and discuss with student writers in 45-minute individual conferences. For the Dean's Date Assignment, the writing process and faculty feedback vary, depending on the nature of the assignment.

(2) Readings are limited to 500-750 pages per term. This ballpark figure doesn't include student writing, which is a primary focus of discussion in every Writing Seminar. Readings typically include books and articles, as well as excerpts of longer works collected in source packets.

(3) Writing Seminars meet for two 80-minute periods per week. In class, students discuss readings (often in terms of writing), receive instruction on key writing skills, and examine their own writing in draft workshops and small groups.

New faculty work with the directors on seminar design and development in the Spring before they teach, meet for three days of teaching workshops at the end of May, meet for two additional days of workshops in the Fall, and participate in a Teaching Workshop series in the Fall term. The full faculty convenes for a Fall retreat in September and two other required faculty meetings per term. We also hold several optional faculty workshops throughout the year. Meetings and workshops focus on, among other things, developing a coherent writing pedagogy, using shared grading standards, and teaching research skills.

The directors visit classes and meet individually with faculty to discuss student writing (including comments and grades) and student course evaluations. All new graduate student and full-time lecturers are required to submit teaching portfolios for review. Faculty are organized into "mentoring pairs" to exchange class visits. To encourage teaching innovation and exchange, faculty have access to a password-protected Blackboard site that serves as an archive of teaching materials, from course overviews to lesson plans to assignments.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center offers student writers free, one-on-one conferences with experienced fellow writers trained to consult on assignments in any discipline. Both undergraduates and graduate students may bring writing projects to the Writing Center in any form—ideas, rough notes, or a first or final draft. Writing Center Fellows offer advice on the writing process, from getting started to developing a thesis, structuring an argument, and revising a draft. The Writing Center also provides a set of hand-outs on academic writing, which are available electronically on the Writing Program website and in paper at the Writing Center.

The Writing Center holds over 3,600 conferences each year. Students sign up through an online scheduling/tracking system or simply come by for drop-in hours. Conferences typically last 50

minutes; extended conferences are available for students working on research projects. Writing Center Fellows also work with student writers in specific courses (for example, FRS 145, Earth's Changing Surface and Climate, and AAS 374, Growing Up Global); with the summer Freshman Scholars Institute (FSI); and with students applying to medical school.

The Writing Center is coordinated by an Associate Director of the Writing Program and six Head Fellows; it's staffed by approximately 60 Fellows—undergraduates and graduate students from a wide range of disciplines, from Comparative Literature and Molecular Biology to History, Anthropology, and Music. New Writing Center Fellows attend a two-day orientation, which includes hands-on workshops and role-playing sessions. During the academic year, the staff meets several times per term to exchange ideas and advice, and to discuss scholarly articles on writing pedagogy and the practice of one-on-one conferencing. The effectiveness of the Writing Center is assessed through a web-based student evaluation, review of Fellows' conference reports, and observation of conferences.

Writing in Science and Engineering (WSE)

The Princeton Writing Program recognizes the special nature of writing in science and engineering (WSE) and has developed a program to address the needs of writers in these fields. The WSE program includes: two graduate half-term courses—WRI 501, for international graduate students on reading and writing the scientific literature, and WRI 502, for advanced graduate students in the early stages of drafting a research article for publication; significant collaborations with Molecular Biology and PICASSo, an interdisciplinary graduate training Program in Integrative Information, Computer, and Application Sciences; and a wide array of writing workshops on various aspects of scientific and technical writing. Topics include “Anatomy of an Abstract,” “Telling Scientific Stories: Results and Discussions,” and “Making Results Visible: Tables and Figures.”

Teaching Writing in the Disciplines

The Princeton Writing Program is dedicated to encouraging a vibrant culture of writing at Princeton—a culture in which writing is regarded as integral to learning and is assigned and actively taught in every course. The purpose of the Teaching Writing in the Disciplines initiative is to enhance the role of writing in every department at the University.

Through this initiative, the Writing Program sponsors an occasional “Roundtable on Writing” for professors and graduate students on topics of general interest, such as academic writing that crosses over to a popular audience. We also consult with faculty on integrating writing into courses, designing and sequencing effective assignments, and helping preceptors respond effectively to student writing. Thus far, we have worked with professors in Chemistry, Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, Economics, English, History, Mathematics, Politics, Sociology, and others. In addition, we offer workshops each year for faculty and graduate student instructors on teaching with writing and responding to student writing. We also give invited workshops in specific departments—for example, “85% of the Grade: Designing Effective Writing Assignments in Politics Courses.”

Since 1999-2000, the Dean of the College Office has supported senior thesis writing groups in the departments. The Writing Program began working informally with group leaders in 2003-04, hoping to make discussion of writing a more central component of the group experience. In 2004-05, the Dean of the College invited us to work more formally with the groups, helping to recruit, prepare, and support the group leaders in their work. We now offer an annual orientation for new group leaders at the beginning of the academic year, hold follow-up meetings, and manage a Blackboard site on which are posted leaders' writing group plans, guidelines for facilitating writing workshops, and other resources, including all departmental senior thesis guidelines and timetables.

Princeton Writing Program

South Baker Hall
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544

Last updated October 19, 2009.