Report on the Writing Requirement (W)

MACALESTER

GERC, Spring 2023

Background

The General Education Requirements Committee (GERC), the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment (IR&A), and the Director of Writing collaborated to assess the Writing Requirement (W). Here we summarize results, confirm current practices that support student learning, and make recommendations for improvement.

Rationale for the "W" Requirement

Macalester seeks to ensure that all students receive instruction in writing that gives attention to writing as a process (writing as rewriting), and that provides students individually with feedback on the mechanics and substance of their writing. Writing (W) is one of four general education requirements at Macalester.

Structure

By graduation, all students successfully complete at least three Writing courses:

- Courses are classified as teaching argumentative writing (WA), providing instruction in writing as craft (WC) or as offering significant practice in writing (WP).
- Of the three courses, at least one must be WA and no more than one may be WP.
- Every student must take either a WA or WC course during the first semester of college, a requirement which may be met by a First Year Course (FYC) with a WA or WC designation.

Learning Outcomes

Students completing the Writing Requirement will be able to:

- Adapt their writing to context;
- Use clear language;
- Express ideas clearly using sentence and paragraph-level structures;
- Communicate others' perspectives effectively;
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others;
- Use evidence to support arguments, interpretations, or findings;
- Cite sources of evidence properly;
- Demonstrate intellectual reach.

Recent Assessment Activities

Our teaching and learning-centered approach to assessment guides us to assess both program effectiveness and student learning, with an emphasis on using assessment results to inform our practices. This assessment included several phases, outlined in the following pages:

p2 Program Effectiveness

p3 Connecting Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

p4 Collecting Student Papers & Identifying the Sample

p5 Scoring Papers and Analyzing & Contextualizing Results

p9 Key Findings & Recommended Action Steps

Scan for more details & resources

To assess Program Effectiveness, we reviewed institutional records to answer four questions:

1. Do W courses support learning outcomes?

✔ In the sample of papers we collected, all 9 learning outcomes were addressed with some frequency, with each learning outcome present in at least 40% of the papers.

2. Are there enough W courses available?

✔
- 25% of <u>all</u> courses at Mac have a W designation. This is a ***sizeable*** increase in the number of W courses available, i.e., a 16% increase in W courses from 2015-16 to 2020-21.
- Over the past 3 years, graduates have taken an average of 6.5 courses with a WA, WC, or WP designation.
- Courses are well-distributed across course levels, as shown in the average number of W courses available in an academic year, averaged from course data over the past 6 years:

	100 - level	200 - level	300 - level	400 - level
WA	55	45	43	9
WC	16	7	3	2
WP	25	20	10	2

- Students are required to take a WA or WC course in their first semester; over the past 3 years, an average of 84% of all First Year Courses (FYCs) were designated as WA or WC.

3. Do students complete W courses as expected / desired?

✔ Students are expected to complete the requirement by graduation. Over the past 3 years, 75% of students completed their Writing Requirement by the end of *Sophomore* year; an additional 19% completed the requirement by the end of *Junior* year.

4. Do we have an infrastructure that supports students and faculty?

✔ Housed in the Serie Center for Scholarship and Teaching, the Director of Writing encourages faculty to designate courses for the requirement and provides faculty development around effective writing pedagogy.

Professional staff at the MAX Center and the Director of Writing collaborate on training opportunities for tutors and preceptors. The writing tutors work one-on-one with students to support their proficiency in and growth towards these learning outcomes. Trained preceptors provide yet another rung of student support for individual classes.

Research & Instruction Librarians offer course-integrated instruction on a variety of W-related topics, e.g., how to narrow topics, selecting and citing sources. All First Year Courses include at least one class session with a Research & Instruction Librarian.

Background

The first phase of our W assessment was to focus on assignment transparency and assignment prompts. Researchers at Transparency in Teaching & Learning (TILT) found that small interventions in teaching to build "transparency" (an explicit how and why of learning) resulted in great gains for all students in both confidence and a sense of belonging, two key indicators for student success. All students made gains, with the greatest gains among students who are first generation and/or from social identity groups that have been historically marginalized. An added bonus is that transparency and clear alignment between an assignment and the requirement's learning outcomes also increase assessment validity.

Inspired in part by TILT, the assessment included 1) workshops and resources for building assignment transparency, and 2) content analysis of assignment prompts for papers submitted. While this assessment focused on WA assignments in particular, lessons learned can be applied to a variety of contexts.

Workshops on Transparent Writing Prompts

- As a kick-off to the assessment, the Director of Writing, IR&A, and the MAX Center created and delivered two workshops on transparent assignment design; repeat workshops followed.
- We adapted the TILT framework to create a checklist for incorporating transparency into prompts and to explicitly connect prompts to the learning outcomes for the writing requirement. The checklist and other materials can be accessed using the QR code at the bottom of this page.

Content Analysis of Writing Prompts & Instructions

- As part of this assessment, IR&A collected the writing prompts / instructions faculty provided to students for all 39 of the assignments included in the assessment.
- The Director of Writing and Associate Director of Assessment used the writing prompt checklist as a basis to analyze the assignment prompts / instructions and identify trends or techniques that emphasize transparency. The content analysis is not an evaluation of individual faculty but a systematic review of patterns for the purpose of informing our teaching practices.

Areas of STRENGTH

✓ **Explaining the task**
- What to do
- The topic

✓ **Criteria for assessment**
- Characteristics of a finished assignment

✓ **Readability**
- Organized & easy to follow
- Positive tone

✓ **Logistics**
- Due date, formatting, drafts, how to submit, etc.
- Citation style

Areas for IMPROVEMENT

⚠ **Describing the purpose**
- Identifying the target audience
- Explicit connections to learning outcomes
- Explaining the purpose for the assignment and why it's important

⚠ **Explaining the task**
- The process: how to start
- Genre

Scan for more details & resources

Method – Direct Assessment of Student Writing in WA Courses

- This direct assessment included a snapshot of WA papers, providing an overall sense of "everyday" writing and writing instruction at Macalester. It is not intended to represent students' *best* writing at the college, which would be better assessed in a capstone; however, it helps us to understand how well we *scaffold* writing instruction for students *leading up to* the capstone.
- Almost all faculty teaching a WA course in Spring 2022 participated in the assessment; faculty teaching more than one WA course were asked to choose *one* of their courses to include in the assessment.
- Participating faculty provided a prompt from one of their writing assignments, along with *all* student papers submitted for that assignment.
- In a short survey, faculty also provided details about the papers: e.g., the learning outcomes connected to the particular assignment, paper length, and whether students received feedback on drafts.
- IR&A de-identified the papers and led a calibration exercise and scoring workshop for a group of 10 faculty and staff volunteers, who read and scored the papers using a common rubric (more details about scoring is included on the next page). Access the rubric and related materials via the QR code below.

Our Sample of Students

- There were 842 students enrolled in these courses; some students were enrolled in more than one W course. We scored a sample of **384 papers**, including 333 selected randomly and 51 purposively oversampled to allow for cross-group comparisons.
- The random sample is representative of the population of students taking WA courses in Spring 2022 on all attributes analyzed: course level, division of course, total W courses taken, year in college, citizenship, first generation identity, and US race/ethnicity.
- The sample includes both students who have and who have not yet completed the W requirement.
- ***Overall*** results were generated using the random sample of 333 cases. All ***group-level*** analyses were conducted on the full sample of 384 papers.

Snapshot of Papers

90% were written in English; the remainder were in French, German or Spanish.

86% received feedback on one or more drafts, either from the faculty member (72%), through peer review (40%), and/or another type of feedback, e.g., oral feedback in a writing conference or via scaffolded assignments that eventually comprised the longer paper (16%). Feedback on at least one paper is required for WA-designated courses, although this was not a requirement of papers submitted for this assessment.

53% were "medium" in length – 6 to 15 pages; 36% were 5 pages or fewer.

Scoring

- IR&A de-identified the papers and led a calibration exercise and scoring workshop for a group of 10 faculty and staff volunteers who read and scored the papers using a common rubric.
- The common rubric was originally developed by GERC. In 2020-21, GERC revised it with input from W faculty, and staff and writing tutors in the MAX Center.
- All scorers "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the rubric, with minor tweaks, is an effective tool for assessing the WA component of the Writing General Education Requirement.
- Not all of the 9 learning outcomes were scored for every paper – only outcomes indicated by the instructor. On average, papers were scored on 5.6 outcomes.
- Each outcome received one of three scores: 1=Does not meet, 2=Meets, or 3=Exceeds expectations for the Writing Requirement. Occasionally, scorers did not score an outcome for a paper if they felt they lacked evidence. These outcomes received an "NA" and are not included in the analysis.
- The chart below is a snapshot of *all* papers; in later pages we share cross-group analyses.

% Meet or Exceed Expectations for Each Learning Outcome*

A. Adaptation to Context *(n = 143)*	**81%**
B. Language *(n = 146)*	**91%**
C. Macro Structure *(n = 227)*	**84%**
D. Micro Structure *(n = 164)*	**84%**
E. Communicate others' perspectives *(n = 228)*	**68%**
F. Integrate your own ideas with others *(n = 230)*	**71%**
G. Evidence *(n = 296)*	**74%**
H. Cite sources of evidence properly *(n = 238)*	**NR****
I. Intellectual reach *(n = 204)*	**66%**

* Scored "2" or "3" on a 3-point scale: 1 – Does not meet, 2 – Meets, or 3 – Exceeds expectations for the Requirement.

** Not Reported. Please see details on Page 6.

✓ **For almost every learning outcome, there were no statistically significant differences in scores** by US race/ethnicity, first generation college student identity, or citizenship.

✓ **Overall, papers scored relatively high on:** Adaptation to Context; Language; Macro Structure and Micro Structure.

▲ **Overall, papers scored lower on:** Evidence; Integrate your own ideas with those of others; Communicate others' perspectives effectively; and Intellectual reach.

A Word about Two Learning Outcomes

Cite sources of evidence properly for the intended audience

Scores for this rubric category were inconclusive and are Not Reported (NR). Scorers were not aware of a paper's assigned citation style, and without this guidance it was difficult to assess performance; e.g., when page numbers were missing, it was unclear to scorers whether it was due to an error, or due to the assigned citation style. APA, for instance, requires page numbers only for direct quotes.

Language

The original learning outcome is for students to demonstrate "standard written English"; however, research in writing pedagogy recognizes that this is a construct, one which may reinforce white supremacy, classism, and other forms of exclusion. For this assessment we used the term "Language" to describe this outcome, and the performance criteria emphasized communication and comprehensibility over a narrowly constructed idea of "correctness."

Analysis of the Learning Outcomes on which Students were LESS LIKELY to Meet or Exceed Expectations

Evidence

74% met or exceeded expectations for this learning outcome.

- The following student, course, and/or paper attributes are all associated with higher scores on the "Evidence" outcome: higher course level, more W courses taken, students in their later college years, longer paper length, and at least one form of feedback on a draft.
- Rubric and Scoring Notes:
  - → The rubric should better differentiate between criteria for "meets" and "does not meet."
  - → Scorers recommend replacing the term "questionable" evidence with "inappropriate or unacceptable evidence given the context, genre, or audience."

Integrate your own ideas with those of others

71% met or exceeded expectations for this learning outcome. Additional analysis did not reveal insight into performance; in other words, students' ability to integrate their ideas with those of others did not seem to depend on student class year, course level, number of W courses taken, paper length, or draft feedback.

- Rubric and Scoring Notes:
  - → Scorers suggested that the performance levels described in this rubric need revision.
  - → Scorers who are unfamiliar with the literature in a given field may find this outcome hard to assess.

Analysis of the Learning Outcomes on which Students were LESS LIKELY to Meet or Exceed Expectations *(Continued)*

Communicate others' perspectives effectively

68% met or exceeded expectations for this learning outcome. Papers from Domestic US students scored somewhat higher (an average of 1.80) than papers from International students (1.61).

- One of the biggest predictors of whether students meet or exceed expectations on this learning outcome is whether they receive feedback on drafts of the paper. Only about half (53%) of students who received no feedback on drafts met or exceeded expectations on this outcome, whereas close to two-thirds (65%) of students who received instructor-provided feedback met or exceeded expectations. Students who received peer-provided feedback (75%) or multiple feedback types (71%) fared even better.
- Rubric and Scoring Notes:
  - → The rubric places an overreliance on the idea of "summarizing" others' ideas rather than "drawing upon" others' ideas and placing those ideas in context.
  - → During the calibration, there was some confusion about the rubric description for "summarizes others' ideas in a clear, balanced fashion." For the purposes of scoring, the group defined this category as "contextualizing an argument" rather than "paraphrasing an argument."
  - → In the scoring panel follow-up survey, the majority of scorers indicated that the rubric's Performance Description for "Meets" was not appropriate for the level. In addition, almost half indicated it was difficult to discern the difference between "Meets" and "Does not meet."
  - → There's a concern that it's difficult for faculty who are not familiar with the sources to judge whether or not ideas "accurately reflect the original source."

Intellectual reach

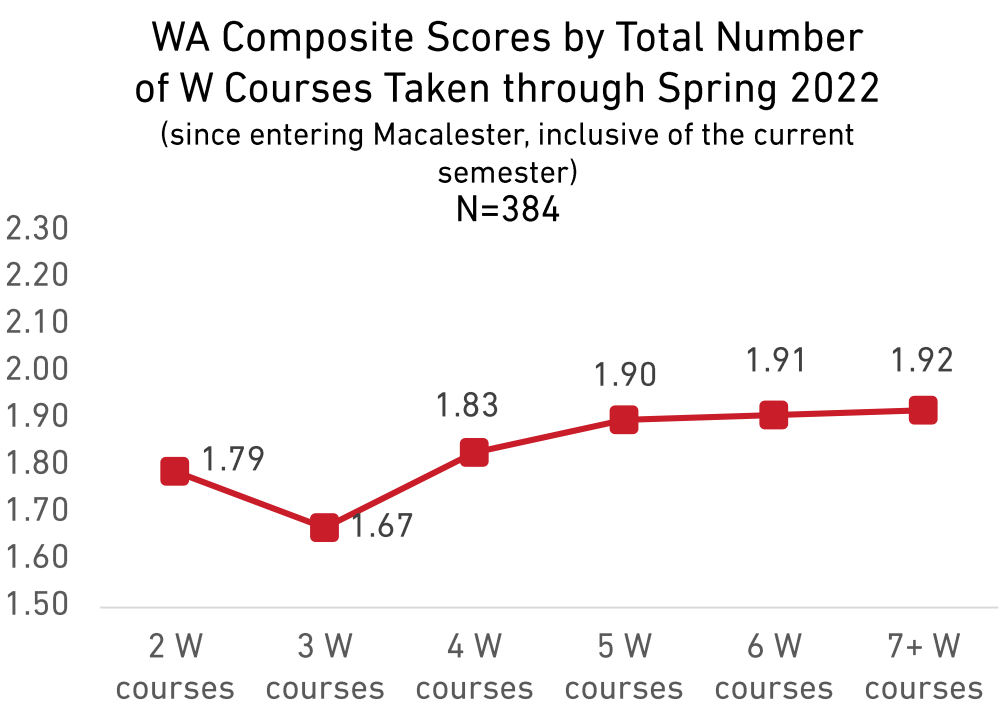
66% met or exceeded expectations for this learning outcome.

- Paper length and whether the paper received feedback on drafts are the key predictors of success on this learning outcome.
- Rubric and Scoring Notes:
  - → It is difficult to construct an effective rubric for "Intellectual Reach" since expectations may vary significantly by course level, assignment and/or discipline.
  - → There were also questions about whether an "Intellectual Reach" learning outcome is a good fit for general education, or whether it might be better suited to expectations / assessments in the major.

Composite Scores

Another way to analyze results is to calculate a composite score – the average of all scored learning outcomes for a paper (where **1=Does not meet, 2=Meets and 3=Exceeds** expectations for the Writing Requirement). A composite score helps us to conduct cross-group analyses to ensure that the W requirement is structured in such a way to support learning for all students.

The average composite score is: **1.84**



Composite scores were highest for:

- 400-level courses (2.19)
- Students in their Junior year (2.02)
- Papers over 5 pages in length (1.91)
- Papers receiving more than one form of feedback (1.89) or at least one form of feedback (1.81) scored marginally higher than those with no formal feedback (1.75)

✓ **Importantly, our cross-group analyses identified no significant differences in composite scores by US race/ethnicity, first generation college student identity, or citizenship.**

- Students' composite scores tend to *increase* with the total number of W courses taken (see graph above). This may be because "practice makes perfect," or because stronger writers tend to take more writing-designated courses, or both.
- Although not statistically significant, we note that there was a *dip* in scores among papers from students with 3 W courses – the point at which students complete the W requirement. Further context for these papers provides insight:

  → Three-quarters of the students with 3 W courses were First Year students, concentrated in 100- and 200- level courses, and over half are short papers; papers with these attributes were associated with lower scores.

  → Most critically, more than any others, students with 3 W courses were least likely to receive feedback on drafts, an attribute associated with much higher scores.

- Students' 4th writing course appears to be a tipping point at which their scores improve. The requirement is a minimum of 3 courses; however, on average, students take 6.5 writing-designated courses by the time they graduate. 6% of students take only 3 W courses.

These recommendations include input from faculty and staff scorers, including professional staff in the MAX Center and Library, and student Writing Tutors.

Program Effectiveness

Key Findings

- Macalester offers a robust number of courses with a healthy variety of options at the 100-, 200-, and 300- course levels. On average, about 25% of courses have a "W" designation.
- It doesn't appear to be a challenge for students to complete the requirement – almost all (94%) fulfill "W" by the end of their Junior year; three-quarters by the end of Sophomore year.
- The Director of Writing provides several workshops and individual consultations throughout the year to support faculty teaching writing, with a special emphasis on inclusive writing pedagogy.
- The MAX Center and Library staff deliver intentionally designed instruction and support to help students improve writing skills.
- WA course assignments align with the requirement's learning outcomes; although there is some question of whether "Intellectual Reach" is well-suited to a general education requirement.
- One concern – voiced by faculty, staff and students – is the learning outcome for students to demonstrate "standard written English." Research in writing pedagogy recognizes that "standard written English" is a construct, one that may reinforce white supremacy, classism, and other forms of exclusion. In this assessment, we used the term "Language."

Recommended Action Steps

The requirement is well-supported by the current infrastructure; however, the General Education Requirements Committee (GERC) recommends these actions to improve the learning experience:

➡ In AY 2023-24, GERC will propose revisions to the "standard written English" outcome and will consider the "Intellectual Reach" outcome. We ask EPAG to review GERC's recommendations and eventually bring them to the faculty for a vote.

➡ Writing Tutors suggested that the course schedule provide students with more information and context for the requirement and clearly distinguish between WA, WC, & WP; e.g., include a key or link in the course schedule to define these abbreviations and describe the differences.

Connecting Teaching, Learning & Assessment

Key Findings

- The pre-assessment workshops on transparency in assignment design serve dual purposes – to promote adoption of transparent teaching techniques and reinforce the importance of alignment between teaching, learning, and assessment.
- A review of assignment prompts highlights the prevalence of transparent pedagogical practices; however, there is room for improvement in describing the purpose for the assignment, and in helping students get started. These are directly connected to two cornerstones of transparency – an explicit *how* and *why* of learning.

Recommended Action Steps

➡ Continue the consultations and workshops on transparency, further sharing resources such as the checklist, and highlighting good practices for connecting to the *how* and *why* of learning.



Collecting Student Papers & Identifying the Sample

Key Findings

- The program effectiveness component of this assessment included WA, WP, and WC courses; however, the direct assessment included only WA papers. WA papers were emphasized due to their prevalence in number and their likelihood to address a larger number of learning outcomes.
- The partnership between the Director of Writing and the Office of Institutional Research & Assessment (IR&A), as well as the methods used, exemplify a "teaching and learning" assessment philosophy.
- The processes used to contact faculty teaching WA courses and collect student papers yielded almost universal participation.
- The sampling plan effectively produced a representative sample, while the oversample was large enough to allow for cross-group comparisons.

Recommended Action Steps

Apply these "teaching and learning" models and processes for future assessments and consider incorporating WC and WP papers as well.

Scoring Papers

Key Findings

- Overall, GERC's writing rubric worked well; however, the scoring panel provided specific guidance for clarifying the performance criteria for several individual learning outcomes – e.g., communicate others' perspectives effectively.
- Because scorers were not aware of a paper's assigned citation style, it was difficult to assess performance, resulting in inconclusive data for this learning outcome.

Recommended Action Steps

The Director of Writing and IR&A will revise the rubric accordingly and make it available on the Serie Center website.

Future assessments should provide the assigned citation style to scorers.

In the future, we may also consider using an embedded assessment model, such as that used in Macalester's Second Language Proficiency Requirement assessment. In this model faculty would grade papers as usual, and then would *also* score papers using the shared rubric. IR&A would aggregate and analyze the rubric scores; the Director of Writing and IR&A would present findings to faculty and staff and lead an interactive conversation to identify key findings and recommendations.

Analyzing & Contextualizing Results

Key Findings

- This assessment included a snapshot of WA papers, providing an overall sense of "everyday" writing and writing instruction at Macalester. It is not intended to represent students' best writing at the college, which would be better assessed in a capstone; however, it helps us to understand how well we scaffold writing instruction for students *leading up* to the capstone. (It should be noted that in the one 400-level course included in this assessment, all papers met or exceeded expectations for almost every learning outcome assessed.)
- The vast majority of students met or exceeded expectations for four W learning outcomes: Adaptation to Context, Language, Macro Structure, and Micro Structure.
- There's room for improvement on these four W learning outcomes: Communicate others' perspectives, Integrate your own ideas with others, Evidence, and Intellectual reach.
    - There's a question about whether "Intellectual reach" is appropriate for general education or if it is better suited to writing in the major. *(See the section on Program Effectiveness.)*
    - One of the biggest predictors of whether students meet or exceed expectations on "Evidence" and "Communicate others' perspectives effectively" is whether they receive feedback on papers. Feedback on at least one paper is required for WA-designated courses; but was not a requirement of papers submitted for this assessment.
    - With the exception of "Intellectual reach," these learning outcomes are very closely connected and could be the focal point of pedagogical training and/or additional student instruction.
- A composite score was calculated for cross-group analyses; these analyses help us to ensure that the requirement is structured to support learning for all students.
    - The average composite score is 1.84 (on a 3-point scale), approaching the criteria for "meets" expectations for the writing requirement.
    - Importantly, our cross-group analyses identified no significant differences in composite scores by US race/ethnicity, first generation college student identity, or citizenship.
    - As might be expected, scores tend to increase with more W courses, paper length, and in upper-level courses.
- Feedback works! In both the composite measure and analysis of individual learning outcomes, feedback is connected to higher scores. Papers with peer-provided feedback and/or multiple forms of feedback fare even better.

Recommended Action Steps

- Results are mostly positive and indicate that overall faculty and staff are working well together to support students' development as writers. Continue these intentional collaborations.
- Maintain the feedback component of the requirement and incorporate training opportunities for additional forms of feedback.
- We ask the Director of Writing, Library and MAX Center staff to review findings together and collaborate on professional development opportunities for faculty and instructional offerings for students – e.g., tips for helping students to provide effective feedback to peers.