

AANAPISI Grant
Project Proposal:
Improving the Teaching and Assessment of Student Writing in GE Courses

Sara Cook
Department of English and Comparative Literature
San Jose State University

Project Summary:

Create a collection of writing-focused materials to aid professors who teach GE courses containing a writing component. Materials may include, but are not limited to, assessment rubrics, handouts to accompany essay prompts, peer editing activities, and revision instructions. Professors will be able to pick and choose what materials will be helpful to them in their course, with little to no “extra work” required on their behalf.

Target Audience:

All professors teaching GE courses with a writing component at San Jose State University. The materials and data generated from this project may also be used at any other university, by any professor teaching a class where writing is an element of the coursework.

Need for the Project:

One of SJSU’s General Education Program Objectives states that students should be able to demonstrate “an ability to communicate ideas effectively both in speaking and writing” (SJSU). To fulfill this objective, all GE courses at SJSU have a written word requirement, with minimums ranging from 1,500 to 8,000 words. Despite SJSU’s clear commitment to the importance of writing across the disciplines, no consistency exists in the teaching and assessment of writing across these myriad courses.

Professors teaching GE courses are free to emphasize the importance of a well-composed assignment, and assess the quality of prose as part of the assignment’s grade. However, most GE course professors are not composition or English instructors, and are not required to teach writing skills or assess the quality of prose their students submit. For many (if not all) professors, the course content of a writing assignment is the paramount component to assess; the writing itself is often ancillary, or occasionally the elephant in the room that is easier to ignore. Instructors may give some weight to the quality of the composition itself, but grading an assignment for content *and* execution takes more time, and training that some professors may not have. Because students are required to pass 3 composition courses at SJSU (English 1A, English 1B, and 100W), and because most professors are already overworked and underpaid, there is little incentive for GE instructors to teach or assess writing in their courses.

If GE courses do not teach or assess writing in some uniform manner, our billboard reads what my students often mutter: “Good Writing Only Matters in English classes.”

In the Project Narrative of the AANAPISI grant, one weakness listed at SJSU is the “inconsistency in the teaching and assessment of writing in undergraduate courses across SJSU” (xx). The narrative further details this issue:

Although our GE structure and guidelines give students many opportunities to write, we do not have common strategies or consistent evaluation rubrics to encourage or assist students to improve their writing as they move through their GE courses. There is also wide variation in the quality of teaching and assessing student writing in GE courses and in the majors. A common and widely disseminated approach, relevant to all students but particularly sensitive to the needs and untapped potential of students for whom English is not the primary language, is clearly needed to realize the writing proficiency outcomes to which our GE guidelines and course requirements are committed.

By creating writing instructive materials that professors teaching these GE courses may use to supplement their courses, SJSU will gain some commonality and consistency in the teaching and assessment of writing across the curriculum. There will be practical, hands-on writing support to substantiate our GE Objectives. Most importantly, our students will become better writers.

PHASE I

Project Design:

1. Gather data. Using surveymonkey.com, create a brief email survey for all professors teaching GE courses. Instructors will be asked what writing materials or support they believe would be helpful to their classes, as well as a brief series of questions regarding what types of writing assignments they give, and the quality of their students’ writing.
2. Create materials. Based on best practices, and data from the survey, create a set of materials for GE professors to use in their classes to aid in writing instruction and assessment.

For example:

- a. General information-type handouts detailing what a good essay/paragraph/abstract etc. contains and accomplishes
- b. A checklist to supplement essay prompts, in order to assist students in understanding all the components of a well-written assignment
- c. A list of the most common student writing errors (and how to fix those errors)
- d. A ‘how to’ guide on incorporating borrowed material
- e. Peer editing activities that may be used with a rough draft of an assignment
- f. Tips on revising a rough draft
- g. A choice of narrative and numerical rubrics to aid professors in assessing the quality of student writing in their assignments
- h. Handouts and activities to follow-up on what the assessment of their previous writing work criticized
- i. Unofficial “referrals” to the writing center that may be stapled to graded work

3. Disseminate materials. Materials will be emailed to instructors individually. Please see the Project Design of Phase II, below, for further discussion of broadcasting materials.

Time Requirement: August 2012 – December 2012; equivalent to one course release.

PHASE II

Project Design:

1. Use. Give instructors the majority of a semester to test-drive the materials in their classes.
2. Evaluation.
 - a. *Professors:* After participating faculty have selected and used the materials, they will be asked for their feedback. This will be done, again, through surveymonkey.com to determine which materials they've used, why, what they would change, etc.
 - b. *Students:* With the permission of instructors, students will be surveyed briefly, during class time, at the end of the semester to determine what effect the materials have had.
3. Revision. Based on the feedback above, revise materials as necessary.
4. Disseminate materials. Once the materials reach a final-draft stage, they can be broadcast campus-wide. Departments may post them on homepages, the writing center may disseminate them, the faculty development center may post them, etc.

Timeframe: January 2013 – May 2013; equivalent to one course release.

A Note to the AANAPISI Committee:

While Phase I and Phase II of this proposed project clearly work together, completing Phase I alone would also yield great success in improving the writing support at SJSU.

Work Cited

San Jose State University. SJSU Catalog. General Education (GE) Program. 14 July 2012. 23 July 2012. < <http://info.sjsu.edu/web-dbgen/narr/catalog/rec-1494.html>>