A Lot Like Us, but More So: Listening to Writing Faculty Across the Curriculum

SUSAN E. SCHORN, COORDINATOR
College of Liberal Arts WAC Initiative
University of Texas at Austin

The editors of this volume asked me a very specific question: "How, if at all, do standards of 'college-level' writing change if faculty from departments outside of English weigh in on the subject?" As an administrator in a university-wide, cross-disciplinary writing program, and a teacher of composition, I have a sort of catbird's seat from which to consider this question. Accordingly, I solicited opinions from some of the hundreds of instructors teaching Substantial Writing Component (SWC) courses at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. The SWC program at UT Austin is decentralized, and although it is built around a very basic set of course requirements, it does not bind instructors to a single set of learning outcomes. Thus our teachers, in eleven colleges and schools across campus, represent a cross-section of definitions of college-level writing outside of English.

Taking Patrick Sullivan's essay in this volume as a starting point, I asked SWC instructors in a wide range of disciplines a number of questions, including:

- What is college-level writing?
- How does it differ from, say, high school writing?
- Can we define what college-level writing looks like? Should we do so?

- Can we define the purpose of college-level writing?

The responses I received indicate that writing instructors outside English share virtually all of our many concerns about student writing. Moreover, as a group, they share our disagreements over the content, purpose, and need for standards. In short, they are a lot like us, only more so. I see this as a good thing. My sense is that, rather than trying to reconcile these many definitions into a single standard, we can do more to improve student writing by looking for the reasons behind the definitions. In fact, when we look at the range of ideas about writing across disciplines, we may become more comfortable with the level of disagreement we find within our own field. Disciplines obviously have divergent goals, but college writing must meet all of those goals. The differences among disciplines demand a more dynamic set of writing standards that are adaptable, as we assume all writing should be, to purpose, audience, and occasion.

In response to my first two questions, a professor in the School of Business provided a detailed, five-point list of skills:

College-level writing should demonstrate the following:

- High level of accuracy (grammar, punctuation, spelling)
- Discipline-relevant vocabulary (e.g., business students should be able to use economic, financial, and management vocabulary appropriately)
- Discipline-relevant style (e.g., business students should use business-related formats and structures for writing such as memos, letters, reports)
- Ability to clearly and concisely relay a message (appropriate use of topic sentences, highlighting, introductions/conclusions, etc.)
- Writing that meets the intended purpose (demonstrates an understanding of the audience and goals of the message) (Loescher)

Compare this response to the more general (and more ambitious) standard laid out by a professor of economics:

> The rough first stab I can offer is: College-level writing succeeds in communicating college-level content. A written product (es-

> say, paper, monograph, etc.) achieves the standard of college-level writing if it could reasonably be included among college-level readings, assigned to be read by a relevant class of college students with the expectation that it would contribute to the students' learning in a way and to an extent similar to what instructors expect of the readings they typically assign. (Trinque)

These instructors approach their definitions of college writing quite differently. One foregrounds correctness and the other stresses content. They are representative of the range of responses I received. And yet, the two definitions are not mutually exclusive; indeed, the professors could actually be describing the same ideal piece of writing.

Moreover, the instructors I surveyed clearly appreciated the interplay of small- and large-scale issues as they tried to define college-level writing. A professor of history, for example, narrowed the difference between college and high school writing down to three seemingly minor, but to her, telling, points:

> I get seniors who are still tightly wedded to the five-sentence paragraph, who think they will go to hell if they write "I," and who can't imagine that [the professor] might be really truly interested in what they actually think (because I'm asking them to write on historiographical matters that are unsolved). Those three problems seem most clearly to define the difference between college and [high school] writing. (Frazier)

When she goes on to discuss the purpose of college writing, this professor reveals why these high school writing habits are so troublesome to her:

> I teach a period of history (European Middle Ages and Renaissance) that attracts students with many pre-conceived ideas. I'm happy enough if I manage to help them overcome those prejudices and see the sources we read in order to write about them freshly. (Frazier)

No doubt the preconceived ideas about history she wants her students to overcome are reinforced by their preconceived ideas about writing. The ability to write "freshly," to contribute new ideas and perspectives, requires thinking that isn't bound by

counterintuitive rules. Here, the instructor is concerned about how an overemphasis on such rules unfits her students for college writing—a somewhat different perspective from that of the business professor. This concern may reflect the demands of her discipline, or her personal experiences as a teacher, or some combination of the two. Whatever the source, it is a valid concern, and it arises because she is trying to accomplish a reasonable and worthwhile goal: getting students to reconceive history.

A professor in art history described the difference between high school and college writing this way:

> For me it has to do with level of research (deeper and more sophisticated—no encyclopedias, for example), quality of analysis (there has to be some at the very least and it has to demonstrate a broader knowledge of the subject than the paper can or should represent), and the presence of an actual argument. (Canning)

Surface error is not what comes first to the mind of this instructor (though, knowing her, I am sure it bothers her when she sees it). She is looking for research ability, analysis, and argument. In fact, she sounds a lot like a composition teacher to me!

None of these responses is likely to surprise a composition instructor. We know all the things mentioned by these teachers are important. We understand the professional pragmatism that motivates these instructors' goals. We might disagree with the business professor's emphasis on surface issues if we felt it impeded a student's development, but we would probably admit the importance of error-free writing in the workplace. None of these descriptions could, I think, be called unreasonable. The question is: Can they all simultaneously be "right"? Can all these definitions and expectations be made to live together in harmony?

I believe they can. The result may be inelegant—a palette of definitions for different majors and careers rather than a single, neat standard, perhaps—and the process itself will certainly be noisy, but involving faculty across disciplines in defining college writing has many benefits. Such a process broadens an institution's understanding of the purpose of writing and sharpens awareness of writing's myriad uses. Standards devised by a cross-disciplinary process are more thoroughly interrogated and better under-

stood by all parties. Giving all instructors a voice in setting the standards gives them a stake in improving student writing.

The key, I believe, lies in looking at the goals and expectations these faculty members bring to writing instruction, and how they mesh with those of English and composition faculty. I use the term *mesh* carefully; rather than expecting faculty in various disciplines to share the exact writing goals and expectations of English faculty, we should collectively discover where our goals coincide, where they diverge, and why. This helps everyone concerned determine who bears responsibility for meeting various goals.

Responsibility, admittedly, can be a sticky problem—one that emerges quickly when faculty outside of English are asked to describe the relationship between basic composition and writing in their discipline. For example, a professor of government replied to my questions by describing a dichotomy that professors of English (at least) would probably call false:

> In political science, clarity, precision, and analytic rigor are valued very highly. Eloquence and literary flair are less prized. (Madrid)

The economics professor was more forthright:

> . . . [I]t might be worthwhile to compile a set of definitions for each discipline as an instructors' resource. One benefit I imagine is to free instructors from the possible default position that they are to function as satellite English professors, using the content of their course as an opportunity for remedial instruction. That students might improve their skills in composition is not unwelcome, but quite beside the point. (Trinque)

I am guessing most English teachers will bristle at this instructor's use of the word *remedial*. There does still persist a sense among the disciplines that students *progress* from writing English papers to writing lab reports or business presentations. Housing basic composition courses in the English department reinforces this perception. Setting composition courses adrift in programs that offer no major does not help. These kinds of curricular structures imply that one *advances* from the study of English and com-

position to the study of more complicated things as one matures; as if Adam Smith were a more highly evolved being than William Shakespeare, or the contemplation of the tax code required more maturity than understanding Aristotle's rhetorical triangle. Yet, curiously enough, when I distribute our institution's "Grading Criteria for First-Year Writing" to instructors across campus, many of them immediately co-opt the criteria for use in their own, junior- and senior-level, classes. When they get an opportunity to examine the standards we hold our students to, they are less inclined to dismiss them as remedial. This, then, is another benefit of involving instructors from the disciplines in discussions about college writing: they come to better understand and appreciate the work we do in English and composition.

Discussing standards and criteria with these instructors also provides an opportunity to share with them the scholarship we writing professionals wallow in on a daily basis. Some instructors in other disciplines think of grammar as someone else's problem—namely, ours. They wonder what on earth we did during those fifteen weeks of First-Year Composition when we should have been teaching basic grammar. To many teachers in other disciplines, it is news that assigning grammar exercises will not magically produce error-free writing. They may not understand the relationship between what they call composition skills and critical thinking ability. They may have completely unrealistic ideas of the sort of writing students have done in high school. Here, our background knowledge can do much to enlighten them, to the benefit of their students. (In my experience, instructors in education and educational psychology are most likely to understand the developmental aspect of writing; faculty in these disciplines often make especially good allies if you are having trouble communicating with other disciplines.)

Of course, discussing standards with many instructors does not mean accepting or validating all those standards. At some point, consolidation is necessary or the approach becomes pointlessly reductive. If each individual instructor sets his or her own standards, there is nothing standard about them. But there is good reason for writing instructors to expend at least some energy in that direction. In any act of writing, the standards, for content, correctness, purpose, and so on, ultimately reside in a tacit agree-

ment between writer and audience. If the standard, whatever it is, is not met, the reader either fails to understand or refuses to read the writing. Thus, developing any standard for college-level writing requires spectacular generalization of what is really a quite individual relationship.

It is less than ideal, but on some level necessary. Based on my work with instructors across the curriculum, it seems eminently possible to work toward a comprehensive set of learning strands related to writing. These would admit the need for, and benefit of, different emphases among strands, and different levels of performance, in different disciplines, institutions, and situations. Such a set of standards, while perhaps not as easily explained to state legislatures as a single rubric, is far more reflective of how writing really happens.

Creating such standards is good for us as composition instructors because it makes us more aware of the needs of students in majors other than English. We serve these students better when we know the full trajectory of their writing development in college, rather than just the stages that we guide them through. The process is good for instructors outside our field because it makes them aware of what we do—and what we don't do. It helps them better understand what *they* contribute (or should contribute) to their students' writing and critical thinking skills.

Having spent so much of this essay discussing differences, I would like to close by examining a common thread among the responses I received. It became clear as I read these instructors' thoughts that they all shared one specific goal for student writing. It is a goal dear to composition teachers. For these instructors in other fields, the goal is intimately connected with both the ideal and the intensely practical facets of their disciplines. The instructor in the School of Business expressed it this way:

> If I had to pick one thing that separates adult-level writing from adolescent-level writing, it is the ability to reflect the needs of the audience in your writing. To be able to empathize with the reader and present the material in a way they can best receive and comprehend it. As part of the college journey, the adolescent needs to learn to empathize on this level and to leave behind the self-centered focus of youth. (Loescher)

Now, this is the same professor who provided the five-point list of grammatical, disciplinary, and stylistic skills quoted earlier in this essay. But she takes pains to say that the *one thing* that denotes "adult-level" writing, to her mind, is empathy with the audience. Not just *awareness* of the audience, but "the ability to reflect the needs of the audience" and "leave behind the self-centered focus" of the immature writer.

A teacher in the School of Nursing strikes a similar note in her response:

> You have to write to a wide variety of people, both inside your institution and outside. . . . Most writers don't spend nearly enough time understanding the people to whom they'll be writing. (Johnson)

Not just knowing who your readers are, but *understanding* them. This is a call for empathy much like that voiced by the business professor. Both teachers are concerned with the *practical* need for such empathy. It is, to them, simply necessary to good communication. And good communication is necessary to succeed in both their respective fields.

Along similar lines, the professor of Germanic studies worried that her students are too focused on "figuring out" the audience's point of view. This concern at first seems to contradict those voiced in the previous quotations, but the reverse is actually true:

> The difference with "high-school writing" seems to be (and this is someone talking who has grown up in another educational system) that the students tend to assume that there is one correct answer to each question and one correct way to write it down. What they want from me is the "formula" that they can use. What I am trying to teach them is to *find* their own voice: develop their own opinion as opposed to trying to figure out mine. This, however, also means that they have to *prove* their point. (Hafner)

This professor's emphasis on "finding" voice and "developing" opinion is telling. She has observed her students using her as a stand-in audience for their writing—a tactic we have all prob-

ably witnessed. Why go to the trouble of trying to visualize a hazy professional or public readership when the teacher with the grading pen makes such a convenient substitute? If the student writer can just decode the biases of the faux audience embodied in the professor, he or she need never learn to empathize with amorphous, multifaced, imagined audiences (admittedly, a difficult task for any writer). But if students follow this course, the professor notes, they lose the opportunity to interrogate their own views—the very reason many of us in composition stress audience awareness in the first place. They will never develop the ability to prove a point or defend their opinions to real-world readers. They will lack both audience awareness and self-awareness. And this, according to these instructors, is what will keep them from being college-level writers.

In the College of Communication, a professor responded to my questions with his own list of desired student writing skills. But he too specifically mentions the writer's approach to audience as central to college-level writing:

> The move from high-school-level to college-level writing is, to my mind, a move toward a much greater consciousness and self-consciousness concerning the role of writing. That is, on the one hand, college-level writing involves a greater appreciation for the located-ness of the sources used and the subjects talked about. . . . On the other hand, the student's own writing should demonstrate a sense of audience: Am I writing this for people who have seen this film or to introduce it to people who have not seen it? Am I analyzing a film's formal qualities or am I concerned with its reception by viewers? What are the preconceptions my audience is likely to hold toward this film, this genre, this country's films, and the like? How will I either work with those preconceptions or attempt to change them through my writing? (Siegenthaler)

Again we see the concern for self- and other-awareness. Note too that this professor not only wants students to ask questions about audience ("Am I writing this for people who have seen this film or to introduce it to people who have not seen it?"), but expects them to then actively adjust their writing, so that they may, as Ronald Lunsford puts it elsewhere in this collection, "talk to people who see the world differently" (190): *How will I either*

work with those preconceptions or attempt to change them through my writing? Students of this professor must embrace the possibility that opinion is changeable through open discussion. If they cannot admit this possibility then they can never develop the skills to change opinion. And furthermore, they will never develop the ability to rationally modify their own opinions, or even interrogate them at all. And thus, the instructor in me feels compelled to add, they will be unable to tell when their own opinions are being changed, perhaps even grossly manipulated, by others.

My respondents were striking in their persistent concern over the quality that Ronald Lunsford, in his essay, calls "attitude." Moreover, they see this quality as integral to the work of people in their respective professions. Clearly, a writerly attitude is not merely something we demand in English or composition. The need to talk to people who see the world differently, rather than simply yelling at them, is integral to all disciplines—even the "objective" sciences, the ever-so-pragmatic world of business, and the life-and-death world of health and medicine. This fact strikes me as a vindication of our focus, in composition, on the ability to question, reflect, persuade, and listen. All too often I have been faced with students who not only did not want to seriously consider a different viewpoint, but felt it was unfair of me to require them to do so. It is heartening to know that instructors in other disciplines will continue to emphasize this important skill, and work to teach it to our students. Anyone involved in that great struggle, I think, deserves to have his or her opinions about writing heard.

Works Cited

Canning, Charlotte. "RE: Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 21 June 2004.

Frazier, Alison. "RE: Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 16 June 2004.

Hafner, Susanne. "RE: Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 16 June 2004.

Johnson, Regina. "College Level Writing." E-mail to author. 15 Sept. 2004.

Loescher, Kristie. "RE: Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 9 July 2004.

Madrid, Raul. "RE: Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 21 June 2004.

Siegenthaler, Peter. "Questions on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 28 June 2004.

Sullivan, Patrick. "An Essential Question: What Is 'College-Level' Writing?" *What Is "College-Level" Writing?* Ed. Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006. 1–28.

Trinque, Brian. "thoughts on 'college-level' writing." E-mail to author. 24 June 2004.