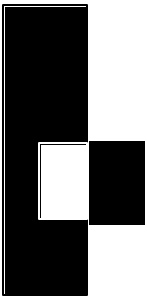

# Assignments Across the Curriculum: A Survey of College Writing

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In "The Future of Writing Across the Curriculum: Consensus and Research" (1993), Chris Anson traces the history of research in Writing Across the Curriculum, from early evidence of writing across disciplines that was mostly anecdotal to current research that emphasizes case-study and ethnographic methods. Anson approves of recent qualitative WAC research that has moved beyond "anecdotes, testimonies, and reports from colleagues," but he also calls for more large-scale research into disciplinary writing (p. xvi). In "Where Do We Go Next in Writing Across the Curriculum?" Robert Jones and Joseph Comprone (1993) also ask for "research that will tell us what is actually going on in academic discourse communities" (p. 63). Some of the richest data for this kind of WAC research to date has come from case studies and ethnographies involving a handful of courses or students (see Sternglass 1997; Walvoord et al. 1991; McCarthy 1987; Herrington 1985), but with the exception of studies of high schools (see Britton 1975; Applebee 1981; Parker 1985), there is little large-scale research into the kinds of writing being assigned outside the college composition class. One way to investigate questions about disciplinary writing on a larger scale than ethnography is to collect and analyze one of the fundamental pieces of classroom discourse: writing assignments.

In order to inquire more expansively into disciplinary writing, researchers at the college level have studied writing assignments and analyzed rhetorical features such as writing aims, audiences, and genres. This research has been conducted either via solicited sample assignments (Rose 1983) or surveys asking instructors to describe their assignments (Eblen 1983; Bridgeman and Carlson 1984; Harris and Hult 1985). Although these surveys allow for broader speculation



Language & Learning Across the Disciplines 6(1): January 2003
DOI: 10.37514/LLD-J.2003.6.1.05

than naturalistic studies of a handful of courses, they don't come close to achieving the kind of breadth of assignments and courses that can be found in Britton's 1975 study of high school writing in England or Applebee's 1981 study of American high-school writing. Anson (1988) points to another problem with these surveys: "Because most surveys are responded to by choice, even a relatively good return may still represent a skewed sample" (p. 12). As Anson points out, instructors filling out these surveys may exaggerate the importance of writing or the variety of writing in their classes, either to put themselves in a positive light or to attempt to give the researchers what the instructor thinks they want.

This essay will present the results of a study that looks to address the need for both a large-scale study of college writing and an unsolicited sample: a textual analysis of the aims, audiences, and genres of nearly 800 writing assignments from across the college curriculum at forty-eight institutions, collected via course websites on the Internet. The study emulates Britton's and Applebee's research by exploring the nature of writing across disciplines on a broader scale than has yet been attempted at the college level, and at the same time it looks to avoid the problems of teacher self-reporting found in previous WAC surveys.

## Research Methods

My primary research method is a textual analysis of 787 writing assignments from undergraduate courses in forty-eight institutions in four categories: state universities, regional colleges, liberal arts institutions, and two-year colleges. I collected these assignments from the Internet, through a search of departmental and course websites. In order to aim for an arbitrary sample, I visited institutional websites through an index of the home pages of all accredited universities, regional colleges, and community colleges in the United States, which is found at www.utexas.edu/world/univ/. This index is organized by state, and I visited each state and selected the first institution that provided access to course websites. I collected assignments in courses within four broad categories: hard sciences, social sciences, business, and humanities. I did not collect assignments from first-year writing courses, since this data is not relevant to the study.[1]

My focus for analysis is the rhetorical features of the assignments, outlined in Figure 1.[2] Borrowing from prior re-

search into writing assignments across disciplines, I divide the rhetorical features into three categories: aims, audiences, and genres. My aim and audience categories are based in large part on Britton's. Britton divided writing into three different "functions," which correspond to different points on the rhetorical triangle of writer (the expressive function), text (the poetic function), and audience (the transactional function). Transactional assignments ask students to inform or persuade an audience; for example, a book review, annotated bibliography, or editorial. Expressive assignments are informal and exploratory, with minimal demands for structure and the self as audience. Freewrites and personal journals are typical expressive assignments. Poetic writing is imaginative, with the focus on the text itself as an art form. Poems, stories, and plays are common poetic assignments. Based on Timothy Crusius' (1989) critique of Britton's categories, which Crusius feels lack a place for informal writing for an audience beyond the self, I added one more category, "exploratory." Like expressive assignments, exploratory assignments are informal and focus on exploring ideas, but the audience is public and the form is usually more structured than expressive assignments. The type of academic journal assignments I discuss later in this essay— journals that ask students to explore ideas in a conversation with peers and the instructor—are typical exploratory assignments.

**Aims**

Transactional
- Informative
- Persuasive

Expressive
Exploratory
Poetic

**Audiences**

Teacher
- Student to Instructor (General)
- Student to Examiner

Self
Peers
Wider Audience
- Informed Audience
- Novice Audience
- Generalized Reader

**Genres**

Short-answer exam, term paper, journal, lab report, etc.

**Figure 1:** Rubric for Analysis

I divide the audience categories into the self, the teacher (which is further divided into "Student to Examiner," in which the student provides the "correct" information to the teacher, and "Student to Instructor [General]," in which the student engages in a dialogue with the teacher), peers, and wider audiences. Often assignments have multiple audiences and aims. Like Britton, I coded for the dominant aim when more than one aim was evident. However precise these aim and audience categories may appear, they are not absolute, as Crusius emphasizes in his critique of Britton's study. Coding an assignment is, finally, a subjective act. Britton, for example, trained a group of experienced researchers to code each essay, but even they agreed on the aim of only two out of every three assignments.

Britton conducted his research prior to the growth of genre studies, and Crusius suggests another needed addition to Britton's categories: genre. Genres, which are more concrete than aims and take on forms and purposes that, as Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway (1994) point out, are "stabilized-for-now," include short-answer exams, term papers, journals, and lab reports. Genres can be difficult to deduce from just the structure of the discourse act itself, partly because genres often blur, and partly because understanding genre requires social context. As Carolyn Miller (1994) argues, "A system of classification for forms of discourse should have some basis in the conventions of rhetorical practice" (p. 23). Although I do have some sense of the social context of the genre through class materials on the Internet, any conclusions I make about genre must be qualified by the fact that this study does not include classroom observation of "genres in action."

Because it doesn't include classroom observation, this project cannot provide the kind of information from instructor/student interaction and examples of student writing and instructor response that are the hallmarks of ethnographic qualitative research; information such as classroom discussion about the writing assignments and written teacher response. Along with Anson and Jones and Comprone, however, I would argue that the need for large-scale research into college writing that will complement the work of ethnographers is overdue. What follows are the results of just such an analysis.

## The Aims of Writing: An Overview

Both Britton and Applebee found that transactional writing, and especially writing to inform, dominated in the assignments they collected. Sixty-three percent of Britton's samples were transactional, with the informative function accounting for 62% of transactional writing. Seventeen percent of assignments were poetic, and only 5% were expressive. Transactional writing was even more predominant in Applebee's research. Surveys of college courses by Sherwood (1977), Eblen (1983), and Bridgeman and Carlson (1984) reveal similar results: writing to transact, and in particular, writing to inform, was the dominant purpose.

My research shows results similar to prior studies, as Table 1 outlines. Of the 787 assignments I collected, transactional writing makes up 84%, and most transactional assignments (73%) are informative rather than persuasive. Although a significant amount of the writing is exploratory (13%), poetic writing and expressive writing are almost non-existent. I'd originally planned to investigate the differences in writing purposes between disciplines and between introductory and upper-level courses, but I quickly realized that there are no significant differences. In every discipline and at each level in my study—from introductory courses to senior seminars—writing to inform is the dominant aim.

## The Transactional Aim: Informative and Persuasive Assignments

Much of the informative assignments in this study ask students to display the "right"answer or the "correct" definition to the instructor through a recall of facts. Typically the required information comes from lecture material or the textbook, rather than the students' own experiences. These exam questions illustrate this point:

> In your textbook, Steven Smith describes three different roles legislators might play in representing their constituents. List and describe each of these three.

> Describe the major factors causing changes in food consumption (see chpts. 1-4) and describe the marketing channel for a chosen commodity (see chapter 12).

From my outline on earthquakes, explain the 'effects' of earthquakes.

| Aim | Number of Assignments | Percentage of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Informative | 574 | 73 |
| Persuasive | 90 | 11 |
| Expressive | 2 | .02 |
| Exploratory | 117 | 15 |
| Poetic | 9 | .05 |

**Table 1:** Distribution of the Aims of Writing

Short-answer and essay exams make up 23% of the assignments, and the majority of informative writing is for an audience of "teacher-as-examiner."

Often this examiner role is further emphasized in the assignment sheet. For example, according to the assignment sheet for an exam, one instructor of environmental science is looking for "phrases and sentences that show me what you know about a topic." An instructor of international business goes so far as to tell his students that "the answers should be composed to inform the reader. In the end, I am the reader, so you are writing to inform me." A sociology instructor includes in his assignment sheet an explanation of essay response marks, including the symbol "?" for "Do you really think so. I doubt it"; "??" for "Are you serious?"; "x" for "This is not correct"; and "No" for "You have badly misinterpreted the reading. I'm unhappy."

Assignments that have a persuasive aim often begin with the kind of summary or explanation found in informative writing, but they require students to go one step further and argue a position, as these instructions for a review of an environmental article illustrate: "Do give a brief summary of the paper in your review, but DON'T stop there. You should also undertake some analysis—DO some original thinking of your own!" A social science instructor uses similar language in her welfare policy assignment: "The purpose of this paper is to stimulate your thinking about 'social or distributive justice.' You are to develop you own position on this topic. Specifically, what principles should guide government in determining what to guarantee its citizens?" The key words here are "stimulate thinking" and "develop your own position."

Since the persuasive aim is aligned with the "audience" component of the rhetorical triangle, it's not surprising that many of the assignments with a persuasive aim provide students with a hypothetical audience beyond the instructor. In an application letter assignment, a management communications instructor writes: "Note that your application letter is an 'argument'; that is, it tries to persuade the reader to act in alignment with your aims. A proposal is written to persuade an audience to act favorably on a solution to a documented problem." This connection to an audience is seen again in an essay for an international business course in which students must "recommend an action based on argumentative claims" and "provide a rationale for your recommendations to the management team at a company." Only 27% of transactional writing in my study asks students to write for the wider rhetorical situation often found in persuasive writing.

## The Expressive Aim

Only two assignments in my research call on students to produce expressive writing. These assignments are both "freewrite" essay drafts written to an audience of the self, with the goal of invention. Both of the expressive assignments are ungraded. Other than these two freewriting drafts, only one assignment even mentions expressive writing. A British poetry instructor assigns a poetry analysis paper with the ultimate aim of persuasion, but he does tell students to "do some exploratory or 'free' writing to loosen up, establish your own voice, and identify the core of your argument." As these examples illustrate, expressive writing can be used to help students find a voice, discover arguments, and relate ideas to their own experiences. Toby Fulwiler (1982) argues that "expressive writing is the primary means we have of personalizing knowledge" (p. 4), a sentiment shared by Britton and Applebee. The lack of expressive writing in my research further points to the limited range of purposes students are given for their writing in the classes in my study.[3]

## The Exploratory Aim

The dominance of informative writing to teacher-as-examiner in my research is similar to the results of previous studies. Where my findings differ from prior research is the number of exploratory assignments. Most assignments in my

study that ask students to "explore" for an audience beyond the self are journals, and the number of journal assignments, 106, roughly corresponds to the number of exploratory assignments. Previous researchers, from Britton to Applebee to Rose to Eblen, found that exploratory writing—and the genre of the journal—was rare. In my research, however, exploratory journals and their computer age equivalent, the electronic discussion board, are a common phenomenon.

The instructors in my research see exploratory writing as a way to encourage students to invent arguments, make connections, reflect on personal experience, and take risks. The following quotes from journal assignments illustrate this use of exploratory writing:

> The journal is a space for you to investigate your own thoughts, reactions, and feelings on particular art ideas and art works. I'm asking you to make connections between what you are learning and what you have already experienced.
>
> Think of it as a conversation in writing, or as pre-talking analogous to the pre-writing you do for papers. Our goal is not to produce expertly crafted individual treatises, but to develop the ability to think, respond, and communicate through writing. Your contributions should be informal, spontaneous, informed, and impassioned.
>
> Treat the e-mail messages as an opportunity to express freely your own thoughts, opinions, observations, and questions. You may also use them to float preliminary ideas for your essays. Because they are informal you needn't be overly concerned with structure, organization, and rhetorical polish.

I found that exploratory writing is being assigned across disciplines. The previous passages, in fact, are from journal assignments in courses in art history, British poetry, and environmental studies, respectively.

## The Poetic Aim

Britton found that each year students progressed through the British public school system, they did less and less expressive and poetic writing. Perhaps this is doubly true as students go from high school to college in America. Although

Britton found that 17% of the writing in his research was poetic, my sample contains only three assignments whose dominant aim is poetic: a play monologue in an introduction to theater course, an imaginative description of a natural setting in a nature literature course, and a retelling of an ancient myth in a Western humanities course.

Beginning with Janet Emig's (1971) *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, researchers who have investigated student writing habits in school and out of school have found that in their self-sponsored writing, students are more likely to write for expressive and poetic aims. WAC theorists such as James Moffett (1968) and Art Young (1982) argue, in Young's words, that "the creative impulse is central to the development, understanding, and application of knowledge" (p. 78) Both Moffett and Young see creative writing as a valuable way for students to make connections with disciplinary content. They would argue that the students who write a monologue in the introduction to theater course or an ancient myth in the Western humanities course gain a new appreciation of those forms. Moffett and Young would view the lack of poetic writing in my sample as once again speaking to the limited uses teachers make of writing.

## The Audiences for Writing

Both Britton and Applebee found that most of the assignments they collected were written for the teacher, most commonly the teacher-as-examiner. Eighty-six percent of Britton's samples were written for the teacher, and in 48% of those the teacher played the role of examiner. In Applebee's study, 55% of school writing was directed at the teacher-as-examiner. As Table 2 indicates, the percentages in my study are similar to Britton's and Applebee's. In 83% of the assignments, the teacher is the audience for student writing.

Just as I was curious if upper-level courses in my research require less informative writing than freshman surveys courses, I wondered if students write for audiences beyond the teacher—and especially the teacher-as-examiner—as they move from introductory courses to upper-level courses in their major. I speculated that the junior and senior-level courses in my sample would

require students to write in disciplinary genres aimed at a wider readership than just the instructor; for example, readers of disciplinary journals or grant committees. But just as

informative writing dominates at all levels of instruction in my study, the dominant audience for the assignments at all levels of instruction is "Student to Examiner." In the following discussion I look more closely at each audience category.

| Audience | Number of Assignments | Percentage of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Student to Examiner | 542 | 69 |
| Student to Instructor (General) | 112 | 14 |
| Self | 25 | 3 |
| Peers | 50 | 6 |
| Wider Audience: Informed | 37 | 5 |
| Wider Audience: Novice | 13 | 2 |
| Wider Audience: Generalized Reader | 8 | 1 |

**Table 2:** Distribution of the Audiences for Writing

## Student to Examiner

Coding assignments to the teacher as examiner wasn't difficult: nearly one out of every three assignments is directed to a stated audience of the teacher-as-examiner. The 29% of assignments that fall into this category roughly coincide with the percentage of assignments that are short-answer and essay exams. This prevalence of the stated audience of Student to Examiner was true of both the introductory survey courses as well as senior seminars. Although classroom observation may have revealed instructors acting as a "coach" or engaging in a dialogue with students before the exams or in their response to the exams, thus complicating this category, in most cases the assignment description revealed that the instructor was looking for a "correct" answer.

## Student to Instructor (General)

In most of the assignments I placed in the "Student to Instructor (General)" category, there's evidence of a dialogue between instructor and student. Assignments that I placed in this category are often done in stages, with the instructor collecting and commenting on a draft of the essay. The instructors that comment on drafts appear to be trying to establish a dialogue with students that place them in a "coaching" rather than an "examining" role. This passage from a political science assignment is representative:

> The writing assignments are designed to assist you in developing your writing skills. For the term paper listed in your syllabus, you will first submit a draft to me. I will review your essay and suggest ways to improve the argument and style. These comments will raise questions, suggest changes, and provide you with a valuable resource for revising your material for the final draft. You will then submit both the original draft and the final paper.

Some of the assignments with the audience of Student to Instructor (General) are ungraded. For example, a few of the instructors in my research ask students to do a brief "freewrite" the first week of class, with students discussing their goals and hopes for the course. In one of these freewrites, a computer programming instructor asks students to write a letter about themselves in order to help him get a sense of his students as learners: "Tell me of your strengths, weaknesses, goals, and fears. Discuss your worlds and how your roles in those worlds might affect your performance in class." The goal of this assignment, according to the explanation in the assignment description, is to help the instructor modify the course to meet the students' needs. It's important to stress, however, that assignments like these are rare in my collection.

## Self as Audience

In my study, there are only two general types of assignments written for the audience of the "self": a self-assessment written at the beginning or end of the course, or an assignment that requires students to relate the content of the course to their own lives. An "Assessment of Learning Reflection Memo" for a business writing course is an example of an assignment from the first category. In this memo, stu-

dents write an ungraded self-assessment in which they are asked to reflect on how the course has improved their professional development. A self-evaluation assignment from an environmental studies course also requires this kind of reflection on self. As the instructor writes in his description of the assignment: "This is your education, you must be an active participant in it, and it is only you who can determine its value to you, through self-evaluation and reflection."

An example of the second type of writing for the self comes from an anthropology course. Students compare their diet to that of a caveman, partly to "analyze the nutritional quality of the diet of a hunter gatherer," and partly to "analyze the nutritional quality of your own diet" and "give you a broader perspective on the relative quality of your own diet." These are the kind of assignments that Fulwiler (1982) feels can "personalizing knowledge" (p. 4) and "represent our experience to our own understanding" (x). In the courses I surveyed students were not often called upon to relate course content to personal experiences and interests.

## Peer Audience

In both Britton's and Applebee's research, writing to peers was negligible. Considering the results of previous studies, the fact that 6% of the assignments I collected have the stated or implied audience of peers is significant. Although this percentage isn't necessarily impressive compared to the number of assignments written for an instructor audience, it certainly isn't negligible.

It's not surprising that courses that use what Paulo Freire (1970) disparagingly refers to as the "banking" method, where instructors "deposit" information to students through lectures and then test them for the information on exams, rarely require writing to peer audiences. It seems that instructors who require writing to a peer audience do so in order to take the emphasis off of the "teacher-as-examiner." In an American history course, for example, students write a series of research essays that have to be "credible to both peers and instructors." The culmination of the essays is an in-class presentation where students explain the results of their research to peers. A number of instructors use electronic bulletin board "journals" as a space for writing to peers, and this emphasis on writing to peers is reinforced by assignment sheets that

described these journals, as one British literature instructor says, as "a conversation in writing."

## Wider Audience

In sharp contrast to assignments written to the teacher-as-examiner, assignments written to a wider audience almost always provide students with a rhetorical situation and a genre. This is especially true of assignments in the Wider Audience: Informed category. Some of the audiences students write for in this category are company CEOs, Democratic Party organizers, and readers of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Usually these rhetorical situations mirror the kind of writing students will encounter in the workplace. For example, the management course assignment that asks students to "provide group recommendations as if you were a consulting team offering suggestions on how to improve management practices," and the finance course assignment that instructs students to "assume that you are just hired as a CFO for a major corporation. The CEO would like you to review some of the major financial decisions for the company."

The majority of assignments written to audiences like company CEOs or readers of academic journals introduce students to disciplinary and professional writing by requiring them to write in specific genres. Many of the assignments in the Wider Audience: Informed category are professional genres like résumés, application letters, memos, and feasibility reports. Rather than simply summarizing articles for the sake of displaying knowledge to a teacher-as-examiner, these assignments ask students to summarize for a specific audience, in a specific genre.

## Writing Genres: An Overview

Previous large-scale studies of the genres assigned in courses across the curriculum—most notably surveys by Charlene Eblen (1983) and Jennette Harris and Christine Hult (1985) of a single university and Brent Bridgeman and Sybil Carlson (1984) of thirty-six institutions—have shown that instructors claim to assign a variety of genres, both academic and professional. Despite this variety, however, these surveys also reveal a dominance of two genres: the short-answer exam and the term paper. The most common writing task among the teachers Eblen surveyed was the essay test,

which made up 55% of the assignments. The "research paper" was second, at 26%. In Harris and Hult's survey, the research paper made up 27% of assigned writing, and the essay exam accounted for 62%. Bridgeman and Carlson also found that despite the variety of genres teachers claim to assign, the research paper and the exam made up a significant majority of all assigned writing.

My results are similar to previous studies in that a variety of genres are assigned, as Table 3 indicates. Besides the well-known genres of exams, research papers, journals, abstracts, and lab reports, there are summary/responses, feasibility reports, reviews, and business letters. In the category of "other," there is an ethnography, a real estate contract, a press release, a landfill report, and a business plan, to name a few genres.

Despite the apparent variety of genres, however, nearly a quarter of the instructors in my research assign short-answer exams—usually a mid-term and final exam. For the majority of these instructors, the exam is the only assigned writing. In the following discussion, I look more closely at the three most popular genres: short-answer exams, journals, and term papers.

## Short-Answer Exams

In my discussion of aims and audiences, I've already mentioned some of the features that are typical of short-answer exams across disciplines: questions that require memorization and recall of facts, instructors in the role of teacher-as-examiner looking for "correct" answers, and an emphasis on covering material rather than engaging in critical thinking or problem solving. Essay exams—although still emphasizing the role of teacher-as-examiner—are more apt to challenge students to go beyond regurgitation of lecture and textbook material, and ask them to make comparisons, evaluations, and arguments. In their survey, Harris and Hult (1985) found that the essay exam was common. Only 1% of all "testing" in my sample, however, is in the form of essay exams. Most exams consist of short-answer questions that require only a few sentences of explanation.

| Genre | Number of Assignments | Percentage of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Short-Answer Exam | 184 | 23 |
| Journal | 106 | 13 |
| Term Paper | 50 | 6 |
| Summary/Response | 29 | 4 |
| Lab Report | 29 | 4 |
| Abstract | 16 | 2 |
| Review | 15 | 2 |
| Essay Exam | 11 | 1 |
| Feasibility Report | 7 | 1 |
| Self-Evaluation | 7 | 1 |
| Business Memo | 6 | 1 |
| Business Letter | 6 | 1 |
| Other | 22 | 3 |
| No Recognizable Genre | 300 | 38 |

**Table 3:** Distribution of Genres

One pattern I noticed in both the short-answer and essay exams is the extraordinarily broad scope of questions that are supposed to be answered in a few sentences or—in the case of in-class essays—an hour or less. This fifty-minute American history exam is representative:

> Write on one of the following two questions:
>
> 1) It is argued by some that the Soviet-American Cold War from 1947 through 1991 was inevitable given the results of World War II and the ideological conflict between the two countries. Evaluate that argument.
>
> 2) Discuss the impact of American liberal democratic values on American national security policy during the Cold War.

In another American history course, students have an hour to answer four in-class exam questions, each of which could be the subject of a dissertation in history. The essays ask students to:

> Discuss the evolution of the American Republic from 1782-1789.

> Discuss the ratification of the Constitution and the forces the promoted its adoption.
>
> Discuss the expansion of the United States from 1800-1850.
>
> Discuss the developments and events that led to America's Civil War.

The short answer exam questions from a global environment course also present students with an overwhelming task. In only a few sentences, students need to explain, "What is the environment?" "How does science work?" and "What is economics?" Perhaps this is one reason the word "exam" has negative connotations for most students—a fact that a gothic literature instructor implies when he says of exams in his course: "We inflict two."

## Journals

Like Harris and Hult (1985), I found that students were frequently asked to write in journals. Of course, there are different types of journals written for different purposes, as an environmental studies instructor mentions in a journal assignment sheet:

> A learning log is more than a personal journal or documentation of work done, it is a tool to help you integrate your thoughts on your course work, readings, research efforts, and personal experiences. This will hopefully help you clarify your ideas and future goals through synthesizing your background.

Although there are no "personal" journals in my collection, in the sense of journaling as diary writing or freewriting, most of the journal assignments are informal and exploratory, as I mentioned in my analysis of assignments written for an exploratory aim. Journals are more or less the only genre in my research that allow students to test ideas and take risks, to use personal experience, and to respond to peers. As Ann Berthoff (1987) says, "Journals provide students with the opportunity to think, wonder, speculate, question, and doubt—in their own terms and in their own language—without fear of penalty for not having a right answer" (p. 217).

Because I associated journals with first-year writing courses before I began this study, I was surprised to find that 13% of the assignments in my sample are journals. Although this might not seem like a significant amount, with the exception of Harris and Hult (1985), prior surveys of college writing reported very little use of journals. Perhaps the influence of WAC pedagogy is reflected in this increase. It seems as though technology could also play a role in how common journals are, since over half of the journals in my research are assigned for electronic bulletin boards or class listservs.

## Term Papers

Richard Larson (1982) argues that the "term paper" or "research paper" cannot be classified as a genre, since research writing varies to such a degree from discipline to discipline. I agree with Larson that's it's difficult to classify research writing, and to some extent I am using the label "term paper" artificially, as a convenient way to classify a broad range of research writing. However, I also found that fifty assignments in my research are given the name "Term Paper" or "Research Paper" by instructors, and that these assignments have similar features in terms of purpose, audience, and breadth. Or rather, that there seemed to be two categories of research papers.

A useful classification for my analysis of the research papers in my study comes from Robert Davis and Mark Shadle. Davis and Shadle (2000) divide research papers into two major categories: "modernist" and "alternative." The modernist research paper is the "traditional" research paper. It's informative in aim, logical, thesis-driven, and objective. Modernist research papers value "detachment, expertise, and certainty" (p. 417). The purpose of a modernist research paper is "not making knowledge so much as reporting the known" (p. 423). A research paper from a psychology course contains many of the features Davis and Shadle would call "modernist":

> Research Paper Guidelines
>
> Purpose: The purpose of this project is for the student to 1) become familiar with a particular area of research activity in the field of human development, 2) by learning referencing techniques for this discipline, 3) gleaning information from the primary psychological literature, 4)

summarizing this information clearly in a written report, and 5) practicing the format of scientific writing in this discipline.

Format: The format of the paper is a term paper about research, not an original research report. Each paper presents a summary of a single article.

Evaluation: The grade is based on content and form, including:

Organization of the paper as a whole and of each section, adequacy of the summaries and interpretations of literature, the explication of controversial issues when appropriate, your conclusions and defense of your conclusions, grammar, punctuation, neatness, listing and citing of bibliographic references.

The grade will be lowered ten points for each of the following:

errors in citation format
errors in reference format
failure to use APA format (title page, margins, running head, page header, font, spacing, left justification)
excessive spelling, grammatical or punctuation errors
inaccurate information

This is a "term paper," not an "original research report": students "glean" and "summarize" information. The evaluation criteria are focused mostly on the correctness of information, citations, and grammar.

Perhaps a religious studies instructor from my research provides the best description of the way alternative research writing differs from the modernist term paper. In a handout on writing essays, this instructor writes:

> Remember when you were in grade six and your teacher told you to write a report on such and such or so and so, and you went to the library, opened up the encyclopedia, and tried to put the information into your own words? You should be past that now. A university essay is not a standard report that uses a few more books!

Alternative research writing values the creation of new knowledge, and not just "amassing of brute facts," in Robert Connors' words (1997).

Compositionists from Larson to Davis and Shadle have bemoaned the staying power of the traditional term paper, so I fully expected that the majority of term papers in my research would fit Davis and Shadle's modernist category. I was surprised to find that the religious studies instructor is right, as far as the research writing in my collection: the majority of research and term papers are closer in spirit to alternative than modernist research writing. Take, for example this research project from a sociology course:

> Final Projects
>
> There are two options for the final project, individual projects that deepen your understanding of the social movement you have been analyzing in your class papers, and collective projects that examine a new case to broaden your understanding of the theoretical questions we have examined. Individuals who choose the first option will be expected to write a longer research paper tying together the shorter exploratory papers into a tighter argument and adding to it by examining more documents or more secondary literature.
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> Further tips:
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> There are many ways to write a sociology paper. Judging from your papers this semester, all of you have an intuitive grasp of the elements of a good social science project. For those of you who would like a checklist, the following describes the elements sociologists try to incorporate into their papers:
>
> 1. A puzzle or question and the context that makes it theoretically interesting.
>
> 2. Review of two general sociological theories.
>
> 3. Discussion of at least two opposing topical explanations presented by area specialists you locate through your own library research on the movement.

4. The argument you plan to evaluate and how you will do so.

5. A conclusion in which you explain what further research would need to focus on, followed by a list of references

The goal of this research project is not to report the known, but to "deepen" and "broaden" the students' own understanding. Students begin with "a puzzle or a question." The form of the paper introduces students to disciplinary writing, which requires more than just amassing of facts.

The instructions on many of the term paper assignment sheets echo this sociology assignment's insistence on personal exploration and argument. A philosophy instructor tells students, "A genuine research paper grows out of a genuine question about something." In an assignment sheet for a British poetry research paper, the instructor writes: "Advocate your own interpretation in dialogue with others. Speak...in your own voice. I am looking for lively, precise, and incisive analyses that teach me something new about the works you discuss." This emphasis on voice and a personal connection to the topic means that in the term papers in my research, students can "bring their own knowledge, experiences, and linguistic resources into their learning and writing as they also work to learn academic genres," as Ann Herrington (2000) recommends.

## Conclusions

It's disheartening that the aims and audiences for writing in my college-level study conducted in the year 2002 are as limited as those in Britton's and in Applebee's studies of high schools conducted over twenty years ago. The great majority (84%) of the assignments are transactional. Nearly a quarter of the writing done in the courses I researched are informative, short-answer exams to the teacher-as-examiner. In the assignments I examined, students have almost no chance to use writing to explore their own ideas in deeply personal ways for an expressive aim, or to shape language creatively for poetic purposes: a situation WAC theorists and practitioners have been working against for the past twenty years.

My results, however, are not quite as bleak as Britton's and Applebee's. One piece of good news is that exploratory writing makes up a far larger percentage of the assignments in my study than it has in previous studies. Although the students in the courses I researched may not encounter expressive assignments—writing tasks that allow them to freewrite, brainstorm, and explore ideas with only the self as audience—they at least get to engage in a more public form of exploration, often to a peer audience in the form of journals. Another interesting finding from my study is the predominance of alternative research writing. Very few instructors in my study assigned traditional term papers, where students merely report on existing knowledge in a logical and linear fashion. More common research projects were ethnographies, business plans, position papers, and hypertext projects. Often the instructors who assign these alternative research projects, as well as the instructors who assign journals, are involved either directly or indirectly in WAC, which leads me to end on a final note of hope.

Although much of what I'd had to say about the assignments in my research has been a critique of the limited aims, audiences, and genres for writing, I noticed an encouraging pattern. The instructors in my research that assign the widest variety of writing, and that provide students with interesting and complex rhetorical situations rather than just the traditional lecture/exam format, are often teaching in writing-intensive disciplinary courses, or as part of a team-taught course with an English department faculty member. Many of the instructors who assign journals participate in WAC workshops or are part of a WAC-influenced series of First-Year seminars, and they often cite WAC theorists such as Toby Fulwiler and Art Young in their journal assignments. Although my research leads me to conclude that college students write for limited audiences and purposes, even as they progress through their majors, WAC has certainly had a positive influence on many of the instructors in my study. The prevalence of exploratory writing in the form of journals, the increase in writing to peer audiences, the dwindling influence of the traditional term paper—all point to the influence of WAC, and the importance for college writing of the WAC movement's continued growth.

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## Endnotes

[1]The Internet makes this kind of collection of a large amount of assignments expedient, but it's not without its own problems. Although the assignments I collected were not given voluntarily, as they were in similar studies of writing across disciplines, the fact that instructors published their assignments on the Internet means that they are aware of at least the possibility of a more public audience. Instructors who use class websites could be considered "early adopters" of technology, and it's possible that their assignments might be fuller or more explicitly laid out than the assignments of instructors who are not using websites. It's also likely that some instructors posted more formal assignments on the Internet and explained less formal, more exploratory or expressive assignments in class. Despite these problems inherent in my study, I feel that the advantage of studying a large sample of assignments that is not given voluntarily outweigh the disadvantages of collecting data from the Internet.

[2]This essay summarizes one chapter from my dissertation, "Assignments Across the Curriculum: A Study of Writing in the Disciplines," Florida State University, 2002. The broader project includes an analysis of the procedures, rationale, and evaluation criteria of the assignments, as well as interviews with selected instructors.

[3]Although informative writing is clearly dominant in the courses I examined, I'd hesitate to assert that expressive writing is close to non-existent in these courses. Many expressive

assignments are in-class freewrites that aren't presented on formal assignment sheets, so expressive writing may not be mentioned on a course description or syllabus. Classroom observation, had it been a part of my study, may have revealed more cases of expressive writing.