



The University of Denver Longitudinal Study of Undergraduate Writing

Original Team: Jennifer Campbell, Richard Colby, Kelli Custer (now Western CT U), Doug Hesse,* Eliana Schonberg (now Duke U), Rebekah Shultz-Colby, John Tiedemann

*Principal Investigator and Contact
Department of English | University of Denver |
Denver, CO 80211 USA
dhesse@du.edu | 1-309-287-8960

About the University of Denver

“A great private university dedicated to the public good.”
--*University Vision Statement.*

The University of Denver, the oldest independent university in the Rocky Mountain region (founded in 1864), enrolled about 11,600 students in fall 2010. Of these about 5,300 were undergraduates, with a first-year class of about 1250. 43% of first year students come from Colorado, the rest from 50 states and 52 countries. The Carnegie Foundation classifies DU, with 6,300 graduate students (over half) as R1 (research extensive). DU generally ranks in the top 100 among national universities. DU is a traditional residential campus of 125 acres with expansive green spaces and views of the nearby Rocky Mountains, located in a residential neighborhood southeast of downtown Denver.

Scope, Participants, Methods

From spring 2007 to spring 2011, we closely followed 61 undergraduates for their entire writing experiences at DU, having them completed a detailed survey each quarter (see below); interviewing them once a year (see below), with a key retrospective exit interview (see below), and, most ambitiously, having students upload to a database every piece of writing they did in their time at DU. In the end, we collected 9,975,867 writing words, an average of over 163,000 per writer (or conservatively over 400 pages). We coded 10,298 artifacts (about 177 per student) for length, genre/type, nature of source materials, and other features. We collected 60,000 data points through surveys and conducted over 300 hours of interviews, yielding 858,000 transcribed words. Our basic questions: How much writing did students do? Of what kind? How did this vary by discipline? Between general education and major courses? What writing processes did students follow? What did students know and believe about writing? Did any of this change over time?

From all first-year students enrolled in a spring required writing course, we randomly selected 130 whom we invited to participate in the study. 81 of them enrolled. From students in first-year seminars in fall 2009, we invited a second cohort of 38 students. In exchange for a \$75 honorarium paid each quarter (increased to \$95 in years 3 and 4), participants agreed to complete a quarterly questionnaire, upload writings, and be interviewed. About 75 students provided data for 7 or more quarters. In the end, 59 students completed all phases, with two more doing all but the exit interview.

Element 1: The Questionnaire

Each quarter, students completed a detailed online questionnaire that asked about the kinds of writing and writing instruction they were doing in each course that quarter. There were a few open-ended questions, but students mostly chose from options. Because of space limitations, we've not provided all choices. Write to Doug Hesse (see above) for the complete questionnaire.



- 1 What is your major?
- 2 How many credits have you earned at DU?
- 3 How would you characterize yourself as a writer at this point?
- 4 Are you studying abroad this quarter?
- 5 If you're studying abroad, in what country? (Write "DNA" if this does not apply.)
- 6 Compared to the last quarter, how much writing have you been assigned for courses this quarter?
- 7 Compared to writing you were assigned last year at DU, are you doing the same types of writing this quarter? (Types of writing might include things like research papers, lab reports, journals, policy briefs, and so on; types of media such as web pages, blogs, PowerPoints, wikis, or so on.)
- 8 If you're doing any new types of assignments, please describe them.
- 9 Following are several types of writing. Which types will you have done for your classes this quarter? Check all that apply.
- 10 About how many hours per week do you spend writing for your courses? (Estimate the total for all courses.)
- 11 About how many hours per week do you spend doing assigned reading for your courses? (Estimate the total for all courses.)
- 12 Think for a moment about the research and writing skills you have learned at DU. Which of these research and writing skills are you using in your current classes? (Select all that apply)
- 13 How important do you think writing will be in your career after graduation?
- 14 How important do you think writing will be in your personal and public life (life outside of work) after graduation?
- 15 What kinds of non-required writing have you done recently (writing that you do in your own time, for personal interest, writing for an group, etc.)? Please check all that apply.
- 16 About how many hours per week do you spend doing writing that isn't required, that you do because it interests or engages you (creative writing, email, Facebook, myspace, blogs, fiction or poetry, keeping a journal, writing for a group, etc.)?
- 17 About how many hours per week do you spend doing non-required reading (newspapers, magazines, novels or other books, blogs, and other sites on the Internet, etc.)?
- 18 About what percentage of your course grades in the courses you take for your major do you estimate is determined by writing?
- 19 About what percentage of your grade in your non-major courses (Foundations, Core, Elective, etc) do you estimate is determined by writing?
- 20 If you're taking a Writing Intensive Core Course or ASEM this quarter, please type the name of that class (Please write in the following format or as close to it as you can, for example, "Political Science 2251: Latin American Politics." Thanks!) If you're not taking a Writing Intensive Core Course, please type "no":
- 21 What has been the most enjoyable writing you've done this quarter? Why?
- 22 What has been the least enjoyable writing you've done this quarter? Why?
- 23 What has been the most personally beneficial writing you've done this quarter? (For example, what writing experience has taught you the most?) Why?
- 24 Please tell us anything else you'd like about your writing or about this questionnaire.
- 25 Choose one specific class you're taking this quarter. What is the number and name of that course? Please write in the following format or as close to it as you can: for example, "Political Science 2251: Latin American Politics."
- 26 Does this course require writing (papers, written exams, online discussions, lab reports, journals, etc.)? If "no," then answer "does not apply" to the next eight questions until you get to the next course.
- 27 About how many individual writing assignments will you have in this course?
- 28 About how many total pages of writing are required in this course?
- 29 Which of the following types of writing will you be doing in this course? Check all that apply.
- 30 About how much of the writing in this course requires you to write about readings or use readings in your writing? Such assignments might involve things like summarizing, analyzing, synthesizing, responding to, or interpreting published articles, books, online sources, and so on.
- 31 About how much of the writing in this course requires you to writing about quantitative data—information that comes in the form of numbers or statistics? Such assignments might include reporting lab findings or survey results, explaining statistical information, discussing mathematical computations, analyzing tables, and so on.
- 32 About how much of the writing in this course requires you to write about qualitative information? Examples could include conducting or writing about interviews, doing first-hand observations of events or groups of people, systematically analyzing TV shows, music, films, and so on?
- 33 In this class, will you have the opportunity to revise your writing after feedback from your instructor?
- 34 In this class, how much class time is spent on matters related to writing (discussing assignments, generating ideas, doing peer response, talking about research strategies or revisions, reading other students' papers, etc.)?

Element 2: Uploaded Writings

We asked students to upload a copy of every piece of writing that they did for every class, every quarter. Ideally, this meant every paper, formal and informal; every course posting; every quiz, exam, lab report; writing-to-learn activity, PowerPoint slide, and so on. We invited them, further, to upload any self-sponsored (non-assigned) writing they could. We used an existing campus portfolio site to gather student writings, making frequent reminders that students upload their writings. Once a year, then, we coded the writing using the following coding guide.

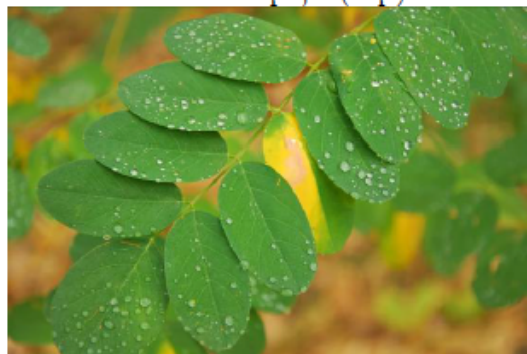
Each submitted artifact will receive up to six codings: for length, genre, predominant sources, purpose, and, optionally, secondary sources and process. So, therefore, Paper 1 might be coded as A7, B2, C2, D2, E4; Paper 2 as A1, B3, C1, E2 and so on.

A. Length (Estimate. Round.)

1. About 1 page or less (~300 words)
2. About 2-4 pages (~600-1200 words)
3. About 5-7 pages (~1500-2100 words)
4. About 8-11 pages (~2400-3300 words)
5. About 12-15 pages (~3600-4500 words)
6. About 16-20 pages (~4800-6000 words)
7. About 21-25 pages (~6300-7500 words)
8. More than 25 pages (~7500 words)

B. Genre

1. "Traditional" essays or papers; essayistic writing (paragraphs of connected prose)
 - Analyses, syntheses, arguments, expositions, responses
 - Research papers
 - Position Papers
 - Letters of any substantial length (~ > a page); "public" letters ("to the editor")
2. Conventionalized reports
 - Lab reports
 - Clinical reports
 - Interview reports
 - Business plans
3. Writing to test content knowledge or practical coverage
 - Essay Exams
 - Short-answer quizzes
 - Reading or lecture summaries
4. Writing tasks to facilitate student learning, exploration, or discussion.
 - Lecture notes
 - Journal or notebook
 - Informal in-class writing
 - Class forum posts (discussion board, listserv, class emails)
 - Answers to reading questions or discussion questions
5. Writing tasks to support research or projects.
 - Outlines
 - Proposal or prospectus
 - Abstract or précis
 - Annotated Bibliography
 - Survey or interview questions
 - Research protocols
 - Ethnographic or case notes
 - Interview notes
6. Assigned Multi-media projects or texts
 - PowerPoint
 - Web site or web page
 - Podcast or other audio project (script)



Video project

Artwork, Poster, brochure, flyer, etc.

7. Assigned Creative works (short stories, plays, poems, novels)
8. Self-sponsored works, creative and otherwise
 - Short stories, plays, poems, novels, artwork
 - Journals, diaries, FaceBook, MySpace, Blogs, Podcasts, Videos; Writings related to a club or organization; f
 - Submissions to publications (both print and digital)
9. Correspondence not covered above (cover letters; memos; letters to a single/focused recipient; short "public" letters.)
10. Computer coding or documents in other symbolic forms (algebra, calculus, music, etc.)
11. Writing in language other than English
12. Other

C. Predominant source materials

1. Reading (use of primary or secondary sources)
2. Empirical data (quantitative information, as from measures, questionnaires, etc.)
3. Qualitative data (from firsthand observations, interviews)



4. Experience or opinion
5. Other artifacts (films, art, sound recordings)
6. Other or cannot be determined

D. Secondary source materials

1. Reading (use of primary or secondary sources)
2. Empirical data (quantitative information, as from measures, questionnaires, etc.)
3. Qualitative data (from firsthand observations, interviews)
4. Experience or opinion
5. Other artifacts (films, art, sound recordings)
6. Other or cannot be determined
7. No report.

E. Apparent main purpose of the writing

1. Report, describe, summarize, or synthesize information, artifact(s), or reading(s)
2. Interpret, analyze, or apply information, artifact(s), or reading(s)
3. Respond to information, experience, artifacts, readings. (Share opinion; evaluate based on experience)
4. Argue or defend a position
5. Reflect on quality or features of one's own work.
6. Cannot be determined

F. Process related (optional)

1. Collaborative Project
2. Early draft
3. Revision
4. No report (writing fits none of these categories)

Element 3: The Interviews

We interviewed all participants annually. Following are the basic interview questions. At the end of the study, we asked students to review all their uploaded writings and prepare six questions before the interview.

1. You've been in college X years now. Are you more satisfied with the writing you've done recently than when you began college or less satisfied? Why?
2. When you encounter a writing assignment, what are the most important points, strategies, or processes that you keep in mind? Where do you think you learned them? Are there any things that you used to do or think that you no longer do?
3. In your past year at DU, have you done any new types of writing? If so, what are they?
4. What kinds of writing do you most like to do? Can you think of a specific example?
5. Why do you enjoy these types of writing? What made the example you cited enjoyable?
6. Please tell me about the kinds of writing you least like to do. Can you think of a specific example?
7. What makes those kinds of writing unenjoyable? What made the sample you cited unenjoyable?
8. Think of the most recent paper that you wrote. What was the assignment? What was your process for writing that paper?
9. Was that process typical of the way you write other kinds of papers? [Get the student to elaborate on short answers.]
10. Has there been an individual who has been particularly helpful to your development as a writer in the past year? [This can be a professor, a classmate, a friend, or whoever.] What has made that person helpful?
11. Have you taken a writing intensive core course? Please tell me about the writing in that course. [What were the assignments? What kinds of instruction did you receive about writing? Did you have a chance to revise your work? Was the writing in this class similar to or different from writing you've done in other courses? What were your overall impressions of the course?]
12. We'd now like to ask you about writing in just one of your current classes. Think of a course you're taking right now that includes writing.
13. What kind of writing are you doing for this class? [Prompt students to talk about numbers of assignments, kinds of assignments, their process, what each professor seems to value, and so on.]
14. What kinds of writing do you do for your major? How does this compare to writing you've done in your nonmajor courses? [Follow up: have you done an internship or service-learning project that included writing?]
15. Please tell me about any writing you do in your free time. [Prompt students to elaborate on emails, texting, blogging, social media, writing for an organization (sorority, club) etc.]
16. What kind of reading do you do in your free time?
17. How do you know when writing is good? (either your own or other people's)
18. What kind of writing do you imagine yourself doing between now and graduation? How about after graduation?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your writing or your writing experiences at DU?

Exit Interview

Dear [First Name],

You're nearing graduation, so we'd like to interview you a final time for the longitudinal study of writing at DU. We deeply appreciate your participating in this study over the years. Your final interview will be a little different than the previous ones. In addition to some familiar interview questions, we'll ask you to look back at the writing that you have uploaded throughout the study. (Amy will send you directions on how to see the writings you've uploaded to Portfolio.) Before your final interview, we would like for you to look back at your writing and consider six questions.

1. What was your favorite piece of writing that you uploaded? Why?
2. What was your least favorite piece of writing that you uploaded? Why?
3. What have been the three or four most valuable writing experiences you have had? Why? These can be entire courses, specific assignments, particular lessons, or a combination.
4. Take a moment to look at a very early piece that you uploaded, during your first year. Four years later, how do you feel about the level of your writing ability in that piece?
5. Select a piece that you think best represents your ability as a writer. Imagine that this is a piece that you would present to a future employer or on a graduate school application. Briefly explain why this piece best represents your writing abilities.
6. Do the writings in the portfolio accurately represent the amount and kinds of writing you did here at DU? Briefly explain any differences.

We'd like you to prepare a brief statement or reflection regarding the portfolio of writings that you have uploaded. You can bring a formal written statement or notes that you can refer to during the interview. As you're considering your responses to the questions above, concentrate on those writings that you uploaded to the portfolio, whether they were lab reports, essays, marketing analyses, computer coding, or poems.

Thanks again for your participation! We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

