

Profiles of First-year Writing

Roger Graves, Director, Writing Across the Curriculum, University of Alberta

Overview of this session

- ▶ What are students asked to write, particularly in the first year of post-secondary education?
- ▶ How can individual instructors across the disciplines help them perform better as writers?
- ▶ How can institutions structure their writing resources to support students as they develop as academic writers?



Canadian context: a primer

- WAC programs that support faculty members are few and far between; WAC programs more commonly support students (“How to write a psychology paper” workshops for students)
- Research: writing “inventories” to describe how departments use writing now (baseline data) and to inform discussions of how to expand, direct, or improve the use of writing for learning



Previous study

- Graves, R., Hyland, T. & B. Samuels (2010). Undergraduate Writing Assignments: An Analysis of Syllabi at One Canadian College. *Written Communication* 27 (3): 293-317.
- This study collected 485 assignments from 179 syllabi at a small liberal arts college in Ontario
- We have continued this work to include six (6) follow-up studies in Alberta:
 - Faculties of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Physical Education and Recreation;
 - Political Science department; and a
 - Community Service-Learning program.



Students write a lot

	Number of writing assignments	Percent of courses with writing assignments
Liberal Arts	485	79%
Nursing	157	86%
Political Science	198	100%
Geography	186	82%
Service Learning	163	100%



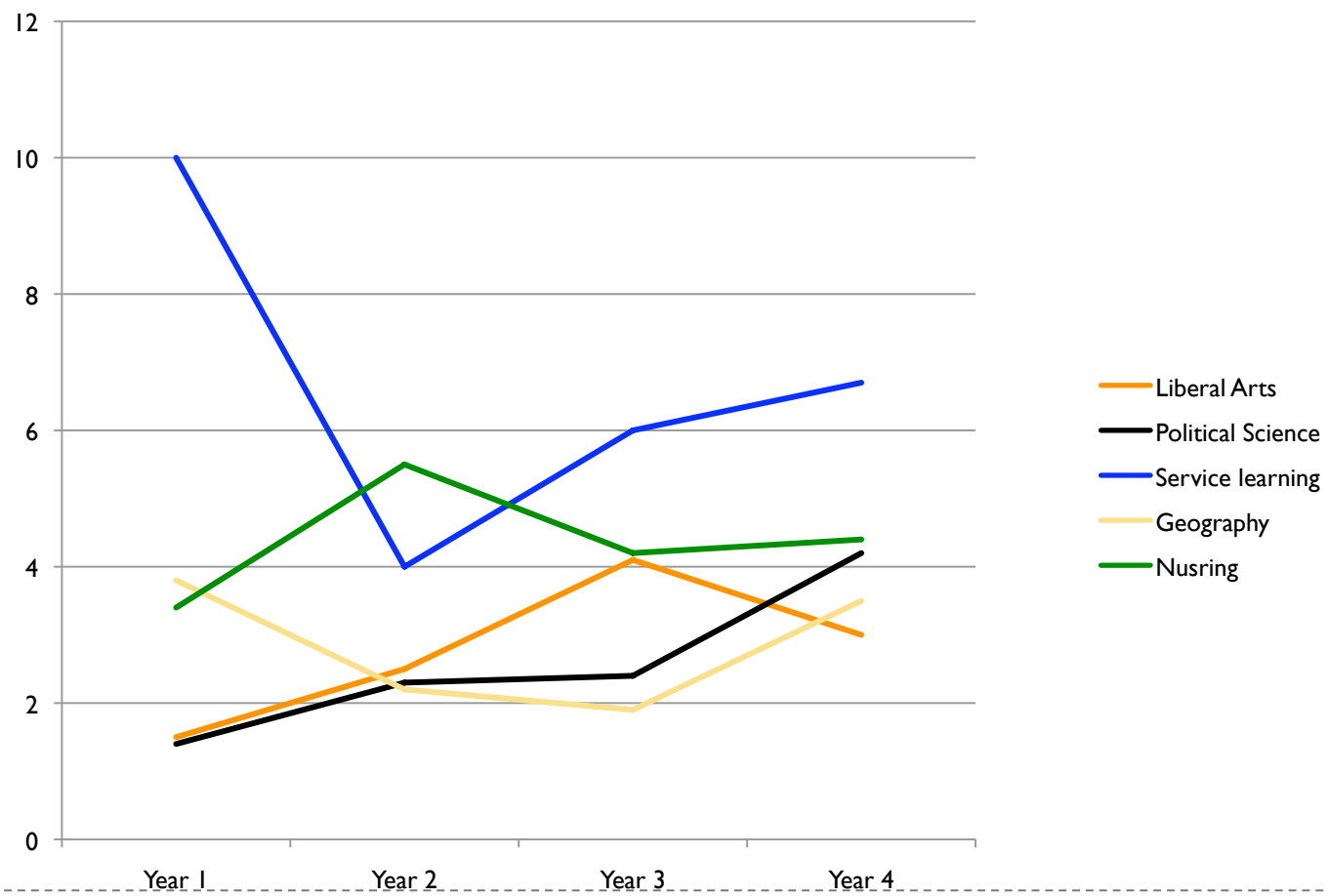
Number of assignments

	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
Year 1	34/1.5	7/1.4	42/10	15/3.8	17/3.4
Year 2	225/2.5	39/2.3	12/4	40/2.2	33/5.5
Year 3	189/4.1	40/2.4	35/6	24/1.85	50/4.2
Year 4	56/3.0	112/4.2	74/6.7	107/3.5	57/4.4

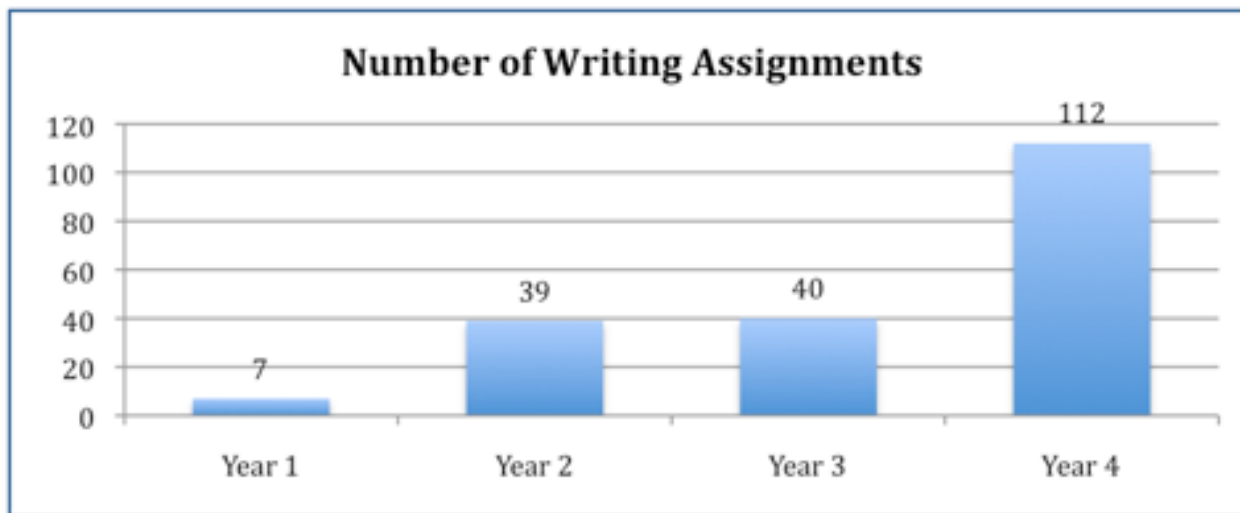
First number is total number of assignments.
Second number is average number of assignments per course.



Number of assignments: trendlines



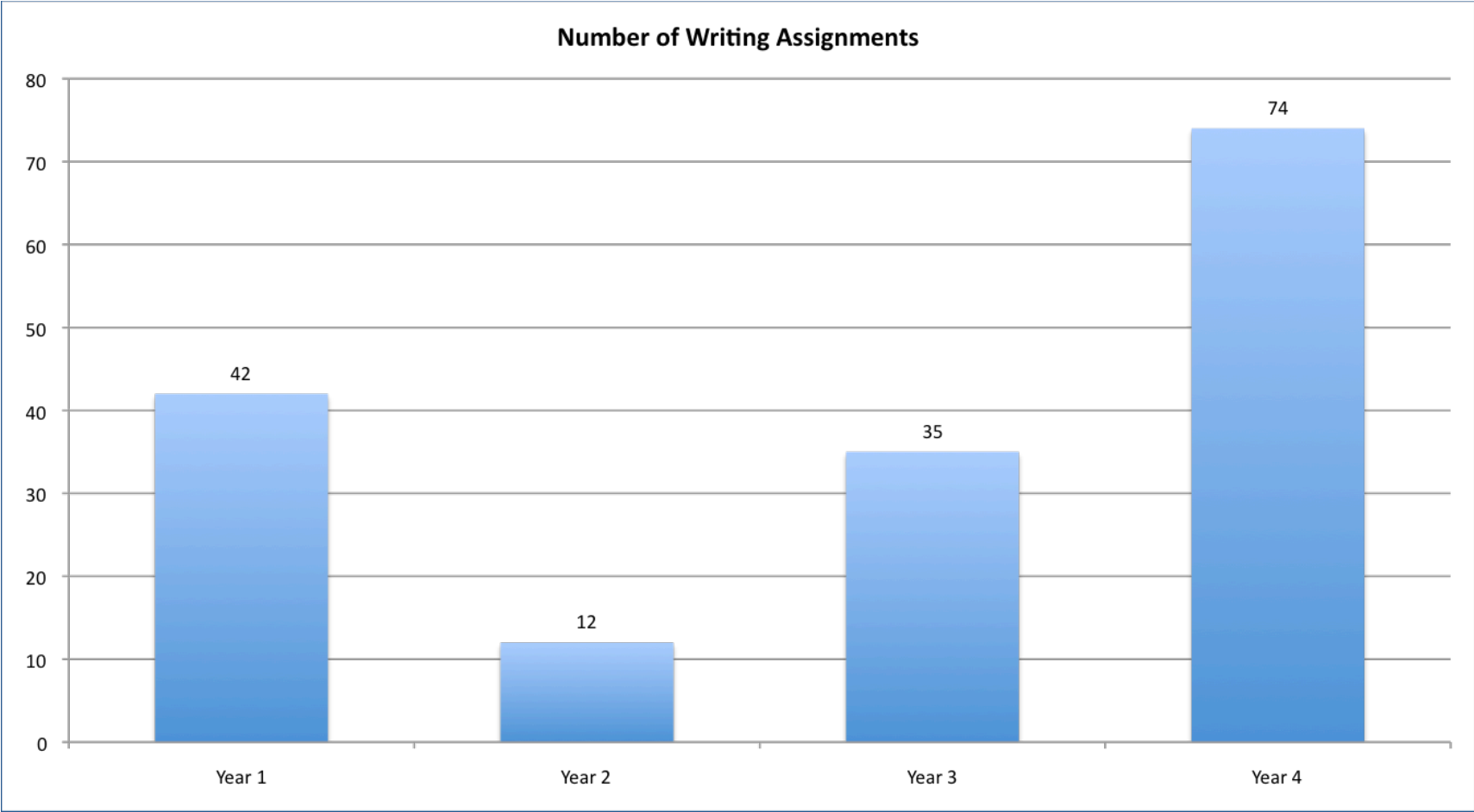
Number: Political Science



	No. Courses	Avg. No. Assign.
1	5	1.4
2	17	2.3
3	17	2.4
4	27	4.2
Total	66	



CSL: Number of Assignments



Number of assignments: Physical Education & Recreation

Year	Total no. of courses	Total no. of assignments	% of courses with writing assignments	Avg. no. of assigns. per course
1	38	66	71%	2.5
2	16	46	88%	3.2
3	27	67	82%	2.6
4	19	87	100%	4.6



Genres vary considerably

	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
Papers	20	32	22	25	18
Reports	18			30	12
Essay	27	21		12	
Summary					
Self-evaluation					24
Handouts					11
Presentation		15	17	13	
Journal			10		

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



Genres: Physical Education

Genres assigned more often in **upper years** than lower years (1, 2):

- summary;
- proposal;
- report; and
- critical thinking problems.

Genres assigned more often in **lower years** than upper years (3, 4):

- logs (e.g., reading logs);
- lab reports;
- lesson plans;
- journals;
- handouts; and
- drafts.



Genres: Nursing

Assignment	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Self Evaluation	38	4	11	8	15
Paper	29	4	2	14	9
Handout	17	2	6	7	2
Personal Goals	12	2	2	5	3
Journal	12	0	3	4	5
Report	12	0	2	1	9
Peer Evaluation	11	2	2	4	3
Group Email	11	2	2	5	2
Presentation	8	1	2	2	3
Outline	3	0	0	0	3
Annot. Biblio.	2	0	1	0	1
Proposal	1	0	0	0	1
Field Notes	1	0	0	0	1
Totals	157	17	33	50	57

Genres: Physical Ed. & Rec.

Assignment	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
1. Presentation/ Demonstration	24.2	15.2	15.0	25.2
2. Paper	15.2	10.8	10.4	24.1
3. Assignment	19.7	10.8	7.4	4.6
4. Log	12.1	4.3	1.5	3.5
5. Summary	1.5	2.2	7.4	4.6
6. Lab Report	4.5	6.5	0	3.5
7. Proposal	0	2.2	3.0	5.7
8. Lesson Plan	4.5	2.2	1.5	2.3
9. Analysis	1.5	4.3	3.0	2.3
10. Outline	4.5	0	3.0	2.3
11. Report	1.5	2.2	1.5	3.4
12. Practice Plan	0	6.5	3.0	0
13. Journal	3.0	2.2	1.5	1.1
14. Handout	3.0	0	0	0
15. Annotated Bibliography	0	0	0	2.3

Genre in CSL: First year assignments

Assignments	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Paper	3.7%	2.5%	4.9%	10.4%
Presentation	1.8%	0.6%	4.2%	10.4%
Journal	1.8%	2.5%	3.0%	3.0%
Essay	3.0%	0	0.6%	2.5%
Outline	2.5%	0	0.6%	1.8%
Draft	3.7%	0	1.3%	0
Field Report	1.3%	0	1.3%	2.5%
Online Discussion (blog)	1.8%	0	0.6%	1.8%
Email	0.6%	0.6%	1.3%	1.3%
Proposal	0.6%	0.6%	0	1.8%
Field Project	0	0	1.3%	1.8%
A/V	0	0	1.8%	1.3%
Bibliography	1.8%	0	0	0.6%
Other	0	0	0	1.8%
Abstract	0.6%	0	0	1.3%
Field Notes	1.3%	0	0	0
Handout	0.6%	0	0	0.6%
Work Log	0	0.6%	0	0.6%
Lesson Plan	0	0	0.6%	0.6%
Review	0	0	0	1.8%
Mind Map	0.6%	0	0	0




Political science: Genres

Assignment	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Paper	63	5	16	12	30
Essay	42	1	9	10	22
Presentation	30	0	0	5	25
Proposal	13	0	2	2	9
Draft	8	0	1	2	5
Handout	8	0	0	2	6
Journal	7	0	4	1	2
Outline	5	0	1	0	4
Book Review	5	0	1	3	1
Other	4	0	2	0	2
Bibliography	3	0	2	0	1
Peer Evaluation	3	0	0	1	2
Film Review	2	0	0	2	0
Online Discussion (blog)	1	0	0	0	1
Field Report	1	0	1	0	0
Business Letter	1	1	0	0	0
Abstract	1	0	0	0	1
Self Evaluation	1	0	0	0	1
Total	198	7	39	40	112



Length of writing assignments



Length in pages	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
under 2	31	5	16	18	0
2 - 4	26	27	39	34	74
5 - 6	12	15	14	19	2
7 - 10	17	23	14	18	18
11 - 12	8	11	6	5	0
13 +	6	19	11	6	6

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.

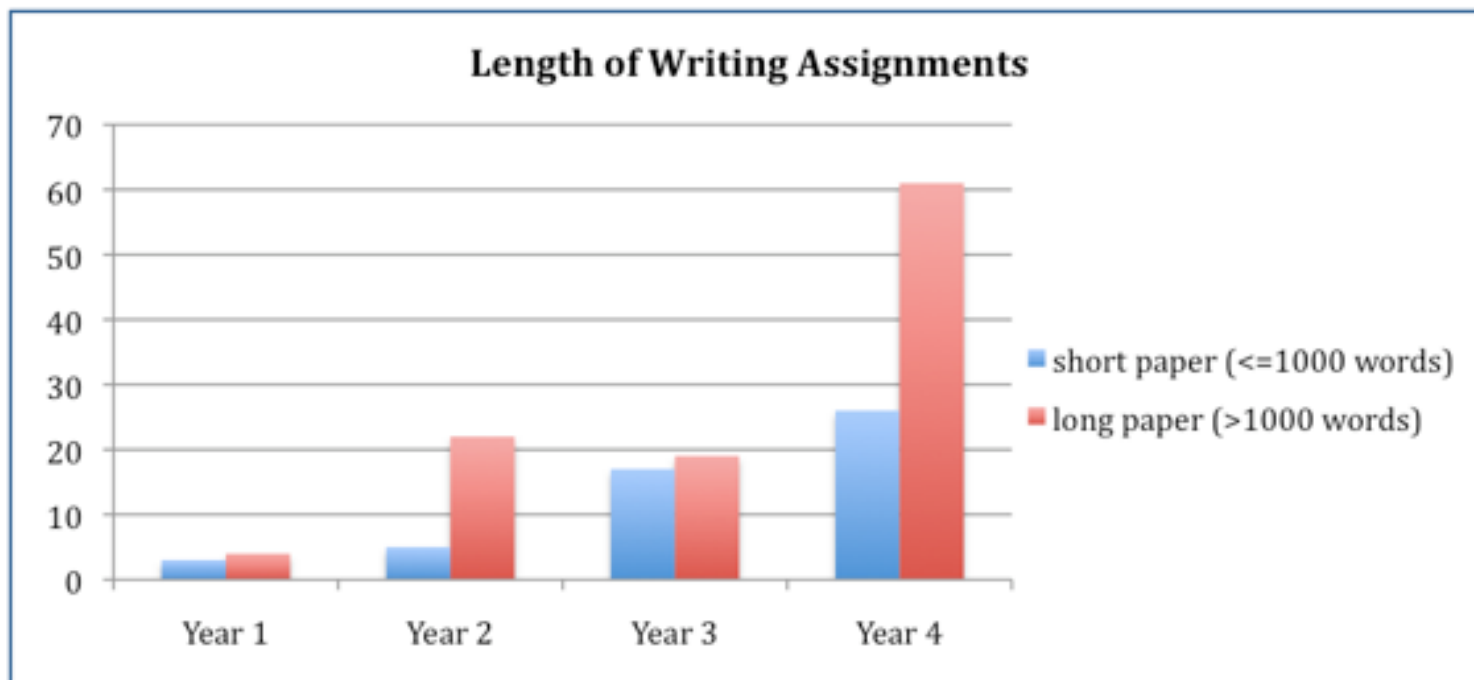


Length: Phys. Ed & Rec.

Length in pages	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
under 2	2%	4%	9%	2%
2 – 4	18%	2%	10%	15%
5 – 6	0	2%	4%	9%
7 - 10	2%	0	1%	10%
11 – 12	1%	0	0	0
13 +	0	1%	0	8%



Length: Political science



Political Science: Length

Assignment word length	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Under 500	8	0	1	2	5
500-1000	43	3	4	15	21
1250-2750	72	3	20	14	35
3000-5000	29	1	1	4	23
Over 5000	5	0	1	1	3
Length not indicated (<i>nd</i>)	41				
Total number of assignments	198	7	27	36	87



CSL: Length of first year assignments

Assignment word length	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Under 500	35%	6%	18%	41%	100%
500-1000	50%	7.5%	20%	22.5%	100%
1200-2500	10%	4%	31%	55%	100%
3000-5000	21%	7%	29%	43%	100%
Over 5000	0	0	0	100%	100%
					100%



WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts

- Light (2003) noted student engagement correlated to frequency of writing:
 - how we use assignments to engage students is perhaps best answered within specific disciplines.
- Our data considers the disciplinary context in Canada:
 - Should students write more than 10 assignments in 12 weeks?
 - What is the upper limit?
 - Who decides?



WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts

- Haswell (1991) argued that student efficacy (a key issue in student retention) requires sequential composition over the student's entire college career:
 - How does this happen sequentially over a student's career within a discipline?
- Consider how disciplinary programs implicitly or explicitly structure assignments (over the course of the entire program) to maximize student engagement and efficacy
 - For example, we can show the structure of writing assignments in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta

