



Writing assignments in disciplinary contexts

4th International Conference on
Writing Research

Writing Research Across Borders II
Washington DC, 2011

Roger Graves
Director, Writing Across the Curriculum
Professor, English and Film Studies
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB
roger.graves@ualberta.ca

Susan Chaudoir
WAC Research Assistant
PhD Candidate
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB
chaudoir@ualberta.ca



Canadian context: a primer



- With one or two exceptions, no required first year writing course
- Writing historically taught through the study of literature
- Wide range of writing centres; perhaps the closest point of comparison with US context
- Disciplinary support for writing more common—not **across** the curriculum but **in** the discipline



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;
 - Geography and Political Science departments; and a
 - Community Service-Learning program.



Today's presentation



- Today we will discuss the following five (5) studies:
 - Liberal Arts College;
 - Faculty of Nursing;
 - Geography Department
 - Political Science Department; and
 - Community Service-Learning Program.

- Faculties of Pharmacy and Physical Education and Recreation are in process.



Research questions

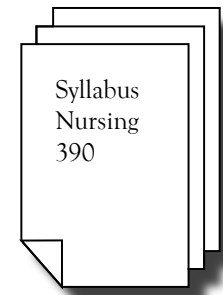


- What range of genres of writing assignments are students asked to write?
- Does this range vary over the 4 year program?
- Do these assignments get longer in the upper years of the programs?
- How frequently do instructors scaffold writing assignments within a course?

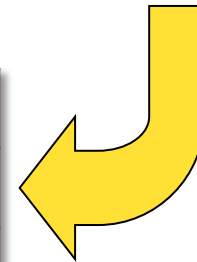


Methods: Assignments

- We gathered copies of course outlines and assignments that were given to students
- All assignments and documents were coded by the researchers



✓ course year level	✓ source documentation
✓ genre	✓ provision of feedback
✓ word length	✓ method of assessment
✓ value (percentage of mark)	✓ audience





Who isn't assigning writing?



	Number of writing assignments	Percent of courses with writing assignments
Liberal Arts	485	79%
Nursing	157	86%
Political Science	198	100%
Geography	186	77%
Service Learning	163	100%



Number of assignments by year in program

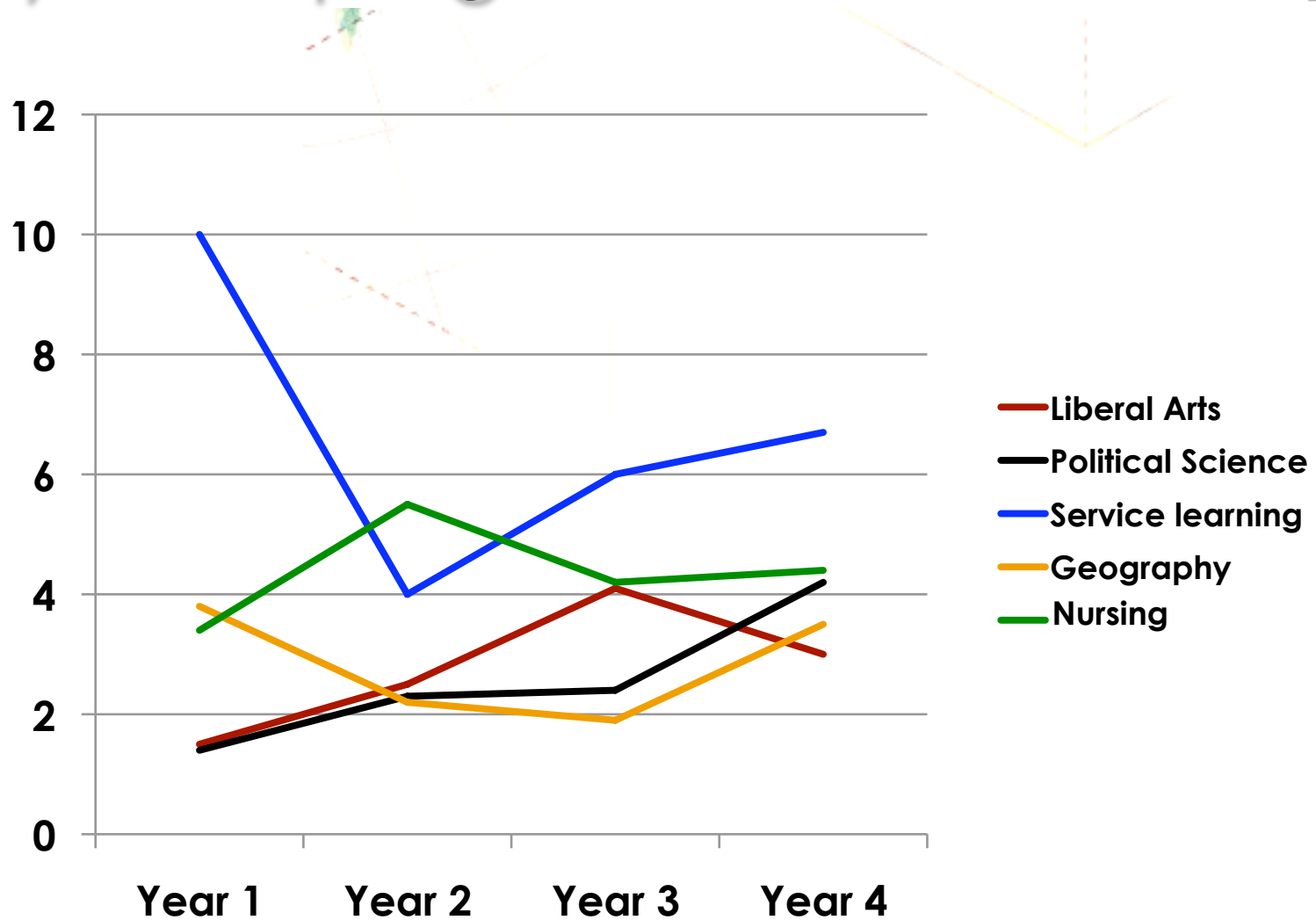


	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
Year 1	34/ 1.5	7/ 1.4	42/ 10	15/ 3.8	17/ 3.4
Year 2	225/ 2.5	39/ 2.3	12/ 4	40/ 2.2	33/ 5.5
Year 3	189/ 4.1	40/ 2.4	35/ 6	24/ 1.85	50/ 4.2
Year 4	56/ 3.0	112/ 4.2	74/ 6.7	107/ 3.5	57/ 4.4

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



Number of assignments by year in program





Genres vary across the disciplines

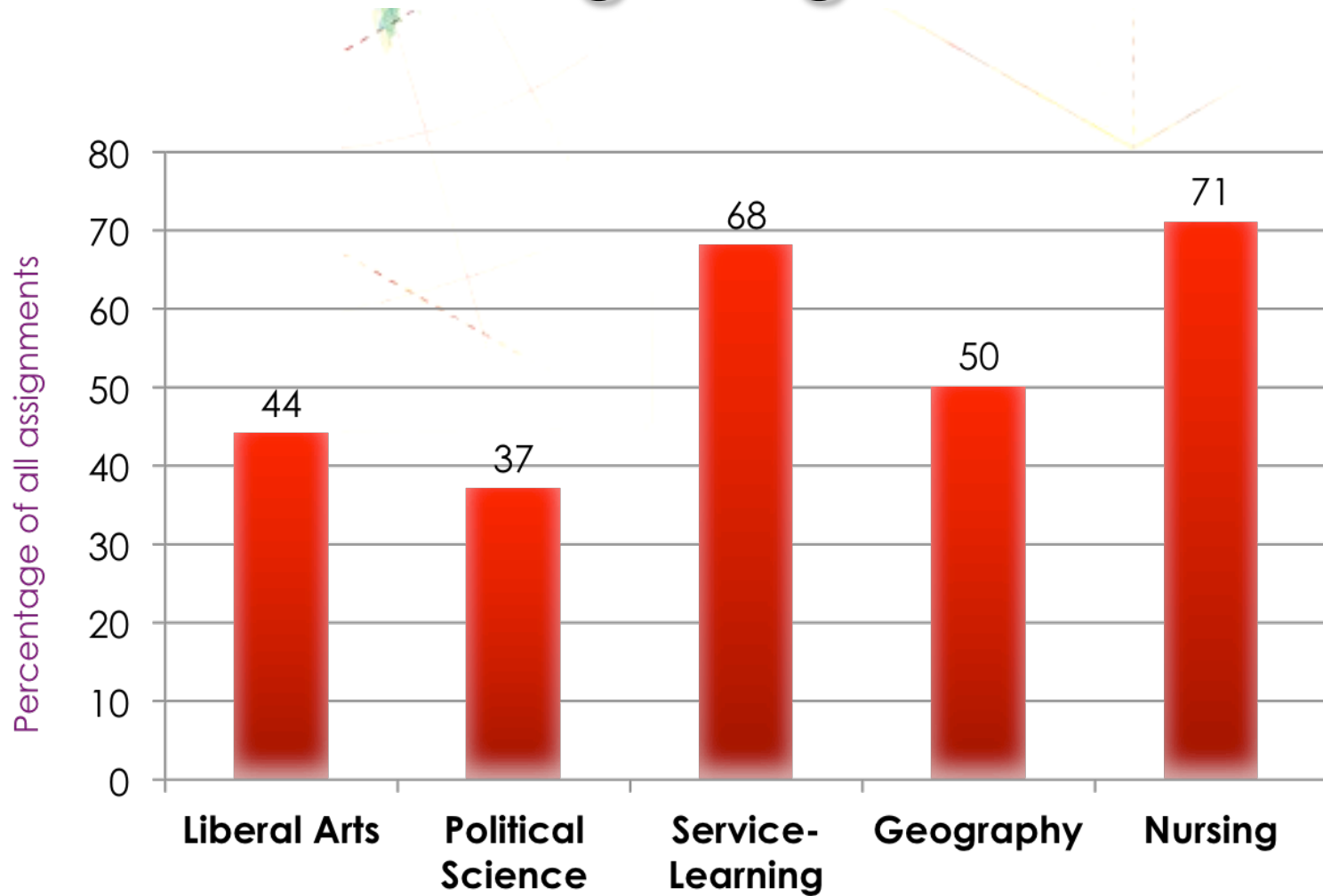


	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
Papers	20	32	22	25	18
Reports	18			30	12
Essay	27	21		12	
Summary					
Self-evaluation					24
Handouts					11
Presentation		15	17	13	
Journal			10		

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.





Nested writing assignments





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.



Audience of writing assignments



	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
Instructor or peer	90	92	91	100	99

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



Feedback on writing assignments



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
14	21	41	12	96

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



Rubric for writing assignments



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service-Learning	Geography	Nursing
30	25	13	20	60

Note: numbers are reported in percent of all assignments.



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.
- Melzer (2009) reported WAC-associated courses contain more writing assignments than non-WAC courses:
 - Would WAC initiatives increase the amount of writing done throughout the university as Melzer observed?
- Our data considers the disciplinary context in Canada:
 - Do we really want CSL students writing 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 requires sequential composition over the student's entire college career:
 - How does this happen sequentially over a student's career within a discipline? Without first-year composition?
- 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



WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- The writing inventory in our study provides a tool for instructors and administrators to:
 - examine the kinds of writing students are doing across and within the disciplines;
 - evaluate the extent of student writing required in disciplinary curriculum;
 - review curricular goals and outcomes.



References



Bridgeman, B., & Carlson, S. B. (1984). Survey of academic writing tasks. *Written Communication, 1*, 247-280.

Britton, J., Burgess, T., Martin, N., McLeod, A., & Rosen, H. (1975). *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. Urbana: NCTE.

Dias, P., Freedman, A., Medway, P., & Pare, A. (1999). *Worlds apart: Acting and writing in academic and workplace contexts*. Mahwah, NJ/ London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dias, P., & Pare, A. (Eds.). (2000). *Transitions: Writing in academic and workplace settings*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Graves, R., & Chaudoir, S. (2009). [Writing assignments in the Faculty of Nursing, Department of Political Science, Department of Geography, and Community Service-Learning program]. Unpublished raw data.

Graves, R., & Chaudoir, S. (2010, May). *What assignments do university professors ask Nursing students to write?* Paper presented at the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing, Montreal, Québec.

Graves, R., Hyland, T., & Samuel, B. (2010). Undergraduate writing assignments: An analysis of syllabi at one Canadian university. *Written Communication, 27*(3), 293-317.



References



Haswell, R. (1991). *Gaining ground in college writing: Tales of development and interpretation*. Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press.

Kelly, G. J., & Bazerman, C. (2003). How students argue scientific claims: A rhetorical-semantic analysis. *Applied Linguistics* 24(1), 28-55.

Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Light, R. J. (2003). *Writing and students' engagement*. *Peer Review*, 6(1), 28-31.

Melzer, D. (2003). Assignments across the curriculum: A survey of college writing. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/archives.cfm>.

Melzer, D. (2009). Writing assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 61, W240-261.

Paltridge, B. (2002). Genre, text type, and the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom. In A. Johns (Ed.), *Genre in the classroom: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 73-90). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.