

# Writing Fellows in the Faculty of Law

Creating a Collegial Learning Environment  
Using Upper-Year Students to Deliver  
Substantive Content

Presented by:

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## What are Writing Fellows?

- The Faculty of Law employs twelve part-time students in their final year of study (typically their third year).
- Writing Fellows (“WFs”) are hired for an eight-month period (September to April) and receive compensation on the basis of 8 hours/week.
- WFs are responsible for a group of ~15 first year law students (total first year class size: ~180).

## How are Writing Fellows used?

### 1.) Content Delivery:

- Responsible for leading “Learning Group Activities” hands-on activities in small group settings. These Learning Group Activities follow a traditional hour-long lecture given by the Director.

#### Learning Group Activity examples:

- Hands-on writing exercises
- Mock oral presentations
- Game show style quizzes
- WFs assist with the development of Learning Group content

## How are Writing Fellows used?

### 2.) Mentoring

- WFs hold office hours for 2h / week (shared space in the Faculty) and provide detailed, individualized feedback to students.
- WFs mediate disputes related to group assignments.
- Many first-year students view WFs as role models. Students often contact WFs on subjects that are beyond the scope of the LRW course.

### 3.) Assessment:

- WFs do the majority of grading in the course (comprising a total of 80% of the course weight).
- WFs are provided an “answer key” and an expected class average, but a fair bit of discretion to make their determinations.

## How are Writing Fellows used?



## Efficacy of Peer-Staff Writing Centers

- Peer-staffed writing centers have been used in universities across North America since the 1970s. The pedagogical underpinnings are centered on concepts of peer reinforcement and feedback.

Jones, Casey (2001). The Relationship Between Writing Centers and Improvement in Writing Ability: An Assessment of the Literature. *Education*, 122(1), 3-20.

- Quantitative and qualitative results indicate that writing centers are a useful and effective complement to traditional learning methods.

Hoon, Tan Bee (2009). Assessing the Efficacy of Writing Centers: A Review of Selected Evaluation Studies. *Pertanika J. Soc. Sci & Hum.* 17(2): 47-54

- The WF program is an extension of this concept.

## Writing Fellows in other Law Schools

- Many other North American law schools use upper-year law students to provide writing instruction and enhance traditional learning.
- Law schools vary significantly in the degree to which the upper-year students are integrated into the curriculum, with involvement ranging from ancillary to substantive reliance for content delivery and assessment.

Murray, Kristen (2011). Peer Tutoring and the Law School Writing Center: Theory and Practice. *Journal of the Legal Writing Institute*, 16(1), 175-206.

Grande Montana, Patricia (2015). A Contemporary Model for Using Teaching Assistants in Legal Writing Programs. *St. John's Legal Studies Research Paper No. 15-0016*.

## Efficacy of the UAlberta Law Writing Fellow Program

- In the 2018-19 academic year, 51 students responded to the optional midterm evaluation survey.
- They were asked to evaluate both the instructor-led large lecture format and the WF-led learning groups.
- Questions mirrored the USRI question bank.
- Overall results were that students favoured the WF learning environment.
- The quantitative results were also reflected qualitatively in the optional comments. Overwhelmingly, the majority of students responding to the survey extensively praised their WFs.

## Results from Midterm Evaluation Survey

Question	Instructor	WF
The classroom is a comfortable learning environment	4.39	4.51
The [Instructor/WF] is helpful answering questions	4.03	4.33
The [Instructor/WF] presents the material in an interesting and helpful manner	4.13	4.29
The [Instructor/WF] gives clear explanations	3.47	4.27
The [Instructor/WF] stresses the important points in lectures or discussions	3.82	4.33

## Benefits of Adopting the “Writing Fellow” model

- WFs can provide much more individualized instruction and rapid feedback than would otherwise be possible. In turn, this allows for room to create more assignments and opportunities for student feedback.
- WFs are effective precisely because they are not yet experts: they are closer to the learner’s position as a novice.
- Small learning group sessions allow for greater discussion of specific writing choices, which in turn leads to greater retention of difficult concepts.

## Benefits of Adopting the “Writing Fellow” model, con’t

- WFs provide emotional support and assist in creating an overall communal and collegial learning environment in the Faculty.
- WFs receive feedback from the first year students that they would not normally share with a faculty member. This gives the instructor / program director tremendous insight regarding the problems and concerns experienced by the first year class.
- WFs themselves benefit tremendously from an academic perspective. In the four years since it has been implemented, the program has consistently produced some of the faculty’s finest students.

## Disadvantages of Implementing the WF model

- Establishing the program requires tremendous investment – designing small group activities, recruiting qualified students, shifting normative expectations in the student population.
- The greatest risk with this model is inconsistency with instruction and assessment (whether the inconsistency is perceived or actual).
- When WFs contradict either the instructor or each other, it can create confusion and substantially increase student anxiety.

## Mitigating the Risks

- Selecting students who are academically successful, but also approachable and personable.
- Providing comprehensive initial and ongoing training, particularly as it relates to grading expectations and curricular goals.
- Ensuring WFs defer on any questions that are controversial or overly subjective.
- Scheduling regular meetings with WFs to ensure that any problems or potential areas of confusion are addressed early.



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