

# **Writing Assignments in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta**

## ***A Research Report***

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## ***Abstract***

This report summarizes a study done of the writing assignments given to students in Faculty of Nursing (FON) courses offered in the 2008-09 academic year. Of the 51 courses offered in that time frame, we were able to obtain 42 course syllabi. These 42 syllabi included 157 separate writing assignments for the students in these courses. Together, these syllabi create a view of the Nursing curriculum from the perspective of writing. Students in the FON write frequently in 14 different genres that are often linked to one another. The assignments frequently require reflective thinking, self-evaluation, and critical thinking (through research-based essays and reports). To support students as they write these assignments, the FON should consider developing resources for instructors and students. At the program level, the FON should develop outcomes statements that describe student writing and consider how best to support student writers as they move from first year into second year.

## **Introduction**

This report takes as its starting point the efforts of faculty members in Nursing to improve the writing of Nursing students. These faculty members participated in the campus-wide effort (the Writing Task Force, 2005-08) to establish the Centre for Writers and Writing Across the Curriculum programs, and in 2008 they formed a committee within the Faculty of Nursing called the “Undergraduate Writing Resource Committee” as a way of improving the writing of Nursing students.

In the last year this group has been responsible for the development of a wide variety of web-based resources such as an APA learning module on eClass, videos of Nursing professors and students, web-based resources on the WAC site (<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC/Resources/NursingStudent.aspx>), class visits by the WAC Director, and encouragement for students to use the Centre for Writers as a resource to improve their writing. In the course of discussions regarding how best to go about improving the writing of undergraduate Nursing students, this group considered doing an inventory of what Nursing instructors required their students to write as a starting point. This information would provide a baseline of data that could then inform other discussions about how to improve the writing of Nursing students.

The current approach to improving student writing includes requiring most Nursing students to take “Any junior- or senior-level English course. WRS 101 or ENGL 105 or 108 is recommended” (after degree students are not required to take an EFS or Writing course).<sup>1</sup> The English 108 course is offered in May, at the end of the students’ first year. The relationship of this requirement to the writing tasks they will encounter forms part of the background for this study. To what extent does this course, or any other junior or senior English course help Nursing students to prepare for their writing in their major program? While the answer to that question is outside the scope of this study, this study does provide data about what Nursing students will be expected to write.

In addition to implications for this requirement, this study also provides important information to writing centres across U of A campuses because it gives the tutors in these centres a much better idea of the rhetorical demands placed on Nursing students.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.registrar.ualberta.ca/calendar/Undergrad/Nursing/Programs/134.html>

## Methods

Course abstracts were obtained from Faculty of Nursing administrative offices as electronic files. We received a total of 42 course descriptions for the 51 courses that were offered in 2008-09 (82% response rate). Of our sample of 42, 36 courses did have writing assignments (86%).

There were 36 courses that had at least one writing assignment and six did not have writing assignments (111, 112, 113, 140, 150, and 215). This resulted in a data set of 157 writing assignments. Ten writing assignments were partially coded because assessment criteria were missing from the syllabus (courses 150, 291, 295, 306, 308, 391, 395, 406, 475, and 491). Writing assignments with missing data were appropriately coded as nd (no data).

## Data coding

Each course and coding sheet was reviewed twice for accuracy. In this review process, several issues surfaced. Some courses contained similar writing assignments (e.g., courses 190 and 290; 194 and 294; 195 and 295), so we compared the coding sheets for consistency. This review showed differences in three areas: (1) course length, (2) completion time, and (3) feedback provision.

Regarding **course length** and **completion time**, courses varied by 6, 7, 12, and 13 weeks in length. The original coding sheet did not allow for this variance, so we added the measurement length of course to our data sheet. In this way, the measurement of time to complete in weeks would preserve data integrity, meaning that the ratio of the assignment due dates to course length would be equivalent, even though the duration of the time to complete the writing assignment would not be equivalent. For example:

Course 290 = 6 weeks. Assignment A for 290 due = 4 weeks. Ratio = 4/6

Course 306 = 12 weeks. Assignment A for 306 due = 8 weeks. Ratio = 8/12

Regarding **feedback provision**, we discovered that writing assignment details and feedback details were in two different sections of the syllabus, sometimes several pages apart, and often separate from the syllabus (i.e., handout or eClass). Therefore, we needed to re-read all the course syllabi and look for specific phrases of text in other sections that explicitly stated the feedback provision or referred to a separate source for assignment details. The coding sheets were adjusted to reflect the syllabus description.

In addition to these issues, we encountered three other novel features of assignments that we needed to establish consistent methods for coding.

### 1. Evaluation of nursing practice: Related genres

Writing assignments labeled **evaluation of nursing practice** included at least six separate assignments: scholarly paper, personal goals, clinical handout/care plan, small group note taking, peer feedback, and self-evaluation. We separated the coding sheet by

assignment type and cross-checked for consistency. There was inconsistency in coding audience, plagiarism, feedback, references, style, suggested resources, and evaluation criteria (items 3(i)-3(j) and 4(c) respectively on the coding sheet). We re-examined each syllabus to verify the coding inconsistency and re-coded the assignments on the assignment sheet.

During this process, we discovered that some (not all) courses with the self-evaluation writing assignment required a mid-term self-evaluation and a final self-evaluation. We re-examined the syllabi specifically for a mid-term self-evaluation and created a coding sheet for those courses that included a mid-term self-evaluation (courses 190, 194, 291, 294, 307, 391, 406, 407, 415 490, and 491).

## **2. Peer evaluation and personal goals: Embedded assignments**

Writing assignments labeled peer-evaluation were embedded with another writing assignment called **personal goals**. We spent several days re-examining all the courses that included this writing assignment, and found identical construction of embedded assignments. As a result, we added personal goals as a writing assignment for each appropriate course.

## **3. Related forms**

The syllabus for course 391 included forms that needed to be attached to the writing assignments of clinical preparation, reflective journal, and personal learning goals. Other courses that had these same writing assignments did not have this form. So we re-examined all the syllabi for this form. There were parts of the syllabus that stated forms and additional assignment details could be found on eClass, which is the university's online academic support system. For all these assignments, we re-coded the measurement of description/information provided from syllabus to syllabus+separate (item 3(a) on the coding sheet).

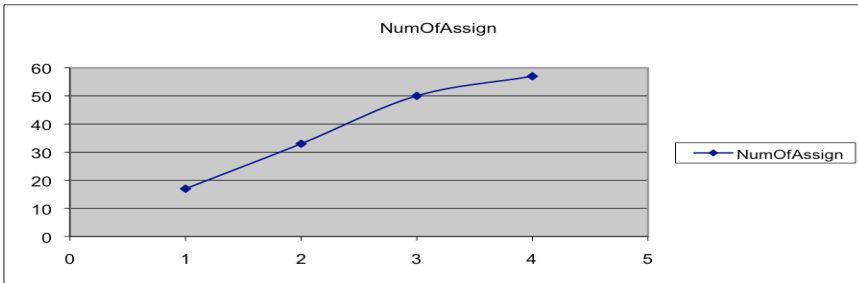
We created a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel® to input the data from the coding sheets. We checked each line item against the coding sheet, and cross-checked the spreadsheet for consistency. This spreadsheet was then entered into SPSS. The data presented in the graphs and tables in this report were generated from SPSS.

**Results**

Students in the Faculty of Nursing write frequently in their courses. Of the 42 courses in our sample, 86% or 36 courses required students to write an assignment, and most of these courses required students to write several assignments.

**How much writing is assigned to students?**

As students progressed through the four-year curriculum, they were asked to write more assignments each year (see Figure 1 and Table 1).



**Figure 1: Number of assignments by year in program**

Year	Number of Assignments
1	17
2	33
3	50
4	57
Total	157

**Table 1: Number of assignments by year in program**

Students do the least amount of writing in their first year, with only 5 of 10 courses requiring them to hand in a written text (see Table 2). However, in the last two years of their programs, every course has at least one writing assignment.

**Table 2: Number of assignments by year in program**

Year	%	Total number of courses (n=42)
1	50%	5 out of 10 courses
2	86%	6 out of 7 courses
3	100%	12 out of 12 courses
4	100%	13 out of 13 courses

The length of the papers that students were asked to write changed, too, over the years. In first year, students were asked to write an equal number of short (less than 1000 words) and long (over 1000 words) assignments (see Figure 2). The increase in the number of writing assignments over the four years of the program came almost exclusively in short papers—far more short papers were required in fourth year than in any other year.

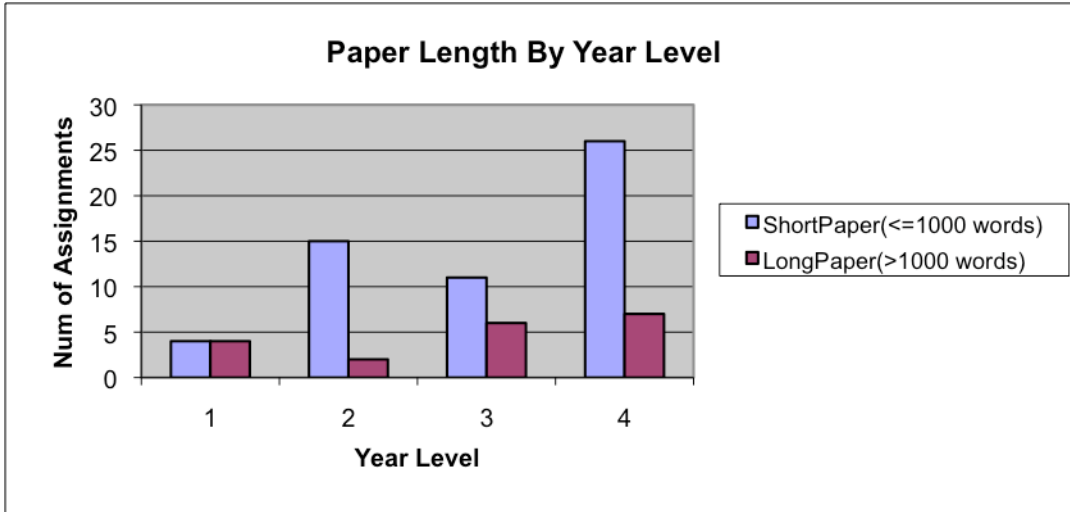


Figure 2: Short and long papers by year in program

In addition, most courses had more than one written assignment (30), with one course having nine written assignments and seven courses having four assignments (see Figure 3). In short, students were very likely to encounter more than one writing assignment, but the exact number or writing assignments would vary widely.

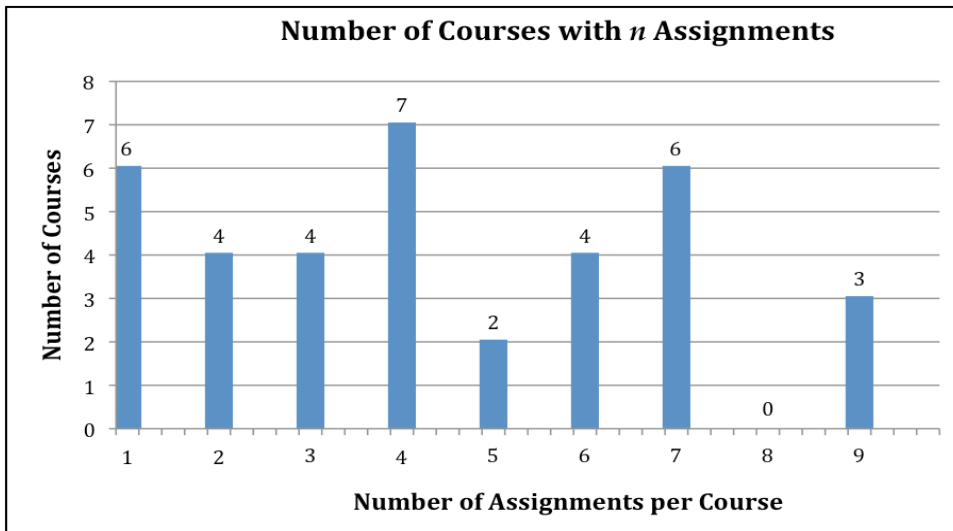


Figure 3: Number of writing assignments per course

The distribution of writing assignments throughout the curriculum shown in Figure 4 shows the gap between the first year basic science courses and the rest of the first year curriculum. The distribution of assignments in years two and three appear here as relatively uniformly spread out with most courses requiring between four and seven assignments. In year four there is a big spread between courses, with three 400-level courses requiring nine assignments and five requiring only one or two assignments.

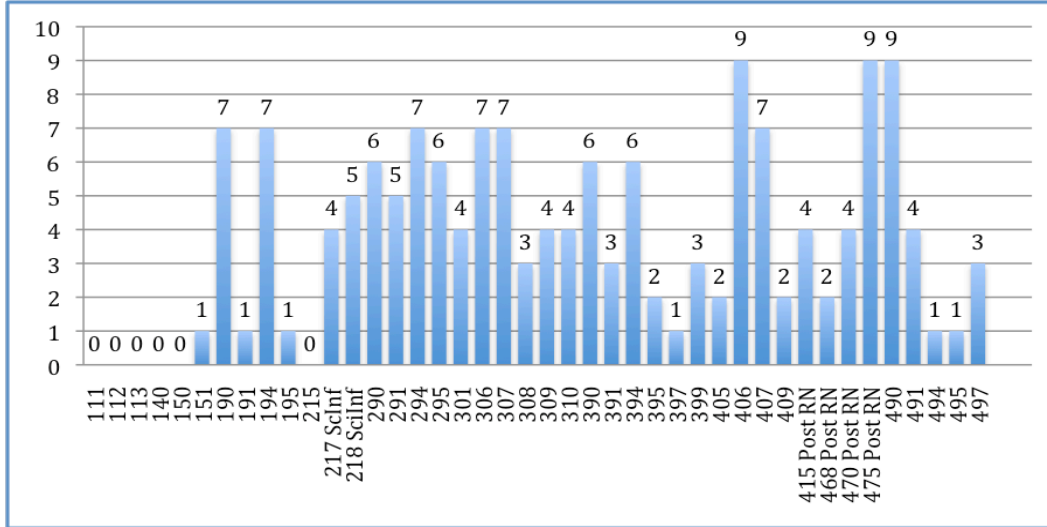


Figure 4: Courses with writing assignments

**What kinds/genres of assignments do students write?**

The list of kinds of writing assignments assigned in Nursing courses is limited to 13 kinds (see Table 3). The names listed here are the names the instructors used to describe the assignment.

Table 3: Genres/kinds of assignments

In some ways, it may be helpful to group these assignments by purpose. For example, we might think of one purpose for writing to be to encourage “reflective thinking.” If so, we could group the following assignments together: self evaluation, personal goals, journals, and peer evaluation (73 assignments). This group represents almost half of the total number of assignments given.

Another group could be gathered under the title “essays/reports”: paper, report, outline, annotated bibliography, proposal, field notes (48 assignments). Presentations and handouts would seem to be related assignments as well.

Types of Writing Assignments	
Self Evaluation	38
Paper	29
Handout	17
Personal Goals	12
Journal	12
Report	12
Peer Evaluation	11
Group Email	11
Presentation	8
Outline	3
Annot. Biblio.	2
Proposal	1
Field Notes	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>

Another way to view this data is by year level (see Figure 4).

### What are the least frequently assigned genres?

Reports emerge essentially in the fourth year of the program; only one is assigned in third year, and none before that. Outlines, annotated bibliographies, proposals and field notes—do not show up in the curriculum until the last year of the program. Students entering the fourth year are asked to write five new genres, with reports representing almost 20% of the assignments for fourth year.

Students are asked to do two or three presentations each year after first year.

### What are the most frequently assigned genres?

Self evaluations are assigned frequently across all years. Papers are frequently assigned with the exception of year two; they are the predominant genre in year three, and together with reports form the dominant genres of year four, along with self evaluations.

**Table 4: Assignments by year in program**

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

### “Nested” or linked assignments

One way to keep students on track with their assignments is to link them: an outline and a paper, for example, would be assigned as two separate assignments but on the same topic. This is a frequently used tactic as Table 5 shows.

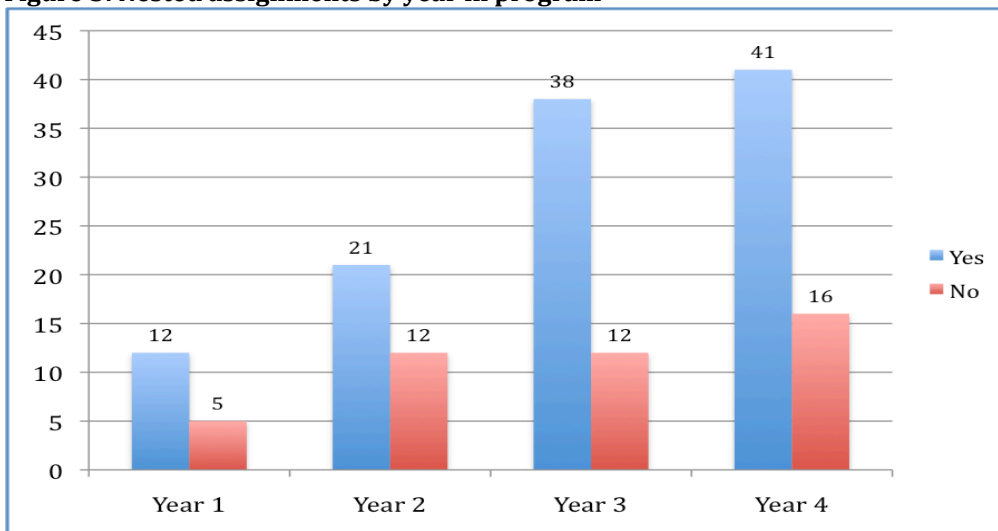


**Table 5: Nested or linked assignments**

Nested	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	112	12	21	38	41
No	45	5	12	12	16
<i>total</i>	<i>157</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>57</i>

In fact, almost three-quarters of assignments were linked in this way (112 or 72% of the total number of assignments). This tactic becomes more prevalent year by year (see Figure 10).

**Figure 5: Nested assignments by year in program**



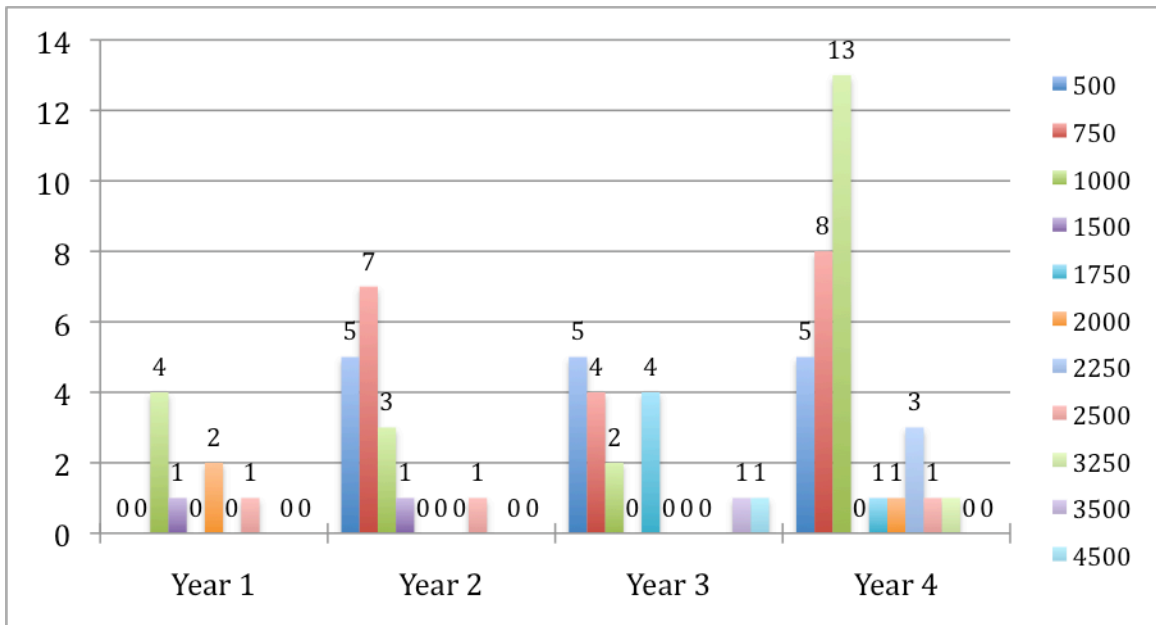
**Length of writing assignments**

Contrary to what we might expect, writing assignments do not get longer as students progress from first year to fourth year (see Table 6).

Length	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
500	0	5	5	5
750	0	7	4	8
1000	4	3	2	13
1500	1	1	0	0
1750	0	0	4	1
2000	2	0	0	1
2250	0	0	0	3
2500	1	1	0	1
3250	0	0	0	1
3500	0	0	1	0
4500	0	0	1	0
<i>total</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>33</i>

**Table 6: Lengths of assignments by year in program**

The longest assignments occur in year three, with year four having the next group of long assignments. But even in year one students are asked to write 2500 and 2000 word assignments. The big difference between year one and year four appears to be the sheer volume of writing: in year four, students write more assignments of all kinds, and in year one students do not write any short assignments.



**Figure 6: Length of assignments by year in program**

**Audience for writing assignments**

Students in the Nursing faculty write exclusively for academic audiences: their instructors or their fellow students (Table 7).

**Table 7: Audiences for writing assignments**

Audience	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
In Class	149	16	27	50	56
Outside Class	1	0	0	0	1
No data	7	1	6	0	0
<i>total</i>	<i>157</i>				

**Feedback on writing assignments**

Students at all levels of Nursing courses get feedback on their assignments (Table 8).

**Table 8: Feedback on writing assignments**

Feedback	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	150	16	30	50	54
No	2	0	0	0	2
No data	5	1	3	0	1
Total	157	17	33	50	57
<i>Percentage = Yes</i>		<i>98%</i>	<i>91%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>95%</i>

**Scoring guides for writing assignments (rubrics)**

The rate is highest at the first year and fourth year levels (Table 9).

**Table 9: Scoring guides (rubrics) by year in program**

Rubric	Total	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Yes	93	12	18	25	38
No	60	4	15	23	18
No data	4	1	0	2	1
Total	157	17	33	50	57
<i>Percentage = Yes</i>		<i>70%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>50%</i>	<i>67%</i>

## ***Discussion and Recommendations***

### **Key findings**

1. Students in the FON write often, particularly in second year and beyond.
2. Students write almost exclusively for instructors as the primary audience.
3. Instructors “nest” or link assignments frequently.
4. Assignments focus broadly on “reflective thinking” and evidence-based synthesis of research.
5. Scoring guides (“rubrics”) are often used, particularly at the first and fourth year levels where students encounter genres new to them.

By any definition, the FON context-based learning curriculum is “writing-rich”—the number, frequency and length of these assignments ensures that FON students will write often. The courses required for the BScN Honors Program, for example, require students to write over 79 assignments (our study did not have data for two of the required courses, NURS 215 and NURS 499).

Many of the assignments in a course are linked: that is, an early assignment in some way prepares students to write a subsequent assignment. They range in audience, however, is quite narrow—almost all student writing is for instructors. To help students write assignments, instructors often provide scoring guides to students to help them self-correct as they write their assignments. In the second and third year, however, these guides are provided for only about half the assignments.

The FON should consider three related issues:

1. How are students prepared for the heavy writing demands of the FON programs?
2. How can the FON ensure that knowledge about writing gained early in the programs is transferred to subsequent courses?
3. How can students be supported in their efforts to improve as writers throughout their undergraduate careers?

The first question seems to be partially answered by the role of English 108: Introduction to Language and Literature. One half of this course focuses on writing instruction, but exactly what genres and what approach to writing is not defined. For FON students to transfer knowledge about writing from this class to their Nursing classes, the terms used to describe writing in English 108 would need to be similar or the same as the terms used to describe writing in their Nursing courses. It is unlikely that this is true at the moment, but the study we performed did not research that question. The other source of preparation for second year Nursing courses is, of course, first-year courses in Nursing. We have no information that suggests that this is done purposefully, but that may be the result of our data collection. The instructors of the first year courses may indeed pass on this kind of knowledge in ways that do not show up in syllabi or in the ways we looked at syllabi.

The second question is also an open one. It is clear that a concern for APA writing style is consistent across the faculty. Beyond that, there are many similarities in writing assignments across courses, although it is not clear just how organized these similarities are. Course leaders and level coordinators meet and coordinate their work, so it is likely that the relatively small number of genres that students write may be a result of this collaboration and coordination. These existing networks of coordination and collaboration could be used well to spread a consistent vocabulary for communicating about writing to students at all levels of the programs.

The third question is already being actively worked on. The eLearning Services group has produced an online learning module for APA style, among other writing support materials. Students in the FON have also made good use of the Centre for Writers in Assiniboia Hall. The Writing Across the Curriculum website has also developed a web page of resources for FON students (<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC/Resources/NursingStudent.aspx>).

Efforts to coordinate the ways students learn to write will improve their experiences as students at the University of Alberta. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and other, similar surveys will measure their perceptions, in part. If the FON makes clear to students the ways in which the FON has worked to support student learning, the scores on the NSSE survey for writing and writing-related questions (group work, interactions with peers and instructors) will improve. More importantly, student learning will improve and their improved ability as writers and as social actors will enable them to speak to the government and the public on issues important to nursing and the health of the public.

### **Recommendations**

1. Assess the efficacy of requiring English 108 as preparation for the writing tasks that students in FON will encounter in years two through four.
2. Develop a set of outcomes statements to describe writing capabilities FON students are expected to develop over the four years of their program.
3. Develop a consistent faculty-wide set of terms to describe writing, either through the use of a common textbook or a new publication/document distributed to all students.
4. Continue to develop online resources to support student writing along the lines of the APA module.
5. Develop a template for communicating writing assignments to students so that they receive consistent and complete information about their assignments.
6. Develop guidelines for responding to student writing to help faculty use their time efficiently and to improve the effectiveness of feedback on student writing.