

February 10, 1997

To: Tino Balio

From: Stephen Lucas

Re: Assessment of Communication Arts 100 for the 1996 fall semester

### **Objectives of Communication Arts 100 and Instruction Designed to Meet Those Objectives**

Communication Arts 100 seeks to develop student skills in writing, speaking, reading, listening, and critical thinking. It also includes work designed to help students become more adept at research and information retrieval. Let me discuss each objective and how we seek to fulfill each of them by instruction in Comm Arts 100.

#### *Writing*

Students planned, wrote, and revised four major speech assignments: a two-to-three-minute speech of introduction, a seven-minute informative speech, a nine-minute persuasive speech, and a five-to six-minute commemorative speech. For each speech, students were responsible for selecting, focusing, and narrowing their topics; adapting their topics and research materials to their specific audience; supporting their ideas with evidence and reasoning; organizing their messages using the structures appropriate for expository and argumentative discourse; revising drafts of their speeches for organization, logic, and language use; expressing themselves accurately, clearly, vividly, and appropriately; and using correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. Students also wrote peer critiques of their classmates' speeches, as well as detailed self-assessments of at least two of their own speeches. Instructors provided extensive feedback on the organization, content, style, and writing mechanics of all speeches and papers. Over the course of the semester students composed a minimum of 30-35 typed pages of written work.

#### *Speaking*

Students prepared, rehearsed, and delivered four major speeches. In addition, students made a number of brief oral presentations to the class. Over the course of the semester, they examined the nature of speech anxiety and ways to deal with it; learned the vocal and nonverbal principles of effective speech delivery; generated speaking notes from full speech manuscripts or outlines; rehearsed their speeches prior to final presentation; and used visual aids to reinforce and clarify their verbal messages.

### *Reading*

The analysis of written texts is an important part of Comm Arts 100. During the 1996 fall semester, students were assigned to read and analyze more than a dozen speeches. In their analyses, students were required to identify each speaker's specific purpose, central idea, and organizational pattern; to identify and evaluate introductions, conclusions, and transitions; to gauge the credibility of sources and the reliability of claims in supporting materials; to assess the soundness of evidence and the validity of reasoning; to assess the clarity, accuracy, vividness, and appropriateness of language; and to evaluate the speaker's adaptation to his or her immediate audience. At the end of the semester, students were asked to apply all of these skills in their final examination, in which they were presented a speech text for analysis and appraisal.

### *Listening*

Careful listening is crucial to any course in speech composition. Students in Comm Arts 100 listened to more than seventy speeches during the semester, including addresses by master orators such as Martin Luther King, Jr., exemplary student speeches from previous classes, and speeches by their classmates. Students were guided to focus on a speaker's ideas, organization, rhetorical techniques, and delivery. They were asked to distinguish among the introduction, body, and conclusion of a speech, to listen for main points and supporting materials, to assess evidence, reasoning, and language use, and to reach an overall assessment of the speaker's message and rhetorical effort. In addition, during each unit of the course, every student wrote a two-page peer critique of one of his or her classmates' speeches. These critiques required careful listening and were expected to be thoughtfully composed and carefully written.

### *Critical Thinking*

Communication Arts 100 sought to improve students' ability to think critically in a number of ways. First, in the process of coming up with things to say—what was known in classical rhetoric as “invention”—students worked on selecting, focusing, and narrowing speech topics systematically in ways that were designed to sharpen their thinking skills in general. Second, every unit of the course focused attention on the structure and organization of ideas. As students researched, wrote, and organized their own speeches, they gained practice in distinguishing main points from minor points, in separating fact from opinion, and in discerning the relationships among ideas. They were also asked to apply these same skills of critical thinking in the analysis of speeches that they read or listened to in class. Third, students were expected to use language clearly and accurately in their speeches and papers, and they were required to assess the use of language in the speeches analyzed throughout the semester. Fourth, we spent considerable time—especially during the persuasion unit—teaching students how to construct valid arguments and how to use evidence in support of their claims. In the final examination, students were asked to apply their skills of critical thinking to the analysis of a complete speech text.

### *Information-Seeking Skills and Strategies*

Students in Comm Arts 100 gained considerable experience in information-seeking skills and strategies. All of their major speeches required them to conduct library research, to create a research bibliography, to take research notes efficiently, and to think critically about the materials acquired through their research. In addition, during the second unit of the course, all students completed CLUE, the multimedia Computerized Library User Education instructional package, which helped students develop basic information-seeking skills and learn how to find useful materials in the UW-Madison libraries. During the third unit of the course, students convened in classrooms in College and Memorial libraries for more advanced sessions, led by a reference librarian, on information-seeking skills and strategies.

#### **How Well Did Communication Arts 100 Meet Its Objectives?**

From every indication it would appear that Comm Arts 100 was highly successful in meeting its objectives. This assessment is based on data and impressions from five primary sources.

1. During the first week of classes and the last week of classes, students in Comm Arts 100 completed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA), a standardized assessment instrument used nationally to gauge anxiety about public speaking. Scores on the test are interpreted as follows:

- 25-59 = little or no communication apprehension.
- 60-66 = less communication apprehension than most people.
- 67-88 = communication apprehension similar to that of most people.
- 89-125 = high communication apprehension.

By comparing scores on the PRCA at the end of the semester with those at the beginning of the semester, we can gauge the extent to which Comm Arts 100 was successful in helping students become more comfortable and confident in making oral presentations. The mean score of students during the first week of classes was 69.90, which means that their level of communication was "similar to that of most people." The mean score of students on the same instrument during the last week of class was 63.99, which means that their level of anxiety had dropped to "less communication apprehension than most people." Not only did the mean score drop a full level on the communication apprehension scale, but the numerical difference was statistically significant as measured by a paired sample t-test. (Analysis of the data was conducted by Professor Michael Cruz.)

2. Teaching assistants in Comm Arts 100 were visited once during the semester by the course director or the assistant course director to evaluate in-class teaching. During their class visitations, the course director and assistant course director found the instruction in Comm Arts 100 to be of a consistently high quality. Instructors consistently demonstrated a strong command of the subject matter, were well prepared to teach their classes, explained ideas and concepts clearly and effectively, engaged students productively in class discussion, and conducted themselves in a

highly professional manner. In addition to visiting classes to watch instructors teach, the course director or assistant director also visited on days when students were presenting speeches. On the basis of those visits—scheduled at random—we felt confident that students were in fact acquiring the skills of speech composition and presentation that Comm Arts 100 is designed to teach.

3. Instructors in Comm Arts 100 uniformly report that their students made demonstrable progress with respect to all the major objectives of the course. By the end of the semester, students evinced stronger command of the principles of speech composition, were better able to organize their ideas for effective communication, and had corrected some of the most glaring mechanical errors in their writing. In addition, they were much more confident in their speaking abilities and had improved—often dramatically—in their skills of speech delivery. Instructors also report that students showed improvement in their listening skills, in their use of evidence and reasoning, and in their ability to analyze written speech texts and to think critically about them. Many students also seemed to instructors to have become more familiar with the library resources at UW-Madison and more adept in their ability to use those resources in researching their speeches.

This is not to say that all students progressed at the same pace or that students from Comm Arts 100 are now perfectly adept in all of the skills taught in the course. We are not in a position to quantify the amount of progress made by students. The judgments of instructors in the class are exactly that—judgments. But they are judgments formed at firsthand and on the basis of careful observation over the course of fifteen weeks. Moreover, as we shall see in discussing the next two measures of assessment in Comm Arts 100, the instructors' judgments are confirmed both by the portfolios of student work and by the students' own assessment of the course and what they learned in it.

4. At the end of the semester, all students in Comm Arts 100 turned in portfolios of their written work. These portfolios included drafts, revisions, and final manuscripts of all major writing assignments. Although we do not have the time or financial resources to examine all of those portfolios, we have looked through a random sample of seventy portfolios, which represents the work of roughly 10 percent of the students enrolled in Comm Arts 100 last semester. For the most part, these portfolios reveal that speeches and papers produced at the end of the semester were better organized than those produced at the start of the semester, manifested fuller development of ideas and more effective use of supporting materials, and were written with greater care and clarity.

5. Formal course evaluations were solicited from all students in Comm Arts 100 at two points during the fall semester. The first set of evaluations was collected during the seventh week of classes. In these evaluations students were asked to provide one to two pages of typewritten commentary on the extent to which Comm Arts 100 was meeting its stated objectives and on the quality of instruction in the course. The second set of evaluations was collected during the last week of the semester, when students completed the standardized teaching evaluation forms administered in all Communication Arts classes. These forms included both quantitative and qualitative questions.

Both sets of evaluations were highly positive. Let me begin by discussing the quantitative data from the end-of-semester evaluations. On these evaluations, the mean score of Comm Arts 100 instructors across all 48 sections of the course was 6.05 on a 7-point scale (compared to a mean of 5.76 for all Comm Arts courses). The fact that such a high rating was earned in a required freshman-level course taught by teaching assistants and taken by students outside of their majors or intended majors is quite extraordinary.

Here are the scale questions from the end-of-semester evaluation forms, along with the mean score for each question across all sections of Comm Arts 100:

<u>Question</u>	<u>Mean</u>
Course expectations were clearly communicated.	6.08
Individual class meetings were well-planned and organized.	6.01
The instructor seemed knowledgeable in the subject area.	6.42
The instructor made effective use of examples and other illustrative material.	6.13
The instructor was responsive to student questions.	6.35
The instructor was available for and helpful during office hours.	6.31
Standards for grading and evaluation were clearly delineated and fairly applied.	5.60
Evaluation of student work was thorough and helpful.	6.01
The course was intellectually challenging.	5.33
The instructor directed class discussion effectively.	6.08
Overall, I thought the instructor was an effective teacher.	6.26
Overall, I am satisfied with what I learned from the course.	5.98

In addition, students responded to the following two close-ended questions:

In retrospect, would you have taken this course even if it were not required?	Yes 54%
Would you recommend this course to a friend?	Yes 82%

Given these numbers, it is not surprising that students' written comments about the class were overwhelmingly positive. In the Appendix, I have reprinted a sampling of student comments about the course, culled from both the midcourse assessments and the end-of-semester evaluations. Those comments leave little doubt that most students believed the course was successful in meeting its objectives and that it was a highly valuable educational experience.

### **How Might the Course Be Revised to Better Meet Its Objectives?**

Given the success of Comm Arts 100 during the fall semester, major changes in its structure, assignments, and method of instruction do not appear necessary at this time. Indeed, the course has evolved over the past two years. During the spring semester of 1995, it was piloted in four sections of Comm Arts 101. Last year, we offered twenty-two sections under the Comm Arts 100 number and continued to revise and fine tune the course on the basis of feedback from instructors

and students. By the time the new Communication Requirement went into effect this fall, Comm Arts 100 had already been through a lengthy process of development and revision.

This is not to say that we are complacent or adverse to revisions. In fact, we made a number of minor adjustments in the course this semester on the basis of our experience with it during the fall semester. These adjustments include providing students more brief speaking opportunities throughout the semester, putting greater emphasis on topic selection and development during the informative unit, reducing the amount of paperwork required by students in the course, giving students more work on developing research skills and strategies, providing more time for preparation of the persuasive speech, and offering additional review materials for examinations. In addition, individual instructors are always on the lookout for ways to improve their instruction. We have held sessions on several key aspects of the course during our staff meetings this semester, and I have been very impressed with the staff's commitment to doing all they can to make the course as valuable as possible for their students.

### **Suggestions for Revision of Course Criteria**

None at this time.

### **Special Difficulties**

The major difficulty we faced last semester was integrating the library visits into our syllabus. As the student comments reprinted in the Appendix indicate, many students found that the course gave them a working acquaintance with the library system and improved their ability to conduct research for a speech. For every positive comment in this regard, however, there was probably a negative comment about the timing of the library-related instruction—and especially of the classroom sessions conducted at the library. The problem is very simple: Students are not going to get maximum value out of their library visits if those visits are not timed as so to be of use to students as they work on their speeches. Because of the lack of adequate library resources—both staff and instructional space—many students had their library sessions much too late in the course to be of much practical value in Comm Arts 100. Students who encountered this situation expressed considerable unhappiness about it.

This problem is not due to any lack of expertise or effort on the part of the library staff. Indeed, they have made heroic efforts to meet the burdens imposed on them by the new communication requirement. And they have done all they can to integrate the library visitations with our syllabus. The problem is that there are only two appropriately equipped classrooms for library instruction. This is not enough. We will run into the same problems with the timing of the on-site library instruction again this semester—and every semester until the University commits enough resources to create an adequate number of properly equipped classrooms for hands-on instruction in information literacy. In the meantime, some students will continue to be well served by this aspect of the course, but many others will not be.

## Appendix

Here is a sampling of student comments about instruction in Comm Arts 100 this past semester. I could present many more such comments, but these should be enough—especially in combination with the favorable numerical data—to make clear that most students find Comm Arts 100 to be a very worthwhile course.

“My ability to give speeches is getting better and so is my writing.”

“Learning how to be an effective listener has helped me in my other classes. I practice what I learned in here [in] the lectures of my other classes.”

“I have really enjoyed taking Communication Arts 100. It is a valuable class to take because the principles can be applied to more than just speeches, but to writing papers, presenting ideas to people, and communication with others.”

“My ability to write and deliver public speeches, I believe, has improved. . . . I am able to analyze written and oral text[s] through practice with peer critiques and by reading sample speeches.”

“I am learning how to listen and speak more effectively, which will definitely benefit me in the future. I am also learning how to use constructive criticism when critiquing an individual’s speech.”

“My listening skills have improved. I have found that I am able to listen more carefully to what a speaker is saying instead of daydreaming or not concentrating on the speaker.”

“By putting a sentence on the board and correcting the errors . . . I am slowly getting better at writing correct sentences.”

“I can tell that my writing skills have improved. I have also noticed improvements in my ability to deliver and well as listen to speeches.”

“My ability to utilize research skills and strategy has improved greatly. Without this class I would still be lost in the UW library system.”

“Through our speeches and preparation for speeches we are able to improve our ability to deliver effective public speeches. In class through note-taking assignments and speech evaluations, we are definitely improving our listening skills.”

“Our critical thinking skills have been enhanced by exercises that we do in class such as outlining, or reorganizing, information into standard preparation outline form. This really helped us to understand how to outline our own papers and prepare for a speech.”

“In this class we’ve been given the chance to improve our listening skills by having ample opportunities to listen to many speeches.”

“The class . . . is definitely improving my public speaking skills, little by little. I definitely saw improvement just from my first speech to my second.”

“I can feel myself becoming a better listener and critical thinker. The activities in this class really got me familiar with the computer and library system. Not only am I finding things, but as I continue to look for information I find other things also.”

“As many speeches as I have written in high school, I am now learning the correct way to organize, write, and perform a speech. I have also learned that in speaking, there are many other factors besides the speaker that are involved. The listener and the setting are two examples of factors involved in speech performance that I have taken for granted. This class has also helped me to research and organize my materials effectively.”

“I definitely think that the class is improving my ability to write and deliver effective speeches. The speeches are hard and very nerve-wracking, but very good practice—and it is fun.”

“The class is helping me to become a better listener. . . . We have to critique other people's speeches, which helps me pay attention.”

“As someone who had a fair amount of public speaking experience I feel challenged in the course.”

“Overall, this course improves my research skills, critical thinking skill, writing skill and delivering skill.”

“The course was helpful and definitely worth taking.”

“This course . . . has definitely improved my ability to deliver and to write. Also this course has helped me to listen more effectively and has improved my research and organizational skills as a speaker and writer. The most valuable part of the class to me is being able to perform a speech in front of an audience. My fears of public speaking are disappearing and I owe a lot of it to this course.”

“I have learned a lot about the necessary elements that must be included in a speech to make it effective. . . . My ability to think critically is improving. This course has helped me to develop my organizational skills, and I have learned the importance of planning ahead of time.”

“My ability to listen effectively has most definitely improved. Even in my other class lectures, I find myself using some of the skills I have learned.”

“I feel much more comfortable writing and delivering speeches.”

“With this course I am learning how to use this huge library system. I would be completely lost otherwise.”

“I have begun to notice what aspects distinguish good writing and speaking from bad. Comparing different examples has really helped me to improve my ability to analyze speeches and writing. My listening has also improved.”

“At first when I signed up for this class I was not looking forward to it at all. Since then I have come to realize that is it an important class and there is a lot that can be learned from it.”

“In Communication Arts 100, I have learned useful techniques that I can apply to my life outside the classroom. . . . Now when I watch a speech I look at it critically and can point out the good and bad parts or it.”

“When it comes to learning how to write and deliver effective public speeches I know I have come a long way. . . . I have also been able to improve my listening skills and hone my research skills. I am learning new things that will help me in my life during and after college.”

“Putting what I learn into practice certainly helps me learn, and I definitely do this in my Communication Arts class. Simply writing a speech and then having to get up in front of the class and deliver it has been an invaluable experience to me. I love the way the class is taught. We learn necessary facts, watch famous speeches, learn from one another, and learn from ourselves. It is very well organized and effective. I am very glad I took this class.”

“My ability to write and deliver speeches has improved over the course of the semester. . . . My ability to write has been improved by using the textbooks and by the time we have had in class to discuss our individual speeches with our teacher. “

“I am glad that this course concentrates on writing as well as delivering speeches. . . . Also, the course is helping my ability to think critically. I can also apply critical thinking to the analysis of written and oral texts. The self-critique and peer-critique assignments have helped me in this way. This class has also improved my ability to listen effectively to public speeches. I have found myself paying more attention to the speeches of public office.”

“The writing skills I have learned in this class have already helped in my other classes.”

“The thing that helped me the most in this class was improving my writing skills. By having to revise most of my work, I gain a lot from it.”

“This class definitely improved my speech writing and delivering skills at least by 100%.”

“The Communication Arts 100 course at the University of Wisconsin is a great course. . . . I honestly feel that all four objectives of this course are being fulfilled.”

“My ability to think critically about speeches as written texts is improved because I understand more . . . why the speeches are constructed the way they are and what is important and considered desirable in a speech.”

“This class has been extremely helpful to me in learning how to write and deliver public speeches. . . . I have also learned to be a more attentive listener during other speeches.”

“For being a required course, Communication Arts 100 is a fun and challenging course. Overall, I think that this course will be very valuable in my life at the University of Wisconsin and after my college career.”

“The class thus far, in my opinion, is a complete success. As a whole, the class is improving their ability to write and deliver a speech effectively by leaps and bounds.”

“This class has helped me improve my ability to write and deliver public speeches. I’ve also improved as a listener. I can now pick out mistakes in speeches and give points for improvement.”

“This class seems like a very good class to require for freshmen. It offers them an opportunity to learn more about the entire process of college by conveying their thoughts, ideas, and research in an organized fashion. I have benefited greatly from this class.”

“Comm Arts 100 has been meeting the given objectives very well. I feel that I have improved my ability to both write and deliver speeches. I have definitely improved my ability to apply the skills of critical thinking to the analysis of oral texts.”

“The class has forced me to learn many organizational skills that I never paid attention to in the past. I have found public speaking to be much more challenging than simply writing a paper for a class. . . . Although I am having a difficult time with the course, I am still enjoying the work.”

“I have definitely learned a lot about writing and delivering public speeches. . . . I’ve also picked up a lot on critical thinking and understanding exactly what writers are talking about and the point they are getting at in their speeches.”

“I was never a strong writer before. This class has helped me tremendously with that. I have learned how to organize my ideas and make a useful outline.”

“I think the class is very valuable overall. It helps in a lot of subjects other than Communication Arts.”

“One thing that has particularly helped me is the preparation outline for my speeches. Getting the feedback from my professor has helped me polish my final outline, and in turn, my speech. I am really satisfied with the course. . . . Everyone involved with the program deserves a pat on the back!”

“Before this class I didn’t even know how to write a speech, and now I feel that I know how to write and deliver one well.”

“I put more thought into my writing, and as a result I am more satisfied with the output. At the beginning of the semester O was very nervous to get up in front of the class, but now I feel comfortable. I am also able to listen to others, and learn from them, without letting the information go in one ear and out the other.”

“This course has really helped me be a better speech writer. It is good to get your prep outlines for your speeches revised by the instructor before you actually deliver your speech. . . . Researching the topic makes the course even more challenging. The course requires a lot of work for a 3 credit course. It should be a 4 credit course.”

“The course in general is well organized. The syllabus is well thought out. . . . I feel that I’ve shown a definite improvement from my first speech and I feel that I will improve even more, not only in speaking but in my grammar and sentence structure as well.”

“The course so far is going well. I personally have found myself speaking more openly in my other classes and feeling more confident.”

“This course will be one of the most important in college and beyond.”