

English Department
Report of the Creative Writing Assessment Committee

Because Creative Writing Emphasis Majors are also English Majors, they are expected to acquire all of the skills and knowledge specified in the Department's English major assessment plan. Knowledge, of canonical and non-canonical works of literature, an awareness of the contexts of literary and social history, knowledge of important literary forms and techniques, and the ability to analyze and interpret texts and to communicate such interpretations competently in written form, are all essential goals of a good writer. We trust that the English major assessment plan will adequately assess this aspect of the Creative Writing Emphasis. The report that follows focuses only on the creative writing element of the major.

In the Spring semester, 1998, forty-eight senior English Majors with a Creative Writing Emphasis enrolled in four sections of English 695 (Directed Creative Writing), the capstone course required of all graduating creative writing majors. Having completed at least three (and often more) creative writing workshop courses, these majors worked one-on-one with four faculty writers (Ron Wallace, Ron Kuka, Roberta Hill) and one writer-in-residence (Brad Owens) to produce book-length or chapbook-length manuscripts of poetry, fiction, or creative non-fiction.

The instructors met at least bi-weekly with each student to discuss their progress in revising work written over the past several years for workshops, and new work written specifically for the thesis. Because the instructors read work written over a several-year period, and conferred with students at some length about specific published writers and writing in general, they were able to reach a fairly confident assessment of the students' training in creative writing with specific reference to the goals articulated in the assessment document:

The ability to create original literary work in at least one, and preferably two, of three genres: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction.

The ability to imagine broadly, with sensitivity to language and style.

A particular knowledge of the range of contemporary literature, with special emphasis on current modes and practice.

The ability to analyze and evaluate creative work-in-progress, both the student's own and that of other writers.

The ability to read *as a writer*; that is, to read literary works not only for their social, historical, intellectual, formal, and interpretive value, but for their capacity to inspire and generate new work; to see in a finished work its process of being made.

The instructors ranked their students' achievement of the five goals on a scale of "high," "medium," and "low." We defined these three ranking loosely as follows: "High" indicated a truly exceptional student whose work and knowledge approximated that of publishing writers or graduate MFA students elsewhere; "Medium" indicated a very good student whose work was what one might expect from a talented undergraduate writer (promising, but not perhaps yet completely accomplished); "Low" indicated a student whose work was inferior to what one might expect from an undergraduate writer. In all categories but one, approximately 30% ranked "high," 60% ranked "medium," and

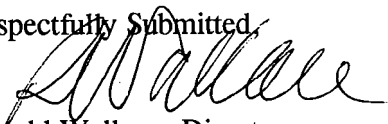
10% ranked “low.” We believe that these figures as we define them are considerably higher than they would be at most undergraduate programs around the country. The one category for which instructors ranked students lower, or were unable to rank them for lack of evidence, was that which specifies a knowledge of the range of contemporary literature. Because few contemporary literature (1960--present) courses are typically offered in the Department, students’ reading may be limited to the texts they encounter in their writing classes (and all classes normally use anthologies of contemporary work) or on their own. It would be useful if more contemporary literature courses were available, especially courses that focussed close reading of texts.

In addition to the assessment provided by instructors in English 695, campus-wide writing competitions provide an indication of the students’ success in achieving our goals for them. For example, six of our writing majors won \$1,000 University Bookstore Awards for Academic Excellence for their theses-in-progress (more than any other department on campus, and more than the creative writing program has ever won before). In addition, approximately twenty students won prizes for their writing in the George B. Hill and Therese Muller competitions. Finally, one of our Creative Writing Institute Fellows and Writer-in-Residence, Allyson Goldin, read a selection of the completed English 695 theses as judge of the Department’s Felix Pollak, Eudora Welty, and Cy Howard Prize awards and reported informally her enthusiastic response to the level of the students’ achievement.

Finally, in addition to the regular course evaluation, senior majors were asked to provide a brief narrative assessment of their experience at Wisconsin with special attention to the level of instruction, the range of courses offered, the faculty and visiting writers, their extra-curricular writing experiences, related courses, advising, etc. Only a handful of students actually turned their assessments in, and their accounts are understandably impressionistic, but they further suggest the students’ satisfaction with the program as a whole. All praised the accessibility and dedication of the instructors and the usefulness of the workshop courses. Several noted how much their writing had improved, and indicated that what they learned in writing classes helped them in other classes as well. Some offered suggestions about the format and level of courses.

An addendum to the assessment plan notes that an important part of the student writer’s experience takes place outside the classroom. This year the creative writing program sponsored, as it does typically, readings and residencies by visiting writers, a national magazine (*The Madison Review*), an undergraduate magazine (*Canvas*), an open mike reading for students, seven campus creative writing prize competitions and five national competitions. All of these activities were successful, as attested by audience size, student participation, and student feedback. The residency of Alicia Ostriker, who met with classes, met with a special workshop of English 695 poets, and gave a public reading, was especially valuable.

Respectfully Submitted,



Ronald Wallace, Director
Creative Writing

Assessment Procedures for The English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis

Preface: The English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis was implemented in 1978 to provide an alternative to the standard English major for literature students with a special interest in creative writing. The required course of study is 27 semester hours in the major, including 15 hours of literature courses and 12 hours of 300-level writing courses. Of the 12 hours of writing, 9 are devoted to creative writing workshops, and 3 are devoted to a Directed Creative Writing Thesis (English 695). Majors, non-majors, graduate students and special students are eligible to apply for workshops. Majors only are eligible for Directed Creative Writing.

The creative writing workshops are designed to provide professional training in the writing of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Some time is spent on theory and technique, some time is spent reading the work of established writers as models, and some short writing exercises are assigned. But the major focus of the courses is the analysis of student writing in the classroom and in individual conferences.

Goals: Because Creative Writing Emphasis majors are also English majors, they are expected to acquire all of the skills and knowledge specified in the Department's English major Assessment plan. Knowledge of canonical and non-canonical works of literature, an awareness of the contexts of literary and social history, knowledge of important literary forms and techniques, and the ability to analyze and interpret texts and to communicate such interpretations competently in written form, are all essential goals of a good writer. In addition, Creative Writing Emphasis majors are expected to acquire the following specialized knowledge and skills:

The ability to create original literary work in at least one, and preferably two, of three genres: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction.

The ability to imagine broadly, with sensitivity to language and style.

A particular knowledge of the range of contemporary literature, with special emphasis on current modes and practice.

The ability to analyze and evaluate creative work-in-progress, both the student's own and that of other writers.

The ability to read *as a writer*; that is, to read literary works not only for their social, historical, intellectual, formal, and interpretive value, but for their capacity to inspire and generate new work; to see in a finished work its process of being made.

Implementation: Since its inception in 1978 the English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis has incorporated a "capstone" course, English 695 (Directed Creative Writing). After completing their 3 required workshops, and typically in the last Spring semester before their graduation, Senior majors work closely with a faculty writer to produce a book-length or chapbook-length manuscript of poetry, fiction, or creative non-fiction. This manuscript usually combines work written in previous workshops (and revised for English 695) with new work. A poet, for example, might revise twenty old poems and write ten new ones; a fiction writer might revise three old stories and write two new

ones. The final manuscript is expected to work as a whole, and be organized and typed as if it were being submitted for publication.

Typically, three or four faculty writers work individually with twelve to fifteen Senior majors each on these projects which represent a culmination of the students' writing experience at Wisconsin. Because the instructors are reading work written over a several-year period, they can reach a fairly confident assessment of the students' training in creative writing. The bi-weekly individual conferences also serve to reflect the students' knowledge of contemporary literature, and ability to analyze and evaluate creative work.

In addition, each Spring semester, students are encouraged to submit their work-in-progress to the University Bookstore Academic Excellence Awards Competition (\$1,000 awards for independent projects completed under the supervision of a faculty member in a course like English 695). A majority of the Creative Writing Emphasis majors do submit their work which is then read by an independent University committee. Over the past five years our students have won more of these awards than students in any other discipline, and committee members have reported back to us informally on the quality of the submissions.

Further, each semester an English Department faculty member Institute fellow (not a member of the permanent creative writing staff) is asked to read a portion of the book-length Creative Theses in order to determine winners of two Departmental Prizes: The \$500 Felix Pollak Poetry Thesis Prize and the \$500 Eudora Welty Fiction Thesis Prize. The faculty judge reports informally on the quality of the year's submissions to the members of the writing faculty.

Finally, as part of the regular course evaluation, English 695 students are asked to include remarks on their experiences as Creative Writing Emphasis majors, with special attention to the four goals listed above.

The three or four English 695 instructors serve as an ad hoc assessment committee, reporting back to the other creative writing teachers in late spring or early fall on the work produced by the graduating Senior majors, on the course and program evaluations, and on the feedback from the outside readers.

Addendum: This assessment plan focusses primarily on the the course work required for the English Major with a Creative Writing Emphasis. We believe that an important part of a student writer's education takes place outside the classroom as well. Thus the Creative Writing program sponsors periodic readings and residencies by distinguished writers who lecture, meet with students (both in class and out) and occasionally read student work. The Program also sponsors two magazines: *The Madison Review*, a national literary magazine, edited entirely by undergraduate students, that publishes the work of established writers from around the country; and *Canvas*, a campus magazine that publishes the work of enrolled students. The program further sponsors seven creative writing contests (Hill, Muller, Pollak, Welty, Derleth, Hart, Howard) annually for currently enrolled students, as well as five national competitions (Halls, Brittingham, Pollak, Young, O'Malley). All of this activity enhances the students' writing experience at Wisconsin and should be taken into account in any overall assessment of the Creative Writing Program. We are, in fact, constantly reassessing these programs (through student response papers, audience attendance figures, quantity and quality of work submitted) and refining them better to meet student needs and desires.

In order better to assess the creative writing program, we are asking all Seniors to provide a brief summary of their experience as English majors with a creative writing emphasis at Wisconsin. In no more than a page or so, please assess the program as a whole with reference to the classes you took (the level of instruction, the range of courses offered, the faculty, visiting writers, etc.), the extracurricular opportunities you may have had (readings, literary magazines, special events, etc.), and any other issues that concern you (advising, prize competitions, related courses, etc.). What are the program's greatest strengths? What suggestions would you have for improvement? Please leave your response with either Lynn or Rosa in 7187 Helen C. White sometime before the end of the semester. Responses should be anonymous (and typed, if possible). Thank you.

Ron, Bobbi, Brad,

As part of our Departmental assessment procedures, we have to estimate the success of our students in acquiring certain knowledge and skills. On the basis of your work with your English 695 (thesis) students this semester, please rank your students on a scale of high, medium, and low in the following categories. (I.e. list the *number* of students whom you would rate as high in their ability to create original literary work, the *number* whom you would rate as medium in that category, and the *number* you would rank low in that category. Do this for each of the five categories. I realize that with some of these, you're speculating).

- 1.) The ability to create original literary work in at least one, and preferably two, of three genres: poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 2.) The ability to imagine broadly, with sensitivity to language and style.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 3.) A particular knowledge of the range of contemporary literature, with special emphasis on current modes and practice.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 4.) The ability to analyze and evaluate creative work-in-progress, both the student's own and that of other writers.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____

- 5.) The ability to read *as a writer*; that is, to read literary works not only for their social, historical, intellectual, formal, and interpretive value, but for their capacity to inspire and generate new work; to see in a finished work its process of being made.

High: _____

Medium: _____

Low: _____