

Towards Consistency in Student Writing Assignments

In the 2008-2009 academic year, the Department of Classics at Miami University, a liberal arts university in southwestern Ohio, received a grant provided by the Howe Center for Writing Excellence to improve the writing assignments in our Thematic Sequence courses. All undergraduates at Miami University must complete the Miami Plan for Liberal Education. This consists of two components, 36 hours of Foundation courses across fields such as English Composition, Humanities, and Natural Science, and 9 hours in a Thematic Sequence (one 100-level course, one 200-level course, and one 300-level course) outside a student's major. The Department of Classics at Miami offers two thematic sequences, one in Classical Civilization and one in Classical Literature. We had three specific objectives: 1) to build more integration and consistency in terms of our expectations of student writing and learning outcomes across courses at the same level (100, 200, 300-level), bearing in mind the need for flexibility given the range of course sizes, individual teaching methods, and course contents, 2) to enhance our overall outcomes with regard to student writing in our thematic sequence, building on skills required at each level, and 3) to clarify expectations for students and instructors within each level of the thematic sequence and with regard to the department's ultimate goals for learning.

This presentation will present our conclusions, outlining the sequence of skills that we seek to instill in all students enrolled in our major, minor, and thematic sequences. We determined first what skills students could expect to gain from studying primary and, eventually, secondary sources, and then how students would use writing to learn and practice these skills, and demonstrate what they have learned. Although not every department has the same institutional requirements as Miami University, the sequence of reading and critical thinking skills can be adapted to other programs so that both faculty and students will have a reasonable set of expectations and at least some common grounds for assignments and assessments that express a commitment to fostering critical thinking.