

Assessment Practices in the Department of English Undergraduate Program in Literature

draft for departmental discussion

The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC) in the Department of English organizes assessment practices for the major and minor. During AY 2006-07, the Committee has been evaluating existing procedures and planning for the future.

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I. Departmental Goals

The Undergraduate program in English is directed toward three primary educational goals. The English Major aims to ensure that all students can demonstrate their grasp of

- 1) **critical practices**, or careful strategies of reading and interpretation, including the conceptual tools necessary to investigate and analyze the complex interactions of texts within their multiple contexts;
- 2) **knowledge of the field**, conceived as the historical significance, cultural diversity, and intellectual richness of literatures in English in different periods and geographical areas; and
- 3) **writing skills**. During study in the English Major, students develop their ability to analyze printed texts and other media, to engage in historical research and analysis, to practice several genres of analytical and descriptive writing, and to communicate effectively in discussion or oral presentation. These skills are all transferable, and they are all fundamental to the core general education objectives of a liberal arts education.

The program welcomes a diverse group of students, knowing that there are many different reasons for becoming an English major. We offer a variety of approaches to the major, in order to encourage students to select the route through which they will pursue our departmental goals. We also encourage students to minor in English – or simply to take English courses, neither majoring nor minoring.

- 1) The distribution requirements outlined below are required of all majors; but they are categorical requirements rather than specific course requirements (with the single exception of the gateway courses) so that students may select within a wide variety of course offerings;
- 2) We offer four special options within the Major – in film, creative writing, professional writing, and feminist studies – so that students may pursue a special interest, if they wish; and
- 3) We offer an Honors Program for high-achieving students. Each of these is described below.

Our departmental **goals for our majors** are reflected in the structure of our requirements for the English Major. These requirements are designed to ensure that all Majors will, repeatedly and through many avenues, be taught to achieve the departmental goals described above. We require all Majors to complete:

- * **Two gateway courses**, 350:219 and 350:220, Principles of Literary Study: Poetry and Fiction. These are skills courses, designed to prepare students for university work by inculcating careful reading, writing and interpretive practices at the beginning of the English Major.
- * **Four historical period field courses**, chosen from among the five historical period fields: medieval, Renaissance, 18th-century, 19th-century, and 20th-century. This requirement is meant to expose all Majors to change or development in literatures in English, across a wide reach of historical time.
- * **One course in literary Theory**. This requirement is meant to introduce students in some detail to methodological questions in the discipline.
- * **One course in African-American, Ethnic American, or Global Anglophone literatures**. This requirement is meant to acquaint students with the cultural diversity of literatures in English.
- * **One 400-level seminar**. This is the capstone course, meant to foster independent thought and research, responsibility for discussion, and synthetic thinking. (The seminar is described in greater detail in item 3a).
- * **Three electives (or more)**.

Beyond the fundamental structure of the Major and minor, we offer students two different structural opportunities to achieve further learning goals:

The **Options within the Major** represent extra course work in addition to the Major Requirements. Students who elect one of the options – in film, creative writing, professional writing, or feminist studies – must take five additional courses, clustered within the option’s specialization.

The **Honors Program** is designed to offer high-achieving students an opportunity for creative thinking, independent research, a close relation with two faculty mentors, and the structured experience of writing a longer paper. Honors is recommended for all students who are interested in preparing themselves for graduate school.

General Education. We encourage all Rutgers students to take 200- and 300-level courses.

II. Disciplinary Learning Objectives

A. Learning Objectives for the Major

1. Learning Objectives for the Gateway Courses (350:219 and 350:220, Principles of Literary Study: Poetry and Fiction)

These are skills courses, designed to prepare each student to become a strong English Major. All students receiving a C or above in 219 or 220 must:

- demonstrate their ability to do detailed, slow, or “close” reading;
- demonstrate their awareness of, and their ability to engage in, various strategies of interpretation;
- write logical, well-developed critical essays using proper citation methods.

Goals specific to 219

Students receiving a C or above in 219 must:

- use fundamental concepts, techniques, and terminology of literary interpretation;
- be able to recognize and analyze figurative language;
- recognize and employ correct terminology for basic metrical patterns;
- recognize and analyze basic forms and stanzas (including ballad stanza, sonnet, heroic couplet, blank verse and free verse);
- recognize poetic drama as a form of poetry as well as drama;
- demonstrate the ability to evaluate structure and form;
- be aware of various contexts within which poetry is written, heard and read (personal, biographical, cultural, historical, theoretical, critical, practical);
- understand basic concepts of literary history (such as genres and subgenres, tradition and the poet’s responses within tradition, homage, parody, allusion, intertextuality);
- be able to distinguish among poems written in different historical periods, different places and from different cultural positions;
- have completed an in-depth study of a few selected poets, representing a variety of diverse cultural backgrounds and thematic concerns.

Goals specific to 220

Students receiving a C or above in 220 must:

- master and employ basic categories and modes of narrative analysis: characterization, plot, dialogue, argument, structure, modes of narration, and genre;
- further explore a range of specific critical approaches: discourse analysis, ethical analysis, social and historical analysis;
- be able to distinguish among fictional prose written in different historical periods, different places and from different cultural positions;
- have completed an in-depth study of a few selected works, representing a variety of diverse cultural backgrounds and thematic concerns.

2. Learning Objectives for other 200- and all 300-level Courses

In the English department, 200-level courses are meant to be introductory or survey courses, whereas 300-level courses are meant to be of intermediate difficulty and, in course design, focused more narrowly and deeply than a survey. 200- and 300-level courses fall under four rubrics: 350 (historical study of English, American, African-American, ethnic American and global Anglophone literatures), 351 (Topics courses, including Creative Writing) 353 (Literary Theory) and 354 (Film). In all English courses, students are generally assessed through their written work, quizzes, midterms and final exams, as well as through classroom presentations and participation.

The following disciplinary goals are meant to be interactive both externally and internally – in other words, they are designed to interact with any core or general education requirements that may be adopted and with any given individual course within the department.

In the 200-level and 300-level courses, English Majors must:

- continue to demonstrate mastery of all learning objectives from the gateway courses.
- actively demonstrate proficiency in analysis of texts specific to each course’s focus and field.
- become aware of change or development in historical time, as represented by courses in the historical period fields.
- demonstrate an understanding of the concept of context and various ways of thinking about relations between and among texts and contexts.
- demonstrate an awareness of the variety of theoretical methods used in literary analysis and a proficiency in one or more of these methods.
- demonstrate an awareness of the cultural diversity represented by literatures in English, and awareness of relations between British, American, African-American, ethnic American, and global Anglophone literatures.
- demonstrate the ability to evaluate and respond to the views of others, to express one’s own ideas and opinions within the context of previous discourse on the topic.
- demonstrate the ability to write clear, well-developed essays in standard American English; to edit and revise one’s work for greater clarity; to formulate a critical argument more complex than those produced in 219-220.

In addition, they should:

- learn to extend methods of textual analysis to paraliterary and non-literary texts, artifacts of visual culture, film and other media, a wide range of cultural objects and phenomena.
- become aware of various approaches to identifying literary language.
- learn to think about the historical development of a canon, including recent and contemporary challenges to, revisions of and expansions of the canon.

3. Learning Objectives for the 400-level seminars

The seminars are restricted to English Majors. One seminar is required, though majors are encouraged to take more than one.

In the seminar, students must:

- continue to demonstrate mastery of all learning objectives from the gateway courses.
- demonstrate that they can take responsibility for the direction of the class by generating or leading discussion.
- demonstrate the ability to do research; to understand the organization of libraries and electronic resources; to perform effective searches of print sources and the web; to assess those resources, distinguishing useful from useless, trustworthy from untrustworthy.
- demonstrate in their discussion and in their writing that they can engage with secondary materials and can place their own arguments within the context of prior discourse.
- write at least one longer paper (12-20 pages), demonstrating the ability to formulate a sustained, clear and well-developed critical argument using secondary sources and proper forms

of citation: in other words, learning to write a longer paper with research apparatus.

B. Learning Objectives for the Honors Program

English Majors in the Honors Program must:

- conduct independent research, engage in creative thinking, and begin to create new knowledge.
- demonstrate the ability to work closely with a faculty advisor.
- complete an honors thesis (about 35 pages).

C. Learning Objectives for the Minor

English Minors must:

- develop an understanding of the field of English, including some exposure to literature written before 1800.
- practice critical writing and analytic skills in relation to a variety of topics and materials.

D. Learning Objectives for Students neither Majoring nor Minor-ing (200-level courses, excepting 219 and 220)

Students neither majoring nor minoring in English may take 300-level courses after they have completed their Expository Writing requirement. However, the 200-level courses are designed especially with these students in mind. Such students will meet the learning objectives of each course, in accordance with the general objectives outlined above.

III. Evaluation of Target Groups

A. Central Role of the Seminar (“capstone course”) in Assessment

Students in the seminar provide a perfect target group. The seminar is required of all majors and is taken in the junior or senior year. Thus, the seminar is a good place to survey students about their experience in the major as a whole. The seminar is also a capstone course, and therefore is a good place to assess the proficiency of the student at an optimum time in the major. We have developed a set of expectations for comprehension, method, and writing ability for the senior seminar (see Learning Objectives for the 400-level seminar, above). We will mandate remediation if these standards are not met – possibly by requiring that the student retake the seminar, or possibly by requiring an additional set of tasks overseen by the Plangere Writing Center.

B. Exit interviews or surveys.

We are exploring this possibility and studying various sorts of survey models.

C. Cross-grading checks of target groups to monitor program effectiveness.

Grades in 219 and 220 will be correlated and cross-checked with grades in the seminar (similar

to the cross-grading practices in the Writing Program).

D. Learning Portfolios

We are interested in and continue to consider the use of portfolios. (See “Reflective Practices in Student Learning,” Middle States pp. 49, 53 and commonly-used measures of critical thinking, p. 52.)

IV. Time Line

In place now: grading (passing and failing, but also awarding of honors) according to stated learning objectives, regular attention to student evaluations.

Future plans (AY 2008-2009 and beyond) include: surveys administered in seminars, and cross-grading exercises implemented, learning portfolios and exit surveys.

V. Administration

The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC), chaired by the Director of Undergraduate Studies, administers assessment.

VI. Use of Information

Assessment information gathered by the UCC will be used by the faculty for remediation of under-performing students, identification of honors students, continuous discussion of grading criteria among the faculty (in order to forge an always-stronger linkage between grades and stated learning objectives), and revision of course content and method. The faculty will also discuss learning objectives (which will appear on all syllabi) and grading criteria with students, in order to make the process more transparent, and to encourage them to become more aware of the criteria upon which their grades depend, with the goal of helping them to improve their performance. Other recommendations will be discussed by the UCC, including matrix-based instruments (rubrics for grading scales).

VII. Assessment Evaluation

Assessment of our assessment practices will take place annually. This annual examination will be organized by the Director of Undergraduate Studies and carried out by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee.

The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee have recently engaged in a comprehensive assessment of the program as a whole. During AY 2005-2006, the UCC reviewed, re-evaluated, and revised the requirements for the Major.

As a preliminary to this re-assessment, the UCC conducted a study of the structure of the

English Major at all AAU Universities. We found that our Major is one of the most comprehensive, coherent and rigorously structured English Majors in the AAU, based on criteria available upon request.

Nevertheless, we made one important change in the Major to reflect our most current thinking about best practices in the field. We took action in AY 2005-2006 to change our African-American requirement to a requirement in “African-American, ethnic American, and global Anglophone literatures,” in order to signal the greater range of diversity in the field as global awareness grows in every area, and in order to foster growth in all three of these areas of our department’s offerings.