

A Guide to the Writing Proficiency Requirement

Introduction to the Writing Proficiency Requirement

The Writing Proficiency Requirement (WPR) is one aspect of the university-wide General Education (Gen. Ed.) Program. The WPR is a graduation requirement for all students who are working towards an undergraduate degree at UMass/Boston. The Writing Proficiency Evaluation (WPE) refers to the way that the university-wide Writing Proficiency Requirement is met in three of the five colleges at UMass/Boston: College of Nursing and Health Sciences (CNHS); the College of Liberal Arts (CLA); and the College of Science and Mathematics (CSM). Students in the College of Management (CM) and the College of Public and Community Service (CPCS) must meet the University requirement. Every student at UMass/Boston must demonstrate an intermediate level of writing proficiency, even if they do so in a different manner.

Students in the College of Management demonstrate writing proficiency through required coursework. **Students in the College of Management can find information regarding the WPR at this site:**

http://www.management.umb.edu/undergrad/undergrad_wpt.php

Students in the College of Public and Community Service demonstrate competencies with a writing portfolio. **Students in the College of Public and Community Service can find information regarding the WPR at this site:**

http://www.cpcs.umb.edu/undergrad/curriculum_degree_requirements_portfolio.htm

Students in CLA, CSM, or CNHS are required to take the Writing Proficiency Evaluation after you have taken the Intermediate Seminar and reached 60 credits. The Writing Proficiency Evaluation (WPE) is an assessment of the skills that you have developed in your General Education (Gen. Ed.) course work. WPE applies to all students in these three colleges; students in CNHS, CLA, and CSM need to read this manual carefully because some policies do differ from one College to another. In CNHS, CLA, and CSM, there are two ways that we evaluate your writing to meet the WPR: a timed essay exam; or, an essay that is accompanied by a portfolio of papers that were written in courses at UMB. Both of these options are called the Writing Proficiency Evaluation, and either one fulfills the WPR.

An important feature of our website is to offer you some advice that we think will help you to prepare for the WPE. Perhaps the most important way to prepare for the WPE is to understand the role that the **Elements of Writing Proficiency** plays in the WPE. In the General Education (Gen. Ed.) program courses are constructed to develop certain capabilities and student learning outcomes; the WPE assesses a student's ability to perform the capabilities

and program outcomes. Your Gen. Ed. course work is a pathway to help you prepare for the WPE. The particular capabilities and work habits, which are listed and described in the **Elements**, are what the WPE will assess. The **Elements** is the list of the capabilities and work habits that the faculty will use as the criteria to judge whether or not your writing is at an immediate level of proficiency. It is important that you read and reread the **Elements** so that you understand the criteria used to evaluate your writing proficiency.

Remember that the goal of the WPE as an aspect of the Gen. Ed. Program is for you acquire the skills and habits of mind generally defined as critical thinking. Critical thinking, which include critical reading, writing, and verbal reasoning, will develop as you progress through your first two years at UMB. Although the Gen. Ed. courses are designed to help you prepare for the WPE, **you are responsible for monitoring your own capabilities through self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting as you progress towards completing 60 credits and the WPE.**

Finally, it is important for you to collect any course papers that meet the portfolio requirements as you take your Gen. Ed. courses. If you collect course papers, you will be able to have a choice regarding which mode of writing assessment you feel most comfortable taking; if you collect appropriate papers, and decide to use the Portfolio option to fulfill the WPR, you will have the three required supporting papers.

If you have any questions please phone or come by the Writing Proficiency Office (WPO). We are located in the Campus Center 2/2100. Our telephone number is (617) 287-6330. We will make every effort to provide you with information, practical advice, tutoring, workshops, and support to help you meet this requirement in a timely way.

The Elements of Writing Proficiency (Brief Version)

The Elements of Proficiency are the criteria that faculty readers use to evaluate your proficiency in critical reading, thinking, and writing. The Elements are directly related to particular aims of the General Education program (Gen. Ed.). The Gen. Ed. program is based on the premise that frequent consideration of complex problems helps you to develop the specific capabilities most often used in critical reading, writing, and thinking.

You are not expected to have mastered all of the capabilities completely; rather, you are expected to “demonstrate intermediate proficiency in writing.” This means that your writing will not be graded as a “retake” merely because it contains a few spelling or punctuation errors. However, it is unlikely that you will pass the exam without demonstrating an intermediate

mastery of the higher order thinking criteria outlined in the *Elements of Writing Proficiency*.

The elements are separated into three categories: critical thinking, critical reading, and effective writing. Each of these categories is assigned a percentage weight in evaluating your essay. The categories and elements are listed below in an abbreviated form; there is a printer friendly version of the full descriptions called, *Elements of Writing Proficiency and Evaluation Rubric*, in the menu of the WPR website.

Critical Thinking, Effective Use of Your Own Ideas: Evaluation Area 1 = 40% of grade

- **Develop a sustained clear position, often by using a thesis, central idea, or hypothesis** throughout the whole paper. The question will instruct you how to focus on the issue; you should hold that focus throughout the whole paper. Generally, your paper should go into depth and full detail about a single topic. Deep focus allows you to inquire into a particular issue. Full detail and depth might mean you do these types of things: examine evidence closely; assess the source and quality of evidence; distinguish between facts and opinions; and/or, acknowledge, analyze, and evaluate value judgments in the readings and in your own position.
- **Synthesize source materials to support your position.** Develop your position with clear references to specific arguments in the reading set. Quote, frame, and analyze passages with the clear purpose of supporting your position. To create a context for your position, you need to summarize and attribute any ideas that you use from the readings.
- **Organize your argument in a clear and appropriate sequence** of support for the thesis, central idea or hypothesis. Sustain your position throughout the whole paper by ordering it with a clear organizing principle. Each paragraph contains one idea, supported and developed fully, that supports your thesis; paragraphs are "linked" in a chain of reasoning that develops your argument persuasively.

Critical Reading , Effective Use of Multiple Sources: Evaluation Area 2 = 40% of grade

- **Identify, Summarize, and Define key terms or categories of classification** in the reading set. Often, the purpose of academic reading and writing is to create or contest a definition of a complex concept. Often, a writer organizes a pattern of information around definitions. Or, a writer develops a definition that contains value judgments (i.e. "Intelligence is ..."). Try to identify the key terms and definitions in the readings; then, establish what the readings have in common, or equally important, what definitions

are contested. Summaries are generalizations that condense complex ideas, sometimes by noting structures of classification, stages in a process, or abstract connections that organize an argument. You may identify a topic or possibly supporting evidence for your essay by identifying, summarizing and defining the key terms in the readings.

- **Analyze, and Evaluate** the problem/question at issue (and/or the sources' arguments) in the reading set. Summarizing and defining the ideas in the readings starts the process of taking an idea apart so you can analyze and evaluate it. Analysis often occurs in the act of summary when you identify the key elements of an argument; however, analysis goes further than just noting the key elements. Analysis is a type of critical reading that works with the meaning of a text; perhaps reading with or against an argument or perhaps evaluating it from your position. Evaluation acknowledges various perspectives, and explains your position with a reasoned presentation of your evidence. Evaluation is the weighing of complex issues in terms of the strengths and weakness of the various perspectives.

- **Synthesize and assess** the key assumptions, concepts, themes, or ideas in the reading set. Your paper pulls together the various assumptions, ideas and issues in the readings and assesses them. Then, you synthesize the ideas so that they are connected to your position. The processes of synthesis often occurs as the continuation of analysis and evaluation; if analysis is the process of taking an idea apart to see and understand its structure, synthesis is often the process of putting an idea back in to a whole to establish its connection to your position.

Elements of Writing, Effective Use of Writing Skills: Evaluation Area 3 = 20% of grade

- **Organize paragraphs**, both globally and locally.

Global: Each paragraph signals a new idea; and it signals how that new idea is clearly related to the paragraphs that come before and after it. Check paragraph length, unity, and order.

Local: Focus on one idea per paragraph; each sentence in the paragraph connects clearly to the meaning of other sentences. Develop ideas; often this is done when sentences pick up one idea from a previous sentence and advance it further by analyzing the idea more fully.

- **Sentences should express your meaning clearly.** Avoid these things: using clichés; using common place knowledge; using sentences that are underdeveloped or overdeveloped. Organize sentences to make your meaning clear and understandable to the readers. Check for wordiness, spelling, word choice, and mechanics.

Advice to Help You Prepare for the WPE:

Once you have selected a reading set, read and reread each article carefully. When the exam is graded, your readers are not judging your essay by your general knowledge of, or unsupported opinions about, the topic. **You are expected to refer specifically and accurately to ideas and arguments in the assigned readings.**

You will need to study the readings with care in order to understand their arguments and positions thoroughly. You will want to analyze precisely how the articles in a set of readings are related to each other. For most students, this means spending at least several hours a day over a period of three or four days; some students like to prepare the set gradually over the full six weeks. Adequate preparation requires that you do more than skim the articles once or twice. The articles are complex and you are expected to re-read them. The questions will ask you to focus your analysis on an important relationship between all or most of the readings in that set.

Critical reading starts with searching for information, but you need to write more than a “book-report” for the WPE. Remember that your essay will be evaluated by the critical reading and writing criteria that are listed and explained in the **Elements of Writing Proficiency** and the Evaluation Rubric.

Careful reading for either the timed essay or a new portfolio essay includes these strategies:

1. Make sure you identify and understand the key terms that the various authors use to develop their arguments. The more accurately you can define the key terms, the better your analysis of the issue will be.
2. Demonstrate that you are correctly summarizing an author's ideas; cite important (and short) passages from the readings as evidence.
3. As you read an article, try to formulate probable exam questions for the timed essay. Make marginal notes only on the printed side of the readings; your notes should identify the structure of an author's argument, and particularly the evidence used in each paragraph to support and develop the author's thesis, hypothesis, or central idea. This will help you form your own ideas about the problem presented in the readings; and, it will allow you to locate passages to analyze and to support your thesis or central idea when you start to write.
4. Analyze and evaluate the major ideas and topics from each reading and see how they are related to the other articles. Try to establish particular connections by naming the conclusions that each author arrives at about

- the problem. Do some of the articles seem to support each other or does one seem to refute another? Does one author argue with more persuasive evidence than the others?
5. When you read and reread the question, look for the words that tell you what concept you are expected to analyze. What relationship are you being asked to focus on -- e.g., does the question ask you to explain how some ideas or issues in the readings relate to other material or issues or ideas in the readings? Look for key concepts that you must address, and look for words that limit or qualify your tasks. You may want to write the important terms in the question on your scratch paper. Doing so may help you decide how to organize your essay.
 6. Generally, the readings will discuss the same problem, events, or issues, but from different points of view. How do they propose alternative ways of understanding or evaluating the material? Do the articles represent an historical sequence? Are some of the readings primary sources and others secondary sources of information? Or, are some of the articles analytical, while, others present a strong interpretation?
 7. If you can articulate a relationship among the articles, **you have a way of synthesizing them around your thesis, hypothesis, or central idea.** Can you generate another possible explanation of the problem? Are there aspects from the argument of one or more authors that support your explanation? Do you think that one author has the best explanation for the problem? If so, why? What do the other authors miss that this author gets right? Does any author have weaknesses in his or her argument, or do they all?
 8. Do not oversimplify the ideas in the readings or try to polarize them if they are not totally contradictory. Most often the question asks you to discuss a range of probability. Organize your discussion around your position rather than by lining up the readings into a pros and cons format. Acknowledge that the authors' viewpoints are complex or that their judgments are often qualified or framed by particular intentions.
 9. Organizing or clustering related ideas is only one part of planning. Planning also involves listing definitions of key terms, summarizing particularly important and complicated ideas that are central to your argument, evaluating if there is a general agreement about the key terms between the authors in a reading set, evaluating if each author has gathered evidence to support their definition, and forming some tentative short responses that start to stake out your position on the disputed terms or your response to the disputed issue (thesis statement). You need not complete these activities in any set order. Instead, you will probably shuttle back and forth among them. As you generate ideas, collect data, and organize on scratch paper, just use key words or phrases that you can turn into sentences once you begin to draft your essay or that indicate the full quotation that you plan to include.
 10. As you draft your essay, concentrate on expressing your ideas simply and clearly through analysis of quotes. It is important to choose quotations that

- demonstrate your exact point, that provide evidence to support your thesis, or central idea, and that you analyze in close and sufficient detail. Never assume that the reader understands what you want them to see; always lead the reader into the quote and then afterwards analyze how it proves your point.
11. As you are revising, check your paragraphs to make sure that they are unified and that each supports one aspect of your thesis. Remember that each paragraph should lead to the next paragraph. Transitions between paragraphs help show the structure of your argument because they act as signposts to readers, helping to show them the connection or relationship between your ideas.

If you have analyzed and synthesized the readings carefully, you should be substantially prepared to start writing your essay for the WPE.

Advice for the Timed-Essay Exam:

1. The exam will last for three hours. That will give you enough time to choose the question you prefer, plan your essay, draft the essay, and edit your essay. You will probably not have time to re-copy your essay, but you will not need to if you follow the suggestions below.
2. If you know what issues the readings raise and what the authors' positions are in advance, then you will save precious time during the exam because you will not have to reread the articles to find out.
3. When you have drafted your essay, reread it to make certain that you have answered the question, and said what you meant. Be especially careful to mention the names of authors whose ideas you use and to place quotation marks around and carefully attribute any words or phrases taken from the readings. Place page references in parentheses after quoting.
4. Edit it and check for correctness. You will not be penalized if you make corrections in your bluebook; rather, the readers expect you to edit your draft. In order to make your corrections more understandable **please write on every other line of the blue book**. That will leave enough space for you to insert corrections after you cross out what you want to change. Use a caret mark (^) and, if necessary, draw an arrow to your correction.

You may find it easier to write your first paragraph once you have a pretty good idea of what your essay will be about, but some students like to leave the first page of the bluebook blank and write the first paragraph last.

Portfolio Requirements

A Writing Proficiency Portfolio **has two components: first, one new essay that is based on a reading set and a question distributed by the WPO; and, course papers**. The new essay must be **at least five full typed**

pages in length. On the cover page of the new essay students must write this statement: "I certify that this essay is entirely my own work and has not been revised or altered by anyone else." The statement must be signed by the student verifying its truth. **Second**, a portfolio must contain three or four graded course papers that must total 15 complete pages of analytical writing, and demonstrate proficiency according to the criteria outlined in the *Elements of Writing Proficiency*; each of the supporting papers must be certified by the course instructor. Listed below is the complete list of criteria for a portfolio:

The course papers must meet all of these criteria:

- Each must be a graded paper written for a course taught at UMass Boston (such as, but not limited to, English 102, First Year Seminar, Intermediate Seminar).
- At least one of the three papers must come from a course at the 200 level or higher (such as a Intermediate Seminar).
- All of the course papers must be analytical essays written in English.
- At least two of the three or three of the four supporting essays must be based on the analysis of two or more readings. The final paper may be based on the analysis of one reading or on the analysis of information gathered through observation, interview, or experimentation.
- Each paper must come from a different course.
- Each portfolio must have three or four course papers **that total fifteen full pages. No single paper can be less than three full pages and one paper must be at least five full pages** (double-spaced, 1" margins maximum, 12-point type, on 8 1/2" X 11" paper).
- Each paper must be certified as the original graded paper (not a copy or a photocopy). If the original was handwritten, a typed transcription (not a revision) must be attached to the original. Please start the process of certification as soon as you can; the closer it gets to the end of the semester, the harder it becomes to connect with instructors to get papers certified.
- Each original graded paper must have attached to it a completed certificate signed by the teacher who graded it. (A department chair may sign the certificate only if the teacher is no longer here or is on leave.)
- Just because you have grades on your supporting papers does not automatically mean the portfolio will be a pass because the criteria that a teacher uses may not match those in the *Elements of Writing Proficiency*.
- Students must fill out completely and sign a Portfolio Submission Form and hand it in with his or her portfolio. Both the Certification and the Portfolio Submission forms can be downloaded at <http://www.umb.edu/academics/wpr/forms.html>.
- Completed portfolios must be submitted in an envelope or folder before 5 p.m. on the due date.

Note an Exception to three or four-supporting-papers requirement:

All students who are required to take an Intermediate Seminar should attempt the WPE after completion of the course. **A new transfer student**, who will have accumulated 75 or more credits at the end of his/her first semester at

UMB, may submit only two or three supporting papers that total 10 full pages, in addition to the required new essay. As stated above, **no single paper can be less than three full pages and one paper must be at least five full pages.** At least one of the two papers must come from a course at the 200 level or higher. The Portfolio Submission Form has a space for you to list the supporting papers; **a new transfer student should use the space provided for the third supporting paper to write that he or she is a new transfer student and the date that he or she has transferred to UMB.**

Important:

3. The new essay, based on readings and a question distributed by the Writing Proficiency Office, must be a full five typed pages or more in length (see format requirements above) and must contain, on its cover page, this statement, signed by the student verifying its truth: "I certify that this essay is entirely my own work and has not been revised or altered by anyone else."

4. Students must fill out completely and sign a Portfolio Submission Form and hand it in with his or her portfolio.

5. Completed portfolios must be submitted in an envelope or folder before 5 p.m. on the due date.

Important:

a.) Please see, http://www.umb.edu/student_services/student_rights/code_conduct.html to understand the university policies on academic honesty and plagiarism. This policy applies to all papers submitted in a Writing Proficiency Portfolio. Violating this policy has serious consequences, which may include suspension or expulsion. If faculty graders question whether a portfolio paper is the student's own work, then additional evidence may be requested as part of an investigation. Students should retain copies of drafts for the new portfolio essay until after the grades have been received.

b.) Discussing the readings in a workshop or with friends is an appropriate way to help prepare to write the essay. However, it is not permissible to engage the assistance of another person, whether for payment or not, in writing, revising, or editing the final essay. Students composing essays on a word-processor may use spell-checkers for light editorial assistance.

c.) Portfolios are kept on file for about 10 years. If you wish to reclaim your original essays, make photocopies of your graded papers before turning them in. When you have successfully completed the proficiency requirement you may exchange the copies for your originals. If you have questions, call the Writing Proficiency Office (617 287-6330) and make an appointment with a counselor.