# Towards a Plan for Communication Skills in the New BA

In this space I’ll try to sketch out some ideas for how a new BA structure might account for the development of communication skills in our undergraduates. We already have a base in first year; we could add two further components—one in second year and a second one as a capstone exercise—to give shape to the work we already require of students.

## First year “W” course

**Current requirements for the first year**. Currently Arts students take 6 credits of 100-level English or a combination of 3 credits of 100-level English and 3 credits of 100-level Writing Studies. While English and Film Studies is currently reviewing the curriculum of the 100-level courses, at the moment they devote approximately 30% of the course to writing development.

The Writing Across the Curriculum program has done studies of writing assignments in Political Science and Community Service Learning (CSL) that show that every course in each of these two programs require students to write at least one assignment. In Political Science, the average number of writing assignments in all courses is 3 (2.5 in 100-level courses); in CSL the average number of writing assignments is 6. To graduate with a major in Political Science, **students currently write in excess of 60 writing assignments**. It may be something of a leap of faith, but it seems likely that most humanities and social sciences require similarly intense writing experiences. In the fine arts, my own experiences working with Art History, Sociology, English, History, Women’s Studies, East Asia Studies, Economics, MLCS, and Religious Studies classes confirms that they, too, require numerous writing assignments from their students.

**Ideas for new requirements**. Offer any department who wants to take on the task of introducing students to academic writing the opportunity to schedule 100-level classes in their discipline that would devote at least one-third of course to developing student writing skills.

## Second year “W” course

**Writing in the major**. Students who took courses in their major would be required to take a course designated as a “W” course by the department as a requirement for their major. This course would have responsibility for explicitly communicating the ways scholars in the discipline use writing in the production of knowledge: what kinds of evidence are valued, what systems are used for documenting the use of knowledge produced by others, what genres of texts are typically used in this discipline. This course could be an existing course that is revised somewhat to include explicit instruction in how to write in the major; consequently, this requirement would not necessarily require the development of a new course.

## Third or Fourth year Capstone Portfolio

**Portfolio of written work**. Students would be required to create an online portfolio of their best written work from their undergraduate courses. The exact requirements of the portfolio might vary from one program to another, but the broad outlines might be faculty-wide:

* perhaps 8-10 written projects, half of which had been revised;
* perhaps a total of about 50-75 pages of finished prose in the portfolio.

Students might be required to take a course such as “WRS 400: The Writing Portfolio” that would help students develop their writing style and support feedback that would lead to revisions of the work included in the portfolio. The instructors of this course would grade the portfolio, perhaps in conjunction with some one from the discipline of the student. In addition to the WRS version of the portfolio course, departments might want to offer discipline-specific versions of the portfolio course. For students who wanted to use the portfolio as part of graduate school applications, a department-specific course might have advantages.

## A Draft Proposal

In short, this vision of the communication skills requirement would consist of three requirements for the new BA:

1. “W” course at the first year level (English 100-level and WRS courses would count for this, but other departments could also offer courses that would count).
2. “W” course in writing in the major at the 2nd year level (an existing course + writing instruction).
3. A writing portfolio requirement.

These requirements, together, would

1. function as an introduction to academic writing;
2. provide clear information about how to write in a particular field; and
3. generate a capstone assessment that would provide employment application material and/or graduate school application documents.

A benefit to our faculty could be that the portfolio might also function as an assessment tool for our faculty of the level of work produced by our graduates.

Roger Graves

Director, Writing Across the Curriculum