English Department Assessment Plan

Saint Peter’s College

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Mission

In accordance with the mission of the College, the mission of the Saint Peter's College English Department is to develop a lifelong appreciation for literature and for writing as relevant preparation for a life of learning, leadership and service in a diverse and global society. The study of literature advances the mission of the College by preparing students to be enlightened members of the community and by providing examples of the value of leadership and service.

Goals

The achievement of the mission depends on the skills identified as goals by the English Department. Both the Mission of the College and that of the department inform the Department's goals.

1. To instill a lifelong appreciation for literature as an expression of cultural and ethical values
2. To foster an appreciation for a variety of cultures and ideas
3. To promote critical thinking
4. To encourage close and critical reading
5. To develop effective writing skills
6. To develop clear speaking skills

Continued learning and effective leadership are facilitated by the habits of careful reading and critical analysis. Communication skills are essential for leadership in any arena. In addition, the works covered in English classes, from the ancient Greeks to Shakespeare to Black American writers, foster an appreciation for a variety of cultures and ideas.

Program Objectives

1. In composition classes, students will learn to write clear, logical, competently developed essays, following basic rhetorical models, and employing correct, standard English.
2. In composition classes and in partnership with the Common Reading Program, students will develop deeper cognitive, analytic and rhetorical skills in both reading and writing.
3. In composition classes, students will learn to conduct college-level library research on topics of serious inquiry and to document their research according to the MLA format.
4. In core literature classes, students will develop techniques for reading literary works of different genres, eras, and cultures.
5. In core literature classes, students will learn to use a variety of methods of interpretation to understand, analyze, respond to and evaluate literature.

6. In English elective classes, students will learn to synthesize the results of literary research into coherent, well organized papers and/or presentations.

7. In English elective classes, students will learn to employ methods of critical interpretation based on close and careful reading of the texts.

8. In English elective classes, students will develop an understanding of the cultural, historical and aesthetic contexts of important periods in English and American literature.

9. English elective classes will offer students the opportunity to explore serious works of literature in translation and their cultural contexts, as well as the literature of theater and film.

Curriculum Organization

All English majors are required to take the Survey of English Literature I and II. These courses provide a chronological review of the important works of English literature and the periods that produced them. In addition, all English majors must include one course from each of five chronological groups among their nine English electives. This requirement provides additional background in English literature; however, the range of choice within each group (from three to six courses) insures the opportunity to study American literature as well as works in translation. The five groups are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Periods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Beginnings to Fifteenth Century</td>
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<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries</td>
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<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries</td>
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<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Nineteenth Century</td>
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<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Twentieth Century</td>
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</table>

Students may choose their remaining four English electives from a range of courses based on genre, theme, skill or film study, such as Tragedy and Comedy, The Historical Novel, Creative Writing and Film Noir.

The Department encourages independent work through its Hopkins Scholar Program. The two-semester commitment to independent research may be done in conjunction with the Honors Program thesis requirement and permits serious students of literature to work in a field of their choice under the direction of a member of the Department.

Student Objectives in Specific Courses

The degree to which individual courses advance the stated objectives will vary, depending on the content of the course. For example, British Novels will not advance Objective #9, nor will Objective #8 be the primary focus of Detective Fiction. However,
it is understood that every course will address Objective #6 and #7. The table provided on pages 6 links types of courses with the Department’s objectives.

**Current Assessment Practices**

Through its Writing Program, the English Department provides instruction in the basic skills of college level writing. Based on their performance on the Accuplacer Writing Test, students are placed in one of five levels of composition. At the end of each semester, students take a proficiency test that is graded on a holistic scale by members of the English Department. A passing score on the proficiency test allows students to progress to the second half of the composition course, or, having completed that class, to the core literature courses.

To this point, the department has not had, in its core or elective literature courses, a systematic means of assessing student outcomes beyond the measures employed by individual instructors in the classroom. These instruments of assessment include quizzes, tests, essays and papers. The standards for grading this work and the formula for arriving at a final grade have remained the province of the professor. English majors’ progress toward the degree is monitored by departmental advisors and reviewed by the Chair in the students’ senior year. In 1989 the Department conducted an extensive survey of its graduates; the process was repeated in 1996. Graduates were questioned about their current careers, the relevance of their English major in their professions and the degree to which their work in English instilled specific skills, e.g. writing and analyzing clearly and communication with others (“A New Life After the English Major”).

**The English Department Assessment Plan**

When the department drew up its first assessment plan in 2001, it was similar to the present document (except for the objectives, which have been significantly revised in order to distinguish them more sharply from the goals and to make them more quantitatively measurable). Early in the subsequent series of departmental discussions, however, a consensus developed that probably the most valuable approach we could adopt would be to tighten our assessment of student writing in our core literature courses by explicitly and regularly reminding students that their writing should demonstrate proficiency in the basic skills covered in the composition courses that are a prerequisite for the core literature courses, and that failure to demonstrate such proficiency in a written assignment will adversely affect the grade. We also recognized that these demands depended upon the certainty that our composition courses were, in fact, providing the training students needed to meet the expectations of the core courses.

As a result, we reviewed the practices in our composition classes. The Director of the Writing Program created a more explicit set of standards for grading and a more specific set of guidelines for composition faculty. These guidelines included a greater emphasis on grammar instruction as well as requirements for the number and types of student essays. Copies of these directives are included in the appendix to this document.
Having established clear expectations for student performance in our Writing Program, we felt confident in applying those expectations to written work in our core literature classes. We created a statement of departmental guidelines for written work for distribution in those classes. This statement has been circulated to students in their core classes for three years, and a copy is included in our appendix. We have been unable to devise a way to objectively demonstrate that the document has led students in the core courses to take more pains with their written work, but there is a general sense that it has made a difference. Many of us have found that it has made us more rigorous about standards, less tolerant of careless or shoddy work. We are, one might say, giving lower grades with greater confidence.

The logical next step might be to write a version of this statement adapted for our English electives. It has also been suggested that the current version might be helpful to our colleagues in other departments, who so often deplore the writing of their students but are unable or unwilling to mark individual errors as thoroughly as most of us do. They might be glad to be able to make a general comment to the effect that a paper has been assigned a low or failing grade because it displays weaknesses in a specific area or areas covered in the composition classes. They need feel no obligation to circle all such errors; the student should be able to locate them once they are named or categorized.

Departmental assessment plan will build upon current practices. The role of the assessor here to be repeated, having a student and of the advisor in mentoring will remain unchanged; however, steps will be taken to ensure a more systematic assessment of the performance of our students.

1. The Department has been and will continue to discuss a variety of assessment approaches, both traditional and innovative.

2. As the Department moves from a review of assessment practices in the composition and core classes to those in use in electives, it will consider the possibility of a departmental examination to determine the efficacy of our program. The exams will be read and evaluated by members of the Department Committee. At this point, we do not anticipate using the exam as a means of evaluating individual students. Issues to be determined by the Department Committee include:

   a. Exam content
   b. Appropriate point in the student’s career to administer exam
   c. Evaluation standards
   d. Record-keeping details, e.g., monitoring students for eligibility to take exam, tabulating results, etc.

3. The Department Survey, administered in 1989 and in 1996, has been a valuable source of information. The Assessment Committee must consider the survey and determine ways to use the information it generates. Issues for the Committee to decide include:
a. A schedule for administering the survey. Seven years separated the existing surveys. If it is agreed that that is an appropriate interval, the Department should distribute another survey before the end of 2008.
b. A report on the survey results should be distributed to members of the department.
c. The Assessment Committee and the Department should determine what, if any, changes are indicated by the survey results.

4. An effort should be made to keep all Hopkins Scholars papers in an accessible place in the Department. Currently, copies of these papers are kept by the instructors and, if the papers were Honors Theses, copies are available in the Honors Department. The Department should endeavor to make these papers available to students and professors in the Department as evidence of student accomplishment. In addition, the Department will keep on file samples of student papers demonstrating strong, average, and weak work in all of its courses.
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<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Genre Electives</th>
<th>Core Courses</th>
<th>Composition</th>
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<tr>
<td>7. To employ methods of critical reading of the texts.</td>
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<td>6. To synthesize results of literary research in well-organized papers and presentations.</td>
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<td>5. To use a variety of methods of literary analysis and evaluative literature interpretation to understand literature works of different genres.</td>
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<td>4. To develop techniques for reading research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. To conduct college-level library research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. To develop deeper critical, analytic, and methodological skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. To write clear, logical, conceptually developed essays.</td>
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GUIDELINES FOR GRADES IN COMPOSITION COURSES

Our overall goal for any section of any level of composition is to have students produce work that meets certain general standards. Each essay and research paper must:

* -- have a clearly stated thesis
* -- have sufficient and varied support drawn from more than mere personal observation
* -- remain focused throughout
* -- be mechanically proficient
* -- come to a logical conclusion based on the thesis presented.

However, as we know, a paper can meet all the above criteria with varying degrees of success, as can a body of work for a full semester.

To better help students understand the reasoning behind grades assigned to individual papers and the complete body of coursework, consider using the following guidelines:

A (4.0 – Outstanding)

For an individual paper to be worthy of an “A”, the classification of “outstanding” must be met consistently. Does the essay meet an ideal standard of sophisticated thinking, elegance of style, and technical proficiency? Is there real depth to the argument? Is there a certain fluidity of style that makes for effortless reading? Does it truly engage the reader with polished rhetoric? Is it basically error-free in mechanics and in logic? Does it inform, engage, entertain, uplift – or some combination of these goals?

If the answer is yes to these questions, the paper deserves an “A”. If it is lacking in some respect or is not as polished as it could be, it is not “Outstanding” and therefore not “A” material.

To achieve a solid “A” for the course, the student’s work in all aspects (in-class, first drafts, revisions, research, discussion) would have to be consistently superior. Encourage students to think deeply about their topics and to read a variety of writing styles to better enhance their own. Superficial thinking and merely competent writing have no place in this classification.

A minus (A- … 3.7 – Excellent)

A paper in this range exhibits great skill, clear and creative thinking, good style, and technical proficiency. However, it differs from a solid “A” in that there is yet some work to be done, be it in development or technical points or even clarification of facts. Arguments presented are supported with credible professional resources, such as academic journals and definitive texts in a field of study. Personal opinion is thus bolstered by such materials, highlighting the original approach and in turn making the new insights that much more credible. An “A-” paper is well-crafted but generally does not show as much sophisticated thought as an essay that rates a solid “A”.

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To achieve an “A minus” for the course, the student’s work in all aspects must be notable and truly strive for felicity of expression. The pattern of work shows that the pieces done were fairly polished, showcasing some measure of sophisticated thought and approach.

**NOTE:** Since students in the “A/A-” range are adept at self-editing for mechanics, remember that your job as instructor/editor falls more in the line of helping them to a greater sophistication of style, support, and defense.

**B+ (3.3 ... Very Good)**

A paper that gets a “B+” shows evidence of solid competence in mechanics and argument while featuring a unique voice and obvious style. This level paper showcases a distinct writing personality, albeit one that still requires considerable polish.

Achieving a “B+” for the course indicates that the effort all semester shows growth in development of style and greater understanding and application of more advanced support. This body of work is very readable and demonstrates clear, fine thinking on the part of the student who has an emerging awareness of his/her own style and is skilled at self-editing with a moderate amount of guidance from the instructor.

**B (3.0 ... Good)**

A “B” paper is consistently clear and well-organized, has sufficient detailed support, utilizes a somewhat elevated vocabulary, presents a logical argument while neatly avoiding logical fallacies, and offers an appropriate conclusion based on the thesis originally presented.

Papers at this level demonstrate what most would consider “college level writing”. The reasoning for defense does not fall into specious patterns and sentence structure is varied enough to display the beginnings of individual style. Mechanics may need some editing to adjust for smoothness of flow but are generally proficient.

To achieve a solid “B” for the course, the body of work for the semester must demonstrate a consistent level of proficiency in argument, style, support, and mechanics, and, most importantly, be free of convoluted thought and structure. It must, above all, remain readable.

**B minus (B- ... 2.7 Above Average)**

A “B-” paper demonstrates college level skill in all areas but is not as precisely presented as a solid “B” or “B+”. The arguments presented are usually not as fully developed as they need to be and the mechanics and syntax are less than precise. A paper of this grade designation generally presents good ideas but may not support or develop them fully and may not make clear connections between ideas meant to bolster the thesis.
Having a “B-” as the final grade reflects a body of work that demonstrates a dedicated effort to the process of writing and research. The overall tone of the work is competent and clear, the papers possessing good, workmanlike quality throughout the semester.

**NOTE:** Anything in the “B” range is evidence of very solid writing, demonstrating skill in organization and development, decent command of mechanics, presentation of a clear thesis, a solid through line, plus a logical conclusion.

**C+ (2.3 ... Average)**

For a paper to be graded as a “C+”, it needs to display a clear understanding of basic essay structure (i.e., solid thesis, multiple paragraphs of support, clear transitions, logical conclusion, reasonably competent mechanics). It must also show some evidence of independent thinking and creative expression, at least in a rudimentary form.

Achieving a “C+” as a final course grade indicates a semester’s worth of work that demonstrates basic skill in grammatical structure and development of ideas, all rendered in the beginnings of a distinctive personal voice.

**C (2.0 ... Satisfactory)**

A paper graded “C” meets the basic requirements for an essay in that it has a thesis, a logical conclusion, some appropriate support, and a reasonable command of mechanics. It does not, however, have much else. Such a paper will address an argument in a very limited fashion, and while being clear, will not be insightful or thought-provoking. The overall presentation may be marred by repetition of ideas and limited variety in types of sentence structure used. The vocabulary level is also somewhat basic and uninspired.

A “C” earned as a final course grade signifies a body of work that never moved beyond basic presentation skills. Often, little difference in skill and style development can be noted between a first day writing sample and a final exam. While a student in this classification may have met all course requirements in terms of assignments, revisions, and participation, the actual skill level has remained about the same – competent in a very basic way but showing no evidence of any real growth.

**NOTE:** Anything in the “C” range can best be compared to high school level writing and generally falls into one of two categories: mechanically clear OR creatively rendered. While good points of style and precision can be noted at times, the writing overall lacks depth.
D+ (1.5 ... Poor but Passing)

A paper deserving a "D+" is easily recognized by its failure to meet very basic standards for a college essay. It is either too short, saying very little and so cannot qualify as a true defense of a point of view, or it is too long and rambling and loses focus. Mechanical problems are also evident in abundance, featuring not just a few stray typos or small mistakes, but multiple error patterns in mechanics, syntax, and idiom in general. Often the argument is superficial or repetitive, with the logic being full of fallacies of all types. It may also lack a clear thesis or fail to come to any solid conclusion. While there may be some evidence of a particular point of view, it is so weakly presented that the paper is ineffectual.

A final course grade of "D+" signifies that the student applied few, if any, of the techniques presented in the course to his/her own writing. There has been very little improvement or attempt at same. Often, the record will show that a student receiving such a grade is missing assignments and/or attended class irregularly.

D (1.0 ... Minimum for Credit)

A paper receiving a "D" is one that displays minimal development and minimal understanding of the mechanics of written English. It may be incomprehensible and is certainly empty of original ideas. It often reads as a "token" submission in that the writer jotted down something in a hurry just to meet the requirement for submission. "No real thought, no real effort" is the hallmark of such a paper.

Having a "D" as a final course grade suggests that the student completed (albeit not very successfully) just enough of the course requirements to escape getting an out-and-out failure. Perhaps the student only completed in-class writing assignments (which were done in a perfunctory manner) and never did any outside assignments. Class participation and general attendance may also have been poor. While it is possible that a "D" student may have acceptable writing skills, getting a "D" for the course means that such skills as may exist were never demonstrated to the instructor's satisfaction.

NOTE: Any grade in the "D" range reflects minimal skill and/or effort on the part of the student. Application of standard knowledge of grammar, syntax, and argumentative/narrative form is poor. Work in this range is NOT college level writing and students should be made aware of this fact. Sending warning notices to the academic dean at least by midterm regarding any student consistently performing in this range is a helpful technique to employ and may better remind the student of the seriousness of the problem.
F ( 0.0 ... Failure )

A paper receiving an “F” has failed to meet the requirements of the assignment on many levels. It may not address the issue supposedly under discussion sufficiently or it may even side-step it entirely. There may also be severe mechanical problems present that make the paper unreadable. Students should realize, however, that sometimes a paper can fail for content even if their grammar is acceptable – or vice versa. For a written piece to be effective, it has to be correct in content and form. Of course, an “F” can also be earned for non-submission of any assignment or for lateness, as per the instructor’s stated policy in the course syllabus.

Earning an “F” for a Composition course reflects a consistent lack of effort on the part of the student, who may have done some or all of the following:
   a) failed to submit any (or most) assignments;
   b) failed to revise and produce multiple drafts when asked to do so;
   c) failed to participate in class activities;
   d) failed to meet deadlines;
   e) failed to attend conferences or tutoring sessions on a regular basis, if at all;
   f) failed to apply editorial advice given by instructor;
   g) failed to attend class regularly;
   h) failed the Proficiency Exam.

NOTE: Students should be reminded that there is no excuse for failing a composition course as, while the work is demanding and time consuming, every effort is made by the instructors and the Program overall to help the student improve. Ultimately, however, the students are in charge of their own success or failure.

Please consider this document a guideline to help you better explain your grading policy to your students. This is especially important for students who may have come from relatively undemanding high schools and so were given top marks for essentially average work and good behavior. You may also find yourself faced with students who, while highly skilled, are not used to stretching because even their middle-of-the-road work was lauded at their old school.

Always remind students that college writing requires more sophisticated modes of expression, deeper thought, and more challenging sources as support.

Hope this helps!
Constance G. Wagner
Director, SPC Writing Program
English Department Guidelines for Written Work

1. **Quality of written work.** Because the composition classes are a prerequisite for the core literature classes, the English Department expects that written work for El 123 and El 134 will demonstrate proficiency in basic writing skills. Acceptable work will include a clear thesis and reflect a coherent structure. The content of the paper will be developed through appropriate means (examples, explanation, etc.), and, when required, reliable sources will be correctly cited. The paper should show competence in sentence structure and syntax, and be relatively free of errors in agreement (both subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent). Attention should be paid to verb tenses and forms, possessives, plurals and basic spelling. Patterns of errors in these areas are unacceptable.

2. **Plagiarism.** The College policy on plagiarism and other forms of cheating is stated in the College Bulletin, the student handbook and on the College website.

Plagiarism is a most serious form of dishonesty. It may be defined as stealing, or purchasing ideas and writings of another and using them as one's own. The most common form of plagiarism is the incorporation of whole sentences and paragraphs from published material into papers submitted as one's own work or purchasing term papers and/or related materials and submitting them as one’s own work. The forms of plagiarism are many and varied, and it is not the intent of this policy statement, therefore, to give a complete catalog. Plagiarism is rarely the result of confusion or misunderstanding. If one conscientiously acknowledges the sources of one’s ideas and citations, plagiarism is effectively avoided. In cases of doubt, students should consult their instructors.

The College, as a matter of policy, does not condone or tolerate plagiarism. Students who submit plagiarized work are liable to receive a failing grade for the assignment and/or the course. In more serious cases, the student who plagiarizes is liable to be suspended or dismissed from the College by the appropriate academic dean. (*Undergraduate Course Catalog, 2006-2008*)

The English Department will treat every case of academic dishonesty as a serious matter, and appropriate and immediate action will be taken.