

Writing Across the French Studies Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to articulate a set of goals for writing throughout our curriculum, the French Studies department has inventoried of the various writing assignments for our courses and agreed upon the need for more consistency and in some cases more structured training. Our discussions have given us a clearer picture of the diversity of assignments and expectations for writing at the various levels of the major/minor. In the past several years we have increasingly varied our writing assignments at all levels. Instead of focusing mainly on traditional analytical assignments in our advanced courses (*explications de texte*, literary analysis, critical reactions), and creative work in lower-level language courses (personal essays, poems, or creative essays based on language structures), we now assign more creative assignments in the advanced literature and civilization courses. The department agrees that this has led to more rewarding learning experiences, more motivating assignments, and better work overall. We agreed that the more creative assignments in the advanced literature and “civilization” courses are an important step in developing writing skills, and that ultimately they improved the students’ ability to write analytical papers. This development reflects a change in the curriculum of the French department toward French studies. In other words, there is less emphasis on a traditional literary program, and more on cultural literacy and expression.

We continue to stress the importance, so critical to writing in a foreign language, of multiple drafts and the expectation that some assignments be resubmitted to achieve a polished final paper.

Our discussions also revealed a disappointing lack of progress from one course to the next, and from one level to the next. This shows up mainly in repetitive errors of grammar and style. An instructor may insist on progress during the semester, but without a way to monitor progress throughout the curriculum we cannot properly assess writing skills.

Finally, we also realized that our methodological goals in the introductory “content” courses (French 235, 236, 245, 296) lack consistency and clarity.

PROPOSED CHANGES:

We agreed to adopt a software package called “**Système-D**,” and integrated dictionary-thesaurus-grammar and style checker for writing in French that includes grammar tutorials for “catching up” that will be available to all students (probably on a keyed system, with 8-10 simultaneous users). This program will help ensure progress in basic skills and help students catch up on such skills even in “content” courses, where we do not focus on grammar and composition specifically.

We also agreed to maintain **student portfolios**, simply by photocopying the graded versions of all major papers and keeping files for all students. This way, if there is not clear progress, or if the student continues to make the same mistakes again and again, we have a way of checking that and holding students responsible for their progress.

Finally, we decided that we more discussion is needed on the standards and goals for teaching writing methodology in the introductory content courses. We also need clearer expectations for our capstone experience, the “Senior concentration.” What level of writing and research do we expect and how much exactly?

The following is a breakdown of the various types of assignments at the different levels of the program: 100-level courses, 200-level courses, 300-level courses, etc. This is an accurate if not exhaustive list.

- FR 102:**
- Very short personal essays like autobiography or reports on daily activities, a few paragraphs at most
- FR 211:**
- Vocabulary building exercises such as writing directions to a dorm room, beginning at the entrance to the building
 - Creative essays built upon specific grammatical structures.
 - “Pastiches” and “reinventions” such as imitating a poem read in class, or reinventing an episode in the *French in Action* story.
- FR 221:**
- Short (1-page) papers on topics related to readings, literary analysis, reaction papers
 - Revisions of certain selected quiz answers, usually for grammar corrections
 - Exams: all essay-type answers from “identify and comment on” brief quotes or expressions, to longer essays discussing the role and significance of quotes or pairs of quotes.
 - Creative personal essays designed around specific grammatical structures: for example, the notoriously difficult conditional sentence (What would you do if you won the lottery?)
 - Theatrical assignments: ten-minute plays or short dialogues to be written, revised and later Performed in class or for a larger audience (the best 10-minute plays have been performed in French in Charlotte Meehan’s Ten-Minutes Play festival).
- FR 235-245:**
- 3-4 page papers, analyses of novels, short stories or plays.

- Analyses of visual advertisements that illustrate dominant French points of view as defined by Lawrence Wylie.
- Brochure on a region of France including historical, cultural and economic information suitable for a “chamber of commerce” type publication.
- Press review comparing the treatment of one topic by several newspapers with varying points of view or politics.
- “Pastiches” and “Reinventions”: writing a surrealist poem in the style of an author on the syllabus; Write a missing chapter to a novel like Gide’s *Immoraliste*, written from the point of view of the narrator’s otherwise silent wife; Reinvent the end of a play or novel.
- Short essays on midsemester and final exams

FR 296: • Personal narratives, text summaries, the specific methodologies of *Explication de texte* and *Commentaire de texte*. Literary analysis involving the traditional French method of argumentation: “Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis”

FR 300: • Analytical term papers on literary works or cultural history, 7-10 pages.

- “Pastiches” and “Reinventions” (see above)
- Reaction papers to essays or secondary sources involving summary and opinion

SENIOR CONCENTRATION: French majors choose any 300-level course during their senior year to do the “concentration”

- Requires longer term papers incorporating secondary sources
- Summary/reaction papers on secondary sources concerning works on the syllabus (10-12 one-page reports).

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