**Why Have a List of Preferred Practices**

**(A) Why do we want to write down a list of Preferred Practices and Guidelines for all Upper Division Classes? Can’t we just trust the faculty to know what to do in their own classes?**

The main purpose of this list is to serve as a guideline for faculty revising course outlines and preparing new syllabi. While we can certainly trust faculty to know what to do in their own classes, none of us are teaching in a vacuum. Articulation of preferred practices is a way of affirming that, as a teaching community, we have some shared values and expectations. It does not mean that each and every one of us will (or must) always do everything on the list. It does mean that we should take the list into account when planning our classes because, ideally, it represents what most of the department is doing and therefore may be connected to what students expect from each class.

**(B) Why are there so many specific instructions about documentation? Why is “Require students to submit a List of Works Cited” the first item on our list? Why is the next item the documentation style? Is documentation the most important thing that we teach?**

The list of Preferred Practices and Guidelines is organized from specific to general. The works cited list is the most specific practice that the list promotes. The assumption is that this is a fairly easy thing for each of us to do, and one thing that, regardless of how we teach, we can easily incorporate into our curricula.

I think we can all agree that documentation of some sort is very important both because it avoids the danger of plagiarism and because it helps students develop a sense of accountability in general. Citing sources is important—not just because it gives credit where credit is due but because it helps the audience track down the original statement or idea.

Documentation style is less important than teaching students **the importance of documenting and of observing a consistent documentation style.** The only reason that MLA is the preferred style for the department is that it is the one most accessible and most frequently used.

The purpose of defining one style as “preferred” is not to indicated that it is better but that it is the style that faculty may expect students to have worked with in the past. It is the one they are taught in English 3000 and which they will have covered in English 1020 and (we hope) English 2020/2030. Therefore, an instructor will have to spend less time going over it than other citation styles.

The area of documentation affects two areas of the English senior assessment: “Writing within the Expectations of the Discipline” and “Understanding of Key Concepts and the Language of the Field.”

The hope is that if each of us gives a little more attention to **the fact** of documentation (not so much the format but the use of some sort of documentation) students will get a clearer message that citing sources is important and will reach their senior year ready to produce papers that follow whatever citation format the instructor prefers.

**(C) Why does the list include details such as recommended minimum length of assignments and the number of types of evaluation used in a class?**

Because this document is intended to help us revise and create new course outlines, it seemed important to include guidelines for the kinds of things that the University Curriculum Committee and SACS look for in course outlines.

**(D) Why require an analytical essay of a minimum specified length for literature classes? Isn’t it sometimes more effective to require several short assignments instead of one long assignment that may lack substance because the student is more concerned with filling the length quota than with saying something?**

The assumption is that the minimum length applies to only *one* essay for the class and that most of us will have at least one and often two or three other writing assignments that will help the students develop their analytic and writing skills on shorter papers. The reason for the longer paper, however, is that an essay of fewer than five pages (1700 words or so) is not going to give the student much opportunity to develop ideas in depth.

If we are going to evaluate our exiting students on their ability to develop ideas in an essay of six to ten pages, our classes need to ensure that the students have had practice writing such essays. However, this doesn’t mean that *every* class *must* include an analytical essay of the specified minimum length. It just means the department prefers that as many classes as possible include such an analytical essay in their curricula.

Based on the results of the Senior Essay Assessment, one of the areas we most need to work on is “Thinking and Reasoning Logically.” This is specifically connected to the assignment of writing a paper that is well-developed, well-organized, and shows analytical ability.

**(E) Why should upper-division classes that are not specifically devoted to writing or grammar have to spend additional, valuable class time giving students “instruction in writing and/or research skills”? Shouldn’t that have been covered by other classes already?**

Most of what people learn is learned through some sort of repetition. It is not enough for important material to be covered only once or twice. If our goal is to raise our students’ scores in the senior essay areas of “Writing within the Expectations of the Discipline” and“Thinking and Reasoning Logically,” then each class in the department needs to contribute to the task.

This does not mean that we need to set aside whole class-periods for addressing the craft of writing over and beyond what is relevant to an assignment in the class, but it does mean that as we identify or anticipate weaknesses in our students’ writing, we should take time to comment on these and provide students with examples of good writing, suggestions for improving organization and development, tips about common writing errors, etc.

**(F) Why can’t we leave the teaching of literary and critical terms, literary periods and genre etc. to the four core courses? Why try to include this material in every single class? Besides, aren’t we making a mistake in prioritizing the ability to spout definitions and chronologies over developing good thinking and reading skills?**

Discussion of literature (or any other field) requires the gradual acquisition of a specialized vocabulary and understanding of the relevant contexts. Therefore, having a handful of core classes covering this material is not enough. Each English class should be introducing and/or reinforcing the use of key terms **necessary for the discourse of that class** which, ideally, will also be terms that are used in some other classes.

Learning how to use a specialized vocabulary is not to be confused with memorizing lists, nor does one really gain full understanding of literary periods (or other important contextual material) through learning a timeline with authors and definitions. The preferred practices for the department do *not* encourage such memorizing. However, students will benefit from having faculty highlight key terms, make context explicit, and indicate an expectation that students will be able to distinguish between significant contextual references.

It is worth including these areas of instruction among our “preferred practices” because the students’ scores in “Writing within the Expectations of the Discipline” and “Understanding of Key Concepts and the Language of the Field” and even “Competent Use of Language, Sophistication of Writing Skills” in the senior essay assessment were affected by students’ grasp of language and labels to show command of concepts and contexts. Furthermore, in the major exit exam (the standardized ETS test that all our seniors must take) there are sections that specifically test knowledge of key terms, authors, literary periods, etc. Nevertheless, selection of what to cover and how to cover it is left up to the individual instructor, who is always the best judge of what a particular class needs. The preferred practices list merely serves to remind instructors of what needs to be identified/included in the course outlines and syllabi.

**(G) How are we going to ensure that every faculty member follows these preferred practices and guidelines?**

The list is not intended as a set of rules that will be applied to every class, nor is it a list that will be used “against” those who don’t conform to it. It is intended instead as a **guideline for revising course outlines and proposing new courses** according to what the upper-division committee, after receiving feedback from the upper-division faculty at large, deems are useful and desirable practices for most if not all of our courses. We believe that most of these practices are already followed by a great percentage of the faculty and that when the faculty practices differ from what is recommended, there is a good reason. By articulating these preferred policies, we help individual faculty to examine their own teaching practices as they relate to student learning goals and general department practices. In short, **the list of preferred practices and guidelines is to be seen as recommendations based on some degree of consensus among peers**.