<u>Guidelines for Foundational Writing Courses[1]</u>

<u>1: Understanding Context</u>

Writing is produced in, and responds to, its *context of use*. These contexts are determined by a number of factors, including the genre of the writing (blog post/research essay/lab report/etc.), the level and tone (popular/academic/personal/etc.), the purpose (description/analysis/argumentative/etc.), the goals (to provoke action/to spur reflection/to contribute to the scholarly discourse/etc.). The ability to recognize and reproduce key contextual features is essential to being a successful writer or reader.

In order to understand and critique the writing that they read, and to produce their own contextually-appropriate writing, students need to work with and create writing produced in a variety of contexts. They should be trained to notice, analyze and critique the context-dependent aspects of the writing that they work with, and they should be given the opportunity to write and/or read material in a variety of contexts. They should be taught to identify the expectations of readers in their fields and the main features of the important genres in their fields, along with the rationales for these features.

Students should be able to **read** from a variety of sources (media, journalistic, academic) and identify the rhetorical context of the work. For example, students should be able to do the follow:

- Identify the purpose of the passage to define what the author hopes to achieve.
- Identify how that purpose is expressed through the author's choices with regard to vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, and so on.
- Identify the intended audience.
- Identify ways that the author 'appeals' (pathos and ethos) to the intended audience.

Students should be able to **write** in different formats. For example, students should be able to do the following:

- Present an issue in manner suitable for newspaper commentary or blog post.
- Present an issue in a short descriptive essay.
- Present an issue as a formal argument.

<u>2: Thinking Critically</u>

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts. When writers or readers think critically about the materials they use—whether print texts, photographs, data sets, videos, or other materials—they separate assertion from evidence, evaluate sources and evidence, recognize and evaluate underlying assumptions, read across texts for connections and patterns, identify and evaluate chains of

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[1] This outline is based on and adapted from the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcome Statement for First-Year Composition (http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html), with the exception of section 5.

reasoning, and compose appropriately qualified and developed claims and generalizations. These practices are foundational for advanced academic writing.

In order to develop these skills, students need to read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations. They also need practice in locating and evaluating (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources. They also need to use strategies—such as interpretation, synthesis, response, critique, and design/redesign—to compose texts that integrate the writer's ideas with those from appropriate sources. Part of their training should involve instruction in the kinds of critical thinking important that are important in their disciplines and the kinds of questions, problems, and evidence that define their disciplines.

Students should, for example, be able to do the following:

- Use literature search strategies for identifying high quality and relevant information.
- Critique a communication (e.g. magazine article, info-commercial, advertising, propaganda etc.) by discussing the types of sources of reasoning and research used to support the opinion presented.
- Analyze the development of an argument in a piece of scholarly writing.
- Write about phenomena in descriptive, analytic, and argumentative ways.
- Convert an essay into a short slide presentation where slides review the arguments following the same logical progression as the essay.
- Use appopriate strategies to present a clear and precise argument using evidence and reasoning to draw conclusions.

3: Processes

It is important for students to be able to plan out their writing tasks: that is, they need to acquire flexible and nuanced strategies for how to conceptualize, organize, and carry out the various sorts of writing that they will be obliged to do. In order to do this, they need to understand writing as something that happens through a diverse range of *processes*, few of them linear, and they need practice determining which strategies work best in which contexts.

In order to develop these skills, students should be given opportunities to plan out and develop writing projects through multiple stages and drafts, and to both give and receive (and productively use) formative feedback at each stage. It is particularly important that they be taught the importance of editing and revising, and that they be given practice in doing both. Part of their training should involve employing the methods, processes and technologies commonly used for research and communication within their fields; this training should take into consideration their discipline's characteristic writing contexts (i.e., individual work, collaborative work, group work, etc.).

Students should learn strategies for doing the following:

- Generating ideas (e.g., rapid writing, setting context, adding content)
- Developing and organizing ideas (e.g., mapping, webbing)
- Revising and editing (e.g., proofreading, peer editing, reorganization)

4: Working within Conventions

Conventions are the formal rules and informal guidelines that determine readers' expectations of writing in a given genre. Some conventions—such as basic rules of grammar, punctuation and syntax—will apply to most writing done in academic contexts; other conventions—such as citation styles—will differ in particulars but be more or less universal in their general aspects; yet other conventions—such as register, structure, or development of arguments—will vary greatly between genres and contexts. A writer's grasp of conventions in one context does not mean a firm grasp in another: successful writers are able to understand, analyze, and negotiate conventions for purpose, audience, and genre.

In order to develop these skills, students should develop knowledge of fundamental elements of English, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling, through practice in composing, giving and receiving feedback, and revising. They should be taught both the general and context-specific aspects of, and reasons for, citation conventions, and should be given the opportunity to practice using them and to give and receive feedback. They should have the opportunity to analyze the conventions of different genres of writing and to relate those conventions to reader expectations, and should compose in several different genres.

For example, students should be exposed to and given practice in working with the following:

- The justifications for academic citation practices and specific conventions for common citation styles (APA, MLA, Nature, etc.).
- The basic rules of English grammar and syntax Write in grammatically correct, clear prose and be able to access and use resources to assist them in their writing
- The rationale behind generic conventions for academic work

Students should be able to take an issue and translate it into different communication modalities, for instance by doing the following:

- Write a short formal essay.
- Convert the formal essay into a short slide presentation where slides review the arguments following the same logical progression as the essay.
- Convert formal essay into a modality of their/ instructor's choice.

5: Transitioning to University

The goal of a foundational writing program is to help students transition from the status of novices or interested outsiders to people who can read and write as disciplinary insiders. This transitioning can be most efficiently carried out when it is understood as functioning within a

broader context, and when it is seen in the light of the many transitions that students need to make as they make the jump from high school to university.

And in fact, first year seminars have been recognized as "the most commonly implemented curricular intervention designed specifically for first-year students" (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot & Associates, 2005, pg 56)[2]. At their core, first year seminars facilitate learning by focusing on the needs of entering students through assisting students with their academic and social transition into university. The proposed UTM writing foundation courses could be categorized from one of six course types as an academic seminar, a course that can be interdisciplinary, thematic, or part of an education requirement where attention is focused on academic skill components[3] as evidenced in the above (1-4) learning goals. The secondary goal of these course types is to support the transition into university as outlined in the proposed goals below. These two objectives together can be broad and cover a variety of content.

Transitional learning is especially concerned with assisting students to do the following:

1. Connect with other students—i.e., to help form peer-support networks and peer-learning communities;

2. Connect with UTM —i.e., to promote involvement in the co-curricular (out-of-class experiential learning), and use of campus support services

3. Connect present experience with future goals and plans— i.e., to help relate current university experience with upcoming decisions about majors, career path, and life beyond UTM.

Some of the ways in which these goals can be achieved in a foundational writing course include the following:

- Emphasizing group work and group assignments
- Building activities and projects around UTM's characteristics and services
- Integrating writing work with presentations and support delivered by campus organizations such as the career centre: using writing as a way to think through longer range planning

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[2] Upcraft, M.L., Gardner, J.N, Barefoot, B.O., & Associates. (2005). *Challenging and supporting the first-year student: a handbook for improving the first year of college.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
[3] Young, D.G., & Hopp, J.M. (2014). 2012-2013 national Survey of First-Year Seminars: Exploring high impact practices in the first college year (Research Reports on College transition, No. 4). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.