

**University of Toronto  
at  
Scarborough**

**THE TASK FORCE ON WRITING  
Final Report**

**PREAMBLE**

The Task Force was established by the Academic Affairs Committee and approved by the Scarborough College Council in May, 1997, with the following terms of reference:

1. To examine ways of assessing student writing abilities.
2. To assess existing methods and resources at Scarborough and across the University for teaching writing and assisting students with writing problems.
3. To make recommendations on ways of improving student writing, with particular attention to changes to existing methods, new approaches, and the allocation of instructional and remedial resources.

Membership

Chair, Professor Michael Bunce, Social Sciences  
Professor Douglas Bors, Life Sciences  
Ms. Stacy Burke, Graduate Teaching Assistant, Social Sciences  
Ms. Janice Crichton-Paterson, Library  
Professor Charles Dyer, Physical Sciences (withdrew in February, 98).  
Professor Melba Cuddy-Keane, Humanities  
Professor Goldine Cupit, Physical Sciences (joined in April, 98).  
Professor Brian Greenspan, Humanities and Writing Centre

General Background

The quality of student writing first emerged as an issue at Scarborough College in the seventies. In common with the rest of the university and other institutions across the country, there was a growing consensus among faculty that writing proficiency was declining. In 1978 the College introduced a post-admission writing proficiency test, which all students were required to take in their first year and to pass in order to graduate (this procedure was adopted by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in the following year). Two years earlier the Teaching Learning Unit was established with a mandate which included providing advice to students on study and communication skills. There was also an expansion of other support services, including non-credit writing courses for ESL students and writing guides available in counselling services and the library.

The writing proficiency test was terminated in 1985 mainly for budgetary reasons, although some also argued pedagogical justification. Also for budgetary reasons, the teaching-learning unit was closed in 1985, although the Writing Laboratory (now the Writing Centre) which had been established in 1978 continued to operate. In various formats the other support services have also survived.

Following the termination of the writing proficiency test, formal discussion of the issue of student writing seemed to move off the College's agenda for a while. However widespread complaints by faculty about the declining quality of student writing persisted. Reduced support to the writing centre also drew attention to the issue and prompted the public discussion of alternative ways of addressing the problem. In 1995, the then Vice-Principal and Vice-Dean, Professor Cuddy-Keane, initiated discussions in the Academic Affairs committee of writing across-the-curriculum. The aim was to find ways of ensuring that the experience and assessment of writing became an integral part of all College programmes. These discussions culminated in the "Writing Across the Lines: Teaching With Technology" symposium held in March 1997.

This Task Force, then, represents a continuation of the past two years of the consideration of the writing issue by the Academic Affairs Committee. During the debate leading up to the tabling of the motion to establish the task force, it became clear that student writing proficiency and the question of how to assess and improve it were still contentious issues. Yet almost all who participated in the debate agreed that there was a problem and many argued that it was getting more serious. These opinions were not new, nor were they unique to Scarborough. The problem of student writing is clearly a persistent theme throughout the Canadian and indeed the North American university system. So, when the terms of reference for the Task Force were drafted they did not include the detailed assessment of the extent of writing problems at the College. We began our work with the assumption that there is widespread agreement among faculty that many students do not write well. This view was supported by the survey of student writing activity in programmes, in which most programme supervisors expressed the opinion that many of their students had serious problems with writing and that something needed to be done to remedy the situation. However, the Task Force also proceeded under the belief that the University of Toronto at Scarborough should have high expectations about the quality of student writing across the curriculum and that it has an obligation to help students meet these expectations.

### The Activities of the Task Force

That the Task Force has taken more than a year to present its final report is due in large measure to the complexities of the issue at hand. Early discussions centred on two main issues: the consideration of writing as just one element of broader communication and comprehension problems, and the value of formal, standardised testing of writing proficiency. On the first issue, we decided to restrict our work to developing recommendations on writing while accepting that all effective approaches to improving writing are an integral part of the larger learning and communication process. The second issue generated considerable discussion but eventually the Task Force agreed to reject writing proficiency tests and to focus instead on ways of improving writing within the context of academic programmes and courses and of strengthening extra-curricular writing resources.

In addressing the issue of writing proficiency tests, the Task Force reviewed published literature as well as examples of approaches taken at other institutions. However we drew much of our information from two University of Toronto reports: the 1992 Report of the Steering Group on Writing (the Melcher Report) and 1995 report, *Post-Admission Assessment of Writing: Issues and Information*, by Margaret Procter, the University's Coordinator of Writing Support. We also relied on Brian Greenspan's considerable knowledge of the literature on writing assessment.

In examining writing in courses and programmes (sometimes referred to as 'writing across the curriculum'), we again reviewed published literature and examples of practices at other institutions. In addition to this, a survey of programme supervisors at Scarborough was carried out to solicit information about the current status of writing in programmes and opinions on writing designated courses.

Our consideration of writing resources involved collecting information from other institutions and other parts of the University of Toronto. But we devoted most of our efforts towards assessing the past and current situation at Scarborough. We sought guidance on the specific issue of the needs of ESL students from Professor Ron Smythe of Linguistics who has been involved in setting up the new ESL credit courses at Scarborough.

#### The Survey of Programme Supervisors

In the survey which is referred to above, our principal aim was to establish how much and in what ways various programmes pay extended attention to writing, in other words how seriously they regard writing as an integral part of learning. We were also interested in finding out about the nature of writing problems and in obtaining opinions on approaches to writing improvement. The survey was kept intentionally brief and simple (some would probably call it crude), so it does not cover all of the issues nor does it go into great detail. Moreover, by involving only programme supervisors, the survey results do not represent the opinions of all faculty. Nevertheless we believe that it does provide a useful record of the existing status of writing in individual programmes and a general impression of how programmes would approach the improvement of writing problems.

The tabulated results of the survey can be found at the end of this report and will be referred to in the elaborations which follow each recommendation. However, before proceeding to those recommendations, it is worth emphasising that the survey does reveal a widespread sense of serious writing problems. This opinion was expressed from all academic divisions but was particularly strong in those programmes where writing is an important component. The most frequently cited problem was grammar, in other words the ability to write "correct" English, but several respondents said that many students had problems with all aspects of writing. Other specific problems mentioned included essay construction, vocabulary, coherence, logic, plagiarism, referencing and comprehension.

#### Writing Proficiency Tests

The assessment of student writing proficiency has long been one of the most contentious issues for universities. The basic debate revolves around the question of mandatory testing. Many institutions in North America require students to pass a standardised writing test, some for admission but most as a post-admission requirement. Types of testing are mainly either a timed essay or a multiple choice test. Tests may be used to ensure that no student will graduate unless

she/he has demonstrated a particular level of writing proficiency, for placement in writing courses and programmes or for identifying special needs such as ESL. They have also been used to provide evidence of the need for more remedial resources. Mandatory post-admission testing is widespread in American but less common in Canadian universities. In Ontario only four universities still use mandatory testing. Laurentian probably has the most comprehensive programme. All incoming students there must take a timed essay test in one of the official languages and obtain minimum scores in order to proceed to second year and then to graduate. To improve their scores students may repeat the test or take courses designated 'Writing Across the Curriculum', which are regular courses offered in arts and social science programmes and supported by specialists in the Writing Centre. This is a costly, labour intensive programme.

The history of writing tests at this university goes back to 1949 when the first mandatory test was instituted, but this was abandoned after a few years. But our main experience with testing was the English Proficiency Test which was initiated by Scarborough College in 1978 and copied by the Faculty of Arts and Science in 1979. Several professional faculties also introduced tests, some of which survive today. The Scarborough College test consisted of a timed essay which students were required to pass in order to graduate. It was abandoned in 1985 mainly for budgetary reasons.

The main arguments made in favour of mandatory writing tests are:

- i) that they are tangible evidence of the university's commitment to writing proficiency
- ii) they are an effective method of diagnosing writing problems
- iii) they can be used to place students in appropriate writing courses
- iv) they encourage students to take writing proficiency seriously regardless of their programmes of study
- v) they can be used to 'weed out' students who might otherwise graduate without basic communication skills.

Against these arguments must be set the growing awareness of the serious limitations of mandatory, formal writing tests, These can summarised as follows:

- i) the focus is less on learning the writing skills necessary for academic work than it is on the writing skills necessary to pass the test
- ii) the one-off and timed nature of the test does not really diagnose writing skills
- iii) the separation of writing from academic work does not encourage students to take writing seriously; instead the test becomes regarded as an isolated hurdle to be passed
- iv) any weeding out should be done prior to admission
- v) the focus is on writing evaluation not writing improvement
- vi) tests are costly and hard to administer
- vii) variability in marking creates an unfair evaluative system.

While the Task Force recognised some of the advantages of mandatory proficiency tests, it decided that these were outweighed by their considerable disadvantages, in particular their high administrative cost and their separation of writing from regular course work. Much of the recent thinking on student writing skills has moved beyond the blunt instruments of summary assessment to a recognition that writing is most effectively assessed and certainly improved in academic contexts, in other words within programmes and courses. It recognises also the importance of variations in what constitutes effective writing in different subject areas. The Task Force therefore turned its attention to what is often referred to as 'writing across the curriculum':

the incorporation of writing - its evaluation and improvement - into all programmes so that all students have the opportunity to graduate as competent writers. **The major thrust of this report is that we should focus our attention on the improvement of writing as an integral part of the learning experience and develop a College culture of good writing.** The starting point for this should be an institutional commitment to the importance of good writing and a clear statement of what is expected of students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**1. Scarborough College should formally state its commitment to good undergraduate writing skills and should affirm that it expects all graduates to have achieved proficiency in writing in her/his programme of studies.**

While the mere statement of the importance of good writing may seem tokenistic, it has the effect of committing the institution to the improvement of writing through programme development and budget allocations. At the same time it makes students recognise the importance the university attaches to good writing and clearly states what is expected of them. Moreover it stresses the importance of good writing regardless of programme. This was the view of the Provostial Steering Group which urged the University "to reaffirm the need for effective writing in all disciplines and at all levels of the curriculum..." (p. 27).

In addition to appearing in the College Calendar, such a statement could be included in the package which is sent to students with offers of admission, as well as in registration material. This statement should be accompanied by a definition of what constitutes good writing and information on the methods and resources for improving writing skills. Of course it will not be easy to condense the various opinions as to what constitutes good writing, nor do we wish to ignore the distinctive writing conventions of different academic disciplines. However, it should be possible to agree in a few lines on the basic elements of good writing. It is also essential that students are made aware of how they can improve their writing and what resources the College provides to assist them.

**2. All specialist and major programmes should be required to include an identified writing component as a requirement. The choice of this component will be left to the faculty teaching in the programme but will require approval as part of the normal programme and curriculum approval process. Each programme should develop guidelines for the evaluation and assessment of written work (see example in appendix) and consider ways in which the successful completion of a writing component could be recorded on student transcripts.**

Our survey of programme supervisors revealed that, in most programmes, good writing is important to student success and that students generally cannot complete programmes without doing written work. Yet two supervisors claimed that writing was unimportant in their programmes and four (biochemistry, economics, computer science major and linguistics) said that students can complete the programme without doing written work. There is also considerable variation in the extent and nature of required written assignments. While the majority of programmes require students to complete substantial pieces of writing - essays,

research papers, book reviews - in others the writing experience can be limited to laboratory reports and writing in examinations and tests. So, in some programmes students can graduate having done little or no evaluated writing and without having had the opportunity of improving their writing skills. This is a situation which does not serve those students well. However the Task Force does recognise that there are necessary variations in types of writing in different disciplines as well as in the ways in which writing can be evaluated in course work, and thus favours leaving the responsibility for determining the nature of the written component to the individual programme.

One method of ensuring a writing component in programmes that is becoming increasingly popular in universities is the **Designated Writing Course (DWC)**. The idea of offering such courses at Scarborough was first proposed by Professor Melba Cuddy-Keane in 1995 when she was Vice-Principal and Vice-Dean. A survey conducted by her that year indicated that 15 disciplines supported the concept, although there was some resistance to devoting time to actual writing instruction. The DWC involves identifying an existing course or offering a new course in which at least a portion of the assignments would be assessed for the quality of writing and in which students would have the opportunity to improve their writing skills. Students would have to pass the writing component in order to pass the course. The advantage of this approach is that it emphasises the importance of writing in context, in other words the inseparability of content and communication. It also stresses an incremental rather than summary approach in which assessment is followed by improvement over the duration of the course. If a DWC is a programme requirement then students will take writing more seriously. This message would be reinforced if the successful completion of a DWC or other writing component is recorded on student transcripts.

### **3. Special attention should be paid to the needs of students for whom English is a second language.**

That many ESL students need special help with improving writing skills has already been recognised at Scarborough. The Task Force applauds the introduction of the new credit courses for ESL students (HUMA10Y, Current Approaches to the Academic Writing Process for Non- Native Speakers of English, and HUMA11Y, Introduction to Canadian Culture and Society for Non-Native Speakers of English), and recommends that resources be provided for the continuation and expansion of these courses. The Task Force also supports the allocation of OTO funding to the Writing Centre for the hiring of an ESL writing consultant and propose the conversion of this funding into base budget for the continuation of such an appointment (see recommendation #6). It is apparent that many ESL students who need help with writing are either not aware of the problem or are not willing to seek assistance. The awareness of the problem should improve if the Task Force's recommendations on writing in programmes and writing designated courses are implemented. But these measures need to be matched by a serious effort to increase remedial assistance and to encourage students to avail themselves of the courses and services provided.

### **4. A Writing Improvement Steering Committee should be established to oversee and co-ordinate writing programmes and encourage the regular exchange of information and ideas about writing instruction.**

The main functions of this committee would be:

- i) to ensure and co-ordinate the continued delivery of effective services to writing improvement,
- ii) to raise awareness of writing issues,
- iii) to act as a focus and organizing body for the exchange of ideas,
- iv) to make recommendations budget allocations for writing instruction.

Responsibility for writing instruction and assistance at Scarborough is currently divided between the Academic Divisions and the Writing Centre. Within the Divisions, some programmes, for example English and Psychology, have initiated special writing courses or workshops while Humanities also offers credit ESL courses. The Writing Centre is part of the new Teaching and Learning Services (TLS) unit in the Bladen Library that brings ‘out-of-classroom’ learning support services together. Other members of TLS are the Centre for Instructional Technology Development, and Information and Research Instruction services. TLS promotes enhanced writing, researching, critical thinking and new media technology skills, and provides expertise, instruction and support for excellence and innovation in teaching and learning.

While the TLS represents a positive move towards the consolidation of related services, there is no single individual or committee directly responsible for co-ordinating the various curricular and extra-curricular writing instruction activities at the College. The Task Force sees a need for College-wide co-ordination especially if the recommendations in this report are to be effective. The Steering Committee would consist of representatives of faculty, teaching assistants, undergraduate students, plus the Writing Centre (or TLS) director.

#### **5. Additional base budget funding be provided for writing instruction at the College as follows:**

- i) additional teaching assistants to support writing instruction in programmes and in the Writing Centre,**
- ii) increased contact hours for Writing Centre instruction,**
- ii) the conversion of the ESL position in the Writing Centre from one-time-only to base budget funding,**
- iii) the provision of teaching release for the Chair of the Writing Improvement Steering Committee.**

The Task Force's survey revealed substantial support for designated writing courses and other ways of improving writing in programmes, but with the caveat that this could be achieved only with more resources to permit the hiring of staff with the expertise to assess and provide assistance on writing skills. The need for additional resources to support the initiatives that are recommended in this report is, to a large degree, self-evident.

#### Teaching Assistants

In the Task Force's survey the most frequently mentioned need was for additional teaching assistant support. Indeed, there seems to be a general feeling among faculty that the erosion of this support over the past decade has made it more difficult to pay attention to student writing problems within programmes and courses. If Writing Designated Courses and other types of writing components are to be successful, they will need qualified teaching assistant support. The Task Force recognises that the specific allocation of teaching assistants to writing improvement may not be appropriate in all programmes. Indeed there are many ways in which additional teaching assistants could be used. They could be allocated directly to academic divisions to use

directly in programmes or they might, as the Chair of Social Sciences has suggested, function as writing resource people at a divisional level. Alternatively some of the additional TA's could be allocated to the Writing Centre. All TA's appointed would have to be already qualified or would receive training in writing instruction.

The Task Force agreed that the recommendation to hire additional teaching assistants should be supported by a cost estimate. \$80,000 to \$85,000 is proposed as the minimum amount necessary to embark on a long-term programme of improved TA support to writing in programmes. This amount is based on two alternative models:

- i) 140 hours of teaching assistance per Designated Writing Course in 20 programmes @ \$30.58/hour (SGSII rate) = \$85,624),
  - ii) 4 TA's available in the Writing Centre (or TLS) for 5 hours a day each, 5 days a week for 26 weeks = 2600 hours @\$30.58/hour = \$79,508. This could involve individual consultation with students from Designated Writing Courses in TA's own subject areas.
- This does not rule out other permutations for allocating the additional TA funding.

#### Increased Contact Hours for Writing Centre Instruction

Since the early eighties the Writing Centre's budget has been steadily eroded. It is now able to offer only 25 hours of individual consultation during the winter session, which is quite inadequate to meet demand. To some extent this is compensated for by non-human resources such as the Electronic Composition Workbook, the homepage with writing tips and the recently introduced service which permits students to submit papers by e-mail or on disk for an initial appraisal. While there is the potential for further developments in on-line assistance, there is still a need for more instructional time in order to provide service throughout the session and on at least two evenings a week. This would involve an increase of approximately 10 hours a week. While this could be met through the teaching assistant appointments referred to above, the Task Force has decided at this point to identify it as an additional expense of approximately \$10,000.

#### ESL Position in the Writing Centre

The current OTO funded position in the Writing Centre is a recognition by the College administration of the pressures of the large numbers of ESL students who need special assistance. This pressure is unlikely to diminish in the near future, so it is a position which should receive base budget funding. The approximate cost is \$25,000.

#### Release Time for Steering Committee Chair

To ensure continuity and commitment to the role of this committee, the chair would be appointed for a 3 year term. She/he would be a faculty member with interest in and knowledge of writing improvement issues who would receive 0.5 FCE release in order to devote sufficient time to this responsibility. The approximate cost \$ 5,000.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In identifying the approximate costs of implementation, the Task Force is presenting its recommendations, not just as guiding principles but as a set of proposals which require budgetary support and therefore significant policy decisions. Of course we are aware that we make these recommendations in the context of continuing budgetary constraints. However, we are convinced that serious attention must be paid to the improvement of writing skills and that



Scarborough should acquire a reputation for graduating students who write well. This endeavour can be approached in a number of ways, not all of which are included in our recommendations. But whatever the approach, it will cost money. It would be unwise to divert much of the substantial amount of money that we have identified from other parts of the existing College budget. The alternative is to seek outside funding. It is an endeavour therefore which should be added to our advancement activities.

Michael Bunce  
Chair  
October 14, 1998

### **References**

Procter, Margaret, 1995, Post-Admission Assessment of Writing: Issue and Information, University of Toronto.

Report of the Steering Group on Writing, 1992, Office of Vice-President and Provost, University of Toronto.

### **Appendices**

I: Guidelines on Evaluation and Assessment of Writing

II: Summary of Survey Results