

# Experiential Education and AWD

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## Introduction

The Advanced Writing in the Disciplines (AWD) course is a graduation requirement for all NU undergraduates. Students fulfill their AWD requirement by completing one of available courses that has been approved for the student's college and/or major (these are described at <http://www.casdn.neu.edu/~english/writingprograms/awd/courses/>).

AWD is currently undergoing program-wide reform, including diversification of course offerings and revision of course goals. One of the first steps in reform was to create new learning goals and course guidelines. Learning goals seek to respect the diversity of class offerings while maintaining a strong and universal standard for student work. Course guidelines identify classroom practices for meeting the goals.

### Learning Goals

A student who successfully completes the AWD requirement at Northeastern should have demonstrated:

1. A strong understanding of the uses of writing in his/her academic discipline and/or career path
2. Critical understanding of and facility in the discourse of a field
3. Successful use of appropriate citation conventions
4. An understanding of the importance of audience and context with respect to writing style and arrangement
5. Confidence and facility with the processes of revision
6. The production of 5000+ words of polished, revised writing
7. Written reflection on his or her own writing processes and texts and their role in his or her own practice of critical reasoning.

### Guidelines for Courses

Advanced Writing in the Disciplines courses have particular emphases corresponding to the diverse needs and locations of Northeastern students. The AWD program recognizes and acknowledges the variable uses and purposes of written communication among different academic and workplace contexts. Therefore, different versions of AWD may vary considerably with respect to the types of writing they assign and expect. However, all AWD courses should contain the following elements:

1. A primary focus on the production and revision of written student work
2. Frequent and regular attention to student writing in the classroom
3. Extensive opportunity for revision and improvement
4. Instruction in how to identify, and opportunities to inhabit, the discourse and idiom of a field
5. Practice in the use of the library and other resources and technologies for research and investigation
6. Attention to the importance of audience and context
7. Practice in the responsible use of appropriate citation conventions
8. Opportunity for students to respond to each others' draft work in written form
9. Production of 5000+ words of polished writing appropriate to the students' field, discipline, or workplace context
10. Opportunity for students to respond to and reflect on their own writing processes and practices
11. An evaluation mechanism focusing mainly on the assessment of revised and polished student writing with secondary attention to drafts, reflections, peer reviews, and other instances of unrevised writing

A reader can locate elements of experiential education in all of the above goals and guidelines. Indeed, in an AWD class, it is neither desirable nor possible to draw a clear line between experiential education and other components of the course. To be sure, some students design writing projects that draw particularly on their co-op experience or their outside interests. On the other hand, the primary current experiential context for many students may be school itself. The formation of students as academic writers is something that the AWD program is deeply invested in fostering. We have started to design a set of assignments that help students understand the scholarly experience by replicating the behavior of professional scholars. Further, we are instituting a reflective AWD portfolio so that students may develop as writers by treating their own writing in the class as an experience worthy of intellectual inquiry.

## **Assignments**

### ***Call for Papers — Abstract***

#### **Integration Activity**

Students search for a “Call for Papers” (CFP) in their academic discipline. When they have found a conference, meeting, or journal issue that interests them, they propose making a contribution by writing a proposal in response to the call, including an abstract and a cover letter.

## **Learning Goals**

- A strong understanding of the uses of writing in his/her academic discipline and/or career path
- Critical understanding of and facility in the discourse of a field
- An understanding of the importance of audience and context with respect to writing style and arrangement

## **Implementation**

Students split into groups by discipline or faculty (humanities, social sciences, and sciences) and locate Internet repositories of CFPs. Each student brings in 5-10 CFPs which are exchanged among group members. As part of the learning process, the instructor brings in abstracts completed for actual academic conferences and explores the abstract as an academic genre.

## **Final Product**

An abstract (approximately 300-500 words) and a cover letter to the conference organizer or journal editor.

## **Assessment**

Abstracts are reviewed by peers and also by instructor based on their “fit” with the CFP, their attention to an academic audience and appropriate discourse conventions, and the timeliness and relevance of the proposal.

## ***Peer Review — Writing Assignment***

### **Integration Activity**

Students compose peer reviews for each others’ drafts. The reviews are not marginal comments or peer editing but full-fledged, written peer reviews modeled after the peer review process in academic journal submission. Students revise their drafts, partly in response to the peer reviews, and submit their revised papers with a cover letter explaining the reasons for their choices in revision.

## **Learning Goals**

- A strong understanding of the uses of writing in his/her academic discipline and/or career path
- Confidence and facility with the processes of revision
- Written reflection on his or her own writing processes and texts and their role in his or her own practice of critical reasoning.

## **Implementation**

When a draft of a larger project is submitted it goes out to two peer reviewers based on a table generated by the instructor. Peer reviews are written in three parts: Summary, Major Points, and Minor Points; typically they are 300+ words. Reviews are returned to the author and the

instructor. Students then submit revised drafts with cover letters explaining their revisions. These letters must particularly explain decisions that are made when the paper receives conflicting advice from the two reviewers. This process may be repeated over several drafts with the same reviewers or with new ones.

## **Final Product**

The immediate products of the peer review process are the written documents of the peer review itself and the cover letter responding to the reviews. The ultimate product of the process is the larger paper that is the subject of these smaller texts.

## **Assessment**

The peer review and cover letter are assessed for their completeness and the seriousness of their execution. The secondary effect on the quality of the larger project varies but can be quite significant.

## ***Reflective Portfolio — Final Assignment***

### **Integration Activity**

Students who have finished their major writing assignments assemble a portfolio of work and write a reflective essay assessing their own goals, achievements, current limitations, and future plans as writers.

### **Learning Goals**

- A strong understanding of the uses of writing in his/her academic discipline and/or career path
- Confidence and facility with the processes of revision
- Written reflection on his or her own writing processes and texts and their role in his or her own practice of critical reasoning.

### **Implementation**

Students are made aware of the need for the reflective portfolio at the beginning of the course. Throughout the semester, they are given the opportunity to reflect on and improve their work while revising it. During the last week of the semester, they are given the following assignment:

#### **Reflection Essay**

The reflection essay, to be included with your portfolio, is a chance to take stock of your writing this semester. Your basic strategy is to write an essay quoting several passages from your work this semester and discussing how you understand the strengths and weaknesses of your writing with respect to those passages. You want to frame these quotes both with specific contexts and interpretations and with a general introduction and conclusion assessing how your work as a writer this semester fits (or doesn't fit) with your longer-term identity and/or goals.

You can choose any number passages to discuss from your work. However, I would like you to discuss some of the following kinds of passages:

- A passage that changed significantly from draft to draft.
- A passage that incorporated source references effectively.
- A passage you had particular difficulty in composing.
- A passage where you summarized or provided a thesis or clincher statement.
- A passage that you would like to have more time to research in order to feel completely satisfied with.
- Your most effective review.
- A passage you would like to develop into an independent paper later in your life.
- A passage where you acknowledged limits or qualifications to your claim.
- A passage where you defined a word or concept.

The goal is to talk about the *choices* you made in constructing these passages, the decisions that went into the style and approach you adopted, and the kinds of things these choices say about you as a writer. The goal is most pointedly *not* to trumpet your own virtues as a writer or to appeal for a good grade in the class.

### **Final Product**

The final project is a paper of roughly eight pages, about half of which is composed of quotes from the student's earlier work. We have found that asking students to identify specific kinds of passages is more helpful than asking them simply to reflect on their progress through the semester. This way they don't write the reflection essay as a conversion narrative, i.e., a self-justifying story of how the experience of the class radically transformed their writing. By focusing on passages that do specific things, students are more able to treat their writing as an object of analysis rather than praise.

### **Assessment**

The reflective essay is assessed for its success in analyzing the student's writing and reasoning practices and for its choice of passages that effectively illustrate its points.