

The Department of English

In addition to its course offerings for majors, the IU Department of English is, like most English departments, also responsible for writing courses that fulfill general education requirements. The professionalization of English graduate students, therefore, typically includes preparation to teach a variety of courses in expository, professional, and/or creative writing, as well as courses in literature.

HIRING AND ASSIGNMENT PROCESS FOR AIs

The English department appoints about 150 associate instructors, with their responsibilities varying from one semester to the next. Many are responsible for teaching sections of various composition and creative writing courses, while others serve as discussion section leaders in multi-section courses having a faculty course director. Some serve as interns or graders.

In accordance with a policy adopted by the department in the fall of 1996 aimed at improving recruitment and financial support, once doctoral students specializing in literature or rhetoric/composition are admitted into the program, they automatically receive an AI appointment in their second year, provided they are found to have made adequate progress on their degrees in their first year. As first-year AIs, they are required to take a proseminar in the teaching of composition during the fall semester while teaching concurrently one section of elementary composition (W131) using a common syllabus. Thereafter, teaching assignments are made based upon graduate students' requests, their seniority and continued good standing in the program, and the department's commitment to providing them with varied teaching experiences.

Graduate students working toward an MFA in Creative Writing receive AI-ships in their first year. All incoming graduate students in the MFA program in creative writing (10-15 a year) serve as discussion section leaders in a large faculty-led creative writing course, while they are taking a required proseminar in the teaching of creative writing. In their second year, MFA students teach composition and take the accompanying composition proseminar.

INITIAL ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

All first-time teachers of composition and creative writing participate in faculty and administrator-led orientation workshops held in August the week before the school year begins. Both the workshop on teaching composition and the workshop on teaching creative writing are held for five full days.

In the composition workshop, led by the director of composition and the four assistant directors of W131, Elementary Composition, about 30 AIs receive both an introduction to teaching issues and an introduction to the composition course that includes discussions of the theoretical and practical aims of the first-year course (including the master syllabus and all assignments), department procedures, responding to and grading sample student essays, sample lesson plans and classroom activities, and guidance in strategies for analyzing readings and leading discussion. The workshop structure includes presentations to the whole group and small break-out sessions, in which new AIs begin working with the assistant-director led group of peers (7 or 8) with whom they will meet once a week throughout fall semester. The orientation concludes with a two-hour group meeting with an assistant director to review each AI's week-by-week syllabus, and, finally, a microteaching session in which AIs present a sample ten-minute lesson and receive feedback from peers and the program directors. New AIs also attend the campus-wide workshop on diversity issues.

The creative writing pedagogy coordinator, in consultation with the director of the Creative Writing Program, conducts the creative writing workshop and serves as the fall semester lecturer in English W103, the large lecture course for which new creative writing AIs serve as discussion section leaders. Topics covered include guidelines for teaching W103, syllabus building, methods for connecting lectures and discussions, managing in-class discussion of texts and student work, critiquing and grading, as well as department procedures and problem resolution.

THE ORIENTATION MANUAL

Central to the orientation workshop on teaching composition is a 250-page spiral-bound handbook that is updated every year. The handbook provides materials for each segment of the August orientation workshop and valuable resources on each course unit, sample student papers, information on evaluating writing, plagiarism, etc. Materials for the binder are designed and updated each year, and reflect in part materials (e.g., case studies of revised assignments) submitted in the teaching portfolios which AIs turn in as their final projects in the W501 Proseminar (See Teaching Portfolio).

THE ASSISTANT DIRECTORS

Central to the preparation of our first-time teachers of composition are the four assistant directors of W131—advanced graduate students hired for their abilities to redesign course materials and supervise and mentor new AIs in weekly small group meetings. Not just their presence but their investment in a course that is always changing from within helps to establish a sense of a community of reflective teachers. The assistant directors, in consultation with the director of composition, have also compiled and published two editions of a custom course reader with Bedford/St. Martins, along with an instructor’s manual just for our IU-Bloomington course.

PROSEMINARS ON TEACHING

The Department of English offers three proseminars on teaching: composition, creative writing, and literature. Most English department AIs begin their teaching with composition and are required to enroll in W501, “The Teaching of College Composition,” concurrently with their first time teaching W131 in fall semester. This 3-credit course meets once a week for two hours with an additional hour for small group meetings with one of the four assistant directors to share strategies, problems, and lesson materials. The proseminar (typically 3-4 sections of 8-10 graduate students) expands on the topics covered in the August orientation through the reading and discussion of pertinent theoretical

and practical articles on writing pedagogy. The course also includes analysis of several case studies of classroom issues and the design of future courses in reading and writing. Useful readings for this purpose include those in *Conflicts and Crises in the Composition Classroom—and What Instructors Can Do About Them*, edited by Dawn Skorczewski and Matthew Parfitt (Boynnton/Cook 2003); *Teaching Composition: Background Readings*, edited by T.R. Johnson (Bedford/St. Martin's 2008); and *The Allyn and Bacon Teaching Assistant's Handbook: A Guide for Graduate Instructors of Writing and Literature*, edited by Stephen W. Wilhoit. The composition proseminar requirements include two classroom observations (with pre- and post-discussion and written observation reports by peers and directors), and the construction of a teaching portfolio, which encourages continuing reflective practice and preparation for the academic job market.

All new creative writing AIs are required to enroll in English W554, "Teaching Creative Writing," taught by a creative writing graduate faculty member in the fall concurrently with the AIs' initial teaching assignment in W103. This two-credit course explores the basic goals and methods of teaching the writing of fiction and poetry at the college level. Among the subjects examined are the personal dynamics of the writing workshop, authority in the classroom, the creative writing process, methods of criticism and grading, and the role of exercises, revision, and conferences. Readings in several creative writing pedagogy texts are also required.

Originally sponsored by the department's Preparing Future Faculty grant, the department is now in its tenth year of offering an additional (non-required) proseminar on the teaching of literature, whereby faculty members collaborate with AIs a semester in advance on the design of a topical general education course for undergraduates on writing about literature and culture. The number of graduate students enrolled corresponds to the number of discussion sections needed in the lecture course the following semester. This is a successful arrangement that unites scholarship and pedagogy and extends AI training beyond the teaching of composition courses.

THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO

The teaching portfolio as the final project in the proseminar includes: a reflective teaching statement; two observation reports and a response to the observation process; a “case study” of a revised assignment; and an annotated, revised syllabus for the following semester. The director of composition meets with each new AI individually early in the second semester to discuss the teaching portfolio, his/her course evaluations from the fall, and how the second semester teaching is progressing. AIs who have regularly updated the teaching portfolios they assembled in the proseminar may have them reviewed annually by faculty. This review is an occasion for a conversation with a faculty member that focuses on the AI’s goals as a college teacher, teaching experiences that might be pursued in coming semesters, and on the overall quality of the teaching credentials as reflected in the portfolio documents.

A first pass at a Reflective Teaching Statement (2-3 pages) might include answers to the following questions (Farris, W501 Syllabus 2007, in *Subject to Change: New Composition Instructors’ Theory and Practice*, Hampton Press, 1996):

- What worked in your teaching this semester?
- How do you think students benefited from your course?
- What didn’t seem to work so well? What will you do differently next time?
- What kinds of thinking, reading, and writing do students need to develop in a first-year writing course? How do you make this happen (example of a unit, assignment, activity, etc.)?
- In what ways have your views of students, writing, and teaching changed over the last three months?

ONGOING SUPERVISION AND TRAINING

Beyond their first year of teaching, departmental support for AIs continues in several different forms. Doctoral students teach on five-year contracts. MFA students are on three-year contracts. Experienced AIs assigned to teach other writing courses in the department meet before the semester begins in orienta-

tion sessions with the composition program coordinator to discuss theoretical perspectives, course goals and responsibilities, recommended texts and syllabi, and guidelines and strategies for designing and evaluating reading and writing assignments. Typically, a doctoral student will have taught first-year composition, professional writing, and served as a discussion section leader in a literature and/or combined literature and composition lecture course by the end of his or her contract.

Experienced AIs are observed regularly and meet periodically throughout the semester with the composition program coordinator in small groups of four or five (at sessions called “roundtables”) to afford them an opportunity to discuss issues of common concern, to help solve any problems that they have encountered in teaching the course to date, and to share successful assignments and teaching strategies. Experienced AIs serving as course interns and discussion leaders in large literature courses meet regularly with the faculty member responsible for the course for the purposes of discussing course aims, pedagogical strategies, writing assignments, and grading. Occasionally these meetings occur well before the semester begins to enable the faculty member to collaborate with the AIs in the design of the course and the reading list. Typically the faculty member invites each AI assigned to the course to deliver one of the lectures to the class as a whole (50-100 students) and to visit his or her own discussion section; in addition, most observe the AIs in their discussion sections at least once during the semester.

The department also encourages AIs to participate in a variety of informal activities designed to strengthen their teaching skills. Usually sponsored by the department’s Composition Committee, the composition directors and graduate student committee members lead workshops on designing a W170 course, Projects in Reading and Writing, a theme-based version of W131, and roundtable sessions on teaching issues of interest to both new and experienced AIs. Recent roundtable topics have included presentations by the Office of Disability Services for Students, the Office of Affirmative Action, and the Athletic Academic Services.

EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK FOR AIs

All AIs are encouraged to administer anonymous midterm course evaluations to enable them to respond in a timely fashion to any problems or concerns students might have in their classes. Typically, AIs ask three questions of their students: “What’s working in this course? What’s not working so well? What suggestions do you have for me?” At the end of each semester, AI teaching performance is more formally assessed via classroom observation reports, assistant directors’ reports, teaching portfolios, individual exit interviews conducted by the composition director and coordinator, and a careful review by the director and the coordinator of both the final grade rosters and the teaching evaluations that all AIs are required to submit (using the BEST form devised and approved by the department for writing courses). Overall findings are then used by the director and the coordinator to shape curriculum and guide supervision in subsequent semesters. At the beginning of the following semester, these findings are shared with AIs in the form of a memo that provides a summary of student responses to the course evaluations submitted for all first-year writing courses; this summary enables AIs to contextualize scores they received on their individual course evaluations. AIs whose evaluations appear particularly problematic in this context are asked to meet with the composition director or the composition coordinator to discuss strategies for improvement.

UNIVERSITY AND NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR TEACHING

In recent years, three of our graduate students, all of whom served as program consultants or assistant directors, have received the university-wide Associate Instructor Teaching Award. In addition, faculty and graduate students have made panel presentations at the Modern Language Association and at the Conference on College Composition and Communication on our innovative W131 and W170 composition curricula combining academic writing and cultural analysis and on our literature proseminar (L503/L141-42) in which faculty and graduate student collaborate in the teaching of literature

and composition. In 2007, Professors Judith Anderson and Christine Farris edited a volume for MLA, *Integrating the Teaching of Literature and Writing*, inspired by their collaboration with graduate students in L503 and L141-42. It includes several articles on literature and writing pedagogy by former IU English graduate student instructors.

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