

# **WAC Writing Survey 2012 Report**

## **I. Introduction/ Rationale**

In December of 2011, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Appalachian State University conducted a survey of students in the Writing in the Discipline classes and in English 2001, Introduction to WAC, to get feedback pertaining to their attitudes about how well they are being prepared for writing in their majors, about their experience with the University Writing Center (UWC), and to find out how they felt about themselves as writers. The primary goal of WAC is to offer faculty development to support the vertical writing curriculum in order to help students write better in their academic careers and to prepare them for the writing they will do outside academia. Gathering information via this survey can help WAC strengthen faculty development for the English 2001 course, which serves as students' introduction to writing across the curriculum. (This document reports only the results relevant to the WAC program.)

## **II. Methods**

The survey was developed by WAC consultant Dennis Bohr with the aid of feedback from other WAC consultants Sherry Alusow Hart, Travis Rountree and Elizabeth West; Georgia Rhoades, Director of WAC; Beth Carroll, Director of the UWC, and Rachel Strickland, Assistant Director of the UWC. The questions were divided into three sections: questions about WAC and English 2001; questions about students' experiences with the writing center; and general questions about writing. The survey was completed on ASU's UCASS survey instrument, and Bohr went through IRB training to get approval for the survey. (Graphics were supplied by WAC research assistant Victoria Lozano.)

Once IRB approval was obtained, the survey was sent to teachers of the WID courses and English 2001 teachers, with a link for the students to access and complete the survey. The survey was purely voluntary and anonymous. Teachers were free to pass on the link to the survey or ignore it entirely, while students had the option of taking the survey or not.

## **III. Results**

One hundred and twenty-six students completed the survey: 49% were sophomores with 20% juniors and 20% seniors. (See figure 1.) Ten freshmen completed the survey and two identified themselves as transfer students. Sixty-three per cent of those surveyed had taken English 1000 at ASU, and 70% had taken English 2001.

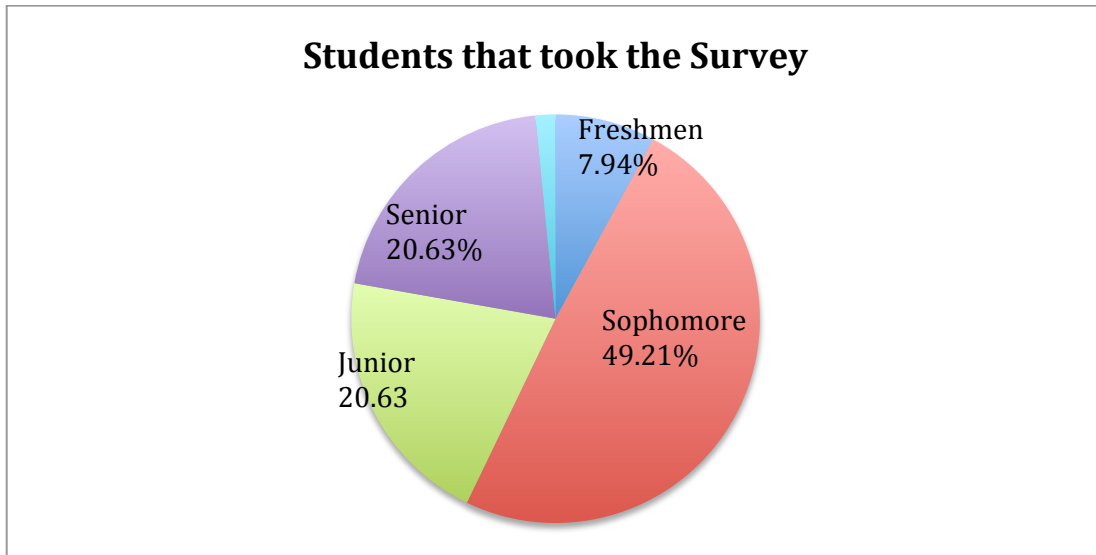


Figure 1

There were 39 different majors ranging from the “hard sciences” (biology, chemistry and physics) with 31 majors and 19 psychology majors to one each in music education, technical photography, sociology, mathematics and similar fields. Of the 125 surveys, 79% said that writing was important in their majors.

Seventy-six per cent said that English 2001 had prepared them for writing in their majors: 35% answered “yes” to the question, while 41% answered “somewhat.” (In connection with that answer, 8 people said that they had not taken 2001 because they had tested out of the course or were transfer students.) (See figure 2.)

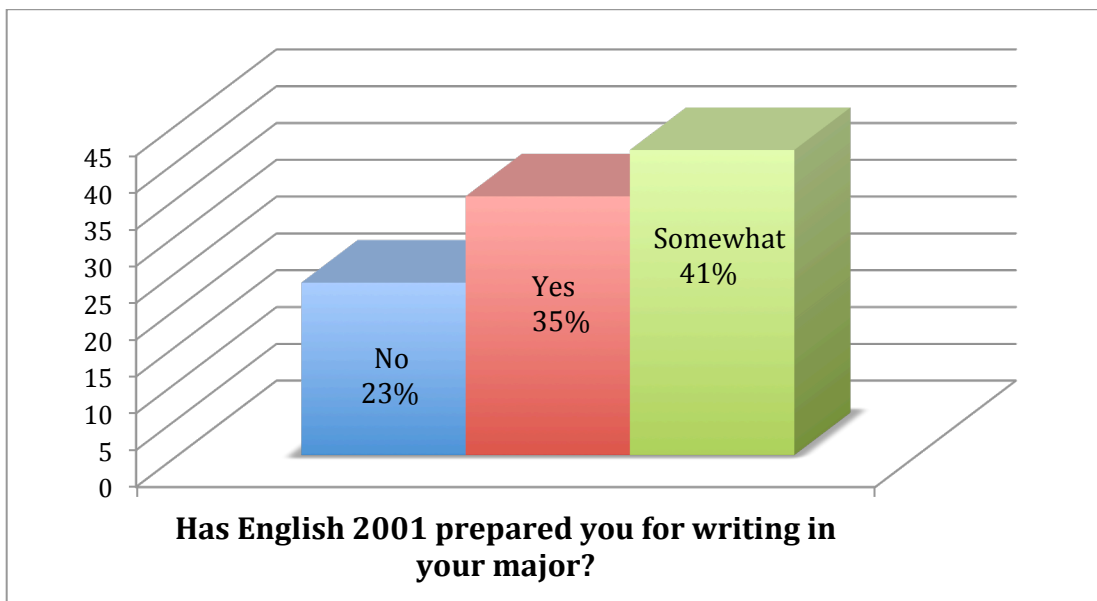


Figure 2

The top two responses to what was helpful about both English 1000 and English 2001 were “further practice with writing” (55% in 1000, 52% in 2001) and “teacher feedback on papers” (50% in 1000, 45% in 2001). Class size (40%) and the ability to choose their own topics (39%) were also cited as important in English 1000. In English 2001, 37% felt that learning information about writing in their majors was important along with closely related items, “becoming aware of different writing conventions” for different fields and learning how to cite correctly (both with 34%), figuring prominently as well. (See figure 3.) (Class size was inadvertently left out of the choices for the question about English 2001.)

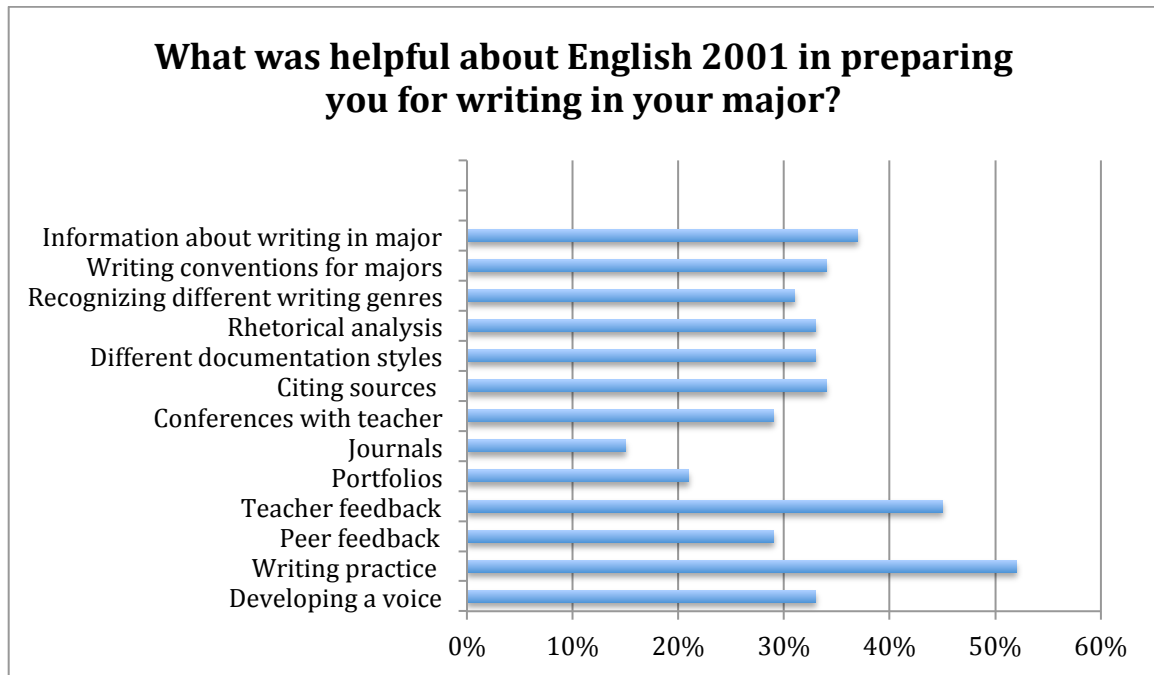


Figure 3

Only 14.4% said they were “familiar with the Vertical Writing Model.” (This question may need to be revised since it is possible that students know they have a writing course in each of their four years at ASU, yet they may not know the specific term for it.) The people who were familiar with the concept cited “classroom instruction” (50%) and “advisor or teacher” (35.71%) as the sources of their familiarity.

When asked, “What area(s) do you struggle with when writing?” the top two responses are closely related: procrastination (84 people or 67%) and “I have problems getting started and/or writing conclusions” (64 or 50.79%). (See figure 4.)

## What area(s) do you struggle with when writing?

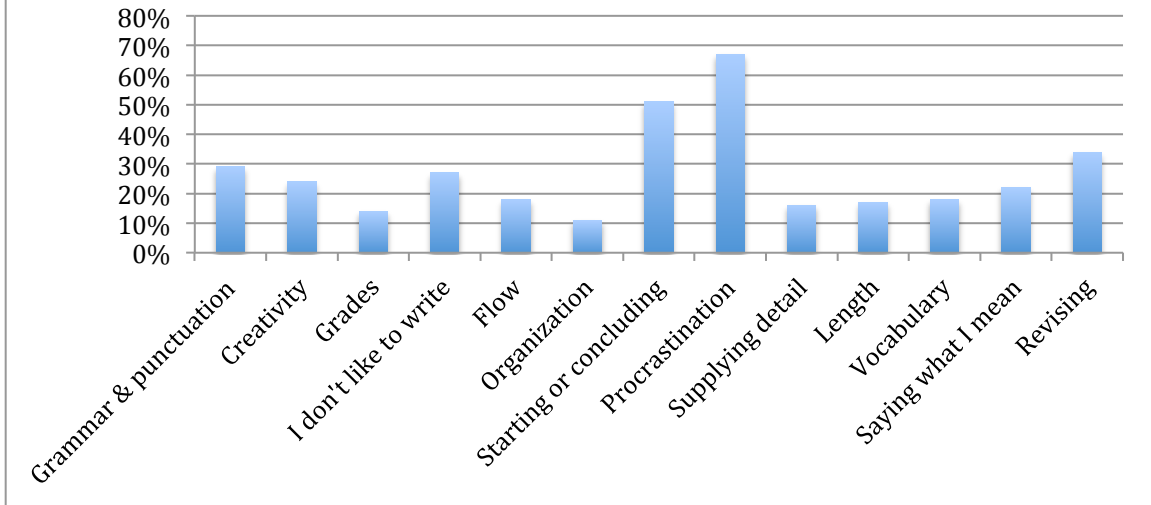


Figure 4

The question of "What helps you as a writer?" asked students to rank seven different aspects of writing instruction. The top two responses to this question were "teacher feedback" (50 answers, 42.37%) and "clear, specific instructions" (27 answers or 22.88%). (See figure 5.)

## What helps you as a writer?

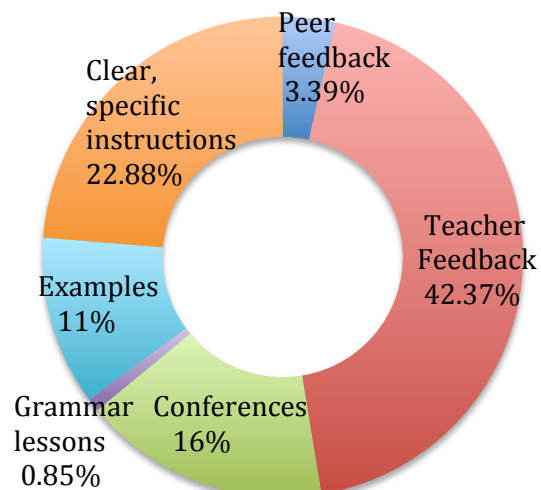


Figure 5.

Since only one person said “grammar lessons” helped him/her improve as a writer, it appears that the Composition Program, which stresses process writing and portfolio use in its classes, is effectively conveying the message that learning about writing is more complex than writing in correct sentences.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

The fact that 76% said that English 2001 is helpful in preparing them for writing in the major is gratifying, as English 2001 has only been a required course since Fall 2009 and was created partly in response to students’ perceptions of English 1100 (which 2001 replaced) as a repetition of their high school work.

Several other areas that English 2001 stresses were also considered helpful to students:

- Gaining information about writing in their majors (37%)
- Learning an awareness of the different writing conventions about their fields (34%)
- Citing sources correctly (34%)
- Gaining an awareness of the different documentation styles (33%)
- Developing their voices (33%)
- Analyzing a text rhetorically (33%)

Students’ views that teacher feedback is the most important factor in improving their writing supports the argument for regulating the size of writing courses. (Class size was cited as “helpful” about English 1000 by 39% of those surveyed.) Studies conclude that students learn more effectively in small classes where teachers have time to frame effective responses to writing.

WAC plans to present the information from this survey to Composition teachers, emphasizing the following:

- a large majority of responders (79%) believed that writing is important in their majors;
- 76% of students felt that 2001 has prepared them for writing in their major, answering “yes” or “somewhat”;
- the two main elements that students felt are helpful about English 1000 and English 2001 classes are writing practice and teacher feedback;
- class size and the ability to choose their own topic were important in English 1000;
- “teacher feedback” (42.37%) was also cited as the number one response to “What helps you as a writer?”;
- respondents said that clear, specific instructions are very helpful (22.88%);

- two main areas that students struggle with are procrastination (67%) and “getting started and/or writing conclusions” (51%).

### **WAC Action Plan**

In its work with faculty, WAC will continue to offer support for multiple drafts in WID courses and strategies for responding to writing in large courses and to encourage faculty to show the WAC film to educate students about the vertical writing model.

The survey covers a fairly small sample, but it is a start on a long-range project. WAC will administer the revised survey at the end of Spring 2012 and in subsequent semesters so that we can get a more accurate picture of what students perceive about their writing classes at Appalachian State.