

WPA Statement on the Five Knowledge Domains of First-Year Composition (v4)

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Five Knowledge Domains of First-Year Composition

Brief History and Positionality

The Council of Writing Program Administrators' (CWPA) Outcomes Statements (v1, 2000; v2, 2008; v3, 2014) are a part of ongoing collaborative revisions by scholars with a wide variety of lived and professional experiences. We, the authors of this version, recognize our positions as administrators, researchers, and teachers include power and privilege that we cannot ignore, distance ourselves from, or disregard. We also acknowledge the challenges faced by past members, leaders, and stakeholders who have devoted their time, expertise, and passion to this work. In honoring the experiences of past committees, we commit to transparency, continuous improvement, and fostering a future that arcs toward justice.

Purpose and Goals

This statement identifies five common knowledge domains of first-year or introductory composition programs in higher education. Drawing on the most recent research, theories, and practices of composition pedagogy, these domains describe the most consequential areas of learning to help undergraduates develop their skill and competency in college, professional, and community-level writing. Each domain carries equal weight in importance and when taken together they represent a synergistic vision of first-year writing programs: to promote and facilitate writing knowledge transfer—understanding that writing knowledge and abilities learned in one context are reused within new writing contexts, both in immediate college coursework and beyond academia.

This document is designed to facilitate conversations and decision-making efforts among writing program administrators, university administrators, writing center directors, graduate instructors, teaching professors, faculty across disciplines, and any other relevant stakeholders. Many approaches to curriculum development can be complex and specific to institutional type, student population, labor conditions, faculty expertise and experience, university resources, community needs, and current laws and policies regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Therefore, users of this document will not find generic, broad learning outcomes for each knowledge domain. Instead it is theoretically aligned with organic assessment—a practical

framework to develop assessments according to the unique conditions of the local level. WPAs are encouraged to develop learning outcomes that align with the five knowledge domains and match the unique contexts of their institution.

Domain 1: Rhetorical Knowledge

Students should analyze contexts, genres, and audiences as they develop purposes and goals for their writing and produce texts using the full range of their linguistic, cultural, and semiotic repertoires. The texts that students consume and produce, both in and out of academia, may be alphanumeric combined with multimodal formats, thus creating epistemic conditions that include various digital and visual rhetorics. Students need support to understand their composing processes as embodied and connected to the ways that different people navigate texts and contexts and to consider the ethical and material stakes of these processes.

Domain 2: Conventions and Language

Students understand that all people bring diverse linguistic histories and practices to various contexts, each offering valuable perspectives. No dialect or language is inherently superior; value is shaped by communities and power dynamics. Instruction that privileges Standard English risks reinforcing inequities and overlooking students' linguistic assets. Conventions and language are not universal—they evolve with cultural and disciplinary contexts. Students understand how conventions are constructed and negotiated, and why power circulates through language. Students are equipped to analyze, adapt, and advocate for their linguistic identities.

Domain 3: Critical Reading and Thinking

Students develop strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and analyze a text, including reading to understand what a text says, what a text does, and what a text means. Students need support to develop critical reading practices through standalone reading instruction and integrated reading and writing instruction. Students come to first-year composition with a wide range of reading practices. These reading practices emerge from their lived experience and education histories and shape how they uptake critical reading and thinking in first-year composition.

Domain 4: Material Conditions and Technologies

Composing is always subject to the material conditions of the rhetorical context; such material conditions might include time and space, knowledge, previous writing experiences, and access to production and distribution technologies. Students should critically attend to and reflect on material and ethical considerations in choosing and using information and technologies, acknowledging that they are not always in control of, or able to access the material conditions of any given rhetorical context.

Domain 5: Composing Processes

Students develop a variety of strategies to create a wide range of texts. The strategies composers use are seldom linear but rather iterative and recursive, often consisting of interlocking individual and collaborative activities that lead to a completed (for-now) project. Such recursive activities include critical thinking, planning, creating, revising, and (re)creating, based on composers' rhetorical situations, interactions with feedback and other composers, and the material affordances that shape their composing. Reflection and metacognition help composers adapt as a project unfolds as well as to deepen writing knowledge and transfer.

Cross-Category Knowledge Domains

In addition to the five knowledge domains above, this statement includes three cross-category knowledge domains: areas of writing knowledge that relate to multiple domains above. For example, developing Genre knowledge involves Rhetorical Knowledge, Conventions and Language, Material Conditions and Technologies, and Composing Processes. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) impacts many writerly activities, and the discipline contests to what extent writing programs should teach GenAI, if at all. What learning outcomes match the values of the discipline and the program's definition of critical GenAI literacies? These domains are implicated yet so influential they cannot be flattened into one of the five domains. Therefore, these domains should be in consideration as WPAs design new learning outcomes according to the five knowledge domains.

Accessibility and Disability

Students should learn about and reflect on the diverse ways they and other readers or audiences engage with conventional print-based and multimodal texts. While accessibility can include consideration of what language styles, conventions, and uses might support a reader's uptake of a text, it must also center the embodied needs of disabled composers and readers.

Generative Artificial Intelligence

Generally, specific kinds of digital technologies are not elevated to a learning outcome or domain. However, this cross domain for GenAI is predicated upon how writing programs are developing responses in different ways. The continuation of these cross-domains depends on the trajectory of the discipline's interventions. Students understand GenAI as a class of artificial intelligence systems that can create new content, such as text, images, audio, and video. Students familiarize themselves with GenAI's many forms, such as chat interfaces, features embedded in software, and AI agents. Students become aware of this technology's contributions to existing social inequalities, as well as its material impact on the environment, labor, creativity, human agency, and students' learning. At the discretion of program and university leadership, students critically reflect on what GenAI platforms do and do not add to learning composing processes, research methods, and other writerly activities.

Genre

Students understand that genre is a social action. That is, they understand that genres are purposeful responses by writers to recurring situations within contexts and communities, not simply categories of texts and their typical features. Genres help writers identify the conventions of a given text, whether it is primarily alphanumeric or multimodal, as well as the expectations for audiences who are familiar with these texts. Analyzing genres helps writers to understand unfamiliar texts.