

## College Instructor Perceptions of Student Writing Preparedness Across Disciplines

Jeremy Rubio and Brenda Refaei

*University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College*

In college classrooms across the country, instructors throughout various disciplines have expressed concern over their students' writing abilities. Many find that their students are under-prepared for the writing demands of their courses, and while there have been studies examining this issue over the years (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford, 2011; Horwitz, 2007), there has yet to be a clear determination of the source of these struggles nor a consistent discussion of what may be done to better prepare these students for college-level writing.

For this research study, the researchers wanted to discover what both teachers of English as well as teachers of other disciplines thought regarding students' writing proficiency. We also wanted to find out what other college instructors perceived as students' weaknesses when it comes to their writing abilities, as well as how much, what type, and to what extent the importance of competent writing affects the grades in their courses. Throughout this research, the researchers wished to explore what potential suggestions these instructors might have in order to better prepare students for the writing demands of English as well as other disciplines.

## Literature Review

There has been a significant amount of research done that shows that college instructors from disciplines outside of English feel that students are not adequately prepared for the reading and writing demands of their subjects. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) state that both teachers and scholars are now questioning two assumptions that many have had for years with regard to writing: 1) There is an actual genre called “academic writing,” and 2) Teachers are teaching writing as effectively as they might (p. 2). With regard to the former, it then seems that what many view as academic writing should be integrated into other writing courses if it does not exist as a genre itself. If writing teachers are ineffective, then alternative strategies must be developed and implemented in order to achieve desirable and necessary results. Michael Donnelly argues that “there is no ‘must’ content; the only thing(s) that really matter is what students are doing – i.e., reading, thinking, responding, writing, receiving (feedback), and re-writing” (as quoted in Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014, p. 3). In other words, educators should think practically about what should be taught. We should not focus on teaching something just for the sake of teaching it or because it’s always been done a certain way, but we should aim to teach students what they need and what will help them in the classroom and beyond.

Horwitz (2007) cites a survey that shows many college professors feel that their students are not adequately prepared for college. Respondents said that their students lacked proficiency regarding writing fundamentals such as “basic grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation” (p. 27). Horwitz says that it is the responsibility of high schools to better prepare students for the demands of writing in college. He blames the Internet and other technology for the deterioration of basic skills such as the ability to critically evaluate sources as well as integrate these sources into students’ arguments. He says that students who have grown up in the age of the Internet are often good at finding sources but struggle to differentiate between scholarly, peer-reviewed sources, and popular sources such as *Time* magazine. In addition to high schools needing to teach more with regard to the proper research process, Horwitz believes that these students must also be given shorter assignments in order to identify the position(s) a

source may have on a subject as well as being shown what “ethical and accurate” use of sources looks like even before they begin their research.

Berrett (2014) has found that while students think they’ve either mastered writing or are at least proficient, they often fail to meet their professors’ expectations. He notes that 80% of the instructors who responded to his survey found that at least some of their students believed they were well prepared for the demands of college writing. However, most faculty members stated that many of these students are in fact not ready, if for no other reason than the fact that “learning to write is a process.” Berrett also says, “Emphasizing the revision and continuous improvement of one’s writing reflects a change in instructional approach for many professors.” This is something that students often fail to grasp at the beginning of their college writing experience.

There have been studies examining what types of writing college instructors assign as well as how they perceive students’ strengths and weaknesses. Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford (2011) administered a university-wide survey, and additionally, 14 faculty members consented to be a part of their focus group. The faculty members represented various levels of experience as well various disciplines and pedagogical views (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford, 2011, p. 75). The authors stated that in sharing the comments of the instructors, “We strive to promote not automatic acceptance of them but, instead, teacherly reflection, further assessment, and ongoing conversation about what our colleagues across disciplines say about student writing” (p. 75). Education is not static. Once a lesson has been completed, students should not close their books and move on. It is important to examine what worked well and what didn’t as well as why. As the researchers noted, education is “ongoing,” and thus it is important to always be looking to improve and be more effective as educators. They asked how much and what kinds of writing are assigned by faculty members, what the perceived strengths and weaknesses are when it comes to students’ writing, what the instructors consider to be “good” writing, and finally what types of pedagogical strategies are used by faculty members in order to help the students become better writers (p. 75)? These are important questions because if they are not considered, it will be difficult to help students. It is meaningful to be cognizant of what students do well in order to build their

confidence, and educators should be mindful of where they struggle so that they can focus on what to improve. Also, since the term “good writing” is subjective, doing the best to define it is important to have a baseline for assessment. Finally, it is important to investigate not only *what* instructors are teaching but *how* they are teaching so that it can be determined if they are having a positive effect.

The researchers stated that those taking part in the focus group “shared a view of writing as developmental” (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford, 2011, p. 76). They also noted that no one taking part in the study said that five-paragraph essays were essential for college writing (p. 76). One participant noted that, “...most of my students tell me that to them this [class] is a hoop to be jumped through so they can graduate and someday go out and be a real social worker” (p. 77). Additionally, faculty members taking part in the study mentioned that they often assign critical responses as well as other types of research-based writing. The researchers noted that “the focus-group comments suggest that college writing asks students to read and write about previously unfamiliar topics as a way to learn course content” (p. 77). They also pointed out that comments from faculty seem to suggest that professors place value in “intellectual risk taking” and that they favor critiques which promote “complex analyses” (p. 77).

The faculty at the institution where the research by Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford (2011) was conducted generally agreed that the reason behind much of the writing assignments is to assist students with learning concepts in class, and they should require or perpetuate an ability to “read, understand, and manage source material” (p. 77). Comments from the focus-group reinforced the importance of students managing source materials in college writing (p. 78). Additionally, comments from the focus group suggest that it would be beneficial for students to recognize a “varying range of necessary skills associated with managing source materials” (p. 78). It was noted that the faculty members in the study understood that students do not arrive at college as fully prepared college writers, and the instructors did not feel that students will learn all that they need to learn about writing from taking a first year writing course (p. 79). One professor said that, “Students don’t understand that writing is a craft that you improve and you’re constantly improving and that it’s not as if you can write or you can’t” (Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford, 2011, p. 79). Brockman et al. conclude their findings with five

points many of those in the focus-group seemed to agree on: 1) Students must attend and pay attention in class; 2) It is important to use model papers and rubrics in addition to other forms of supporting materials; 3) Students must be sure to follow assignment guidelines; 4) Students need to begin papers early so as to give them time to discuss drafts with professors; and 5) Students must be both receptive and responsive to feedback (p. 79).

Many have conducted research on students' literacy and writing abilities. However, most of this research has been done within the context of reading and writing courses. In addition to the insight of English teachers, this research study was also aimed at discovering what instructors outside of this discipline thought as well as why they feel the way they do and what they believe could be done to improve students' writing *before* entering these college classes.

### **Methodology**

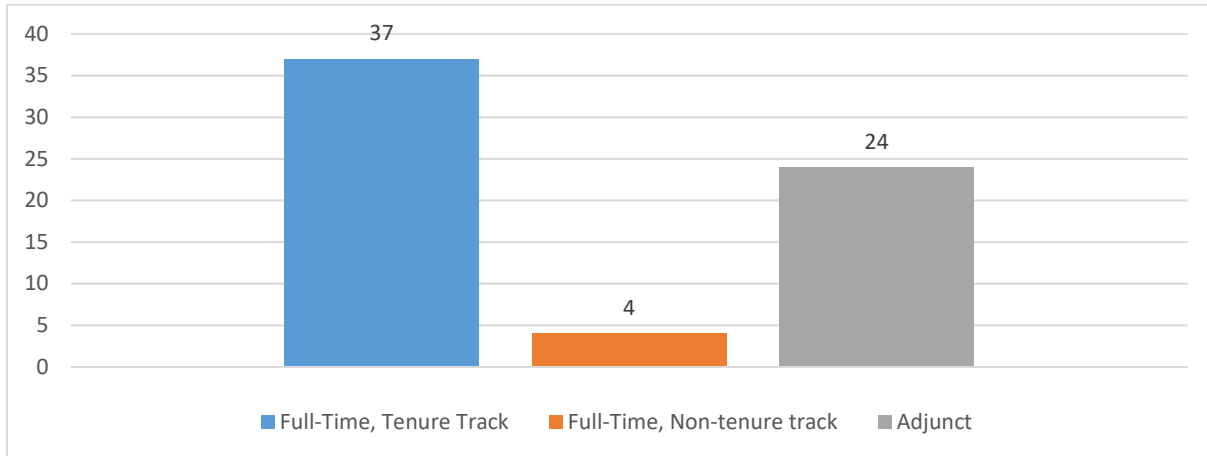
The aim of this research was to discover if college instructors of various disciplines, including English, felt the same as those in previous studies, as well as to discover if any new insight might be offered. Since Berrett (2014) noted that the majority of students do not meet professors' expectations of writing, it seemed crucial to study this dilemma further in order to understand why. And due to Horwitz's (2014) acknowledgment that students are not adequately prepared for college, this furthers the need to study this issue more. Additionally, we sought to find what kinds of suggestions and ideas college instructors might have for English instructors to better prepare these students for the various demands of college writing. In order to do this, we hoped to obtain a sizable sample of college instructors (both part-time and full-time) from a regional college of a Carnegie Research I institution in the Midwest. This is not to suggest, however, that the results of this study are only applicable to comparable institutions. The researchers feel that the results collected are generalizable to a variety of college settings given the broad and varied background of the student population at this school. In the fall of 2017, a brief, 12-question survey of multiple choice and short answer questions went to all instructors at the institution. In order to analyze the survey responses, both descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis were used.

## Findings

There were 65 responses to the survey. Of these 65, 37 were full-time, tenure track, 24 were adjunct, and the remaining four were full-time, non-tenure track (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

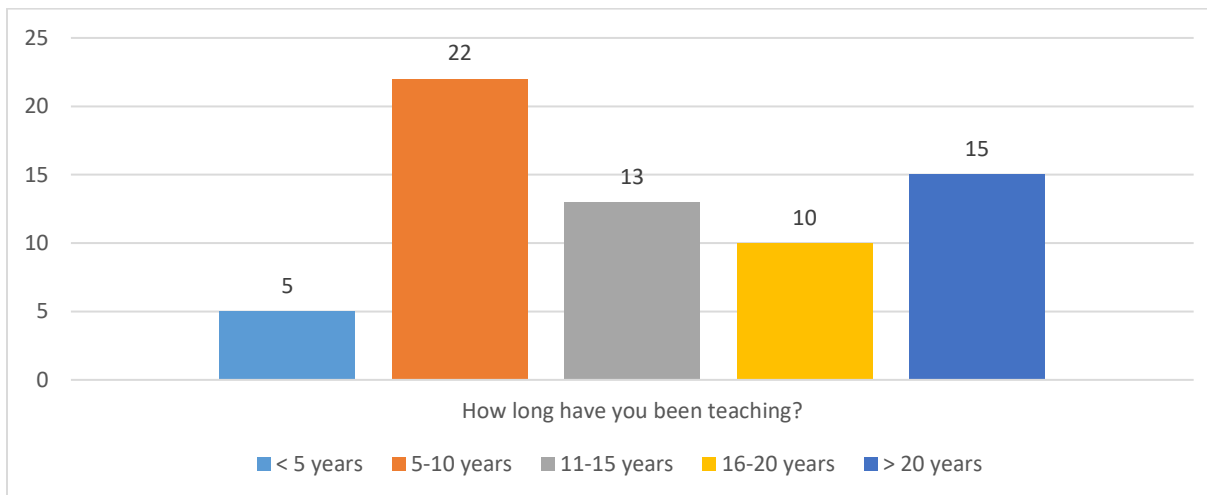
*Number and Rank of Faculty Respondents*



The number of years teaching by the respondents varied widely, with 5 indicating they had been teaching for fewer than five years, 22 in the 5-10 year range, 13 in the 11-15 year range, 10 in the 16-20 year range, and 15 in the 20+ years range (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

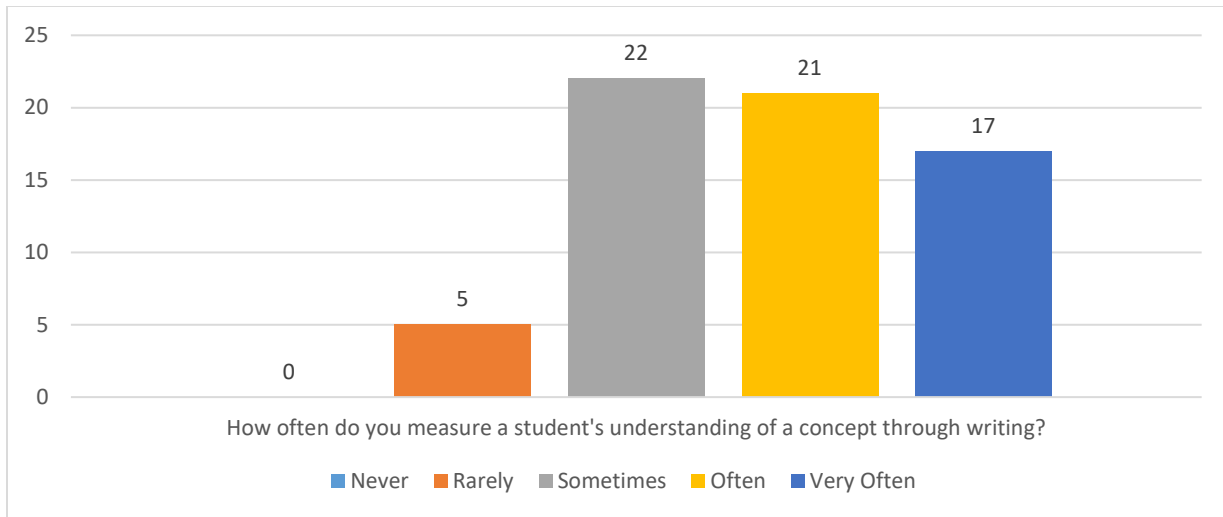
*Length of Time Teaching for Respondents*



All indicated that they measure students' understanding of a concept through writing to at least a small extent, and 58.5% responded that they did so "often" or "very often" (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

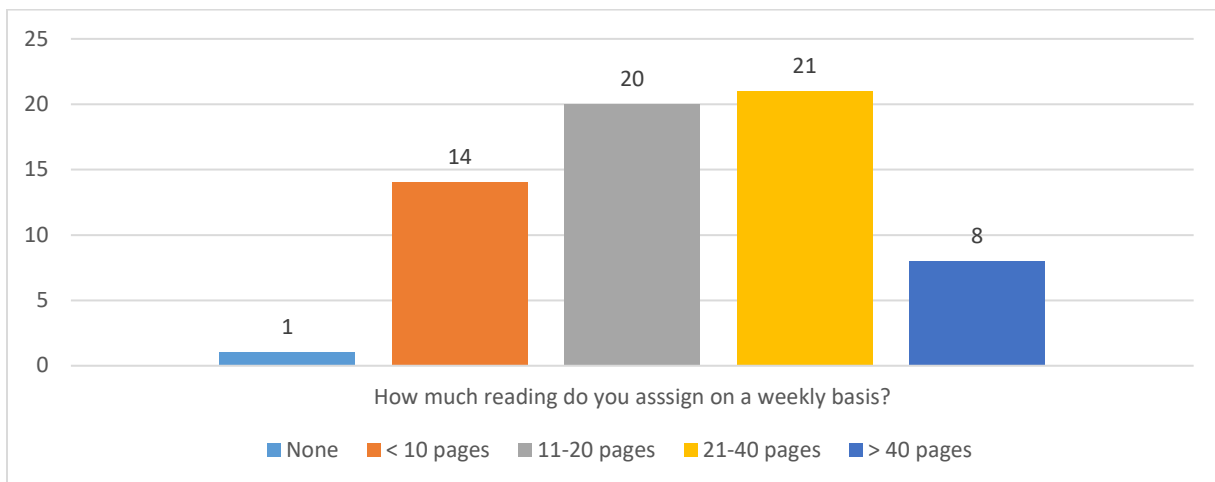
*How Often Respondents Reported Measuring Student Understanding of a Concept through Writing*



Regarding reading assigned for homework, 76.6% said that they assign more than 10 pages of reading on a weekly basis, while 12.5% said they assign more than 40 pages (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

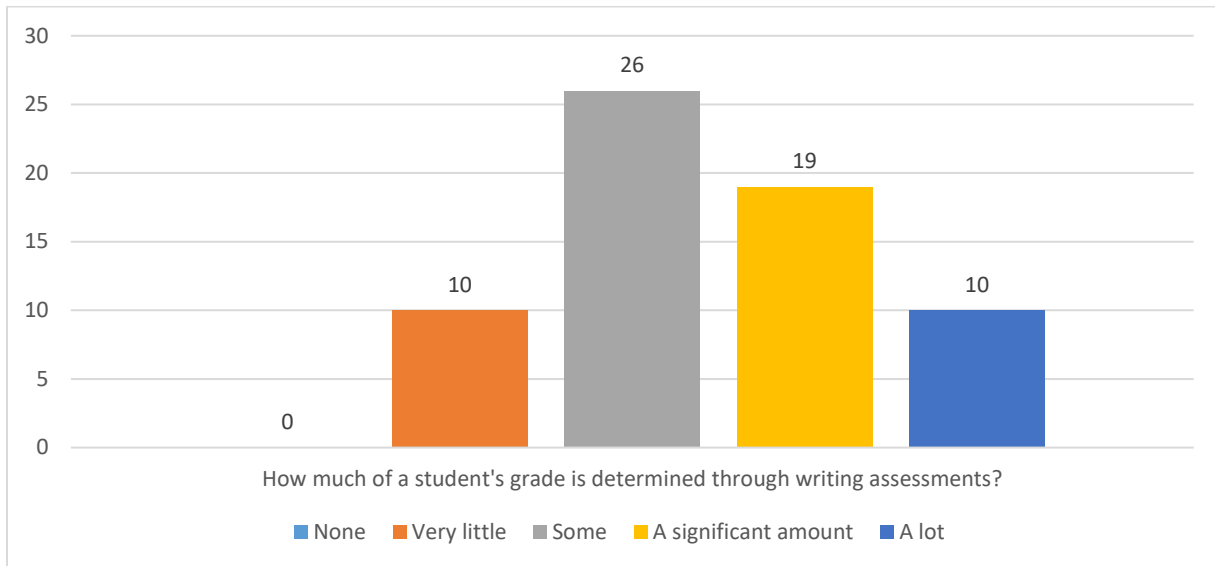
*How Much Reading Respondents Assigned on a Weekly Basis*



Furthermore, 44.6% of instructors responded that their students' grades are determined through writing assessments "a significant amount" or "a lot." An additional 40% said that at least some their grading is determined in such a way (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*How Much of a Student's Grade Respondents Determined through Writing Assessments*



Since the researchers wanted to see what instructors of all disciplines thought regarding students' general reading and writing abilities, one of the questions asked on this survey was what did these instructors see as their students' greatest weakness in their writing ability? Many of the responses included references to mechanical issues such as simply "grammar" or "spelling and basic grammar rules" as well as "spelling and punctuation." This would seem to be a problem for many students, as roughly 86% of those who responded to this survey indicated that at least some of their students' writing grade is impacted by mechanics (i.e., grammar, punctuation, sentence structure). Of this 86%, approximately 38% said mechanics impacted their students' writing grade either "a significant amount" or "a lot."

There was also an agreement among many of the instructors surveyed that the proliferation of texting has hindered writing abilities. One expressed concern that too many students "write the way they



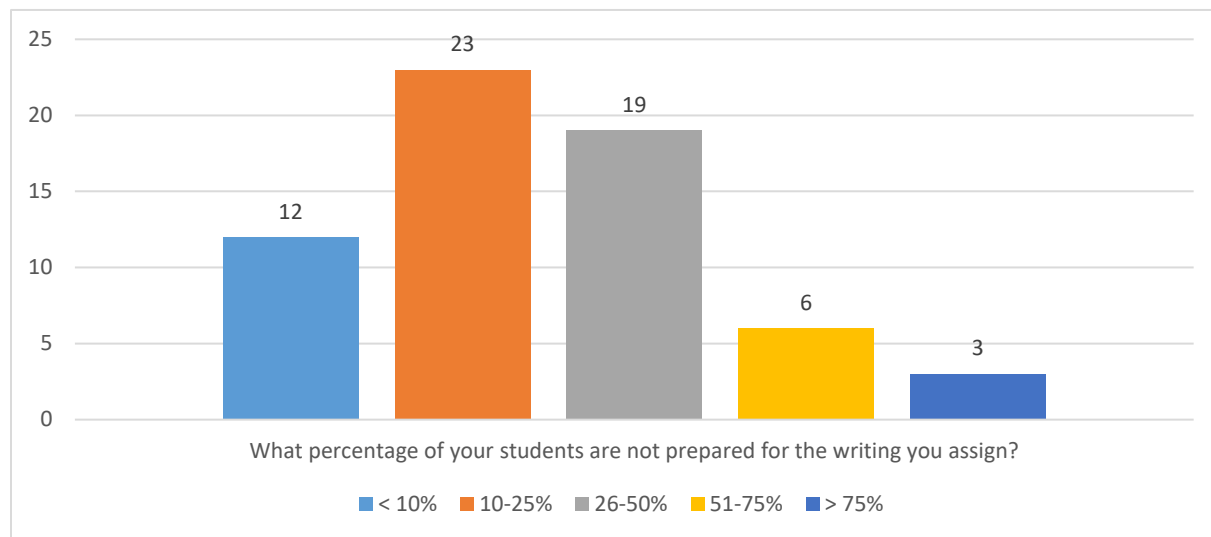
talk,” while another lamented students’ poor “transitioning from texting style” abilities. “Text writing is not writing,” stated one instructor, while another mentioned “casual language and slang.”

Multiple respondents said that students have trouble forming coherent ideas/arguments. Another said “making a convincing argument” is an issue. “Problems structuring an argument, supporting it with evidence” is what another instructor said was the greatest weakness of students’ writing ability. Using and incorporating evidence was mentioned by multiple instructors. Some pointed to the lack of confidence students have when it comes to their own writing abilities.

Overall, faculty thought students could be better prepared for the demands of reading and writing in their courses. One replied that “the training needs to begin around 6<sup>th</sup> grade” and that “Now, I don’t know...” Another respondent said simply to “review the basics.” One suggested that multiple choice and true/false testing be eliminated, and instead they should be “asked to also write in other classes.” When asked what percentage of students are not prepared for the writing these instructors assign, only a little over 14% indicated that more than half of their students were not prepared, but an additional 30.2% responded that 26%-50% of their students were not prepared. Only 19% said that fewer than 10% of their students were not prepared for the demands of writing in their courses (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

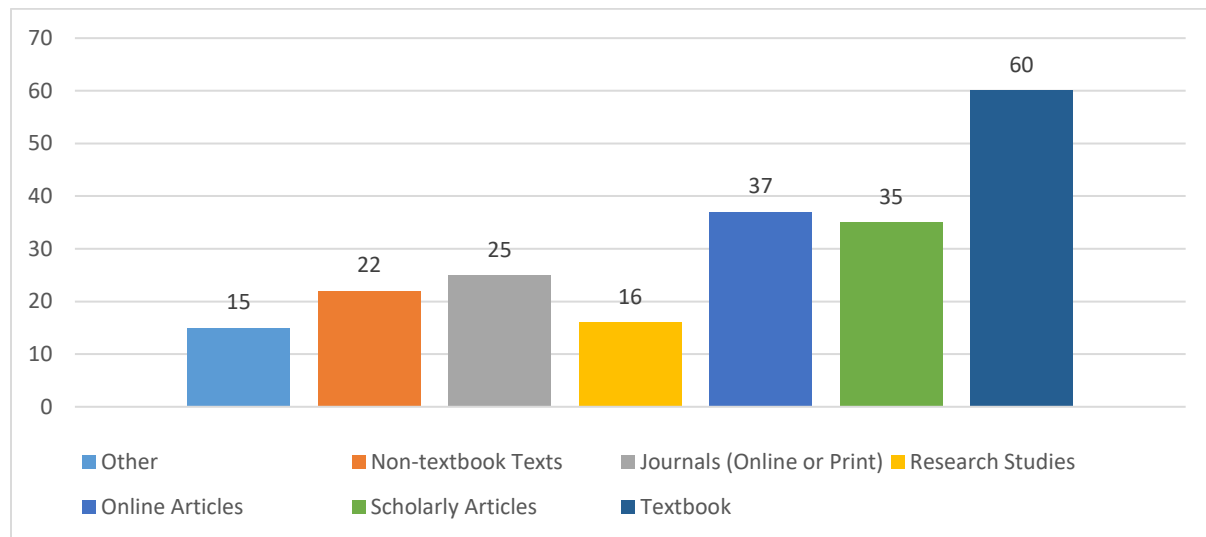
*Percentage of Students Respondents Reported Are Not Prepared for the Writing They Assign*



Furthermore, the researchers were interested in what types of reading these instructors required in their classes. Not shockingly, 92.3% said they utilize a textbook(s). Additionally, 56.9% assign reading in the form of online articles, and 53.8% assign scholarly articles (these, of course, could overlap). Nearly a quarter (24.6%) have their students read research studies, while 38.5% have their students read journals (online and/or in print). Additionally, 33.8% assigned non-textbook texts as part of their reading requirements (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Types of Reading Respondents Incorporated in their Curriculum (out of 65)*



Additionally, instructors described several ways they assessed reading. Many said that they give tests or quizzes to help them determine if the reading was understood by the students. Several others said they did so through in-class discussions. One responded, “By the way the [sic] communicate the information to others.” Another said simply, “I don’t think I do know,” and one respondent reported that they “generally can get an understanding of their level of comprehension,” but added that “the [students’] mechanics sometimes interfere.” “Critical thinking activities” is a tool one instructor said they use, while another said they can often tell “through their writing and discussion and by their statements.” There was also a more thorough response: “I know they have understood the reading when they can solve a problem

and provide reasons for their answers based on the textbook content. I also know they have understood the reading for the lab course when they can relate their data to their explanations.”

### **Discussion**

Through an examination of the findings, it appears that faculty report that many students lack the ability to form coherent ideas and arguments. Also, faculty report that students seem to struggle with reading comprehension. Both observations are important as both skills are utilized quite often in college courses, not just in English. Additionally, it is possible that grammar and punctuation could be improved since the vast majority of the faculty surveyed responded that at least some of their students' grades are impacted by this. Before conducting this study, the researchers assumed that many non-English instructors were concerned little with this, but clearly, they are, and therefore students must be more aware of these expectations. Many faculty also feel that texting is damaging students' ability to write properly.

Yang Gao (2013) notes that “[t]he interrelation between reading and writing has been taken for granted by a majority of scholars and researchers...” (p. 43). Gao points out that there has been a dearth of research studying the connection between reading and writing. Based on the findings of this research study, it would seem instructors as well as students could benefit from more research about this connection, as several respondents noted their students' poor reading comprehension skills. Gao's (2013) analysis of studies examining this connection “confirms the positive effect of summarization on readers' reading comprehension” (p. 46). Students improving their writing abilities for the sake of writing itself is desired, but doing so can also positively impact other skills, namely reading comprehension.

David Mulroy (2004), Professor Emeritus of foreign languages and literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, agrees with many of the respondents in that standard academic English grammar is important and that an inability to use it accurately can lead to major problems in writing. He says that “ignorance of grammar is very widespread among our students and constitutes a serious educational problem” (p. 53). He also points out that when students do not understand grammar, this can lead to other

issues such as lacking the ability to “[analyze] meaning when it is not intuitively obvious” (p. 53). Mulroy (2004) even goes as far to say that “the restoration of grammar is a matter of life and death” (p. 57).

Clearly, Mulroy sees the importance of using grammar accurately because it is something that is valued in courses beyond English.

On the other hand, Scott Warnock (2017), an associate professor of English at Drexel University, disagrees with some of the responses to my survey concerning texting and writing. While many expressed concerns that the ubiquity of texting has damaged the quality of students’ writing, he states, “We need to put to rest the idea that digital forms or writing pose a threat to overall writing ability” (p. 301). Warnock argues that concerns about texting and other forms of digital writing are “part of a history of complaining” about the deterioration of writing in younger generations, that how people define grammar is often incorrect, and that there is an “unproven link between digital writing behaviors and other kinds of writing” (p. 301). If what Warnock says is true, then perhaps it would be prudent to not be as concerned with texting because much of the slang and abbreviations used in it do not transfer to scholarly writing. Instead, we should devote more time and instruction to making sure students have a basic understanding of academic English grammar and sentence structure to begin with.

It would seem to be beneficial for English instructors to stress the importance of students being able to make coherent and logical arguments when writing, since this is one skill which seems to be lacking. This could be done by modeling such writing for them as well as providing examples to be studied. And while academic English grammar may not be a heavily weighted part of most instructors’ grading, providing additional instruction and resources on the basics could be a key to students’ success in a variety of different courses.

## **Conclusion**

Through analysis of the findings, the results suggest that it would be beneficial for English instructors at the college level to spend some time teaching and reviewing basic academic English grammar and sentence structure, even though this is often not part of college-level English curriculum.

This would, however, seem to contradict 60 years of composition writing research that suggests this may not only be ineffective but also possibly detrimental. For that reason, the researchers are not suggesting teachers abandon decade's worth of pedagogy. Instead of hammering academic English grammar into students, they might try to develop ways to incorporate instruction into what is already being taught. Instructors might incorporate academic English grammar and sentence structure rules and concepts into assignments that are already being taught instead of handing out grammar worksheets or devoting days and weeks to grammar lessons. Students tend to take tasks more seriously if they can see how they might be applicable to them in "real world" scenarios. Perhaps instituting a career day, where professionals in various careers are invited to speak on the importance of writing in their respective fields, could be useful and tangible to students. Demonstrating the importance of standard written English grammar in several careers could motivate them to take it more seriously. Bullard and Anderson (2014) have even suggested incorporating standard written grammar into games. Their research has shown that using games to help students learn standard written grammar "improved [students'] grasp of these grammar concepts," which suggests that this may be worth pursuing further.

The researchers have spoken with colleagues at various colleges and universities who say that college students should have already learned academic English grammar, critical reading skills, and written analysis, and they do not have time to go over them again with students. Based on the findings of this study, it could be argued that college instructors simply *must* find time to do so, regardless of whether or not their students should have already learned this in high school. And if these basics are incorporated into assignments that are already being done anyway (as the researchers suggest), no significant time will be lost. Not only is it important to have this foundation in general, but based on the results of this study, a large percentage of college instructors consider academic English grammar and mechanics when determining a student's grade, so it would behoove students to improve these skills in order to be more successful in their college courses.

Additionally, several respondents noted that their students had trouble making and structuring an argument. For this reason, it could be concluded that argument writing should be a required form of

writing that is taught in all introductory English courses. In many cases this is already true, and in these cases, perhaps more of an emphasis should be placed on how to form, structure, and support an argument so that students can transfer this form of writing to other disciplines. However, it is important to keep in mind that each discipline is part of a unique discourse community, and as such, the word “argument” has a different meaning and connotation for each. Certain kinds of material may not count as “evidence” across disciplines. At some point, English faculty must rely on their colleagues in these other disciplines to support students’ writing development because it would be nearly impossible for the former to fully incorporate all kinds and styles of argument into their curriculum. The basics must first be taught, and then the nuances of different forms of argument should be taught by instructors of the respective disciplines.

Finally, we believe it is crucial to acknowledge different discourse communities because often times the arbitrary grammar “rules” instructors cite may be biased against some of these communities, such as those who utilize African American Vernacular English (AAVE). It is important to acknowledge AAVE follows its own rules, and it is not just “a badly spoken version of [standard English],” as British-American linguist specialist Geoffrey Pullum cautioned against (1999, p. 40). Failure to do so could unfairly penalize those who speak AAVE or other varieties of English. This is not a matter of what is “correct” or “incorrect.” We shouldn’t use grammar and sentence structure rules to such an extent that they determine which students have access to learning and academic success and those who do not.

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## **Appendix A**

### Survey Questions

How often do you measure students' understanding of a concept through writing?

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

Very often

How many pages of reading do you assign on a weekly basis?

None

Fewer than 10 pages

11-20 pages

21-40 pages

More than 40 pages

What percentage of your students are not prepared for the writing you assign?

Less than 10%

10-25%

26-50%

51-75%

More than 75%

How much of a student's grade is determined through writing assessments?

None

Very little

Some

A significant amount

A lot

How much of a student's writing grade is impacted by mechanics (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.)?

N/A (I don't give writing assignments)

None

Some

A significant amount

A lot

What types of reading do you incorporate into your curriculum? (check all that apply)

None

Textbook

Scholarly articles

Online articles

Research studies

Journals (online or print)

Non-textbook texts

Other

What do you see as students' greatest weakness with regard to their writing ability?



How do you know if students understood the reading?

In what ways do you feel students could be better prepared for the demands of reading and writing in your course?

What is your discipline/subject area?

What is your position?

Adjunct

Full-time, non-tenure track

Full-time, tenure track

Other

How many years have you been teaching?

Fewer than 5 years

5-10 years

11-15 years

16-20 years

More than 20 years