Writing Enriched Curriculum Writing Plan Cover Page

WEC Department Name: Economics

WEC Faculty Liaison (print name) and Title: Jennifer Tessendorf, Instructor

Liaison Email: tessendorf@hws.edu

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Hobart and William Smith
Economics Writing Plan

Introductory Summary

The Economics faculty values effective writing, both in the discipline and in their classrooms. Department members give our majors opportunities to learn and practice the skills they need to become good writers in courses throughout the curriculum. However, we continue to be concerned about the quality of writing among our majors.

One source of difficulty/frustration is the great range of skills with which students enter our classrooms. While the department recognizes that we have some excellent writers among our majors each year, we also have many students who lack some vital writing skills. Given the size of our classes, which have 25 to 35 students, it can be difficult to determine how best to help students remedy their deficiencies and master the abilities necessary to be good writers.

Another source of difficulty is the nature of the discipline itself. Economists investigate a wide range of questions, both positive and normative, using a variety of methods, including analysis of theories and theoretical approaches, comparative case studies, modeling, and data analysis. This necessitates a number of different types of writing—from technical papers with quantitative models or econometric analysis aimed at fellow economists to policy papers intended for a broader audience. Because of the range of assignments students encounter throughout the major, it may be difficult for some of them to see that there are abilities that are fundamental to all effective writing in economics.

Thus the Economics Department entered the WEC process in Fall 2018 to find ways to discuss our current writing instruction across our curriculum, to develop a shared vocabulary to use in our classrooms, and to explore ways to use our resources more efficiently to help our students become better writers and critical thinkers.

Section 1: Characteristics of Writing in Economics

Economists attempt to answer complex, unsettled questions, both positive and normative. Therefore, arguments should be

I. Well-constructed:
   • Contextualized, either through a review of literature or with a traceable policy narrative.
   • Hypothesis-driven.
   • Internally congruent—type of evidence and methods fit argument.
• Anticipating of and responsive to counter-arguments or claims.

II. Analytical:
• May be case-, data-, or model-driven.
• Explicit about methodology used.
• Sensitive to limitations of method and/or available data--acknowledging the constraints of data and/or methods and limiting conclusions accordingly.
• Using only reliable evidence and sources.
• Often using graphs or charts.

III. Critical:
• Explicitly adding to or challenging previous work.
• Nuanced and dispassionate in evaluating argument, evidence, results.

IV. Using effective prose:
• Clear to readers across subfields of economics.
• Thesis-early (thesis stated early in the work).
• No ambiguity in language.
• Coherent—providing connections a reader needs to move from one point to the next.
• Concise—using minimal jargon and only necessary equations.
• Adheres to norms of formal written English.

V. Ethical:
• Using models, data, and sources according to norms of academic integrity.
• Careful to cite sources.

Section 2: Desired Writing Abilities

Because economists attempt to answer complex, unsettled questions, both positive and normative, and because Economics majors go on to work in a variety of professional fields, majors should expect to communicate their arguments effectively to readers with diverse backgrounds.

When they graduate, Economics majors should be able to:

I. Compose a well-constructed argument that addresses a question of importance. In order to do this, the student will:

   A. Provide context with a literature review or historical or policy narrative.
   B. Formulate a hypothesis/make a claim.
   C. Use methods and provide evidence appropriate to the claim.
   D. Support the claim.
   E. Anticipate and respond to counter-arguments.
II. Analyze a question using appropriate methods and tools, which may include cases, models, or econometric tools for data. In order to do this, the student will:

A. Explain methodology, including assumptions.
B. Use only reliable sources and evidence.
C. Explain limitations of method and/or data/evidence.

III. Critique their own and other’s work. In order to do this, the student will:

A. Identify gaps or weaknesses in existing literature.
B. Interpret results in light of the limitations of method and/or data/evidence.

IV. Compose using effective prose suitable for intended audience. In order to do this, the student will:

A. Identify the intended audience.
B. Use and/or explain economic terms as appropriate for intended audience.
C. Avoid ambiguity in language.
D. Make connections between ideas or steps in argument so that the reader can easily follow the logic.
E. Organize the material in a way that is appropriate to the assignment, genre, and purpose.
F. Shift from English to the language of mathematics and graphs and back again as necessary.
G. Write concisely.
H. Adhere to rules and norms of formal written English.

V. Write ethically. In order to do this, the student will:

A. Use evidence, sources, and argument according to norms of academic integrity.
B. Cite all sources in format specified by instructor.

Section 3: Integration of Writing into the Undergraduate Curriculum

The Economics Department began the WEC process in Fall 2018. The initial discussions of our individual pedagogy were enlightening; we were surprised by the rich variety of assignments and approaches to feedback we all use. Below is a brief summary of the variation in assignments by level of course, type of course, topic of course, and instructor.
The department’s theory sequence begins with Econ 160 Principles of Economics, followed by Econ 300 Intermediate Macroeconomics and Econ 301 Intermediate Microeconomics, which both have MATH 130 as a prerequisite. In these quantitative theory courses, we typically require students to move between English and quantitative analysis in both problem sets and tests, but short essays or brief reading responses may also be required.

In our 200- and 300-level topics courses, we expand on this. Projects in these classes may include brief reading responses, policy papers, negotiation positions, analyses of news articles, class presentations, and/or research papers. Within one class there may be a mixture of low-stakes and high-stakes assignments, as well as scaffolding of assignments, and/or peer review.

The level of skill the department asks for also changes with the level of course. In the 100- and 200-level courses, assignments tend to be shorter and may be focused on a few specific skills and introducing students to a few reliable sources used in the discipline. In the 300- or 400-level topical courses, assignments typically require more research, a broader range of skills, and work that demonstrates greater familiarity with economic theory, a wider range of sources, and greater sophistication of analysis. This is why students must take at least one 200-level topic course, as well as one of the intermediate theory courses, before they can take a 300- or 400-level elective course.

This is particularly true for another core course, Econ 305 Political Economy. Students take this course after taking both of the intermediate theory courses. Econ 305 presents alternative methodologies and theories in economics. The course requires students to engage in critical thinking about each approach involving evaluating the strengths and critiquing the weaknesses of each approach to economic analysis. The students are required to write three to four critical essays that involve comparison, critique, and evaluation of these approaches.

Finally, the department has a two-course quantitative reasoning sequence: Econ 202, Statistics, and capstone course Econ 304, Econometrics, which also requires either Econ 300 or Econ 301 as a prerequisite. In Econ 304, in addition to learning econometric (more advanced statistical) techniques, the students will write a final project that requires them to review the literature on a topic of their choice, formulate a hypothesis, find reliable sources of evidence to support their methods, describe their data and methods, and interpret their findings in light of limitations of data and method. Thus our capstone course combines both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of writing in the discipline.

And yet, despite all of the writing our majors are required to do, the department remains concerned about the level of writing abilities of some of our majors. We were encouraged by the students’ WEC survey results, which showed that students understand that writing is highly valued in the discipline, and understand which aspects of writing are most important in economics. On the other hand, it also was clear that our
majors rate their writing skills more highly than the faculty do. Thus, through the WEC process we hope to find methods to use our existing resources and limited time with students more effectively.

**Section 4: Assessment of Student Writing** (Criteria for assessing student writing).

A student has accomplished the Desired Writing Abilities when the student has:

I. **Composed a well-constructed argument that addresses a question of importance.**
   This ability is demonstrated when the student:
   
   A. Summarizes relevant literature to show where student’s argument fits in existing discourse.
   B. States a hypothesis/makes a claim.
   C. Chooses method(s) and evidence appropriate to hypothesis/claim.
   D. Provides evidence sufficient to support the claim.
   E. Explains and refutes counter-arguments.

II. **Analyzed a question using appropriate methods and tools, which may include cases, models, or econometric tools for data.**
   This ability is demonstrated when the student:
   
   A. Explains how they have applied the methodology, including assumptions.
   B. Chooses only reliable sources and uses only reliable evidence.
   C. Explains the limitations of the method and/or data/evidence.

III. **Critiqued their own and other’s work.**
   This ability is demonstrated when the student:
   
   A. Identifies and explains gaps or weaknesses in existing literature.
   B. Explains how the limitations of method and/or data/evidence limit conclusions that can be drawn from results.

IV. **Composed using effective prose suitable for intended audience.**
   This ability is demonstrated when the student:
   
   A. Uses and/or explains economic terms as appropriate for intended audience.
   B. Uses *all* vocabulary, economic or otherwise, precisely enough that a reader understands *exactly* what the student wants to convey.
   C. Makes connections between ideas or steps in argument so that the reader can easily follow the logic.
   D. Uses a logical structure appropriate to the assignment, genre, and/or purpose.
   E. Interprets graphs, tables, and equations in English at the appropriate point in the argument/paper. This includes labeling graphs and tables accurately and/or explaining notation for equations.
   F. Writes concisely.
G. Adheres to rules and norms of formal written English.

V. Written ethically.
This ability is demonstrated when the student:

A. Uses evidence, sources, and argument according to norms of academic integrity.
B. Cites all sources in format specified by instructor.

Section 5: Summary of Implementation Plans (including requested support)

During our last WEC meeting in November 2018, the WEC team helped us brainstorm a variety of ideas for steps we could take to help our majors improve their communication skills. After considering what would be the most fundamental, most effective, and best use of our existing resources, the department has chosen the five strategies for the first year of the Writing Plan. These are the first steps the Economics Department has committed to take; we realize that WEC is an iterative process, and we look forward to assessing the results of these steps next year.

1. The department will put the list of Desired Writing Abilities on our website, both to inform our majors of our expectations and to establish a department-wide, shared vocabulary for writing.

We realize that, given the variety of writing in the discipline, students may not see that effective communication in economics requires the same fundamental abilities, regardless of topic, approach, or method. The Writing Abilities List gives us a common vocabulary for discussing writing in our classrooms. Naturally not all courses or all assignments will require all of these skills, but we can indicate in our syllabi and assignments the particular skills on which we’re asking students to focus. Our hope is that using this shared vocabulary in every course, from 100- to 400-level courses, in required theory courses as well as electives, from low-stakes assignments to research papers, will demonstrate and reinforce to students that regardless of the particular assignment, the skills they need to acquire remain the same.

2. In Fall 2019 the department will offer our Teaching Fellows a one-hour, compensated training workshop to brief them on the Desired Writing Abilities List.

While our Teaching Fellows are not currently asked to support writing specifically, we know that students bring a variety of questions to Teaching Fellow hours, so it makes sense to make sure that our TFs understand the list and the department’s goals for student writing.
The department requests $110.00 of WEC funding to allow us to pay and caffeinate the Teaching Fellows for this training. [The WEC Team finds this request congruent with WEC funding, and is happy to make these funds available.]

3. To raise the profile of writing among Economics majors, the department will establish two small cash prizes, one to a William Smith student and one to a Hobart student, for the best paper written that year in Econ 304 Econometrics, our capstone course, and choose the three best posters from the same course to display on our floor.

We have some excellent writers in the major each year and we want to commend their work. This is yet another way in which we can demonstrate to our majors that the department values effective communication. Choosing the three best posters as well as the best paper should also reinforce that, in economics, good visualization of ideas is also important.

The department is committed to funding this aspect of our implementation in the future, but we request WEC funding for our first implementation year in the form of 1) $100.00 for the prize-winning essay writer, and 2) $120.00 printing and laminating funds for displaying the top three Economics 304 posters. [The WEC Team finds this request congruent with WEC funding, and is happy to make these funds available.]

4. The department, with support from the WEC team, would like to participate in a workshop that would give us techniques to enable faster, better feedback on student writing.

We are interested in learning ways to use the time we spend responding to student writing as efficiently and effectively as possible, and ask the WEC team to design a workshop around our Desired Writing Abilities list that would help us do this.

To ensure that this workshop will be substantial and effective, we ask for $300 to fund lunch and coffee for a two-part workshop for all department faculty. [The WEC Team finds this request congruent with WEC funding, and is happy to make these funds available.]

5. The department, with support from the WEC team, would like to have a set of Canvas-compatible resources which individual instructors could put in their Canvas courses.

The department will ask the WEC team to put together, with the help of the DLC as needed, resources which the faculty could use in their courses in Canvas, guided by the department’s Writing Abilities List. These resources could include modules on how to cite properly using the citation style chosen by the individual instructor, but also higher-order skills as well; because HWS already subscribes to many potentially useful online resource services, it is not anticipated that this aspect of our implementation plan will require funding [the WEC Team agrees].
**Total Year 1 Implementation Cost Request:** $630.00

**Section 6: Process Used to Create Writing Plan**

The Economics WEC liaison drafted this plan with feedback from the Economics Department and the WEC Team. We drew on the results of surveys of both faculty and students conducted the previous semester, and held five meetings to develop the content of this Writing Plan.

In the first meeting, which was brief, the WEC Team laid out the goals of the Writing Plan as well as the general timeline for meetings and implementation.

In the second meeting, we considered survey results, characteristics of writing in the discipline, and what abilities the faculty look for in student writing. We began with a discussion of what individual faculty members hoped to achieve through the WEC process. The WEC Team then presented the results of both the faculty and student surveys on writing in the discipline that had been conducted at the end of the Spring 2018 term. Our next step was to brainstorm a list of characteristics of good writing in the discipline. In light of this discussion, we went on to discuss what abilities we thought majors should have by the time they graduate. As all of this was wide-ranging, the liaison from WEC and the department worked on organizing and refining these characteristics and abilities after the meeting; these lists were then shared with the faculty for feedback.

The objective of the third meeting was to consider where in the curriculum students are required to write, as well as the type of writing and assignments they might have in various courses and at different levels. We began by considering specific ways in which we try to teach a specific aspect of writing in one of our courses. This led us into a discussion of a wide variety of assignments and types of writing our majors may encounter, as well as how this changes with level of course and topic of course. Finally, the faculty discussed the draft of the Characteristics of Writing in Economics, generating more feedback for the liaison.

The fourth meeting began with a review of where we were in the process. Our goal was to return to our initial draft of the Writing Abilities list and refine it. Again, this discussion was wide-ranging and generated much feedback for the liaisons. Faculty members then chose one ability and thought about how we would turn that into specific criteria for an assignment. Finally, the WEC Team asked us to start thinking for the next meeting about how we would want to implement our ideas, and what support we might want to request from WEC.
In our final meeting, we discussed various options for implementation and, from among a long and delightfully robust list of options thus generated, chose five for implementation Year 1. As discussed above in Section 5, the department will publish the Writing Abilities list on our departmental website and use this shared vocabulary in our courses and assignments. We will also brief our Teaching Fellows on this list and our goals for the Writing Plan. To make writing in economics more visible to students, the department will give a writing prize for the best paper in our capstone Econ 304, Econometrics, and begin posting the best Econometrics posters in our hallway. We will ask the WEC Team to design a workshop for us on giving effective feedback on student writing efficiently, informed by the Writing Abilities list. And finally, we also will ask the WEC team to put together Canvas-based resources that we could tailor to our individual courses and assignments.

The WEC liaison and departmental liaison compiled this plan from WEC meeting notes and material shared at that meeting, then sent the plan to all department members for feedback and approval. We plan to submit this Writing Plan for CoAA approval no later than April 3, 2019.