For years I have both taught and done technical writing. Since 1975 I have been a technical writing program coordinator. Of necessity—but pleasant necessity—I have worked closely with faculty members and other professionals from many disciplines besides English. I wish to offer here some thoughts about the place of research writing in advanced composition. This article is in essence tentative, intended to isolate one variable—research writing—that will help define more fully just what is meant by the term "advanced composition program."

Advanced Composition and the Continuum of Writing Courses

Composition courses come in a nearly infinite variety of shapes and sizes. For purposes of classification, though, one can envision a continuum of courses. At one end is the course conducted entirely within the classroom. Students write papers on subjects assigned by the instructor, and no resource materials are used except those available on the spot—course texts, class discussion and the memory of personal experience. At the opposite end of the continuum is the course conducted on an interdisciplinary basis. Students write not just in their English classes but in all of their classes. Teachers from all disciplines work together to devise assignments and to improve the quality of writing instruction, and English professors serve as resource persons and facilitators for what is really a campus-wide pro-
gram. It will be clear that this second type of course is in the traditional sense not a course at all. It is a writing-across-the-curriculum program.

It may be doubted whether so hermetically sealed a composition course as our first example offers actually exists. It is beyond doubt, though, that writing-across-the-curriculum programs, because they involve so many people from so many departments and cost so much money to implement, are (unhappily) very rare. Thousands of advanced students who have passed introductory composition and have no access to a writing-across-the-curriculum program seek to further improve their writing skills. It is for them that advanced composition programs are designed. Because these students come from a variety of disciplines, the advanced composition courses they take must adopt an interdisciplinary perspective. Because these students are engaged in more specialized research and not simply in general education, their advanced composition courses must be oriented to research writing. If they are both of these things—interdisciplinary and research-oriented—they move on our hypothetical continuum away from introductory composition and toward the ideal embodied in writing-across-the-curriculum. The essential issue in defining the term "advanced composition program" is this: How does the program approach research writing?

Research Writing in Introductory Composition

It might be objected first, though, that research writing—however it is defined—is part of introductory or "freshman" composition and thus not an essential characteristic of advanced composition alone. I have come for several reasons to believe that such is not the case. For one thing, guided readings play too important a part in introductory composition to be dropped. They acquaint students with ideas and issues fundamental to understanding what it means to be a person in these times, understanding that I believe it is the mission of liberal arts, general education courses to provide. Moreover, it has been urged that "some of the cognitive activities that enable one to understand a subject are the same activities that enable one to formulate and support the assertions one makes in one's writing," in other words, that improving reading skills can improve writing skills. Yet the only way I know to make room for the research-writing unit is to
jettison these valuable readings. I am not convinced that the less focused reading done for the research paper is an adequate substitute.

A second answer to the objection mentioned above is that professors in other departments are far less interested in having their freshmen write research papers in introductory composition than in having them write short papers clearly and coherently. The supposed homage they pay to research writing at the freshman level seems limited to a desire that students learn how to make endnotes and bibliographies properly and to know when these are needed. A plain exercise in documentation can teach them this skill.

Finally, there is a third answer to our objection—an answer that is, at least to my mind, decisive. It is highly questionable that true research can be taught by one English instructor to twenty freshmen who possess differing interests and little experience with college-level work. Richard Larson has summed the matter up this way:

\[\text{We in English have no business claiming to teach "research" when research in different academic disciplines works from distinctive assumptions and follows distinctive patterns of inquiry. . . . Most of us are trained in one discipline only and should be modest enough to admit it.}^2\]

To this eminently reasonable assertion I would add that never once have I met a colleague who expected from English professors the omnicompetence that introductory composition courses featuring "research papers" insist on promising.

**Research Writing in Advanced Composition**

Research writing, then, to return to the thesis of this article, is the province of the advanced composition course and the advanced composition program. Here students are familiar enough with research methods in their particular areas to be asking questions about organization, audience, style, format, and the like. And they have something to say. This situation, which I encounter frequently in advanced composition, presupposes the existence of outside specialists. Indeed, to a focus on research writing we might add consultation with outside specialists as another key characteristic of the advanced composition program.

Let me illustrate. One of the students who completed my
course in Advanced Technical Writing was also completing his master's thesis in the area of physical education. He was an assistant coach of the Illinois State University soccer team, and his thesis developed the idea that training methods, or protocols, should mimic the sport for which the athlete is training. For soccer players, my student contended, a training protocol should consist of short periods of maximum energy output separated by short periods of reduced exertion, because soccer, unlike, say, sprinting, does not require maximum sustained effort but rather spurts of effort.

This was not just theory. There are techniques and mechanisms to monitor the significant functions of the respiratory and motor systems so that the effects of various training protocols can be charted and only desirable types of conditioning retained in the final protocol. One of these mechanisms is called a Digital Read-out Jaeger Ergoscreen. As this imposing name implies, the researcher using it must have some acquaintance not only with exercise physiology but also with computer programming and statistical analysis.

The work described here is certainly specialized research, and the writing may justly be called research writing. The paper that my student submitted to me at the end of the course—four chapters of his master's thesis—was surely better than the original version he had shown me fifteen weeks before. Of course it was more complete because more of the research had been finished, but it was also more coherent, it contained fewer loose ends, and it was stylistically more concise and direct.

If by teaching research writing we mean solely teaching coherence, clarity, the concise style, and so on, we can say that all writing is research writing. The trouble with a definition as general as this is that one suffers from a kind of intellectual want of fresh air. A definition like this is, as someone once said of transcendentalism, a train of fifteen coaches with one passenger on it. If by teaching research writing we mean teaching students to grapple with content and not just with problems of form, we fool ourselves—certainly not them—if we think we can perform the task alone. As a matter of fact, in the case I just described, the student was receiving guidance from his thesis director. The director and I were engaged in an interdisciplinary research writing cooperative effort, which is just as it should be.
Implementation of Research Writing in Advanced Composition

We in advanced composition have, then, a grand opportunity to broaden the scope of our courses. Let me suggest some preliminary steps for making the most of this opportunity, steps that define not only the nature of advanced composition but also the very way in which an advanced composition program can be conducted and administered.

1. All students enrolled in an advanced composition course should be identified by major, minor or special option, number of completed credit hours, career plans, and special interests. This information should be contained in a card file and, for large-enrollment courses, a tabulation of cards should be maintained. All departments should be singled out for special attention that for two semesters or more provide more than five per cent of the students enrolled.

2. Letters should be written that describe succinctly the goals of the course, typical writing assignments, and special features. I have found it best to address such letters to the department chairperson and promise a follow-up telephone call within a week. If all goes well, the chairperson may in the meantime post the letter or send copies of it to advisers and other interested department members.

3. The chairperson should be told in the follow-up call that members of the advanced composition faculty would welcome an opportunity to visit with him/her and other interested faculty to discuss ways of making more useful and directly applicable those writing courses to which students are being sent.

Department chairpersons often delegate responsibility, so advanced composition faculty may meet with a department council or curriculum committee, or be invited to attend a department faculty meeting. These visits enable composition faculty to meet—often for the first time—faculty in other departments who are interested in writing. And that is what this preliminary process is for—to identify "interested persons," like graduate or undergraduate advisors, the chairperson of the curriculum committee, an area coordinator, or simply the departmental writing nut. This last person, by the way, may prove invaluable—may for years have been seeking a good chance to say to his/her colleagues, "OK, now you have no excuse
for not acting. They have even come to us!"

The results of the kind of interdepartmental dialogue just mentioned are as varied as the persons who engage in it. For example, faculty, particularly in departments with large numbers of majors, where detailed tallies are hard to keep, sometimes express surprise that so many of their majors have been electing a given advanced composition course. I mentioned earlier that students are sent to advanced composition courses, but they also enroll on their own initiative. If their experiences are favorable, they recommend these courses to their friends. Contacts initiated by advanced composition faculty may permit a relationship to be formalized which students have initiated without formal faculty advisement. Again, knowing more about what other departments expect their majors to learn helps the advanced composition teacher devise assignments that reinforce the teaching done in the major department. Moreover, such interaction makes it possible to develop assignments that can be used exclusively in non-composition courses to aid in the learning process—and to discover assignments that individual professors have developed and found successful in their own courses. English faculty can help strengthen the writing activities in courses taught across the campus by showing that students who write more learn more. In addition they will learn that they possess no monopoly on good writing assignments or on interest in writing as a tool for learning and communication. If the quality of an advanced composition program depends on the extent to which it is an interdisciplinary effort focusing on student research at the advanced level, such a program has much in common, as was suggested earlier, with that more ambitious endeavor called writing-across-the-curriculum. What should in fact distinguish an advanced composition program is its unremitting effort to transcend the narrow boundaries of the English department, to cross the departmental firebreaks that keep higher education so compartmentalized.

Introductory Composition and Advanced Composition Compared

I hear it said occasionally that advanced composition does not differ from introductory composition but rather offers more of the same. This is a dangerous half-truth. It is true insofar as clear writing
in English 101 is clear writing in English 301; it is false because no composition program teaches writing in a vacuum—or at least no composition program should. Let me conclude with a distinction. Introductory composition courses should be humanistic, general studies offerings that encourage not only writing but also reading on varied topics and discussions of values, social issues, or ethical questions. Advanced composition courses, by contrast, should zero in not just on good writing but on good specialized writing. You can recognize a good introductory composition program because it compels students to think not only about writing but also about issues that one expects a person with a university education to have considered. And you can recognize a good advanced composition program because it moves its teachers to develop a familiarity with the research areas, often highly specialized, in which the students will exercise the writing skills they acquire, both now and after graduation. A good introductory program forces students to look inward. A good advanced program forces English faculty to look across the campus and beyond. Both programs perform essential educational tasks, and where they function in the manner described here, the problem of research writing will take care of itself.

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Notes


3After I had given this article in its briefer form as an MLA paper, I was asked to serve on the master's thesis committee of a second graduate student in physical education. As of July, 1983, both students had completed their degree programs. The time I spent working with them and with colleagues in physical education, statistics, and physiology contributed more toward "teaching research" than any introductory composition "research writing" unit I could have developed on my own.


This approach to advanced composition is not limited to technical writing (which is often too narrowly defined anyway). For a discussion of the process approach used in a writing situation that would not be considered technical, see Russell Rutter, "Teaching Writing to Probation Officers: Problems, Methods, and Resources," CCC, 33 (1982), 288-295.