

# **2015 First-year Wake Forest Students: What They Know (and Don't Know) about Academic Reading and Writing**



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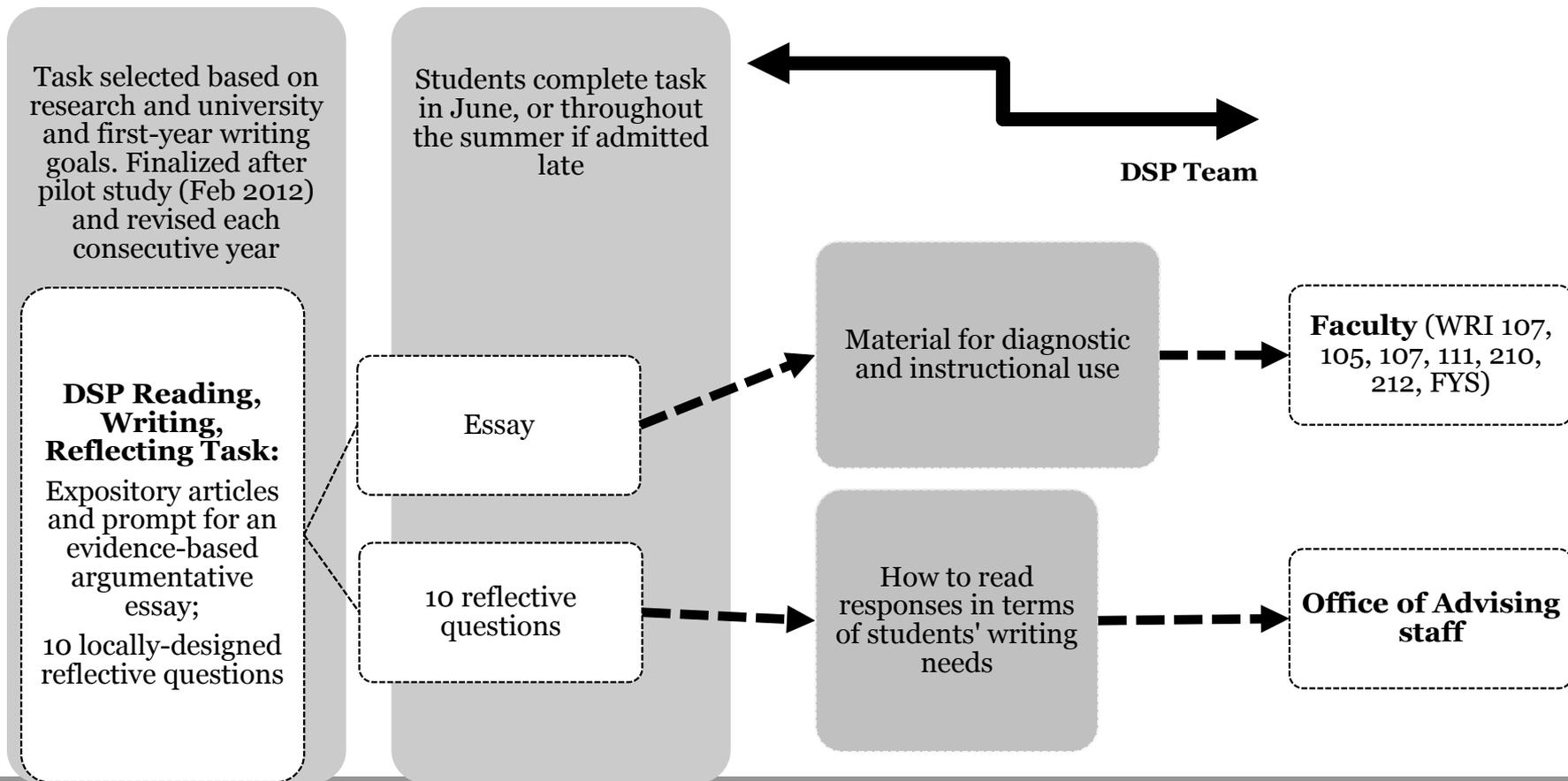
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# Directed Self-Placement (DSP): brief background



# WFU 2015 DSP: reading, writing, reflecting

- After students enroll, they receive directions online and have around one week (by ~ June 16) to read three short articles and respond to a prompt in an evidenced-based argumentative essay. Upon submission to Qualtrics, students reflect on their writing experiences as they answer 10 questions and note their anticipated course.



- **Part one: reading and writing**

## **2015 Wake Forest Directed Self-Placement (DSP) for Writing**

### **Social Media and Mental Health**

- First, read the following three texts: “Is Social Media Dependence A Mental Health Issue?” by Emma Stein, “New Study Links Facebook To Depression: But Now We Actually Understand Why” by Alice Walton, and “Facebook and Your Health” by Dennis Baron.
- All three pieces summarize research related to the relationship between social media sites and mental health. The first two make different suggestions in terms of possible solutions, while the Baron piece suggests that claims about social media use and mental health are exaggerated.
- Using evidence from all three articles, develop your own argument about **the relationship between mental health and social media use**. Write your argument in the form of an 800-1000 word evidence-based academic argumentative essay.

- **Part one: reading and writing (continued)**
- Your essay should be a 800-1000 word academic essay in response to the prompt. By academic essay, we mean an essay in which you clearly articulate a position and support that position using evidence; by evidence, we mean reasoning, ideas, and/or examples from the article. Your essay should include the following:
  - 1. Focus: your essay should be developed around a clear, thoughtful, and compelling thesis or argument.
  - 2. Structure: your essay should be organized in a way that supports and elucidates your central argument. Individual paragraphs should be cohesive, and your reader should be able to follow the logical progression of your ideas from one paragraph to the next.
  - 3. Evidence/Analysis: the claims in your essay should be supported with well-chosen examples from the article, and you should explain how these examples support your argument.
- **Part two: reflective questions** (next)
  - Immediately following essay upload
  - Used to record students' academic reading and writing experiences and how well students' answers match their anticipated course
  - Revised each year according to institutional/ writing studies research



Why this kind of evidenced-based argumentative essay, in response to expository reading material?

# Standardized Secondary Writing Prompts



SAT and ACT tests, English language proficiency tests (IELTS and MELAB), and state-level National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam

- **Standardized secondary writing assessments often include scope and evidence expectations that do not match college-level writing.**
  - NEAP exams: “why it is important for teenagers to have chores?”; “explain the most important qualities demonstrated by the adults you admire”
  - SAT: “Take a position on the extent to which memories hinder or help people in their effort to learn from the past and succeed in the present”
  - IELTS “Tradition and technology are incompatible. Argue in agreement or disagreement”

# Standardized Secondary Writing Prompts



- Secondary students are often invited to write topic-based or opinion-based arguments (or narratives) that speak for large groups of people or human beings generally without drawing from source text evidence.
- Patterns in FY responses and writing:
- (1) claims that generalize across people and contexts; (2) arguments rooted in opinion on the topic (vs. other views); and (3) experience as evidence.

# Research in support of DSP



- Helps students gain insight on expectations in higher education (Pinter & Sims, 2003)
- Helps faculty gain insight on student needs (Tompkins, 2003)
- Gives students sense of control over own writing (Chernekoff, 2003; Royer & Gilles, 1998, 2003) and decreases resistance to preparatory classes (Frus, 2003)
- Provides links between curriculum, instruction, and assessment based on a college-level task rather than high school experiences (Gere, Aull, Green, & Porter 2010; Aull & Toth 2014; Aull, 2015)

# Some basic enrollment numbers



- 1,287 incoming students (before August 20); 1254 students completed the DSP (97.44%)
- Of these students, 1,187 are signed up for FYS or a WRI course
- 73% followed the DSP course recommendation

# Patterns in students' reflective responses



**N = 1287**

**(FOCUS: PAST 2 YEARS AND DSP TASK)**

# DSP Reflective Questions: Past experiences



# 1. In your last two years of high school, how often did complete tasks similar to this one?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>%</b>
0 times	23	2%
1-3 times	118	9%
4-6 times	220	17%
7-9 times	244	19%
10 or more times	668	52%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,273</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 2. In your last two years of high school, how often did you write the following?



Question	0	1-2	3-4	5 +
Responses to a general topic that did not require integration of ideas from other texts	61	288	298	626
Research-based essays that required me to locate sources on my own and integrate them into my argument	27	371	483	392
Essays that required me to integrate information from expository, historical, or scientific readings into my own argument	35	231	406	601
Multi-media pieces that included audio and/or visual components	233	447	332	261
Responses to literature that required me to integrate examples from literary texts to support my interpretation	17	83	192	981
Essays or reports that required me to summarize other texts without making an argument	261	428	262	322
Essays that required proof-reading and word-level editing	43	108	189	933
Essays that required substantial revision of the argument, organization, and/or examples	69	243	295	666

# DSP Reflective Questions: Experience with the WFU DSP task



## 4. How would you describe the following aspects of your essay?



	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2-3</b>	<b>4 +</b>
Direct quotation from reading material:	92	127	445	609
Paraphrase/ summary from reading material:	69	144	655	405
Examples or ideas in agreement with my argument:	19	58	569	627
Examples or ideas that disagreed with my argument:	298	484	434	57
Examples from my own personal experience:	740	278	221	33

## 4. How would you describe the following aspects of your essay?



<b>Primary reading material used:</b>	<b>Primarily Stein &amp; Walton articles: 803</b>	Primarily Stein article: 147	Primarily Walton article: 39	Primarily Baron article: 47	<b>More General Ideas than Specific Articles: 237</b>
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5. Which of the following statements do you think best describes an effective written, academic argument in terms of treatment of other views?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Writing that assertively “wins” over alternative views on a topic.	236	18%
Writing that considers but does not overtly mention alternative views on a topic.	598	46%
Writing that shows a dialogue or conversation with alternative views on a topic.	438	34%

6. Which of the following statements do you think best describes an effective written, academic argument in terms of a central argument?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Writing that shows a very certain (or highly definitive) central argument.	587	46%
Writing that exhibits a very personalized (or strongly subjective) central argument.	93	7%
Writing that displays a balanced (or carefully measured) central argument.	594	46%

## 7. Which of the following statements do you think best describes academic writing in terms of organization?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Writing that develops a position using three supporting claims or examples in five structured paragraphs.	217	17%
Writing that develops a position by using supporting claims or examples in a well-organized manner.	1045	81%
Writing that explores a position through a story, such as through a personal narrative or anecdote.	12	1%

8. Now consider to what extent you think the choices you selected above in questions 5-7 is true of the DSP essay you submitted.



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
I believe my essay reflects the three choices I made above.	481	37%
I believe my essay reflects the three choices I made above to some degree but not completely.	13	1%
I do not know if my essay reflects the three choices I made above.	747	58%
I do not believe my essay reflects the three choices I made above.	33	3%

## 9. How would you rate your proficiency in academic, written English?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Average or stronger in some subjects than others.	844	66%
Very strong, regardless of discipline or topic.	285	22%
In need of more development, regardless of topic or subject.	145	11%

10. During your upcoming year of college, how prepared do you feel to feel to undertake similar writing tasks?



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
I feel prepared to do similar kinds of work without help from a professor.	574	45%
I feel somewhat prepared to do so with help from a professor.	630	49%
I feel like I would benefit from one-on-one guidance before I do more of these tasks.	70	5%

10. After having completed the DSP process, the course I am likely to take is:(Please note: this question is not at all binding.)



<b>Answer</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
WRI 105: Introduction to Critical Reading and Writing	94	7%
WRI 210: (Gateway course for the Writing Minor)	151	12%
First-Year Seminar (FYS)	468	36%
WRI 212: (Gateway course for the Writing Minor)	38	3%
WRI 111: Writing Seminar	523	41%

# Observations from course interest



- Students who indicated they had familiarity and preparation with college-level academic writing and reading expectations tended to choose the first-year required or advanced courses.
- Students who indicated they had little familiarity or preparation with college expectations—tended to choose the preparatory courses.
- Students in the middle varied much more than students on either end.
- In every group, however, students' specific preparation in varied.

# Analysis of patterns in student essays



# Corpus linguistic analysis



## Corpus-based investigations:

- Scans of frequently used words and phrases
- Comparisons across FY and expert writing
- Observations of recurring features during close reading

## Targeted language areas:

- **Generalization Markers** (including indefinite pronouns *every, everyone, everything, anything, anyone, all, none*)
- **Involved (or Interpersonal) versus Informational Production** (*you, your, yourself, I, me, my myself, a lot, think, wish*)
- **Narrative Features** (*third person pronouns, perfect aspect verbs*)
- **Overt Persuasion** (*will, would, shall, must, should, have to, has to, if, unless*)

Per 1,000,000 words	Expert writing	2015 WFU
<b>Generalization Markers</b> ( <i>every, everyone, everything, anything, anyone, all, none, humans, people, society</i> )	7,120.54	18,749.55
<b>Involved Production</b> ( <i>you, your, yourself, I, me, my myself, a lot, think, wish</i> )	9,420	24,639.67
<b>Narrative Features</b> ( <i>third person pronouns, past perfect aspect</i> )	14,149.59	12,003.18
<b>Overt Persuasion</b> ( <i>will, would, shall, must, should, have to, has to, if, unless</i> )	6,670.60	7,254.39
<b>Indefinites</b> ( <i>every, everyone, everybody, any</i> )	4,132.68	6,542.169

# Quantitative analysis patterns



FY writers tend to use the following less often than expert writers:

Reporting verbs focused on processes of argumentation  
(e.g., *argues, claims, asserts*)

Narrative Features

FY writers tend to use the following more often than expert writers:

Generalized claims (about *people, society, this day/age/world*)

Personalized stands, self mentions (*I believe*)

Involved (versus informational) production

# Generalization in students' essays



- We love to blame **everything** on one specific thing. It is hard to recognize that the **world** is not that simple. Sometimes there is no one solution. Social media takes this kind of heat all the time. **People** try to blame it for **all** the disasters our world is currently facing, especially concerning the mental health of our citizens. The relationship between social media and mental health is one that has been under lots of scrutiny. Many believe that the growing presence of social networking sites in our lives marks the plight of humanity and its sanity. Social media is criticized for prompting addictive tendencies, depression, low-self esteem, OCD, ADHD, anxiety, and narcissism in its users. Although, this panic of unfamiliarity is **nothing** new. It is just history repeating itself. The unknown can be threatening and frightening. With every new technological advancement, there **always** seems to be skeptics. When previous technologies like writing, electricity, mechanization, electricity, and telephones were first introduced, they too were harshly denounced. Yet **none** of the anticipated havoc ensued. The relationship between social media and mental health is one that is highly exaggerated and misunderstood. **People** are quick to condemn it for unleashing a whole new set of problems that our world has never yet before faced. But the reality is, that these actually are not new problems and maybe social media is not the only one to blame.

# Personalization in students' essays



- **I believe** that the link between social media and this newly developed mental health issue is that social media is a quickly-blamed culprit for an issue that is already established in younger people.
- **I have experienced** this addiction in my own life.
- **I feel**, however, that these problems are inevitable and common within teens.
- In lamest terms, **I think** that social media is used as society's crutch of dealing with the real problems of addiction.

# Overall observations and implications for instruction





- Some patterns in FY responses and writing:
- 
- (1) more intensified and generalized claims than qualified or honed ones;
- (2) arguments on the general topic and/or rooted in opinion on the topic (versus other texts); and
- (3) personal experience as evidence.

## Shared across most FY writers (1)



- More experience drawing on **evidence in agreement with argument** than evidence that disagrees; less likely to engage alternative views explicitly
- Most experience with **literary analysis**, and
- Experience with **general, topic- or opinion-based writing** that does not require research or engagement with existing views

## Shared across most FY writers (2)



- **Little experience with summarizing** other texts without making an argument
- **Revision of word-level** versus argument-level changes
- **Missing connection between perception of writing expectation and efficacy with actual writing**

# Mixed responses across FY students



- Mixed experience with conducting or compiling research
- Mixed experience reading expository material and incorporating it into written arguments
- Mixed perceptions of effective organization for written academic arguments
- **Mixed perceptions of academic argumentation (as assertive/ definitive versus as measured)**

# Related research-based conclusions



- Many successful student writers control a more sophisticated and specific metalanguage for talking about writing (Jarratt et al. 2009)
- Many first-year students have difficulty associated with the transfer of writing knowledge, such as from secondary school to college (e.g., Bazerman 1981; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Beaufort 2007).
- FY students call upon limited number of the genres they know when approaching college writing (Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi 2008).
- Instructors who can articulate writing expectations explicitly help students transfer writing knowledge across tasks and levels (Mustafa 1995; Beaufort 2007)
- Student writing seems to develop on a trajectory, from FY to upper-level to published academic writing, from more overstated and adversative to more honed and measured arguments that leave room for alternative views (Aull & Lancaster, 2014)

# Considering instruction and assessment



- As explicitly as possible, articulate what you do and do not want re: assignment expectations, e.g.,
  - A “real world” argument about an issue (topic-centered), or a smaller-scoped argument about how an issue is currently being researched or discussed (research- or text-centered)
  - Speculations or generalizations about how humans do or do not behave or think
  - Descriptive versus evaluative argument
  - Evidence generally welcome or unwelcome
  - Leaving room for alternative views or not (not only in explicit mention of counter arguments, but in qualifying risky or unsubstantiated claims)

# Considering instruction and assessment



- **Shared language and explicit conversations**
  - Before assignments:
    - Consider moves it would take to address an assignment, either introductory moves or larger moves in an assignment
      - ✦ How should students introduce the topic and/or others' arguments? How and where? Course readings in class that showcase a similar logical structure/sequence?
  - After assignment completion:
    - Have students note 1-2 things they want you to note in their writing assignment
    - Have students select 2-3 pieces of feedback from you and make a plan for how to incorporate it into their next writing assignment
    - Consider how noted patterns are different than your writing expectations, and discuss these with students.
  - During the semester:
    - Consider expectations that are particularly important in your field or in a genre in which you want students to write.
      - ✦ Do they foreground interpretation and reasoning? Do they foreground empirical evidence? Do they describe and evaluate example scenarios? Do they highlight a phenomenon or problem and offer a solution?

# Additional resources



- Using the DSP essays in class:  
<http://college.wfu.edu/writingprogram/directed-self-placement/faculty-resources-using-the-dsp-essays-in-class>
- Additional resources for students:
- <http://college.wfu.edu/writingcenter/resources/new-student-resources>

Thank you



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