

Writing Placement FAQs

May 4, Brian Casario sent this message:

I'm writing today with an important update to Writing Placement at the university for fall 2026 that will impact all incoming first-year students. Rather than complete a placement test to determine which writing-intensive course a student takes, all incoming first-year students will be pre-enrolled in the first of a two-course writing sequence. The only exception will be if a student has satisfactory AP or transfer credit. This change is intended to better address student need with respect to communication skills in general and writing skills in particular. Information regarding currently matriculated students who have yet to fulfill their Basic Writing Proficiency (BWP) requirement will be communicated in the next week.

Please understand that I'm well aware that the timing of this change is less than ideal, but that this shift in policy was recently accelerated by university administration. Ultimately, however, I think it will be very beneficial to the education our undergraduates receive.

If you have any questions about this change or anything else first-year writing related, please don't hesitate to reach out.

FAQs

1. Why are we moving toward placement test elimination?

Excellent question. Multiple reasons.

- We are piloting a number of changes to core curriculum in writing, and to support that, we are piloting this placement process, starting the summer of 2026.
- Placement tests were common in the 1990s, but since then have been phased out based on overwhelming evidence that they do not work in the best interest of the students.¹
- Classes based on placement exams are perceived as remedial; this course is part of a non-remedial standard course sequence in communication²
- The process of writing the tests and assessing them has been resource intensive and poorly managed in the past.³
- The movement toward enrolling incoming first year students for yield activities (something that is proven to increase yield) is blocked by this process.⁴

¹ <https://publicationsncte.org/content/journals/10.58680/rte201218457>
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265532220912412>

² <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/01/08/students-should-refuse-remedial-placements-opinion>

<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/the-problem-with-community-college-placement-tests>

³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/02655322251346840>

⁴ <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2572581496?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>

- The advent of AI has fundamentally changed how students are “testing,” meaning that they are not representing their own work.⁵
- A movement toward handwritten tests is shown to not represent student ability for many reasons, some of which has to do with the physical limitations of students who cannot write for a prolonged period of time without a keyboard.⁶
- Students are floundering in their other classes and complaining that they cannot do what is required of them because this is the class that teaches them how to research and write at a university (introduction to library, communication lab, etc).⁷
- The placement exam is not testing what the outcomes of the class are.
- Engagement in first year writing courses have been repeatedly shown to increase retention from first to second year and engagement with the university.⁸

I am sure that there are other things, but a summary: It is not best practices, it does not make pedagogical success, it is not in the best interest of students, it cripples our yield activities, and it is expensive.

2. Does this change affect the total number of credits a student needs to take?

No. The core curriculum already included these credits in the planning. Students who were awarded credit for this were simply given additional free electives.

3. What happens if a student was already here and was planning on taking that test?

Those students can still provide evidence of the necessary skills by following the process outlined in #4

4. What happens if students already have those skills? Can they still test out?

Students who would like to test out can apply to do so. They will need to submit a portfolio of writing with a cover letter. The portfolio needs to meet these criteria:

- Include 3 individual pieces of writing totaling at least 12 double spaced pages, Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1-inch margins
- Must include clear, thesis-driven argument
- Must include at least 3 citations per writing that are academic (peer reviewed or justified as a primary source) and adhere to a recognized citation format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc)
- Be completed in the last 2 years
- Must be accompanied by evidence of drafting and revision
- Must have a cover letter (1 page, single-spaced, 12-point font, Times New Roman, 1-inch margins) that defines which artifacts are chosen, why, and how they achieved the above.

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1472811723000563>

⁶ <https://ormobility.com/why-do-your-hands-hurt-when-writing/>

⁷ <https://mtsu.pressbooks.pub/engl1010/chapter/first-year-composition-should-be-skipped/>

Also our own internal assessment of C classes demonstrates this clearly.

⁸ <https://today.uic.edu/first-year-writing-course-increases-belonging-retention-at-a-broad-access-university/>
<https://secure.ncte.org/library/nctefiles/resources/journals/cc/0232-nov2013/cc0232policy.pdf>

5. What happens if a student's portfolio does not provide adequate evidence or is assessed at below college quality?

Like the current test, those students will be required to take COM 101. They cannot repeat this process.

6. What happens with students who are already enrolled in COM 101? Can they submit a portfolio?

Of course! They can do this over the summer. They need to complete their portfolio by July 15. Placement results will be returned by August 1 to enable ample time for planning.

7. Does a student need to take COM 101 in their first semester?

While many universities strongly suggest COM 101 be taken in the first semester (ours included), it is not mandatory. A student can take this course in the spring or the following year. Data shows that students gain more out of the class and it correlates to higher retention and connection rates if taken the first semester; however, we understand that student curricula are complicated and that their out of class lives are also often complicated.

8. What are other ways that students will be placed out of COM 101?

Current practices in exam placements will continue to be followed. These are currently:

- They can take an appropriate optional section of the ACT or SAT exam and pass it.
Passing levels are:
 - 8 or higher on ACT Writing
 - 600 or higher on SAT Writing
 - 9 or higher on SAT Essay
 - 33 or higher on new SAT Writing and Language
- They may present transfer or AP credit (4 or higher on the English Language exam)

Ultimately, this enables us to accurately assess students to the outcomes and intention of COM 101. The current goals of the university are yield, supporting retention and time to degree, meeting the workforce needs of student readiness (which includes communication), and student success. These changes reflect a ready answer to all of these.

Administratively, it ensures that we can accurately plan for student placement and assign faculty teaching correctly. We can ensure qualified faculty have the required materials to assess student