

# The Master of Applied Arts in Written Communication at Missouri Western State University

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**ABSTRACT.** This article describes the development, successful proposal, and curriculum of the Master of Applied Arts in Written Communication at Missouri Western State University. A program profile, institutional and program history, and faculty profile are included.

**KEYWORDS.** applied learning, interdisciplinary programs, program development, New American Regional University, technical communication, writing studies

**I**n August 2009, Missouri Western State University will welcome the first students into its Master of Applied Arts (MAA) in Written Communication program, the final step in a process that began in 2004. In addition to profiling this interdisciplinary, applied degree, we offer a portrait of the development of a master's program at an institution that had only recently begun offering graduate programs.

## Program History

### Institutional Context

Located in St. Joseph, Missouri, north of Kansas City on the Missouri River, Missouri Western State University has strong roots in the local community, founded in 1915 as St. Joseph Junior College, a two-year liberal arts transfer institution. In 1969, it became Missouri Western College after voters in the five-county area surrounding St. Joseph approved bond and tax levies to add baccalaureate programs to the junior college and to build the present campus. Western added "State" to its name in 1977 when it joined the Missouri system of public, four-year

institutions. In 2005, Western achieved university status, and the legislation that enabled the name change also authorized Missouri Western to offer professional master's degrees. This legislation specified Western's mission as the state's only applied learning institution of higher education, a recognition of the role already played by applied learning in Western's undergraduate curriculum, where over 80% of Western's students participate in an internship, clinical practicum, service learning, study abroad, and/or faculty-student research prior to graduation.<sup>1</sup>

Western's student body of approximately 5,200 consists primarily of undergraduates enrolled in four-year degree programs, two-year associate degrees, pre-professional transfer programs, and one-year certificates. Western is an open-door, teaching-centered institution, with graduation rates of baccalaureate degree-seeking students at 31%, with another 31% transferring to another institution.<sup>2</sup>

Western's tenured and tenure-track faculty teach 23–26 hours per year, usually four courses per semester. In support of Western's applied learning activities, faculty might apply for summer research grants to work with high school and undergraduate students; grants to fund applied learning research and/or presentations at conferences have been in place for over 10 years. Faculty members also receive support for their research not directly related to applied learning. They are expected to present at national conferences and to publish in peer-reviewed journals and encouraged to share research with regional organizations and businesses through workshops, presentations, and consulting.

## Departmental Context

The undergraduate English major offers concentrations in journalism, literature, public relations writing, and technical communication. (Journalism, public relations writing, and technical communication students are often treated as a single group—professional writing students.) The core of the English major includes introductory courses in journalism and technical communication; English education students are required to take courses in composition theory and pedagogy; and all English majors take an upper-division writing course. According to MWSU's *Major Information Report* (2009), the majority of the department's majors opt for a professional writing concentration: 44% in 2005, 46% in 2006, 53% in 2007, 44% in 2008, and 47% in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

Writing has always been a strong component of the undergraduate English program at Missouri Western. To serve students at this open-door institution, Missouri Western's developmental writing program was initiated by tenured and

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in 2007 for students entering Missouri Western in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Missouri Western State University. Building the New American Regional University: A Five-Year Strategic Plan 2007–2012. 15.

<sup>3</sup> See <<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/ird/institutionaldata.asp>>.

tenure-track English faculty in the early 1980s. Today, approximately 40% of the entering student body have EACT scores that place them in the developmental writing course. In 2008, the program received the Conference on Basic Writing's Innovation Award for its successful delivery of ENG 100 Introduction to College Writing.

Given the demographics of Western's student body, faculty accepting tenure-track appointments here have done so knowing they would likely be teaching one or more general studies composition courses on a regular basis throughout their tenure. New and replacement hires in the department since the 1980s, then, have deliberately been targeted toward strengthening the writing and technical communication programs. Faculty involved in the Master of Applied Arts in Written Communication hold graduate degrees in Rhetoric and Composition and Curriculum and Instruction. Some participating faculty have degrees and practitioner experience in technical communication, and all faculty in the program teach composition as part of their regular course load. Areas of faculty research and specialization include computer-mediated communication, technical documentation, visual rhetoric, assessment and curriculum development, writing in the public sphere, and feminist rhetoric. Faculty members have published articles on scientific rhetoric, writing assessment, and rhetorical theory, and two faculty members have published technical communication textbooks. Faculty members have consulted in and conducted workshops for industry and educators.

## Development of the Program

As proposals for Missouri Western's university status were in development, no one knew what form graduate programs at Western might take. One thing was clear: Because of non-compete agreements, when Western was given permission to offer graduate programs, they would not look like traditional master's programs. Western is located within 60 miles of two other state universities, so developing a mission that set it apart from other state universities was necessary. To respond to this need, Dr. James Scanlon, president of Missouri Western, coined the term *New American Regional University*. The New American Regional University focuses on serving the economic, cultural, and social needs of area communities through partnerships with area businesses, schools, government, and social agencies. It emphasizes the connection of "theoretical and experiential learning" through applied learning and research."<sup>4</sup>

Applied learning was already a key element in writing courses at Missouri Western. The newspaper and yearbook are part of the journalism curriculum.

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<sup>4</sup> See entire document at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/AboutWestern/visionmissionvalues.pdf>.

Students serve on the editorial staffs of a national literary magazine, *Mochila Review*, and a student creative writing publication, *Canvas*. Journalism, public relations writing, and technical communication students are required to complete internships. Even students in the developmental writing program have their outstanding work published in an anthology every year. The strong undergraduate writing curriculum was a natural foundation for an applied graduate degree.

As the legislation for Western's university status was being introduced in 2004, English faculty prepared materials to support a graduate program in writing. We studied master's programs in composition and rhetoric and technical communication. We also drew on published studies of writing curriculum (listed in the Appendix A) and on the resources from the National Writing Project (NWP), the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC), and the Master's Degree Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists. Later, the department surveyed members of the Kansas City Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) as well as professional writing students and alumni.

When Western finally received its university designation in 2005, there was still no clear picture of what form its graduate degrees would take. As policies and requirements for full master's programs were still under development, Prairie Lands Writing Project (PLWP), the home of the University's National Writing Project site, began developing a proposal for a graduate certificate in the Teaching of Writing. The PLWP director studied graduate certificate programs offered at other National Writing Project sites and surveyed teachers who had participated in its institutes and workshops. The graduate certificate, which would serve as a foundation for the Writing Studies program, was approved in 2006.

One of the first decisions made about graduate degree programs at Western was that they would be *applied* degrees—Masters of Applied Arts (MAA) or Masters of Applied Sciences (MAS). Applied graduate programs offered by Missouri Western were expected to meet these criteria:

- To be interdisciplinary,
- To include a core and at least two options,
- To be designed as a terminal degree,
- To emphasize the application of theory to practice, and
- To meet the economic, cultural, and social needs of the region.

Additionally, new graduate degrees were offered with as little budgetary impact as possible through the use of shared and existing courses and existing resources. The first three graduate degrees to be approved were

the Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of Writing, a Master of Applied Science (in chemistry, human factors and usability testing, and information technology management), and a Master of Applied Arts in Integrated Media with media and convergent media options. The MAA and MAS became models for our Master of Applied Arts in Written Communication, and the Graduate Certificate served as the foundation for the Writing Studies option. By including some of the existing courses in the Graduate Certificate and already-approved MAS and MAA degrees, we designed a program that is both interdisciplinary and low-impact. Courses have been included in the MAA in Written Communication from programs in integrated media, mathematics, communication studies, business, and psychology. The need for new courses and resources was also kept to a minimum by creating 500-level courses that could be paired with 400-level undergraduate courses. Dual-listed courses in the MAA in Written Communication include ETC 420 Technical Documentation, ENG 503 Literature for Children, ENG 567 Grammar and the Teaching of Grammar, and ENG 574 History of the English Language. ETC 408/508 Technical Editing is a new course offered at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

Composition/rhetoric faculty and the writing program director in the English department began formulating plans for when the “Building Graduate Programs” emerged as the first “opportunity area” in the university’s 2007 five-year strategic plan, using principles from Western’s “Building the New American Regional University” mission.

The pre-proposal was sent to Western’s Graduate Council in fall 2007. The Graduate Council approved the program, complimenting the department on the thoroughness of its research and preparation and the completeness of its proposal. Especially helpful were letters of support from colleagues at other Missouri universities that offered degree programs in technical communication. They supported our assertion that the interdisciplinary and applied nature of the program made it different from programs offered at other Missouri institutions.

The complete program proposal was posted on the website of the state-wide Controlling Board of Higher Education for comment by other institutions in December 2007. In the spring 2008 semester, the program received approval from our Controlling Board, and we were given permission to accept students in spring 2009 and offer classes the following fall. At the same time that the proposal for the MAA in Written Communication was being considered at the state level, we began developing admission standards and procedures, internship expectations, thesis project requirements, and other policies and procedures for the program. The process of creating policies and procedures continued through spring 2009.

## Program Overview

The Master of Applied Arts in Written Communication was designed for educators, communications specialists, and subject matter experts interested in pursuing graduate education as a step in career advancement. The program includes a 22-hour core of courses and one of two 12-hour options: Technical Communication or Writing Studies.

The Technical Communication option was designed for students with a wide range of undergraduate degrees and careers. This option should appeal to students currently working in business, government, or industry and looking for a program that will add value to existing skills. The Writing Studies option is designed for teachers looking for a graduate program that strengthens their background in writing and for students interested in preparing to teach composition at the post-secondary level.

## Distinctive Features of the Program

As noted previously, two features especially characterize this program—its interdisciplinary nature and its emphasis on applied rhetoric. Both features were created in response to the institutional requirements for the degrees, but both also are a key part of focusing the program to meet specific needs of the region's students and employers. The interdisciplinary nature of the program is immediately obvious in the curriculum. In developing the program, we worked with colleagues in business, journalism, education, and psychology to integrate courses that would meet student needs, and we have developed courses in our curriculum to serve students across the university. We also collaborated with the Department of Education on a writing option in its Master of Applied Science in Assessment. Applied learning is key to Missouri Western's undergraduate mission, and its graduate degree programs are all designated as applied degrees. For the MAA in Written Communication, this designation has meant an emphasis on the application of rhetoric in the workplace and in the classroom. The applied nature of the program is clear in the curriculum.

## Curriculum

### Core Courses<sup>5</sup>

AIM	505	Converging Media Theory and Practice
MAT	609	Technical Analysis for Decision-Making
or		
ENG	609	Qualitative Research Theories and Methods

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<sup>5</sup> Curriculum Abbreviations

AIM	Arts and Integrated Media	ETC	English/Technical Communication
COM	Communication Studies	MAT	Math
ENG	English	MGT	Management
EPR	English/Public Relations	PSY	Psychology

COM	501	Professional and Organizational Communication
or		
MGT	503	Organizational Theory
ENG	620	History and Theory of Rhetoric
EPR	620	Proposal and Grant Writing
ENG	695	Thesis
or		
ETC	695	

We assume that many students interested in the MAA in Written Communication will have practitioner experience, so the program core was designed for reflection and building on experience through an understanding of rhetorical theories. Three courses in the program's core teach theory: AIM 505 introduces students to theory as related to multimedia, COM 501 or MGT 503 addresses communication theory, and ENG 620 addresses rhetorical theory through a historical lens. In addition, during the first semester, students are expected to take either ENG 664 or ETC 600, courses that provide the theoretical and practical foundations for each 12-hour option.

We also assume most students in both the technical communication and writing studies options will be interested in helping others to become better writers, using technology more effectively, and in career advancement. The core was designed with these goals in mind. AIM 505 examines multimedia from a range of artistic and practical perspectives. Courses in organizational theory and communication introduce students to issues that they will face as they move into supervisory and decision-making positions. English/Public relations 620 addresses concerns of students in education, government, business, and industry careers, by including requests for proposal, grant proposals for government agencies and private foundations, and industry proposals for potential clients and contracts; this course has also been designed to meet the needs of students in education or in the sciences interested in practicing grant writing strategies.

The research methods courses and thesis hours provide students with an additional opportunity to develop as professionals. In their first semester, students are expected to enroll in the foundation course for their option (ETC 600 or ENG 664). As part of this course, students begin planning for thesis projects. In the second semester, students are expected to take the research methods course, quantitative or qualitative, that will be most helpful for the projects. The thesis project is broadly defined in this program. Students interested in pursuing a PhD are welcome to write a traditional thesis. However, most students will likely conduct classroom or workplace research that results in something different from an academic research paper. Instead, theses may be practitioner research, whether the

practitioner is a teacher or an industry professional. Final thesis projects may include grant proposals or reports for clients or employers that apply theoretical research to practical concerns. These projects are to be accompanied by a reflective essay that serves as a review of the literature and explains the research methods. Because these projects are primarily transactional, dissemination of the research results is an important component. In addition to submitting projects in written form to the institution—and to supervisors, granting agencies, or clients as appropriate—students are strongly encouraged to share results in a professional forum such as a workshop, conference, magazine, or journal article.

The impact of technology on written communication is a key element in both options of the degree program and another element of the program's applied nature. All campus classrooms are smart classrooms with uniform hardware (desktop presentation computer, video/data projector, document camera, VCR) software, and controls, and fiber optic connections, which provide excellent broadband access to the Web. Courses in both options are taught in computer labs maintained by the English department. Students have access to the Adobe CREATIVE SUITE, Adobe TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SUITE as well as DIRECTOR MX, FLASH, OMNIPAGE PRO, and Microsoft OFFICE. This emphasis on technology in the undergraduate technical communication program and in the Prairie Lands Writing Project is carried into the graduate programs. Students learn to apply technology to communication problems and to examine the problems introduced by communication technologies.

The MAA in Written Communication is not purely technical, however. Both options in the program share an emphasis on a humanistic approach to writing and technology. When graduate programs were first discussed at Western, we were offered the opportunity to include technical communication as an option in a Master of Applied Science program. However, we wanted to focus on the field's humanistic aspects (Miller, 1979). Throughout the program, we expect students to explore how textual and visual language are used in a variety of settings as well as expect them to explore the problems within language.

## Technical Communication Option

### *Required Courses*

ETC	600	Graduate Studies in Technical Communication
ETC	616	Internship in Technical Communication

### *Electives (6 credits)*

AIM	540	Interactive Web Design
ENG	601	Practicum in the Teaching of College Writing

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ENG	540	Writing for Management and Supervision
ETC	508	Technical Editing
ETC	520	Technical Documentation
ETC	612	Seminar in Professional Writing
PSY	610	User Centered Design Methods and Tools

The technical communication option is designed not only as a program for technical communication practitioners but also for industry professionals interested in improving their writing as a way of advancing their careers. We hope to welcome not only students whose undergraduate work was in English or English Education but also those students currently working in technical fields such as software development, engineering, medical services, and animal health. In our program proposal, the key justification for the technical communication option included this statement:

Technical communicators are the bridge between technical specialists and less expert readers, between product designers and users, between government and citizens. Within organizations, they improve collaboration between co-workers, they provide necessary documentation, and they advocate for users' interests. As leaders in the Plain English movement, technical communicators have advocated for clarity in all areas of government and industry communication. Technical communicators can play a key role in globalization, as they seek to improve international communication and an understanding of local audiences. As "knowledge work" becomes more important in the economy, technical communicators will design documents and document-handling systems to make information more accessible to decision makers, workers, and citizens alike.

We have approached technical communication as applied rhetoric, that is, as the study of rhetorical principles as applied in professional and technical settings. We recognize that the field has expanded from its writing and editing roots to online documentation and help files, information architecture, web design and content creation, international communication and technical translation, training, usability and user advocacy, technical illustration and document design, and project management. The required courses give students a solid background in workplace writing and new experiences in the workplace. Students are encouraged to complete internships with organizations other than their employer. If this arrangement is not possible, then on-site internship supervisors will be asked to ensure that internships consist of experience outside their usual responsibilities.

The electives give students the opportunity to focus graduate studies on writing, training, technology, or supervision. Students who want to focus on improving their writing may choose to take ENG 540 Writing for Management and Supervision and ETC 508 Technical Editing. ENG 540 is also designed as a service course for students in other graduate programs. ETC 508 will also be useful to students interested in training because it includes approaches to helping others become better writers. A student interested in training may also enroll in ENG 601, the practicum that is part of the program's teaching assistantships. Students interested in technology and writing might choose to take AIM 540 Interactive Web Design and PSY 610 User Centered Design Methods and Tools. ETC 520 Technical Documentation gives students practice in writing and addresses current issues such as content management, management of writing projects, and supervision of writers. Supervision issues are also addressed in ENG 540. Students are encouraged to choose electives that meet professional as well as research goals.

## Writing Studies Option

### *Required Courses*

ENG 512 or EDU 512 Teaching Writing With Technology  
ENG 664 Composition Theory and Pedagogy

### *Electives*

ENG 501 or EDU 501 Topics in Teaching Writing  
ENG 502 or EDU 502 Professional Learning Community  
ENG 503 Literature for Children  
ENG 567 Grammar and the Teaching of Grammar  
ENG 574 History of the English Language  
ENG 601 Practicum in the Teaching of College Writing  
ENG 610 or EDU 610 Prairie Lands Writing Project Invitation Institute  
ENG 612 or EDU 612 Seminar in Professional Writing for Teachers  
ENG 540 Writing for Management and Supervision

The writing studies option was designed primarily for area English teachers, especially those who wanted to strengthen their understanding of writing theory and pedagogy. However, we were careful not to limit its scope to only those currently teaching. We also designed this option for students interested in writing program administration, doctoral work in rhetoric and composition, or community college level or adjunct teaching. In fact, we have already received inquiries from professionals interested in teaching writing as adjuncts after they retire. In our program proposal, we included the following justifications for this option:

Education and industry leaders are now recognizing the relationship between writing skills and student achievement: “Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge” (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Consequently, many high stakes exams—including the Missouri Assessment Program, the ACT, SAT, and AP—have recently initiated a required writing component in all content areas undergoing testing. This renewed emphasis on writing performance as a measure of student learning has resulted in a need to provide teachers with the tools to teach writing effectively, including using Web 2.0 technologies.

Both required courses in the Writing Studies core had previously existed in some form. ENG 512 Teaching Writing With Technology is a hands-on course previously taught three times as a requirement for the graduate certificate students and area teachers, grades K–12. ENG 664 Composition Theory and Pedagogy is currently paired with the undergraduate course ENG 364 Introduction to Composition Theory. These two courses are not technically dual-listed because dual-listed courses are offered at the 400/500 levels. This level is by design; we did not want to raise the 300-level course to the 400 level, and we felt that the foundational course in each option should be offered at the 600 level. As part of keeping the impact of this program at a minimum, we will offer these courses in a dual format—in the same classroom at the same time—but we will offer them separately as soon as graduate enrollments will support a separate class.

Many electives in the Writing Studies option are part of the graduate certificate approved in 2006. Some electives are dual-listed 400-level courses already offered in the English department. Courses developed for the graduate certificate include ENG/EDU 501 Topics in Teaching Writing, ENG/EDU 502 Professional Learning Community, ENG/EDU 610 Prairie Lands Writing Project Invitational Institute, and ENG/EDU 612 Seminar in Professional Writing for Teachers. Only ENG 601 Practicum in the Teaching of College Writing, the required course for first semester Graduate Teaching Assistants, and ENG 540 Writing for Management and Supervision are new in the electives for this option.

## **Challenges**

The initial challenges for this program are shared by all graduate programs at our institution. Missouri Western’s move to university status, and to offering graduate programs, did not receive universal support in the state legislature; consequently, all new programs have been under careful scrutiny. Because of noncompete agreements for state institutions, Missouri

Western was given a specific mission for its graduate programs—applied learning. In addition, we were asked to offer programs with as little initial impact as possible, using faculty and resources currently available. Western has also faced the challenge of establishing policies and procedures for graduate programs and introducing a culture of graduate study across the institution.

Although interdisciplinarity is one of the program's greatest strengths, it also presents one of the program's greatest challenges. The biggest problem here is communication. When a course is included in the programs of several departments, coordination of curriculum offerings and changes becomes essential. Because the programs are all new, schedules are in flux, and courses are sometimes offered or canceled with little warning. It has occasionally been difficult to get information about course offerings from other departments. We have tried to encourage communication by giving departments that offer graduate programs a seat on the Graduate Council.

The biggest challenge for any new program is recruiting students. Although we do have contacts with area teachers, with businesses where our alumni are employed, and with the Kansas City Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, we are still looking for ways to reach beyond this core constituency. We want to build contacts with area educators and employers not just to recruit students but to continue developing a program that meets student needs.

## **Lessons Learned**

The need for communication is obviously one of the most important aspects of starting any program. Before Missouri Western attained university status and was given permission to offer graduate programs, the administration worked to communicate with faculty about the applied nature of any programs that would be offered. As we prepared the program proposal, we gathered information from a variety of sources:

- Published studies of graduate curriculum gave us a sense of what educators and industry found valuable in writing programs;
- Course offerings from other departments were developing and showed us how their graduate programs shaping up;
- All members of our department contribute to discussions;
- Area educators, alumni, professionals, and students responded to a survey that not only indicated their interest in graduate programs but also suggested the best formats and schedules for offering classes; and

- Professional organizations and colleagues provided valuable insight and recommendations. Molly Johnson of Eastern Washington University gave us excellent advice about planning and preparing for a graduate program, and Diane Scollay, Gateway Writing Project director at the University of Missouri–St. Louis was especially helpful in providing course and program descriptions.

To those beginning the process of program development, we also recommend patience. We began researching and planning our program in 2004, four years before it was approved and five years before we offered our first classes. The preparation, research, and time spent developing a complete, well-thought-out proposal paid off when we sent it to the Graduate Council. We received compliments for such a complete, well-designed program, and the proposal moved through the approval process smoothly.

Now, as we begin accepting students and offering classes, we are reviewing the program's progress, noting anything that we might want to change. We plan to use the same patience and care in maintaining and revising the program that we used in designing the program.

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## Appendix

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