

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Spring, 2003

**Report of the General Education Subcommittee
to Revise the Comm-B Criteria**

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Why we are proposing to revise and clarify the Comm-B criteria.

In response to the findings of the Verbal Assessment Committee last year, the General Education Committee delegated us to investigate the feasibility of revising the working criteria for Comm-B courses to increase the emphasis on oral communication. Although the original objectives for these courses mention the importance of both writing and speaking, the guidelines used for implementation have always been unbalanced in favor of writing-- so much so, indeed, that both faculty and students have envisioned the courses primarily as requiring many pages of writing and rewriting, with oral communication squeezed in as an afterthought, if at all.

We believe this imbalance can be alleviated, making more room in Comm-B courses for instruction and meaningful practice in oral communication, by revising the criteria in a way that allows instructors to give more class time and more emphasis in grading to such activities. Such a shift of emphasis need not seriously dilute the writing component of the course, since preparing a formal oral presentation requires a good deal of writing and uses most of the same skills that the student would need to write a formal paper: planning, research, considering the audience and occasion, outlining, selecting the most pertinent evidence, drafting, and revising.

Which courses and instructors will be affected by the new criteria, and to what extent.

We recommend distributing the revised criteria to all departments and Comm-B instructors, with a cover letter explaining that instructors in existing Comm-B courses may (but need not) revise their assignments to increase the emphasis on speaking. Newly proposed Comm-B courses, on the other hand, should follow the new criteria from the start. An important aspect of these criteria is the flexibility they include, allowing instructors in appropriate disciplines to design courses that give as much as 50% of their emphasis to oral presentations (as vs. written ones), or as little as 25%.

How we propose to help instructors solve the practical problems of incorporating more oral communication activities in their Comm-B courses.

Since many instructors will need help in designing oral communication activities and evaluating students' oral performance, we propose that several steps be taken to make pertinent resources available to them:

Distributing a packet of suggestions for instructors as an appendix to the revised criteria (see attached draft).

Expanding the handbook and website of the L&S Writing Across the Curriculum Program to include more resources for oral communication.

Giving more emphasis to oral communication activities in training workshops for Comm-B instructors and teaching assistants

Targeting some issues of the Verbal Assessment Bulletin specifically to these issues

Including pertinent articles in the Teaching Academy Newsletter

Working Criteria for Communication-B Courses (as updated by Communications Implementation Committee, 1997-2000, and revised by General Education subcommittee, 2002-03)--(changes in boldface-approved by University Academic Planning Council, June 26, 2003)

Purpose: The second Communication course will be a low-enrollment course involving substantial instruction in the four modes of literacy [that is, speaking, reading, writing, and listening], with emphasis on **speaking and** writing, either in the conventions of specific fields or in more advanced courses in communication.

Objectives: Specific objectives will vary with each discipline, but each course is expected to develop advanced skills in

- ! critical reading, logical thinking, and the use of evidence
- ! the use of appropriate style and disciplinary conventions in writing and speaking
- ! the productive use of core library resources specific to the discipline

Requirements:

- ! numerous assignments [6-8 would be ideal], spaced through the semester, **that culminate in oral or written presentations. The balance between oral and written presentations may vary, as appropriate to the discipline, so long as the total amount of graded communication remains reasonably consistent from course to course. In a course with a 50/50 balance, students should submit at least 20 pages of writing (in multiple assignments) and give multiple formal oral presentations totaling at least 10 minutes. In a course with the maximum emphasis on writing (75%), students should submit at least 30 pages of writing and give formal oral presentations totaling at least 5 minutes.** Drafts count in the total number of pages.
- ! **at least two opportunities for each student to be graded for oral communication as well as two or more opportunities to be graded for writing. Comm-B courses should also include informal, ungraded oral communication activities that give students further opportunities to develop and receive feedback on their speaking skills.**
- ! at least two assignments that require students to submit a draft **or give a practice speech**, assimilate feedback on it, and then revise it. Additional opportunities for feedback and revision would be better yet.
- ! at least one individual conference with each student, preferably early in the semester, to discuss the student's writing **and/or speaking.**
- ! an information-gathering component beyond a beginning level, normally involving two hours of instructional time in one of the campus libraries. Such activities should be planned in consultation with appropriate members of the library staff; contact Abbie Loomis, 443D Memorial Library, for help in getting started.

Prerequisites: Successful completion of or exemption from first communication course. Courses designated as satisfying Part A of the requirement may not be used to satisfy Part B of the requirement.

Class size: Recommended 20 or fewer students. Those departments or individuals requesting approval for courses with larger class size must clearly demonstrate how the objectives and requirements of the course can be satisfied within the larger format.

Instructors: Faculty and other qualified instructional staff

Assessment: There will be normal evaluations of student work by individual instructors. In addition, each course proposal shall include an assessment plan designed to demonstrate that the course meets the objectives and requirements stated above.