The First-Year Writing Program

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The department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures is the heart of and home for writing at Michigan State University. Across our initiatives, in the research and scholarship we pursue, and in the teaching and learning opportunities we offer, we emphasize curiosity, discovery, and the exchange of ideas along with attention to the importance of writing and communication—drawing across techniques and media, being attentive to audience and purpose, and sharing one’s ideas with the world.

We want to share a part of our common curriculum that invites students to learn about rhetorical practices relevant to their academic and professional futures: The Disciplinary and Professional Literacies Project (DPLP).

This DPLP project invites students to inquire into a community of academic or professional practice, recognizing that as students move into the rest of their undergraduate educations, they will face writing situations that will ask them to work within new rhetorical contexts. Although many students declare or change their majors during their time at MSU, an early invitation to explore the literacies and rhetorical practices of the fields in which they aspire to participate can serve students well regardless of the fields they ultimately choose.

Exemplifying and extending our writing curriculum’s emphasis on self-discovery, inquiry, reflection, and goal setting, the DPLP engages students in collecting and inquiring into textual products (e.g., scholarly articles, trade publications, and news items), as well as in interviewing a person (typically a professor or professional) within their chosen fields of study or practice. Additional project components may include analyses of job ads and web sites of professional organizations, or a visit to a campus Career Services Network event or a student organization meeting.

The DPLP builds on students’ inquiries into their own learning histories and cultural influences to invite them to recognize disciplinary and professional communities as rhetorically complex and cultures in their own right. They learn to assess, for example, how historians or mechanical engineers or supply-chain managers or health care specialists make knowledge, and how they communicate what they know to others both in and outside their respective fields. Students are invited to continue the inquiry into their educational purposes begun in their earlier writing experiences (what am I doing here? What resources do I bring to the project of my education? What do I need? How do I achieve my goals?), and to put these questions in relation to their discoveries about the literacies of a specific disciplinary and professional culture. The project’s ultimate goal, then, is not so much to create a report on any given profession’s literacy practices, per se, but to make the professional cultures students hope to join more transparent and intelligible, leading students to make informed decisions about their own goals and the processes (like networking and conducting research) by which one might begin to enter into a field or profession.

Regardless of the fields that students will ultimately enter, the DPLP engages students in preliminary research about the literacies and forms of communicative in a given field of study and practice, and supports their learning as they discover that all fields require ongoing learning and rhetorical flexibility—that is, the ability to move between and among diverse audiences and to respond to various, ever-shifting communicative challenges. The project also helps discover other resources for their learning at MSU as they articulate their academic goals and begin to imagine their professional pathways—for instance, via our partnerships with Instructional Librarians with and specialists in Career Services, both of which understand and support the goals of the DPLP by introducing students to relevant sources of information and other resources for inquiry. The message to the students is clear: regardless of where students end up, by the time they finish the DPLP, they will have developed the tools of inquiry and created links to important resources they can use to investigate and learn more about any given discipline or field. More importantly, perhaps, students also come to see how they belong at MSU and how the University can support them in their learning and pathway to professional success.

For more information about MSU’s First-Year Writing program and our BA and Minor in writing, please see wrac.msu.edu