

WR 100 / WR 150 Timeline: What to Teach When September 1, 2011

Our writing seminars have many goals, and it is impossible as a practical matter to give all of them equal emphasis at once. Your task as a teacher is to find the right balance among them—in a particular lesson or assignment, in a particular unit, over the course of a semester. When designing your syllabus and assignments, you need to ask not only, “*What* should I teach?” but also, “What should I teach *when*?” The Course Requirements documents address the former question; this document addresses the latter.

I. WR 100/WR 150 Trajectory

The trajectory from the beginning of WR 100 to the end of WR 150 follows from three principles and one corollary:

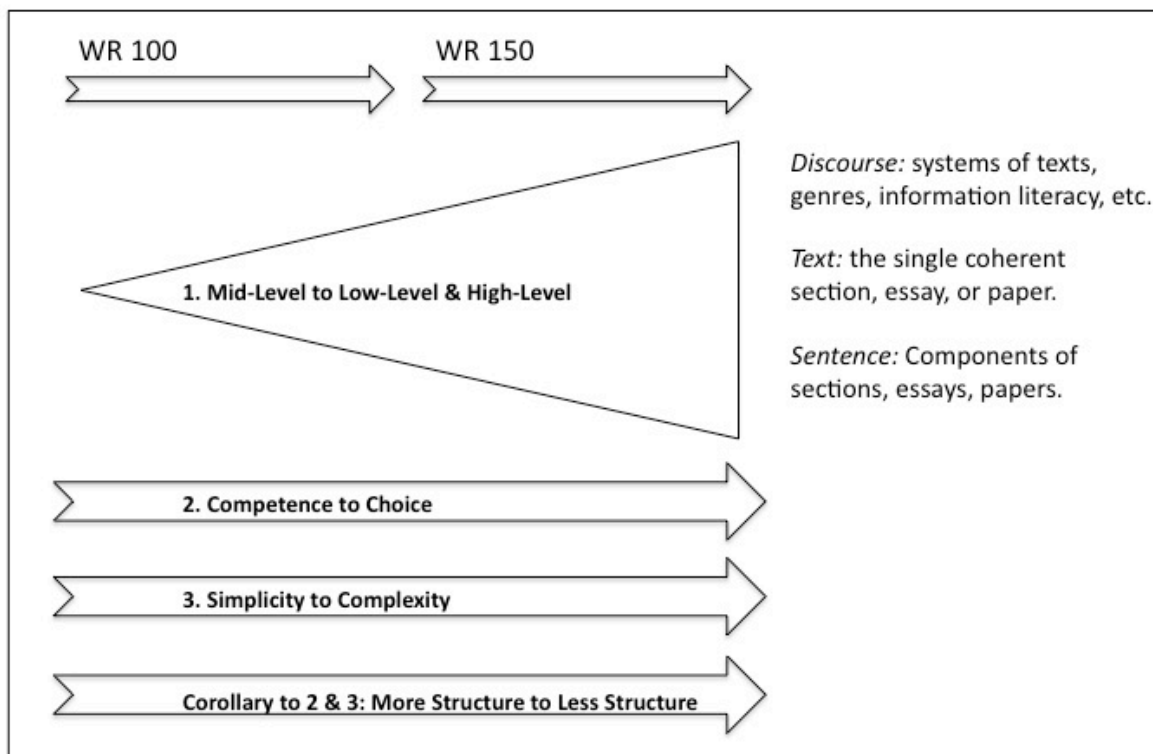
1. Start with an emphasis on *mid-level* issues, and broaden out to emphasize *low-level* and *high-level* issues. This principle follows from the psychology of learning. When attempting to master a new skill or area of knowledge, most people learn best when they begin at a middle level: specific enough to be comprehensible (no “heads in the clouds”) but still general enough to provide a sense of context (no “losing the forest for the trees”). Once novices are “anchored” at this middle level, they can move down to address nuances of technique or up to consider more abstract theoretical issues and questions. For us as teachers of writing, mid-level issues are at the level of the *text*: the level of argument (in terms of content) and the level of the single section or single paper (in terms of form). *Low-level* issues are at the level of the *sentence*: grammar, usage, style. *High-level* issues are at the level of *systems of texts*, or of what might be called *discourse*: genre, intertextuality, information literacy, research. *Mid-level* issues are at the level of the individual *text*. The WR 100/150 sequence should begin by anchoring students in a solid understanding of academic writing at this middle level and, as it progresses, give increasing attention to issues at the levels of *discourse* and the *sentence*.

2. Start with an emphasis on *developing competence*, and move to an emphasis on *practicing choice*. Good academic writers have mastered a repertoire of rhetorical patterns and moves, but they are also good tacticians and strategists. They have a sense of *when* to make certain moves, and they are able to recognize options available to them, weigh pros and cons, and make reasonable choices. In the WR 100/150 sequence, the focus gradually shifts from helping students master the various patterns and moves characteristic of academic writing to helping students develop their capacities to make thoughtful decisions about what projects to pursue, what sources to use, what patterns or moves to deploy, etc.).

3. Start *simply*, and build toward *complexity*. This principle too follows from the psychology of learning. When novice academic writers are firmly grounded in the “basics,” they can more ably build toward complexity and nuance. *Simple* doesn’t mean *simplistic*, and *basic* doesn’t mean *remedial*. Likewise *basic* does not mean *low-level*, as that term is used above. A commitment to beginning with the basics does not mean beginning with sentences and building up to paragraphs and whole texts. It means, *at each levels described above*, introducing students to fundamental concepts, patterns, and skills that they can deploy with increasing sophistication

as their abilities develop and as they progress through the course. The first paper assignment in WR 100—one exhibit, one argument source or alternative position—exemplifies this principle. This assignment introduces students to the conversational model of argumentation and asks them to engage in a simple version of acknowledgement and response. This first paper is simpler than the other papers students will write, but it is not different from them in kind.

Corollary: Start with tasks and assignments that are relatively structured and constrained, and move to tasks and assignments that are relatively unstructured and open. This corollary follows from principles 2 and 3. Structured assignments are good for cultivating competence because they require students to learn and execute specific moves in specific ways. More open assignments give students an opportunity to practice choice. Likewise, highly structured assignments may take longer to describe, but they are usually simpler to execute, because many decisions have already been made for the student. More open assignments can often be given quite succinctly, but they are generally more challenging than more structured assignments to execute, because students have to make so many decisions for themselves.



Principles Structuring Trajectory of WR 100/150

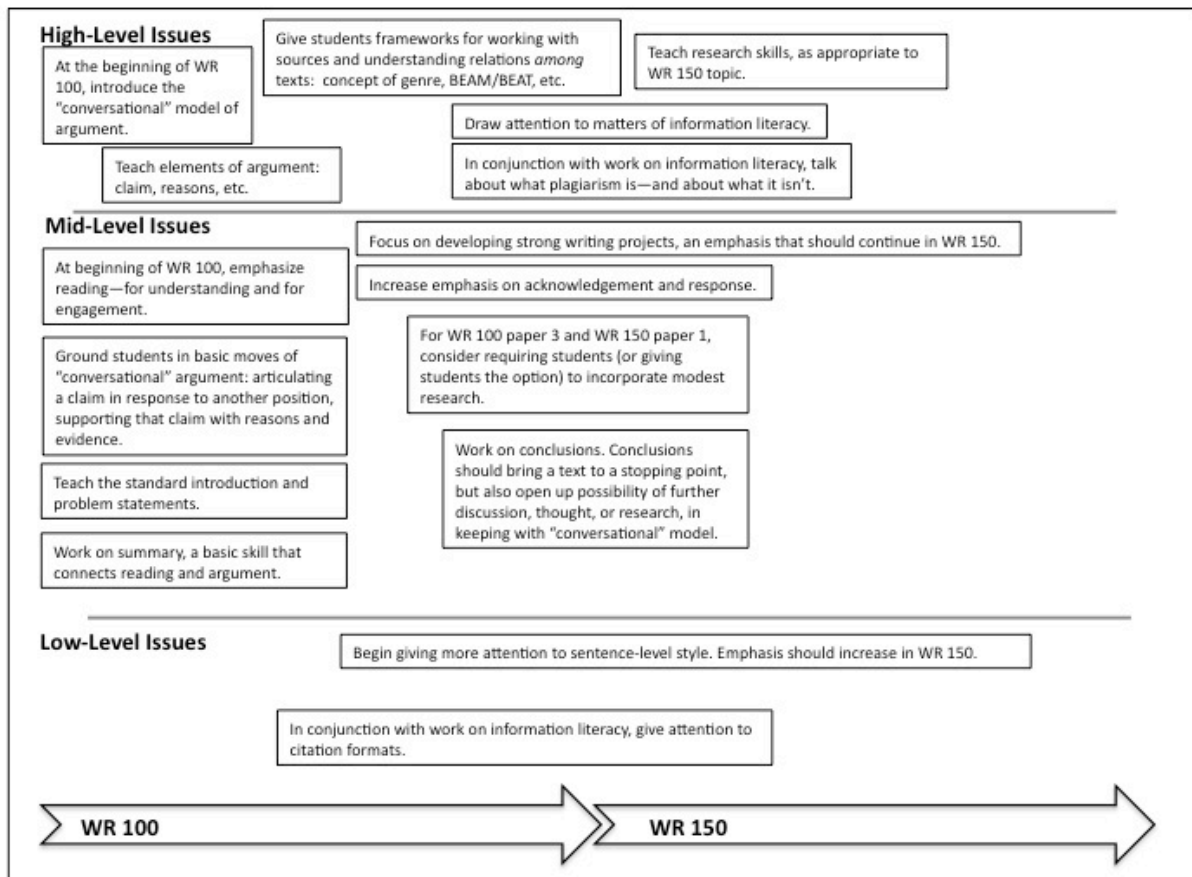
II. Timeline: Core Skills and Points of Knowledge

The 2011-2012 WR 100 Course Requirements document includes a list of core skills and points of knowledge that students should learn by the end of WR 100. The timeline below indicates where in WR 100 we recommend that you introduce these skills and concepts. The timeline also includes skills, concepts, and competencies that should receive emphasis in WR 150.

Note that the elements on this timeline are cumulative. We recommend, for example, that students work on summary early in the semester. But this does not mean that summary should drop out of the picture when the course begins to attend to other aspects of writing.

You will also note that as represented on the timeline, the WR 100/150 sequence appears to be heavily front-loaded. That appearance is somewhat deceptive because the timeline does not represent the level of sophistication at which students can be expected to deploy a particular skill. For example, students engage in acknowledgement and response in the first paper, but they will continue to work on acknowledgement and response, recursively, with increasing sophistication and complexity, throughout the sequence.

Labels on the timeline indicate the point in the sequence at which the skill or concept should receive the most explicit attention. Students may do certain things (e.g., include a Works Cited page) before they are emphasized in the course sequence. Although WR 150 introduces fewer new skills and concepts, it requires students to use the things they learned in WR 100 in more complex ways. Again, the principle of recursivity obtains. In WR 150, students return to the skills and concepts to which they were introduced in WR 100 and deploy them with increasing sophistication and—as important—with increasing independence.



Timeline: Cumulative Points of Emphasis in WR 100 & WR 150