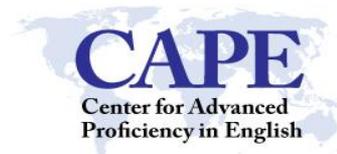# Advanced Professional Writing in English Online: Lessons Learned from a Pilot Course

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Language Training Center Program

- Origin: An initiative of the Defense Language and National Security Education Office (DLNSEO)

- Purpose: To increase DoD capacity in strategic languages

- Focus: Training in a strategic language or training in advanced English as a second language

- Eligibility: Institutions of higher education with DoD partner(s)

- Awards: Base year and two option years

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Project institution: University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)

Partner institutions: Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL); one DoD agency

Course participants: 25 Department of Defense personnel who are nonnative speakers of English

Online course: Advanced Professional Writing in English (APWE)

The Big Question

Does online writing instruction really work?

Staffing

UMBC

- Project director
- Course Developer
- Content consultant
- **Instructor**
- **Teaching assistant**
- **Technology coordinator**
- **Online instructional assistant**
- **Program assistant**

CAL

- Assessment developers/program evaluators (2)
- **Additional raters**

DoD partner

- **DoD liaisons/recruiters (2)**

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Overview of APWE Course

Designed for nonnative speakers of English

10 hours of coursework per week during duty hours

Developed and offered by UMBC

Entry and exit writing proficiency assessment by CAL

Fully online 10-week course

Advanced Professional Writing in English

Program evaluation conducted by CAL

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Overview of APWE Course

Improve professional writing skills in English

Build effective interpersonal and intercultural competence for a multicultural workplace setting

Program goals:

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Partnerships

- Needs assessment

- Regular communication and meetings

- Responsiveness and ongoing feedback

- Flexibility and adaptation

- Grading and course completion expectations

- Coursework expectations (for example duty hours, reassignments, leave)

Course Development

- Decontextualized content
- Multiple levels of writing proficiency
- Linguistic and cultural diversity
- ADA compliance
- Number of participants
- Assessment tools
- Scheduling

Online Platform: Challenges

- Orientation

- Email communication

- Familiarity with online learning

- Giving feedback online for writing

- Online testing by CAL

- Engagement and course location

- Keeping participants on task

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Online Platform: Benefits

- Flexibility

- 24/7 Access

- Asynchronous for any time zone

- Easily reproduced

- All materials online

- Accessible anywhere

- Multiple exposures to course lectures

- Extensive reading & writing practice

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Security

- Identification
- Enrollment and registration
- Communication
- Content development and delivery
- Application of content
- Access to platform and computer compatibility

APWE Topic Outline

Orientation: What is Good Writing?

Unit 1:   The Writing Process

Unit 2:   Writing Strong Sentences

Unit 3:   Paragraphs: Structure and Organization

Unit 4:   Paragraphs: Unity and Coherence

Unit 5:   Intercultural Communication in Writing, Pt. 1

Unit 6:   Writing Emails and Memos

Unit 7:   Writing Reports

Unit 8:   Intercultural Communication in Writing, Pt. 2

Unit 9:   Summarizing and Paraphrasing

Unit 10: Writing Performance Evaluations & Reviews

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Entry & Exit Assessment

- Entry and exit assessment online

- Three-item constructed response test

- Prompts based on general professional writing tasks

- Rated using an ILR-aligned rubric developed by DLI-ELC

Assessment Rating

- Ratings given using labels rather than ILR numbers

- Each main level subdivided using plus and minus ratings

- Ratings given on each factor:
  - Global tasks & functions
  - Lexical control
  - Structural control
  - Sociolinguistic competence/style
  - Orthography
  - Text produced

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Rating Scale

General Professional Proficiency
- Plus
- On level
- Minus

Limited Working Proficiency
- Plus
- On level
- Minus

Elementary Proficiency
- Plus
- On level
- Minus

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Sample Ratings and Comments

Global Tasks and Functions

Limited Working Proficiency Minus

- Completes tasks to some degree.

- #1: Good, well-constructed story with clear ending.

- #2: Completes first half of task well; does not follow through to actual hiring procedure.

- #3: No framing or orientation; good description of aspects of location.

Sample Ratings and Comments

Sociolinguistic Competence/Style

Limited Working Proficiency

- Writing is comprehensible
- #2 and #3 have appropriate formatting but lack appropriate introductory sentences.
- #3 does not provide enough context to understand why the recommendations are being made.
- Non-native style, but satisfies routine social demands and limited work requirements.

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Entry Proficiency

- Averages for all factors were in the Limited Working Proficiency range
- Wide variation among participants
  - Highest: Average rating = General Professional Proficiency
  - Lowest: Average rating = Elementary Proficiency
- Strongest factor at entry: Lexical control
- Weakest factor at entry: Text produced

Outcomes

- 17 of the original 23 participants took the exit assessment

- 6 increased their rating average by one full level

- 4 increased their rating average by two full levels or more

- Overall average for all participants went from Limited Working Proficiency–Minus at entry to Limited Working Proficiency-Plus at exit

Outcomes

Factor	Number of Ratings			Average Rating	
	Increased	Same	Decreased	**Entry**	**Exit**
Global Tasks & Functions	8	4	5	**4.5**	**5.3**
Lexical Control	12	5	0	**4.7**	**6.2**
Structural Control	8	7	2	**4.6**	**5.5**
Sociolinguistic Competence	12	3	2	**4.3**	**5.9**
Orthography	10	5	2	**4.6**	**5.9**
Text Produced	11	3	3	**4.1**	**5.6**

Program Evaluation

- Evaluation questionnaires completed by participants and by all instructors and staff

- All instructors and staff responded

- 17 of 23 participants responded

- Questionnaires used Survey Monkey— external to the UMBC LMS

Positives

- Appreciation of opportunity
- Value of feedback
- Recognition of progress in achieving learning goals
- Importance of release time

Concerns and Adjustments

- Time management and ability to complete assignments
    - Some reading assignments reduced or made optional
- Insufficient Feedback
    - Decrease class size, 2 co-instructors
- Unclear connections between entry/exit testing and course activities
    - In-unit quizzes reference the rating factors

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Participant Voices

- *The teacher's feedback is very good. It is a lot of information in a somewhat short period of time.*

- *The material of the course is useful. I am planning to go over it after I finish the course to benefit from it more.*

- *I love reading the different posts and comments from students. Their stories really make the class interesting and gives me encouragement. Knowing that I am not alone on my mistakes allows me to also learn from others' mistakes. Sharing is great.*

- *I'm very happy with this course and finding it very helpful. This is just the kind of course I needed to improve my writing skills.*

Participant Voices

- *Overall I enjoy the class. The actual written exercises are relevant and encourage me to think of what I'm doing and why. Many things I already knew or have been doing already but didn't know why or was not consistent. Reading about it and having to pause to actually do it has been very relevant to me. It gives me the confidence that I am on the right track, while reminding me about what and how I should keep those things in mind. Great reinforcement.*

- *I became more aware of the structure of professional writing, and what is most important – how to give feedback and write buffered refusal emails. So far, I really enjoy the course – if only I had more time!*

Participant Voices

- *Other than the flowery words and poetic writings of some cultures, I hadn't realized there were so many other cultural writing differences... I had no idea there were so many English grammar websites out there. I definitely want to look at them again and continue to improve my writing.*

- *In my culture it is not encouraged to talk about your accomplishments. I had never had a lesson on how to write a performance evaluation, and was overlooked for promotion in the past because I didn't write strong evaluation reports. This unit has been very helpful.*

Thank You!

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