

# Disconnect of Intent: The Disparity Between Teacher Intention and Student Interpretation Concerning Page Requirements in College Writing

by Christopher Varano

## *Abstract*

*This article is a report of the results of a study conducted on the reasons and reactions to page requirements in college writing. Using grounded theory as a basis for the research, college professors were interviewed and college students were surveyed to ascertain the pedagogical motivations of the professors and the students' interpretations of page requirements. This study creates a new conversation in the academic community which lacks sufficient exploration of this particular concern. The results show that educators have good reasons for creating the requirements that they do, but they recognize that those reasons are often not elucidated to their students. Students have mixed experiences with page requirements, and the results were contradictory. A majority of students found the requirements arbitrary, yet a majority also understand why teachers utilize them. The primary conclusion drawn from this research is that a conversation between professors and students on this issue needs to occur frequently to maximize student learning and assignment potency.*

## **Introduction**

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Imagine this:

1. It's the beginning of the semester in a junior-level college course.
2. The professor passes out the syllabus.
3. You notice there are five required papers.
4. That's it. No other details are provided.

How would the students react? What questions would they have? They might want to know how long those papers are required to be. This makes sense. With the busy lives that most students live—juggling work, school, family, and more—they all have a finite amount of time that they can dedicate to writing one paper. Some students do not find writing requirements an issue while others often struggle with meeting the requirements of certain papers. Moreover, the difference between page requirements from paper to paper and class to class add confusion to the mix. If that professor in the thought experiment decides that three of those papers are five pages long, and the other two are fifteen, what are the reasons for those differences? What is the teacher trying to accomplish? How do students react to those different expectations?

Most would agree that writing is a critical part of teaching in nearly every discipline, and many papers have some type of page requirement. It is safe to assume that professors blend learning goals into the creation of their writing assignments and that there is thought behind the design of writing assignments, so that they are efficient and effective in their pedagogical aims. For teachers, it seems, the reasons for the length of papers are clear. The paper should be as long

as it needs to be to accomplish the task of the assignment: content informs format. Student reactions to the length of assignments are a less-discussed topic. This disconnect shines a light on an interesting question: Why is the message of the purpose of writing being lost on the students? Do assignment parameters affect student invention? In what ways? Why do teachers see page requirements as a function of content, but students see them as the end goal?

Finding the answers to these questions is the motivation for this research. Three college-level professors were interviewed, and over fifty college students were surveyed. Their opinions on page requirements, the purported reasons for those requirements, and the students' reaction to those requirements will be examined to determine two main points: 1) Is there actually a gap between student and teacher understanding of the efficacy of page requirements? 2) Is there a solution to bridging that understanding between teacher and student? Common sense suggests that there are reasons for the choices professors make, and also that there must be nuance in students' reactions to those professorial choices. The end goal of this study is to find answers to the questions listed above in hopes of making clear this sometimes-muddy issue, so that more can be learned by both students and teachers. This study will hopefully serve as a jumping-off point to get more students thinking about and more teachers explaining the reasons for the length of the writings that are assigned.

### **Review of Literature**

The amount of literature on this specific topic was scarce, but some information was found within articles and books about writing pedagogies. Hidden within these disparate texts were references to the efficacy of page requirements and suggestions for the implementation of those assignments for maximum learning assignment impact.

In "Reading, Writing, and Knowing: The Role of Disciplinary Knowledge in Comprehension and Composing," John Ackerman analyzes two sets of graduate students (psychology and business majors) and examines how different invention and process techniques affect the writing outcomes. To do this, he implements a special system that he is testing the efficacy of (group-based dialogue on the topic prior to writing) on half of the participants, and uses the other group as a control. He finds the outcomes are enhanced by the special protocol, and writers use more new material, synthesized across more disciplinary lines, and produce better papers if they are in the variable participant set.

This study relates to this present inquiry because it concerns itself with writing outcomes, and how the invention process plays a role in those outcomes. Although Ackerman has different questions that drive his study, Ackerman and this study arrive at a similar place: Invention drives better outcomes. Ackerman also has better primary sources to work from. He analyzes the forty papers and makes his conclusion based on a more quantifiable data, even if the interpretation of that data could be seen as subjective. Ackerman's focus on invention protocol can relate directly to the solution to the problem identified in this study. That problem will be explained in the discussion.

In "The Role of Task in the Development of Academic Thinking through Reading and Writing in a College History Course," Stuart Greene shows different writing tasks can be used to create the same outcomes. What this does is provide different paths of learning that can each be used to reinforce the writing process. The question that drives Greene's study is whether or not a specific writing assignment or task leads to better learning outcomes for the students completed said tasks. To accomplish this, Greene studies a group of fifteen undergraduate students in a European History class. He creates two different writing tasks, a report and a problem-based

essay, but all other requirements for the tasks (number of sources, page length, etc.) were the same. To track student reaction and processes, he requires them to complete a think-aloud protocol and keep a writing journal. Greene also performs in-class observations of the students working. His findings show that there is no discernable difference in outcomes for either writing task. The students use the same amount of prior knowledge and exhibit the same amount of content depth and academic understanding. He suggests that the students reached these similar outcomes in different ways, and each writing task has its own benefits to the learning of the student. A student can write a report on this topic and a problem-based essay on another topic, all the while reinforcing the same writing tools, but not repeating the same assignment. This “different routes, same destination” approach can keep material fresh for students and keep interest high. These pedagogical gymnastics can benefit all students. This study finds that different writing lengths will reflect different writing content. Greene shows that different content can produce similar results, which can teach students different techniques that will enable them to reach the same goal—like a specific page requirement.

In Anne Herrington’s study “Writing in Academic Settings: A Study of the Contexts for Writing in Two College Chemical Engineering Courses,” her aim is to examine two related, but different, discourse communities within the field of Chemistry to see how writing is similar and different across those communities. Her methodology includes surveys of all the professors and students, interviews with a select number of teachers and students, and then she draws conclusions based on the quantitative and qualitative data she collects. Her findings indicate that the writing requirements, expectations, and norms varied across these seemingly closely related discourse communities. And that each class, although similar in subject matter, requires students to use different rhetorical techniques regarding audience, tone, organization and the like. She also concludes the lack of consistency between the classes led to some confusion about expectations and rhetorical considerations, such as audience.

Although she has different aims, Herrington uses almost the exact same methodology that is utilized in this study. Both use interviews and a survey, then synthesize the data collected in order to draw conclusions. Both also discover that mixed-messages and lack of communication between professors and students, and professors within a discipline, create serious issues for students and undercut outcomes. So far, this article by Herrington is the most related to the study explained here, despite the fact that requirements specifically are not Herrington’s aim.

In “Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum” Lucille McCarthy’s study aims to find out how students adjust to different writing communities as they go from class to class in high school. In order to accomplish this, she conducts a longitudinal study of one student for two years. She follows this boy to class, does observations, interviews, out-loud composing protocols, and she analyzes the texts he produces. All of these methods are not only focused on the one participant; many other students and teachers are observed and interviewed as well. During his junior year, she culls and analyzes all the data and lands on a few conclusions. Her first conclusion is that the student does not make connections across classes concerning his writing assignments. He sees them as all different and all new. Next, she discovers that social factors affect the student’s outcome in certain classes. His interest, and the role of writing in those classes, serves to motivate and inspire the participant into better outcomes. The last conclusion she makes is the student consistently figures out how to uncover the expectations of each individual teacher. She gets very detailed here, but suffice it to say the student primarily uses tacit means to uncover these expectations.

McCathy's study has different aims and outcomes, but her conclusions are related and shed some light on this study. The fact that her student fails to make cross-class connections concerning writing shows the failure of the educational system to reinforce ideas like genre. As this study shows, if these genres could be codified, student outcomes would improve. Also, McCarthy shows that interest plays a large role in student outcomes; this study does the same. Finally, McCarthy shows how her student picks up implicit signals to figure out what the teacher wants, whereas this study shows that teachers need to do a better job communicating expectations to students.

*Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska is a very popular book among college professors, and the authors are social scientists who study the academic rigor of college courses in the United States. Here is an explanation of one of their germane studies: They ask students, "How many times during the prior semester they took a class where they 'wrote more than 20 pages over the course of the semester' and how many times they took a class where they 'read more than 40 pages per week'" (70-71). Their results are staggering, and not expected. About 50% of the students report that they never took a class that requires more than twenty pages of writing. Only one-third read more than forty pages per week. In the end, only 42% experience both these requirements in a single class over a single semester. The authors conclude that students cannot be expected to think critically and comprehensively if they are not required to read and write at a high level. Arum and Roska find that there is not a significant amount of reading and writing occurring at the college level, and their findings coincide with the results of this survey.

The last academic cited is John C. Bean and his book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. This is a guidebook for professors regarding how to construct writing assignments in an effective way that benefits the students and the time limitations of the class. He suggests saving time and focusing writing energy on multiple short assignments that align with disciplinary genres. That way, he submits, students will have consistent expectations across classes. The multiple-shorter-paper technique reinforces genres, and according to Bean, packs more student learning into smaller papers. Bean's suggestion reflects some of the responses received from the professors interviewed in this study. Multiple small papers seems to be the route teachers are taking, and this is seen in my interview responses and from an academic expert like Bean. Importantly, Bean also addresses one of the key concerns from this research: why is there a disconnect between teacher and students? He states, "Often an assignment that seems clear to the instructor can be confusing to students. Effective assignments clearly present the instructor's expectations for a successful performance" (97). This genre-based requirement model is a great way to ensure that students understand what is being required of them. However, this idea runs into snags when students have many different teachers, with many different ideas about what a specific genre requires. This uniformity is great as a thought, but as an implementable process, it seems out of reach.

These are just a few voices that mostly skirted around the issue of page requirements. This opening in the conversation provides an excellent opportunity for this study to ask the questions about page requirements directly. Perhaps the results from this analysis can be folded into the research about writing pedagogies to fine-tune the assignment-creating process even more.

## **Methodology**

The method for researching this topic follows the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, according to Kathy Charmaz in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory*, is “a rigorous method of conducting research in which researchers construct conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive theoretical analyses from data and subsequently checking their theoretical interpretations. Thus, researcher’s analytic categories are directly ‘grounded’ in the data” (343). The best way to understand this theory is that it uses different data sets than normal quantitative data (e.g. numbers), and instead focuses on analyzing qualitative data collected from interviews, case studies and other sources. In this study, three college professors were interviewed from three related but different academic disciplines. For full disclosure, I have been a student of all three professors. Two were male, one was female; two have PhDs, one has a Master’s. One is a history professor at PPCC, one a Professor of Literature at UCCS, and the other the Director of First Year Writing at UCCS who is also a Rhetoric teacher. The questions asked are contained in Appendix I. The answers were transcribed and coded on an incident by incident basis into 141 initial codes. After focused coding, 39 focused codes were analyzed axially into 6 categories: basics and expectations, short papers, long papers, feedback, the conversation, and theories. The significance of these axial coded will be discussed in the results. A full list of all 39 focused codes appears in Appendix II.

To augment the exclusively qualitative nature of grounded theory, college students were also interviewed, and the quantitative data from those results are used to compliment the qualitative data from the interviews. An online survey was distributed to college students via campus email and also posted on Facebook. A variety of questions asked participants to score answers on an always/never scale. A drop down answer tab to get specific ranges of numerical responses was also used. The last question was an open textbox asking respondents to add whatever they wanted to about the subject of page requirements. The responses were culled and the results are displayed below.

Lastly, the survey data was collected, interpreted, and synthesized with the codes from the interviews. In the discussion, the relevance and implications of this study will be placed in the context of the existing literature.

## **Results**

The interview axial codes landed in six distinct categories: basics and guidelines, short papers, long papers, feedback, the conversation, and theories. The basics and guidelines codes cover the institutional and personal expectations and requirements of the professors. There are institutional guidelines from state boards and universities, but none of the professors interviewed were concerned with them because they consistently overshoot the requirements for page length over the course of a semester. Professors stressed that their primary tool for instituting page requirements was their own experience and discretion. Different courses and subject matter inherently contain different writing requirements; another way of presenting this result is that different page requirements will be reflected in different content areas. The professors stressed that page length is not the proper metric to judge the quality of any given paper, and all three emphatically stated that content is more important than length.

Under the short papers category, the professors expressed their concerns and experiences regarding receiving papers that were shorter than the explicit page requirement. Professors try to not harbor any preconceived notions about the paper prior to reading, they all admitted to having initial concerns about short papers. Those concerns were directed at the content of the paper, a lack of idea or argument development, and student laziness or apathy. If corners are cut, content

is lacking, and the paper is short, two of the three professors stated they would grade that paper harshly. Under the axial code labeled long papers, professor has less concerns than with shorter papers. All three professors stated that longer papers are rarely submitted, but when they are, the professors do not generally have any initial concerns. Their experience shows that issues with long papers centers around a lack of cohesion and focus on the main point of the assignment. Digressions can be deleterious to the overall product, and students can lose quality with length if they are not armed with the proper writing skills. Scaffolding as a technique for managing longer writing was mentioned by all three professors.

The next category, feedback, refers to the actual writing a professor does on the paper prior to returning it to the student. When asked, professors shied away from terms like “fluff” and “filler” because they provide little valuable instruction to the student. Instead of these terms, the professors try to ask questions on the paper concerning the questionable content in hopes of engaging the student in critical thinking about the superfluous material. If the paper is short or long by a reasonable amount, the length is rarely commented on. Content is the focus of professor feedback, and all three professors stressed that students need to use the professor as a tool. That segues nicely into the fifth category: the conversation. The professors feel strongly that in order for their feedback to be fully understood, the students need to actively engage with the professors about their papers. Only one professor commits to explaining the reasons and expectations of every writing assignment every time. The others rely on the context of the class and the assignment to dictate the amount of explanation. All the professors stated that more leaning and growth occurs when students understand the reasons for the requirements, despite the fact that the professors admitted to falling short of this ideal. Most office-hour conversations between professors and students tend to focus on content expectations rather than organizational requirements.

The final category, theories, is an umbrella term for all other insights gleaned from the interviews that did not find a place in the prior five. The most consistent theory is that students learn more from multiple short papers than they do from fewer long papers. The reason the professors provided was the same: practice makes better. All the professors contend if the writing process itself, particularly invention, is repeated and improved, other concerns like length will be improved as well. A solid process will lead to a solid paper. Concerning requirements specifically, the professors admitted that they are a useful tool that teaches students about life in general, not only writing. They contend that requirements are a fact of life, and students must learn to cope with limitations and expectations. The professors also stress scaffolding as an essential tool if students are expected to write longer papers. Drafting and writing micro-themes were suggested as ways of increasing student confidence, and thus increasing the page output. They also believe that a proper level of engagement with the material will naturally lead to a student’s ability to meet the page requirements. All three, decidedly, admitted that a significant amount of student understanding is lost through miscommunication and unclear expectations.

In short summary, professors have a good deal of discretion regarding paper requirements, but they do understand that frequent shorter papers teach students more than longer papers. Professors are more concerned with the content and the quality of the content than the length of paper, but they recognize that requirements serve a practical purpose. Professors feel that the content should drive the length of the paper, but students will only be able to engage content if they have a solid process. Most importantly, professors know that a conversation needs to be had about page requirements to ensure that students understand why they are the way they are.

The survey results were mixed and difficult to interpret. The results to the questions are displayed below in Table 1.

| Question   | Response |
|--|----------|
| Number of participants                                   | 45       |
| % female   | 77.78%   |
| % male   | 22.22%   |
| Number of majors   | 23       |
| % English majors   | 51.1%    |
| % seniors or graduates                                   | 62.22%   |
| % always met page requirements                           | 73.3%    |
| % page requirements are easy to meet                     | 60%      |
| % never think about page requirements                    | 4.44%    |
| % professors explain reasons for requirements            | 13.68%   |
| % agree/strongly agree requirements are arbitrary        | 51.11%   |
| % agree/strongly agree page requirements reflect content | 84.44%   |
| % understand why professors use page requirements        | 71.11%   |
| % had page length negatively affect paper                | 13.33%   |
| % average paper was 5-8 pages long                       | 46.67%   |
| % average paper 2-5 pages long                           | 26.67%   |
| % written a paper longer than 22 pages                   | 17.78%   |
| % written a paper longer than 15 pages                   | 53.33%   |

*Table 1. Survey Results*

The results show that most respondents were female English majors who were seniors or had already graduated. Most always meet the page requirements, and two-thirds submit that that is an easy task. A vast majority of students admitted that they think about the page requirements while writing. A small number of students stated that their professors ever explain the reasons for the requirements, and most students believe the requirements are arbitrary. However, a majority also stated that they understand why professors use the requirements that they do. The students overwhelmingly agreed that the length of a paper should reflect the content of a paper, and very few had ever had a paper negatively affected by its length. For most students, a long paper is above eight pages, and less than half of the students had ever written a paper longer than fifteen pages.

## Discussion

This study makes clear that a disconnect exists between students and teachers regarding page requirements. A combination of the interview data, survey data, and the academic literature leads me to a number of interesting observations and conclusions. Professors know that students need to know why the requirements are the way they are in order to maximize student performance, but that communication is not often occurring. Students do get hung up on the requirements, and professors know it. To help combat this, the focus should be on the writing process, not the number of pages. This means that impactful instruction needs to occur during the invention stage of the writing process (Ackerman). This focus on invention can solve other problems like the tendency of students to write enough pages, but with content that is underdeveloped. The fundamentals of writing are critical to success, but they appear to be lacking in the student population (Arum and Roska).

Another discovery made is that for most students a long paper is less than eight pages. In order to get students comfortable with writing longer papers, professors should employ scaffolding. In the population studied, scaffolding is most likely not familiar to students in purpose or practice. Scaffolding is essential to teaching process, and that process leads to confidence in writing. This is why this research, and that of other academics show that students learn more for multiple shorter papers (Bean). As Greene's research shows, different writing exercises can reinforce the same pedagogical aims. Consistency across disciplines and within schools would also help student writing (Bean), but implementing that kind of reform seems unrealistic. But there is no getting around the finding that most students claim to know the reasons for the page requirement, and at the same time, a majority think that they are arbitrary. This cognitive dissonance must be adding to student and professor confusion about the efficacy of page requirements. The best solution, based on the research conducted here, is for professors to communicate the reasons for the requirements to their students, to focus on the invention process, and to use scaffolding as a tool to help students write longer papers. As Herington and McCarthy's research showed, the slight differences in writing aims, genre conventions, and teacher expectations can really confuse students and obfuscate the writing process.

There are little tangible implications of this study, save for professors and students reading it and getting inspired to promote change. As a researcher, it is important to recognize and list the limitations of this study. The sample size I utilized for both the interviews and the survey were extremely small and limited. The populations were homogenous across discipline, sex, and specialty. The lack of academic writing on this subject further adds to the limitations of my findings. More research should be done to see if my results are an outlier or a bellwether for student and professor opinions on this issue. The scope is too small to make any bold predictions beyond what I outlined in the previous paragraph. However, I personally believe that the confidence students gain when they practice a consistent writing process is paramount to their continued growth and academic success. That confidence can also be instilled by professors. If classes focus on the basics, and have open environment where students feel comfortable discussing their writing with their professors, success is much more likely—regardless of the page requirements.

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### **Appendix I**

1. Do you have any institutional requirements concerning page limits for undergraduates in your department?
2. Before you read a paper, you realize it's short. What is your primary concern?
3. Before you read a paper, you realize it's long. What is your primary concern?
4. Is content more important to you than length?
5. If a paper is great content wise, but is more than a page short, how would you grade that paper?
6. If a paper is great content wise, but is more than a page over, how would you grade that paper?
7. If a paper meets the length requirement, but lacks content, how do you approach this problem?
8. Which of these above scenarios do you encounter most frequently?
9. There is pedagogical research that suggests that multiple small papers teach students more than fewer larger papers. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
10. Do you explain to your students the reasons for your page requirements? Why or why not?

### **Appendix II**

#### **BASICS AND EXPECTATIONS**

Guidelines exist, but are loose, not ample, and easily surpassed.

Using discretion.

Different courses require different # of papers, and # number of pages.

12-15 pages of writing for long paper; 20 pages per semester.

Different types of papers serve different writing aims and skills.

Different length equals different content.

Length / grade are not the right measure of growth and goals.

Length is a reflection of content expectations.

Content is more important than length.

Page requirements can affect student writing (students get hung up)

#### **SHORT PAPERS**

No preconceived notions prior to reading.

Could be lacking content if short; corners could be cut.

Arguments could be expanded or made more cogent.

Paper not edited well; arguments not well developed.

If lacking content, short papers will be graded more harshly.

### LONG PAPERS

Rarely happen.

No real concerns about long papers.

Students can lose quality with length.

If content does not serve the purpose of the paper, length can be a liability.

Scaffolding makes writing longer papers manageable.

### FEEDBACK

Comments like “filler” and “fluff” are not helpful

Length is rarely commented on; focus on content and organization.

Deciding when to be concise and when to expand.

Use the professor as a tool.

### THE CONVERSATION

The reasons / expectations for requirements need to be explained by professors.

Explanations are only needed if the assignment warrants it.

Ensuring students understand the reasons for length.

Helping struggling students with basic skills.

### THEORIES

Students learn more from multiple short papers.

Solid process and fundamentals are created through practice.

Solid processes will lead to no problem with page requirements.

Professors learn over time how long requirements should be based student products.

Requirements are a fact of life and prepare students for real life.

Scaffolding is essential for teaching advanced writing.

Page requirements teach students how to operate within a set of rules.

Losing understanding though miscommunication.

Using page minimums as a starting point.

Engaging properly in the material will lead to appropriate length.