



UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON | BOTHELL

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COMPUTER SCIENCE & SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

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# Master's Writing Skills Assessment

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STUDENT GUIDE

VERSION 9/2015

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## **INTRODUCTION TO MASTER’S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT**

The UWB CSS Master’s degree has a writing emphasis that requires students to demonstrate scientific writing at a University advanced level. In addition, one of the outcomes of the Master’s program is that students have the ability to communicate to varied audiences with ease.

However, current admissions tools do not provide an assessment of a student’s advanced writing capability. Thus, the UWB CSS division created a Master’s Writing Skills Assessment to perform this step.

## **WHAT TYPE OF WRITING IS EXPECTED OF A MASTER’S STUDENT?**

Each of the foundational courses have their own writing requirements, including exams, scientific papers, proposals, wiki pages, reports, design documents, and more. Additional communications is required for the major Master’s Project or Master’s Thesis, including status reports, proposal plan, final project paper or thesis, defense presentation, and abstract (see Table 1).

## **WHO TAKES THE MASTER’S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT?**

The Master’s Writing Skills Assessment is a timed writing exam, given to all Master’s students who have been admitted into one of the UWB CSS Master’s programs to assess their writing skill level. Every admitted Master’s student will be contacted after admission regarding taking the writing assessment.

The outcome of the assessment identifies if the student is required to take additional Master’s level skills courses to assist the student with the writing expectations of the master’s courses. See “What do the results of the Master’s Writing Skills Assessment mean?”

## **WHEN DO STUDENTS TAKE THE MASTER’S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT?**

Students take the Master’s Writing Skills Assessment during their first quarter enrolled in their Master’s program. This gives them ample time to arrive on campus; get settled with housing, etc.; prepare for it, should they desire to; and then take time out of their schedule to take the exam.

## **WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE MASTER'S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT?**

The Master's Writing Skills Assessment is taken at a computer connected to the Internet. The student logs into a Canvas course used for the assessment using the student's NetID. The quiz is timed, one attempt only.

Students are recommended to avoid using other resources while taking the skills assessment because that would jeopardize their ability to complete the assessment in the prescribed time period. Additionally, if the questions cannot be answered quickly and with assurance, that is a signal that the student would benefit from the 509/510 sequence.

All questions ask for well-structured, multiple-paragraph answers. Students need to respond in complete, grammatical sentences. These developed responses mimic the Master's writing emphasis.

## **WHAT DO THE RESULTS OF THE MASTER'S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT MEAN?**

Scores indicate whether the student is required to take additional Master's skills courses.

Students will be notified in time to enroll in the courses for the following quarter.

The two-course sequence is CSS SKL 509 (2 credits) and CSS SKL 510 (1 credit). Each course is designed to help the student at a different stage of the writing requirements of the Master's program.

Table 1 lists the communications requirements of the final project or thesis.

### **CSS SKL 509**

Students take this course at the beginning of their curriculum to help them with the writing requirements of the foundational courses.

**Course Description:** Focuses on critical technical writing skills including formulating arguments and technical use and portrayal of data in reports and oral presentations.

### **CSS SKL 510**

Students take this course when they are ready to write their Master's project paper or Master's thesis paper. The skills course is designed to help students break this large writing task into small pieces to help students focus their writing efforts and complete the writing in a timely fashion. It helps students in many ways, including avoiding writing blocks, becoming overwhelmed, preparing for their verbal defense, and prioritizing other activities that pile up at the end of the program.

**Course Description:** Explores how to locate, analyze, and synthesize professional literature on a topic and how to assemble the resources necessary to write a review of that literature. Focuses on organization of information, writing critique process and presentation skills for verbal defense.

Table 1: Master’s Project or Thesis Communications Requirements

<b>When</b>	<b>Master’s Project</b>		<b>Master’s Thesis</b>	
<b>Throughout project</b>	<b>Status Report</b>	Written summary of progress.  Completed at the end of each interval (as specified by your faculty advisor)	<b>Status Report</b>	Written summary of progress.  Completed at the end of each interval (as specified by your faculty advisor)
	<b>Project Proposal with a Project Plan</b>	Written proposal for Master’s project including the Project Plan.  Completed when establishing committee and enrolling in CSS 597.  Note: You may be asked to revise your Project Plan as your design changes.	<b>Thesis Proposal</b>	Written proposal for Master’s Thesis including a Thesis Plan.  Completed when establishing committee and enrolling in CSS 600.  Note: You may be asked to revise your Thesis Plan as changes occur.
<b>For Defense</b>	<b>Project Paper</b>	Written demonstration of Master’s project.	<b>Thesis</b>	Written demonstration of scholarly work
	<b>Capstone Presentation</b>	30-45-min oral narration with slides	<b>Thesis Presentation</b>	45-min oral narration with slides
<b>Showcase after completion</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	1-pg Project Overview, suitable for CSS website showcase	<b>Abstract</b>	1-pg Thesis Overview, suitable for CSS website showcase

### WHAT ARE STUDENTS SAYING ABOUT THE WRITING SKILLS COURSES?

Look at what students are saying about these writing skills courses:

“CSS509 and CSS510 taught me how to research and write a research paper systemically from start to end without having to rush through the writing process at the last minute. It is

invaluable not only for the Master's program, but also for life when one is working on a big writing project."

--Bohao Shea

MS CSS June 2015

*WHAT2PRINT: an IMAGE EVALUATION SYSTEM*

(Project Report)

"Despite having spent three years doing research and research writing, I found that CSS SKL 509 helped me to be more productive. You will learn methods for organizing ideas from related literature, in a way that may otherwise be ad-hoc. Even for those that have experience writing prose, or technical documents, like manuals and proposals, the course helps bridge the gap between these related writing styles and scientific writing."

--Del Davis

"The courses improved my academic writing and presentation skills, which are crucial to get my research ideas across. They also helped me keep on track with my project planning"

--Hung Ho

*Asynchronous and Automatic Agent Migration in MASS*

Advisor: Munehiro Fukuda

### **CAN STUDENTS TAKE THE MASTERS SKILLS COURSES EVEN WITH AN ACCEPTABLE MASTER'S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT SCORE?**

Because the specific forms and conventions scientific technical writing may be unfamiliar and even mysterious, most students, regardless of their general writing skills, will benefit from taking the 509/510 sequence.

### **IS THE STUDENT'S SCORE THE ONLY DETERMINING FACTOR TO TAKING THE MASTERS SKILLS COURSES?**

In some cases, regardless of scores, students may be asked to take this course sequence at the request of their faculty advisor.

## **WHAT SCORE IS CONSIDERED SATISFACTORY?**

Students who score greater than 70% are not required to enroll in the Masters Skills course sequence.

## **IS IT POSSIBLE FOR STUDENTS TO PREPARE BEFORE TAKING THE MASTER'S WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT?**

Students are welcome to prepare for the Master's Skills Assessment before they take it.

### **Skills Assessed**

The Master's Writing Skills Assessment is designed to assess the student's capabilities in a range of skills relevant to the best practices of scientific writing, including the following:

#### *Organizational Patterns*

- Explain a process stages and steps, and how and why they are used
- Explain the scientific research process through library databases
- Write an introduction and a conclusion
- Write an abstract or summary

#### *Research Methodology*

- Identify and explain proper citation methods
- Articulate the differences between the purposes of the various sections of a scholarly research paper
- Explain the research process

#### *Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis*

- Verbally interpret a quantitative graphic and assess its effectiveness in terms of scientific technical writing best practices
- Explain or create a table for a scientific document

#### *Writing Style and English Conventions*

- Write effective, coherent paragraphs
- Show an awareness of different audiences' needs and expectations
- Write complete, grammatical sentences
- Write in a formal tone
- Demonstrate an understanding of the principles for formatting documents for readability, cohesion, and reader interest
- Write free from gender bias or sexist language, and inclusive of all cultures

## **Resources**

The following resources can provide helpful information for students interested in preparing in advance of the taking the Master's Writing Skills Assessment.

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams. The Craft of Research. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. ©2008 The University of Chicago Press.

Hacker, Diana, and Nancy Sommers. Rules for Writers. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. ©2012 Bedford/St. Martin's Press.

Sorby, Sheryl A., and Bulleit, William M. An Engineer's Guide to Technical Communication © 2005 Longman (Especially Chapter 9 "Visual Communication")

Swift, Kate, and Casey Miller. The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For writers, editors and speakers. © 2001

Tufte, Edward. The Visual Display of Quantitative Information 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. © 2001. Graphic Press.

Williams, Robin. The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice (any edition.) Peach Pit Press.