

# Case Study

First Year Writing  
at the University of  
Mississippi



THE UNIVERSITY of  
**MISSISSIPPI**



# Contents

<b>About the Supporting Organizations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Teambuilding</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Project Contacts</b>	<b>5</b>

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# About the Supporting Organizations



**Every Learner Everywhere** is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institution practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit [www.everylearnereverywhere.org](http://www.everylearnereverywhere.org).



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# First Year Writing at the University of Mississippi

Flexibility for faculty in a multi-section course

## Background

The University of Mississippi (UM) is an R1 public research university located in Oxford, MS and with five regional campuses across northern Mississippi. The undergraduate population is 17,500 students, of which 24% identify as minority and 19% are first generation college students.

## Teambuilding: Flexibility for faculty in a multi-section course

Not all implementations of adaptive courseware have the goal of increasing student success. With pass rates above 90%, the first year writing course at UM was less concerned with student performance and more concerned with providing faculty with a tool that would help them review basic writing skills with students who needed additional instruction and practice. With 2,500 student enrollments across over 100 sections of Writing 101, there is a lot of variability in student preparedness for success in the course.

Multisection pilots can present challenges for evaluation and improvement if clear expectations for use of the courseware are not established during pilot design. This was the case at UM. In UM's First Year Writing I pilot, the Course Leads gave the 20 participating instructors flexibility in how to use the adaptive courseware modules. They also gave them flexibility to determine how much the courseware performance would contribute to their students' final grades.

Consequently, the course instructors' instructional approaches and grading expectations varied widely. Some instructors fully integrated all eight learning modules into homework practice and in-class activities, while other instructors encouraged students to use the modules on their own to practice course concepts. In terms of grading, the Course Leads suggested that the courseware account for 10–20% of the final grade. While instructors stayed within that range, one quarter counted the courseware as 10% of the final grade, half of the instructors set it at 15%, and the remaining quarter set it at 20%.

While giving instructors flexibility to use courseware in their sections in different ways may have invested them in the implementation process, it came at the cost of pilot consistency and evaluation. The variations in use and grading made comparison of pilot course outcomes against control group outcomes very difficult. Despite the difficulty this presented for assessment, the Course Leads decided to continue to allow instructor flexibility in how the modules were used rather than changing practices for the sake of gaining comparative data. However, this experience has informed the design of other pilots at UM. The Course Lead and Project Lead now consider the degree to which the use of courseware should be consistent across sections when designing a pilot and training instructors.

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In addition to the adaptive courseware modules, writing instructors support each other through a departmental teaching hub which includes resources for teaching first year writing as well as a forum for instructors to share ideas and collaborate on projects. While implementation of adaptive courseware has not led to statistically significant gains or losses in student final grades in the First Year Writing I course, it has bought back instruction time in the classroom and given students a just-in-time resource to learn and practice writing skills.

If you want to learn more about the First Year Writing program at UM, please visit [Addressing College Readiness Gaps in First-Year Composition](#).

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