

# **Incorporating Black Life, History, and Culture (BLHAC) in English Composition 101 at an HBCU**

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“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.”

—Marcus Garvey

## **Course Description**

English Composition 101 at Morehouse College is the first course of a two-semester, freshman-level sequence designed to help African American college-aged men gain more control over the writing process and improve at their own pace. Writing and analytical skills are enhanced through extensive work in expository, argumentative, and documented essays. Activities allow the exploration of various perspectives in different disciplines, emphasizing works by African American authors and scholars included in the department’s edited textbook. A grade of C or above is required in each course to complete this sequence and satisfy the General Education Core Curriculum requirement in Composition. English 101 is a prerequisite for English 102. Both courses provide opportunities for students to improve and integrate their critical reading and writing skills. The English 101 course considers outcomes in three contexts: for General Education, as English Composition 101 outcomes, and as student learning outcomes: (1) The General Education student learning outcomes align with the course/major/program and assessment plan for each learning outcome. (2) English 101 learning outcomes are course-level specific. (3) The student learning outcomes are expected mastery of the course’s objectives (see course syllabus).

During the Fall semesters, twenty-eight to thirty sections of English 101 are offered, and six to eight are offered during the Spring semesters. This course has an enrollment cap of 18-20 students and is taught by full-time faculty and adjuncts with experience teaching basic writing. It also has writing interns assigned to the course to provide additional workshops, office hours, and one-on-one peer writing consultations for the students.

## **Course Rationale**

The College’s strategic plan targeted areas that require intervention, including strengthening the academic program, especially writing. One of the objectives was to overhaul the General Education program and the First Year Writing

ing Program to make them current and responsive to the re-accreditation process and selected writing as the College's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Morehouse's First Year Writing Program had not been evaluated and revised for several decades. As a result, I was appointed to chair the English Department's Composition Committee to assess and revise the writing courses syllabi. During the Fall 2018 semester, we engaged in developing new English 101, 102, and 103-course syllabi content, goals, objectives, and learning outcomes that underscored the College's mission focusing on writing to improve student success. The English Department adapted this template syllabus for all English 101 courses.

This course design resulted from discussions and research centering on teaching African American history and cultural competence to African American college-aged men. Using materials that integrate our students' cultural backgrounds into the classroom and curriculum promotes academic achievement. This course was designed to incorporate Black Life, History, and Culture (BLHAC) and provide opportunities for the Men of Morehouse to improve and apply their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills to connect their learning across courses and within disciplines to (1) teach Men of Morehouse to transfer reading into writing; (2) prepare Men of Morehouse to read critically and write in class and beyond; (3) teach Men of Morehouse to analyze the history and culture of Africa and the African Diaspora through multiple disciplines, and critical perspectives; (4) develop an understanding of the diverse experiences, patterns, philosophies, theories, and ways of knowing that pertain to Africa and the African Diaspora; (5) integrate ideas, knowledge, and practice within the context of Black Life, History, and Culture into the course; and (6) require writing assignments that pertain to BLHAC. In support of this concept, English department faculty completed a Morehouse customized edition of a rhetoric and composition textbook to incorporate readings by African American scholars, authors, and visual images of the Morehouse College campus and students.

### **Institutional Context**

Morehouse is the only Historically Black College and University (HBCU) for men. A Morehouse education begins, in part, with writing. The first writing task for all students entering Morehouse is an assignment that requires them to write an essay that responds to an academic topic. This practice reflects the college's longstanding commitment to improving the writing abilities of Black men. In the twenty-first century, this need is more evident than ever before. No matter what field the student chooses, he will use/need writing to think, analyze, investigate, and create during his time at Morehouse. Furthermore, no matter what path or career he chooses after graduation, he will use

writing for those purposes and others: to propose, investigate, analyze, and represent himself and his work. Mastery of oral and written communication has facilitated the success of Morehouse Men over time—many of whom have distinguished themselves as great leaders, in considerable measure, because they have also been great communicators.

Black Life, History, and Culture (BLHAC) is an integrative learning experience grounded in understanding Africa and its Diaspora. One of the college's missions is to “teach the history and culture of Black people.” Students' experience in writing at Morehouse will be distinctive in its deliberate use of texts, examples, perspectives, experiences, and principles by and from Black people from all over the world and across time, working across themes of social justice, equity, and servant leadership within the humanities, sciences, and business. In addition, Black Life, History, and Culture connects the development of the writing skills of Men of Morehouse to the exploration of topics related to BLHAC, a process that the English department's writing faculty believe will increase students' engagement and ultimately improve their writing proficiency.

Since 2018, all first-time freshmen and transfer students at Morehouse College have taken a writing pre-test examination. Based on their test results, students take either the two-semester sequence English 101 and English 102 or one semester of English 103. Students are required to take courses as indicated by the results of their placement examination. Students must earn grades of “C” or better in all developmental courses. In addition, Men of Morehouse must be able to: (1) analyze and understand African American history and culture to analyze and understand present reality; (2) apply their knowledge of African American history and culture to their reality; and (3) understand their roles in the continuum of history.

## **Theoretical Rationale**

### *Integrating Reading and Writing*

As early as the 1980s, researchers such as Sandra Stotsky found that “better writers tend to be better readers,” that “better writers tend to read more than poorer writers,” and that “better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers” (16). Education and composition research suggests that reading and writing are connected and should be integrated. Also, Robert Tierney and Margie Leys concluded that:

the study of reading-writing connections involves appreciating how reading and writing work together as tools for information storage and retrieval, discovery and logical thought, communication, and self-indulgence. There are numerous benefits that can be accrued from connecting reading and writing. Thus far, for example, the re-

search data have substantiated that (1) depending upon the measures employed to assess overall reading and writing achievement and attitude, the general correlation between reading and writing is moderate and fluctuates by age, instructional history, and other factors; (2) selected reading experiences definitely contributed to writing performance, just as selected writing experiences contribute to reading performance; (3) writers acquire certain values and behaviors from reading, while readers acquire certain values and behaviors from writing; and (4) successful writers integrate reading into their writing experience, and successful readers integrate writing into their reading experience. (Abstract)

Anthony Petrosky similarly noted that writing can also contribute to the development of reading and that “the only way to demonstrate comprehension is through extended discourse where readers become writers who articulate their understandings of and connections to the text in their responses” (24).

Teresa Redd conducted a study that examined whether the adoption of an African- American centered textbook motivated freshman composition students to read, write, and think. Results indicated that:

Black writers made 80% of the students feel more positive about writing; (2) 94% of the students said they had enjoyed reading about the issues discussed in the textbook; (3) 64% of the students indicated that they had enjoyed writing about the issues in the textbook; and (4) approximately 89% of the students agreed that reading the textbook had made them think more carefully about the Black Experience. She reported three factors that play an important role in [African centered] theory: (1) many students were motivated to read the textbook because they could “relate to” essays about the Black Experience; (3) students wanted to read the book because of what they were discovering about Black people; and (3) the Black role models in the textbook proved to be a source of inspiration. (Abstract)

In the context of Morehouse’s writing program and institutional mission, then, it was critical that reading and writing be integrated to reflect the experiences and motivations of our students.

### *Pedagogy Rationale*

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, also known as culturally relevant teaching, is an instructional tool used to acknowledge students’ cultural experiences, knowledge, and skills in the classroom. Culturally responsive (or relevant) teaching has been described as “a pedagogy that empowers students intel-

lectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billing 382). These cultural referents should be included in the writing curriculum at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and especially at HBCUs.

I agree with Thomas Fox that teaching texts by African American authors and scholars teaches “positions” (political relationships between the literary critic and culture, history, and institutions). These “positions present intersections between race and history, race and institutions, race and gender, and others that help writing teachers and their students map cultural and historical positions . . . as a means of exploring the relationship between self, race, language, and education” (292). In addition, Latrise Johnson and Hannah Sullivan note that “the pedagogical approaches used to center students’ lives and the contributions of Black people created a classroom environment that reflected a sense of freedom and intellectual engagement that was evident in students’ writing” (431).

### *Culturally Relevant Materials*

Incorporating African American cultural readings into the writing curriculum provides students with content knowledge that facilitates critical reading and thinking skills and enhances analytical writing in each discipline and each mode of discourse. Texts by and about African Americans connect students with realistic and relevant writing. Culturally relevant materials are incorporated into the course to promote academic achievement. Therefore, culturally relevant readings are used as topics for writing in various rhetorical modes, and culturally relevant readings provide Black students with knowledge about African American history and culture. Students read:

- “The Mis-Education of the Negro”—Carter G. Woodson
- “The New Negro”—Alain Locke
- “For My People”—Margaret Walker
- “I Am a Black Man”—George Tait
- “If We Must Die”—Claude-McKay
- “Should ‘Black Lives Matter’ Fight for All Lives?—Talla Klein Perez
- “The Lynching of Jube Benson”—Paul Laurence Dunbar
- “Why We Need Reparations for Black Americans”—Rashawn Ray and Andre M. Perry
- “Characteristics of Negro Expression”—Zora Neale Hurston
- “The Black Panthers Ten Point Plan”—Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale
- “Black Lives Matter Six Points”—Black Lives Matter Coalition
- “How It Feels to be Colored Me”—Zora Neal Hurston

- “The Time for Freedom Has Come”—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Defining Difference”—Audre Lorde
- “The Coming of Negroes to America”—Benjamin Brawley
- “The Black Arts Movement.”—Larry Neal

In addition, the Composition Committee developed culture-referenced writing prompts to elicit writing samples for the pre- and post-tests administered in each course (see Appendix A). Culture-referenced prompts encourage African American writers to include more culture-based knowledge of self and community. Black life, history, and culture prompts aligned with the course’s readings.

### *Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy Rationale*

Culturally relevant readings facilitate critical thinking and elicit better quality essays (i.e., fluency, coherence, content, organization). So, in English 101, culturally specific, critical writing tasks elicit an understanding of selected culturally relevant readings. Thomas Fox recognizes this connection in suggesting that writing teachers who understand the urgent need to reconceive writing pedagogy look to African American literacy theory for writing strategies for African American students. These strategies see African American literacy in social, economic, and historical contexts free from the residue of deficit theories of language that still govern the reading of African American student writing (292). Gloria Ladson-Billings suggests that culturally relevant teaching requires recognizing African American culture as an essential strength to construct the education of African American children. Culturally relevant teaching, then, is a pedagogy of opposition that recognizes and celebrates African and African American culture (314). Culturally responsive teaching elicits substantial and intellectual reactions from students because it creates and enhances student-centered critical thinking.

### **Critical Reflection**

Incorporating African American cultural readings into Morehouse’s writing courses and the General Education curriculum provides students content knowledge that promotes critical reading and critical thinking skills. The English 101 course teaches analytical writing and specific types of writing required in each discipline. At Morehouse College, we use culturally relevant materials and pedagogy (1) to teach students to improve their writing; (2) to instruct students to understand connections between reading and writing; and (3) to prepare students to read critically and write proficiently in class and beyond.

Writing assignments aligned toward cultural heritage and cultural identity may develop positive self-esteem and self-image through cues embedded in the text of the topics that can affect the writing performance of African American students. Reading and writing assignments that integrate Black life, history, and culture to teach the writing process enhance and develop African American men's writing. Redd writes that "there is some evidence that having students read and write about African American texts develops more positive attitudes toward writing" (9).

The Composition Committee is evaluating and revising the syllabi of the English Composition courses as a set to design the writing courses around themes or projects. The revised syllabi will engage students with activities and options to address Black life, history, culture, social justice, LGBTQ, technology, digital history/humanities, and ethnography to teach writing to African American men. In addition, the syllabi will incorporate multimodal composition emphasizing cross-disciplinary writing, critical thinking, anti-racist discourse, and critical and digital literacies.

## **Final Reflection**

### *Support Components*

The Writing Center Tutorial Services: The Writing Center offered many resources to help students not only complete the writing requirement but also continue to improve as writers throughout their undergraduate careers to become lifelong competent writers:

(a) Writing Center Virtual/Online Student Workshops: The Writing Center provided writing workshops—online virtual—tailored to English 101, 102, and 103 writing assignments and the specific needs of students. Topics included writing an extended essay, literature reviews, using evidence, building complex arguments, or integrating data into a text. In addition, research workshops for students on topics such as: (1) generating a research question; (2) developing a thesis; (3) introduction to documentation and style conventions of a particular field; and (4) effectively managing sources to support an argument.

(b) Tutoring: Trained writing consultants/tutors supplemented students' course learning by guiding them through the writing process and helping them develop the thesis statement, construct sentences, write well-developed and coherent paragraphs, and organize an essay. The Writing Center provided support to students from all disciplines.

(c) The Hugh Closter Writing Program Essay Awards: Students enrolled in English 101, 102, and 103 (First Year Writing) are eligible for prizes for outstanding essays in those courses. Nominations come from the faculty. Each course will be awarded a first, second, and third prize. Criteria for judging include an articulated thesis; cogent development with well-chosen specific details; precise, thoughtful analysis; logical organization; and polished style. This competition will reinforce the college's commitment to the importance of writing.

(d) Tips for Writing: The Writing Center created and distributed weekly one-page culturally referenced "writing tips" with topics: brainstorming, the eight parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentence types, thesis sentence, introduction paragraph, body paragraphs, use of the comma and semicolon, creating ideas, revising, and the purpose and characteristics of the various rhetorical modes.

(e) Composition Resource Center: Another ongoing project is the continued development of the Composition Resource Center (CRC). A vast array of resources has been uploaded to the CRC for English faculty members to use in their composition courses. PowerPoint lectures on the writing modes, writing assignments, grammar quiz pools, and tests are available in the CRC in our Blackboard LMS.

We surveyed our students' perceptions of their writing abilities. Sixty-five percent reported that their writing was good, eighteen percent reported average, ten percent reported excellent, and seven percent reported poor and below. We also surveyed our faculty's perception of the writing proficiency of students. They reported that sixty percent of freshmen did not write well and twenty-five percent slightly well. For seniors, ten percent did not write well, twenty-five percent slightly well, ten percent very well, and six percent exceptionally well.

In developing teaching strategies to improve African American men writing abilities, we considered the following: (1) teach them what is writing and what is the writing process; (2) assess the proficient level of African American men writing to improve their writing skills; (3) become familiar with their life experiences, current life circumstance, career goals and objectives, and their overall feeling about who they are; (4) have them complete a self-assessment survey of their perception of their writing; (5) assure them that they can write and that they alone can improve and enhance their writing skills through rewrites of their written assignments; (6) make sure they master the elements of Standard American English (SAE) grammar, punctuation, and syntax; (7) make sure they know the purpose of the thesis sentence, support sentences, and transitional sentences; (8) make sure they know the purpose, content, and

structure of the introduction paragraph; (9) make sure they know what is an essay, its purpose, content, and structure; and (10) make sure they know the characteristics of the different rhetorical modes and types of writing.

Our faculty believes that we have dramatically improved student writing by better preparing teachers with writing workshops, students scheduling appointments with the Writing Center, culturally relevant course materials, writing assignments, and topics. For example, many faculty members require students to schedule an appointment with the Writing Center before they submit their papers. In addition, Writing Center tutors supplement students' course learning. Faculty and students are provided with a detailed summary of each tutoring session.

Teaching fundamental writing processes and skills using culturally relevant prompts and materials may improve the writing performance of Black men, including their critical thinking skills. Research is needed on practical ways for teaching writing to African American men in college. To date, we have no comprehensive study of the effect of an approach like Black Life, History, and Culture on Black men's collegiate writing skills. Quantitative and qualitative research on the writing produced by African American students in various discourse modes and proficiency levels should be conducted using culturally relevant assessment models.

### *Looking Forward: Faculty Research, Writing in the Disciplines, and Quality Enhancement*

Morehouse College aims to become a center for conducting research on Black men's writing and writing pedagogy, particularly on incorporating culturally relevant resources in the writing process. Faculty in all disciplines are actively working to produce the following scholarly articles:

- "Some Preliminary Results of Culturally-Referenced Prompts";
- "Teaching Writing to African American Men";
- "Some Discourses Features of African American Men";
- "Integrating Culturally Relevant Materials: Writing in Disciplines";
- "Use of Daily Journal Entries to Improve African American Men's Writing"; and,
- "African American Men Personal Narratives."

For Men of Morehouse to become better writers, and learn how to employ writing as a learning tool, we incorporated Black Life, History, and Culture writings into a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) program. The program supports Morehouse faculty in all aspects of their work with student writing, from consulting on assignment design or developing a new course to offering workshops on giving feedback and grading. To demystify the WID approach,

the program developed a draft of guidelines for writing in the discipline for twenty-eight academic majors at Morehouse College. These guidelines are specific to each discipline and provide culturally relevant information and recommendations for how Black Life, History, and Culture can be incorporated. These guidelines define WID, state the benefits of WID, provide specific writing characteristics found in a particular discipline, and suggest writing assignments that qualify a course as a Black Life, History, and Culture writing course.

Finally, Morehouse's Quality Enhancement Plan (known as a QEP), The Black Ink Project, provides Morehouse students with opportunities to immerse themselves in the writing process at every stage of their educational experience at the College—from English Composition 101 and 102, First-Year Experience, the General Education Curriculum, BLHAC, and two significant culminating junior and senior-level WID writing assignments. The Black Ink Project connects the writing skills development of the Men of Morehouse to their exploration of topics related to Black Life, History, and Culture (BLHAC), a process that we believe increases their engagement and ultimately improves their writing proficiency. The essence of The Black Ink Project is to provide an overarching structure for student writing experiences at the College that ensures continuity and complementarity among the units, courses, and programs focusing on writing. Through the program, writing is incorporated throughout the curriculum of all majors and programs at Morehouse. The first step toward all of this is an English 101 curriculum that integrates reading and writing with a culturally relevant approach to Black life, history, and culture.

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## Appendix A

### *Pre- and Post-test Topics—Fall 2018/2019 and Spring 2019/2020*

1A “No person is your friend who demands your silence or denies your right to know.”

—Alice Walker

2A “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

—James Baldwin

3A “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”

—Malcolm X

1B “When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions.”

—Carter G. Woodson

2B “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

3B “The color of the skin is in no ways connected with strength of the mind or intellectual powers.”

—Benjamin Banneker

1C “Say it loud. I’m Black and I’m proud.”

—James Brown

2C “Oppression makes a wise man mad.”

—Frederick Douglass

3C “There is no future for a people who deny their past.”

—Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.

1D “Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization and the advancement and glory of their own race.”

—Marcus Garvey

2D “For colored people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.”

—David Walker

3D “One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

—W. E. B. Du Bois

1E “What you do for yourself depends on what you think of yourself. And what you think of yourself depends on what you know of yourself. And what you know of yourself depends on what you have been told.”

—Ghanaian proverb

2E “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”

—Ralph Ellison

3E “The first thing to do is to get into every school, private, public or otherwise, Negro literature and history [art, music, dance, anthropology, religion, political science, economics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, science and technology, film]. We aren’t trying to displace other literature but trying to acquaint all children with Negro literature and history.”

—Booker T. Washington

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