**The Writing Center:**

**“Unsatisfactory” (“U”) Notation in Writing**

**What is the “U” notation in writing?**

Any instructor who finds that a student’s achievement is impeded by weak writing skills may submit a “U” (unsatisfactory writing) notation along with the regular final grade in any course (including courses taken credit/no entry, even though credit may not have been earned and the course may not have been entered on the record). A student whose performance in a course is satisfactory, even exemplary, may still have problems with effective writing; hence, a student may earn a B or an A in a course and still be given a “U” in writing. The “U” notation does not alter the course grade, nor is it an indicator of a poor attitude, missing work, or low academic achievement. A “U” notation indicates primarily that the professor believes the student’s writing skills need work. Students who are given “U” notations are required to meet with an instructor in the Writing Center for weekly professional tutoring in the following semester.

**What kinds of writing problems merit a “U” in writing?**

When problems persist throughout the semester for a student in one or more areas of writing, whether organizational, syntactical, or mechanical, you might assign a “U” notation, particularly if you have worked individually with the student and believe additional instructional support will be necessary to ensure the student’s future academic success. In some cases, poor writing on a major end-of-semester assignment might warrant a “U,” particularly if the student’s writing is below the expected level for his or her class. Some professors give “U”s when they see errors or inadequacies in a specific area of writing, such as grammar and mechanics, documentation, or paragraph development.

**Why give a “U” in writing?**

The “U” program provides a unique opportunity for less experienced and struggling student writers to work one-on-one in a non-threatening pedagogical environment with a professionally trained tutor. Though some students initially question the value of the “U” tutoring program, most students identify it as a valuable experience in our post-program questionnaires. Students become more confident, deliberate writers, have a better understanding of their writing strengths and deficiencies, and develop transferable skills they can apply in their other courses and writing assignments. Many of these students return to the Writing Center in the following semesters, often multiple times during a semester, when they are working on writing projects for their courses and for assistance with resumes, cover letters, personal statements, and other application materials.

**When do I inform students who might or will receive a “U” in writing?**

Though students would prefer not to receive an “Unsatisfactory” in writing, they appreciate learning about the “U” notation from their professor rather than learning about it when they check their semester grades. If you plan to give a student a “U” at the end of the semester, please talk to the student about your decision before the last day of classes or inform him or her in an email message right after you submit your course grades. You might also inform the student earlier in the semester about the possibility of getting a “U” if you have evidence—for example, a poorly written paper submitted at mid-term—the student would benefit from additional instructional support. In addition, encourage the student to attend one or more Writing Center consultations during the remaining weeks of the semester with the promise that you might not assign a “U” notation if his or her writing improves in revisions or in additional writing assignments. (Please see the section below about assigning a mid-semester “U.”)

Including a statement about the Writing Center and the “U” program in your class syllabus can also help you prepare students for the possibility they might receive a “U” at the end of the term. You might also inform students at the beginning of the semester, particularly in a writing-intensive course, about the Writing Center and the “U” policy and tutoring program—or, if you prefer, a Writing Center consultant can visit your class to talk to your students about these matters.

**How do I submit a “U” along with my final grades?**

If you plan to give one or more “U”s at the end of the semester, please follow these steps:

1. Submit the “U” along with the final grade. Open the window to the left of the student’s name and click on “Final Comments.” Then type in the notation “U” and add a brief comment about the student’s writing. For example: “U.” The student should work on paragraph development and documentation.
2. Inform the student that he or she will receive or has received a “U” in writing, if you have not done so already (Here are examples of templates for informing your students about the “U”). In addition, if you would like to provide the student with a more detailed explanation of the “U” notation, follow this link to a form you may forward in an email
3. Complete the “U” Referral form (link to form) and send it, along with a sample of the student’s writing, to the Writing Center—Corns 316. You may access the referral form at the Writing Center website at http://writing.owu.edu/ in the section labeled Writing Guides and Resources.

**How does the Writing Center tutoring program work?**

We focus on teaching transferable skills, not on correcting or “fixing” papers. We work with students on all aspects of writing, from organizing and drafting to revising and proofreading, as well as documenting and citing sources. We also provide regular support for students with English as a Second Language (ESL) difficulties and Learning Disabilities (LD).

Using writing samples and a student questionnaire, we identify two or three main areas on which to focus instruction. A typical program involves writing and revising several papers, or working on a few longer papers through all stages of the writing process, along with instruction and exercises. Usually, students work on writing assignments in their current courses, but if they have little or no writing in the first half of the semester, they will be assigned writing projects by their Writing Center instructors. We notify you (for your information) and the Registrar when students have progressed sufficiently to have the “U” notation removed from their records. The Registrar erases all “U” notations from the students’ transcripts once the “U”s are cleared.

Most students complete the program to remove the “U” within eight weeks. If students fail to complete the tutoring program during the semester following the receipt of a “U,” the Committee on Academic Status will review their records, and those students may be academically dismissed. Students cannot graduate until all “U”s are cleared from their records.

To sum up, our “U” notation underscores OWU’s commitment to make sure all students graduate with effective writing skills. Even very able students profit from individually tailored assistance with the essential skill of effective written communication. For more information, please see our website or contact the Writing Center.

**What is a mid-semester conditional “U” in writing?**

In addition to the current tutoring model for the “U” program, you have the option of assigning a conditional “U” during the semester if students submit “unsatisfactory” writing that does not meet the writing objectives of your course. (link to page about the mid-semester “U”) You might assign a mid-semester “U,” for example, if students need work in one or more major areas of writing, such as writing with sources or developing sentence level writing skills. You might also assign a “U” if your students have a severe writing deficiency in a specific area of writing, such as embedding sources or identifying and correcting fused sentences.

Assigning a mid-semester conditional “U” lets students know the professor is considering assigning a “U” in writing along with the students’ final course grades unless they improve in one or more areas of writing. While the conditional “U” does not appear on the students’ transcripts, the “U” allows the professor to identify a set of specific writing goals and outcomes so students can develop the skills they need to succeed in this and other courses. There are several potential benefits of assigning a mid-semester “U” in writing, such as

* Working one-on-one with a professional writing consultant
* Improving grades in subsequent course papers or writing projects
* Improving writing skills so students are better prepared to meet greater intellectual and writing challenges
* Addressing writing obstacles during the semester to prevent receiving a “U” at the end of the semester
* Earning “R” credit for a writing-intensive courses

**Please Note:** Even if students fulfill the mid-semester “U” obligations identified in the mid-semester “U” referral form(link to form)—and even if their writing improves during the semester—an end-of-the semester “U” may still be warranted if students have not met the writing objectives of the course or demonstrated competency in writing equivalent to their peers or classmates.