

Writing Assessment Results 2009

Assessment of Writing Skills among Beginning and Advanced Students IU Northwest General Education / Assessment Committee

May 12, 2009

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Introduction

During May of 2009, the combined General Education / Assessment Committee of the IU Northwest Faculty Organization completed an assessment of writing skills revealed in a sample of forty six final papers selected from either W131, Elementary Composition, or from upper division courses in each of the six schools and colleges. This report details the procedures used to solicit the papers, to review and evaluate them, and the results as revealed in quantitative judgments and comments of the faculty evaluators who served on the committee. We hoped to establish a baseline of evidence for writing skills and to find evidence of more advanced skills among upper division papers than among W131 papers.

Selection of Writing Samples

The Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs requested that the Deans of the schools and colleges solicit sample papers from their faculty. The request was for at least two papers along with descriptions of the assignment, from a given instructor, one judged by the instructor as relatively skilled and the other as relatively weak. All identifiers except the course number were stripped from the papers before they were submitted to the AVCAA. The final sample included 23 papers drawn from W131 sections and 23 papers from upper division courses. All schools and colleges submitted at least 2 papers from upper division courses.

Assessment Procedures

The committee adapted a tool designed by Professor Anne Balay, Department of English. It included eight categories, including definitions, of writing skills: research, persuasion, prose and syntax, counterargument, mechanics, complexity, reader pleasure, and organization, (See attachment). Each evaluator read three or four papers and judged them as excellent (3 points), acceptable (2 points), or unacceptable (1 point) in each category; additional open-ended comments were optional. Each paper was evaluated by only one rater; thus no inter-rater reliability can be reported.

Results

The mean rating for each skill category among W131 and upper division papers is shown in the table below. As expected, in every category upper division papers were given higher ratings than those from W131. Readers knew the course level of the paper, so expectations for better performance on the upper division papers may have influenced ratings. Future assessments should remove the course identifiers. Ratings for the W131 papers were low, that is, the means were below 2, defined as "Acceptable." Mean ratings for the upper division papers were just above "Acceptable" in all but 2 categories.

	Course Level		
	W131 (N=23)	Upper Division (N=23)	Combined sample
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Research	1.83	1.96	1.89
Persuasion	1.74	2.17	1.96
Prose and syntax	1.65	2.23	1.93
Counterargument	1.61	1.68	1.64
Mechanics	1.61	2.13	1.87
Complexity	1.65	2.13	1.89
Reader pleasure	1.73	2.09	1.91
Organization	1.68	2.02	1.86
Total points	13.70	16.24	14.97

The comments (see attachment 2) about the papers were much more negative than the mean ratings would have suggested in the case of the upper division papers. It may be that raters hesitated to classify the upper division papers as "Unacceptable" even though they were highly critical. If so, future assessment efforts should use a rating scale with a wider range.

In general, evaluators found the experience of reading student papers valuable and useful. The committee did not discuss the question of what steps should be taken to improve the quality of student writing at that time. However, we agreed to take up this issue at the next General Education / Assessment Committee meeting in the Fall of 2009. Comments and suggestions on the process included the following:

1. Our assignment instructions should be clearer to the units to ensure more conformity to the assignment.
2. Rubric should be more universal to any assignment; suggested areas of assessment include: focus, development, mechanics, philosophy.
3. Sheila Marie T. brought a rubric that we might consider for next time rather than the one we used this time?
4. Suggestion that everyone, including faculty, have a Handbook (perhaps purchased by the university) that is used in most w130 or w131 classes to encourage students to keep them and use them in all future classes.

**Attachment One Writing Assessment Form
General Education / Assessment Committee Assessment Project
May 12, 2009**

Reader _____

Paper # _____

This list of desired attributes has been adapted from one designed by **Anne G. Balay** , although she strongly favors holistic assessment rather than evaluating attributes separately, as we will be doing here. She has argued that after a student has completed one year of a college-level writing course, a final essay should demonstrate *most* of these attributes. After reading each essay please use the definitions which have been provided to rate each sample paper for each attribute.

	Excellent 3 points	Acceptable 2 points	Not acceptable 1 point
use of research			
effectiveness of argument or persuasion			
style reflecting prose and syntax			
use of counterargument without bias or ethos			
attention to mechanics and punctuation			
complexity of ideas			
reader pleasure			
structure reflecting organization and focus.			
Total points in each category			

Total points: _____

Additional comments:

Definitions of the categories:

Use of research: Students should execute both library and Internet research in gathering sources for their projects. Sources appearing in student papers should be drawn from electronic databases, and contain a combination of academic, public, and primary sources. Students are expected to

demonstrate an ability to summarize, analyze, and synthesize sources appropriate to academic writing.

Effectiveness of argument or persuasion: Students are expected to establish a research driven thesis supported by warranted claims that shaped their purpose in writing. Claims are supported by evidence gleaned from research, primarily, as well as from personal experience and common knowledge.

Style reflecting prose and syntax: At the surface level, the writing should be clear. Sentences should reflect a degree of sophistication appropriate to a college writer and should flow in prose that sustains the argument.

Use of counterargument: The essay should include a counterargument as reflecting a writer's sense of ethics and fair-mindedness in working a thesis. Furthermore, a writer should guide the argument without undue bias, acknowledging opposing opinions and points of view.

Attention to mechanics and punctuation: Writing should be clear and free of errors. The writer should demonstrate mechanics that reflect the grammar of Standard American English, free of slang and jargon, and should attend to the impact of punctuation on the reader.

Complexity of ideas: Papers should reflect thoughtful interpretations and applications of research (considered critical thinking). As such, successful papers avoid pedestrian arguments on mundane subjects.

Reader pleasure: A good essay interests its writer as well as its reader, and is fresh in ideas and well written.

Structure reflecting organization and focus: Deep issues of organization and development define this category. A paper's thesis and claims should guide the reading, and those claims should be developed through extended discussions and use of research as support.

Attachment 2 Comments on papers

Total points	Course level	Comments
8	131	this essay does not follow assignment, does not provide an adequate or clear presentation of the sources pursue a thesis, provide fresh ? Or cite sources. Furthermore, it contains an array of grammatical errors
8	131	a lot of serious errors in sentence structure. I get no sense of her sources, arguments and writer relies too much on personal experience
9	131	mostly writer opinion, lack of research support. Fails to cite sources in text references unacceptable, many writing errors (mechanics)

9	131	works cited page has appropriate references but they are not really used in text as a basis for the "argument" this is simply an "opinion piece" with attempts to make it appear as if the research supports the writers opinion. Completely unsophisticated, no fresh ideas, very repetitive
10	131	
10	131	
10	131	major claim was not clear enough and sub-claims weren't clear and didn't adequately support and develop major claim. Use of research indicates lack of critical reading skills.
11	131	
11	131	no central thesis other than title, just a flow of thoughts with personal example and a few quotes supporting only the authors point of view, problems with grammar
12	131	
13	131	Very mixed, when formal scores were low, in middle, when personal, much better
14	131	
14	131	little depth to analysis
15	131	
15	131	flow more conversational than formal essay - no central thesis and so supporting TPs don't have connection other than conversational, but sent structure good and mechanics
16	131	one of the sources is not cited. There are many generalizations about minorities and communities that would seem to require documentation
16	131	
16	131	met the criteria
17	131	opening and closing ¶ reflect acceptable writing (whereas middle ¶'s seem more disorganized and subject to inappropriate sequence of ideas
18	131	
19	131	
21	131	Basically good, arguments occasionally personal, bit long
23	131	
8	upper division	this was unacceptable for a 400 level class
8	upper division	Student did not follow instruction in assignment and did not seem to even understand the point of the assignment
8	upper division	no citations / references, can't tell what kind of assignment this is. Not required length for a take-home paper. No book identified (except 1984) so not a book review
10	upper division	If student ? Article o a study to answer the questions in the instructions then, according o the ? Noted deficiencies in information the ? Should not have ? This article for review
12	upper division	did not follow instructions of assignment; weak on syntax and grammar which hindered reader understanding - was persuasive in argument that good source for classroom instructor and did connect approp. To the standards
12	upper division	show and tell paper
13	upper division	Frankly, I didn't understand the assignment so evaluated the paper totally on its own. Was research required?
14	upper division	ineffective use of transitions, spelling errors, and sentence structure errors detract from this broad look at schizophrenia and cautionary view of certain medications
15	upper division	the paper is too much driven by summary: it's often not clear why we are being provided with description of people and events from the book being reviewed. There needs to be a better sense of purpose in the writing, a central evolution
15	upper division	incorrect APA format, some misuse of words, assignment calls for figures to be placed at end of paper but writer includes them with text, conclusion is vague / cursory

16	upper division	
18	upper division	
18	upper division	
18	upper division	good grammar syntax
18.5	upper division	
19	upper division	Citations in text lack year and ?. Student uses footnotes instead -maybe okay? Problems with confusing outline structure. Intro poorly developed
20	upper division	
20	upper division	well written paper
21	upper division	good writer, little or no evidence of field research visits to the church
22	upper division	
22	upper division	Good
23	upper division	there weren't a sufficient number of sources, and I wasn't sure how the source provided historical background for the memoir. The citation system is also confusing
23	upper division	well documented, effectively written paper!