

Written Communication Assessment Update 2007-2010

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I. Written Communication Assessment Overview

This issue of *In Focus* provides an update on writing assessment at Mason since February 2007, with particular attention to how Mason addressed a new mandate from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to conduct value-added assessment for six general education core competencies, one of which is written communication. In addition, this issue lists undergraduate units that have conducted writing assessment since 2002 and focuses on changes that have been made as a result of writing assessment, particularly since 2007, to improve teaching and learning with writing at Mason.

Since 2001, after Virginia's higher education institutions were required by SCHEV to assess and report on six core competencies, including written communication, Mason has successfully implemented department-based, faculty-led writing assessment across the university. In addition to being a strong link to Mason's nationally ranked Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program—by *U.S. News & World Report* for each of the past nine years as one of the best colleges for Writing in the Disciplines—this assessment process has been recognized as a model program by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Council of Teachers of English (<http://wpacouncil.org/assessment-models>).

In 2007, SCHEV issued a new core competencies mandate for "value-added assessment measures [that] indicate progress, or lack thereof, as a consequence of the student's institutional experience" (SCHEV, 2007, p. 7). In response, Mason incorporated its ongoing writing assessment procedures into a new plan, which included creating a common definition of *Overall Competence in Written Communication* to be used for both pre- and post-assessments of student writing. Pre-assessment, located in introductory composition courses, was conducted in fall 2008 and post-assessments are ongoing in departments through 2013. (In 2010, SCHEV determined that value-added assessment will no longer be required and institutions may propose an assessment approach that is appropriate for the institution and the competency being assessed.)

II. Writing Assessment Methods

To respond to SCHEV's new value-added mandate, the following new writing proposal was developed by key faculty members who oversee Mason's Composition program and the Writing Across the Curriculum program, and staff from the Office of Institutional Assessment:

- *Pre-assessment* would take place in the introductory composition classes (English 100/101) with the collection and scoring of random samples of research-based essays.
- *Post-assessment* would remain in departments using the previously designed model of collecting and scoring papers from writing-intensive and/or writing-infused courses.
- Composition and departmental faculty would still develop their own discipline-specific criteria and categories for the scoring guides, but all writing assessment rubrics (pre- and post-assessment) would include a common four-level rating scale for assessing overall competence in written communication (see Appendix One).

The holistic rubric-creation workshop is at the heart of the writing assessment process. As many faculty as possible from a department come together to read samples of student writing, usually under the guidance of the WAC director, who is also co-chair of Mason's Writing Assessment Group, and the WAC assistant director, The samples provide a basis for the discussion of traits that are valued in writing in that particular discipline and that may or may not be present in the particular samples read. The traits are then grouped into categories to create the rubric or scoring guide. The rubric, created by the faculty themselves, is a solid foundation that then can be adapted to specific assignments or purposes. The following sections of this report provide more specific details about the process and findings for the pre- and post-assessments of writing.

In December 2009, an article co-authored by Mason's Terry Myers Zawacki, Shelley Reid, Ying Zhou, and Sarah Baker detailing the entire pre-assessment process appeared in the online journal, *Across the Disciplines*. The article articulates how the pre-assessment process fit into the assessment model described above to stay consistent with Mason's commitment to conducting meaningful assessment that moves forward the teaching and learning of writing.

III. Pre-assessment in English 100/101

At the beginning of the fall 2008 semester, all 50 English 100/101 instructors received a one-page outline detailing the assessment plan, which asked them to submit by the semester's end a clean final copy (paper or electronic) of a research-based assignment from four randomly selected students in each section they taught. As the composition program asks instructors to teach to common learning goals (<http://composition.gmu.edu/faculty/designsyllabus/ENGL101/goals.php>) rather than with standardized assignments or textbooks, instructors also submitted a copy of their assignment prompt. By January 2009, the final collection rate was 71.7%, with papers collected from 79 out of 85 sections (93%) of English 100 and 101.

To develop the scoring rubric, the composition program followed the already established workshop model. A group of composition faculty met in fall 2008 to draft a rubric, which was then refined by the composition director and the WAC/OIA liaison (who also teaches composition). The rubric identified the following five categories (see Appendix Two for the full rubric and a more detailed description of each category).

- Audience, context, purpose
- Organization, coherence, development
- Presentation of evidence and use of sources
- Contribution to conversation
- Mechanics, format

The rubric used the four-level rating scale that would be used to compare the pre-assessment and post-assessment scores but with one change: the "emerging competence" rating was subdivided into two categories, "emerging competence—consistent" and "emerging competence—inconsistent," to better represent faculty views about the range and nuances of student writing that this rating level could encompass. This subdivision also made the results more useful for the program, because the expectation was that most students at the introductory composition level would fall into this rating level. (For reporting purposes in relation to the post-assessment results, the two emerging categories were added back together.) Also stemming from the workshop discussion and other feedback, an additional framework was added to the rubric to help raters contextualize their scoring in relation to the expectations of the composition program. This framework, which relates each rating level to how prepared a student might be for Mason's junior-level required advanced composition course, English 302, was useful in helping faculty choose the overall score, sometimes a difficult decision when the range of scores across the rubric categories varied. Composition director Shelley Reid put

this decision about subdividing the “emerging” rating into a broader context: “the revised and final rubric, though developed specifically by and for English 101 readers, thus connects that course more directly with our WAC program, and, we think, will inform our FYC [first-year composition] faculty development in ways that attend to broader disciplinary concerns” (Zawacki et al.).

Of the 256 papers collected, 149 were randomly selected for scoring (approximately 10% of the enrolled students), and in early spring 2009, 12 faculty convened for a full day of scoring, which included a training session to achieve a common understanding of rating student work with the rubric. Each paper was rated by two readers, with a third and sometimes a fourth reader used for overall scores that did not agree.

Pre-assessment Results

The following results are based on the ratings assigned by the first two raters as these numbers yield the most complete results. The ratings given by the third readers were sometimes incomplete: some papers, although assigned an overall competence, had no category ratings. A total of 149 papers were rated and the maximum number of ratings for each category was 298. As Table 1 shows, a minority of papers received ratings of “highly competent” or “competent” in each category and a majority fell into the “emerging” category. Given that English 100 and 101 enroll primarily first-time freshmen, the findings were not surprising. Students did fairly well in two areas: “Mechanics and format” and “Audience, context, purpose.” “Presentation of evidence and use of sources” was identified as the weakest area, and “Contribution to conversation,” the proxy for critical thinking abilities, also received low ratings. The composition program, as described later in this report, is taking steps to address these two weaker categories.

| Table 1: English 100/101 Writing Assessment Results (by category) | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| | | Highly Competent | Competent | Emerging | Not Competent |
| Audience, Context, Purpose | Count | 0 | 36 | 194 | 35 |
| | % | 0% | 14% | 74% | 13% |
| Organization, Coherence, Development | Count | 0 | 18 | 208 | 41 |
| | % | 0% | 7% | 78% | 15% |
| Presentation of evidence and use of sources | Count | 1 | 10 | 204 | 52 |
| | % | 0% | 4% | 77% | 19% |
| Contribution to Conversation | Count | 1 | 22 | 187 | 54 |
| | % | 0% | 8% | 70% | 20% |
| Mechanics, Format | Count | 0 | 24 | 219 | 24 |
| | % | 0% | 9% | 82% | 9% |

One of the surprising findings was the large number of papers to which the first two raters assigned different overall competence levels. Almost one out of four papers received a different overall score and had to be reviewed by a third reader, and three papers needed a fourth reader. For the composition director, this finding was particularly instructive in helping her “remain committed to having our assessment continue as a collaborative, inclusive process” while realizing “how setting some clear guidelines and/or limitations can be necessary so that some conclusions can be reached and actions taken to improve the program” (Zawacki et al.) After resolving these differences, the final pre-assessment analysis showed that 2% of the papers were judged to be “competent,” 77% fell under the “emerging competence” category, and 21% were rated as “not competent.”

IV. Post-assessment in Undergraduate Units

Other than new and very small programs, since 2002 almost every department at Mason with an undergraduate major has completed one cycle of writing assessment, and a few departments have done more than one. Table 2 shows departments that have assessed student writing and submitted a formal report to the Writing Assessment Group, a committee composed of representatives from each college and school. As well as these departments, many others, for

both undergraduate and graduate degrees, have conducted some form of writing assessment as part of learning outcomes assessments, such as for the university's internal Academic Program Review, for outside accreditation, and for their own program-specific assessments.

TABLE 2: Undergraduate Program Writing Assessment Reporting (2002-2010, by year)

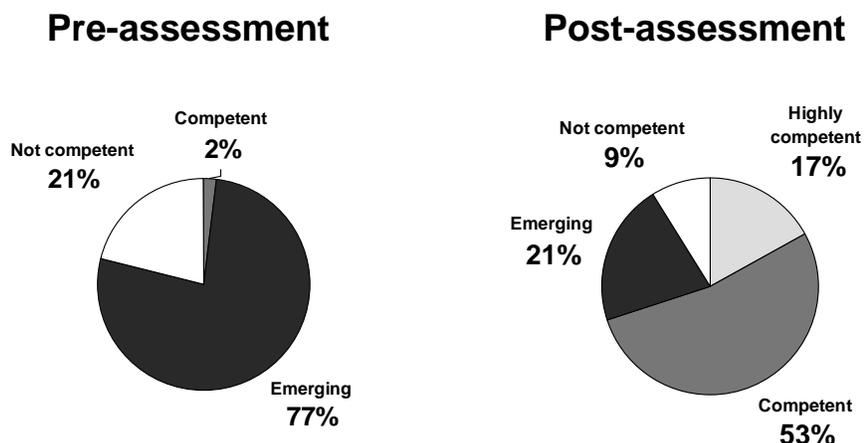
| Year | Unit | Course | # of Papers | Year | Unit | Course | # of Papers |
|------|-----------------------------------|--------------|-------------|------|--------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 2002 | Psychology | PSYC 301 | 32 | 2009 | Administration of Justice | ADJ 303 | 26 |
| 2002 | Public & International Affairs | various | 37 | 2009 | Anthropology | ANTH 490 | 15 |
| 2003 | Art & Visual Technology | various | 32 | 2009 | Chemistry | CHEM 336 | 30 |
| 2003 | Communications | COMM 300 | 34 | 2009 | Economics | ECON 360/365 | 38 |
| 2003 | Philosophy | PHIL 301/303 | 12 | 2009 | Individualized Studies | BIS 390 | 29 |
| 2003 | Religious Studies | various | 10 | 2009 | Mathematical Sciences | MATH 290 | 49 |
| 2003 | Theater | unknown | - | 2009 | Modern and Classical Languages | various | 25 |
| 2005 | Computer Science | 306 | 24 | 2009 | Nursing | HHS 465 | 44 |
| 2005 | Integrative Studies | various | 60 | 2009 | Physics | PHYS 407 | 11 |
| 2005 | Recreation, Health, and Tourism | PRLS 450 | 27 | 2010 | Dance | DANC 391 | 15 |
| 2006 | Electrical & Computer Engineering | ECE 442/445 | 43 | 2010 | Global Affairs* | EVPP 337 | 24 |
| 2007 | Applied Information Technology | IT 304 | 30 | 2010 | History* | HIST 499 | 25 |
| 2007 | Biology | BIOL 307 | 26 | 2010 | Music* | MUSI 332 | 20 |
| 2007 | School of Management | various | 51 | 2010 | Social Work* | SOCW 471 | 20 |
| 2008 | Art History | various | 18 | 2010 | Systems Engineering | SYST 489 | 16 |
| 2008 | English | various | 29 | | | | |

* report due 9/30/10

Post-assessment Results

Post-assessment results are based on a total of 541 papers assessed in 20 undergraduate units that completed writing assessment from 2007 to 2010. As Figure 1 shows, students do progress up the rating scale in terms of the quality of their writing, with 2% rated as “competent” in the pre-assessment and 70% rated as “competent” or above in the post-assessment. Given the demographic diversity of Mason’s student body and the high number of transfer students, these numbers are encouraging. These aggregated numbers also provide a general snapshot of the value added in written communication skills, but they cannot truly show the range and strength of commitment to improving this aspect of students’ learning that faculty have demonstrated throughout this process. Nevertheless, one might expect to see fewer than the current 30% showing in the “emerging” and “not competent” levels. This may be explained in part by the fact that designated writing-intensive courses, which are required to be upper-level courses and are approved by the Writing Across the Curriculum committee, span the range of upper-level course numbers from the low 300s to the high 400s and thus are not taken at set times during a student’s tenure at Mason. The overall results suggest that there is room for improvement and as the next cycle of writing assessment is undertaken, the expectation is that the curricular and program changes made by each unit will result in improved writing scores. Many units, as described later in this report, are committed to addressing those areas in their students’ writing that fall short of their desired outcomes for graduates of their programs.

Figure 1: Overall Writing Assessment Results



V. Changes Made as a Result of Writing Assessment

In the previously mentioned co-authored article about the pre-assessment process, Terry Myers Zawacki, Mason WAC director and former Writing Center director, talks about one of the central changes that occurs as a result of the writing assessment process at Mason: “One of the great values of [the writing assessment] workshops is that they bring together faculty within a department who may teach with writing yet may never have sat down with their colleagues for a pedagogically focused discussion of their expectations for student writers related to the genres and conventions that characterize good writing in their disciplines” (Zawacki et al.). Although hard to quantify, these conversations drive a variety of changes that make the assessment process one that focuses on teaching and learning rather than solely on the reporting of data. What this does, in turn, is to create an environment in which discussions of writing are sustained and ongoing, which then leads to other changes and events, large and small, that promote and sustain writing across the university. The assessment process at Mason can then be and often is viewed as recursive and dynamic rather than static, and the pool of faculty from which to pull for discussions about writing (e.g., joining faculty learning communities or committees) continually increases.

The Composition Program

For the composition program, the benefits gained by going through the pre-assessment process are manifested in ways that also are hard to quantify. Starting in fall 2009, director of composition, Shelley Reid, started sharing the results of the English 100/101 assessment at annual pre-semester orientations for new and returning composition faculty. Based on the previous year’s discussions and the pre-assessment results, the August 2010 orientation days have included groups designed to address the following issues:

- redefining the core research-based learning goals for English 101 by limiting the scope of the existing goals and focusing more on analytical and critical thinking skills, which was one of the weakest areas in the pre-assessment results (“contribution to conversation”);
- designing activities to help introductory composition students both find better sources and work on integrating information from two or more sources into paragraphs, to address the category with the weakest scores (“presentation of evidence and use of sources”); and
- redefining what is expected to earn a “C” on a research-based, argumentative essay in English 100/101, which came out of the discussions about the “emerging” rating level and prompted the subdivision of this rating level on the pre-assessment rubric.

The results of this work will be published to all English 100/101 faculty for implementation this fall, and the program will have a working group refining them again spring 2011.

Though the composition program has always been committed to providing resources, workshops, and places for discussion, these have been sustained even in the face of various administrative challenges. In addition, those who participated in the pre-assessment process, which all introductory composition faculty did to some degree by having to collect and submit assignment prompts and student papers, now have a broader community in which to share resources and strategies. In talking about all the questions that arose for faculty involved in the rubric-creation and scoring workshops, Reid focuses on the relationships both within and outside of the program: “Data and participant stories from the assessment process allow us to raise those questions in focused yet inclusive and community-building ways.... [F]raming our rubric in terms of the larger arc of writing instruction and writing learning at Mason has helped us assess English 101 in its dual institutional role: improving students' writing knowledge, skills, and strategies overall, and preparing students for writing tasks elsewhere in the university.”

Writing in the Disciplines

The workshop discussions of writing as a process, even at the level of disciplinary writing, has meant in some cases that departments and their faculty have begun to look at where the disciplinary elements of writing that they identified in their rubric are addressed across their department's curriculum rather than just the writing intensive course(s). Some are thus looking into how and where writing and its instruction figures in all levels of courses instead of just in upper-level or designated writing-intensive courses.

One of the issues sometimes encountered in assessment is the issue of sustainability of changes that may occur as the result of assessment. A particularly focused, successful, and sustainable development that comes out of the writing assessment process is the creation of discipline-specific online writing guides for students that provide expectations, guidelines, and resources for writing specific to the department and discipline. The writing guides are developed by faculty in the department with support from Mason's WAC program through such means as collecting assignments and rubrics, interviewing students and faculty, and collecting model papers, among others. Mason currently has 12 writing guides active on department websites and as links from the WAC website and Writing Center website (Biology; Criminology, Law and Society; English; History; Information Technology and Engineering; School of Management; New Century College; Nursing; Philosophy; Psychology; Public and International Affairs; Religious Studies). The model also has garnered interest from outside sources in the form of queries about developing these kinds of writing guides and requests to link to the guides. In the coming year, two new writing guides are planned and up to three current ones will be updated.

An important benefit of having a rubric created by faculty and of using current student papers from classes actively being taught is that the results of the assessment can be used to inform curricular and course decisions and make changes happen quickly, often by the next semester. For example, both the Bachelor of Individualized Studies (BIS) program and the Systems Engineering and Operations Research Department acted upon the results of their assessment with assignment redesign, added readings or contextualization of assignments with an eye to strengthening skills that showed as weaker on their rubric, and the addition of a Writing Fellow to the BIS writing-intensive course.

One unit that has undergone significant changes as a result of the writing assessment is the Department of Criminology, Law, and Society (CLS, formerly Administration of Justice). In addition to having a high proportion of faculty attend the assessment workshop (also one of the richest conversations ever conducted), the department has been extremely responsive to the ideas that emerged from the workshop discussions in terms of assignments and curriculum, as well as willing to address issues that came out of the results. During the semester following the assessment, a committee of faculty was convened to “work on revising the curriculum for [the designated writing-intensive] course..., paying particular attention to the nature and form of the writing assignments” (ADJ writing assessment report). Other measures included developing an online writing guide, widely sharing the writing assessment rubric, scheduling annual or semesterly workshops for faculty on designing effective assignments and improving feedback/effective grading, and helping CLS students take advantage of writing resources such as the University Writing Center.

As a direct result of the reach of writing assessment into an increasing number of units, which forges new relationships across the curriculum, the WAC program has been able to sustain and even grow its undergraduate writing awards initiative. The number of these awards has steadily increased and in 2010, 22 awards were funded by the WAC program (solely or in part) in 18 units and six colleges/schools, and an average of four new awards were created in each of the past three years.

In the workshops, discussions related to the writing of assignments, sequencing, and commenting/grading practices inevitably arise. With the reality of the variety of instructors and faculty teaching writing-intensive and writing-infused courses, as well as the turnover of faculty teaching these courses, some departments (e.g., Biology and Social Work) have instituted annual workshops that focus on the teaching of writing, introducing the rubric, and addressing specific issues and questions newer instructors may have in teaching with writing. In addition, workshops on designing assignments and grading, formerly presented as part of the general workshops offered by the Center for Teaching Excellence, are now increasingly targeted to and presented to specific departments rather than through a general call to faculty.

References:

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) (2007). *Guidelines for Assessment of Student Learning*. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia: Richmond, Virginia.

Zawacki, Terry Myers, Reid, E. Shelley, Zhou, Ying, & Baker, Sarah E. (2009, December 3). Voices at the table: Balancing the needs and wants of program stakeholders to design a value-added writing assessment plan. [Special issue on Writing Across the Curriculum and Assessment] *Across the Disciplines*, 6. Retrieved August 2, 2010, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/assessment/zawackietal.cfm>

Appendix One: A Definition of Overall Competence in Written Communication

Overall competence in college-level written communication in print and digital environments includes an understanding of audience, purpose, genre, content, and thinking processes appropriate to the level of course, as demonstrated through the appropriate use of rhetorical and (inter)disciplinary/workplace conventions, to include:

- format, tone, and vocabulary;
- organization of argument/information;
- evidence from experience, observation, and/or primary and secondary sources; and
- standard edited American English.

| Overall Rating | Definition |
|-------------------------|---|
| Highly Competent | The writer demonstrates a strong and clear understanding of audience, purpose, genre, discipline- or course-content, and the thinking processes appropriate to an intermediate or advanced college course, as evidenced by the use of appropriate format, tone, and vocabulary; clear organization and thorough development of argument/information; credible evidence integrated and documented accurately; and standard edited American English. The writing makes a substantive, original argument or other contribution to the field; it demonstrates strong sentence-level fluency and/or has a clear authorial voice. |
| Competent | The writer demonstrates a competent understanding of audience, purpose, genre, content, and the thinking processes appropriate to intermediate college-level coursework, as evidenced by the use of appropriate format, tone, and vocabulary; clear organization and development of argument/information; and credible evidence integrated and documented accurately. While all of these rhetorical elements are present, some may be less developed or uneven. Though an argument may be clearly stated, it may lack originality and/or depth. The writing may contain some errors in standard edited American English but readability is not compromised. |
| Emerging | The writer demonstrates an emerging understanding of audience, purpose, and content, and the thinking processes appropriate for an introductory level of college writing competence, as evidenced by the use of appropriate format, tone, and vocabulary; organization of argument/information; and integration and documentation of supporting evidence. While these rhetorical elements have been attempted, some may be less-than-satisfactorily accomplished. The writing may contain some errors in standard edited American English that do not consistently compromise readability. |
| Not Competent | The writer demonstrates little understanding of audience, purpose, format, and/or the thinking processes appropriate to college-level writing. A majority of these rhetorical elements are weak or absent, as evidenced by an unclear sense of audience and/or purpose; confusing organization and/or format; weak, inappropriate, and/or undocumented evidence. Writing that displays frequent errors in standard edited American English that consistently compromise readability may be rated at this level particularly if other key rhetorical features are weak or absent. |

Appendix Two: English 100/101 Assessment Rubric, Fall 2008

| Highly Competent | Competent | Emerging Competence: Consistent/Inconsistent | | Not Competent |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| Does not need English 302 (rec. portfolio exemption); is prepared to write well in upper-division courses in the disciplines | Is strongly prepared to learn additional strategies in English 302 and manage writing in upper-division courses in the disciplines | Is prepared for but will strongly benefit from English 302; could reasonably attempt writing in upper-division courses in the disciplines | Demonstrates minimal or partial preparation for English 302; will struggle in writing for upper-division courses in the disciplines | Does not demonstrate sufficient preparation for English 302; is not prepared for writing in upper-division courses in the disciplines |

Audience, Context, Purpose: Meets assignment expectations, demonstrates clear focus/argument, adapts to audience/context (academic reader or as specified in assignment)

Organization, Coherence, Development: Uses introduction and conclusion to frame essay and engage audience, demonstrates cohesion and flow through the essay, demonstrates intra-paragraph cohesion, develops points fully through evidence and analysis

Presentation of evidence and use of sources: Incorporates source material appropriate to and sufficient for the assignment/purpose/audience; uses quotation, paraphrase and summary appropriately; demonstrates understanding of source material; analyzes and synthesizes source material in relation to topic/claim (moves beyond summary or "all about"); integrates source material in support of topic/claim

Contribution to Conversation: Provides accurate and interesting content, situates claims/analysis in relation to current conversations and/or broad issues, acknowledges and responds to alternate perspectives, provides nuanced analysis and/or synthesis of ideas/positions, attends to disciplinary knowledge and/or methods related to topic/claim, employs distinct authorial voice

Mechanics, Format: Consistently meets expectations for Standard Edited US English (grammar/punctuation) with evidence of proofreading, demonstrates sentence-level fluency, employs appropriate tone/diction for context and discipline, uses consistent and correct citation formats

OVERALL

| Highly Competent | Competent | Emerging (Consistent or Inconsistent) | | Not Competent |
|------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|--|---------------|
| | | | | |

Post-assessment Rubrics

Rubrics and scoring guides for 28 units are currently available on the WAC website at:
http://wac.gmu.edu/assessing/assessing_student_writing.php#part3