

EMU First-Year Writing Program
ENGL 121 Assessment Preliminary Report
September 2006

Executive Summary

A direct assessment of over 100 randomly selected portfolios of students' work in English 121, conducted from November 2005-May 2006, produced multiple layers of rich conversation and a wealth of useful data that will drive programmatic development.

Results

First-year writing students' final portfolios addressed or exceeded the established criteria for "good writing" in the following areas:

- Connection between writer's ideas and those in the text
- Challenge to the writer's ideas about the process of writing
- Sense of authority about the material in the portfolio
- Enjoyment of some aspect of the process of writing
- Complexity of analysis
- Thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing
- Disciplinary conventions appropriate for the writing

First-year writing students' final portfolios demonstrated several areas within which the first-year writing program might dedicate further resources for pedagogical development:

- Challenge to the writer's ideas
- Development of the writer's ideas about the process of writing (see footnote 2, below)
- Complexity of analysis
- Disciplinary conventions appropriate to the writing

Further, correlations between Likert-scale questions and descriptive questions reveal additional information about readers' perspectives on the portfolios. They indicate that:
*Writerly investment is crucial.

*Connections between writers' ideas and theoretical or research-based concepts was an important characteristic associated with good writing.

*Evidence and analysis were key characteristics associated with "complexity of analysis." Overall, the portfolios in the sample demonstrated consistently strong use of evidence to support the work in the portfolio.

Background of the Current Assessment

The First-Year Writing Program works from the principle that programmatic assessment should be ongoing and should tie directly into improving instruction. In 2002-03, a survey-based assessment indicated that students' confidence increased significantly in nearly all of the first-year writing outcomes. That assessment surveyed all students in English 121 at the beginning and end of semester about their confidence levels with the course outcomes for ENGL 121.¹ It also asked students indicate how useful the writing, reading and thinking strategies in the course would be for future courses. (For a fuller discussion of this assessment, see the 2003 First-Year Writing Program Assessment Report). The ENGL 121 assessment reported here follows on the 2002-2003 assessment, expanding its focus by directly assessing the work of students in ENGL 121.

The current, direct, assessment of student writing from English 121 is grounded in the idea that assessment is context-specific. Following this principle, this assessment is:

- ✓ Site-based. It was developed in response to a specific need in a specific site and is based on resources and concerns in that sit);
- ✓ Locally controlled. The FYWP has devised, managed, and implemented the assessment procedures;
- ✓ Context sensitive. Procedures honor instructional goals and methods of the FYWP, as well as cultural and social environment of the institution and its students, teachers, and other stakeholders; and
- ✓ Rhetorically based. Scoring criteria and reading procedures adhere to recognizable and supportable rhetorical principles integral to the thoughtful expression and reflective interpretation of texts (see Huot).

Methodology

Following the principles articulated above, this assessment began with the assumption that qualities associated with "good writing" are context-specific. In other words, what is considered good writing in one workplace might be different from what is considered good writing in another; good writing in one discipline might be different from good writing in another, or different from good writing in an out-of-school context. First-year writing courses like ENGL 121 (and ENGL 120), therefore, are designed to help students become flexible writers, able to assess what is defined as good writing in a variety of contexts and able to adapt to those different contexts (see Adler-Kassner and Estrem; Thaiss and Zawacki; Royster; Bawarshi).

While there are multiple contexts for writing *within* the university (in- and out-of-class writing; writing across different courses and disciplines), the assumption underscoring this assessment is that, to some extent, EMU (as any university) comprises a single community. This assumption also underscores much of the curricular foundation of the university (for example, the Strategic Directions and the General Education curriculum).

¹ ENGL 121 is the second semester of EMU's two-semester composition sequence. It is the course that carries general education credit and is taken by approximately 90 percent of all EMU FTIACs.

Working from this position, the question guiding this assessment was: “What are the qualities of writing valued in the EMU community? What do those look like in specific instances of writing and reading?” This question facilitated a research project that enabled research outlining the boundaries of “good writing” in the EMU community, and assessing the extent to which writing in ENGL 121 reflected those definitions.

The procedure for the assessment involved two phases:

- 1) The **value mapping phase** convened focus groups to learn about qualities associated with good writing in the EMU context, and then analyzed the transcripts of focus group discussions to develop an assessment instrument (revised with comments from focus group members),
- 2) The **portfolio assessment phase**, which involved applying the assessment instrument to a systematic sample of portfolios from ENGL 121 to determine the extent to which student work from ENGL 121 reflected qualities of good writing articulated by the EMU community. members of the specific context.

Phase 1: Mapping Values

To determine qualities associated with good writing, three representative focus groups consisting of EMU administrators, staff, students and faculty (primarily from outside of the FYWP) were convened in May 2005. An additional focus group of faculty from inside of the FYWP was convened in October 2005. All participants were asked to respond to five prompts:

- What makes a particular piece of writing (which they were asked to bring with them to the focus group) “good writing?”
- Tell a story about a time when you wrote something inside (one question) and outside (another question) of school or work that you considered meaningful or significant, and discuss why it was significant.
- Tell a story about a time when you read something inside (one question) and outside (another question) of school or work that you considered important for you, and discuss why it was important.

Focus group discussions were audio and videotaped, and focus group discussions were transcribed. The transcripts were then analyzed to identify patterns among discussants of qualities associated with “good writing” and mapped using the dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) process (Broad 2003). This process allows for analysts to identify salient qualities, map their areas of intersection and divergence, and indicate their importance relative to one another.

This process generated themes that emerged consistently as qualities associated with good writing:

- Connection between writer’s ideas and those in the text
- Challenge to the writer’s and/or reader’s ideas
- Engagement with the subject of the writing
- Enjoyment of the process of writing
- Complexity of ideas and analysis
- Strength of evidence used in the writing

- Quality of textual features present in the writing (e.g., clean surfaces, appropriate and correct use of citations, etc.)

Phase 2: Reading and Assessing Portfolios

Following the transcript analysis and the initial development of a dynamic criteria map, a rubric that reflected the qualities of “good writing” manifest in the focus group discussions was developed. This preliminary rubric, along with a report on the analysis of the transcripts, was presented to focus group participants in a November 2005 meeting. Feedback from the participants was also recorded and used for a revision of the initial rubric.

A second draft of the rubric was developed by February 2006, and presented to a group of composition and rhetoric researchers at a professional meeting in March 2006. Following feedback from that group, the rubric was revised a third time (see attachment 2). The revised rubric consisted of three sections.

Section one of the rubric focused on key qualities (or “Keys”) associated with ‘good writing’ that emerged from the focus groups. In this section, readers indicated only whether key qualities were present.

Section two focused on the *extent* to which key qualities were present in the portfolio. In this section, readers used a Likert scale to indicate the degree to which they found these qualities in the writing by indicating their level of agreement with questions about that presence.

Section three focused on written response. Here, readers wrote a response to the portfolio author about their experience of reading, responding particularly to strengths and challenges of the work.

A group of 20 portfolio readers (all first-year writing instructors) assembled in May 2006 to read and rate the portfolios. Working in pairs, these experienced instructors read, discussed, and rated a systematic, randomized sample of 100 portfolios collected from students enrolled in Winter 2006 sections of English 121 (slightly less than 10 percent of the total course enrollment).

Community-Based Assessment Results

This assessment is rich and multifaceted and is grounded in actual written texts and countless layers of conversation. Consequently, the results resist easy compartmentalization. Generally, most of the raters agreed that qualities of good writing articulated by focus groups were evident in the portfolios. Readers found the preponderance of work in the sample demonstrated:

- a strong connection between writer and subject;
- a sense of the writer’s authority about the subject of the writing
- generally consistent work with disciplinary conventions (including use of evidence, appropriate language, and appropriate mechanical and citational forms)
- thorough evidence that supported the purpose of the writing
- evidence that the writing developed through a process of writing*
- some degree of complexity of analysis
- some challenge to the writer’s ideas

Raw Results:

Portfolio raters assigned Strongly Agreed (StA), Agreed (A), or Somewhat Agreed (SA) with the following concepts, which were generated based on the descriptive terms from the DCM phase.:

Question	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Percentage of respondents answering Strongly Agree (StA), Agree (A), or Somewhat Agree (SA)	Percentage of respondents answering StA or A
Q12 There was a strong connection between the writer's ideas and those in the portfolio	35	30	20	85	65
Q 13 The writer's ideas about the subjects in the portfolio were challenged as a result of the writing.	13	20	17	50	33
Q14 The writer had a sense of authority about the subject of the writing in the portfolio.	30	38	23	91	68
Q15 The writer's ideas about the process of writing developed as s/he worked on the writing.	14	19	19	52	33
Q16 The writer enjoyed some aspect of engaging in the process of writing.	16	35	20	71	51
Q17 The papers in the portfolio demonstrate complexity of analysis.	15	19	22	56	34
Q18 The papers in the portfolio demonstrate thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing	18	23	25	66	41
Q19 The papers in this portfolio demonstrate	19	30	27	76	49

disciplinary conventions that are appropriate for the writing.					
--	--	--	--	--	--

These ratings indicate that, within the systematic sample, the majority of readers agreed that qualities associated with good writing (as articulated by the representative focus groups) were present. In particular, writers seem to find a strong connection between their own ideas and/or interests and the work in the portfolio; have a sense of authority with regard to their writing; enjoy engaging in the process of writing; use evidence that supports the purpose of the writing; and demonstrate appropriate disciplinary conventions in the writing.

However, these results also indicate that when the mid-range descriptor of “somewhat agree” is removed, less than 50% of the sample demonstrated some of the key qualities associated with good writing as articulated by the focus groups. In particular, readers indicated that 33% of the portfolios (n=33) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the writer’s ideas were challenged as a result of the writing; in 33% of the portfolios writers’ ideas were found to have developed through the writing process as implemented in ENGL 121; and 49% of the portfolios (n=49) demonstrated disciplinary conventions appropriate for the writing.

Correlated Results:

Since the first section of the assessment instrument asked respondents to indicate what specific elements (derived from focus group discussions) of key qualities they found present in the portfolios, we turned our attention to determining what qualities seem to influence the ratings that readers assigned using the Likert-scaled questions. In particular, there were strong correlations in the following areas:

Connections

Question 12: “The writer found a connection between her/his ideas and those that s/he wrote about in the subject of the writing.”

And

Q2 Key: Connections

- A.) The writer found connections between her or his interests and the subject(s) of the writing
- B.) The writer found connections between theoretical or research-based concepts and the subject(s) of the writing
- C.) The writer thought independently about the subject(s) of the writing

There was a strong correlation between the quality, “connection between the writer’s ideas and the subject of the writing” (q2a) and a SA/A rating on q12. There was an extremely strong correlation (of 100 percent) between “a connection between theoretical or research-based concepts and the subject of the writing” and a rating of SA/A on q12.

However, without the quality “connections between the writer’s ideas and the subject of the writing,” readers would “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with q12. Thus, “connection between writer’s ideas and the subject of the writing” was required for a StA/A/SA rating, and if papers demonstrated “connection between theoretical or research-based concepts and

the subjects of the writing” raters always indicated “StA” or SA” to q. 12. This indicates that the writer must be able to make connections among various kinds of material (academic texts, personal interests).

Engagement

*Question 16: “The writer enjoyed some aspect of engaging in the process of writing,”
and*

Q4 Key: Engagement

- A. The writer was invested in the subject of the writing
- B. The writer was invested in the written product

There is a strong correlation between those who chose A and B and a rating of “StA,” “A,” or “SA” on q. 16. Again, this indicates that readers did not find investment in the product of the writing without investment in the subject of the writing.

Complexity

*Question 17, “The papers in the portfolio demonstrate complexity of analysis,”
And*

Q5 Key: Complexity

- A.) The writer developed a complex analysis
- B.) The writer used evidence that supported her/his analysis
- C.) The writer provided insight into others' ideas
- D.) The writer's ideas were accessible to us as readers

Where readers agreed that the papers demonstrated complexity of analysis (StA, A, or SA), “use of evidence that supported her/his analysis” was a predominant quality present in the portfolio. However, even where readers “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that the papers in the portfolio demonstrated complexity of analysis, readers found that the writer used evidence to support her/his ideas. If readers indicated that quality “A” (“developing a complex analysis”) was present in the portfolio, they always “Strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the papers in the portfolio demonstrated complexity of analysis, as 33 percent of the portfolios in the sample were found to have demonstrated. Thus, evidence and analysis are key to “good writing” in first-year writing courses.

*Q 18, “The papers in the portfolio demonstrate thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing
and*

Q10 Key: Textual Features

- A. The writer used well-defined and interesting evidence
- B. The writer employed an organization that was effective for her/his purpose
- C. The writer used clear language
- D. The writer used effective evidence
- E. The writer used writing that helped the subject or characters come alive
- F. The writer used language appropriate for her or his purpose

AND

Q18 The papers in the portfolio demonstrate thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing

- A. Strongly agree – 18%

- B. Agree – 23%
- C. Somewhat agree – 25%
- D. Disagree – 20%
- E. Strongly disagree – 12%
- F. N/A – 1%

If readers found qualities A and C (“well-defined and interesting evidence” and “clear language” in the portfolio, they were likely to assign “StA,” “A”, or “SA” to q 18. The quality of “well defined and interesting evidence,” clear language,” and “language appropriate for her or his purpose” seem to affect whether or not readers StA/A/SA with the statement regarding the evidence used in the writing. Students’ rhetorical choices and ability to use appropriate language thus ties directly to their proficiency in using evidence for a variety of purposes in their written products.

Discussion

This assessment makes clear the areas in which first-year writing students’ final portfolios are addressing, or exceeding, the expectations for good writing as represented in the community-based dynamic criteria mapping process. Ratings of both individual questions and the correlations between descriptive and Likert-scaled questions indicate that the representative portfolios demonstrated many of the “good writing” consistently. Among the scored items, the majority of portfolios demonstrated the following qualities (at either strongly agree, agree, or somewhat agree):

- Connection between writer’s ideas and those in the text
- Challenge to the writer’s ideas about the process of writing
- Sense of authority about the material in the portfolio
- Enjoyment of some aspect of the process of writing
- Complexity of analysis
- Thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing
- Disciplinary conventions appropriate for the writing

This is encouraging news; instructors within the first-year writing program work from challenging outcomes and with diversely prepared students. Many first-year writing students are encountering the practice of analyzing others’ ideas with evidence for the first time; these results indicate that readers found them to be developing qualities associate with “good writing” on the EMU campus through this work.

As assessment should do, these results also provide the program with areas to continue working on together with students. Removing the ratings where readers indicated that they “somewhat agreed” with the items included in the rating matrix, the majority of portfolios demonstrated the following qualities:

- Connection between the writers ideas and those in the text
- Sense of authority about the material in the portfolio
- Enjoyment of some aspect of the process of writing
- Thorough evidence that supports the purpose of the writing

When the “somewhat agree” responses are removed, readers found that a majority of the portfolios did not demonstrate these qualities:

- Challenge to the writer’s ideas

- Development of the writer’s ideas about the process of writing (see footnote 2, below)
- Complexity of analysis
- Disciplinary conventions appropriate to the writing

The items included in these lists fall into three dimensions: affective (enjoying the process of writing, having a sense of authority)², analytic (complexity of analysis, using evidence to support analysis, making connections between own ideas and those in the text, using disciplinary conventions), and process-based (development of the writer’s process)³.

Correlations between Likert-scale questions and descriptive questions reveal additional information about readers’ perspectives on the portfolios. They indicate that:

*Writerly investment is crucial. For readers to “strongly agree” or “agree” that portfolios demonstrated characters associated with good writing, they must have seen evidence that the writer was invested in and/or enjoyed the process of writing. When no such connection was found, readers “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that characteristics of good writing were present.

*Connections between writers’ ideas and theoretical or research-based concepts was an important characteristic associated with good writing. When readers found this connection, they always “strongly agreed” that there was a connection between the writer and the subject of the portfolio.

*Evidence and analysis were key characteristics associated with “complexity of analysis.” Overall, the portfolios in the sample demonstrated consistently strong use of evidence to support the work in the portfolio. The findings also indicate that writers must use evidence that is effective for her/his purpose, explain that evidence in language that is clear to the reader, and make the ideas in the writing accessible to the reader in order for the portfolio to be seen as demonstrating complexity of analysis.

Three areas where fewer than 50 percent of the readers indicated that they “Strongly agree” or “Agree” with qualities associated with good writing, “challenge to the writer’s ideas”; “development of ideas about the process of writing”; and “complexity of analysis” are qualities associated with good writing, and key outcomes of the current FYWP.

These are among the most complex dimensions associated with writing and writing development. The majority of students in ENGL 121 are traditionally-aged FTIACs; at 18, they are just entering stages of cognitive development where they see beyond themselves and begin to engage in dialogue with others (e.g., Piaget, Vygotsky, Haswell). Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that many students exiting public high schools have not

² Affective dimensions of writing are better measured by indirect assessments, as students themselves are better able to indicate the degree to which their feelings toward writing have shifted as a result of an experience. See Allen, 2004.

³ This dimension is best assessed through an examination of reflective work completed during the course (see Yancey, 2000); however, some portfolios were submitted without reflective materials developed as a part of the work of ENGL 121.

been asked to engage in the kind of systematic, complex analysis that they are introduced to in ENGL 121 and that will be at the heart of their college work. Thus, students are *introduced* to this kind of work in ENGL 121; however, they have not “mastered” this work by the completion of the course because “mastery” takes place over years and with considerably more practice and support than can be provided in one, 14-week course.

Possible Avenues for Professional/Programmatic Development

The results of this assessment point to several possibilities for professional/programmatic assessment. These might include:

- Work on developing connections between students’ ideas and theoretical and research-based texts. While this kind of work is challenging for instructors and students alike, it is crucial for students’ further development as writers, both for the academy and beyond. Some of this pedagogical development can take place in instructor workshops, while other kinds of significant engagement in these processes would lead to large-scale changes (such as a two-semester composition sequence for all students, or increased support for writing-intensive courses in the disciplines, for example).
Revision of the 120/121 outcomes.
- Work on reflection/demonstration of writers’ increasing knowledge of/familiarity with their writing processes.
- Continued attention to disciplinary conventions within the context of genres of writing/text. Again, through both curricular development and instructor engagement, the writing program can facilitate improvement in this area.