



## English Composition | 2014-2015 Assessment Report

1. Please give a brief overview of the assessment data you collected this year. This can be in any form you feel is appropriate, such as a table, a short narrative of results, statistical analysis, highlighting findings that were of particular interest, etc. You will, however, likely want to submit results for each learning outcome you assessed this year individually.

For 2014-15, English Composition assessed Programmatic Outcome #1: Structure - Students will formulate an appropriate thesis and support that thesis with unified, coherent, appropriately developed paragraphs set in a logical order.

Our method of doing this was to use embedded assessment: during the Fall 2014 semester, all teachers of traditional (as opposed to online) English Comp classes asked the first student on their roster, in alphabetical order, if his or her paper on the last major writing assignment in the course could be used for program assessment, with all individual identifiers removed. If that student declined, teachers asked the next person on the roster, and so on, until we got one paper from each class. All students whose papers were used signed an informed consent form. One student paper either wasn't turned in or was misplaced, but we had a sample of 20 papers, representing all but one of the 21 traditional sections of College Writing or Expository Writing taught on campus during the Fall 2014 semester.

We created a rubric (included here as Attachment A) to evaluate the essays for structure. The rubric broke structure into five components: thesis, unity, coherence, development, and organization. It then asked readers to rate each essay on a 1-4 scale (with 4 as the best) for each component. A committee of four English Composition teachers (Kristin Denslow, Dianne Gordon, Brian Sutton, and Linda Toonen) read the essays, evaluated them according to the rubric, and met to compare results.

The averages for the 20 essays as a group, by component, were as follows:

- Thesis - 2.64
- Unity - 2.68
- Coherence - 2.54
- Development - 2.49
- Organization - 2.60

Obviously, these numerical results are practically meaningless in and of themselves: there's very little range in average from among the five traits, with all coming out somewhere in the middle of the 1-4 scale. And examining the numerical results from other perspectives generally yields only similarly banal and predictable results:

- Although the scorers were given no specific training or instructions for applying the rubric, all ended up with variations on a bell-shaped curve: 14% of the individual scores were 4s, 40% were 3s, 36% were 2s, and 10% were 1s.
- Similarly, the individual essays fell roughly into a bell-shaped curve: three essays received at least 80% 3s or 4s for all components combined (one received all 3s and 4s), while two received at least 80% 1s or 2s, and the others more or less clustered in the middle.
- There was a fairly strong amount of inter-rater agreement: for any particular component of any particular essay, all four scorers were within 1 point of each other 53% of the time. This seemed a high rate of agreement given the absence of specific training or directions for scoring, the difficulties in defining and separating out the components of structure, the fact (discussed in more detail later in the essay) that we were at times comparing apples with oranges in that the components in the rubric weren't always appropriate for the demands of the apparent writing assignments, and the fact that committee members didn't have copies of the writing assignments themselves and had to infer what the assignments must have been from the completed papers.
- Despite the largely unremarkable nature of the numerical results, committee members affirmed the worth of the assessment activity: reading a range of papers responding to assignments given by almost all the teachers in the English Composition program and evaluating them through the lens of the rubric. And they did feel they could draw significant lessons from that activity. In fact, when the committee met, its members spent very little time dealing with the numbers, instead devoting nearly all the meeting to comparing less quantifiable individual impressions and general conclusions based on their reading. While any summary of such conclusions is inevitably subjective, here is our best attempt:
- While the essays were far from perfectly organized, the overwhelming majority demonstrated that the student writers possessed at least a basic knowledge of essay structure. Except in cases where the assignment (as inferred from the papers) called for a different structure, nearly all had a discernible introduction, body, and conclusion, and nearly all had a discernible thesis statement or controlling question, almost always placed at the end of the introduction. It would seem that by the time they complete an English Composition course at UWGB, most of our students are prepared to respond at least adequately to the many academic assignments calling for introduction-body-conclusion essays.
- But the essays seemed less consistent regarding structure of the body portion itself. It should be noted that the rubric itself contained very little provision for evaluating the logic behind the sequencing of body paragraphs: the description for a 4 in Coherence states Ideas within the essay flow because of effective, smooth, and logical transitions, suggesting that flow is simply a matter of choosing effective transitions, while the description for a 4 in Organization states Ideas are easily followed because the essay is logically organized, with an easily discernible introduction, body, and conclusion, suggesting that simply following introduction-body-conclusion format assures a logical organization. But some committee members observed that in a number of the essays, the body paragraphs seemed somewhat modular, unrelated to paragraphs before or after them other than in the sense of Here's another thing about [overall topic of essay]. And the order of the body paragraphs in many of these cases seemed almost random, or in a few cases logic-defying, as in a problem-solution paper in which a paragraph about

the causes of the problem was placed after paragraphs about the effects of and possible solutions to the problem. One committee member also noted that even in papers with clear introduction-body-conclusion structure, some body paragraphs seemed to contain information extraneous to the central point, or even the overall goal, of the paper.

- Committee members also noted that the rubric (which most of them had helped to create), with its emphasis on thesis statements, transitions, and introduction-body-conclusion format, didn't always seem adequate for evaluating how well an essay's structure responded to the demands of the student's assignment. All UWGB English Composition teachers do cover such fundamental essay-writing elements as thesis statement, transitions, and introduction, body, and conclusion, but they don't necessarily design every writing assignment in the course to elicit an introduction-body-conclusion paper organized around a thesis statement. For example, when we read the papers, it became clear that:
  - Four essays in the sample were written in response to an assignment requiring that the introduction end with a central question which the essay would explore, rather than with a thesis statement.
  - Two essays were written in response to an assignment requiring students to produce papers in traditional experimental-report format: an abstract, followed by an introduction reviewing relevant literature and introducing the study the student carried out, followed by a methods section (including subheaded subsections about participants, materials, and methods or procedures), a results section, and a discussion/conclusion section including suggestions for further research. The headings expected in this genre make conventional transitions largely superfluous, the genre's requirement that the study's results are not discussed (other than in the abstract) until near the end undercuts the expectation of a thesis statement at the end of the introduction, and the expected structure doesn't necessarily lead to a paper in which everything is unified in support of a thesis statement.
  - Four essays were written in response to an assignment focusing on a historically significant photograph, the events behind the photograph, and the ethics of publicly displaying photos involving violence or human tragedy. The assignment required students to begin with an abstract, followed by a section headed Part One: Introduction, briefly introducing the historical event behind the photograph and then describing the photograph in considerable visual detail, followed by a section headed Part Two: [The Event] in History and Photographs, going into more detail about the historical event and describing immediate reaction to the photograph in the media, followed by a section headed Part Three: Critical Response to [Title of Photograph], dealing largely with the influence of the photograph on governmental policies and later events, followed by a section headed Part Four: Personal Reflections on [Title of Photograph], in which students explained why they selected the particular photograph they selected and how completing the assignment had affected their thinking about the photograph, the historical event, and issues related to photography, the media, and history. The teacher who had given this assignment, who was a member of this committee, stated that in grading papers for this assignment she largely evaluates each segment of the essay as a separate, self-contained unit. While this assignment is admirable in requiring a range of styles of writing and ways of thinking from its students, the resulting essays simply cannot be

adequately evaluated according to a rubric designed for introduction-body-conclusion essays unified around a narrowly focused thesis statement.

- Committee members expressed appreciation for the diversity of assignments given by UWGB English Composition teachers, assignments which generally seemed carefully constructed to encourage a variety of research techniques, writing styles, and intellectual perspectives, and to evaluate students' control over those techniques, styles, and perspectives. At the same time, some members expressed concern that some assignments seemed so elaborately detailed as to homogenize the resulting essays to a considerable degree, like subtle variations on a theme. Some assignments in effect outlined the paper for the student; in another case, the instructor had selected in advance the sources the students were required to cite, sources carefully chosen to give the students a clear opposing viewpoints summary of the arguments for and against a particular issue, thus completing arguably the most intellectual challenging tasks in research-based writing before the students began received the assignment handout. Some saw this as particularly troubling because these were not early-in-the-semester assignments in a scaffolding sequence, building toward later assignments that gave students greater freedom; they were the capstone, the final assignments the students completed in the course. At the same time, the committee members also knew from experience as Writing Center tutors that many UWGB teachers in varied academic disciplines design similarly detailed writing assignments, suggesting that practice in fulfilling detailed writing assignments may help prepare English Composition students for assignments across the curriculum. And even beyond those assignments that are specific to UWGB, genres of writing from the sonnet to the lab report impose a detailed, even somewhat rigid, structure on authors, so that highly specific assignments in English Composition may serve to educate students about the importance of recognizing and satisfying the demands of genre conventions. In any event, whether expressing appreciation for the diversity of the assignments or concerns that some assignments might unduly deprive students of freedom and responsibility for their own writing-related choices, all members of the committee came away increasingly aware of the crucial roles assignments (and genres in general) play in student writing, and increasingly aware that a student essay cannot be evaluated independently from the context of the classroom and the assignment.
- While committee members, as noted earlier, were somewhat concerned with organization of sequences of paragraphs, most were significantly more satisfied with the organization of individual paragraphs. Indeed, the Unity (meaning paragraph unity) component received the highest numerical average of any of the five components examined in the rubric. But at least one committee member was concerned that in a significant number of essays, transition sentences were placed at the end of the old paragraph rather than at the beginning of the new one. For example, a paragraph about experimental evidence that genetically modified foods harmed laboratory animals would end with a sentence like "Besides harming animals, genetically modified foods may pose a danger to humans as well, followed by a new paragraph about potential dangers to humans from genetically modified foods. This approach to transitions, which not only causes a unity problem in the first paragraph but also causes the second paragraph's topic sentence to appear in a different paragraph from its supporting material, was fairly common in the essays.
- Committee members also noted that it was sometimes difficult to assess an essay's structure because of problems with Standard English: either the errors were so frequent

and so serious that it was difficult to concentrate on the structure, or the errors were so serious that it was nearly impossible to determine what a sentence (or even a longer passage) was intended to mean, thus preventing evaluation of the intended role of that sentence (or that longer passage) within the structure of the essay. More than one committee member wondered aloud if all the writers were native speakers of English. (The names on the informed consent forms gave no indication of second-language writers, although of course this is not a sure indicator.) A few of the errors allowed occasions for laughter, as when an essay contained the observation that if not for certain labor reforms, today we might still be working in dangerous environments, long shifts with little breaks, and low wages. Some were cause for exasperation that students often don't bother to proofread, as when each page of an essay began with the running head Saigon Execution Rcherrch Project. But most were occasions for sober reflection on the difficult task of teaching writing, as in the papers—definitely in the minority but not at all isolated instances—in which we encountered passage after passage more or less like the following: Who has the right decision? Who Knows, but decisions beside, hunters agree on this statement. There is not as many deer in Wisconsin as there was when I was younger or (from a different paper), The farms has become into factories that produces meat and do not care about the welfare of the animal. The animals are not acknowledged as living beings they are seen as things there are produced to feed humans.

- Perhaps the committee members' reaction resulted because this random set of papers simply happened to contain a disproportionate number of essays with severe sentence-level problems. But perhaps some of the reaction reflects a different phenomenon: perhaps during the semester our long hours of grading largely immunize us against surprise at massive problems with Standard English, and our relationships with individual students cause us to view their writing somewhat forgivingly. The committee members were reading anonymous essays written mainly for other people's assignments, and they were reading them a couple of weeks after the Spring semester had ended, so that they had grown accustomed to the largely professional-level writing they voluntarily read on their own time. To switch from that kind of writing back to student writing, without an ameliorating relationship with the student writer, can be shocking—but not as shocking as the sudden reminder that we as English Composition instructors are expected to somehow teach so effectively that by the end of a single semester, the students who originally wrote the sentences quoted earlier in this paragraph can now produce acceptable academic prose.
2. How will you use what you've learned from the data that was collected? Some examples are: particular improvements to the curriculum, incorporation of a different pedagogy, a change in assessment plan for the following year in order to obtain more specific feedback, better information or a better response rate, a determined need for faculty development in a particular area, better career alignment, a faculty retreat to discuss the data and how best to use it, etc.

First off, we will disseminate the data to the other teachers in the English Composition program. Every summer, nearly all UWGB English Composition vote on a book related to the teaching of writing that we will all read, and then we get together once a month for a potluck dinner followed by an after-dinner book discussion. And every fall, the week before the semester begins, we have an all-day workshop on topics we select ourselves, all related to the teaching of writing. As it happens, we had already decided that this year we would focus both the Summer

Reading Group and the Fall Workshop on ways we might improve the English Composition program, partly to better position ourselves during the current budget crisis in the UW System. Thus, the Director of Composition will send this assessment report to the other teachers in the program and ask them to read it for discussion at a Summer Reading Group meeting, or at the Fall Workshop, or both.

These discussions doubtless will lead us to consider, both individually and as a unit, possible revisions to our approaches to the teaching of writing. While we cannot predict the exact shape and outcome of the discussions, some possible pedagogical applications of our findings are as follows:

- The expected structure for the essays in the sample varied radically depending on the assignment, and the rubric we had constructed suggests we weren't prepared to encounter this variety. As a unit, we may wish to consider whether we need to embrace a more rhetorically complex definition of good writing, teaching our students to be alert and responsive toward the demands of audience, genre, situation, and assignment, rather than assuming that once we've taught thesis, transitions, and introduction-body-conclusion, our work with essay structure is done. According to numerous published studies of writers learning to write for their majors after succeeding in lower-division classes, or learning to write on the job after succeeding in college, writers often experience negative interference as they attempt to import previously successful techniques into new rhetorical situations where those techniques are no longer appropriate. If the UWGB English Composition program is to be a foundation for writing across the curriculum, our courses may need to explore more deeply and explicitly the rhetorical situation and the roles of genre, especially since the essays in the sample demonstrate that we already ask students to write in highly varied genres.
- The huge influence of assignments on student writing also suggests that we may wish to examine our writing assignments. (We were already planning to examine writing assignments during our Summer Reading Group meetings, partly with the goal of more clearly differentiating between our two English Composition classes, College Writing and Expository Writing.) The need for students to be able to handle a range of genres and expectations suggests that we may wish to make certain that in each of our classes, we construct a sequence of assignments that require students to master varied forms of research, varied styles of writing, and varied ways of thinking. In the essays in our sample, different papers written for the same assignment sometimes had an almost cookie-cutter similarity, suggesting that we might also wish to explore ways each of us, in each of our classes, can negotiate the tension between providing students with the security of clear, detailed expectations on one hand, and granting students the freedom to find their own voices and make their own meanings on the other.
- Although our rubric contained little or no provision for examining how ideas within the body of a paper were organized, committee members noted that those ideas often seemed to be presented in random or even illogical order. While most UWGB English Composition teachers probably will not want to start teaching the traditional outline, as a unit we may wish to consider how we might help students learn to structure sequences of related ideas more logically and clearly. To improve students' performance in this area, we may also wish to consider ways we might help students learn to read assignments more analytically, ask the right questions of their sources, and recognize and respect the fact that good writing emerges from a complex process, one requiring considerable time and effort.

- Given the frequency with which students placed their transitional sentences, and thus sometimes even their topic sentences, into the wrong paragraph, we may wish to consider emphasizing to our students the close interrelationship between transitional sentences and topic sentences, and thus the necessity for placing them at the start of the new paragraph.
- The rather stunning frequency of serious lapses from Standard English in the sample essays should remind us that even though we rightly prefer to focus primarily on higher order concerns and even though empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated the inefficacy of traditional grammar and punctuation exercises as a method of improving writing even at the sentence level, we cannot simply pretend sentence-level problem are not a serious issue in many, perhaps most, student essays. We may need to consider ways to (gently) help some of our students realize that they have serious problems in this regard and that resources are available—the Writing Center, for example, or even our own office hours—for helping them with these problems.
- Finally, if this assessment procedure truly leads to a fruitful reexamination of elements of our individual and unit-wide approaches to the teaching of writing, then our discussions also should ultimately lead us to consider what we should focus on during our next self-assessment. While it is impossible to know what the English Composition teachers will decide to assess next, the current assessment suggests a few possibilities:
  - Assessment of our writing assignments themselves, both in terms of distinguishing College Writing from Expository Writing and in terms of each teacher examining what he or she is requiring of students in a given assignment and throughout the semester.
  - Assessment of how effectively our students locate, comprehend, and appropriately use sources in academic disciplines across the curriculum. Even though we were evaluating structure during our discussion, committee members more than once commented on the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of the sources a student used, the extent to which students did or did not seem to have comprehended those sources, students' varying success at selecting appropriate material from sources to support their points, students' varied skill levels at moving gracefully into and out of source material within a paragraph, the extent to which the students' essays did or did not adhere to expected format for in-text citations and a list of references, and so forth.
  - Students' control of Standard English and of sentence-level concerns. We may be reluctant to approach this issue, partly because we don't wish to see ourselves as simply the "comma police" and partly because it is almost legendarily difficult to help students who have serious difficulties at the sentence level. But we might consider whether it might be useful simply to assess the frequency of various types of errors in student writing, or the frequency with which one encounters in student writing sentences that simply are not worded in such a way as to convey the intended meaning.

**Appendix A - Rubric for Evaluating UWGB English Comp Essays for Structure**

	<b>4 - Excellent</b>	<b>3 - Satisfactory</b>	<b>2 - Needs Improvement</b>	<b>1 - Inadequate</b>
<b>Thesis</b>	Thesis is appropriately placed, narrow in scope, concise, and precise, and controls the essay's ideas and organization.	Thesis is appropriately placed, somewhat narrowed, reasonably clear, and controls the essay's ideas and organization.	The essay does have a discernible thesis, although it may be overly broad or may suffer from difficulties with placement or with wording.	Essay has no discernible thesis, or thesis is not worded clearly, or thesis is worded in such a way that it cannot be adequately supported.
<b>Unity</b>	Central point of each paragraph is easily identifiable and all sentences adhere to the topic of the paragraph in which they are found.	In most paragraphs the central point is clearly identifiable and all sentences adhere to the topic.	Some paragraphs lack a clear central point or contain noticeable lapses in unity.	Most paragraphs lack a clear central point. Lapses in paragraph unity are frequent and readily apparent.
<b>Coherence</b>	Ideas within the essay flow because of effective, smooth, and logical transitions.	Ideas within the essay usually flow because of satisfactory transitions.	Transitions are sometimes adequate to link ideas within the essay.	Essay is sometimes confusing because of lack of transitions or because of illogical transitions.
<b>Development</b>	Central ideas are developed through ample, specific evidence and examples, and central ideas are highlighted through critical, careful analysis and/or insight.	Most central ideas are developed through sufficient evidence and examples, and central ideas are usually highlighted through competent analysis and/or insight.	Central ideas are sometimes developed through adequate evidence and examples, and central ideas are sometimes highlighted through adequate analysis and/or insight.	Central ideas are sometimes presented without support beyond an implicit "This is true because I said so." Analysis and insight are generally absent or illogical.
<b>Organization</b>	Ideas are easily followed because the essay is logically organized, with an easily discernible introduction, body, and conclusion.	Ideas are reasonably clear because the essay is generally well organized, with a discernible introduction, body, and conclusion.	Ideas are generally discernible, and there has been a discernible effort to create an introduction, body, and conclusion, despite problems.	Ideas are difficult to follow, in part because the essay lacks even a rudimentary sense of structure or has an inappropriate structure.