English Composition|2015-2016 Assessment Report

1. Please give a brief overview of the assessment data you collected this year.

Methods

For 2015-16, English Composition assessed Program Outcome #4: "Inquiry—Students will formulate research questions appropriate for the assignment, locate and evaluate appropriate sources, and synthesize material from those sources, while adequately paraphrasing, carefully quoting when appropriate, and correctly citing." More specifically, we assessed the latter portions of Outcome #4: students' skills in paraphrasing, quoting, and citing. *(Note: throughout this report, the word "paraphrase" is used for any source-based passages that did not include quotations, including those usually called "summary" rather than "paraphrase.")* Since it would be virtually impossible to assess how students select sources for paraphrasing and quoting, and it would be enormously time-consuming to check every paraphrase or quotation against the source for accuracy, we instead focused on features readily apparent from the papers themselves: use of signal phrases and other contextualizing material just before the paraphrases or quotations, discussion immediately after the paraphrases or quotations to emphasize the material's significance and relevance to the essay's central point, functionality of citations in providing enough information for readers to look up the cited passages themselves, etc.

During the Fall 2015 semester, all teachers of English Comp classes were requested to ask the tenth student on their roster, in alphabetical order, if his or her last source-based writing assignment in the course could be used for program assessment, with all individual identifiers removed. If that student declined, teachers were to ask the next person on the roster, and so on, until we got one paper from each class. During the Spring 2016 semester the same process was followed, except using the fifteenth student on each roster. (We vary the place in the roster each semester in order to avoid, over the long haul, a potential statistical bias from any one part of the alphabet, as for example with the large number of Hmong students named *Vang* or *Xiong.*) Not all teachers were able to provide an essay, particularly from the online classes. Nevertheless, we had a sample of 36 papers (out of 47 English Comp classes in 2015-16).

We created an assessment form (included here as Attachment A) to evaluate the essays for their handling of source material. Because most items on the form were relatively objective, we did not feel that every committee member needed to read every essay. Instead, the four committee members (Debbie Burden, Jenny Ronsman, Brian Sutton, and Linda Toonen) divided up the papers, with each member being responsible for reading nine of the 36 essays and filling out an assessment form for each essay.

Results

- The papers ranged in length from about 3½ to about 13 pages, with the median length being 5 pages and the mean 6 pages. The variety stems in part from the fact that the papers responded to a wide variety of assignments from a wide variety of teachers.

- The papers contained anywhere from 3 to 32 source-based passages, with a median of 13 and a mean of slightly over 14. They ranged from an average of .67 source-based passages per page to an average of 7.4 source-based passages per page, with a median of 2 per page and a mean of about 2.4 per page. *(Note: if a paper used the same source for a number of sentences in succession, we scored this as a single "source-based passage," even if the source was parenthetically cited multiple times in the passage.)* It appeared that students seem to have internalized an implicit norm of about two to three source-based passages per page.

- Paraphrases outnumbered quotations in the papers by a margin of over 3 to 1. Only 9 of the 36 papers contained more quoted passages than paraphrased passages, and most of these were shorter-than-average papers with fewer-than-average source-based passages. More than half the papers contained 10 or more paraphrased passages, while more than half contained 2 or fewer quoted passages, with 10 of the 36 papers containing no quotations at all. Clearly, most students are confident enough in their handling of source material to paraphrase, rather than feeling they must rely exclusively on quotations.

- The papers introduced source-based material with signal phrases 79% of the time. (A *signal phrase*, in its simplest form, is a phrase such as "According to Smith" prior to a paraphrase or quotation.) Sixteen of the papers used signal phrases for every instance of source-based material, while only one paper used no signal phrases at all. Evidently, early all students understood that source-based material is normally introduced with a signal phrase.

- The assessment forms also asked the committee members to tabulate the number of times material just before the source-based passages provided a clear context for the passages *(e.g., "By the 1920s, however, attitudes had shifted radically. Smith, for example, . . .")*, and how many times material right after the source-based passages provided analysis or contextualizing of the source material *(e.g., "One implication of these statistics for students trying to decide on a major is that . . ."),* rather than immediately moving on to a different subtopic or simply repeating the source material in different words. This is more subjective than simply counting up quotations, of course, but both in their tallies and in discussion among committee members, the sense was that most students were able to contextualize, and sometimes to analyze, their source material, except in cases where the assignment did not call for these skills. (Five of the papers were written for a teacher whose assignment handout explicitly states that the body paragraphs are to consist almost entirely of source material, thus leaving little room for students to contextualize or analyze that material.) In a few cases, committee members felt that a particular paper tried *too* hard to discuss source material after that material had been presented, merely stating the obvious when the source material itself was clear and could stand on its own.

- In two-thirds of the essays (24 out of 36), every instance of source-related material was accompanied by sufficient information (from signal phrases, parenthetical citations, and the bibliography) to allow readers to find the relevant passage from the source, and in half of

the other 12 there was only a single instance where insufficient information was provided to find a source (for example by failing to provide page numbers for references to specific passages from multiple-page journal articles). Admittedly, 5 of the 36 papers usually did *not* provide enough information to look up the relevant passage, often because of serious defects in the bibliography. But most students did not seem to have difficulty with providing source information through signal phrases and citations, although admittedly committee members did not look up the actual sources to make certain that the information provided in the papers was always accurate.

The remaining items on the assessment form asked about relatively specialized techniques, most of which the students either hadn't yet learned or else had no occasion to use in these papers:

- Slightly fewer than half of the papers ever mentioned a source's credentials in the signal phrase (*e.g.*, *"As former American Shakespeare Association president David Bevington has noted," or more simply "According to noted Shakespearean scholar David Bevington . . .")*. Although one teacher explicitly asked her students to avoid including credentials because the students were writing in a genre—the social-science report—that normally identifies authors only by last name and year of publication, that teacher's papers constituted only 4 of the 36 in the sample. Committee members generally felt that many of the papers would have benefited from more explicit evidence of the source's credentials, thus making source material more authoritative. Committee members also noted that the papers were likelier to mention a source credentials when it was an indirect source; that is, if an article by Smith quoted the views of Jones, papers were likelier to mention Jones' credentials (perhaps because Smith mentioned them). This may have been in part because at least one teacher, whose assignments accounted for 5 of the papers in the sample, asks her students to include the credentials for indirect sources but discourages them from including credentials for the authors of the sources themselves. Thus, it appears that students generally do have the sentence-level skills to include a source's credentials, if they see a rhetorical (or grade-related) advantage in doing so.

- Only 12 of the 36 papers ever combined quoted material with the student's own sentence structure (*e.g., The advertisers then sought a "symbol of virility" that would exemplify the "masculinity, ruggedness, and intensity of pleasure" associated with the Marlboro brand*) rather than the quotation being an entire sentence or more by itself, accompanied only by a signal phrase. About one-quarter of the quotations in the entire sample used this "blended structure format." Given that this structure is often a characteristic of stronger research papers, some committee members were a bit disappointed at its lack of prevalence.

- Only 7 of the 36 papers contained quotations long enough to require block-quotation (also called long-quotation) format—indenting from the left-hand margin and not using quotation marks except in the case of quotations *within* the longer quotation. Three of those 7 used block-quotation format, while the other 4 did not. One student also used block-quotation format for a quotation that wasn't long enough to require it. Committee members largely encouraged by the infrequency of long quotations, since overreliance on long quotations is usually considered a sign of weakness in a research paper.

Discussion

While college teachers in general, and English Comp teachers in particular, often moan about the state of student writing, especially right after having evaluated a group of student essays, in this case all four committee members were generally pleased with the sample essays in terms of the specific elements we were evaluating. Nearly all the students used signal phrases regularly; most varied their signal phrases to avoid monotony, and chose appropriate verbs to indicate authorial action; nearly all students, in nearly all cases, chose source material that was appropriate to the context within the paper and to the point the student was trying to make; most students avoided overreliance on direct quotations, and while we didn't check against the sources to verify the accuracy of paraphrases, the paraphrased material was almost always clear; direct quotations were generally relatively brief, with very few block quotations (or quotations long enough that they *should* have been in block-quotation format) and with at least a significant minority of students demonstrating the ability to combine brief quotations with their own sentence structure; about 85% of the students, in all or nearly all cases, provided enough information via signal phrases, parenthetical citations, and their bibliographies, for readers to readily find the appropriate passage from the source; and most of the sources cited appeared to be appropriate ones for college-level writing, rather than some of the less reliable material that is so readily available online.

Of course, there was also room for improvement, particularly in certain areas. Committee members agreed that while at least half of the students were reasonably skilled at using the material just before and/or after the source material to provide context for the source material and to discuss that material's implications, a significant number of students had problems with this or omitted it altogether. Committee members felt that the papers were usually more successful at contextualizing source material in the lead-ins to the source material, rather than in the sentences immediately after the source material. After the source material, committee members observed, there was sometimes a "Goldilocks effect": some students provided too little explanation, leaving the significance of the source material less clear than it could've been, while others simply restated in different words what the source material clearly said, or drew conclusions that didn't seem logically justified by the course material, thus adding unnecessary commentary to source material that, in many cases, would have been better served by being allowed to stand on its own. Committee members also commented on an occasional choppiness when a paper moved rapidly from source to source, and also noted that many papers would have benefited from more often providing sources' credentials, in order to establish the authoritative nature of the sources.

In addition, although we were evaluating essays for their handling of source materials, committee members all felt that many of the papers revealed significant problems with Standard English. In many cases, these problems seemed to stem not only from unfamiliarity with certain conventions of punctuation and grammar but from inattentiveness: typographical errors such as missing words, as well as other errors that students would have caught simply by reading their papers aloud. While Standard English was not the subject of this year's assessment, our reactions may suggest an area for exploration in future assessment projects.

Finally, committee members frequently commented on how strongly the assignment influenced an individual paper's handling of source material. Three examples:

- As mentioned earlier, one teacher required that the body paragraphs be composed almost exclusively of source material. In the five papers for that teacher's classes, source material was used more than three times as frequently as in the other 31 papers (an average of 6.5 passages per page vs. an average of 1.9 passages per page). At the same time, in the five papers for that teacher's classes, only about 10% of the instances of source-based passages were judged to be accompanied by "framing sentences" contextualizing or analyzing implications of source material, with no instances of "framing sentences" at all in the body paragraphs, whereas "framing sentences" occurred with about 75% of the source-based passages in the other 31 essays. Besides the heavy emphasis on source material, this teacher's assignment involved an informative rather than a persuasive aim, thus limiting the need for the students to add contextualizing material to advance an argumentative point; in addition, the teacher placed great emphasis on topic sentences as a means of contextualizing the source material that comprised the remainder of the paragraph, thus arguably rendering "framing sentences" somewhat redundant. Thus the assignment, if completed skillfully, still resulted in clear, coherent use of source material, but contextualized in a noticeably different way from source material in other teachers' assignments.

- In the three papers written for another teacher, nearly every body paragraph cited exactly one source and cited it exactly once. (The single exception was one body paragraph from one paper, citing two sources.) Each of the three papers cited a total of six sources altogether. Clearly, the students were responding to specific expectations of the assignment, expectations unlikely to occur outside this teacher's classroom.

- Two teachers had assigned papers within the experimental-report genre: abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusions, references. Because papers in this genre typically assume an audience of specialists in the field, sources' credentials are almost never included in the signal phrases, since specialists in the field would generally be familiar with the sources' credentials already. Not surprisingly, papers written for these teachers never provided sources' credentials.

Committee members suggested that we English Comp teachers (and others who give writing assignments) should "be clear that the rules we give our students regarding the smaller details of source integration are NOT universal, but dependent on genre and instructor expectations." (The quotation is from a committee member's email message to the assessment committee chair; all caps for "NOT" were in the original.) Committee members also suggested that we English Comp teachers should have a departmental discussion of the guidelines we give our students on issues such as quotation versus paraphrase, integration of multiple sources within a paragraph versus use of only a single source in a paragraph, etc. Certainly, we need to make clear how genre conventions, and sometimes an individual teacher preferences, can influence expectations for a particular assignment. Beyond that, if a teacher's assignments require approaches students will never encounter again and may need to "unlearn" in other classes, then the teacher might wish to reconsider elements of the assignment.

Still, we should end this response by reemphasizing the fact that on the whole, all committee members were pleasantly surprised by how well most students performed in the specific areas we were assessing. But not only did the majority of papers demonstrate the basic competencies we sought, but occasionally we received the almost electric pleasure of reading a passage like the following, from a paper about cheating in high school:

> Each time a student cheats, he or she takes away some of the hard work critical to earning a diploma, thereby decreasing its value. However, this is only at a high school level. What happens when high school ends? Galloway suggests that the same habits "remain prevalent in college" (379), and another study presented by Bing, Davidson, Vitell, Ammeter, Garner, et al, suggests that the practices will be carried into the workplace as well (28). If a solution to this epidemic is not applied soon, morally incorrect behaviors will steer the direction of society.

The sentences before the source-material passage contextualize the source material and align it with the paper's central point, although "However, this is only at a high school level" would be better reworded as something like "And the problem of cheating is not limited to high schools"; the source material is accompanied by appropriate signal phrases and parenthetical citations; the student smoothly integrates a brief quoted passage into her own sentence structure and seamlessly combines material from a source about cheating in college with material from a different source about cheating in the workplace; and the sentence after the source material clearly states the larger implications of the source material from the student's perspective. Jeremiads about the sad state of student writing have become so common that it's almost shocking to say this, but it's true: the vast majority of the students displayed competence in the specific skills we were assessing, and some, like the one quoted above, were *really good at this stuff*!

2. How will you use what you've learned from the data that was collected?

The Director of English Composition will make this assessment report available to all members of the unit. As already discussed in the response to item #1, the data suggest several topics the English Composition teachers should discuss at a department-wide discussion, as well as several topics the teachers should cover when they discuss writing assignments with their students. Since these are already described in some detail in the response to item #1, they need not be repeated here.

Almost all the UWGB English Composition teachers get together once a month during the summer for the Summer Reading Group, a series of potluck dinners followed by after-dinner discussion of a book related to the teaching of writing. In addition, the week before Fall-semester classes begin, the English Composition teachers hold a daylong workshop dealing with the teaching of writing. Part of the after-dinner discussion during at least one Reading Group meeting, and probably a portion of the Fall Workshop, will be devoted to discussing the assessment data and its implications for the teaching of writing.

Essay Assessment Form

Essay Number_____   Name of Assessor_____

1. The paper was written for (circle one):   College Writing Expository Writing

2. Approximate length of paper, in pages, excluding the Works Cited/References list: _____

3. Total number of passages involving paraphrase or summary but *not* quotation? _____

4. Total number of quotations: _____
(Note: If the student has more than one brief quotation within a single sentence—e.g., *The advertisers then sought a "symbol of virility" that would exemplify the "masculinity, ruggedness, and intensity of pleasure" associated with the Marlboro brand*—count it as just one quotation.)

5. How many of the passages from #3 and #4 combined were introduced by a signal phrase?
_____

6. In cases where an author was being cited for the first time in the paper, in how many cases did the signal phrase provide at least some information about the author's credentials or background (e.g., *According to Harvard Law professor Mary Smith, . . .)*? _____ out of _____ first-time citations

7. How many of the signal phrases or other lead-in materials provided a clear context for the source material? (e.g., *Smith provides an opposing viewpoint, stating . . .*)? _____

8. For the quotations, in how many cases did the student blend quoted material into the student's own sentence structure (e.g., the Marlboro example in #4), rather than the entire sentence (or more) being a quotation, along with perhaps a signal phrase? _____

9. How many of the quotations were long enough (more than four lines, MLA; 40 words, APA) that they should be in block-quotation form? _____
Of those long quotations, how many actually *were* in block-quotation form? _____

10. Out of the total from #3 and #4 combined, in how many cases did a signal phrase and/or a parenthetical citation provide enough information (along with the references page) for a reader to look up the quoted passage, including providing the page number if the source was print or .pdf?
_____
(Note: for the papers which lack a references list, but which the teacher tells us originally had a references list, we should probably just assume that if a page number isn't listed, the source wasn't print or .pdf.)

11. In how many cases did the material right after the quotation, paraphrase, or summary provide some sort of analysis or contextualizing of the source material (e.g. "One implication of Smith's statement is that . . ." "The statistics demonstrate . . ."), rather than just moving on as if the source material weren't there or largely just repeating it in somewhat different words? _____