Assessing College-Ready Writing

Assessing College Writing on Its Own Terms

The Essential Questions

- What makes a piece of writing college level?
- What differentiates college-level writing from high school-level writing?
- If it is true that all politics are local, is it also true that standards related to college-level writing must be local, too?
- Shouldn’t a roomful of college English professors be able to come to some kind of consensus about what college-level writing is?
- Are variations in standards from campus to campus, state to state, and teacher to teacher something we ought to pay some attention to (or worry about)? Or should we consider these variations insignificant given the complexity of what we are teaching?

“Ms. L., it was clear to me, had never been on the Internet. She quite possibly had never sat in front of a computer. The concept of a link was news to her. She didn’t know that if something was blue and underlined, you could click on it. She was preserved in the amber of 1990, struggling with the basic syntax of the World Wide Web. She peered intently at the screen and chewed a fingernail. She was flummoxed.

“I had responsibilities to the rest of my students, so only when the class ended could I sit with her and work on some of the basics. It didn’t go well. She wasn’t absorbing anything. The wall had gone up, the wall known to every teacher at every level: the wall of defeat and hopelessness and humiliation, the wall that is an impenetrable barrier to learning. She wasn’t hearing a word I said.”


“Note: most writing by professors in the hard sciences also employs highly specialized language which is impenetrable to people outside the respective field. The difference is, the jargon they use tends to have precise and widely-agreed-upon meaning; the meaning of a physics or biology paper is almost always crystal-clear to another physicist or biologist.

“Whereas, when a literary scholar writes her latest paper about ‘Sexting as Literature: Hegemonic Discourse in Precritical Theories of the Postcolonial Body-Text,’ no other ‘scholar’ in her field has the foggiest clue what she’s trying to say. And usually the author doesn’t, either.”

(Michael Ellsberg, “Why Trying to Learn Clear Writing in College is Like Trying to Learn Sobriety in a Bar,” Forbes.com, July 31, 2011, 1)
Reporter’s cable to Cary Grant, while trying to determine the actor’s age: How old Cary Grant?

Cary Grant’s reply: Just fine, thank you. How young reporter?

“Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller.”

— George Orwell, 1984
“It turns out that the style of writing you’ll pick up from your humanities and social science professors in college, and which you will be encouraged to write, is so formulaic, that passable versions of it can be produced automatically by a computer program.”

(Ellsberg, 2)

“A Modest Proposal”

“I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that of the hundred and twenty thousand children already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine; and my reason is, that these children are seldom fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages; therefore one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom; always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table.” —Jonathan Swift
Statement of Principles, UConn FE Program

English 1010 emphasizes the intellectual purposes and discursive formations of academic writing while English 1011 emphasizes the intellectual purposes and aesthetic power of literary texts. Both seminars, however, engage students in the work of academic inquiry through the interpretation of difficult texts, participation in the issues and arguments that animate the texts, and reflection on the significance for academic and general culture and for themselves of the critical work of reading and writing. ...

FE Continued

“In addition to achieving some specific writing goals, such as the ability to write critical essays that demonstrate a thoughtful engagement with complex readings of some length that reflect points of view on material new for the students, the seminars are designed to help students develop, through revision and reflection, an understanding of themselves as writers and thinkers. ...

“[T]he seminars should encourage students to think of themselves as participants—as they, in fact, are—in a collaborative process of questioning and discovery, at times working with and at other times working against the views and voices in the readings and among other students in the class. One goal of the seminars, then, is to provide a context within which students can work with academic texts, texts that constitute the work and the voices of the university. The students’ task is to enter into the conversation. To do this, they must see for themselves that the meaning of a text, no matter the discipline, is not contained exclusively in the words on the page, like peaches in a hermetically sealed container, but that meaning exists only through readers’ active participation.”
“Rhetoric from oldest tradition has been the only advocate of a claim to truth that defends the probable, the eikos (verisimilar), and that which is convincing to the ordinary reason, against the claim of science to accept as true only what can be demonstrated and tested.”  

(Anthony Petruzzi “Articulating a Hermeneutic Theory of Writing Assessment,” 318, emphasis mine.)

The UConn General Education Oversight Committee (GEOC) Guidelines stipulate the following goals for general education:

“The purpose of general education is to ensure that all University of Connecticut undergraduate students become articulate and acquire intellectual breadth and versatility, critical judgment, moral sensitivity, awareness of their era and society, consciousness of the diversity of human culture and experience, and a working understanding of the processes by which they can continue to acquire and use knowledge.”
Key Assumptions

We did outcomes-based assessment that focused on what students accomplished as writers in the course, including growth from first to final papers.

The process was led by faculty, driven by dialogue, and open to revision.

We tried to be future-oriented—aimed at sparking evidence-driven discussions about teaching learning and curriculum design in the participating departments. Our evaluation is intended to be more formative than summative.

The process was attentive to the complex nature of writing. We approached writing less as a set of discrete skills that lend themselves to atomized testing than as a complex, context sensitive mode of learning, communicating, and doing.

We understood academic writing as bound to disciplinary context. Because FE is designed to be cross-disciplinary (or pre-disciplinary), we focused on the disciplinary contexts and cues that came out of the course readings and instructor assignments.

From Theodor Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research”

“In general, the objectivity of empirical social research is an objectivity of the methods, not of what is being investigated. The procedure of operational or instrumental definition generally current in empirical techniques...sanctions the primacy of the method over the object, and ultimately sanctions the arbitrariness of the scientific enterprise itself. The pretense is made to examine an object by means of an instrument of research, which through its own formulation, decides what the object is; in other words, we are faced with a simple circle. The gesture of scientific honesty, which refuses to work with concepts that are not clear and unambiguous, becomes the excuse for superimposing the self-satisfied research enterprise over what is investigated.

The eagerness to quantify immediately even the qualitative findings is not fortuitous. Science wishes to rid the world of the tension between the general and the particular by means of its consistent system, but the world gains its unity from inconsistency.”
FE Assessment Scoring Record [DRAFT 2]

Paper ID: [Redacted]  Score: [Redacted]
Context (ticks): 1096 1034 1011

1 = Unsatisfactory  2 = Minimal Proficiency  3 = Moderate Proficiency  4 = Excellent/Outstanding

A. Thematic Score:

B. Inquiry/Extensive inquiry (writing is used as a mode of discovery or exploration; paper exhibits substantial merit, not merely a superficial knowledge)

C. Thematic Project: An argument and persuasive idea (purpose, thesis, goal, thesis)

D. Critical Engagement: Proposed idea substantiates content with outside reading through not about text, more than citation or support

E. Abstract of Knowledge: Summarizes the domain of the author's expository writing purpose, assignments awareness, analytic awareness

F. Organization and Description: Describes the text, topic relationship between parts

G. Style: Viva, syntax, structure, etc. or grace in language

H. Grammar, Mechanics, and Citation:

I. Assignment:

J. Page Length (not including title page or works cited)

Additional Notes:

Logged:

1/15 5th Assessment Project: Summer 2000
Works Cited


