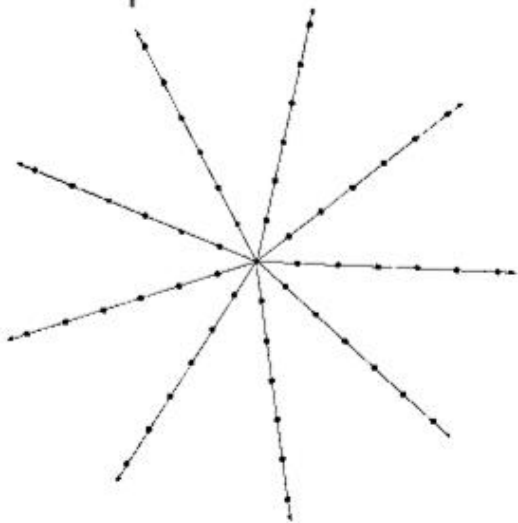


Student Report on the 2006 Core Writing Program Assessment



University of Nevada, Reno

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Introduction

This report explains the 2006 Core Writing Program assessment findings. Program assessment is an evaluative process used to discover how well a program, in this case the Core Writing Program, is meeting its goals. The results of the assessment are used to improve instruction in Core Writing classes such as English 098, 101, and 102. For example, the assessment has helped the Core Writing instructors understand which writing features need to be taught more or taught differently, and which writing features are already being taught successfully.

Why You Care

This report contains two kinds of information that you, as a First Year Composition student at UNR, might find interesting:

- *It describes what Core Writing instructors value in student writing.* The writing feature descriptions used in the assessment illustrate the overall goals of English 102 by reflecting the goals of the many Core Writing Program instructors who contributed to the assessment project.
- *It highlights areas in which first year composition students tend to do well and other areas in which they tend to do less well.*

Reading this report should help you better understand the goals of First Year Composition, especially of English 102. Understanding these goals can help you understand what is expected of you in Core Writing classes. Also, understanding the skills taught in Core Writing may help you see how these skills relate to other college courses you will take.

The Assessment Team

The 2006 assessment was a group project guided by the Director of Core Writing, Dr. Jane Detweiler, and involving many faculty members, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants.

The Assessment Process

Where We Began: Core Writing Program Outcomes

The Core Writing Program outcomes statement for English 102 lists five aims:

1. To read and understand a range of texts—from academic writing in various disciplines (scientific or technical writing)—to imaginative non-fiction and “literary” texts.
2. To comfortably speak and write using the following useful forms: Summary, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation. Plenty of class discussion, group and solo presentations can ensure that everyone is heard.
3. To use speech and writing as tools to understand, express, organize, and communicate what they read and observe.
4. To utilize the incredible varieties of what we call “research”—learning to use library sources (books, periodicals, government documents, Special Collections), as well as living sources (interviews with experts and others, community projects).
5. To recognize and develop written “voices,” from the more formal to the colloquial, and apply them in their appropriate contexts.

While these aims are explained clearly in the outcomes statement, one purpose of assessment is to fine-tune our understanding of the aims by learning more about what Core Writing instructors value in student writing, and how they express those values. Long before the May 2006 portfolio collection, therefore, Dr. Detweiler and a group of graduate student interns used research, a survey, and focus groups to develop the criteria used in the assessment rubric, then ran two test sessions with the rubric to be sure it accurately reflected Core Writing instructors’ values.

This research process, which began in fall 2004 and took nearly two years, yielded nine key features which were scored during the assessment, and three additional comment-only (unscored) features.

What We Looked At: Anonymous Portfolios

The assessment used three student portfolios from each Spring 2006 section of English 102 for a total of 192 portfolios, or 14% of the 1,379 students in 102 that term. In order to protect student privacy, and to make sure assessment readers focused on the Core Writing program rather than on individual students’ work, the assessment team did a few things:

- Randomly selected students from each section to obtain a representative sample of work.
- Assigned each portfolio a randomly generated code number after the random selection was done.
- Removed all identifying information from portfolios, including information that could identify the student, instructor, or section of 102.
- Made sure readers did not score a portfolio if they recognized the writer.

- Compiled student demographic information only in aggregate, not in relation to individual students.

Although some assessment team members had access to some parts of the information, no one in a position to influence the selection had names of students or instructors. Also, because the portfolio codes were randomly generated, there is no way to match a code to a particular student or section of 102. In addition, readers were reminded that scores would provide information about how well the Core Writing Program is meeting its goals and were not judgments of the individual students whose portfolios were being read.

What We Looked For: Features and Scores

We scored nine key features, and also looked at (but did not score) three “comment only” features. Each portfolio was read at least twice, in what it called a “double blind.” This means that the second person reading a portfolio did not know what scores the first reader had given for that portfolio.

Scored Features

We looked at and scored each of the following nine key writing features:

- Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC): Clearly identifies problem being addressed; proposes a clear argument; avoids dichotomies.
- Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN): Understands own beliefs, concepts, and biases; questions own authority of assumptions; locates own position without relying exclusively on the views of others.
- Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH): Ability to recognize, respect, and analyze differing perspectives; questions authority of assumptions; avoids simplistic and reductive frames; sensitive to context for others’ perspectives.
- Rhetorical Awareness (RA): Awareness of audience and purpose; sense of writing situation; displays a conscious awareness of audience; presents a convincing argument to someone; awareness of genre requirements of “correctness.”
- Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF): Ability to express ideas clearly; stays on topic; text holds together; tight; clear process of reasoning; a sense that it is all connected; claims are well reasoned.
- Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD): Avoids commonplaces; “appropriateness”; creates a framework for sources; joins the ongoing conversation; avoids floating quotes.
- Use of Documentation/Citation (DC): Accurate attribution; citation follows MLA/APA style.
- Local Issues (LI): Sentence level, word choice: Concise language; consistent use of word choice; correct use of conventions (i.e. sub/verb agreement); variety of sentence style; minimal errors.
- Global Issues (GI): Overall structure and organization: Ideas are unified & “flow” well; conclusions conclude; introductions introduce; paragraphs relate to thesis; transitions.

The Scores

The scores range from 1 to 6, with 6 being the highest. Half scores were allowed except between 3 and 4 (in other words, a valid score might be a whole number such as 4, or a half number such as 4.5, but it could not be a 3.5).

6 = EXCEEDS the requirements of the feature; problems are minor or nonexistent; demonstrates excellence.

5 = Meets the requirements of the feature WELL: demonstrates competence; some problems.

4 = FULLY meets the requirements of the feature: suggests competence; some problems.

3 = Meets MOST of the requirements of the feature; some areas may seem weak; major and minor problems.

2 = MINIMALLY meets basic requirements of feature; very weak; major and minor problems.

1 = INADEQUATE: does not meet the basic requirements of the feature; not acceptable/incompetent.

Comment-only Features

In addition to the nine scored features, we also looked at and sometimes wrote notes about three comment-only features:

- Requirements of Assignment: Addresses assignment; form and format. General comments regarding how assignments address requirements.
- Overall Portfolio: Sense of the writer (experiments; plays; conscious choices; breaks with convention intentionally; shows engagement); overall impression of the portfolio and writing samples. General comments on your overall impression of the portfolio.
- Anomaly/Outlier: Not applicable to the 102 portfolio assessment; not enough evidence to draw any conclusions. General comments on why assignment(s) cannot be scored or does not seem applicable to assessment.

Results

This section gives the mean (average) scores for each of the nine key writing features, then discusses possible interpretations of these findings.

Scores

The program assessment results indicate that the Core Writing Program is generally successful. The sample mean (average) scores ranged from a low of 3.6 to a high of 4.0, on a scale of 1-6 with 6 as the highest score.

The sample mean scores for each feature are:

Local Issues (LI)	3.9860
Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC)	3.9629
Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF)	3.8831
Rhetorical Awareness (RA)	3.8695
Global Issues (GI)	3.8499
Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD)	3.8085
Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH)	3.7112
Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN)	3.5951
Use of Documentation/Citation (DC)	3.5946

According to the score descriptions used in the assessment:

- 3 means the writing in a portfolio “Meets MOST of the requirements of the feature; some areas may seem weak; major and minor problems.”
- 4 means the writing “FULLY meets the requirements of the feature: suggests competence; some problems.”

In other words, scores ranging from 3.6 to 4 reflect that 102 students are “fully or mostly meeting the requirements of the writing features; they are writing nearly competently or competently.”

That said, the scores show areas where the Core Writing Program can improve. Specifically, the assessment shows that student writing is weakest in areas relating to critical thinking and documenting sources:

- Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH)
- Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN)
- Use of Documentation/Citation (DC)

In other words, features related to critical thinking and research scored the lowest, while more general writing features scored better.

This range is to be expected, given that a serious focus on critical thinking and research begins in English 102, meaning writers had had less time to learn and practice using these writing features by the time of the assessment. This conclusion is supported by the fact that features which are a primary focus in English 098 and 101 (for example, Rhetorical Awareness and Sense of Purpose/Focus) the writing showed more strength.

One of the more interesting findings is that critical thinking features seem to be related to one another. Linear regressions of the assessment data showed significant correlations¹ (over 75%) between the following pairs of features:

- RA (Rhetorical Awareness) and PF (Sense of Purpose/Focus)
- PF (Sense of Purpose/Focus) and GI (General Issues)
- PC (Identification of Problem & Its Complexities) and OTH (Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions)
- RA (Rhetorical Awareness) and SD (Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence)
- PC (Identification of Problem & Its Complexities) and RA (Rhetorical Awareness)
- RA (Rhetorical Awareness) and GI (General Issues)
- PC (Identification of Problem & Its Complexities) and PF (Sense of Purpose/Focus)

It is interesting that certain features appear in several correlations: RA appears in four pairs and PC and PF each appear in three pairs. These correlations, combined with the overall scores for each feature, suggest some possible interpretations.

Interpretation of Strengths

First, student writing showed strength in Rhetorical Awareness (RA), along with strong ability to focus around a clear Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF) and to handle Global Issues (GI) well. These findings suggest that practice in paying careful attention to both audience and purpose helps students produce better-focused, well-organized texts. These results may relate to the Core Writing Program's emphasis on helping students learn to pay attention to their rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, kind of text, immediate context for writing). Core Writing instructors focus on rhetorical situation by using peer response groups, audience profiles, and assignments with carefully specified audiences.

¹ Linear regressions were done by Danelle Clarke of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. As Ms. Clarke points out, correlation does not imply causation. In other words, just because two things tend to happen together does not mean one causes the other. Ms. Clarke provides the example of studying house fires. If x is the amount of damage caused by fire, and y is the number of fire fighters, it is very likely that these two variables would have a strong correlation. However, it would be inappropriate to conclude that the more firefighters are used, the more damage would occur. In this case there would be a hidden/lurking variable (z = size of fire) that would be driving both x and y .

Also, student writing scored very well in the category Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC). This score may relate to strengths in focusing a piece of writing around a clear Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF) and to strength in Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH). These results suggest that being able to set up a complex yet coherent writing task (PC) tends to support the writer's development of a clear, purposeful line of reasoning (PF). Doing well with setting up the writing task (PC) may also encourage writers to honor the complexities in others' perspectives (OTH). Core Writing classes focus on these areas, and that focus appears to help students begin well and carry through purposefully with substantive, complex scholarship.

Interpretation of Weaknesses

Student writing is less strong in areas of writing and critical thinking that are addressed primarily in English 102, such as Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH), Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN), and Use of Documentation/Citation (DC).

OTH and OWN

Because students have had only a few months to practice these scholarly habits, one could expect these writers to show somewhat less mastery these areas. Although treating the view of others fully and fairly is addressed to a degree in 101, its heaviest emphasis occurs in English 102, where students must learn to find, evaluate, and integrate into their arguments the views of others.

Also, Core Writing instructors who looked at the assessment results suggested that these relative weaknesses are probably connected to students' difficulties with reading college-level texts, and with the specific kinds of critical reading required while doing researched writing.

DC

Finally, the lowest score, Use of Documentation/Citation (DC), is interesting because of its contrast with the higher-scoring Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD). This contrast suggests that writers do well at using sources, but have a great deal of difficulty with the *conventions* of attribution, that is, with following the MLA, APA, and/or CBE guidelines.

Although students are introduced to documentation and citation in 101, they do not find and evaluate a number of outside sources as they do in 102. It may be that when writers undertake the substantial intellectual challenges of researching and writing arguments with a large number of scholarly sources, they lose track of managing the finer details of these particular conventions.

Since the assessment found that students have the greatest difficulty with documentation and citation, you may want to pay careful attention and take advantage of opportunities to practice this skill toward the end of English 101 and in 102.

Curricular and Programmatic Responses

“Curricular responses” refers to changes that are happening within Core Writing classes, while “programmatic responses” refers to changes in TA and instructor preparation (e.g., new TA orientation, English 737: College Teaching in Language and Literature, and regular in-service trainings for all Core Writing instructors). In both areas, the changes that will affect you the most will have to do with increased attention to critical thinking, especially in English 098 and 101.

An increased focus on critical thinking means you may be asked to reflect on your own biases and preconceptions, and on how those affect your readings of texts and what you write. This should help create a stronger bridge between English 098 and 101 and English 102. For example, if you are asked in 098 and 101 to think and write more about where your ideas come from, you will be more prepared to think critically about others’ ideas, and more prepared to combine your personal authority with others’ authority, in 102.

In addition, all Core Writing classes will continue to focus on areas which the assessment shows are already strong. In particular, Core Writing classes will also continue to emphasize rhetorical awareness, the writing feature that most strongly correlates with other aspects of student writing. This means that you will be asked to understand the audience, purpose, and context for each piece of writing, and to write in a way that reflects that understanding.

These are not the only goals in Core Writing classes, of course; they are simply the goals that are highlighted by the recent assessment. For more information about course and program goals, please see the Appendix.

Appendix: Further Information

You can find more information about the Core Writing Program in general, about specific Core Writing classes, and about the Core Writing Program assessment on the Core Writing Program web site:

- The Core Writing Program web site: <http://www.unr.edu/cla/engl/cwp/>
- English 098 course information: http://www.unr.edu/cla/engl/cwp/courses/eng_098.htm
- English 101 course information: http://www.unr.edu/cla/engl/cwp/courses/eng_101.htm
- English 102 course information: http://www.unr.edu/cla/engl/cwp/courses/eng_102.htm

Finally, you may contact the English 098 and English 102 Program Coordinators with specific questions. The coordinators' names and email addresses are available on the Core Writing web site, <http://www.unr.edu/cla/engl/cwp/>.