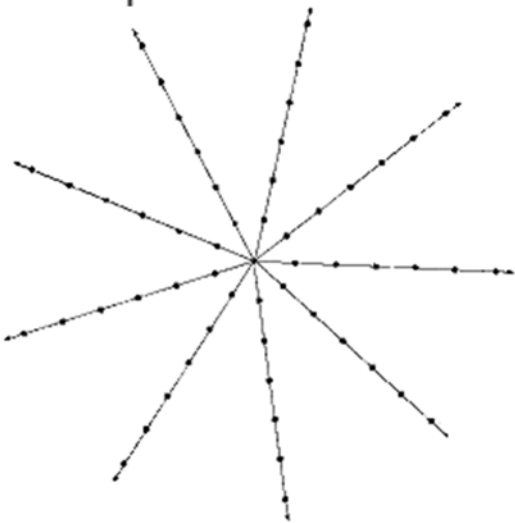


Core Writing Program

Assessment Report

2006



University of Nevada, Reno

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1. Introduction

This report describes the Core Writing Program's 2006 assessment. It begins with contextual information about the University of Nevada, Reno's Core Curriculum and Core Writing Program, especially English 102; explains the assessment team's process for developing and using the assessment tool; describes and analyzes the assessment findings; and discusses implications for teaching in Core Writing and for other disciplines at UNR.

Who This Report is For

This report is intended for several kinds of readers.

Faculty and instructors who teach in Core Writing can use the report to understand the assessment project, start thinking about how to apply the results to their teaching, and find out how they can become involved in the ongoing assessment activities. In particular, the Process section explains how the assessment tool was designed based on information and feedback from UNR Core Writing instructors, and how the language in the assessment tool relates to the Core Writing Program's goals. The Results section, which explains what the assessment found and describes ongoing assessment activities, should be of particular interest to those teaching in Core Writing.

Faculty and instructors in other departments can use the report in a few ways. First, students do significant amounts of writing in classes from disciplines, and faculty who teach writing-intensive classes can learn from this report what kinds of writing features are emphasized in Core Writing. Also, the language used in the assessment tool may be helpful to faculty and instructors whose training is in an area other than writing, but who are interested in finding ways to articulate what they value in student texts. Finally, the extensive process description may be especially useful to other disciplines as a model of one approach to doing a discipline-specific, contextually valid program assessment.

UNR administrators can use the report to find out about assessment results and the actions taking place based on those results. They may also be interested in how the report situates the current assessment within the program's continuing tradition of doing periodic major assessments and of applying assessment findings to teaching practice. Similarly to faculty who are considering how to assess their programs, administrators may find in this report some ideas about how to approach a large-scale programmatic assessment.

UNR students can learn about how the assessment identified what instructors value in student writing and highlighted areas in which students tend to do well and other areas in which they tend to do less well. In addition, the rubric used in the assessment illustrates the overall goals of English 102 by reflecting the goals of the many Core Writing Program instructors who contributed to the development of the rubric and to the assessment project in general. Finally, the report explains upcoming changes to the skills emphasized in First Year Composition as the Writing Program Administrator and Core Writing Program instructors work to improve English 098, 101, and 102. Reading this report should help students better understand the goals of FYC, especially of English 102, and thus help them know what writing skills to focus on.

High school teachers can read about the assessment to gain a clearer understanding of the UNR Core Writing Program values. Although the assessment focused on student portfolios from the sixty-three Spring 2006 sections of English 102, the Core Writing Program sees all of the Core Writing classes (English 098, 101, and 102) as part of a much longer course of study in writing, one that begins during K-12 education and continues throughout the students' college careers.

Curricular and Programmatic Contexts

Assessment takes place in a context of existing curricular objectives at both the institutional and programmatic levels. This section describes the context in which the 2006 Core Writing Program Assessment took place and gives an overview of how the assessment project built on the guidelines present in the Core Curriculum Learning Objectives and the English 102 Course Objectives.

Core Curriculum Learning Objectives

The Core Curriculum Learning Objectives list contains six items, of which the first two are particularly relevant to Core Writing, especially English 102:

1. Compose and communicate effectively in a range of media for a variety of rhetorical and creative purposes.
2. Demonstrate an ability to frame and analyze a problem, find and interpret relevant information, develop and evaluate possible solutions, come to well-grounded conclusions, and craft an appropriate argument, report, application, or other expression of such inquiry.

The other four objectives (see Appendix A: Core Curriculum Learning Objectives) relate more directly to work students do in their majors and in capstone courses, and the Core Writing Program is designed to culminate in English 102 as preparation for further discipline-specific research within students' majors.

English 102 Course Objectives

The Course Objectives for English 102 call for students to:

- Continue and improve the writerly practices learned in 101: prewriting, composing, revising, responding, editing, attending to language and style, and writing with audience and purpose in mind.
- Engage in critical reading and interpretation of a wide range of texts.
- Be able to summarize, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply what they read—both orally and in writing.
- Use writing as a means of understanding, organizing, and communicating what they read.
- Be able to produce a coherent, well-supported argument that gives evidence of critical thinking and careful consideration of alternative viewpoints.

- Recognize, evaluate, and use a variety of information courses: expert people, publications of information agencies, popular and specialized periodicals, professional journals, books, and electronic resources.
- Conduct research that show evidence of the ability to synthesize, evaluate, use, and credit the ideas of others.
- Write coherently, drawing from diverse sources, assimilating information and ideas and producing work that demonstrates the student’s “take” on the material.

Building on the Core Curriculum and English 102 Outcomes

While the Core Curriculum and English 102 objectives are clearly articulated, one purpose of assessment is to fine-tune the course objectives by delving into what Core Writing instructors value and how they express those values. Long before the May 2006 portfolio collection, therefore, Dr. Jane Detweiler and a group of graduate student interns used research, a survey, and focus groups to develop the criteria used in the 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 to be scored during the assessment, and three additional features that assessment readers commented on but did not score. This report explains the process of developing and using the assessment tool, presents the assessment results, and discusses the programmatic and curricular responses being planned.

A Note on the Qualitative and Quantitative Sections of this Report

Because qualitative information is most useful for pedagogical and curricular purposes, and because validity is understood in this assessment as a measure of how well the assessment contributes to improving the program on a pedagogical/curricular level, this report concentrates on the qualitative findings more than the quantitative. However, because a quantitative analysis is useful for some administrative purposes, the Results section includes a statistical analysis of the findings and explains the statistical soundness of the study. In addition, all summary data, T-test results, and linear regression graphs are provided in Appendix B: Statistics.

2. Process

The 2006 assessment is a long-term project that began, to some extent, with a previous assessment done in 2000/2001 under Dr. Kathy Boardman's direction. Active planning for the current assessment began in the fall of 2004 and continued over four semesters. The actual assessment reading took place in May, 2006, and ongoing assessment activities will continue through and beyond the 2006-2007 academic year.

This process description explains each stage of the assessment, listing key resources used and explaining key decisions. (For an overview of the process, see Appendix C: Process Timeline.)

Prequel: Assessment 2000/2001

Under the Dr. Boardman's leadership, the Core Writing Program conducted a comprehensive portfolio assessment of the 102 course in 2000.

Based on this assessment, Dr. Boardman changed instructor preparation and in-service training to improve writing instruction in areas indicated by the assessment. Specifically, the assessment showed some weakness in students' use of documented sources of information, critical thinking and critical reading/interpretation, and writing conclusions.

Following this assessment, Dr. Boardman took measures to increase attention to critical reading and interpretation in First Year Composition (FYC) courses (English 098, 101, and 102). She began by increasing the emphasis on reading in the writing classroom both in the TA orientation and in the required course for new TAs, English 737: College Teaching in Language and Literature. In addition, she created a one-credit graduate teaching colloquium that focused on target issues in 102 such as critical reading, critical thinking, and using and documenting sources. A follow-up study in 2001 focused on these features and found a positive change in the areas examined.

Initial Parameters: Fall 2004

The next round of assessment began in fall 2004 when Dr. Detweiler, as the new Director of Core Writing, met with the new Director of the Core Curriculum, Dr. Paul Neill, to discuss UNR's assessment needs. The assessment process that eventually grew out of this meeting had some similarities to the process Dr. Boardman had done, but also had some important differences.

Like the 2000/2001 assessment, this one was designed to be contextually valid—that is, grounded in the program whose work is being assessed—and it was designed to assess the Core Writing Program by examining work from English 102.

However, unlike the 2000/2001 assessment, the new assessment was not self-contained within the Core Writing Program. Instead, it came into being as part of an upcoming accreditation cycle which would begin with a self-study in 2006-07, and Dr. Neill wanted to design and implement an assessment of writing and critical thinking throughout the Core Curriculum as a whole.

Thus, this assessment has been geared toward more audiences than the 2000/2001 assessment, which was intended for CWP instructors and students. The new assessment added UNR administrators, directors of other programs (CH and capstone) whose assessments might dovetail with the Core Writing Program's, and outside accreditors.

Another new parameter was Dr. Neill's request that the assessment team look at critical thinking along with writing. Although the 2000/2001 assessment had included critical reading and critical thinking elements, it had not specifically set out to measure these particular writing features more than others.

Exploring the Territory: Spring 2005

Once the basic parameters of the assessment were understood, Dr. Detweiler began investigating the Core Writing Program's assessment needs by creating a graduate-level internship in program assessment in Spring 2005. She chose some central texts, but otherwise the graduate students helped design and implement the assessment project in much the same way that Dr. Boardman and her interns had done in 2000/2001.

Dr. Detweiler and the interns began by studying several kinds of materials: Dr. Boardman's report, other universities' assessment plans and reports, and recent theory about assessing writing and about assessing critical thinking. In addition, Dr. Detweiler and two interns attended a workshop conducted by Dr. Diane Kelly-Riley of Washington State University.

Each of these resources is explained in more detail below.

The 2000/2001 Assessment Report

The report and process records from Dr. Boardman's study provided a useful model. For example, the initial rubric was adapted from Dr. Boardman's 2000 rubric. Dr. Boardman and her team members also provided advice on how to encourage involvement from Core Writing instructors and willingly answered questions from Dr. Detweiler and the assessment team. Finally, Dr. Boardman's use of her assessment results in changing instructor preparation and in-service training provided an impressive model of effective assessment practice.

Assessment Theory

Graduate student interns read, annotated, and discussed a wide range of texts about assessment. From these texts, especially books by Brian Huot and Bob Broad, they gathered information about current assessment theory as well as ideas about the best ways to conduct a program assessment. In addition, interns drew on the Council of Writing Program Administrators' "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition." Discussion about these sources revolved around a two important points.

First, because language learning and reading are social and collaborative acts, instructors within the Core Writing Program are in the best position to make meaning of student texts. Thus, it was important that the assessment grow out of the values guiding instruction in Core Writing rather

than being based on some outside criteria designed for another institution's students and writing situation(s).

Second, the concept of validity, as applied in writing program assessment, addresses how the assessment results will inform curriculum design and teaching within the department. In other words, from its inception the assessment was understood as a tool whose ultimate aim was to discover what is working in Core Writing and what can be improved, with an eye toward maintaining effective practices and improving others.

Other Universities' Assessments

Information about other universities' assessments also proved helpful, especially information about the assessment work being done by Dr. William Condon and Dr. Kelly-Riley at Washington State University. While several universities' assessment plans and reports proved helpful (e.g. Western Washington University), the work at WSU was particularly pertinent because of its focus on critical thinking. Two of their points about critical thinking were especially relevant to the assessment project.

First, writing skills and critical thinking skills are not, contrary to common assumptions, yoked together. In other words, a text can score well on writing and poorly on critical thinking, and vice versa. Also, what is meant by "critical thinking" differs by discipline. Taken together, this meant that the assessment tool needed to reflect what was meant by "critical thinking" in Core Writing.

The Kelly-Riley Workshop

Dr. Kelly-Riley's workshop, attended by Dr. Detweiler and two interns, was most useful for demonstrating that critical thinking and good writing do not necessarily coincide. At one point during the workshop, Dr. Kelly-Riley had participants assess a paper for critical thinking, an exercise that was especially useful for demonstrating that assessment criteria for critical thinking are not the same as, and must be considered and developed separately from, assessment criteria for writing.

Key Findings and the Decision to Use DCM

There were three key findings during this period of exploration:

- 1) Writing is contextual, so a good assessment must be contextually valid.
- 2) Overlapping with the importance of having the assessment be contextually valid is the importance of instructor involvement.
- 3) The definition and quality criteria for critical thinking differ by discipline. It was important to understand what "critical thinking" means in the context of the Core Writing Program.

Building on the experience of the Washington State assessment projects, the assessment team worked to create locally-valid, contextually-sound, workable, measurable definitions of habits of mind that could be designated as "critical thinking."

As a result of these findings, the assessment team decided to adapt Broad's method of Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM) as a good method for beginning a contextually-valid, locally-driven assessment. Dynamic Criteria Mapping is Bob Broad's approach, described in his 2003 book *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, for discovering a program's values and translating them into a workable assessment tool. Having opted to use this method, the team set out to gather the necessary information.

Gathering inside information: Spring 2005

Once the assessment team had a preliminary sketch of what the assessment should do, they began gathering information and feedback from Core Writing Program instructors. Specifically, the assessment team was focused on how instructors understood and implemented program goals and course outcomes, how they understood "critical thinking" as an intellectual activity in first-year writing courses, and what they valued in student writing. These were important considerations from a design standpoint (for reasons of construct validity) and from a usability standpoint (for reasons of contextual validity and inter-rater reliability) (See Broad chapters 1 and 2, Huot "Toward," and Lauer and Asher pages 141, 143-5, and 138).

Survey of Core Writing Instructors, March 2005

Initially, the assessment team conducted an informal survey based on the 2000 assessment rubric features (see Appendix D: Core Writing Program Survey). The survey was useful for eliciting initial thoughts about assessment from people who were not directly involved in the assessment project, and it also allowed participation from people who did not have time to attend focus groups or other later assessment activities.

The survey asked instructors to rate sixteen features on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being highest). Instructors were asked to respond to three open questions:

- (1) Describe what you value in student writing.
- (2) How do you recognize critical thinking in student writing?
- (3) What does a successful paper for your 102 course look like?

Surveys were sent to all English faculty and instructors, and the response rate was twenty percent. Although the response was not extremely high, it provided a starting point to work from. Specifically, the survey gave the assessment team some data about what Core Writing instructors value and about what kind of language instructors use in discussing those values. The survey also showed that most instructors who value grammar, conventions, and sentence level issues were consistent in how they rated the different features related to each of these. For example, if an instructor rated "word choice" high, he or she also rated "grammar" high. This allowed the assessment team to combine multiple features from the 2000/2001 assessment rubric into one feature in the current assessment, "Local Issues."

Values Focus Group Test Run, April 2005

The low response to the survey prompted the assessment team to set up focus groups to get more detailed responses and to nurture a sense of inclusion within the Core Writing Program and its assessment project. In April, 2005, they held a rehearsal of the planned values focus group, then two focus groups were conducted in May. These focus groups were designed to elicit more answers to the questions asked in the initial survey: What do instructors value in student writing? How do instructors recognize critical thinking in student writing? And what does a successful English 102 paper look like? In other words, the focus groups built on the work begun with the survey by keeping the assessment design process focused on instructors' values and the language instructors use to describe those values.

Values Focus Group Sessions, May 2005

Two values focus group sessions were held in May of 2005.

Twelve instructors participated in the two sessions, primarily graduate teaching assistants and term lecturers (who cover the majority of the Core Writing courses). These focus groups were primarily designed to open up discussions about what instructors value when they assign and evaluate writing in English 102, to introduce instructors to the idea of assessment, and to get feedback on how to keep the assessment connected to course outcomes and instructors' values. In addition, one of the assessment team's primary fears had been that instructors would feel attacked by the assessment and resist participating in the process, so it was important to provide a space for instructors to discuss their perceptions of assessment. The focus groups gave instructors an opportunity to voice these concerns about assessment by having small groups of instructors discuss their values and participate in different activities that encouraged creative thinking about assessment.

To encourage participation, each focus group participant received a \$50 incentive, plus food and drinks.

To begin, the entire group generated a list of values associated with writing. This helped the assessment team capture the language that instructors were using when talking about writing. After creating lists of what they valued in 102 writing and having an opportunity to discuss these values, participants were asked to review samples of student writing and identify what they valued and found problematic about the examples.

This comparison of what instructors said they valued and what they identified in student writing revealed that evaluating writing created complications in the process. Specifically, what instructors said they valued was much different from what they talked about when they had a sample of student writing in front of them. Although the instructors had created a very long list of values when talking about what is important in student writing, when they looked at student writing they actually discussed a very narrow range of values. For example, during the first part of the discussion many instructors talked about the importance of formatting issues (margins, titles, etc.), but they did not discuss formatting at all when looking at student writing. Instructors also listed "thesis statement" as an important value, but this was not a large part of the discussion about the writing sample. In other words, while the large discussion ended up being a place for

the instructors to talk about what they think should be valued for student writing, having instructors discuss a writing sample demonstrated what they actually focus on in evaluation.

After generating and discussing lists of values, participants were asked to design an assessment tool to evaluate student writing. The word “rubric” was purposefully not used to allow participants to think outside of that form. Although the assessment tool the team eventually developed is a rubric, these focus groups were kept as open-ended as possible in order to elicit the widest possible range of insights and comments from participants. Indeed, while some participants’ tools resembled traditional rubrics, others were extremely simple. Participants created flow chart tools, descriptive paragraphs, and there was a cluster of star patterns.

Creating the Rubric, Spring and Fall 2005

Developing the Initial Rubric, Spring 2005

Following the focus groups, the assessment team developed a draft rubric based on the responses from the survey, the values lists from the focus groups, and the participants’ assessment tools. This initial draft had twelve features, a reduction from the 2000/2001 survey’s sixteen scored features and three comment features. The assessment tool was beginning to move toward its eventual form of a star with one point for each of nine scored features.

Refining the Rubric: Summer and Fall 2005

After the internship ended, two Graduate Coordinators were hired for 2005-2006. They held two additional focus groups in Fall 2005 with the dual goals of refining the rubric and keeping instructors involved in the assessment project. Some participating instructors had been involved in May 2005, while others were new to the department or to the assessment project. Participants in both groups each received a \$50 incentive.

In the first fall focus group, participants were introduced to the star-shaped rubric. The participants offered comments about the design and the features. Most responses were positive, though a few participants expressed concern about the design being too complicated. Participants then read student samples and scored the papers using the rubric.

Following this focus group, the assessment team revised the rubric again and then held a final focus group during which they conducted a test run of the reading process planned for Spring 2006. In this session, the assessment team was especially attentive to timing issues and scoring variances, both of which were possible issues for the Spring 2006 reading. This final focus group session also included discussion time, during which participants raised issues that helped narrow the features down to nine scored features and three comment-only features.

At each stage, the assessment team used participants’ comments to further develop and refine the language used in the feature descriptions. For example, the feature PC (Identification of Problem and Its Complexities) evolved from conversations in the focus groups about the need for students to be aware of multiple perspectives and, as focus group participants stated, “to construct an argument not restricted to dualistic perspectives” The final description of this feature reads “Clearly identifies problem being addressed; proposes a clear argument; avoids dichotomies.”

Similarly, the feature OWN (Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions) came from early focus group participants' emphasis on characteristics such as "presence of the author," "knows own strengths and weaknesses," and "commitment to topic." As participants continued to discuss features in the fall, their language grew more specific and eventually produced the following feature description: "Understands own beliefs, concepts, and biases; questions own authority of assumptions; locates own position without relying exclusively on the views of others." The other seven feature descriptions went through a similar process of development and refinement based on participants' conversations, suggestions, and feedback.

Implementing the Plan: Spring 2006

Informing Instructors

Core Writing instructors received memos and checklists during the Spring 2006 semester reminding them of what to include in student portfolios (see Appendix E: Instructor Checklist).

In addition, two hour-long information sessions were held during the semester. These helped disseminate information about the assessment's goals and about what instructors would need to do. Attendance was optional but encouraged, with food as an incentive for showing up. A presentation about the assessment process and the instructors' role was followed by a short question and answer session.

The Q&A session brought out three main concerns from instructors:

First, some instructors asked about what to do if the random selection process picked a student who had dropped out of the class. The assessment team explained that five students were being selected from each section but only three were needed for the assessment, so even if two of the five students selected had stopped attending class there would still be enough portfolios from that section.

Instructors also wanted to know what to do if the selection process picked a student who was doing badly in the class, and the assessment team explained that the random selection was intended to get an array of students, not just the best.

The third concern was about anonymity, and the assessment team explained the steps being taken to ensure that the students' identities would be completely confidential.

In general, the assessment team emphasized that it was the Core Writing Program being assessed, not individual students, classes, or instructors.

Portfolio Contents

The contents of each portfolio varied depending on what the instructor assigned, but there were common elements across the different sections of English 102. The assessment team had checked each instructor's syllabus earlier in the semester to make sure every section had a research paper assigned, and students were asked (via their instructors) to submit final drafts of all major course assignments. Instructors were asked to include assignment sheets for each major

writing assignment, but to from remove any/all grading criteria from the assignment sheets. Finally, instructors were asked to be sure students did not include any reflective or personal writing, such as self-assessments, in their portfolios.

Elements common to most portfolios were:

- An annotated bibliography
- A research paper
- At least one other paper, usually shorter than the research paper
- Reading and writing journal entries (included only if they were not personal reflective writing but instead focused on assigned readings or related to the course's assigned papers)

Because portfolios are a standard method of assessment in Core Writing classes, nearly all instructors were planning to assign portfolios to their students even before the assessment project.

Portfolio Collection

Portfolio collection took place between May 1 and May 10. Compliance was 100%, and on-time compliance was nearly 100% with only three out of thirty-nine instructors handing in portfolios after the deadline; of those three, two had notified us in advance that the portfolios would be late.

In order to make the process as easy as possible, instructors were given a photocopy code to use in copying portfolios and white-out sticks for blanking out any identifying information.

Members of the assessment team and two student workers sat in the Core Writing office each day portfolios were being collected. The assessment team handed out the copy code and white-out sticks, answered instructors' questions, checked each incoming portfolio for completeness and anonymity, put identification codes on portfolios, and sorted portfolios. Incomplete portfolios went into the "orphans" box, the first three complete portfolios from each section were distributed among nine "sample" boxes, and any extra portfolios were placed in the "spares" box. (See Appendix F: Portfolio Intake Process for the steps in the portfolio collection process).

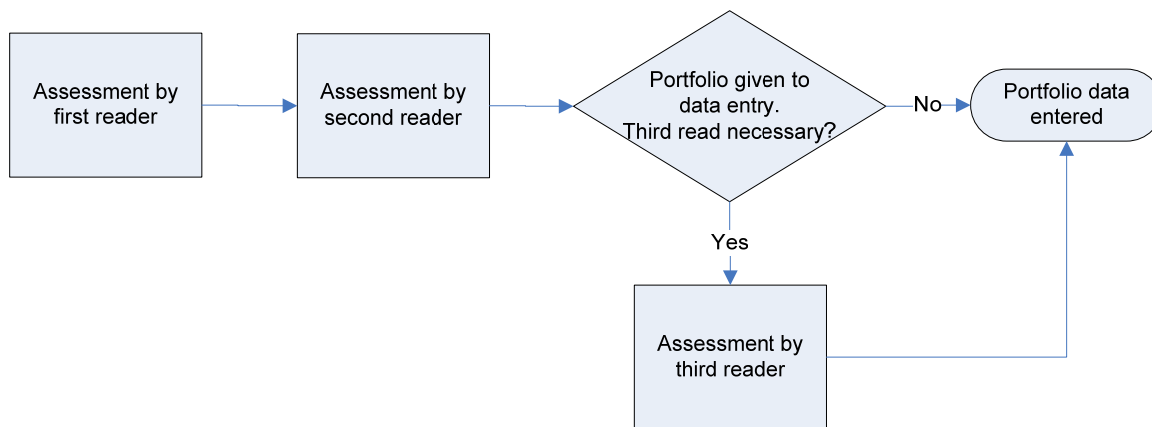
Reading: Summer 2006

Ten readers met for six days. Norming sessions took place the Thursday before the official reading week began, and on three mornings (Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday) during the reading week.

During the norming process, readers were given copies of portfolios from the spares box. For each portfolio, the readers each did a separate assessment, then discussed their scores on each feature. The Thursday norming session also allowed the assessment team to do some final fine-tuning of the wording in the feature descriptions, while the discussions allowed readers to discover when their understanding of the feature descriptions was different from their peers' understanding.

During the reading itself, reader questions about how the assessment scores would be interpreted and used were deferred until after the reading was done in order to keep the readers' focus on the feature descriptions. Cross-talk between readers, whether about the assessment in general or about specific portfolios, was strongly discouraged.

The reading process was simple and ensured that each portfolio was read at least twice. Portfolios that had not been read at all were in one stack, and portfolios that had received one read were in a different stack. After the second read, the portfolio was given to an assessment team member for data entry, at which point any radical discrepancies between the two readers' scores would send the portfolio to another assessment team member for a third read:



A Note About Student Privacy

This assessment focused on the Core Writing Program, *not* on individual students or instructors. Given that five student portfolios were collected from each Spring 2006 section of English 102, this may seem a bit contradictory—after all, the assessment involved reading most of those portfolios and scoring each one for the nine features (described in the Results section below and in Appendix G: Reading Tools). In order to keep the emphasis on the program, and to protect student privacy, 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 (see Appendix H: Student Demographics) 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, and, 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.

3. Results

Overview

The readers assessed nine scored features and also wrote comments on three comment-only features. Based on the results of the 2006 assessment of the nine key writing features, the Core Writing Program is generally successful. The readers assessed 192 portfolios, or 14% of the 1379 students in 102, and 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 mean scores for each feature are:

Code	Feature	Score	Standard Deviation
LI	Local Issues	3.9860	0.8109
PC	Identification of Problem & Its Complexities	3.9629	0.8287
PF	Sense of Purpose/Focus	3.8831	0.8371
RA	Rhetorical Awareness	3.8695	0.7683
GI	Global Issues	3.8499	0.7977
SD	Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence	3.8085	0.8303
OTH	Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions	3.7112	0.9399
OWN	Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions	3.5951	0.7906
DC	Use of Documentation/Citation	3.5946	0.7853

According to the score descriptions used in the assessment (see Appendix G: Reading Tools for descriptions of all scores), a 3 means the writing in a portfolio “Meets MOST of the requirements of the feature; some areas may seem weak; major and minor problems,” while a 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 students are 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)

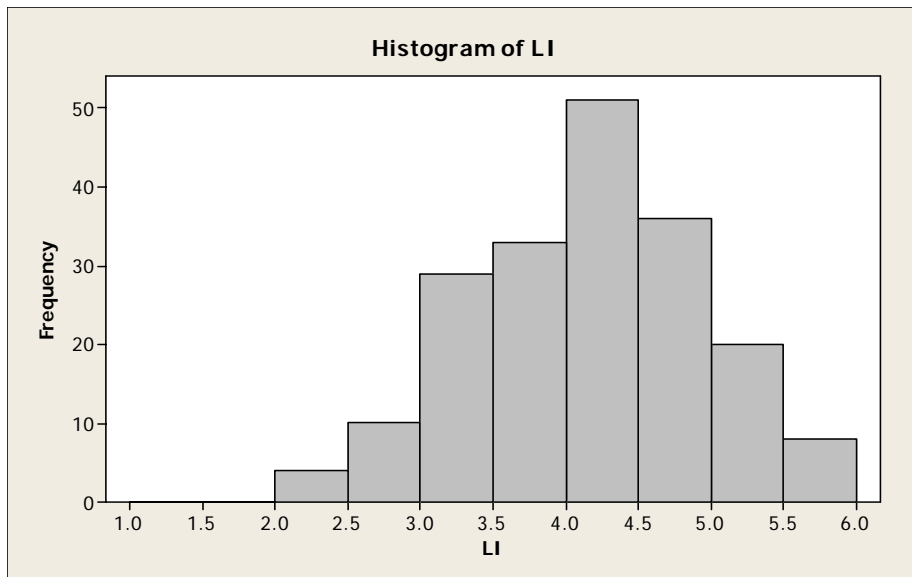
In other words, features related to critical thinking and research scored the lowest, while more general writing features scored better. This range is to be expected, given that students began to focus seriously on critical thinking and research in English 102, and therefore had had less time to learn and assimilate these writing features by the time of the assessment. In skills that have been a primary focus in English 098 and 101, such as Rhetorical Awareness and Sense of Purpose/Focus, students showed more strength. The highest scoring feature, Local Issues, reflects the fact that portfolios contained final, polished writing.

The next two sections look at each scored and comment-only feature individually.

Detailed Results for Scored Features

Local Issues (LI)

The sample mean for Local Issues was 3.9860.

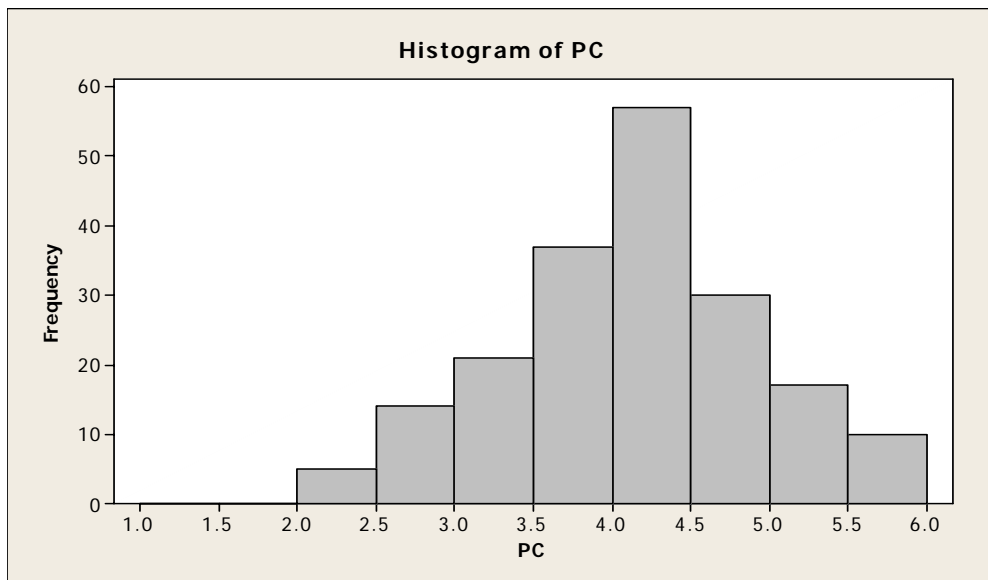


Feature Description: Sentence level, word choice: Concise language; consistent use of word choice; correct use of conventions (i.e. sub/verb agreement); variety of sentence style; minimal errors.

Reader Comments: Readers refer to specific problems such as sentence fragments and peculiar comma usage, but also include positive notes about the variety of sentence structures.

Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC)

The sample mean for Identification of Problem & Its Complexities was 3.9629.

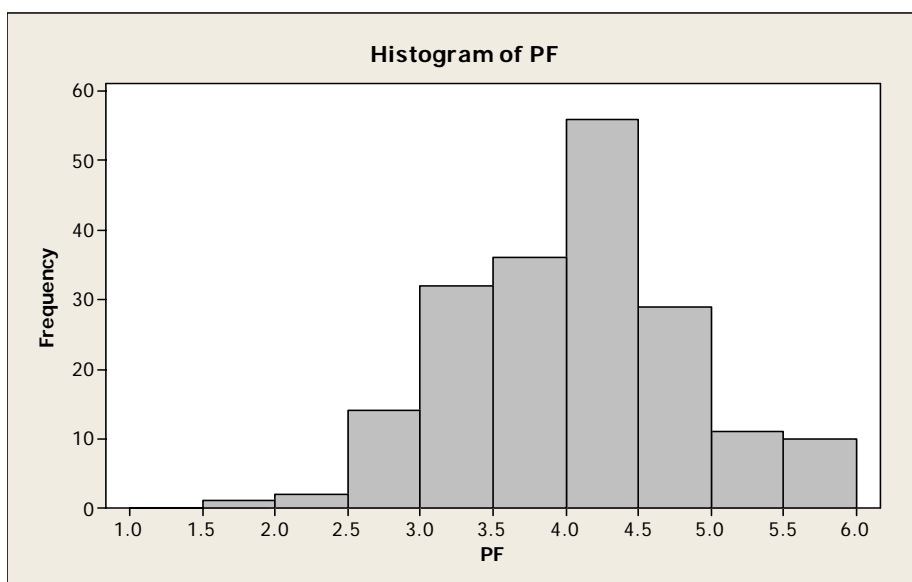


Feature Description: Clearly identifies problem being addressed; proposes a clear argument; avoids dichotomies.

Reader Comments: Readers note problems such as oversimplifications and dichotomous thinking, but also note when a text successfully sets up or identifies a problem. For example, one comment notes that the writer “balances beautifully a multitude of complex viewpoints.”

Sense of Purpose and Focus (PF)

The sample mean for Sense of Purpose and Focus was 3.8831.

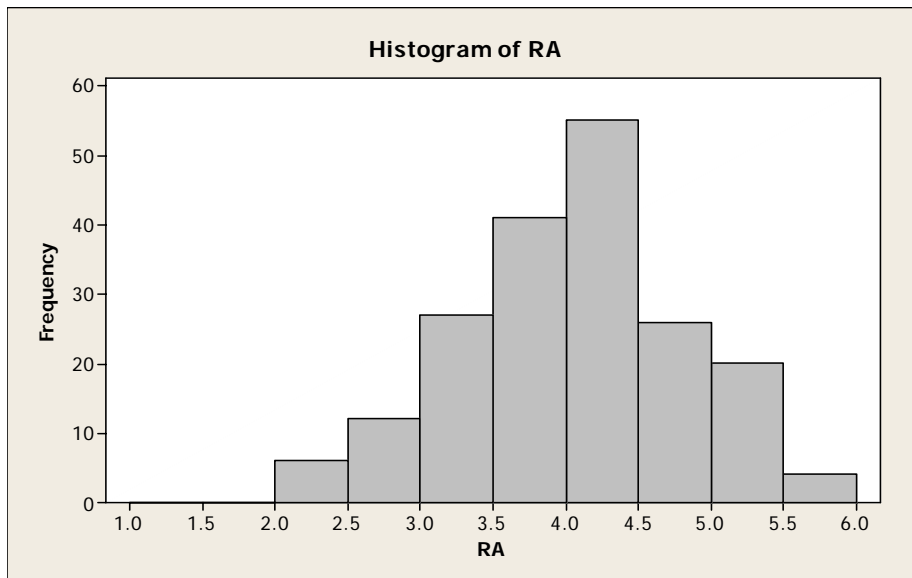


Feature Description: Ability to express ideas clearly; stays on topic; text holds together; tight; clear process of reasoning; a sense that it is all connected; claims are well reasoned.

Reader Comments: Readers call attention to inconsistency on this feature within some portfolios, commenting for example that “the purpose is clear in general” but that the “focus wavers from time to time” in a particular essay.

Rhetorical Awareness (RA)

The sample mean for Rhetorical Awareness was 3.8695.

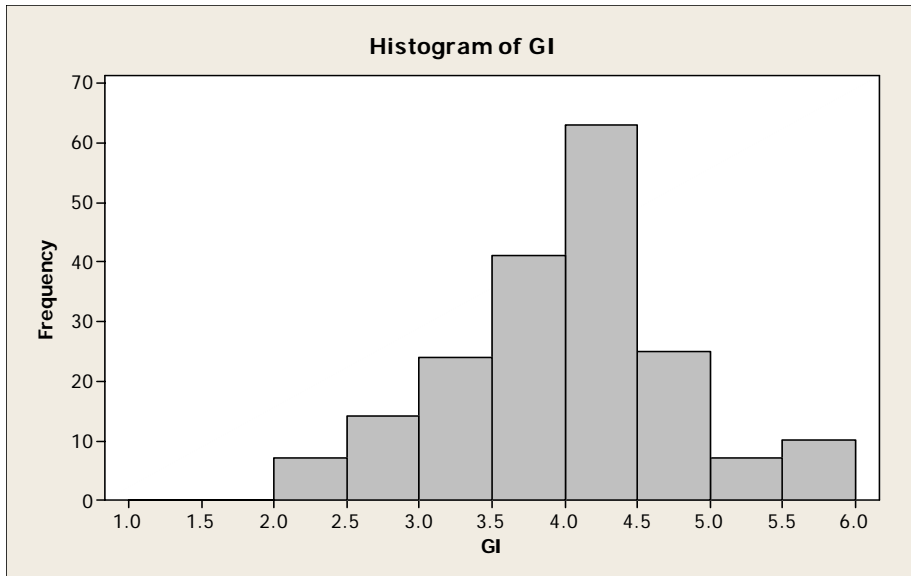


Feature Description: Awareness of audience and purpose; sense of writing situation; displays a conscious awareness of audience; presents a convincing argument to someone; awareness of genre requirements of “correctness.”

Reader Comments: In general, reader comments on Rhetorical Awareness refer to inconsistencies within portfolios. However, several comments refer to the assignment sheet or to the comment section for the (comment-only) feature, “Requirements of Assignment,” indicating that in some cases the problem was less with the portfolio and more with what the writer had been asked to do. For example, one comment says the writer is “clearly making moves to meet assignment” and another says “On first read the first essay seemed unclear. But after reading the assignment sheet for clarification I was able to see a savvy negotiation of viewpoints.”

Global Issues (GI)

The sample mean for Global Issues was 3.8499.

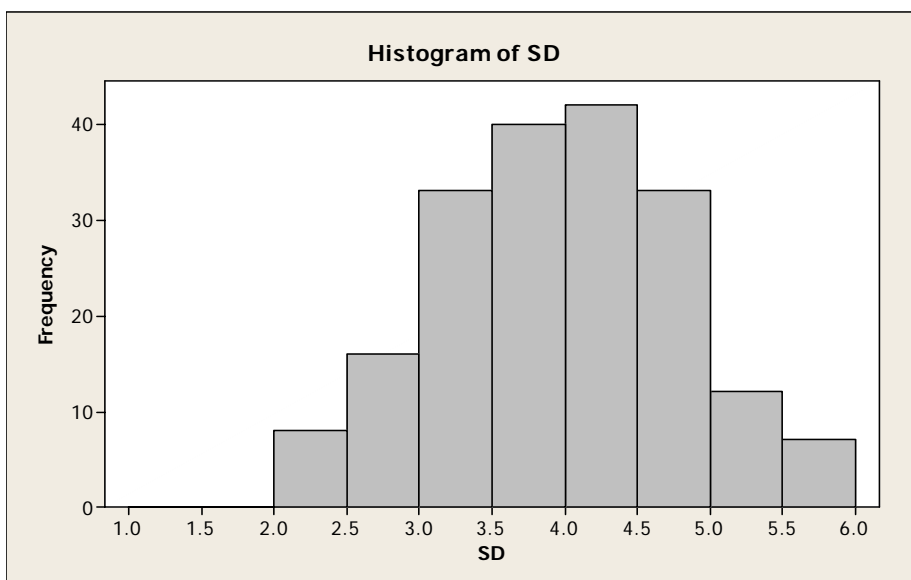


Feature Description: Overall structure and organization: Ideas are unified & “flow” well; conclusions conclude; introductions introduce; paragraphs relate to thesis; transitions.

Reader Comments: Problems with global issues included repetition, excessively long paragraphs, and lack of connections. Positive comments indicate strengths in transitions, introductions, and conclusions. Some comments indicate a mix of strengths and weaknesses in the various pieces in a portfolio, as in the comment that one portfolio has “some repetition in the research essay” which is “not well unified” and has a “lack of flow” while “other pieces” are “well organized” and have “good transitions, intro, conclude.”

Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD)

The sample mean for Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence was 3.8085.

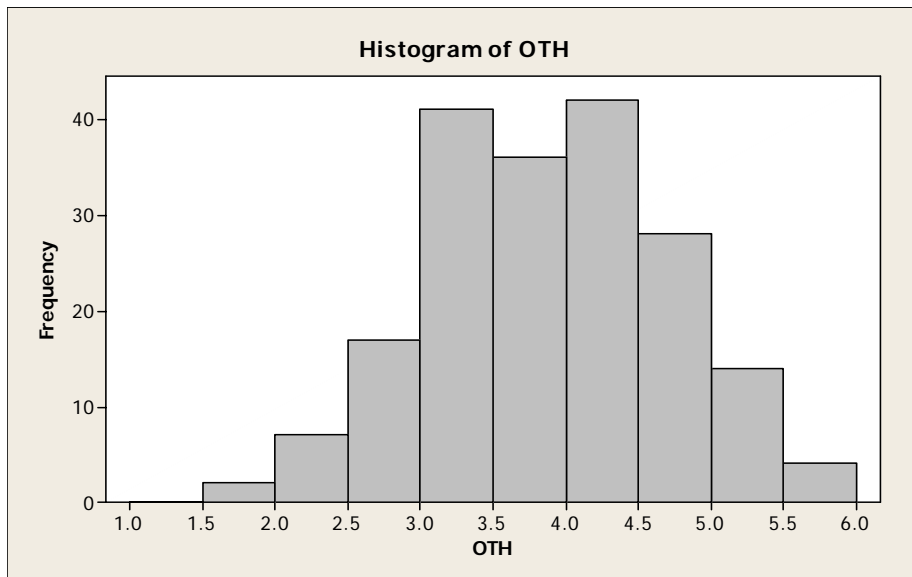


Feature Description: Avoids commonplaces; “appropriateness”; creates a framework for sources; joins the ongoing conversation; avoids floating quotes.

Reader Comments: The main problems mentioned in comments about “Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence” are floating quotes (quotations that are not contextualized but are simply inserted into the text without being introduced or explained) and a lack of outside sources. Strengths include variety in sources, examples that work well and are well integrated, and “joining the ongoing conversation.”

Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH)

The sample mean for Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions was 3.7112.

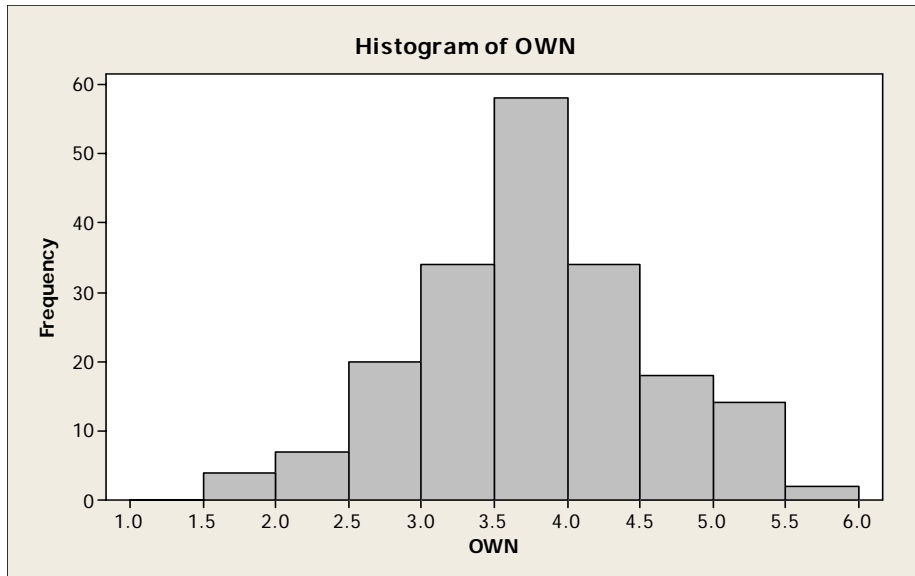


Feature Description: Ability to recognize, respect, and analyze differing perspectives; questions authority of assumptions; avoids simplistic and reductive frames; sensitive to context for others’ perspectives.

Reader Comments: Notes on “Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions” indicate a tendency toward reductive writing and a lack of interaction with others’ points of view. Positive comments are vague, saying only that this feature is good for a given portfolio.

Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN)

The sample mean for Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions was 3.5951.

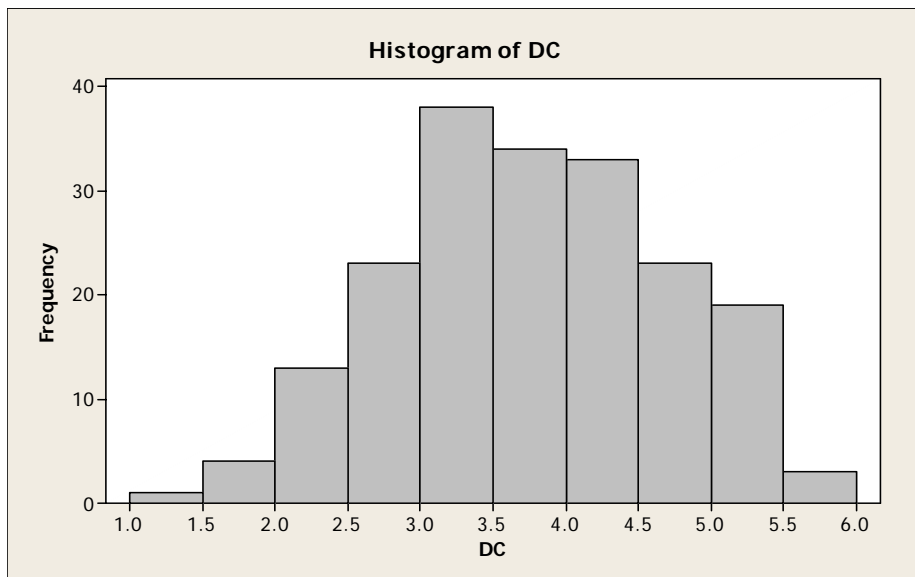


Feature Description: Understands own beliefs, concepts, and biases; questions own authority of assumptions; locates own position without relying exclusively on the views of others.

Reader Comments: The main theme in comments about “Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions” is that writers are aware of, but not critical or questioning of, their own biases and points of view. For example, one comment says “Does locate own position clearly and uses this position to take on other authorities. But it never evaluates/addresses own obvious assumptions and biases.”

Use of Documentation/Citation (DC)

The sample mean for Use of Documentation/Citation was 3.5946.



Feature Description: Accurate attribution; citation follows MLA/APA style.

Reader Comments: The biggest problem with “Documentation/Citation” is missing works cited pages, with missing or problematic parenthetical citations also being common. Some portfolios are mixed, for example having “MLA good” in the annotated bibliography, but “final paper not MLA.” In other words, in this portfolio the writer used the MLA citation format properly in the annotated bibliography, but did not use it, or did not use it properly, for the in-text citations and the works cited page in the research paper.

Detailed Results for Comment-Only Features

Requirements of Assignment

Feature Description: Addresses assignment; form and format. General comments regarding how assignments address requirements.

Because the assessment focused on the program as a whole, not on individual students’ work, assessment readers did not consider this feature when scoring the portfolio features. For the most part, they read the assignment sheets only when they needed clarification about what the writer was trying to do. For example, one instructor had given students the option to write a satire along the lines of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” Some readers were puzzled by the essays written for this assignment until they read the assignment sheet and realized they were reading satires. Reader comments also note inadequacies in the assignments, such as “Research paper assignment asks the student to ‘present’ evidence rather than persuade or argue or take issue” and “I’ve seen these assignments a few times now and it seems they inevitably produce ‘surface-writing.’ Topics are inherently broad and too much for the writer.”

Overall Portfolio

Feature Description: 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.

Reader Comments: Many of the comments appear to be a list of the pieces in a portfolio, for example “DR. Sport, Interview, K. Derby, Annot. Bib, Sports endorsements” and “plastic surgery, prescription drug battle, interview, walk to remember movie, letter to the editor.” Negative comments sometimes reflect readers’ personal responses to the portfolio, for example “Boring—not much passion/engagement with topics. Just ho-hum.” Other comments are enthusiastic, such as “This is a ‘wow’ portfolio all around. I suspect this is an upperclass man [sic] who has put off core writing till late in their [sic] career,” while some readers express mixed reactions like “Great research and writing. More critical thinking skills and evaluative [evaluative] skills need to be demonstrated.”

Anomaly/Outlier

Feature Description: 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.

Reader Comments: Comments on anomalies and outliers generally indicate problems with the portfolio. For example, several readers note that a portfolio contained only one paper or essay. Other comments reflect genre problems, such as mentioning a “research essay that is 2/3 story.” In one case, the reader notes that, while there was only one real essay in the portfolio, “the 1 essay is brilliantly written and explains a complex topic to a novice audience.” Readers also question whether certain problems resulted from problematic assignments, as in the comment that the reader doesn’t think the writing “fits the 102 requirements” because “It doesn’t show the writer’s skill at integrating citations, writing a research paper or critique. It seems little more of a technical writing assignment. It was really confusing to score.”

Descriptions of Sample Portfolios

Where the previous section discussed each feature separately, the following descriptions of four sample portfolios show how the different features work together within representative portfolios from the low, middle-low, middle-high, and high ends of the scoring continuum.

Low example/1-2 (actual sample mean 1.94):

In this portfolio, four of the nine writing features assessed stood out: Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC), Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD), Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF), and Use of Documentation/Citation (DC).

Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC) sets the tone for the entire portfolio. There is absolutely no complexity; the paper is a report, and the author sets up its purpose with the question, “How and where did skiing originate, and how did it get to the Tahoe area?”

This lack of complexity in the problem being addressed creates problems for several other features, including Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD). Although the author uses several sources, these sources are not contextualized; the quotes are “floating” or just “dropped” into the paper. Because the paper is written as a straightforward report, there seems to be a sense that sources do not need to be contextualized.

The reporting style of this portfolio also affects Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF). The paper wanders through the history of skiing with very little focus, and also little illustration of how events affect one another or contribute to the development of the sport overall. Facts are integrated and related to one another poorly when they are connected at all.

Use of Documentation/Citation (DC) is of mixed quality. The parenthetical references have minor problems, while the Works Cited page is numbered instead of alphabetized, has the wrong header, has varying fonts, and is generally sloppy.

While this portfolio has weaknesses related to specific features, it is complete, meaning it does contain a formal research assignment, and it meets the requirements of the assignments.

Middle-low example/3:

This portfolio is representative of a three score (“Occasionally meets the requirements of the feature; some areas may seem weak; major and minor problems”) because of many of the writing features assessed.

This portfolio does demonstrate a sense of a Problem and Its Complexities (PC). However, the problem and its complexities are never clearly defined but instead emerge out of the text. The introduction asks several questions about Muslims and freedom of press. The paper reveals later that the “argument” is about the political cartoons printed in a Danish paper and the ramifications of this incident.

Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD) is weak in this portfolio. Although the longer research paper includes many sources, they often are not contextualized but instead are “dropped” into the author’s text.

Problems in Documentation/Citation (DC) are apparent because the in-text citations shift between MLA and APA styles without apparent reasons, and the citations on the Works Cited page are numbered.

The problems in Local Issues (LI) arise from the wordy syntax that is convoluted to the point of losing clarity and focus. For example, one statement says that “We should get involved because our point of view is different, different because it is outside of the rioting and killing and I feel our country is less biased because it is made up of all types of ethnicities.”

The critical thinking features affect one another in this portfolio. For example, the weak Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN) shows in the lack of sense of where the author’s views fit in the larger conversation regarding the issues discussed. The use of “us/them” statements in referring to Muslims suggests a lack of awareness of how word choice and style choices affect purpose/audience, a problem with Rhetorical Awareness (RA). The broader Muslim perspective does not seem present, and there is no indication that the author recognizes his/her isolated stance.

This portfolio represents work in which the key writing features are being addressed, but not very well.

Middle-high example/4:

This portfolio characterizes a “4”: “Mostly meets the requirements of the feature; suggests competence; some problems.”

While this portfolio clearly identifies the problem addressed in each major research paper, the complexity of the problem, an important part of Identification of Problem and Its Complexities (PC) is relatively low: “I began to become curious as to the effects of smoking marijuana, and I also wondered if these effects could be dangerous;” “My argument for this paper is that education has changed for many reasons some of these reasons are to the benefit of the student while others could hurt our education.”

Use of Documentation/Citation (DC) is low for this portfolio. The basic information for the sources is included, but the attention to formatting is poor, as in the in-text citation “(Kolker pg. 155)” which follows neither MLA nor APA format.

This portfolio demonstrates some competence with Integration of Supporting Evidence/Details (SD) and with Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives and Assumptions (OTH); in other words, sources are evaluated, and the writing creates a context for how sources fit into larger social conversations. After a quote about Sylvan Learning Center, the writer states, “This shows that a child from Nebraska is learning the same things in the same way as a child in California, much like how you can get the same cheeseburger at any McDonalds in the country.” As in the two lower scoring portfolios, the writing contains floating quotes and lack of context, but SD is stronger in this portfolio than in the low and middle-low portfolios.

Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN) is relatively strong in this portfolio. There is evidence that the author is attempting to place him/herself in the larger conversations and to examine her/his own assumptions. For example, one paper states:

When I started this paper I had a bias towards the legalization of marijuana, I felt that it was harmless and that there were few, if any, side effects at all. The more I read I realized that marijuana is not a huge problem in the ways of physical health, but the real danger is how it affects the way that a person views the things they once thought were important to them.

This example also shows the strong sense of Rhetorical Awareness (RA), especially for the instructor as audience and evaluator.

Local issues are still characterized by errors, though these errors do not interfere with clarity.

High example/5-6 (actual sample mean 5.58):

The high score for Identification of Problem and Its Complexities (PC) in this portfolio reflects that this writing shows a complexity lacking in other examples. The author explains many subtleties of her/his argument, finally proposing, “...that dualism of nature or nurture as an explanation for homosexuality should be removed.”

In addition, Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD) is strong as the writing continually identifies and explains why sources are credible, identifying affiliations, publications, and research foci. Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH) also is strong; the discussion is fitted into a larger context, as when the writer says, “But the problem, I realized, was not what determined homosexuality, but instead the real problem is that it is still socially unacceptable, that gays and lesbians are still being denied marriage rights, and that there are so many problems with the language we use when it comes to sexuality.” The student recognizes that s/he cannot make broad claims based on limited evidence: “In the end, I kept returning to the same problem. There was not enough evidence to suggest a significant correlation...”

This portfolio certainly is not perfect. There are minor errors with Local Issues (LI) and Use of Documentation/Citation (DC); however, overall it is a good example of a high-scoring portfolio.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed by Ms. Clarke of the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. This section discusses some of these results. The remaining statistical information is available in Appendix B: Statistics.

Distribution

Ms. Clarke’s analysis indicates that all features show normal distributions, as illustrated in the histograms included with the feature-specific results above.

Inter-rater Reliability

Inter-rater reliability was .77 overall, an excellent figure given that anything over .7 is considered acceptable by assessment professionals such as Lauer and Asher (138-9), Beach (230-1), and Huot (“Toward” *passim*). (See also Appendix I: References for various other discussions). In addition, inter-rater reliability was within one point for each feature, meaning that overall, the readers were within one point of one another’s scores.

Linear Regression and Correlation

Ms. Clarke did linear regressions on pairs of all features to see if certain features correlate with one another.

This matrix is the correlation values between all the variables; the higher the number the stronger the correlation, with the highest value possible being 1. The seven most interesting correlations are highlighted.

Although correlation does not mean causation¹, it does demonstrate that a student who scores well on one feature in a pair generally scores well on the other as well, while a student who scores poorly on one feature in a pair generally scores poorly on the other as well.

	PC	OWN	OTH	RA	PF	SD	DC	LI
OWN	0.542							
OTH	0.792	0.623						

¹ As Ms. Clarke points out, correlation does not imply causation. She 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.

	PC	OWN	OTH	RA	PF	SD	DC	LI
RA	0.771	0.478	0.686					
PF	0.758	0.480	0.664	0.813				
SD	0.697	0.496	0.701	0.779	0.709			
DC	0.447	0.299	0.387	0.570	0.499	0.593		
LI	0.466	0.291	0.414	0.573	0.529	0.596	0.537	
GI	0.656	0.383	0.550	0.767	0.793	0.710	0.568	0.647

As the matrix shows, statistically significant correlations (over 75%) were found for seven pairs of features:

- RA & PF = 0.813

The 81.3% correlation between Rhetorical Awareness (RA) and Sense of Purpose/Focus suggests that a focus on audience relates to an awareness of Purpose/Focus.

- PF & GI = 0.793

The 79.3% correlation between Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF) & Global Issues (GI) suggests that an awareness of focus, and a clarity of focus, are generally mirrored by strength in the writing's structure and organization.

- PC & OTH = 0.792

The 79.2% correlation between Identification of Problem & Its Complexities and Evaluation of Others' Perspectives & Assumptions suggests that a writer who is aware of the complexity in a problem (PC) is likely to be aware of the complexity of views held by others, and vice-versa. Both features call for writers to avoid a reductive frame and to see more than one perspective.

- RA & SD = 0.779

The 77.9% correlation between Rhetorical Awareness (RA) and Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD) suggests that a writer's awareness of the rhetorical situation relates to his or her ability to situate a problem within a larger context, avoid reductive thinking, and join an ongoing conversation.

- PC & RA = 0.771

The 77.1% correlation between Identification of Problem & Its Complexities and Rhetorical Awareness suggests that a writer who considers more than one perspective on a problem also is able to think about how an audience will interpret his or her writing.

- RA & GI = 0.767

The 76.7% correlation between Rhetorical Awareness and Global Issues suggests that a writer's attention to the rhetorical situation can focus his or her understanding of how to organize a text.

- PC & PF = 0.758

The 75.8% correlation between Identification of Problem & Its Complexities and Sense of Purpose/Focus suggests that positively setting up a problem helps a writer with the sense of purpose since PC and PF involve defining and identifying the writing project and carrying it through in a coherent fashion.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that most English 102 students are competent or more than competent in the kinds of writing and critical thinking activities that the assessment measured. Because Dr. Boardman and her 2000/2001 assessment team had already done extensive linking of substantial reader comments with specific scores, and because the Director of the Core Curriculum had requested a study of critical thinking as well as writing, the 2006 assessment team focused on a quantitative measurement of *more, and more specified, domains of critical thinking*, and *fewer, less specified aspects of writing*, with the newly-designed rubric. Statistical tests have determined that the various features were normally distributed, so the findings warrant some *cautious* claims about how current students are doing or how similar students would do “on average.” Yet the team emphasizes the need to be especially careful about making overbroad and ungrounded statements about what any particular student would be able to do. With the quantitative analysis, the 2006 study has gained in its kind of explanatory power, and lost the greater nuance and descriptive-interpretive depth of the 2000/2001 study.

Although the assessment team has done extensive contextual validation of the new rubric, learning to use and interpret findings generated using this new research tool is an ongoing process. The team welcomes responses, rubric revision suggestions, and reinterpretation of the findings.

The following analysis draws together the results of both the scoring and the statistical analysis, and makes some specific observations.

Since approximately three quarters of students in the sample population took at least English 101 as a prerequisite to 102, one might expect that they would demonstrate the greatest strength in the areas that are foregrounded in all the courses of the Core Writing sequence. Not surprisingly, they do:

- **The feature where students scored the highest was “Local Issues” (LI).** When rating this category, readers considered sentence and word-level matters (mechanics and usage, or what is commonly termed “grammar,” along with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other conventions of standard written English). It bears repeating here that the readers were scoring portfolios of *final, polished drafts*, which certainly accounts for some of the strength in this area. Still, this result suggests that, when students are encouraged to engage in the full writing process, especially in the intensive revision and editing required for a final portfolio, they can and do very competently take advantage of the opportunity to polish their writing. This result shows that students may be doing slightly better in 2006 than they were in the 2000 Core Writing Assessment. However, it may also mean that they score higher when readers use a slightly different rubric, one in which several features from the older rubric were subsumed into one feature in the new one.

When Core Writing instructors were shown these results for comment, some of them expressed surprise that LI did not correlate with any other feature in the linear regression analyses. In discussion, the community concluded that this may have been because all the features that *did* correlate with one another in statistically significant ways might be considered markers of *substantive, intellectual work*; in contrast, both LI and DC might be

considered markers of *usage or convention knowledge* only (e.g., sentence mechanics in the former case, formatting of citations in the latter).

- **Students performed very well the category Identification of Problem & Its Complexities (PC), that is, in setting up a good, complex problem to guide their researched writing.** This score in a new “critical thinking” feature may be related to strengths in focusing a piece of writing around a clear Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF), which was also strong (see bullets below). Also, in the linear regression analysis, scores in PC correlated strongly with scores in Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH).

One way to make sense of these findings is to note that the readers were scoring on evidence of ability to set up a *complex yet coherent* writing task (PC), which would tend to support the unfolding of a clear, purposeful line of reasoning (PF). Such a rich “project space” might also lend itself to honoring the complexities in others’ perspectives (OTH), as these were expressed in the scholarship integrated into the developing argument. These patterns of strength may connect to the three Core Writing courses’ emphasis on helping students find and refine their purpose in writing, an emphasis which may also bridge well into the special emphasis on researched, well-supported, thesis-driven argument in 102. In the later portion of 101 and throughout 102, students learn how to generate ideas, develop research questions, and advance arguable claims with solid support. It appears that this ongoing effort may indeed help students to *begin well and carry through purposefully with substantive, complex scholarship*.

- **Students also showed strength in Rhetorical Awareness (RA), along with strong ability to focus their writing around a clear Sense of Purpose/Focus (PF) and to handle Global Issues (GI) well.** The overall scores in these three areas are strong, and the linear regression analysis found statistically significant correlations between rhetorical awareness and purpose/focus, as well as between purpose/focus and global issues.

These results may be linked to the Core Writing Program’s heavy emphasis on helping students learn to attend to their rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, kind of text, immediate context for writing) by means of classroom approaches such as peer response groups, audience profiles, and assignments with carefully specified audiences. These findings suggest that this programmatic emphasis is well-warranted and effective. Practice in paying careful attention to both audience and purpose does appear to help students produce better-focused, well-organized texts.

- **Strength in rhetorical awareness (RA) also coincides with strong scores in Integration of Supporting Detail/Evidence (SD) and in identifying a problem and its complexities (PC).** While the linear regression analysis does not warrant strong claims about causation, the results are suggestive. It appears that the Core Writing emphasis on helping students attend to their writing situation may help them to know how to set up a complex research task for themselves, and to know when and how to include relevant, useful supporting evidence.

It stands to reason that students would do less well in areas of writing and critical thinking that are addressed primarily in English 102; because they have only a matter of months to practice these scholarly habits, one could expect these writers to show somewhat less mastery. Indeed,

the 102-specific learning challenges are reflected in somewhat lower—but still “adequately competent”—scores in a few areas:

- **Students had some difficulty in Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH), and in Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN) as well.** In their scoring, readers responded to relatively inadequate critical analyses of positions on issues. Portfolios that scored lower showed more evidence of biased or shallow treatment of scholars’ discussions, and a purely “informational” or insufficiently “positioned” argumentative stance on the part of the writer. In many cases, readers commented that the assignments did not appear to invite or require such critique; in other cases, the student did not take notice or full advantage when assignments *did* seem to request such approach.

While 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 find, evaluate, and integrate into their arguments the views of others. The 2006 assessment follows Dr. Boardman’s 2000 assessment which pointed out a need for systematic attention to critical thinking and critical reading. By breaking “critical thinking” into several features, the 2006 assessment team has been able to more precisely identify the weakness as a difficulty dealing with the nuance and complexity of scholarly discussion, including the writer’s critical positioning of his or her own views. When these results were presented to Core Writing instructors for comment, they considered these relative weaknesses as most likely being connected to students’ difficulties with reading college-level texts, and with the specific kinds of critical reading required while doing researched writing.

Like the 2000 assessment team, the 2006 team notes that this relatively sophisticated kind of reading and reasoning in argumentation does merit—and will receive—increased, focused attention in both English 101 and 102. Teacher training, especially increased focus on how particular kinds of assignments might elicit more substantive critical response to sources as well as reflexive critique, may improve student performance in the scholarly reasoning labeled OWN and OTH.

- **Use of Documentation/Citation (DC) was the area where students showed the greatest weakness.** While these writers did well with integrating sources (SD), and somewhat less well (but still fairly competently) with evaluating the views of others (OTH), they had a great deal of difficulty with the *conventions* of attribution (DC). By separating these various aspects of “use of sources in a scholarly argument,” this study further elaborates the 2000 assessment team’s finding that weakness here could be attributed to “inadequate integration and lack of crediting [or simply] failure to use correct MLA form” (Boardman et al).

Since students scored relatively better on integrating sources (SD) in the present study (see bullets above), it can be reasoned that the low overall score on this feature (DC) indicates *difficulty with form*: readers commented on sloppily prepared papers and portfolios (missing works cited/bibliography pages, incomplete or incorrectly formatted information, or poorly handled parenthetical citation). 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 students 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 (see commentary on OWN, OTH, and SD,

above). The Core Writing Program will continue to give this important aspect of scholarly writing the attention it deserves, and to encourage other departments to do likewise.

5. Curricular, Programmatic, and Institutional Response

Curricular and programmatic changes are already under way. The assessment results have led to changes in how the Core Writing Program prepares instructors to teach English 101 and 102, and further changes will be implemented over the coming semesters and years. In addition, ongoing assessment activities are refining, and will continue to refine, the information gathered in the 2006 assessment.

The institutional response will be an ongoing process as well. One way the Core Writing Program assessment might be useful at the institutional level is in providing a model to other departments interested in conducting a locally based, contextually valid assessment of their own programs.

Changes in Instructor Preparation and In-Service Trainings

The curricular response to the assessment findings began in the Fall 2006 Orientation for new TAs and continues in a variety of forums such as:

- English 737: College Teaching in Language and Literature (a required course for all new TAs).
- “Teachers Teaching Teachers” in-service trainings, which happen four times each year and are attended by both new and experienced Core Writing instructors.

These include time for instructors to discuss how the assessment findings should affect classroom practices, serving two purposes. First, these sessions help communicate the assessment findings to experienced instructors who are not required to attend orientation and/or who have completed English 737. Also, these sessions function as focus groups during which instructors can discuss and report on how they are applying the assessment findings in their teaching, thereby keeping instructors involved in the ongoing assessment and curricular improvements.

- Ongoing meetings held by the assessment team with Core Writing instructors to discuss the assessment.

These meetings help acquaint instructors with the assessment findings, and they also are useful for eliciting instructors’ ideas about how to understand and apply these findings. For example, in meetings held on September 27th and 28th 2006, instructors discussed the critical thinking categories Evaluation of Own Perspectives/Assumptions (OWN) and Evaluation of Others’ Perspectives & Assumptions (OTH). They also were particularly interested in understanding the relatively high scores in Local Issues (LI) compared with relatively low scores in Documentation and Citation (DC). Further meetings will continue giving instructors opportunities to brainstorm and generate ideas as they have been doing throughout the assessment process.

Based on the assessment findings, the response is focusing on improving two key areas in the classroom: increasing emphasis on teaching critical thinking, and improving assignment design, especially in English 102.

Greater Emphasis on Critical Thinking

The curricular response to the assessment findings began in the Fall 2006 new TA orientation, where instructors were asked to include more critical thinking work in English 101 in order to better prepare students for this aspect of English 102. For example, the 2005 orientation session on “Reading in the writing classroom” was replaced by a session on “Rhetorical and Critical Thinking” led by one of the 2005-2006 assessment coordinators. In addition, the 2005 orientation session on “Final Grades” was replaced by a session on “Assessing and Evaluating with Portfolios” led by two other members of the assessment team. Finally, several presentations in the 2006 orientation had a greater emphasis on focusing assignments on critical thinking. Instructors were encouraged to consider how their students will interpret assignments, and specific assignments were discussed in terms of how they would or would not relate to the course goals.

Changes also took place in English 737: College Teaching in Language and Literature. This year, the course included more reading about critical thinking, such as John Bean’s book *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, and critical thinking was emphasized strongly as new TAs prepared to teach English 102 in the Spring 2007 semester. Also, the standard English 101 text used by all new instructors and TAs, *The Call to Write*, has a strong focus on genre and rhetorical situations. This new reader, introduced last year, worked well in 2005-2006, and for 2006-2007 it includes a broader range of readings to cover more points of view. These changes should help create a stronger bridge between English 101 and 102. For example, if 101 students think and write more about where their own ideas come from, they will be more prepared to think critically about others’ ideas, and more prepared to combine their personal authority with others’ authority, in 102.

Finally, the ongoing in-service trainings have given extra attention to critical thinking and related writing features. For example, during the TTT session which took place on October 4, 2006, instructors discussed what “rhetorical awareness” means to them and shared ideas about how to better teach this aspect of writing in English 098, 101, and 102.

Greater Attention to Assignment Design

The emphasis on assignment design arose from reader comments about the importance of good assignments, and good assignment sequencing, to students’ writing. For example, a reader noted that one research paper assignment “asks the student to ‘present’ evidence rather than persuade or argue or take issue” while another noted that certain assignments seem to result in “surface-writing” because the “topics are inherently broad and too much for the writer.” Reader comments on RA (Rhetorical Awareness) also suggest that unclear expectations in assignments could have contributed to poorer scores on this feature, and two of the lowest scoring areas, OWN and OTH, may relate to the assignments not explicitly requiring students to think critically about their own and others’ points of view.

The Fall 2006 course followed the August orientation in emphasizing assignment design, and assignment sequencing was a key topic for the 102 orientation that took place at the end of Fall semester.

In October 2006 a working group was formed to examine the 102 writing assignments that led to particularly strong portfolios, and that examination prompted changes in the 102 instructor orientation and also provided 102 instructors with models of well-designed assignment sequences.

The working group reported that the most successful student work was written in response to assignments that were strong in three areas. First, they had good pedagogical framing. The assignments provided a clear sense of the rhetorical situation (the audience, purpose, and context for the student's writing), and successive assignments built upon earlier assignments in obvious ways, and were explicitly linked to class work. Second, the assignments in the strong portfolios had good assignment design and organization. Assignments included lists of criteria, often in bulleted lists instead of paragraphs; offered models and examples; used clear language and an encouraging tone; defined terms; and described the assignment's goals clearly. Finally, the assignments tended to include an annotated bibliography that required students not only to summarize sources, but also to analyze and critique the sources. They also asked students to reflect on readings, assignments, their own development as writers, how they would position themselves among sources, context, and how they would differentiate themselves from their sources and their peers.

Ongoing Assessment

The "Teachers Teaching Teachers" sessions mentioned above provide ongoing informal feedback about the assessment's effects on teaching. Other possible ongoing assessment activities will depend on the budget, but could include the following:

- Holding focus groups during which English 101 and English 102 instructors will discuss the assessment and changes to their teaching and make recommendations.
- Having small-scale follow-up assessments for 102, for example by taking three portfolios from each of six sections.
- Having an assessment coordinator work with instructors to help them improve syllabi and assignments.
- Developing assessment tools for English 098 and 101.
- Examining how well the English 101 text, *The Call the Write*, is helping students prepare for 102.

Thus, goals for the ongoing assessment could include:

- Examining articulation, or, specifically, how well English 101 is preparing students for 102.
- Following up on the 2006 assessment by re-assessing 102 after curricular changes have been implemented.
- Extending the assessment to English 098 and English 101. This would involve examining how well the values instructors articulate for 098 and 101 fit with our Core Writing Program outcomes. After determining the specific writing values for each course, we might also adapt the assessment tool to focus on features and to use language reflecting those values.

Application to Other Program Assessments

While the Core Writing Program's assessment tool cannot easily be transferred to other disciplines, the process by which it was developed can be, especially in disciplines that have outcomes, course objectives, and student materials that lend themselves to portfolio assessment.

This process requires time to implement (see the Process section above and Appendix C: Process Timeline) and at least one person to facilitate the process and coordinate the various people involved, but yields an assessment that is locally and contextually valid. In addition, it can provide opportunities for graduate students and post-docs to gain valuable experience.

A department or program interested in adapting this process might consider using the Core Writing Program's assessment tool as a basis for discussions about what they value in writing, and about what constitutes critical thinking in their disciplines. As Drs. Condon and Kelly-Riley note in a 2005 article² on critical thinking and writing, "good writing... differs widely from discipline to discipline and from context to context" and, similarly, what counts as "critical thinking is driven by the values and the types of work required in the discipline" (63-64).

Depending on availability of resources, members of the Core Writing Program's assessment team may be available to offer advice and guidance to departments wanting to adapt this assessment process to their own programs.

² Condon, William, and Diane Kelly-Riley. "Assessing and Teaching What We Value: The Relationship between College-Level Writing and Critical Thinking Abilities." *Assessing Writing* 9.1 (2004): 56-75.

Appendix A: Core Curriculum Learning Objectives

1. Compose and communicate effectively in a range of media for a variety of rhetorical and creative purposes;
2. Demonstrate an ability to frame and analyze a problem, find and interpret relevant information, develop and evaluate possible solutions, come to well-grounded conclusions, and craft an appropriate argument, report, application, or other expression of such inquiry;
3. Understand and apply the knowledge, perspectives, principles, and modes of reasoning employed in the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics;
4. Understand how the knowledge, perspectives, principles, and modes of reasoning embodied in the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics have contributed to human achievement;
5. Develop habits of mind that foster integrative thinking and the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another;
6. Demonstrate an understanding of the concepts of culture and cultural difference, and develop the habits of mind that allow for intercultural understanding and responsible individual and social choices for citizens of the global community.

Appendix B: Statistics

Summary Data

Variable	Mean	StDev	Median
PC	3.9629	0.8109	4.0000
OWN	3.5951	0.8287	3.5000
OTH	3.7112	0.8371	3.6667
RA	3.8695	0.7683	4.0000
PF	3.8831	0.7977	4.0000
SD	3.8085	0.8303	3.8333
DC	3.5946	0.9399	3.5000
LI	3.9860	0.7906	4.0000
GI	3.8499	0.7853	4.0000

T-tests

Two-sample T for PC vs. OWN

	Mean	StDev
PC	3.963	0.811
OWN	3.595	0.829

Estimate for difference: 0.367801

95% CI for difference: (0.202841, 0.532761)

T-Value = 4.38

P-Value = 0.000

Two-sample T for PC vs. OTH

	Mean	StDev
PC	3.963	0.811
OTH	3.711	0.837

Estimate for difference: 0.251745

95% CI for difference: (0.085930, 0.417560)

T-Value = 2.99

P-Value = 0.003

Two-sample T for PC vs. DC

	Mean	StDev
PC	3.963	0.811
DC	3.595	0.940

Estimate for difference: 0.368325

95% CI for difference: (0.191712, 0.544937)

T-Value = 4.10

P-Value = 0.000

Two-sample T for OWN vs. RA

	Mean	StDev
OWN	3.595	0.829
RA	3.870	0.768

Estimate for difference: -0.274433

95% CI for difference: (-0.435209, -0.113657)

T-Value = -3.36

P-Value = 0.001

Two-sample T for OWN vs. PF

	Mean	StDev
OWN	3.595	0.829
PF	3.883	0.798

Estimate for difference: -0.287958

95% CI for difference: (-0.451610, -0.124307)

T-Value = -3.46

P-Value = 0.001

Two-sample T for OWN vs. SD

	Mean	StDev
OWN	3.595	0.829
SD	3.808	0.830

Estimate for difference: -0.213351

95% CI for difference: (-0.380248, -0.046454)

T-Value = -2.51

P-Value = 0.012

Two-sample T for OWN vs. LI

	Mean	StDev
OWN	3.595	0.829
LI	3.986	0.791

Estimate for difference: -0.390925

95% CI for difference: (-0.553876, -0.227974)

T-Value = -4.72

P-Value = 0.000

Two-sample T for OWN vs. GI

	Mean	StDev
OWN	3.595	0.829
GI	3.850	0.785

Estimate for difference: -0.254799

95% CI for difference: (-0.417231, -0.092367)

T-Value = -3.08

P-Value = 0.002

Two-sample T for OTH vs. PF

	Mean	StDev
OTH	3.711	0.837
PF	3.883	0.798

Estimate for difference: -0.171902

95% CI for difference: (-0.336416, -0.007389)

T-Value = -2.05

P-Value = 0.041

Two-sample T for OTH vs. LI

	Mean	StDev
OTH	3.711	0.837
LI	3.986	0.791

Estimate for difference: -0.274869

95% CI for difference: (-0.438686, -0.111053)

T-Value = -3.30

P-Value = 0.001

Two-sample T for RA vs. DC

	Mean	StDev
RA	3.870	0.768
DC	3.595	0.940

Estimate for difference: 0.274956

95% CI for difference: (0.102245, 0.447668)

T-Value = 3.13

P-Value = 0.002

Two-sample T for PF vs. DC

	Mean	StDev
PF	3.883	0.798
DC	3.595	0.940

Estimate for difference: 0.288482

95% CI for difference: (0.113090, 0.463873)

T-Value = 3.23

P-Value = 0.001

Two-sample T for SD vs. DC

	Mean	StDev
SD	3.808	0.830
DC	3.595	0.940

Estimate for difference: 0.213874

95% CI for difference: (0.035451, 0.392298)

T-Value = 2.36

P-Value = 0.019

Two-sample T for SD vs. LI

	Mean	StDev
SD	3.808	0.830
LI	3.986	0.791

Estimate for difference: -0.177574

95% CI for difference: (-0.340681, -0.014467)

T-Value = -2.14

P-Value = 0.033

Two-sample T for DC vs. LI

	Mean	StDev
DC	3.595	0.940
LI	3.986	0.791

Estimate for difference: -0.391449

95% CI for difference: (-0.566186, -0.216711)

T-Value = -4.40

P-Value = 0.000

Two-sample T for DC vs. GI

	Mean	StDev
DC	3.595	0.940

GI	3.850	0.785
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Estimate for difference: -0.255323

95% CI for difference: (-0.429577, -0.081069)

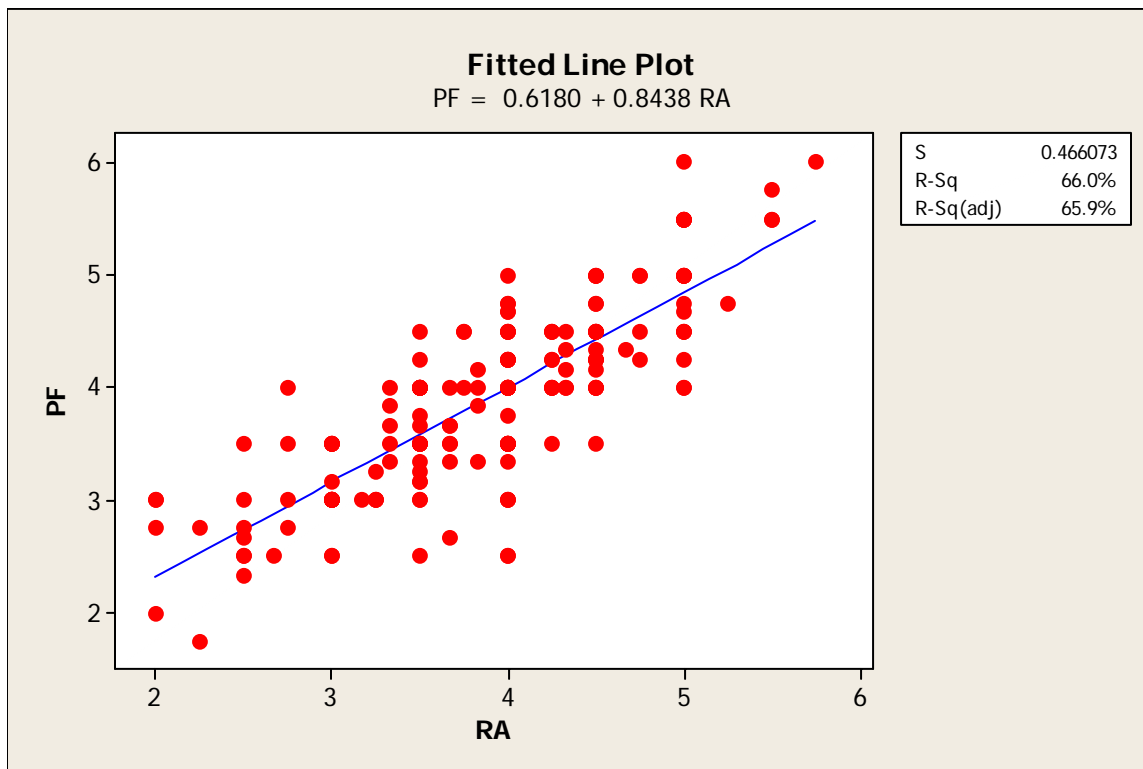
T-Value = -2.88

P-Value = 0.004

Linear Regression Graphs

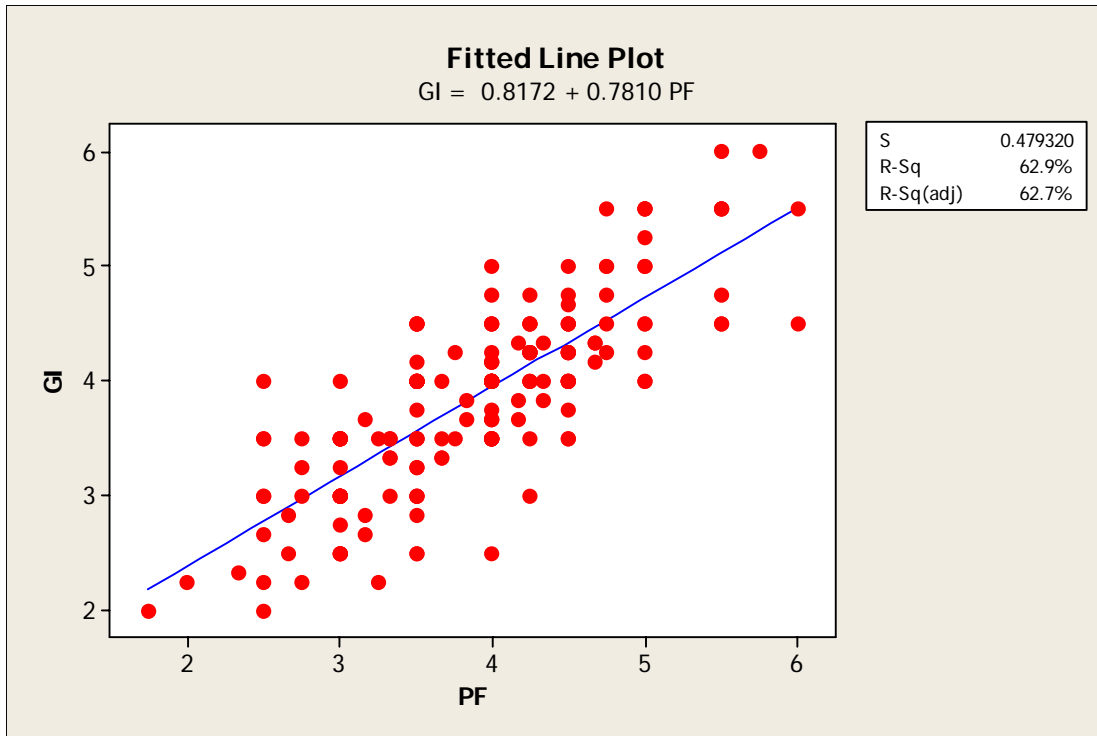
Linear Regression Graph for RA & PF

R-sq = 66% IMPLIES → 66% of the variability in PF can be explained by RA.



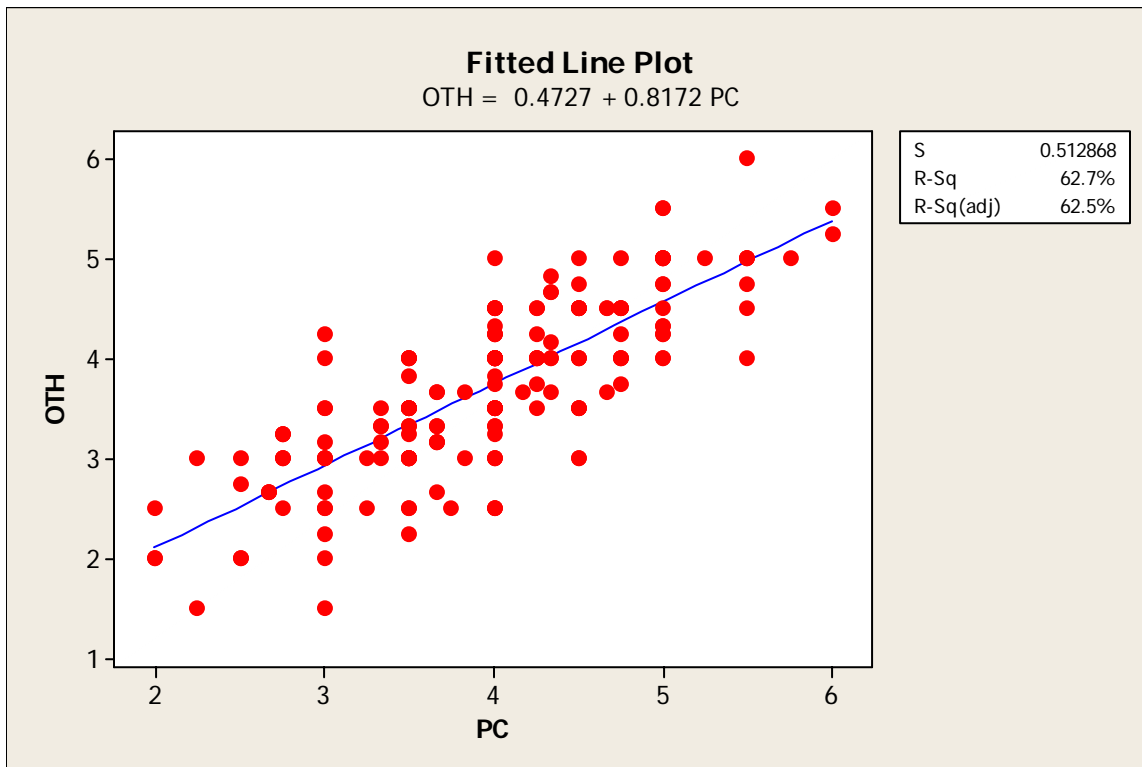
Linear Regression Graph for PF & GI

R-sq = 62.9% IMPLIES → 62.9% of the variability in GI can be explained by PF.



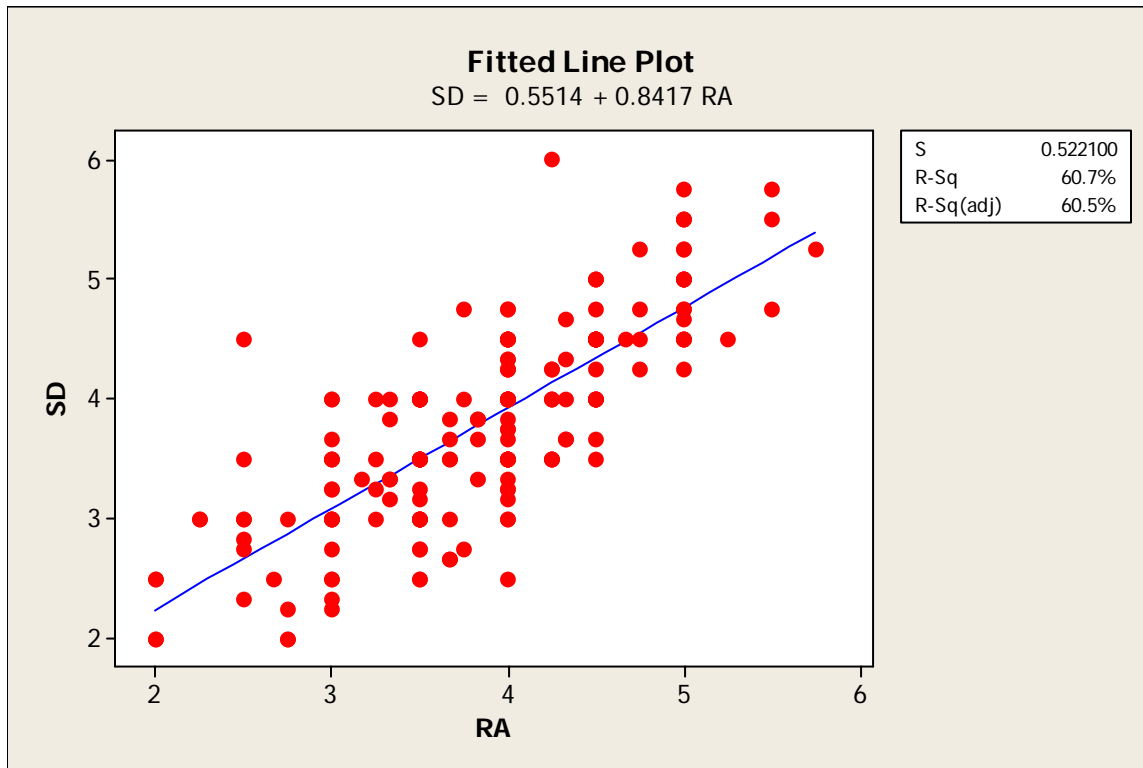
Linear Regression Graph for PC and OTH

R-sq = 62.7% IMPLIES → 62.7% of the variability in OTH can be explained by PC.



Linear Regression Graph for RA & SD

R-sq = 60.7% IMPLIES → 60.7% of the variability in SD can be explained by RA.



Appendix C: Process Timeline

Previous Assessment	2000	Dr. Boardman conducted an internally-driven assessment of the Core Writing Program, then modified 737 and in-service sessions based on the assessment results.
	2001	Dr. Boardman did follow-up studies to see if the changes to 737 and in-service sessions made a difference.
Parameters	2004, Fall	Dr. Detweiler and Dr. Neill met to talk about assessment and establish some initial parameters.
Information Gathering	2005, Spring (all semester)	Internship began with parameters, Dr. Boardman's report, and readings about assessing writing and assessing critical thinking.
	2005, early March	Kelly-Riley workshop
	2005, March	Survey of Core Writing Program faculty and instructors
	2005, April	Test run of the new rubric, done by the intern group
	2005, May	Focus groups 1 & 2, looking at values
	2005, Fall	Rubric tweaking Focus groups 3 & 4, test runs of the rubric
Implementation	2006, Spring	Information sessions for CWP instructors, explaining what they would need to do
	2006, May 1-10	Collecting portfolios
	2006, May 22-26	Reading
Results & Actions	2006, Summer & Fall	Reporting results
	2006-2007 academic year and beyond	Curricular, programmatic, and institutional responses Ongoing follow-up assessment activities

Appendix D: Core Writing Program Survey

Have you ever taught Core Writing Program courses? ____yes ____no

How many times have you taught 102?

____0 ____1-3 ____4-6 ____more than 6

Are you:

____Graduate Teaching Assistant

____LOA

____Term Faculty

____Continuing Faculty

What do you value in student writing?

How do you recognize critical thinking in student writing?

Describe a successful 102 argument paper.

On a scale of 1-10 (1=lowest; 10=highest), rate the following features for the importance they hold for you when you evaluate student writing.

A) Identification of Problem:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

B) Identifies Writer's Perspectives (draws on own experience, identifies personal position):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

C) Identifies Other Perspectives (additional perspectives from outside information):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

D) Identifies/Assesses Key Assumptions:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

E) Identifies/Assesses Data/Evidence (examines data/evidence, considers conclusions, and own assumptions):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

F) Rhetorical Awareness (demonstrates sense of purpose, scope, audience):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

G) Use of documented sources (citations, well-integrated):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

H) Focus (use of controlling idea(s), “center of gravity”):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I) Organization:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

J) Coherence of Paragraphs/Sections:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

K) Paragraph Development (use of detail and evidence):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

L) Introductions/Conclusions:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

M) Sentence Construction (syntactic completeness):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

N) Mechanics and Usage:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

O) Response to Requirements of Assignment:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

P) Evidence of Development as a Writer (demonstrate writing process, peer response):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Q) Other: _____

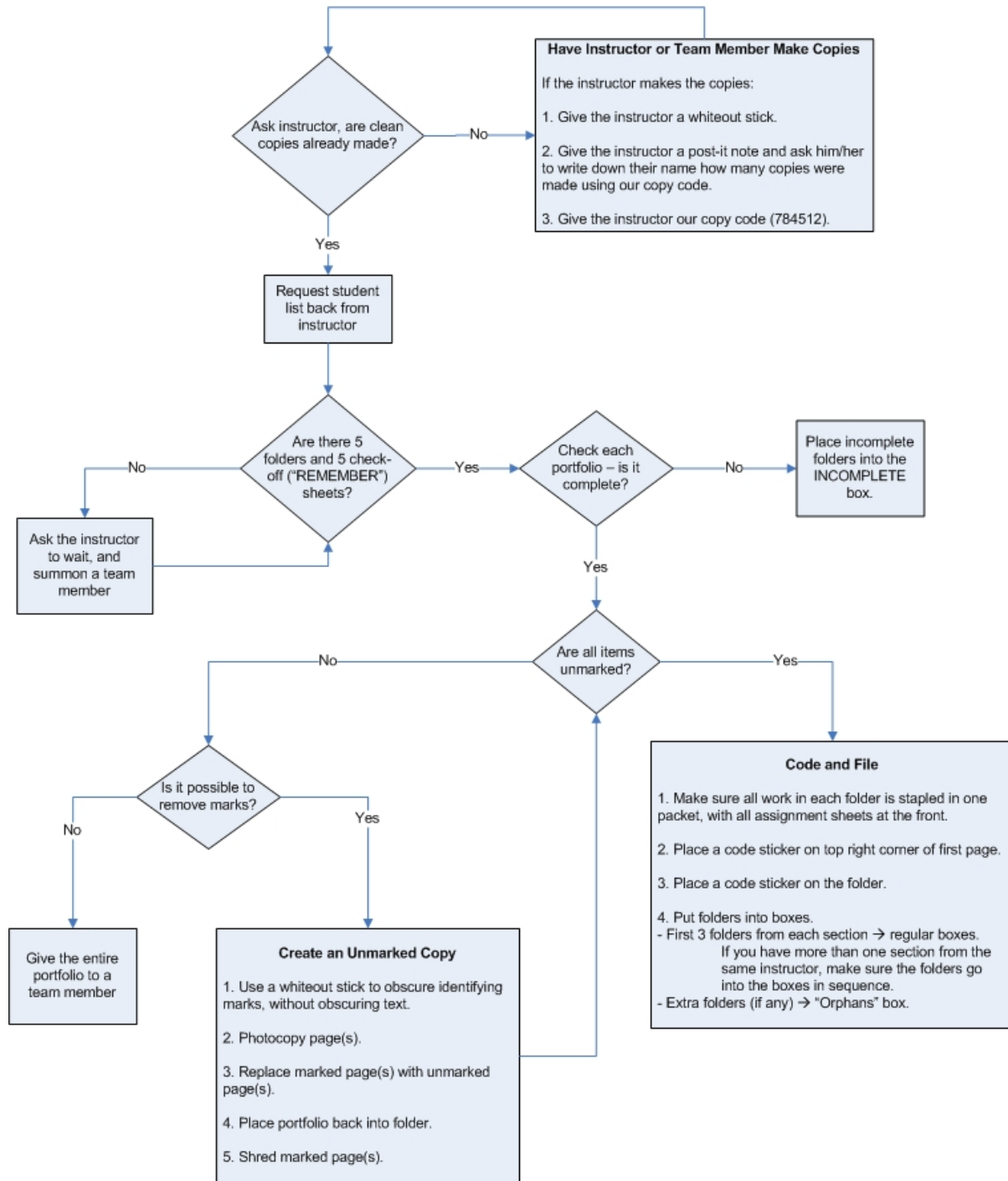
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix E: Instructor Checklist

- Attend the CWP Assessment Project Information Session on April 5 from 12:00-1:30 in JTSU Room 245—especially if you missed the information meetings that were held this past November.
- Inform 102 students of the random selection process for the CWP Assessment Project.
- Inform randomly selected students that they have been chosen to participate in the assessment and what the deadline will be for submitting their work to you.
- Inform students what materials they are required to submit for their *Program Assessment Portfolio*: final drafts of all major course assignments.
- Decide whether you want students to print out “clean copies” of their assignments, or whether you will photocopy “clean copies” of their work using the special copy code.
- Collect *Program Assessment Portfolios* from your English 102 classes.
- Make sure that no student/instructor identifying information appears on any of the assignments in *Project Assessment Portfolios*.
- Attach a post-it note that identifies the class, instructor and student (or have students print out a detachable cover page for their *Project Assessment Portfolio*).
- Include the assignment sheets for each major writing assignment—from which any/all grading criteria has been removed—in each *Project Assessment Portfolio*.
- Turn in *Project Assessment Portfolios* to the Core Writing Program between May 1-10.

Appendix F: Portfolio Intake Process

Portfolio Intake Process



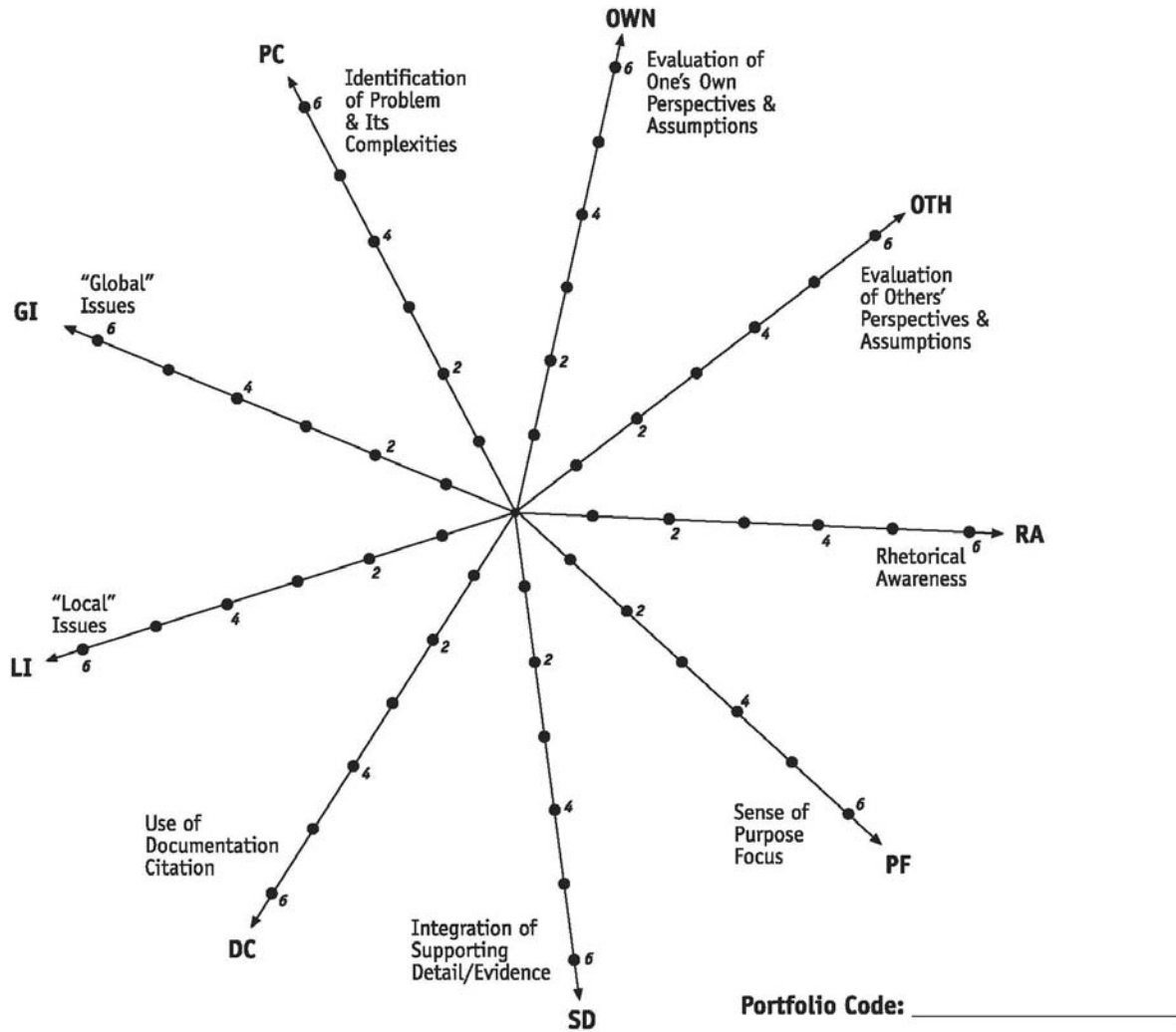
Appendix G: Reading Tools

Readers scored each portfolio using a rubric, and some used the optional comment sheet. Each reader also had a copy of the Rubric Features & Scoring Descriptions handout.

The Rubric

The rubric is a nine-pointed star. Each axis represents one of the nine scored features, and there are six scores (1-6) marked on each axis.

Readers marked a score for each of the nine features, with half-scores allowed between any scores except 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. Readers were told not to use 3.5 in order to encourage them to make a judgment by choosing one of the middle scores on the continuum instead of opting for the exact halfway mark.



Description of Scores

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.

The Comment Sheet

The comment sheet has spaces for three comment-only features, and three blank spaces for writing comments on scored features.

Readers used the comment-only features areas to comment on issues they noticed but were not taking into account while scoring portfolios.

Readers used the three blank spaces to comment on scored features. For example, a reader wanting to make notes about a writer's use of Documentation and Citation (DC) would write "DC" in the left-hand column and the comment in the right-hand column. As the results show, readers varied in how much they used the comment sheet.

Description of Scored Features

The "Rubric Features & Scoring Descriptions" sheet describes the nine scored features on the star chart, and three comment-only features. The scored features are:

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.

Description of 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.

Appendix H: Student Demographics

Total Students = 320

Sex

- 171 females = 53.4%
- 149 males = 46.6%

Previous Classes

3 students (<1%) took English 098 at UNR, and all three received an “S.”

247 students (77%) took English 101 at UNR.

High Schools

- 242 Nevada High Schools = 76%
- 61 Other High Schools = 19%
- 17 Unknown High Schools = 5%

Age Distribution

The vast majority, 266 students (84%), were 18 or 19 years old.

4 students (1%) were 17 years old.

46 students (14%) were between 20 and 24 years old.

4 students (1%) were over 30 years old.

Appendix I: References

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