First Year Composition Assessment

The First Year Composition (FYC) Assessment analyzes the progress and development of students’ writing skills during their freshman year. This assessment effort began in 2007-2008 and is jointly conducted by the Office of Assessment Services (OAS) and the Department of English. This ongoing initiative assesses long term trends to help determine the value added to writing ability provided through the First Year Composition Program. Students are assessed on their ability to demonstrate rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading and writing, knowledge of conventions, and proficiency in writing processes.

Method

Writing samples were collected from 30 students who completed English 103 (Rhetoric and Composition I) and English 104 (Rhetoric and Composition II) during Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 semesters, respectively.

Students enrolled in English 103 wrote a three-to-five page essay on a single experience in their life in which language and literacy played a central role. A copy of the prompt used for this essay can be found in Appendix A. Essays were collected at the beginning of the semester and each essay was rated by two trained scorers from the Department of English using the General Writing Rubric (see rubric on the following page).

Students’ writing skills were reassessed in English 104 through the completion of a three-to-five page essay on a single experience from their time at NIU in which issues of language and literacy played a central role. A copy of the prompt used for this essay can be found in Appendix B. Essays were collected at the end of the term and evaluated as described above with the same standardized rubric.

After the essays were scored, the OAS analyzed the data and made comparisons to the 2008 First Year Composition data. Data analyses and discussion of the data are compiled in this report.
# General Writing Rubric

The following criteria describe writing that *Meets expectations*:

## Focus:
The writing demonstrates adequate understanding of the writer’s task and establishes effective communicative intent.

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## Genre:
The writing demonstrates satisfactory control of the conventions of the relevant discourse community.

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## Audience:
The writing reflects consistent awareness of desired impact on audience and effectively appeals to audience expectations.

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## Organization:
The writing demonstrates appropriate arrangement of material and provides sufficient material to satisfy expectations of readers.

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## Critical Thinking:
The writing reflects adequate development, representation, and/or integration of ideas, experiences, or texts.

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## Writer’s Presence:
The writing suggests an informed writer who establishes and maintains an appropriate voice, tone, and style.

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## Presentation:
The writing shows control of sentence-level features of written language (grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage).

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Results

Writing samples from 30 students who completed English 103 and 104 in Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 were collected. It is the goal of this year’s analyses to determine the strengths and weaknesses of freshman writing, along with the progress and development of freshman writing skills from year to year. Analyses examining students’ overall and subscore performance on the writing samples were conducted and compared with the 2008 First Year Composition outcomes.

A frequency distribution graphing students’ overall performance in English 103 and 104 can be found in Figure 1. Scores from two raters using the General Writing Rubric were combined and then averaged across the subscales to make total scores ranging from 2 to 6; with scores of 2, 4, and 6 indicating the writing ‘did not meet,’ ‘met,’ or ‘exceeded’ expectations, respectively. Fifty-three percent of English 103 writing samples, and 77 percent of English 104 writing samples, met expectations with a computed average score of 4 or better. As seen in Figure 1, the writing samples from English 103 showed more variability in abilities, with more students scoring below expectations than the English 104 sample.

Note. N = 30.
The mean score for English 103 (N = 30) was 4.37 with a standard deviation of 1.0. The mean score for English 104 (N = 30) was 4.17 with a standard deviation of .75. The mean scores for the two courses were not significantly different t(1, 58) = .88, \( p = .38 \). However, last year (2007-2008) the two course were significantly different t(1, 58) = -3.73, \( p = .00 \) with mean scores of 3.70 and 4.43 for English 103 and English 104, respectively. In contrast to last year’s First Year Composition sample, both this year’s English 103 and 104 samples had an average score that met expectations (see Figure 2). Last year, only the English 104 group had an average score that met writing ability expectations (represented by a score of 4 or higher). Additionally, last year’s English 103 and this year’s English 103 average scores were significantly different t(1, 58) = -2.86, \( p = .01 \); while last year’s English 104 and this year’s English 104 average scores were not significantly different t(1, 58) = 1.40, \( p = .27 \).

![Figure 2: Mean English 103 and English 104 Scores by Year](image)

The General Writing Rubric assesses strengths and weaknesses on seven subscales (Focus, Genre, Audience, Organization, Critical Thinking, Writer’s Presence, and Presentation). Expanded explanations of each subscale can be found in the Methods section of this report. The mean score for each subscale was calculated for English 103 and English 104 (see Figure 3).
In the 2008-2009 sample of both English 103 and English 104, all but one subscale (Presentation) met expectations (see Figures 3 and 4). In the 2007-2008 sample, six subscales did not meet expectations in English 103 and two subscales did not meet expectations in English 104 (see Figure 4).
To further investigate differences between writing abilities in 2008-2009, a paired samples t-test was conducted using SPSS to determine if the mean subscale scores in English 103 were significantly different from the mean subscale scores in English 104. The Writer's Presence subscale evidenced significant differences between the groups $t(1, 29) = 2.28, p = .03$; with the English 103 sample scoring significantly higher than the English 104 sample (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5: Mean Subscale Scores for English 103 and English 104](image)

Finally, analyses were performed to determine if writing abilities differed at the end of the freshman year (in English 104) compared to writing in upper-division courses. A comparison of the mean subscale scores for English 104 and the University Writing Project (UWP) was conducted. The University Writing Project data included 493 writing samples from junior and senior courses collected during the 2008-2009 school year and scored by the same team of scorers using the same standardized rubric that is used in the FYC Assessment. Unlike the English 103 and English 104 matched sample, the University Writing Project sample is cross-sectional. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if the subscale scores in English 104 significantly differed from the subscale scores on the University Writing Project. Results showed no significant differences between English 104 and the University Writing Project on any of the subscales (see Figure 6). For a graphical depiction of the mean subscale scores for English 103, 104, and the University Writing Project, see Figure 7.
Discussion

The First Year Composition Assessment sampled course-embedded writing assignments collected from 30 students who completed English 103 in Fall 2008 and English 104 in Spring 2009. A team of trained scorers from the Department of English evaluated the writing assignments with a standardized General Writing Rubric identical to the rubric used for the University Writing Project.

Descriptive statistics showed an increase in the number of students who scored at the level of expectations from English 103 to English 104 but with an decreased mean score from the first to second course. The subscale mean scores also decreased from English 103 to English 104 except for two subscales that increased – Critical Thinking and Presentation. Paired samples t-tests were conducted to determine if the mean subscale scores in English 103 were significantly different from the mean subscales scores in English 104 with the result that only one pair of scores were significantly different. The scores for Writer’s Presence were significantly higher in English 103 than in English 104. Despite the downward trends in this year’s data, all but one subscale (Presentation) met expectations in both English 103 and English 104. It appears that, although there is still room for improvement, NIU students in FYC are meeting writing expectations in all areas other than Presentation.

An ANOVA comparing mean subscale scores between English 104 and the University Writing Project examined cross-sectional data with different samples sizes (English 104: \( N = 30 \); University Writing Project: \( N = 493 \)). Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, and trends, rather than statistical significance, may be most informative. Based on the ANOVA results, there were no significant differences in any of the subscale scores (Figure 7). It may be important to note that, although there are not differences between English 104 and the University Writing Project on all of the subscales, informative conclusions can still be drawn. For example, the Presentation subscale neither increased nor decreased significantly from English 104 to the University Writing Project, however it was below expected levels in both cases. Once again, this suggests that Presentation may be an area of writing where all NIU students could use improvement. Other subscales such as Genre, Organization, and Critical Thinking were similarly low. This is noteworthy, in particular, as the first two of these subscales scores were also problematic in the 2007-2008 FYC study. Over the past two years, Presentation, Genre, and Organization have been weaker areas in both the FYC and UWP assessments. These results should help to inform instructors about students’ weaknesses in writing and should be used when constructing course writing assignment expectations.

This was the second year the OAS used the standardized General Writing Rubric for scoring both the First Year Composition and University Writing Project writing samples. The use of this standardized rubric allowed for some comparisons across years in the achievement of students’ scores on papers form English 103, English 104, and the UWP. The continued use of this rubric for both data sets will allow for the analysis of future trends.
APPENDIX A

English 103

Writing Sample: Personal Literacy Essay

Purpose:
One focus of this course is on issues of language and literacy, and how exploring these issues can make you a better thinker and writer. The first step in understanding these issues and relating them to your own writing is to reflect on how they already affect your life and to start using those ideas to put pen to paper. Your personal literacy essay will help me get to know you as a writer. My responses to your essay will help you get to know me as a reader--with no grade attached.

The purpose of this essay is found in its title. The word essay isn't just a noun; it's also a verb. It means "to strike out" or "to explore." You "essay out" to explore a subject the same way Lewis and Clark "essayed out" to explore North America. In this essay, you'll write to explore your own mind, to find out what you think, and to help your audience fully understand your thoughts. A literacy essay, then, is one in which you explore your own experiences with issues of language and literacy and reflect on how those experiences have affected your life.

Your audience for this essay will be the other members of our 103 class. Part of your job will be to determine the best ways to share your experiences with this audience.

Focus:
Focus the essay on a single experience in your life--one in which issues of language and literacy played a central part. For instance, you could concentrate on an early experience with reading or writing (When did what you read really start clicking in your mind? How did that affect you?), an experience with learning a different language (What were the ups and downs of trying to communicate in that language?), or an experience with learning the lingo of a specific subculture (How did learning to talk like a cowboy or computer person affect you?). You might also focus on a negative experience with language, one in which you felt less than literate, one in which language actually got in the way.

Develop your essay by narrating one or two key scenes from this experience. Describe the scenes using sensory detail. Give examples. Show us what everything looked like; let us hear people talking. Then, reflect on the significance of the experience. How did it affect you then and how does it continue to affect you now?

Make your essay coherent for your audience by choosing an arrangement and style that will present your experiences and ideas clearly and vividly.

Format:
Length will be determined by what you can comfortably write in one hour, allowing for a quick read-through at the end of class. Students in the past have typically generated 3-5 page essays. I do expect you to write for the entire class period, and to develop a complete essay. If you like, you may bring a page of text (notes, map, outline, other prewriting) to class on Friday to be handed in with your essay.

Evaluation:
I will respond to your writing--first and foremost, now and throughout the semester--as a fellow human being interested in your experiences and what you have to say. Then, I will note your essay's strengths and weaknesses, suggesting areas we might focus on this semester. I expect a few glitches under the pressures of in-class writing, but please do your best under the circumstances. Your personal literacy essay receives no grade, but makes an important first impression.
APPENDIX B

English 104

Final Literacy Reflection

Purpose:
According to the First-Year Composition Program Goals statement, the program “prepares students for participation in the academic and professional discourses that they will encounter in their undergraduate studies. To that end, the program develops students’ abilities to read and think critically and to write meaningfully in response to what they read. The writing process is viewed as a way for students to develop their thoughts, to create meaning, and to construct texts that address personal, public, and professional issues.”

The purpose of this essay is to afford you a chance to reflect on your experience with literacy and writing during the course of your time here at NIU; to discuss the ways in which writing and reading have been important to you academically, personally, or publicly.

Your audience for this essay will be the other members of our class. Part of your job will be to determine the best ways to share your experiences with this audience.

Focus:
Focus the essay on a single experience from your time here as a student at NIU--one in which issues of language and literacy played a central part. For instance, you could concentrate on the ways in which reading and writing have played an important role in your academic life (Has your academic writing changed in substantial ways? What prompted those changes?), an experience with writing on a more personal level (Did the experience of reading or writing on the memorial wall in the MLK Commons have a significant impact on you? Were there other forms of reading or writing related to the February 14th shootings that impacted you? Or perhaps other situations unconnected with NIU had a big impact on your view of reading or writing), or an experience of a more public nature (In what ways has your relationship with public discourse, such as political rhetoric, changed? Do you view popular media in different ways, or are you more skeptical of some kinds of language?).

Develop your essay by narrating one or two key scenes from this experience. Describe the scene(s) in detail; give examples where possible. Then, reflect on the significance of the experience. How did it affect you then and how does it continue to affect you now?

Make your essay coherent for your audience by choosing an arrangement and style that will present your experiences and ideas clearly and vividly.

Format:
Length will be determined by what you can comfortably write in one hour, allowing for a quick read-through at the end of class. Students in the past have typically generated 3-5 page essays. I do expect you to write for the entire class period, and to develop a complete essay. If you like, you may bring a page of text (notes, map, outline, or other prewriting) to be handed in with your essay.

Evaluation:
Your Final Literacy Reflection will count as part of your final portfolio. I will note your essay’s strengths and weaknesses; I will expect a few glitches under the pressures of in-class writing, but please do your best under the circumstances, as this reflection will make an important final impression.