Northern Illinois University
Office of Assessment Services

2008 First Year Composition Assessment Report
Analysis of College-Level Writing Ability/Skills
Fall 2008

Distributed Fall 2008
For Additional Information
Contact Carolinda Douglass
cdoug@niu.edu
First Year Composition Assessment

In spring 2008, the Office of Assessment Services (OAS) worked with the Department of English in conducting the First Year Composition Assessment. This writing assessment initiative was developed in an effort to assess student writing ability as freshmen and the value added to writing ability provided through the First Year Composition Program. According to the NIU Department of English website, “The First Year Composition Program at NIU prepares students for participation in the academic and professional discourses that they will encounter in their undergraduate studies.” The project consists of assessing writing abilities in English 103: Rhetoric and Composition I and English 104: Rhetoric and Composition II. By the end of their first year, students are expected to be able to demonstrate rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading and writing, knowledge of conventions, and proficiency in writing processes.

Method

In order to assess the progress and development of students’ writing skills, writing samples from 30 students were assessed at the beginning and end of their freshman year in academic year 2007-2008. 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 that was used in the University Writing Project (see General Writing 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 as NIU students 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.
Department of English
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceeds expectations</td>
<td>Meets expectations</td>
<td>Doesn’t meet expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Writing samples from 30 students who completed English 103 and 104 in Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 were included in the analyses. Descriptive statistics examining students' overall and subscore performance in the first year composition courses were conducted. A frequency distribution graphing students' overall performance in English 103 and 104 can be found in Figure 1. Scores from the two raters could range from 2 to 6; with scores of 2, 4, and 6 indicating the writing 'did not meet', 'met', or 'exceeded' expectations, respectively.

The mean score for English 103 (N = 30) was 3.70 with a standard deviation of .79. A score of 4 or better, indicating writing expectations were met, was achieved by approximately 63 percent of the students in English 103. The mean score for English 104 (N = 30) was 4.43 with a standard deviation of .73. A score of 4 or better was achieved by 90 percent of the students in English 104. The analysis also showed that 28 of the students (approximately 93 percent) scored the same or better in English 104 than in English 103 (Figure 1).

Note. N = 30.
This year’s rubric allowed for subscale distinctions to determine areas of strength and weakness within the writing samples. Seven subscales were identified: Focus, Genre, Audience, Organization, Critical Thinking, Writer’s Presence, and Presentation. Expanded explanations of each subscale can be found in the General Writing Rubric in the Methods section of this report. The mean score for each subscale was calculated for English 103 and English 104 (see Figure 2).

Based on the subscale analyses (Figure 2), scores appeared to greatly increase from English 103 to English 104. In English 103, all but one subscale (Writer's Presence) did not meet expectations. In English 104, all but two subscales (Organization and Presentation) met expectations. In both courses, Organization and Presentation did not meet expectations. Organization is represented by the arrangement of material in a way that provides sufficient material to satisfy expectations of readers. Presentation is represented by basic features of written language such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, and word usage.

To further investigate the differences between writing abilities in English 103 and 104, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) 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. Results showed differences between English 103 and English 104 on the computed average score $F(1, 58) = 13.90, p = .00$ and on six subscales: Focus $F(1, 58) = 13.68, p = .00$, Genre $F(1, 58) = 5.44, p = .02$, Audience $F(1, 58) = 7.66, p = .01$, Critical Thinking $F(1, 58) = 13.60, p = .00$, Writer’s Presence $F(1, 58) = 8.61, p = .01$, and Presentation $F(1, 58) = 19.64, p = .00$ (see Figure 3). In all cases, English 104 subscale scores were higher than those for English 103.
Analyses were performed to determine if the trend toward an increase in writing ability from English 103 to English 104 was also depicted in upper-division writing samples. A comparison of the mean subscale scores for English 104 and the overall mean subscale scores for the University Writing Project was conducted. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using SPSS to determine if the mean subscale scores in English 104 were significantly different from the mean subscale scores on the University Writing Project. Results showed differences between English 104 and the University Writing Project on two subscales: Critical Thinking $F(1, 454) = 7.50, p = .01$, and Writer's Presence $F(1, 454) = 6.23, p = .01$. In both cases, English 104 subscale scores were higher than the University Writing Project subscale scores (see Figure 4). For a graphical depiction of the mean subscale scores for English 103, 104, and the University Writing Project, see Appendix C.

Note. Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was significant for Critical Thinking ($p = .01$) and Writer's Presence ($p = .04$) meaning that the variances within English 103 and 104 scores were not equal. According to Howell (2001), an ANOVA is a robust statistical procedure and not highly influenced by violation of homogeneity.
Discussion

As with the 2008 University Writing Project, the First Year Composition Assessment sampled course-embedded writing assignments. Writing assignments were collected from 30 students who completed English 103 and 104 in Fall 2007 and Spring 2008. 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 mean scores from English 103 to English 104, with 93 percent of the students scoring the same or better in English 104 than in English 103. The subscale scores also increased from English 103 to English 104. In English 103, all but one subscale (Writer’s Presence) did not meet expectations. In English 104, all but two subscales (Organization and Presentation) met expectations. An ANOVA comparing the mean subscale scores in English 103 and 104 showed differences on the computed average score and on six subscales: Focus, Genre, Audience, Critical Thinking, Writer’s Presence, and Presentation. In all cases, subscale scores were higher in English 104 than in English 103 indicating positive value-added gains in writing skills for the students in this sample.

The 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 = 426). Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, and trends,
rather than statistical significance, may be most informative. Based on the ANOVA results (Figure 4), the gain in writing ability from English 103 to English 104 was, for the most part, maintained in the upper division writing samples. The two subscales that depicted more negative results when English 104 was compared to the University Writing Project were Critical Thinking and Writer’s Presence. It is possible that the expected writing styles differed from English 104 to each major area, causing differences in the mean scores of these subscales. 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 from English 104 to the University Writing Project, however it was below expected levels in both cases. This suggests that presentation may be an area of writing where all NIU students could use improvement. Other subscales such as Genre and Organization were similarly low. 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 first year the OAS used an identical rubric for scoring both the First Year Composition and University Writing Project writing samples. The continued use of this standardized rubric for both data sets will allow for the analysis of future trends.
APPENDIX A

English 103, Fall 2007

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, Spring 2008

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.
APPENDIX C

Mean Subscale Scores for English 103, English 104, & the UWP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>English 103</th>
<th>English 104</th>
<th>University Writing Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer's Presence</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>