

**Pittsburg State University
General Education Writing Assessment
2014-15**

**Submitted by
Dr. Donald Judd and Dr. Janet Zepernick
June 3, 2015**

General Education Writing Assessment—2014-15

Pittsburg State University

Introduction

Pittsburg State University conducted its annual General Education writing assessment of both ENGL 101 (English Composition) and ENGL 299 (Introduction to Research Writing) for the academic year 2013-14. The primary purpose was to determine if student writing improved from one ENGL 101 to ENGL 299. The secondary purpose was to determine if students trended toward specific deficiencies at each level, which could then feed back into improved instruction.

General Description of Project

To evaluate student writing, the PSU Writing Rubric was used as our assessment instrument. The rubric consists of six criteria—Focus, Development, Organization, Use of Sources, Style, and Editing—with four levels of achievement—Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, Falls Below Expectations, and No Credit (see Rubric for full descriptions of each criterion/level, Appendix A). The four levels of achievement were given the following numerical values: Exceeds Expectations (EE) 3 points, Meets Expectations (ME) 2 points, Falls Below Expectations (FB) 1 point, and No Credit (NC) 0 points. When scores in all categories are totaled, the resulting range is from 18 to 0 points possible. Thus, the overall scores for NC are 0-5; the overall scores for FB are 6-11; the overall scores for ME are 12-15, and the overall scores for EE are 16-18. These overall scores do not address student success for internal criteria, but for general assessment purposes, this number serves as a good indicator of general student success. A breakdown of internal scores will provide data useful for improving instruction.

Each paper was scored by two trained faculty members who discussed and reached consensus on each paper. The plan was that if consensus could not be met, one of the WAC directors would serve as third reader, and their score would be recorded for the paper. At the same time, the directors would discuss the paper with the two raters and explain the justification for the rating, thus, serving to recalibrate the raters' scoring. However, raters were always able to agree on scores; therefore, intervention of a third reading was not necessary.

In order to address value added, both ENGL 101 and 299 students were given the same writing task and source materials for that task (see Writing Prompt and source materials, Appendix B). ENGL 101 students were given this assignment during the first two weeks of ENGL 101, and ENGL 299 students were given this assignment during the final week of ENGL 299. The writing prompt and source materials were made available to students prior to the administration of the assessment task so students could familiarize themselves with the task and the sources. In addition, students were given the homework assignment of completing a grid that identified key elements of the writing task in order to help students think more clearly about the assignment. This pre-writing assignment was expected to improve scores on Development. Instructors then moderated a class discussion wherein the class collaborated on completing a more thorough grid. Finally, students completed the assignment in class in order to create a comparable testing situation for all students.

All face-to-face sections of ENGL 101 and 299 participated in the assessment project. Of those sections, papers were randomly selected from 38 sections of ENGL 101 and 36 sections of

ENGL 299. A total of one hundred seventeen papers were selected from ENGL 101 and one hundred twenty-one papers from ENGL 299 for a grand total of two hundred and thirty-eight papers.

Overall Results

Of the ENGL 101 papers, none achieved a score of EE, but 0.85% scored ME, 82.9% scored FB, and 16.23% scored NC. Of ENGL 299 papers, none achieved a score of EE, 10.74% scored ME, 78.51% scored FB, and 10.74% scored NC.

	EE	ME	FB	NC
English 101-99	--	0.85%	82.9%	16.23%
English 299-99	--	10.74%	78.51%	10.74%

While the percentage of 299 papers that earned ME is higher than 101 papers (10.74% vs 0.85%), the percentage of 299 papers that earned NC is lower than 101 papers (10.74 vs 16.23). Thus, there is some value added from 101 to 299, but the overall performance of 299 students is disappointing.

Internal Criteria Scores: English 101

	EE	ME	FB	NC
Focus	3.41%	74.34%	17.09%	5.12%
Development	--	8.54%	60.68%	30.76%
Organization	5.12%	69.23%	23.07%	2.56%
Use of Sources	--	.85%	5.12%	94.01%
Style	3.41%	29.05%	61.53%	5.98%
Editing	4.27%	42.73%	48.71%	4.27%

Discussion

Focus was problematic for only 22% of ENGL 101 students primarily because they failed to carefully consider the audience (their boss, councilwoman Elizabeth Bennett) or the purpose (to prepare councilwoman Bennett for a town hall meeting to discuss the various solid waste proposals). Instead, these students envisioned a different audience or purpose. While they had a relatively good grasp of the issues, they did not take the other parameters of the assignment seriously. However, almost 77% of 101 students met or exceeded expectations for focus. This success likely stems from the pre-writing exercise. While the intent of the exercise was to aid students in thinking about development, a corollary benefit was thinking about development *for* their boss, councilwoman Bennett.

Development was the second greatest weakness (after Use of Sources) for ENGL 101 students with 97% of students scoring FB or NC. Most writers were able to identify some strengths and weakness of some proposals, but they routinely failed to address all proposals or all stakeholders. This poor performance is likely the result of students' failure to distinguish strengths and weaknesses from irrelevant information (such as landfill fees or licensing and business fees). This may point to an inability to read for comprehension.

Organization was the second greatest strength (after Focus) for ENGL 101 students, scoring 74% at ME or EE. This was probably because the nature of the assignment lent itself to a simple four-part organizational strategy based on four solid waste proposals. Those who struggled with Organization tended to write rambling paragraphs with no controlling ideas.

Use of Sources was the greatest weakness in ENGL 101 papers, with 94% earning NC, and 5% scoring FB. This may be because writing with sources is not strongly emphasized in most high school English courses.

Style was the third greatest weakness with 61% scoring FB and 6% scoring NC. The predominant cause of the poor rate of success in this category was poor or immature language skills, ranging from immature word choice and overly simplistic sentence structure to difficulty in writing sentences that conveyed meaning. Some students also struggled to achieve an appropriate tone. However, it is worth noting that 29% scored ME and 3% EE in Style, so 32% of incoming freshmen seem to be prepared for college level writing in terms of crafting effective sentences.

Editing was the third strongest criteria for English 101 students, with 47% scoring EE or ME. The editing skill of only 4% of students earned NC, and 48% scored FB, stemming from a variety of problems with sentence mechanics.

While ENGL 101 students need to develop their writing skills in all six criteria, learning to use sources properly and to support claims with appropriate reasoning and evidence are the two skill areas that most negatively affected their overall scores. In addition, students need to develop a rhetorical understanding of any writing situation: they need to consider the task and the audience. Had the English 101 students paid attention to these issues, their scores on Development and Style would have improved.

Internal Criteria Scores: English 299

	EE	ME	FB	NC
Focus	9.91%	73.55%	13.22%	3.30%
Development	3.30%	20.66%	59.50%	16.52%
Organization	15.70%	67.76%	15.70%	0.82%
Use of Sources	1.65%	1.65%	12.39%	84.29%
Style	9.09%	39.66%	47.10%	4.13%
Editing	17.35%	35.53%	45.45%	1.65%

Discussion

Focus was a problem for only 16% of students completing ENGL 299, primarily because they struggled with identifying both advantages and disadvantages of the four proposals and identifying the stakeholders for whom the advantages and disadvantages pertain or because they failed to understand the purpose of the assignment: to prepare this report for their boss, councilwoman Bennett. The 299 students did slightly better on focus than 101 students, with 77% of 101 students scoring EE or ME, while 83% of 299 students scored EE or ME. Those who

scored poorly tended to identify advantages and disadvantages for only some of the proposals or for only some of the stakeholders. While the pre-writing exercise was intended to address Development, it also appears to have helped students think more clearly about Focus.

Development was the second greatest weakness (after Use of Sources) for students completing ENGL 299, with nearly 60% FB, but 24% scored either ME or EE. As with ENGL 101 students, this problem stemmed from students failing to adequately identify advantages and disadvantages of all proposals or the stakeholders to whom the advantages and disadvantages pertain. These papers indicate that by the end of the core writing sequence, many students still struggle with recognizing the difference between relevant and irrelevant information and addressing the entirety of the assignment.

Organization tied with Focus for the greatest area of success for ENGL 299 students with 83% earning ME or EE. Those who struggled with Organization (16%) typically failed to group ideas together in paragraphs.

Use of Sources, was the greatest weakness for ENGL 299 students. A majority (84%) simply did not attempt to cite sources in any way. Only 3% of students scored ME or EE. This demonstrates that students lack a rhetorical awareness of the writing situation, but it also shows that students completing the core writing sequence still have not formed the habit of routinely citing the sources they use in their writing. Additionally, the problem may stem from inadequate preparation for the writing task. Students could bring in a hard copy of their Works Cited page and re-enter that information into the electronic document, but it appears the vast majority do not bother to take advantage of this option.

Style was a problem for 53% of ENGL 299 students. A majority of those who scored FB did so because they used immature vocabulary or excessively colloquial word choice given the rhetorical situation. However, a significant number scored FB because they continued to struggle to write sentences that convey meaning. This likely stems from consistently poor language skills that would have been identifiable in these same students at the beginning of ENGL 101.

Editing was the third greatest area of success for ENGL 299 students, with 17% earning EE, and 39% earning ME. Less than 2% of students earned NC for Editing. Since editing tends to be the biggest complaint from faculty across campus (from an anecdotal perspective), this level of success might be surprising. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement in editing skills.

Trends in ENGL 299 Scores

Comparing ENGL 299 scores from 2013 with those from 2014, we find general improvement in three criteria and a general decline in scores for three criteria. Specifically, we are looking at the percentage of papers in the combined EE and ME categories and the combined FB and NC categories.

Focus	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	4.00%	34.00%	43.00%	19.00%
2013-14	8.08%	27.27%	38.38%	26.26%
2014-15	9.91%	73.55%	13.22%	3.30%

Focus was the area of greatest improvement from 2013-14 to 2014-15, moving from 35% scoring EE or ME to 83% scoring EE or ME. The significant difference between these two years was the additional pre-writing assignment in 2014-15. While this assignment was designed to address deficiencies in Development, it appears that this exercise also may have helped students think more clearly about Focus. This may be due to the social-learning aspect of the assignment when the whole class convened to discuss and complete their grids. Another factor that may have contributed to this improvement in Focus may have come from the instructor moderating the in-class completion of the grid. However, this is only speculation.

Development	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	2.00%	29.00%	59.00%	10.00%
2013-14	1.01%	9.09%	54.55%	35.35%
2014-15	3.30%	20.66%	59.50%	16.52%

While the nature of the assignments contributed to the decline in scores from 2012-13 to 2013-14, the addition of the pre-writing activity appears to have played an important factor in improving Development scores in 2014-15. The assignment from 2013-14 was repeated in 2014-15 in order to see how the pre-writing activity would impact student performance. As expected, Development scores were significantly improved with this addition, which suggests that students need to spend additional time wrestling with assignment topics in order to become comfortable discussing them. Nevertheless, a majority of 299 students were only successful in *identifying* advantages and disadvantages for various stakeholders; rarely did they exhibit a *strong* grasp of the issues.

Organization	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	5.00%	49.00%	43.00%	3.00%
2013-14	24.24%	38.38%	33.33%	4.04%
2014-15	15.70%	67.76%	15.70%	0.82%

On Organization, students scored better in 2014-15 than in 2013-14, which is surprising in that the assignments were identical. However, the addition of the pre-writing exercise may have also aided students in constructing an effective but simple organization for their papers. The majority of students organized their papers into four parts, each part addressing one of the four solid waste proposals, with the addition of an introduction and conclusion.

Use of Sources	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	3.00%	23.00%	22.00%	52.00%
2013-14	1.01%	10.10%	24.24%	64.65%
2014-15	1.65%	1.65%	12.39%	84.29%

The steady decline in scores for Use of Sources is disappointing given that instructors were informed each year that this was one area that, if addressed successfully in the classroom, could easily improve assessment scores. This is all the more disappointing because students were told they could write a complete draft of their paper and bibliography beforehand and then transcribe their work during the timed writing session. The fact that a vast majority did not take advantage

of this opportunity suggests that a majority of 299 students are not taking this final writing assignment as seriously as we would hope.

Style	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	6.00%	36.00%	57.00%	1.00%
2013-14	12.12%	33.33%	52.53%	2.02%
2014-15	9.09%	39.66%	47.10%	4.13%

Scores in Style increased slightly from a combined EE and ME in 2013-14 of 45% to 48% in 2014-15, even though the percentage of students scoring NC doubled from 2.02% to 4.13.

Editing	EE	ME	FB	NC
2012-13	7.00%	53.00%	38.00%	2.00%
2013-14	34.34%	44.44%	18.18%	3.03%
2014-15	17.35%	35.53%	45.45%	1.65%

Editing declined significantly from a combined EE and ME of 78.78% in 2013-14 to 52.88% in 2014-15. While 299 students scored better on Editing than did 101 students (52.88% vs 47%) for combined EE and ME scores, it is still troubling that 299 students scored lower in editing than in the previous two years.

Conclusion

In 2013-14, the WAC directors developed a grid to list all the advantages and disadvantages to the various stakeholders for each proposal and used this grid to train faculty raters. This exercise gave us a clearer sense of the specifics that needed to be addressed in this assignment. Because this exercise was so beneficial to raters, it was decided that students would also benefit from a similar exercise when preparing to write this paper. And as the data show, student scores in Development and Focus improved markedly. However, the declining scores in Use of Sources and Editing are disturbing. Despite the fact that students could complete a draft of their final paper before the timed writing exercise and simply use their fifty minutes to transcribe their papers, evidence suggests that few took advantage of this opportunity. Nevertheless, more time to address these issues might improve students' scores. But the timeframe cannot be expanded for a timed writing exercise because of the limited number of computer labs available. Moreover, the Core Writing Program does not teach students to write under such time constraints. Therefore, the WAC directors are recommending this be a take-home assignment next year, rather than a timed writing assignment. This change, however, will not necessarily motivate students to take this exercise more seriously, especially if this assignment carries so little weight that it will not affect their final grade. Therefore, the WAC directors will also recommend that this assignment be given more weight to encourage students to take it seriously.