

Executive Summary of Writing Assessment Results
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Introduction

One of Westminster's eleven college learning goals is communication, defined as "ability to write, speak, read, and listen effectively." Westminster's policy regarding assessment of this goal (at least the written communication part) involves collection of a sample piece of writing from a student's Westminster Seminar course and a second piece of writing from the student's Tier III course. The papers range from 2-6 pages long and are designed to develop a thesis. The papers are on a wide variety of topics, chosen by the student and/or the instructors of the courses. The samples are then matched and evaluated by a team of writing assessment evaluators.

The papers are evaluated according to a rubric developed by the Assessment Committee. The rubric skills evaluated are content, style, diction, rhetoric, and grammar, mechanics, and usage. Each skill is evaluated on an A-F basis and then converted to a point score for statistical analysis (A = 4; B = 3; C = 2; D = 1; F = 0). The rubric can be found on the last page of this report.

In January, 2006, a team of evaluators assessed a total of 86 pairs (43 from males and 43 from females) of writing samples. This was the first time that we have assessed two complete papers from each student; our most recent attempt at writing assessment involved a complete paper from a freshman course (ENG 103 in this case) with an abstract from a Tier III course.

Results

Results are summarized below. Paired samples t-tests showed that there was statistically significant improvement for each skill ($p's < .05$).

Skill	Freshman Score	Tier III Score
Content	1.48	1.94
Style	1.96	2.28
Diction	2.00	2.45
Rhetoric	1.66	2.18
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	1.95	2.26
Total Score	9.07	11.12

It should be noted that entering freshmen appear to start Westminster with less than average skills in all areas except for diction. By the time that these students have reached junior or senior level, their skills are assessed as above average in all areas, except for content, which involves good thesis development. The average level of Westminster students in all areas appears to be at about the C to C+ level.

An analysis of gender differences showed that women had statistically significantly higher Tier III scores in style, grammar, and total score. Though the trend was for women to have slightly higher scores at in all skills at both the freshman and Tier III levels, none of the other differences were statistically significant. The following table summarizes these results (f = freshman score; t = Tier III score):

Group Statistics

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
fcontent	male	43	1.3837	.85800	.13084
	female	43	1.5814	.77866	.11874
fstyle	male	43	1.8372	.66118	.10083
	female	43	2.0814	.68078	.10382
fdiction	male	43	1.9884	.59250	.09035
	female	43	2.0116	.64999	.09912
frhetor	male	43	1.5814	.71489	.10902
	female	43	1.7442	.79711	.12156
fgrammar	male	43	1.8837	.67996	.10369
	female	43	2.0233	.62634	.09552
ftotal	male	43	8.6860	2.92368	.44586
	female	43	9.4535	3.01744	.46015
tcontent	male	43	1.7558	.94095	.14349
	female	43	2.1163	1.12248	.17118
tstyle	male	43	2.0814	.83759	.12773
	female	43	2.4884	.81276	.12394
tdiction	male	43	2.3023	.63751	.09722
	female	43	2.5930	.85395	.13023
trhetor	male	43	2.0233	.87935	.13410
	female	43	2.3372	.89789	.13693
tgrammar	male	43	2.0116	1.00882	.15384
	female	43	2.5116	.77528	.11823
ttotal	male	43	10.1977	3.79558	.57882
	female	43	12.0465	3.87577	.59105

Summary and Recommendations

The results are encouraging in that Westminster students, on average, are clearly improving each writing skill identified by the rubric.

It is not at all clear that most, or maybe even many, faculty members are acquainted with the rubric being used to assess these writing samples. Thus, we must make a more sustained effort to do so via faculty discussions, perhaps as “writing across the curriculum” workshops. Faculty members should be trained to develop strategies to aid student skill development in each area of evaluation. We should set a goal for having our students achieve a skill level higher than the current “C” level for each skill.

Similarly, it is doubtful that most students know how their samples are being assessed. Thus, it is recommended that faculty members discuss the rubric with their students in their Westminster Seminar, ENG 103, Tier III courses, and other courses as appropriate.

It is not at all clear why the pattern of the results should show male students as having lower scores than female students, though, as noted earlier, most differences are not statistically significant. Nevertheless, some study should be made to determine some hypotheses for the differences. Additional help for male students might be something worth discussing.

WRITING ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

GRADE	CONTENT	STYLE	DICTION	RHETORICAL SKILLS	GRAMMAR, MECHANICS, USAGE
A	Clear thesis, fully developed, specified, illustrated; compelling or original concept or development	Syntax fluent, various, even elegant	Accurate; free from clichés; sensitive to connotation	<u>Unity</u> : control of ideas, global and paragraph level <u>Coherence</u> : graceful movement between ideas, transitions organic rather than mechanical; especially apt and fresh opening and closing; Clear sense of audience	Flawless
B	Responds relevantly to assignment; clear and interesting; ideas well-developed and supported	Fluent, various, clear; occasional awkwardness or infelicity	Accurate; vocabulary broad enough to express ideas clearly, without monotony	<u>Unity</u> : control of ideas, global and paragraph level <u>Coherence</u> : transitions clear, perhaps somewhat mechanical; non-redundant opening and closing; Clear sense of audience	Perhaps a few minor, mechanical errors
C	Clear thesis with sufficient support; ideas may be obvious, lack originality, or merely repeat class discussion or received opinion	Minimal variety, but relative fluency; occasional awkwardness does not interfere with communication	Adequate to convey meaning generally but inattentive to connotation; inadequate to precise analysis	<u>Unity</u> : control of ideas globally, perhaps some lack of focus at paragraph level; an occasional non sequitur <u>Coherence</u> : movement between ideas generally clear, though not reinforced by style; transitions clear but mechanical; adequate opening and closing; Sense of audience or tone may be uncertain or inconsistent	Generally correct mechanics, grammar, usage are expected.
D	Theses trite, poorly developed;	Lacks variety; awkwardness interferes with	Limited vocabulary does not	<u>Unity</u> : inadequate thesis; weak subordination	A few sentence-level or grammatical

	support irrelevant or confusing	communication	allow for adequate expression of idea	<u>Coherence</u> : jumps between ideas; perfunctory opening and closing; No sense of audience	errors, several mechanical ones
F	Thesis inadequate or absent; minimal or irrelevant development	The "F" paper is usually characterized by the absence of stylistic and rhetorical skills			Many errors, major and minor

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