

Executive Summary of Writing Assessment Results
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Introduction

One of Westminster's eleven college learning goals is communication, defined as the "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, 2007, a team of evaluators assessed a total of a sample of 48 pairs of writing samples. This was the second time that we have assessed two complete papers from each student. The initial writing samples were largely taken from 2003 Westminster Seminar courses, and the second sample was taken from Tier III courses taken in 2005 or 2006.

Results

Results are summarized below. **Paired samples t-tests showed that there was statistically significant improvement for each skill, and thus for total score as well (p 's < .001 for all skills except for grammar [p =.02 for grammar]).**

Table 1. Freshmen and Tier III Means for Paired Samples

<u>Skill</u>	<u>Freshmen Mean</u>	<u>Tier III Mean</u>	<u>Mean Improvement</u>
Content	1.58	2.55	0.97
Style	1.76	2.28	0.52
Diction	1.92	2.49	0.57
Rhetoric	1.69	2.21	0.52
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	1.79	2.01	0.22
Total Score	8.67	11.26	2.59

It should be noted that entering 2003 freshmen appeared to start Westminster with less than average skills in all areas. By the time that these students have reached junior or senior level, their skills are assessed as above average in all areas. The average level of Westminster students in all areas appears to be at about the C to C+ level. The biggest area of improvement was in content, which generally refers to stating and developing a clear thesis. It is interesting that freshmen scored lowest in the area of content, while Tier III scores were highest in that area. This suggests that Westminster faculty are spending a lot of time helping students to develop that particular skill and are being particularly successful at it. The least amount of improvement was seen in grammar, mechanics, and usage.

Tables 2 and 3 show a comparison of scores from the last two years of writing assessment analysis.

Table 2. Results from 2006 and 2007 Writing Assessment Analysis

Skill	2002 Freshmen Mean	2003 Freshmen Mean	2006 Tier III Mean	2007 Tier III Mean
Content	1.48	1.58	1.94	2.55
Style	1.96	1.76	2.28	2.28
Diction	2.00	1.92	2.45	2.49
Rhetoric	1.66	1.69	2.18	2.21
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	1.95	1.79	2.26	2.01
Total Score	9.07	8.67	11.12	11.26

Table 3. Improvement in freshmen writing skills in 2002 and 2003 samples

Skill	2002 Freshmen Improvement	2003 Freshmen Improvement
Content	0.46	0.97
Style	0.32	0.52
Diction	0.45	0.57
Rhetoric	0.52	0.52
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	0.31	0.22
Total Score	2.05	2.59

The results show that the 2003 freshmen were a bit weaker overall than the 2002 freshmen upon arrival at the college but improved somewhat more than their 2002 counterparts. In particular, there was a larger improvement in content, style, and diction skills but less improvement in grammar, mechanics, and usage.

Summary and Recommendations

The results are encouraging in that Westminster students, on average, are clearly improving each writing skill identified by the rubric. Nevertheless, the skill level of the average Westminster student at the time that they complete their Tier III class is only a little above average.

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” to “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.

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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