

Communication Assessment for the 2015 LA&S Review

Summary:

Beginning in Spring 2010 Written Communication was assessed with a rubric containing 4 different criteria: controlling idea, organization and development, standards of evidence, and mechanics. Faculty were asked to rate student work as proficient, sufficient or deficient for each criterion on the rubric. In Spring and Fall of 2010 small samples of student work were collected and scored from one course each semester.

In the spring of 2011 Fitchburg State University revamped the Written Communication rubric, separating out organization and development into two separate criteria and adding an additional criterion related to academic discourse. The descriptive language for each criterion at each level of proficiency was revised drawing in part from the AAC&U LEAP VALUE rubric for written communication. In the fall of 2011 and spring of 2012 the revised rubric was used to assess artifacts of student work from one course each semester.

For the assessment occurring in the fall of 2012 Fitchburg State University revised the rubric further adding a criterion on documentation of sources to help scorers distinguish between weaknesses in the manner in which students were using sources to support their arguments, and the ways in which students were properly or improperly citing those sources. Artifacts of student work were collected from one course each semester in the fall of 2012, spring of 2013 and fall of 2013.

Across all years of assessment the manner in which students used sources in their papers remained one of the greatest areas of weakness. Once academic discourse was added as a criterion in the spring of 2011 it was also revealed to be a relative source of weakness in student writing. The separation of documentation of sources as a criterion from sources and evidence allowed scorers to reveal that in many cases the greatest weakness was in the way sources were documented rather than the way they were used to support an argument. However, one assessment of artifacts from a 4000 level Exercise and Sports Science course suggested that this pattern may be reversed once students become more familiar with disciplinary conventions. As expected students showed greater overall proficiency in upper level courses and honors courses, a finding that mirrors what we observed in a separate study comparing first semester freshmen and second semester sophomore written work using the Fitchburg State rubric as well as other rubrics (Slotnick et al. 2014).

These findings suggest the importance of assessing student writing in both introductory general education coursework as well as in upper level disciplinary coursework to get a better sense of what should be emphasized in the curriculum. The data suggests that students could benefit from an increased emphasis on the documentation of sources and the modes of academic discourse in introductory LA&S coursework, and while they show improvements in the documentation of sources at the advanced level, the use of sources and evidence and academic discourse continue to be relative areas of weakness that need to be reinforced in advanced courses such as those designated for the junior/senior writing requirement.

Analysis of Data:

In spring 2010 9 artifacts of student work were collected from a course that was kept anonymous (Table 1). Each artifact was assessed by three faculty members. Students showed by far the greatest weakness in standards of evidence as 81% of scores given were in the deficient range. There was a lower, but still relatively high level of weakness in organization and development with 44% of scores ranking work as deficient.

Table 1
Written Communication
Spring 2010 (n = 9, each reviewed by 3 faculty)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	11%	81%	8%	0%	2.04
Organization and Development	12%	44%	44%	0%	1.67
Standards of evidence	4%	15%	81%	0%	1.22
Mechanics / Presentation	4%	81%	15%	0%	1.89

In fall 2010 11 written communication artifacts were collected from an Honors Writing I course (Table 2). These artifacts received a greater frequency of proficient and sufficient scores relative to the spring 2010 assessment. This is consistent with research we have conducted using the AAC&U LEAP VALUE written communication rubric in which artifacts from honors coursework received higher scores than work from a similar level of standard courses (Slotnick et al. 2014). However, in spite of the improved scores for artifacts from the honors course, standards of evidence remained the greatest area of weakness.

Table 2
Written Communication
Fall 2010 (n = 11 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	45%	50%	5%	0%	2.41
Organization and Development	32%	55%	13%	0%	2.18
Standards of evidence	18%	59%	23%	0%	1.95
Mechanics / Presentation	36%	50%	14%	0%	2.23

For the Fall 2011 assessment, written communication artifacts were collected from a Writing II course. Artifacts from 17 students' research papers were each assessed by two faculty using the revised Written Communication rubric (Table 3). Students once again performed most poorly in the area of sources and evidence. However, the new categories development of controlling idea as a separate category from organization and academic discourse also received relatively high levels of deficient scores with 50% and 45% respectively of scores in the range of deficient for these criteria. The new individual category organization also had 32% of the scores given as deficient for that criterion.

Table 3
Written Communication
Fall 2011 (n = 17 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	6%	76%	18%	0%	1.88
Development of Controlling Idea	3%	47%	50%	0%	1.53
Organization	6%	62%	32%	0%	1.74
Sources and evidence	0%	12%	88%	0%	1.12
Academic Discourse	0%	55%	45%	3%	1.55
Mechanics / Presentation	0%	88%	12%	3%	1.88

For the Spring 12 assessment, written communication artifacts were collected in an LA&S discipline other than English Studies, with 19 artifacts coming from an Informal Geometry research paper (Table 4). In spite of the artifacts coming from a different discipline the pattern remained with sources and evidence receiving the greatest percentage of deficient scores, followed by academic discourse. Development of controlling idea and Organization still received 31% and 34% respectively of their scores in the deficient category.

Table 4
Written Communication
Spring 2012 (n = 19 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	5%	87%	8%	0%	1.97
Development of Controlling Idea	8%	61%	31%	0%	1.76
Organization	13%	53%	34%	0%	1.79
Sources and evidence	3%	21%	76%	0%	1.26
Academic Discourse	0%	39%	61%	0%	1.39
Mechanics / Presentation	0%	71%	29%	0%	1.71

For the fall 2012 assessment 24 artifacts were drawn from a sophomore level course in English Studies, Literature for Young Adults (Table 5). These artifacts were assessed with a revised rubric that now included separate criteria for sources and evidence and documentation of sources. Students performed the most poorly in the documentation of sources, with relatively better performance in sources and evidence (35% deficient), suggesting lower scores on previous assessments of sources and evidence might have been the result of poor documentation of sources. They also continued to have high rates of deficient scores (50%) in the areas of academic discourse and organization (46%). These results did not show any substantive improvement in student scores relative to Writing II, even though this course would normally be taken after Writing II. However, these comparisons are based on small sample sizes and a comparison of scores from Writing I and a sophomore level literature course using the Fitchburg State University rubric in a

separate grant-funded study did show a significant improvement in student scores (Slotnick et al. 2014).

Table 5
Written Communication
Fall 2012 (n = 24 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	0%	77%	23%	0%	1.77
Development of Controlling Idea	0%	73%	27%	0%	1.73
Organization	2%	52%	46%	0%	1.56
Sources and evidence	0%	65%	35%	0%	1.65
Documentation of Sources	0%	19%	81%	0%	1.15
Academic Discourse	2%	48%	50%	0%	1.52
Mechanics / Presentation	0%	71%	29%	0%	1.71

Spring 2013 artifacts were collected from a 4000 level Cardiovascular and Electrophysiology course to determine how our students perform in advanced writing within their discipline (Table 6). A total of 14 papers were each assessed by two faculty members. Artifacts received higher levels of proficient and sufficient scores relative to deficient scores than those assessed from lower level coursework in prior years. Artifacts were scored lowest for sources and evidence, but received relatively higher scores for documentation of sources, suggesting students had mastered the mechanics of citation, but still struggled with using those citations to support their arguments. The second greatest area of weakness continued to be academic discourse. The overall improvement in student scores from lower level coursework to upper level coursework was consistent with patterns of improvement documented in a prior comparison of Fitchburg State fall Writing I and second semester sophomore writing coursework (Slotnick et al. 2014).

Table 6
Written Communication
Spring 2013 (n = 14 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	50%	43%	7%	0%	2.43
Development of Controlling Idea	21%	68%	11%	0%	2.11
Organization	18%	79%	4%	0%	2.14
Sources and evidence	0%	67%	33%	4%	1.67
Documentation of Sources	25%	61%	14%	0%	2.11
Academic Discourse	7%	71%	22%	0%	1.86
Mechanics / Presentation	50%	43%	7%	0%	2.43

The final assessment of written communication conducted for this program review involved a second assessment of Informal Geometry papers with 33 each assessed by two faculty members. Artifact scores were more favorable than in

the previous assessment of Informal Geometry papers with fewer deficient scores. With the addition of the Documentation of Sources criterion since the prior assessment of Informal Geometry papers, this category received the most deficient scores instead of Sources and Evidence. There was substantial improvement on the Academic Discourse criterion. However, as in all of these assessments, while common patterns of relative poor scores on categories like Documentation of Sources can be informative about areas or relative student weakness, individual course differences could be attributed to a host of reasons including differences in assignments, differences in the students generating the artifacts and differences in scorer interpretation. Academic Discourse in particular warrants further discussion to insure that there are shared expectations communicated to students, faculty and scorers across different disciplines, as well as clear information about discipline-specific differences in the expectations for academic discourse.

Table 7
Written Communication
Fall 2013 (n = 33 each assessed by two faculty members)

Criteria	Proficient	Sufficient	Deficient	No Response	Mean
Controlling Idea	27%	68%	5%	0%	2.23
Development of Controlling Idea	29%	53%	18%	0%	2.11
Organization	24%	61%	15%	0%	2.09
Sources and evidence	25%	64%	11%	3%	2.11
Documentation of Sources	20%	31%	49%	2%	1.55
Academic Discourse	24%	61%	15%	0%	2.09
Mechanics / Presentation	15%	69%	15%	2%	2.00

References:

Slotnick R.C., Cratsley C.K, Consalvo A.L., Lerch C. 2014. Outcomes-based assessment in writing: two community colleges and two state universities in a local four-way partnership. *The Journal of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness*. 4(1): 52-84.