

Executive Summary of Writing Assessment Results

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Introduction

Communication is one of Westminster College's (WC) eleven learning goals and a recent report by the Communication Task Force (November 2, 2007) defined an effective communicator as someone who "...is able to receive, interpret, organize, and transmit information, ideas, and emotions through a variety of verbal and nonverbal channels."

The WC Assessment Committee maintains a process for monitoring student progress in written communication that involves collection of a sample piece of writing from a student's Westminster Seminar course and a second piece of writing from the same student's Tier III course. The papers are on a wide variety of topics, chosen by the student and/or the instructors of the courses, and typically range from 2-6 pages in length. The samples are then matched and evaluated by a team of faculty and staff members who serve as writing assessment evaluators. The papers are evaluated using a rubric developed by the Assessment Committee as a guide (see Appendix). The rubric offers descriptive language to clarify the five writing skills of 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).

Writing evaluators typically gather in January with the faculty director of the WC Writing Across the Curriculum program. Evaluators review the writing assessment rubric and then evaluate samples of writing and compare their ratings in the large group to help insure a common understanding of the process. After this initial training period, the evaluation begins with each student sample reviewed by two evaluators. The faculty director reviews the work of evaluators and can ask for additional evaluation of a specific work if there is wide divergence in the two initial ratings.

Results

The team of evaluators assessed 31 pairs of writing samples in January 2008. This was the third time that WC evaluators have assessed two complete papers from each student. The initial writing samples were largely taken from 2004 Westminster Seminar courses, and the second sample was taken from Tier III courses taken in 2006 or 2007. Mean ratings for each skill are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Freshmen and Tier III Means for Paired Samples, 2007-2008

Skill	Freshmen Mean	Tier III Mean	Mean Improvement
Content	1.74	2.12	0.38
Style	1.98	2.48	0.50
Diction	2.05	2.69	0.64
Rhetoric	1.74	2.16	0.41
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	1.81	2.17	0.36
Total Score	9.33	11.62	2.29

Tables 2 and 3 permit comparison of results for three years. The biggest area of improvement for 2007-08 was found for the skill of diction with a mean difference of 0.64, or a 31% change between freshmen and Tier III samples. The least amount of improvement was seen in the skill of grammar, mechanics, and usage with a mean difference of 0.36, representing a 20% increase.

Table 2. Writing Assessment Results for Three Years

Skill	2005-2006			2006-2007			2007-2008		
	Freshmen Mean	Tier III Mean	Mean Difference	Freshmen Mean	Tier III Mean	Mean Difference	Freshmen Mean	Tier III Mean	Mean Difference
Content	1.48	1.94	0.46	1.58	2.55	0.97	1.74	2.12	0.38
Style	1.96	2.28	0.32	1.76	2.28	0.52	1.98	2.48	0.50
Diction	2.00	2.45	0.45	1.92	2.49	0.57	2.05	2.69	0.64
Rhetoric	1.66	2.18	0.52	1.69	2.21	0.52	1.74	2.16	0.41
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	1.95	2.26	0.31	1.79	2.01	0.22	1.81	2.17	0.36
Total Score	9.07	11.12	2.05	8.67	11.26	2.59	9.33	11.62	2.29

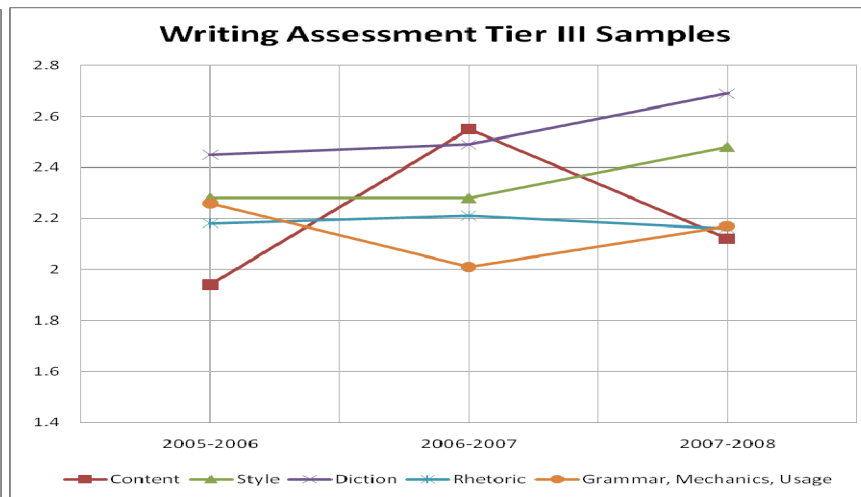
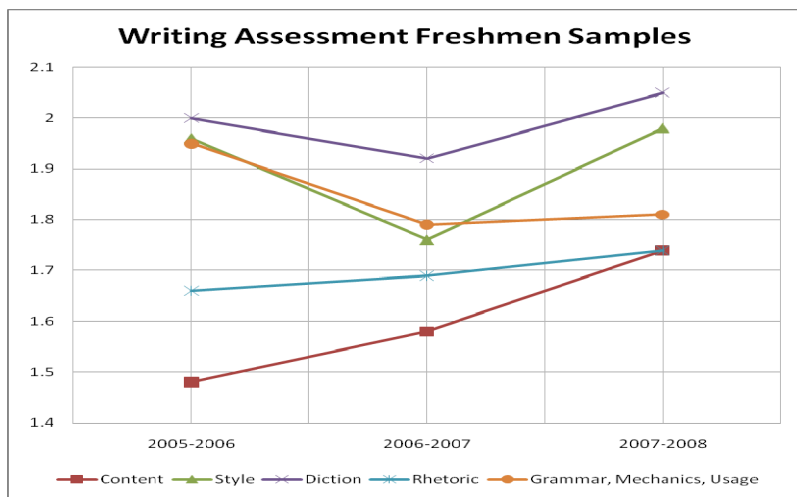
The largest improvement across the three years of freshmen samples was in the skill of content with a mean difference of 0.26 or 18% change. The largest change in means for the Tier III samples over the three years was in the skill of diction with a mean difference of 0.24 or a 10% improvement.

Means for the skill of grammar, mechanics and usage fell over the years in both freshmen (-0.14 difference in means or -7%) and Tier III (-0.09 or -4%) samples.

Table 3.

Skill	<u>2005-2006</u>		<u>2006-2007</u>		<u>2007-2008</u>		<u>3-YR Change</u>		<u>% Chg Over 3 years</u>	
	Mean Difference FR to T-III	% Chg	Mean Difference FR to T-III	% Chg	Mean Difference FR to T-III	% Chg	Freshmen Mean Difference	Tier III Mean Difference	Freshmen	Tier III
Content	0.46	31%	0.97	61%	0.38	22%	0.26	0.18	18%	9%
Style	0.32	16%	0.52	30%	0.50	25%	0.02	0.20	1%	9%
Diction	0.45	23%	0.57	30%	0.64	31%	0.05	0.24	2%	10%
Rhetoric	0.52	31%	0.52	31%	0.41	24%	0.08	-0.02	5%	-1%
Grammar, Mechanics, Usage	0.31	16%	0.22	12%	0.36	20%	-0.14	-0.09	-7%	-4%
Total Score	2.05	23%	2.59	30%	2.29	25%	0.26	0.5	3%	4%

Graphs 1 and 2. Means for Three Years



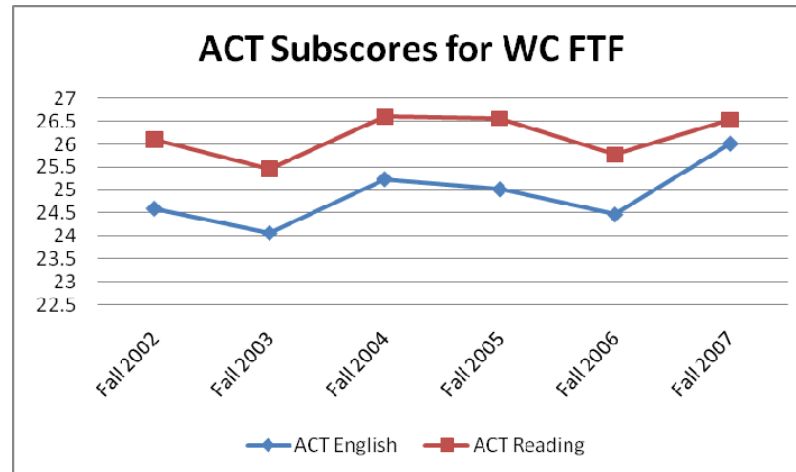
It should be noted that the upward trend in writing assessment scores from the Tier III samples corresponds to increasing ACT sub-scores reported by WC FTF.

Table 4. Mean ACT Sub-scores for WC First-time Freshmen (FTF)

	Fall 2002	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007
ACT English	24.6	24.07	25.24	25.02	24.47	26.01
ACT Reading	26.10	25.46	26.60	26.56	25.77	26.54

Papers used for Writing Assessment were generally drawn from students entering WC as FTF in years represented by the shaded columns.

Graph 3. ACT Subscores



The paired ratings from 2007-2008 were analyzed using SPSS for Windows v. 15.0 and a summary of results is found in Table #5. Mean ratings of writing samples from Westminster Seminar and the upper level Tier III courses improve for all five skill areas. In addition, mean differences in rating for three skills were found to be significant at the $\alpha = .05$ level, Style, Diction, and Rhetorical Skills.

Table 5. Paired Samples T-Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Content_FR - Content_Tier III	-.379	1.006	.187	-.762	.003	-2.031	28	.052
Pair 2	Style_FR - Style_Tier III	-.5000	.7792	.1447	-.7964	-.2036	-3.456	28	.002
Pair 3	Diction_FR – Diction_Tier III	-.638	.743	.138	-.920	-.355	-4.625	28	.000
Pair 4	Rhetorical_Skills_FR Rhetorical_Skills_Tier III	-.414	.745	.138	-.697	-.130	-2.992	28	.006
Pair 5	GrammerMechanicsUsage_FR GrammerMechanicsUsage_Tier III	-.3621	.8954	.1663	-.7027	-.0215	-2.178	28	.038

Bold text is used to indentify significant differences at $\alpha = .05$ level.

Summary and Recommendations

The 2007-08 writing assessment process clearly shows that Westminster students, on average, are improving each writing skill identified by the rubric.

WC faculty members should maintain familiarity with the writing assessment process and look for opportunities to continue progress made through Writing Across the Curriculum workshops and related activities. As an example, the Director of the Writing Across the Curriculum will incorporate these results into a workshop during the spring semester. Faculty members, particularly new hires, should also receive assistance in developing strategies to aid student skill development in each area of evaluation. In addition, the Assessment Committee should look for opportunities to use the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and other similar initiatives for assessment of writing or more generally, communication, either to validate the existing process or replace it, if a more efficient way can be found. Finally, particular thought should be given to sharing information about the process and results with students.

APPENDIX

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; support	Lacks variety; awkwardness	Limited vocabulary does not allow for	<u>Unity</u> : inadequate thesis; weak subordination	A few sentence-level or

	irrelevant or confusing	interferes with communication	adequate expression of idea	<u>Coherence</u> : jumps between ideas; perfunctory opening and closing; No sense of audience	grammatical 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