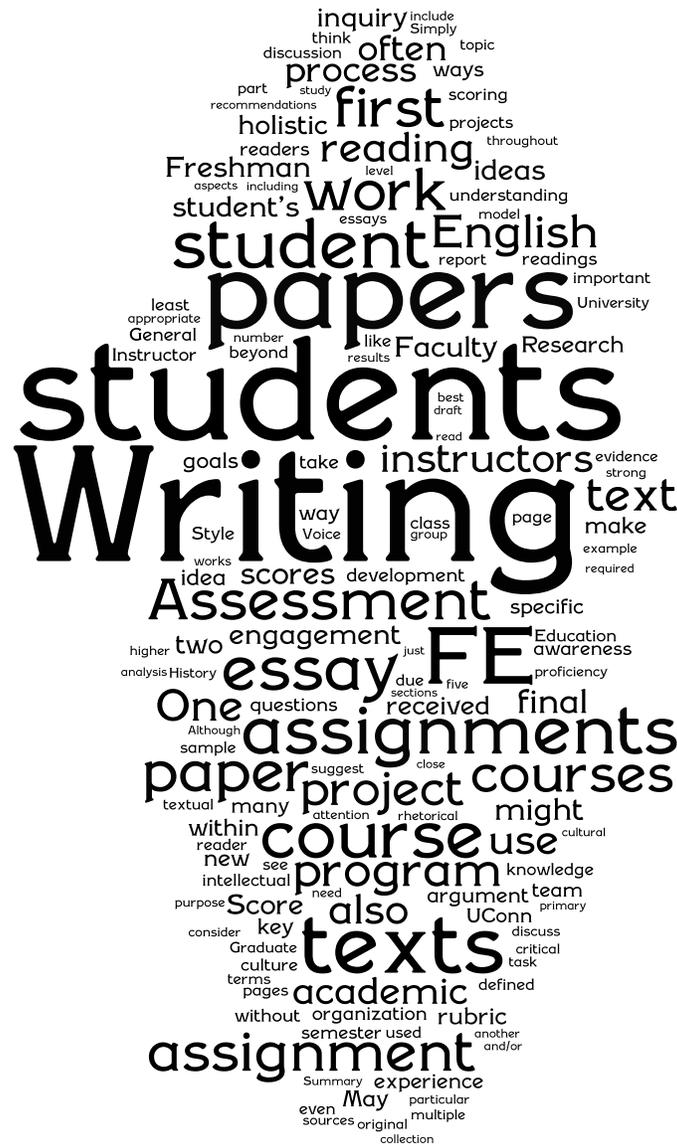


Writing Assessment in Freshman English University of Connecticut, 2009

A Project of the General Education Oversight Committee
Report composed by Scott Campbell, English Department



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Summary

This report provides a description of the rationale and design of a direct assessment project which assessed the writing of students in the university's required Freshman English courses. After a collection process which lasted all of spring semester, a team of graduate student and faculty readers performed this assessment work in the summer of 2009, and what follows is a representation and analysis of that process. The report also summarizes results, explores a few chief arguments about these results, and offers recommendations to a range of stakeholders at the university. But first, a summary.

We can report that the required Freshman English (FE) courses are in the main vigorous courses with substantive reading and writing components and an attention to writing as a process of engagement, reflection, and revision. FE students are asked to write several ambitious papers which incorporate multiple sources and pursue serious intellectual goals. In looking at a broad sample of the first and final papers written in these courses, we noted a consistent adherence to the program's stated practice of assigning 30 pages of writing within a context of feedback, dialogue, and revision. And, likely because of this attention to practices of composition and revision, we can report that the vast majority of these Freshman English students produced work that exceeds our expectations in terms of basic concerns like grammar, correctness, and organization. What is more crucial is that, by the end of the semester, 84% of the students had written papers with holistic scores that cross the threshold of what we are calling minimally proficient. And, because the UConn FE program sets a high standard for what it deems as successful academic writing—asking for much more than just content-free writing goals such as clarity, organization, or compliance with recognized forms—this number should be viewed as a strong result. The number is slightly higher for specific higher order concerns like defined project, rhetorical knowledge, and textual engagement. What is more, 28% of the papers exhibited the sustained energy and purpose of what we consider successful academic writing, no mean feat for students in their first year of academic work.

Notable among our findings is the fact that mean holistic scores improved from first to final papers. Although the increase is not as profound as we might have hoped, final papers saw a mean increase of .22 (on a 4.0 scale) suggesting that the practice of writing and revising several papers does indeed put students on a road toward better writing. We also found a strong correlation between the quality of the assignment prompt and the corresponding student outcomes. Simply put, students who wrote in response to assignments we deemed superior fared better in their overall scores.

Although we address the significance of these findings in great detail below, we begin this report noting that the assessment process documents the success of the FE program in introducing students to the practices and values of the project-oriented writing that defines academic culture. The FE program is vast—comprising a broad coalition of over 110 teaching assistants and part-time instructors spread over six campuses—and yet, despite this massive logistical burden, the program manages to provide a seminar in academic writing that serves as a powerful introduction to the practices and purposes of academic exploration and argument.

Nonetheless, it is understandable, too, that a study of this size would uncover some frailties and problems that need addressing. One concern is that student writing does not improve as markedly as we might expect or hope. The assessment team found that all too often students' work plateaued at an adequate level instead of proceeding toward higher quality work in final papers. There is also evidence of some disconnect or uncertainty in the teacher corps about the goals and practices of the course. A small number of the courses seemed to be pursuing goals and assignments that do not match those of the program, and a somewhat larger group exhibited at least some confusion or perhaps misunderstanding of aspects of the FE course or pedagogy. This report offers several recommendations which speak directly to these concerns and address the possibilities for the course as a first experience of serious academic inquiry and as an important first step in a student's general education.

I. Guiding Assumptions and Research Design

A. General Education and the Freshman English Program

The General Education Oversight Committee (GEOC) Guidelines stipulate the following goals for general education: “The purpose of general education is to ensure that all University of Connecticut undergraduate students become articulate and acquire intellectual breadth and versatility, critical judgment, moral sensitivity, awareness of their era and society, consciousness of the diversity of human culture and experience, and a working understanding of the processes by which they can continue to acquire and use knowledge.” Within these guidelines, the FE course is defined as a rigorous course that addresses writing as a tool for achieving these general education goals. According to the document, students in FE courses are expected to:

- 1) Engage works of academic inquiry through interpretation of difficult texts
- 2) Participate in issues and arguments that animate the texts
- 3) Reflect on the significance for academics and general culture and for themselves of the critical work of reading and writing.

As the analysis of this assessment indicates below, these learning objectives are central components of the courses that FE instructors design and teach. What is especially noteworthy is that writing, here, is not treated as a set of skills or procedures that can be extracted from active participation in academic goals, including reading and other such encounters with the ideas and materials of academic work. At UConn, the first-year writing course seeks to join learning and writing, discovery and the development of ideas in writing. Our report highlights the variety of creative courses that meet these stated goals and emphasizes the foundational role that our Freshmen English courses plays in student's general education. The GEOC Guidelines situate Freshmen English as the first step in students' intellectual/academic and civic/social development, and our assessment therefore examines the importance of such factors as inquiry, defined project, and textual engagement. As we will show, our findings note students' initial unfamiliarity with academic modes of inquiry, engagement, and analysis, and document their growth throughout the semester, from first to final papers.

B. Assessment Goals and Guidelines

Our assessment project shared many key assumptions with the W course assessment from a year earlier, and the design therefore echoes the W assessment design. Here, then, is a short list of key assumptions, modified from Tom Deans' similar list (key differences are noted in brackets):

- We used the *Freshman English Program* as the unit of analysis, not individual instructors, course sections, or students.
- We did *outcomes-based* assessment that focused on what students accomplished as writers in the course. [Unlike the W assessment, we also sought to measure growth from first to final papers.]
- We focused mainly on *direct assessment of student writing* rather than on indirect measures, such as course syllabi or surveys. [We examined instructors' assignments as well.]
- The process was *led by faculty, driven by dialogue, and open to revision*.
- We tried to be *future-oriented*—aimed at sparking evidence-driven discussions about teaching, learning and curriculum design in the participating departments. Our evaluation is intended to be more formative than summative.
- The process was *attentive to the complex nature of writing*. That is, we approached writing less as a set of discrete skills that lend themselves to atomized testing than as a complex, context-sensitive mode of learning, communicating, and doing.
- We understood academic writing as *bound to disciplinary context*. [Because FE is designed to be cross-disciplinary (or pre-disciplinary), we focused on the disciplinary contexts and cues that came out of the course readings and instructor assignments.]
- We wanted this study to be as much about *faculty development* as about assessment of students.

C. Collection of Samples

Collection

Any assessment project is defined in part by the limits of its data sample, and we explored many different possible models for choosing samples. Ideally, we would have preferred to collect *all* student writing for the course, including draft versions of papers, instructor comments, and student self-reflection. And, in an early meeting with the Assessment Subcommittee of the GEOC, we in fact explored the idea of collecting complete digital portfolios from all students. In the end, we decided that such a process was not feasible for a number of reasons (most especially the logistical problems of working with almost 2,500 students), and we settled on final draft copies of first and final papers from two randomly selected students in each section. We transferred the responsibility for collecting samples from the students to the instructors, which allowed the entire assessment process to happen “offstage,” as it were, without impinging on the students’ experience of the course.

The original proposal called for “75 random sample writing portfolios across sections of students’ first writing-intensive course... including 5 samples from each of the five regional campuses,” but, because one primary goal of the study was to represent the full range of the FE program, we therefore decided to draw student writing samples from *every section* of FE across all six UConn campuses. We decided to collect portfolios from every section of FE so that all instructors would participate in the process, making the collection process a shared and equitable labor. This means that we sought work from 129 sections and over 100 instructors, which is, of course, a tremendous logistical task but which also has several benefits. The assessment process was inclusive and quite public (without, we believe, becoming intrusive), and, with just the collection process itself, we already saw a very real increase in discussions of the course, its goals, and its practices. Within the field of composition, these seemingly secondary aspects of an assessment process are increasingly seen as important, even primary components. After all, if a chief goal of assessment is to effect real change in the way a program functions, this very direct engagement with the work of the instructors sets the stage for the implementation of the recommendations that we offer here. Our goal in pursuing such a complete participation of faculty was not just representation but also this step toward greater program communication and coherence.

Knowing that such a large collection process would pose challenges, we opened a dedicated email account (feassessment@gmail.com) that we used to field questions and more fully explain procedures and rationale. We then distributed both digital and paper requests for sample papers with careful instructions for submitting student work. All instructors but six communicated with us about their intention to comply with the request for student samples, and, in the end, we received student work from over 110 sections.

We received 381 papers from an absolute maximum of 516 possible papers (four from each of 129 sections). We learned of twenty students who dropped the course and there were presumably more. Thus, we were able to read 381 of 496 possible papers, or 77% (and likely greater) of the absolute maximum. All papers and assignment prompts were stripped of identifying information

and coded with a random number so that readers were unable to ascertain instructors, student names, or whether the paper was a first or final assignment. When a reader did recognize the work of a specific instructor or student, s/he returned the paper to the pile without scoring it. Each paper was then read by at least two readers, who then conferred and submitted a scoring sheet for each sample.

Limits of Spring Semester Collection

Because FE courses are first-year courses, there can be a significant difference between the student outcomes in fall and spring semesters. Most students in the fall FE courses have just left high school, while students in the spring semester sections can be expected to be more fully integrated into their college experience. We cannot know what instruction or writing experience these spring students have already had at UConn before FE (such as FYE and other introductory courses), and, therefore, an assessment project seeking to capture “raw” student writing (at the earliest stage of the student’s university education) would benefit from looking at the fall semester. Also, many teachers expressed strong feelings that final papers in the spring semester are not representative of students’ best work because of the close proximity of the summer break.

Student and Faculty Data Tracking

It would be wise in future studies to track students, sections, and faculty more directly so that we could get more information about campus to campus, TA to adjunct, regional to main campus distinctions (and so on). But this was not an objective for this first go round for two primary reasons. First, we deemed such grouping premature as we had not established a baseline of achievement in the course as a whole. Second, embarking on this first assessment with these markers intact could have had a volatile effect, underscoring a competitive model rather than a shared enterprise. Nonetheless, we have records for all these papers, linking them to student and instructor information. We could investigate correlations with the variables, but, as we looked at only 10% of a given section, we cannot say our findings would be statistically valid.

A Note on ENGL 1004

Although we collected work from sections of ENGL 1004, the Basic Writing course that some students enroll in before taking ENGL 1010 or 1011, we decided to exclude these papers from the overall findings. The enrollment for the 1004 course in the spring semester is very light in the spring semester (as might be expected, students more often take the Basic Writing course in their first semester), and we felt that the small sample (only sixteen papers) could not be deemed representative. For these reasons, the results discussed throughout this report concern only the 365 papers collected from the 1010 and 1011 sections.

Reader Selection and Training

Five graduate student and adjunct faculty readers were chosen from an applicant pool of forty. Each reader was an experienced FE instructor with graduate coursework experience in rhetoric and composition. All readers were asked to read a selection of key articles in the scholarship of writing assessment, and ideas from these readings informed much of the discussion which followed. Initial broad discussions about the assessment project developed into focused examinations of the rubric terms and sample student writing. Portions of each day of reading

were dedicated to reflection on the assessment process itself. The reading and scoring part of the assessment project lasted for three weeks, from May 18th until June 5th.

D. Rubric and Rationale

Our central research questions concerned the goals and efficacy of the FE course, and we developed the rubric used in the reading and rating process based on the conversations we have had about assessment within the program throughout the year but also drawing on the rubrics from the W course assessment and from recent published examples of similar projects. (A brief bibliography is attached.) We expected to measure the growth (or lack of growth) between students' first and final essays, and to see, too, the relative strengths and weaknesses of various components of the course. In addition to the rating of student work with rubric scoring, we looked at the assignments pertaining to each student essay. And, with the time we had left, we pursued a number of smaller, deeper examinations into several aspects of the FE program. It is crucial to understand that the process of rendering such reading in quantitative terms proceeded within a reciprocal context of qualitative analysis and interpretation. Writing resists evaluation in strictly quantitative terms, and the numbers we offer here must be seen as heuristic tools for grounding the discussion of the course which follows. In other words, the numerical evaluation we offer here can be said to be indicative or suggestive, but not necessarily definitive.

1. Rubric Explanation

The assessment team used a 4-point scale for scoring papers, similar to that which was used by the W Assessment. The scale of the rubric might be productively compared to the GPA scoring system of the University. Thus a "4" corresponds to an A, an excellent or outstanding example of Freshman English writing; a "3" to a B-range, a paper that demonstrated overall proficiency; a "2" to a C-range, an essay demonstrating minimal proficiency; and a "1" indicated a D-F range, an unsatisfactory example of Freshman English writing. Unlike the GPA model, however, the assessment scoring did not include a "0."

While there are inherent problems with creating a rubric to evaluate writing from courses with differing assignments, the team wanted to establish a rubric that reflected both the aims of the assessment (namely, establishing a reliable measure of student learning) and those of the Freshman English Program, which understands writing as an ongoing, revisionary process of engagement with texts and other voices. The team worked from the rubric that we have provided in the Appendix, with the understanding that the brief categorical definitions do not fully capture the rich diversity of student writing.

The papers were scored holistically first, then scored on seven "Writing Outcomes" based loosely on the Freshman English Statement of Pedagogical Principles and Practices: Inquiry, Defined Project, Textual Engagement, Rhetorical Knowledge, Organization and Development, Style and Voice, and Grammar/Mechanics/Correctness. The assessment team also scored the

Assignments received from Freshman English instructors and took note of the page length of papers.

A brief explanation of the categories follows.

The **Holistic Score** was given based on the reader's overall impression of the paper. The holistic score is *not* a measure of an average or balance of categorical scores but, rather, a score denoting a reader's estimation of the paper's overall success. Therefore, holistic scores can and did differ from a net score which would average all categories equally. Scores from the first four Writing Outcomes of the rubric (Inquiry, Defined Project, Textual Engagement, Rhetorical Knowledge) tended to be much more indicative of holistic scores than those from the last three Outcomes (Organization and Development, Style and Voice, and Grammar/Mechanics/Correctness). These four Outcomes were the most complex as well, and thus demanded further clarification and revisiting throughout the assessment period.

Inquiry might best be understood as an exploratory mode: Readers evaluated written evidence of a student's attempt to use the assignment or writing prompt to explore an idea beyond the scope of the texts employed. Instances where the writer appeared to come to an original conclusion, or where they posited conflicting ideas against each other in service of their own argument, ranked higher than those papers where the students simply "answered" the question provided by the assignment (a distinction built upon the idea of academic research as the creation of new knowledge). Readers were not necessarily looking for brand new, original research (which may not be realistic or necessary at this level), but rather, readers rated papers highly for inquiry when they saw evidence that the student was actually using the writing project as a way to learn new things or make new discoveries for herself (often by putting readings into conversation with one another or by reading a personal or social text through a reading).

Defined Project represents a more specifically technical mode. Readers evaluated the writer's ability to both articulate a specific, concrete objective *and* sustain that argument throughout the paper, articulating subject shifts and "signposting" key elements of the essay. The team also looked for what was termed the "so what?" aspect—was the student aware of the need to articulate a justification for their argument, and did they? The reading team defined argument broadly, acknowledging that some successful papers were not traditional thesis-driven argument essays.

Textual Engagement indicates the degree to which a student incorporated texts to inform and support their arguments. While most papers above the score of "1" demonstrated an awareness of outside texts and voices, and a willingness to include them within the paper, the team looked for evidence of engagement beyond simply "proving" that an author said something. This was an area that allowed the team to recognize the students' facility with close, careful reading—the attention to how individual texts work and what they make available to readers—but also to consider more broadly the general value of what we often describe as "putting texts to use."

With these three writing outcomes and with **Rhetorical Knowledge**, the assessment team evaluated the writer's awareness of themselves *as* writers. In other words, was the student aware of writing as a mode of exploration and argument, and did they balance outside voices with their own, while negotiating reader and instructor expectations? **Rhetorical Knowledge** attempted to address this latter question most comprehensively, and scoring reflected two aims: the writer's attempt to negotiate reader expectation and their awareness of writing as performative. To that end, the team evaluated both the ways in which the paper addressed the assignment questions and the degree to which the writer appeared to make deliberate choices in terms of discipline-appropriate syntax, the repurposing of key terms and vocabulary, and the engagement of a reader. Citation was included in this rubric category.

Organization and Development often overlapped with Rhetorical Knowledge: The team looked not only for organization that made logical sense, but also for indications that the writer understood organization as central to the development of an argument, and made appropriate "moves" within the paper to emphasize the elaboration of an claim.

The last two Writing Outcomes, **Style/Voice** and **Grammar/Mechanics/Correctness**, present two measures of a paper's presentation. A high score in Style denoted an awareness and adoption of an academic voice and/or an energy in the writing that enhanced the reader's experience or understanding of the essay; a low score indicated that the style was inappropriate for the task or greatly hindered the reader's ability to understand the writer. The rubric term Grammar/Mechanics/Correctness is fairly self-explanatory; scores of "1" were primarily given to those essays that were incomprehensible or illegible due to the language used.

Assignments were evaluated on the basis of the Freshman English assignment guidelines provided on the program website. A highly scored assignment provides guidance for student writers and clearly establishes goals for writing that meet the values for writing defined above. Missing assignments were denoted with an "X" (not factored into scoring), while unsatisfactory assignments received a "1."

2. Reading Process

Each day of reading included at least one articulation session during which several student papers were read by all members of the team who would then share scores and discuss discrepancies and differences. The resulting dialogue helped remind readers of the distinctions within the rubric elements and keep intact the consensus which helped create the rubric in the first place. Although any group of individual instructors can be expected to have differences (indeed, such diversity within a program is to be encouraged), the team found consensus fairly swiftly and without any notable or unresolved issues. Indeed, if a rubric has a place in discussions of writing, it here, in its use as a mediation between program and instructor, that it is most valuable.

In the scoring sessions, each paper was read by two readers who then, after reading multiple papers, conferred about scores and issues within the reading session. When scoring differences

arose, the scorers worked to find consensus, but, when consensus on individual points could not be reached, two different scores were recorded. In an assessment process that is designed to impact a student's place at the university or in the course (as in a placement exam or an exit portfolio), the principle of reliability dictates that disputed papers be read by a third reader. But, because our assessment was program focused (because no student could be affected by an "incorrect" score), we allowed the minimal differences from readers to stand, expecting that the scoring, in aggregate, would reflect an accurate reading of the sample set. Because readers rotated in changing pairs and participated in the daily articulation sessions, no one reader could drift from the agreed upon rubric emphases without speaking to other team members and comparing scores. In fact, our use of reading pairs developed somewhat spontaneously but quickly became one of the most valuable structures to come out of the work. In at least some minimal fashion, *every* student paper was not only read twice but also *discussed* by readers.

II. Results and Discussion

A. Summary of Broad Findings

On a sentence-to-sentence, paragraph-to-paragraph level, FE students show great proficiency in basic writing skills. The writing in these sample papers is fluid, logical, and largely error free. However, when we look closely at the substance of the writing—its methods and purposes, its attention to readers and contexts—we see students often struggling to navigate the demands of successful academic writing. Both this FE study and the study of W courses suggest that achieving mastery in academic writing is a complex, multi-layered process which benefits from three inter-related components provided by these courses:

1. An environment centered on writing projects (with appropriate context, course materials/readings, and tasks)
2. Support in the form of feedback on drafts, models of successful work, and discussion of goals and methods
3. Time and practice (multiple drafts and/or papers; multiple semesters in writing courses).

The FE course, which emphasizes higher order concerns like purposeful engagement with texts and the use of writing as a mode of discovery, provides a kind of experiential laboratory for students in the first stages of this transition into academic discourse. The FE course appropriately demands project development, moving past rehearsal of static knowledge and into new uses and framings of ongoing thinking. The results of our assessment bear out the value of this emphasis on more than just lower order writing skills.

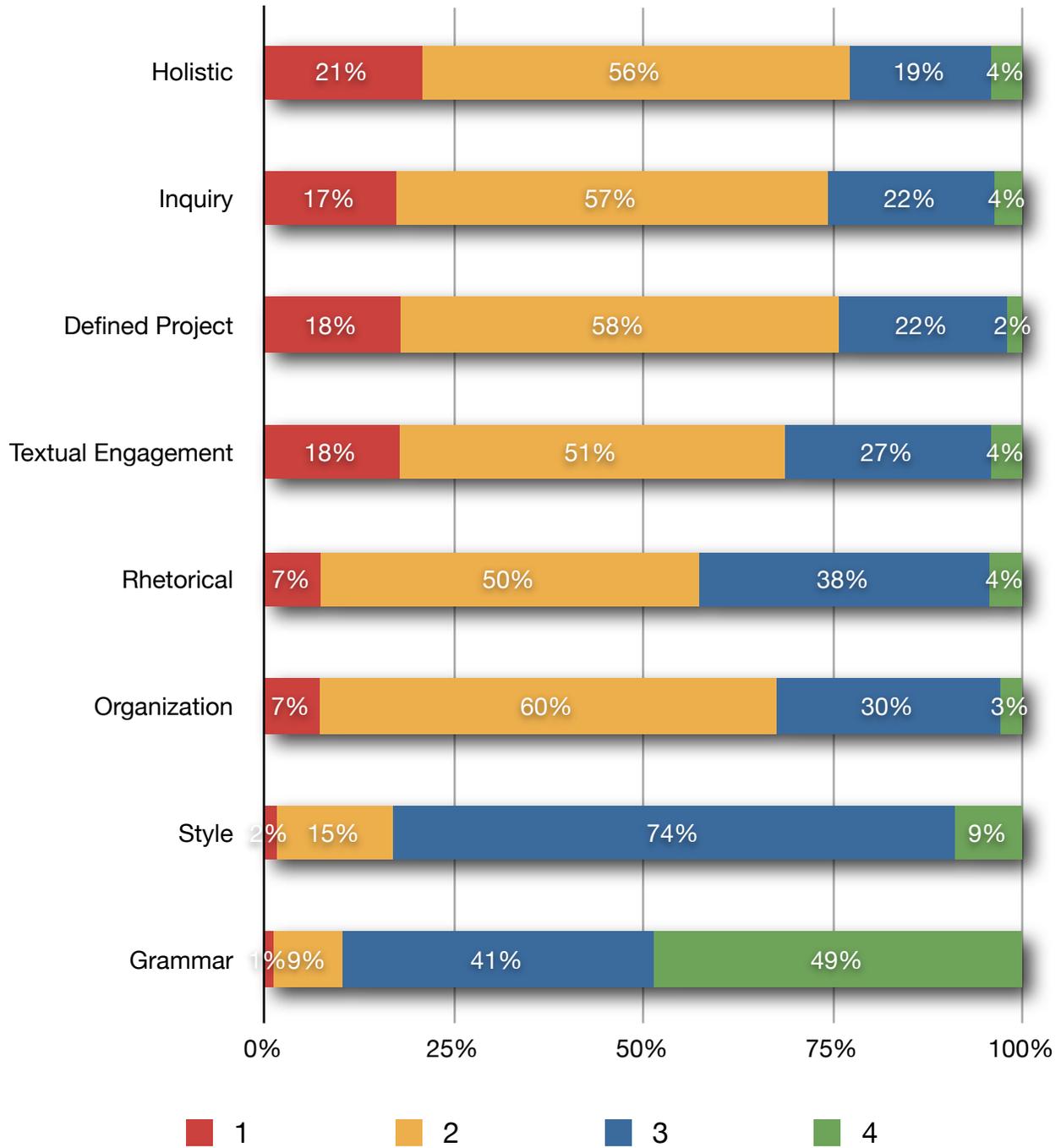
Highlights from the Data

A more complete analysis of the results follows below, but several points bear highlighting.

- The results distribution shows a **preponderance of papers which cross the threshold of minimal proficiency** but which do not achieve a sustained level of success. The significance of this reassuring but somewhat mixed result is addressed below.

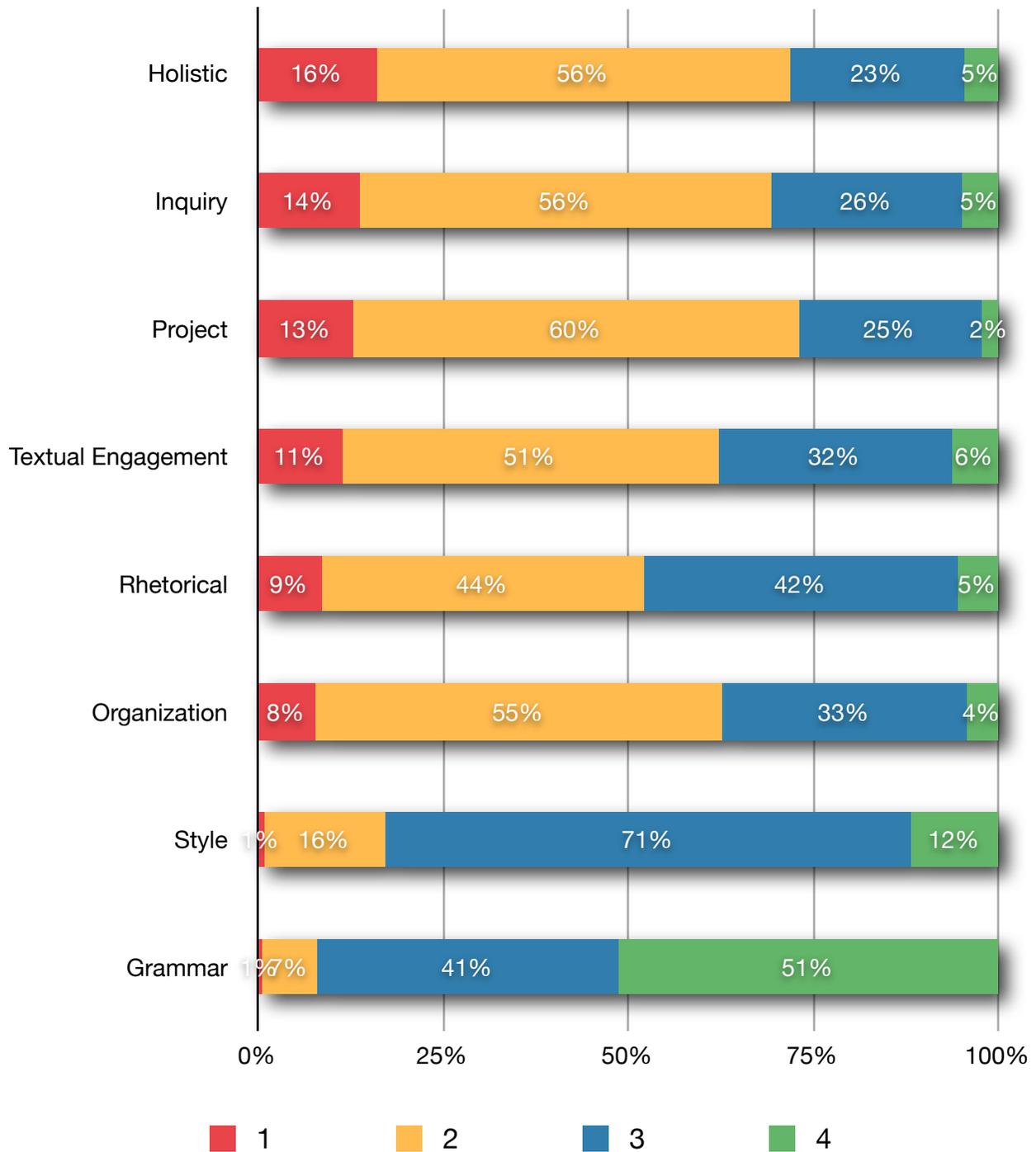
- Notably, results within the **grammar and mechanics** category of student writing were particularly strong. Our study shows freshman level students do not need special instruction on grammar and correctness, a finding that challenges some widespread assumptions.
- Papers on average show **improvement from first to final assignments**, illustrating that experience in the practice of writing academic papers improves the quality of writing.
- **Assignment correlation**: mean holistic scores improved in correlation with higher rated assignment prompts, which suggests that better assignments lead to better writing. Papers attached to “4” assignments scored *significantly* higher (mean of 2.413) than papers attached to either “2” or “1” assignments (1.924).
- **Page length insights**: students in FE courses write papers of significant length (averaging just under six pages in length), and our results suggest that papers from between five and ten pages have the highest rate of success. Papers under five pages in length scored considerably lower (-.44). Final papers averaged over seven pages in length.
- In all categories besides grammar, there were **a small number of papers receiving the score of four** (denoting Excellent/Outstanding performance). Only 4.1% of the scored papers received a four for holistic score.
- While there are substantial **differences between the 1010 and 1011 courses**, the overall mean holistic scores were quite similar (1010 averaged 2.027 and 1011 averaged 2.094). Differences in mean assignment rating (2.494 for 1010 and 2.184 for 1011) were offset by other factors we discuss below.

Score Distribution (All Papers)



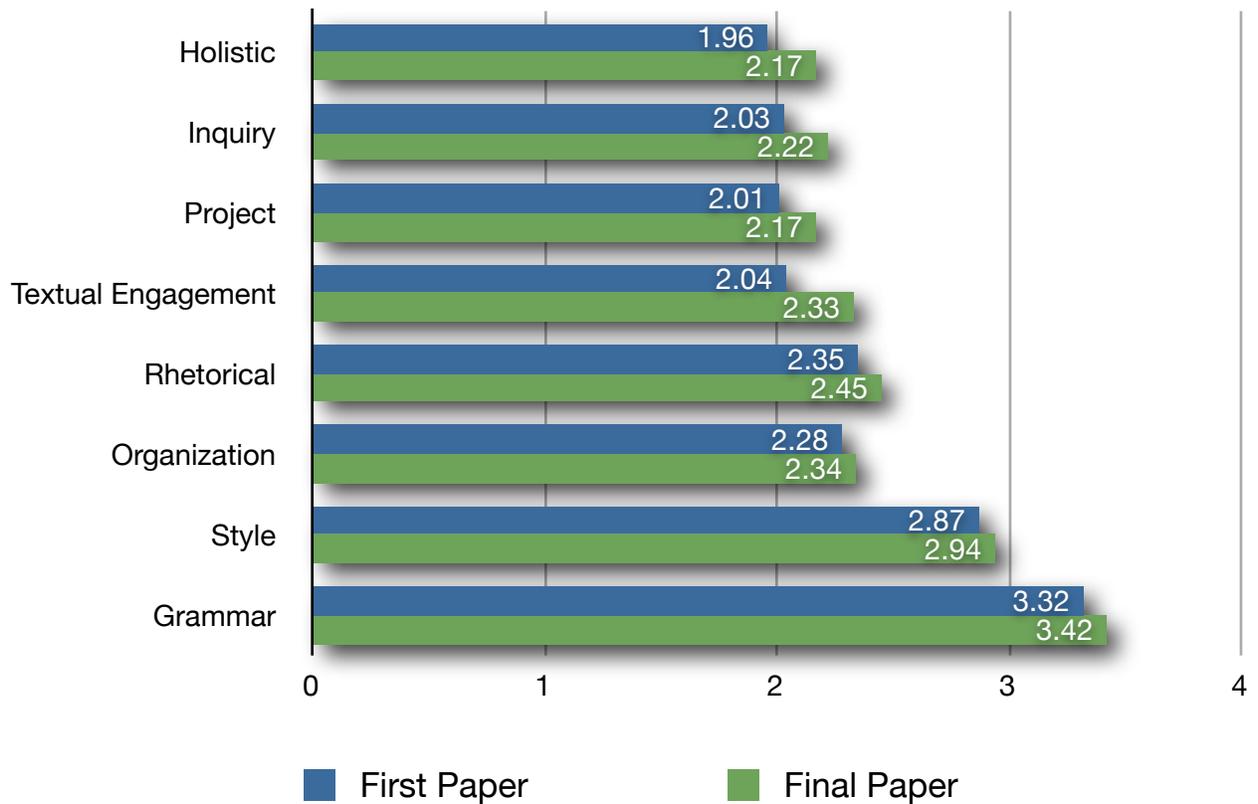
1 = Unsatisfactory 2 = Minimal Proficiency 3 = Moderate Proficiency 4 = Excellent/Outstanding

Final Paper Score Distribution



1 = Unsatisfactory 2 = Minimal Proficiency 3 = Moderate Proficiency 4 = Excellent/Outstanding

Mean Scores from First to Final Paper



Assignment Correlation



B. Understanding the Numbers

The numerical values assigned to student writing samples can only say so much about the substance of the writing by themselves. In the analysis which follows we offer more details and specifics about what these numbers suggest. We begin by analyzing papers with scores firmly within a specific rubric range, what we call “anchor” essays, and we proceed to an analysis of student writers who moved from one level to another. Finally, we consider the results of our assignment scores.

1. Anchor Rubric Scores

Understanding Anchor “2s” and “3s” for Mean Holistic Scores

Papers that received a holistic score of “2” or “3” comprise the majority of essays (74% of combined papers—first and final—and 79% of final papers). Those papers considered solid representatives of “2s” or “3s”—namely those which received the same score in the first five categories of the rubric—demonstrated consistent characteristics within each group, an elaboration of which seems important for understanding both the rubric and the aims of the Freshman English program overall.

It bears repeating that the scale of the rubric more closely follows the GPA scoring system of the University than a scale wherein “2” represents a 50% (or failing) score. Thus a “4” corresponds to an A (excellent) paper, a “3” to a B (very good) paper, a “2” to a C (average), and a “1” indicates a D-F (very low to failing). Solid “2” papers are therefore indicative of what the program might reasonably expect from students and not necessarily a below-standard achievement.

To that end, it seems crucial to understand the criteria by which a paper was deemed “minimally proficient” (2) rather than “proficient” (3). Solid “2” papers moved beyond facility with grammar and style, two elements that were universally strong among the sample essays regardless of holistic scores. Outside texts were present in all these papers, but often in ways that were problematic or simplistic. Most often, students seemed to attempt to summarize the text in question, often through a limited version of what we might call “close readings”: providing an explanation of what “happens” through “proof” from the text or, alternately, finding and spotlighting repeating images or ideas within the text as a way of explaining the argument or plot.¹ While such essays illustrate that the students understand the reading and are able to repeat key elements of the text, they stop short of purposeful engagement with the text in a larger context. They do not demonstrate that the student has a sense of confidence or ownership—over

¹ While “close readings” and plot explications might reasonably be considered academic work within specific areas of the liberal arts (most notably the study of literature), the assessment committee questioned the assumption that such activity was, by itself, *inherently* valuable in the FE context. Since Freshman English aims to develop skills for all fields, the committee determined that such papers fell short of the goals of the program as a whole. The presentation of how one reads a text (or other evidence) is indeed a key component of all academic writing; what we question is writing which stops at the point of presenting a reading without attaching that interpretive work to a purpose beyond mere explication of a text’s meaning.

both their own argument and that of the text—as might be demonstrated through an exploration of the text beyond duplication of its elements through quotation or summary.

Solid “2” papers were therefore limited to plot summaries and/or treasure hunts through a text, while solid “3” papers *combined* such techniques of analytical reading with a dialogic engagement in service to the student’s original idea. In other words, solid “3” papers consistently demonstrated students’ facility with addressing more than one text, often by putting said texts into dialogue with each other in order to develop a critical argument beyond explication. One evaluator noted that in “2” papers, multiple voices (those of the student, author, and/or critics) appear to be “quarantined” from each other, presented (if at all) in disconnected ways with no attempt to bring them together in a coherent way. Solid “3” papers, on the other hand, demonstrate a student’s confidence, self-consciousness, and purpose by making the student’s voice prominent and by exhibiting their control over multiple aspects of the paper. Students who wrote these papers moved beyond summary and explication by using one text to understand or explain another, and by using the resulting connections to defend an original argument about social, historical, and/or cultural ramifications for readers of these texts.

Understanding Anchor “1s” for Mean Holistic Scores

The committee determined that papers that fell below the general guideline of “acceptable Freshman English work” would receive a “1.” “Unacceptable” was understood to mean two distinct but overlapping categories: The first of these was work that simply did not approach or recognize the goals of an academic essay, in subject matter or textual engagement. These papers most often comprised short (1-3 page) personal essays about an aspect of the student’s life, with no discernible connection to classroom discussion, class readings or outside texts, or academic-subject inquiry. The “1” papers that fell into this category also did not demonstrate an attempt to contextualize the personal experience within a social or cultural situation. While often entertaining and smoothly written, these papers did not show evidence of the work of the Freshman English classroom.

As such, many papers that received “1” holistic scores (76 total, or 20.8%) often received high marks in other areas, such as Organization, Rhetorical Knowledge, or Grammar and Style. In many cases, the committee found that the student was indeed fulfilling the task set for them by the instructor; such assignments were also determined to be “1s” and the number of “1” papers that resulted from “1” assignments was 24 total. In light of this, the paper was often scored higher in Rhetorical Knowledge and Organization than its holistic score would suggest.

Those papers that scored “1” holistically but had higher scores for assignments were often very close to anchor “2” papers. The difference in these cases lay in the writer’s awareness of the task of academic writing. While many of these papers showed basic moves toward the framework of academic writing—thesis statements, rudimentary project definition—they did not exceed what might be best characterized as a “book report” about the text in question—a basic summary without direct engagement of texts for either analysis or explication.

The second category of “1” papers, however, were consistently weak in every category—what the committee termed “anchor 1s.” These papers often overlapped with the first type in terms of

subject matter, as the short personal essay was too often a mode for writers to avoid working with texts or voices apart from their own. Anchor “1s,” however, often performed this sort of writing even when the assignment/instructor requested work beyond its scope. Thus the paper did not address key elements of an assignment that could have resulted in higher-scoring work, while simultaneously failing to perform the academic maneuvers critical to college-level composition. These papers occasionally received low scores on Style and Grammar, particularly on the local level: run-on sentences, sentence fragments, verb agreement, and multi-page paragraphs. These findings suggest that such students were less confident in their written communication skills, and that extra attention from the instructor or the FE program might be required to ensure that such students do not flounder during the semester.

The team found that for most of the writing outcomes, a score of “1” often denoted a lack of that skill rather than an unsatisfactory performance. In other words, the paper did not show evidence of the writer’s awareness of the necessary writing outcomes, although the papers themselves might seem competently written. (Textual Engagement was one such area, in that most “1” papers showed no awareness of texts in any way.)

Understanding Anchor “4s”

Papers that received a holistic rank of “4” made up a small percentage of the total papers (4.11% or 15 papers). There were nearly four times as many papers that received a holistic score of “3,” and it seems necessary to establish the standards by which a paper was determined to exceed the expectations of a “3” essay.

While anchor “3” papers demonstrated facility with multiple texts, and the development of a critical argument beyond mere explication of text, papers scored “4” also showed evidence of both the student’s control over these multiple aspects of the essay, and their understanding of how such elements develop an argument. Writers of these papers moved smoothly from text to text, and from one part of an argument to another while avoiding a “shopping list” format in which aspects feel rote or mechanical. Anchor “4s” showed evidence of deeper critical engagement with an author or idea through the building of an argument over the course of an essay, as well as an awareness of the reader as part of the “conversation.” In other words, the writer often noted and addressed possible disagreements, and “signposted” throughout the essay—reminding the reader of previous points while establishing the direction in which the paper would continue.

Formally, “4” papers tended to exceed the standard essay model by utilizing transition sentences, announcing argumentative claims early and often, and maintaining an awareness of the reader at all times. In some cases, the student also showed an awareness of, and comfort with, the appropriate academic language of their field, using style as a means of establishing authority or gaining sympathy.

We might question the scarcity of papers receiving the highest score, and, indeed, more attention must be given to encouraging and supporting excellence in the first-year courses. Nevertheless, it is important to note, too, that students were evaluated on a scale designed to reflect writing quality *at the university level* and not at an imagined “basic” or “introductory” level. That is, the

writing in FE is intended to be comparable to the writing students do in *W* courses and other upper-level courses. It is understandable that few students would demonstrate ease and mastery of academic writing in their first semesters. In fact, the results seem to underscore the importance of practice and experiment in the movement toward writing proficiency. In this way, the FE courses provide important experience for student writers seeking to succeed in other courses.

2. Noting Progress: Mean Holistic Scores from First to Final Papers

“2s” to “3s”

The writing from students whose holistic scores improved from “2s” to “3s” exhibited some recognizable features, most notably a rise in confidence or what we tended to call “ownership” (sustained, purposeful control of the discussion). Students in these first papers often seemed tentative and even somewhat lost. The first papers often closely hewed to assignment prompts and received forms such as the five paragraph essay, pursuing deliberate adherence to stated guidelines over exploration or definition of purpose. These students seemed unfamiliar with seeing writing as a site for advancing or asserting ideas, and the papers were consequently tentative in voice, light in impact.

These same students produced final papers that demonstrated far more confidence and greater familiarity with the conventions of academic discourse. The writing no longer seemed like a mere exercise. One way to describe the difference between “3s” and “2s,” in this analysis, is that the “3s” were *memorable*—one could recall the paper hours or even days later because the student had taken the discussion to a fresh and productive place. We can only speculate on why these students improved, but we are persuaded that the greatest factor is simply the experience the students had gained in reading/discussing the assigned texts and writing several papers over the course of the semester.

“2s” to “4s”

The total number of final papers that received a holistic score of “4” was low (15, or 4.1%); of these, five represented a significant improvement from first papers by the same students. Of the students who received a holistic score of “4” on their final paper, four received a holistic score of “2” on their first paper, and one received a “3” on their first paper. (There were no students who received a “1” on their first paper and a “4” on their final.) Closer study of these “2” and “3” papers and their counterpoints revealed some interesting trends.

Most notably, the first papers demonstrated an *overall* level of competency in the “fundamentals” of writing and an understanding of standardized-testing expectations. All of the first papers received high marks in style and grammar, and with one exception, all featured “readings” of the primary text in question: an elaboration of a character, symbol, or theme within the text, accompanied by a summary of the text as a whole. While these papers demonstrated the students’ facility with what we might think of as “standardized-test norms”—a coherent five-paragraph explication of a text—they did not attempt the critical engagement with multiple texts, and subsequent gesturing towards ideas beyond the primary text, that the reading team saw as essential to a “3”-level or higher paper. Specifically, the students tended to use textual evidence

as “proof” that an author advanced an idea without simultaneously engaging in original or complex argumentation. Their careful reading had not yet begun to serve their writing goals.

This facility with the primary texts makes the final paper scores (holistic “4s”) perhaps unsurprising. Across the board, the students’ final papers demonstrated this same facility while *simultaneously* putting multiple texts into dialogue with external critical arguments, all as a way of developing the students’ original theses. Each of the “4” papers engaged multiple texts in addition to a primary text (a marked difference from the first papers), and included at least one theoretical argument, which the student used to examine the primary text and their own response. The overall sense of the “4” final papers was of a “complication” of the students’ responses to a primary text, through their engagement of outside voices, which resulted in a new and insightful research problem. While “4” papers did not, as a rule, have to be textually “perfect,” all of the final “4” students demonstrated a marked advancement from first to last paper in the sophistication of their arguments and their ability to communicate those ideas clearly.

3. Assignments

We found that on the whole Freshman English instructors are producing assignments that contribute powerfully to the success of their students. The holistic score for papers written in response to assignments that received a “4” was 2.413 as opposed to the holistic score of 1.924 for papers written in response to assignments that received the lower scores (2 and 1). 33% of assignments received a score of “3” or “4” indicating that they were thoughtfully crafted and communicated to students a workable intellectual project consistent with Freshman English pedagogy. An additional 45% received a score of “2” indicating that while they might be unevenly developed or not entirely representative of Freshman English coursework, they could, with some revision, become workable writing prompts. *The key finding overall seems to be that when Freshman English instructors assign ambitious and well-constructed projects, UConn students rise to the challenge and their proficiency in academic writing improves.*

Successful assignments reflected the range of intellectual inquiry and ownership encouraged in these courses. Though content and course texts varied widely, common traits of successful assignments included thoughtful rendering of the instructor’s own reading of course texts, situating of the primary project of the assignment within the larger course framework of assignment sequences, required use of two or three texts (including experiential and visual texts), prioritization of tasks, modeling of academic conventions, and explicit mention of a critical literacy around key terms/concepts unique to the particular course. In other words, the best assignments combined an attention to the practical details of the assignment (listing of texts, citation format, descriptions of drafting process) with a careful situating of the intellectual work expected of the student (the roles various texts should play in the essay, the communicative goals of the assignment, the choices available to the student in framing the project, reference to relevant discussions and assignments in the course).

The specific projects of various assignments will give an idea of the complexity of the work students were asked to do. One assignment asked students to apply Johan Huizinga’s theory of

play to their reading of Michel Foucault. Another assignment asked students to situate the America they observe within historical discourses around race, making use of texts they had read by a variety of authors and in the process determining whether the term “post-racial” is a useful descriptor of their experience of America. A third assignment asked students to construct an essay in the style of Edward Said’s photographic essays, making use of photos they selected as a method of inquiry into representations of war in Western media. At the same time students were to comment upon Said’s project (and their own) as a way of leveraging the powerful arguments of visual media. In all of these assignments, a shared common point of emphasis was the *putting of texts to use for the purpose of developing and testing the student’s own thinking as it emerges in the context of these readings*.

We were encouraged to see so much evidence of “ownership” of the course in our instructors’ assignments, suggesting that instructors and students alike are participating in the vigorous work of inquiry and collaboration that is at the heart of a university education. While many first-year writing programs supply mandatory syllabi and required course texts to instructors in order to “ensure quality,” the UConn FE Program asks instructors to choose readings and course themes to best suit their interests and talents, texts and themes which will animate students and lend themselves to substantive, open-ended inquiry. The remarkable range of texts and assignments in these FE courses offers evidence that the course works best when instructors and students alike are engaged with the intellectual content of the course.

“2” Assignments

Because assignments with a score of “2” represented 45% of our sample, we felt they required some additional scrutiny. While most “2s” were somewhat consistent with Freshman English pedagogy, there were some patterns of deviation from that pedagogy. Many assignments in this category asked students to write an essay with the aim of producing a “close reading,” a genre of writing common to English departments. A close reading requires students to examine a text with the purpose of interpreting it for a reader, looking at formal traits of the text in relation to the text’s communicative purposes. Assignments for close readings tend to ask questions about how writers communicate their positions, what happens in a piece of writing, and how a reader is impacted by the writer’s choices.

Such readings are valuable in establishing a student’s understanding of the text, and this articulation of the specific “yield” of one’s engagement with a text plays a crucial role in the development of new thinking and self-understanding. But assignments that ask for close reading not as a tool but as an end in itself tend to privilege the authority of the text over the student’s own authority as a producer of texts, potentially undercutting our goals in this course. As this is not a course in preparing English majors, the Freshman English program has always sought to emphasize the need for students to *make use* of texts in order to pursue their own intellectual purposes. In more successful assignments we observed that the assignment of a second text will often assist students in framing a use for close reading in pursuit of their own intellectual projects, so the move toward revision of these assignments is a simple one.

In some cases we found that early assignments received “2s” and later assignments in the same course received higher scores. On examining some samples of this trend we found that instructors were sequencing their assignments in ways that built towards greater complexity, suggesting that particularly for first assignments, simpler tasks may be useful when designed to build into larger projects. Freshman English instructors often like to get a writing sample early in the semester, and for this reason a very controlled project early on may assist instructors in assessing student abilities and making time later in the semester for intensive revision and group work with more complex projects. For example, an early assignment that received a “2” might ask students for a close reading of an untraditional essay like Susan Griffin’s “Our Secret,” and, in a later assignment from the course, this reading and others may be used in combination to offer insight into the challenge of situating the personal within the historical.

We conclude from this that even assignments receiving “2s” provide evidence of the quality of instruction in our program, and that problems with these assignments can be corrected with enhanced programmatic communication and support.

Patterns of Strong Assignments

The following is a collection of observations about the traits of particularly strong assignments (those receiving a “4”). Most of these descriptions can also be found in the Freshman English Program’s Assignment Guidelines, though in different form.

Strong assignments do the following:

Create an Appropriate FE Assignment

- Build a critical literacy specific to the class that is referenced and developed across assignment sequences.
- Structure assignment sequences. Sequences may occur in terms of increasing complexity of tasks or in terms of building upon earlier readings. They may also build as they construct a familiarity with a particular author’s work, a particular text, or a particular subject matter, moving towards a more complexly situated sense of the object(s) of their inspection.
- Require that literary texts be situated historically, culturally, etc. so that assignments shift the student’s project from writing *about* the text to writing *through* the text.
 - Offer secondary (often critical or non-fiction) readings so that students can do this with some level of complexity
 - Often make use of fiction to re-read seemingly more “transparent” or “obvious” non-fiction, a move which also assists students in moving towards a more complex understanding of texts.
- Combine texts in ways that resist formulaic readings (not compare/contrast or the traditional “close reading”).
- Recognize that students are often not equipped to read pop culture as a text without some critical framework.
- Encourage students to “take risks” in pursuit of the higher order concerns of inquiry and project even at the expense of organization and polish.

Define the Central Project

- Situate the assignment within class discussions and readings.
 - Also reference the larger course and/or FE sequencing.
- Model both reading of the texts and making use of the texts in order to situate an intellectual project.
 - Point toward a “so what,” “what’s at stake.”
 - Ask “why” questions more than “what” or even “how” questions.
- Privilege student agency in complex projects.
 - Open intellectual tasks supported by scaffolding (steps to take, common pitfalls to watch for, things to remember).
 - Multiple points of entry suggest possible choices students will need to make.
- Present the student essay as a communicative act in which reader, texts, and audience all participate.
 - Students make use of *their own readings* of texts—this is not a performance for a grade or a transparent substitution of texts for the student’s own voice.

Define Tasks and Process

- Suggest ways that students may engage in purposeful and selective re-reading of the texts so that they are not simply culling quotes from the first few pages.
- Model academic conventions – assignments may include titles, in-text citation, works cited, etc.
- Define textual roles in pursuit of student’s own project.
 - Suggest ways to make use of experiential texts (which students have trouble regarding as texts).
 - Suggest ways to make use of visual texts, directing students attention to salient features and suggesting writing tasks associated with representing these texts.
 - Include language defining textual roles and tasks with texts. Ex: lens and artifact, “applying,” “refining,” “extending,” “reflecting,” “countering” texts.
 - Often suggest the dialectical use of a text (looking back at a text – evaluate limitations of textual concepts and uses).
 - Structure relationships between texts when appropriate (some texts are primary, others secondary but have defined roles).
- Offer students ways to think about their process.
 - Re-defining revision.
 - Offer strategies and steps (recommend specific tasks within the larger project).
 - Introduce new terminologies that emphasizes the nature of college-level academic work and challenges their previous notions of this work (“Idea Draft,” “Revision as re-thinking, not fixing”).
 - Specify learning outcomes or writing goals.

Practical Concerns

- Create visually appealing assignments
 - Sections
 - Images, font changes

- Combination of bullet-points and richly considered academic paragraphs
- Practical considerations have their own section (due dates, list of texts, page length, citation format, etc.)
- Explain how essays will be evaluated.

Specific Comments on the Use of Personal Experience, Visual Texts, and Creative Texts

- Personal experiences are rendered as texts and situated in relation to course readings so that students can make something new of both their experiences and the course texts.
 - Assignments suggest ways to make use of experience, to take note and describe.
- Can ask students to “apply” text to an image or experience but the key move is to identify *particular* concepts within the reading and emphasize that the other key move in this sort of essay is to invite the artifact or the process of application to re-read the original lens text.
- When using film or photo, suggest how to represent and make use of these texts.
- When offering students the opportunity to write a non-traditional essay, include in the assignment a detailed representation of the original writer’s project and suggest concrete steps writers can take to mark their essay with traits corresponding to the original writer’s. Likewise the assignment acknowledges the difference between the original project and that of the students, suggesting ways that students may adapt the project and signal their awareness of that adaptation.
- When offering a creative option, it is important that the creative task is generated in response to a work of literature in a critically informed way (reading both an original work and perhaps another creative response to it). The second significant piece should be a substantial essay-length reflection that offers analytical perspective on the “conversation” between the creative pieces.

Specific Comments on the Use of Student-Found Research

- Defining textual roles remains crucial when asking students to find texts beyond those discussed in class. The most successful research assignments ask students to find one or a couple of texts that will serve specific purposes in their projects (such as providing cultural/historical contexts for other texts they analyze in order to make their own argument or serving as points of entry for further exploration for a specific question they are pursuing).
- Avoid asking students to find any type of scholarly articles that critique a particular literary text. Such assignments make it difficult for students to make their own inquiry or pursue their own project and instead encourage them to simply agree or disagree with others’ “readings” of a text. If an instructor does want students to engage literary criticism, s/he should direct them to particular issues and projects *they* can pursue *through* their study.
- Successful assignments that incorporate student-found research continue to situate the students’ projects (including their independent research) within class discussion and readings. For instance, the student’s research may help to extend, complicate, or scrutinize commonly discussed texts and concepts of the course.

A Summary Statement on Assignments

The best FE assignments ask for projects, not tasks. This means they establish a context for the assigned writing and make expectations explicit. Strong assignment prompts are therefore in

writing and articulate the instructor's priorities while remaining open, too, to a range of responses and ideas. And, most of all, strong assignments address the *purpose* for writing: what will students' writing contribute to or advance? What questions or ideas are at the root of the assigned writing?

Our findings suggest that, generally, it is a good idea to have *more than one text* in each assignment (although more than two or three can be difficult to manage as well), and these texts should create tension or energy that might lead into many possible directions. Students write best when they are not simply rehearsing an already scripted conversation as in “choose a side” papers or “what is X saying” papers. For this reason, it is not enough to simply ask for a reading or an interpretation of a text. Especially in 1011, it is tempting to ask for an interpretation of a text, but this is only a first step. It is indeed valuable to “close read,” analyze, and interpret texts, but this is best done *in the service of an idea*. For example, one might analyze *Dracula* to say something about the body or fear of the other, and this might require a detailed reading of the novel. But the paper should be about the body or fear of the other, and not, in the end, about *Dracula*. (Paper titles often reveal this.) In other words, the paper must move past the literary reading into an argument that reaches beyond the literary text (writing *through* literature, not *about* literature). A second text can make this come together more easily, as in: how does *Dracula* help you say something about the popularity of body piercings and tattoos (as represented by a selection from Victoria Pitts' book, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*)?

III. Recommendations

In the main, the FE course is working to give students needed practice in exploring their thinking through writing and in learning to express ideas in the context of feedback and response. Especially in its linking of rigorous reading and reflection to specific writing projects, the FE course provides an important first step in a student's intellectual maturation. Instructors and administrators would be wise to continue the emphasis on inquiry, project, and textual engagement at the heart of the FE program pedagogy. FE provides significant writing experience, and the course is valuable to all UConn students, offering a rigorous pedagogy that benefits all disciplines—namely, critical inquiry and a concept of writing as contact with the ideas and materials of intellectual work. Our study shows that there is real growth between the first and the last papers and that the majority of student writing accomplishes at least the minimum of the desired outcome. And we should build on this strong foundation.

We must, however, attend to the differences between articulating a program philosophy and implementing it. The FE pedagogy is mature, complex, and appropriate for students at UConn. But, especially because faculty are not always deeply integrated into the program, this pedagogy is not always fully operating in the courses themselves. We offer here some recommendations to various stakeholders at the university, including a number of suggestions about how we might improve the effectiveness and impact of the course.

Staffing and Program Resources

Although the assessment reveals an instructor cohort that is talented, diverse, and active, Freshman English remains one of the most demanding of all courses to teach, with a required 30 pages of revised writing per student in classes with students who are often totally new to university-level academic practices. And there can be little doubt that the overall effectiveness of the FE program is limited by the relatively small commitment that is made to its instructors. Despite the enormous task of staffing and supporting almost 300 courses per year, the FE program operates with no full-time staff support and a shrinking pool of resources. Of the 129 sections offered in the spring semester, 72 were taught by TAs, 54 by part-time adjunct faculty, and only 3 were taught by full-time faculty. Many semesters, no FE courses at all are taught by FT faculty. And, at the regional campuses, where students may need even more support, FE instructors are almost all adjuncts, with very limited time or office space for student conferencing, a key component of the course. What this means is that FE is taught by inexperienced and/or contingent faculty, who likely work at other institutions or have other full-time work. And, because all of these faculty are temporary faculty, there is a high turnover rate. Faculty administrators at each campus spend much of their time vetting, hiring, and training new faculty. With *more than 100 instructors* teaching the course in any given semester, the FE program is, personnel-wise, larger than most entire departments at UConn. The course works well, largely because of a faculty that so often goes well beyond their basic responsibilities; but *there is no question that full implementation of the pedagogy and practices we recommend here would require a greater commitment to oversight and engagement with this very large cohort of instructors.*

A 2008 MLA report on the staffing of English courses, “Education in the Balance: A Report on the Academic Workforce in English,” describes the question of resources in the following way:

[S]ome resources that support research and publication should be directed toward the issues represented by general education, which include fundamental questions about the use and value of reading and writing in relation to language and life outside the academy. English departments are large because English courses are required of all or most students. It has always been assumed that the work we do has broad application to basic questions of literacy and culture. Included in our unwritten contract with the public is the understanding that we will take this work seriously, making general education a part of our ongoing research and making our ongoing research part of general education.

The university should look into supporting these most important courses and considering:

- Stronger program apparatus such as full-time administrative support
- More oversight of and engagement with teaching faculty
- New post-doctoral or teaching fellowship positions for experienced faculty
- Full-time lecturer roles (like those at many research universities)
- More rewards and support for adjunct faculty and TAs who perform their work with excellence.

As a first step, the university may wish to execute a study comparing UConn’s resource allocation with those of the first-year writing programs at peer institutions.

Recommendations for FE Program Administrators

- *More communication between instructors (workshops, orientation, handbooks, listservs, and website).* The website and supporting course materials such as handbooks have grown considerably in the past few years. Especially given the rapid turnover of instructors, the program should continue to see these tools as fundamental parts of ensuring the quality of the FE courses.
- *More formalized oversight of the program, including continued assessments like this one.* This project should be just the beginning of the program's ongoing work of reflecting on its performance. Although an annual assessment on a scale similar to this project is not feasible, it makes sense to implement a more routine process of collection and reflection on course materials (especially instructor assignments and student writing). As we have found here, simply engaging in such a process fosters dialogue about what works and what needs more attention.
- *More defining of specific roles for faculty members with FE oversight responsibility.* Currently, a faculty administrator at each campus maintains responsibility for all aspects of the FE sections offered at that specific campus, resulting in a great deal of redundant labor. At the regional campuses, where writing coordinators also oversee writing centers and W course support, the pressure of juggling roles is even more acute. The program might benefit from concentrating aspects of administrative work with specific individuals to better focus these limited resources, allowing individual administrators to serve as, say, 1010 or 1011 coordinator, or to focus on elements of FE such as the summer SSS/CAP program, the basic writing course, the ECE program, student placement, assessment, hiring practices, faculty training and review, grading consistency and grade appeals, waivers, writing centers, ESL, technology, and so on.

Two Specific Proposals for Improved Coordination

1. Although the current administrative staff is too small to play a direct role in each individual course, a current program for mentoring new TAs could be developed and extended to include all TAs and, if possible, all part-time faculty as well. One version of this model would have each instructor in a team of between 3 to 5 instructors with a balance of experienced and less experienced members. Less a direct mentoring program than an open forum for the exchange of ideas, such a program might include reciprocal class visits, sharing of assignments, and discussions of student work. Each team could then provide a brief account of what was learned (or some highlights) at the end of each semester. Administrators could use these reports to gain a better sense of how the courses are functioning and what questions instructors are raising.
2. A second idea is to make portfolio collection a component of the course. Although it might be worth considering a more ambitious shared portfolio review process in future years, especially at regional campuses, we are simply recommending that each student assemble a portfolio of some or all of the semester's work for review by the instructor at the end of the semester. Such a collection process, common in many first-year writing courses at other universities, helps both teachers and students see the semester's work as a series of related projects. Asking students to supplement such a collection with a brief reflective note or letter has been shown to promote self knowledge and to help students assert ownership of their work. Writing portfolios support the program pedagogy without

impinging on the wide range of instructor methods and topics and can greatly aid program assessment by providing easily retrievable raw materials for studies such as this one.

Additional Points of Emphasis

- Consider the distinction (or non-distinction) between 1010 and 1011.
- Consider linking more directly to a second course (like ENGL 2049W: Writing Through Research or ENGL 3003W: Advanced Expository Writing) and/or W courses.
- Develop deeper relationships with campus writing centers, which already supply valuable support.

Recommendations for Instructors

The assignments we saw during this assessment demonstrate instructors' commitment to the course and their students. Instructors pursue and discuss a wide range of complex ideas and texts with their students. Moreover, the papers demonstrate students' abilities, across the board, to pursue the challenging work asked of them. We encourage instructors to continue to take ownership of their courses and to engage their students from the unique settings of their courses. At the same time, we see evidence of some excellent assignments emerging from shared dialogue among instructors and thus promote further professional collaboration as well.

Most of the assignments we saw asked for the work Freshman English program wants students to pursue, but most assignments also showed potential for improvement. Given this finding, along with the clear finding that better assignments yield better papers, we strongly encourage instructors to carefully craft their assignments along the guidelines given in this report and in other FE documents. We also encourage them to regularly share and discuss their assignments, student papers, and other materials from their courses with colleagues. All instructors can develop and renew teaching practices through ongoing reflection and articulation.

Recommendations for the English Department

- For most students at UConn, Freshman English is the face of the English department, the only English course they will take, and even those who go on to take more English courses begin in a FE seminar. The English department could make more of this relationship with even greater involvement with the course and greater recognition of the department's large role in students' general education. If the Freshman English component of the department's work is viewed as different in kind from the upper-level and graduate work in English, an important opportunity is lost.
- Also, many or most recent job placements for graduate students in English have been partly attributable to the strong pedagogical background provided by the FE program. Graduate students should be encouraged to see their FE teaching as deeply related to their professional development, and, therefore, graduate students should be encouraged to take leadership roles and participate in various FE initiatives such as service-learning courses, summer 1004 courses for the SSS program, and the 1010/1011S courses. Currently, graduate students are prevented from working at regional campuses where many such opportunities are available. This policy

could be changed so that graduate students have the widest possible opportunities as teaching professionals.

- The department may wish to reconsider two important changes to FE enrollment policies necessitated by recent budget cuts. First, the increase of class size for Storrs FE courses to 22 students (from 20) simply puts a greater burden on instructors who already shoulder great responsibility relative to their status within the department. Second, the use of AP scores to exempt some incoming students from FE potentially puts these often talented and motivated students at a *disadvantage*. High school advanced placement courses in English have little to do with the university-level academic writing in FE, and students like these who do not take FE lose an important opportunity to develop their writing along with their peers.

Recommendations for GEOC and General Faculty

Faculty in all disciplines are encouraged to *learn more about the FE program* to better understand the kinds of work that their students have experience with. They might do so by accessing the FE website <fe.uconn.edu> or simply by asking students in their courses about the writing they have done. But a shorthand list of key things to know about FE includes the following:

- FE is the beginning of a student’s career as an academic writer, and the courses therefore emphasize the ongoing practices of recursive project development, not the mastery of discrete, portable “skills.” In other words, what students in FE come to know is not so much a series of techniques which they can then “plug in” to new projects but, rather, a habit of mind of raising questions and pursuing thinking through and in writing.
- FE courses are rigorous and intellectually ambitious, requiring several source-driven papers of substantial length (averaging about six pages in length and culminating in final papers averaging more than seven pages in length, with multiple sources).
- FE courses emphasize the deep relationship between reading/content and writing; although student writing is indeed the subject of the course, this writing emerges in contact with assigned reading and substantive questions.
- Writing Centers at each campus can be especially helpful in supporting students making the transition from FE courses into discipline-specific W courses.

GEOC Goals: FE and W

GEOC specifically states that one of the purposes of W courses is “to ensure that writing instruction continues after Freshmen English.” In other words, W courses, are designed build on and extend the goals of Freshmen English described above. This relationship between FE and the W courses must therefore be a point of emphasis in ongoing discussions about student writing at UConn, and, because most UConn students make this transition from FE to W, it is important that, whenever possible, faculty and administrators see these components as providing complementary experiences in academic writing. It is especially helpful when faculty can draw on a shared terminology and a pool of common practices such as peer review, drafting, and revision. W instructors should be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the ways that FE courses frame and pursue academic writing (see above), and, in turn, the FE program needs to be responsive to the demands made on student writers in the courses which come after FE, especially W courses. Although the W Center at Storrs, regional campus writing coordinators,

and some departments provide some explicit guidance and support for navigating between FE and W, much of this work is in its early stages. We can only suggest that knowledge gained in this assessment project and in 2008's W course assessment be used to begin a new phase of attention to this relationship.

Dissemination of Assessment Findings and Recommendations

The findings and recommendations of this report will be made available to all in the UConn community and posted on the GEOC and FE websites, and the raw data is available for examination or further study upon request. In addition, the materials of the study (including the student papers, scoring sheets, and assignments) will be archived for use in future research. We expect this report to spur conversations throughout the UConn community about the impact and value of the university's first-year writing course, and we hope, too, that the report will foster greater attention to the ongoing topics of how central writing is to student development and learning and, what is even more important, how we might best teach writing. In order to promote and enable these discussions, we are taking a few steps.

1. The Committee on Undergraduate Writing Instruction (CUWI) has begun to publicize these results at individual campuses and in its broad communication with writing teachers throughout UConn.
2. At least two forums are to be scheduled to discuss the project results and recommendations. One forum will be for FE instructors and another will be for the entire UConn community.
3. The FE program has begun use the assessment findings to make changes and adjustments to its already existing training materials, including TA orientation, part-time faculty handbooks, the Theory and Teaching of Writing graduate seminar for new TAs (ENGL 5100).

Appendices

- A. Rubric materials (scoring sheet and rubric analysis sheet)
- B. Sample assignments
- C. Bibliography of works consulted for the project

A. Rubric Materials

FE Assessment Scoring Record [v. 5]

Paper ID: _____

Scorer's initials: _____

Course (circle):

1004

1010

1011

1 = Unsatisfactory 2 = Minimal Proficiency 3 = Moderate Proficiency 4 = Excellent/Outstanding

A. Holistic Score

B. Inquiry. Grounded in inquiry (writing is used as a mode of discovery or exploration; paper exhibits intellectual work, not merely a report on knowledge)

C. Defined Project. An arguable and productive idea (purpose, thesis, goal, direction)

D. Textual Engagement. Purposeful and substantive contact with text(s) (writing through not about texts, more than reporting)

E. Rhetorical Knowledge. Negotiates the demands of reader expectation and writing purpose (assignment awareness, audience awareness, citation)

F. Organization and Development. (identifies key moves; notes relationship between parts)

G. Style, Voice. (energy, humor, wit, or grace in language)

H. Grammar, Mechanics, and Correctness.

I. Assignment

J. Page length (not including title page or works cited)

Additional notes:

Logged

	1	2	3	4
Holistic score	Not an acceptable FE paper.	Some key features of FE work, but with persistent problems or questions.	A solid model of FE work. May not meet all needs or expectations or may not exceed expectations.	An exemplary model of FE work, though not by definition exceptional.*
Inquiry	Mailed in; no intellectual energy.	Rudimentary; does not examine significance or implications. Little “happens.”	Makes gestures toward ideas beyond task fulfillment; moments of insight.	Writing used as a mode of discovery or exploration; paper exhibits intellectual work.
Defined Project	Project is undefined, without purpose.	Project is somewhat undefined or unclear. Lacks clear purpose.	Project is defined and purposeful, if at times uncertain or weak. Notes the “so what” question.	Purpose or goal is clearly defined <i>and</i> substantive. Follows through on “so what” question.
Textual Engagement	No texts or texts are dominant.	Texts are present, but in problematic ways, e.g., quotes are dropped in.	Sustained engagement with texts if not in a wholly satisfactory way.	Texts are central without becoming dominant. Writing <i>through</i> texts, not just about them.
Rhetorical Knowledge	No markers of task or audience awareness.	Limited task or audience awareness.	Adequately demonstrates awareness of task and audience. Writing as performance.	Shows superior awareness of audience and assignment; genre fluency.
Organization/ Development	Unacceptably flawed.	Flawed or very rudimentary organization; light or no development.	Some evidence of organization; appropriate “moves.”	Paper establishes clear pattern of development; develops ideas in depth contributes to success of the paper.
Style, Voice	Style or voice greatly hinders the project and/ or argument.	Some questions with style or voice.	Style or voice is appropriate to the task.	Style or voice contributes to success of the paper. Style or voice is notable.
Grammar, Mechanics, and Correctness	These elements greatly hinder the project and/ or argument.	Some interference with paper goals.	Adequate (some minor errors).	Flawless or nearly so.

	1	2	3	4
Assignment	Not at all an appropriate FE assignment.	Assignment needs some revision to be an adequate FE assignment.	A solid model of an FE assignment, if unclear or undefined in some respects. Puts texts to use.	An exemplary model of an FE assignment, though not by definition exceptional.

1 = Unsatisfactory 2 = Minimal Proficiency 3 = Moderate Proficiency 4 = Excellent/Outstanding

Note: It may be true that there is some implicit correspondence between these scores and grade equivalents. That is, a 4 = A; 3 = B; 2 = C; 1 = F. Note this last score *differs* from the grade point model. There is no zero.

Notes.

*In theory, *all* papers or assignments could receive 4's. In other words, a 4 is not defined by its difference from other work but rather in its meeting of all criteria. It must be stressed that "excellent/outstanding" is a flawed description of the category of 4. We are not grading on a curve. Quite the contrary. We seek a program that produces a preponderance of 4's. In a perfect program, 1's, 2's, and 3's would be "outstanding" because they would be so rare.

Defined Project includes more than statement of purpose and may be more of a felt sense. It also includes something like scope or parameter.

Citation is located in rhetorical knowledge—a small, tangible marker of convention awareness. Style: energy, humor, wit, power in language or presentation. Voice.

Rhetorical Knowledge includes, often, the use of key terms in self-aware ways. Recognition that language requires commentary, placement, and "re-purposing."

Assignment can be deemed "appropriate" as per assignment guidelines on FE website.

See Pagano et al. for more useful details about several of these categories. Some of these categories and explanations are taken from that article.

From Brian Huot, *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*:

If assessment is research, then methods like constructing rubrics, training raters and the like should be secondary to the questions for which the research is being undertaken in the first place (Johanek 2000). Unfortunately...these methods have become what most practitioners consider writing assessment itself. The result is that instead of allowing us to think about what we want to know about students, most writing assessments require extensive attention to the writing of prompts and rubrics, the training of raters, and ultimately the production of reliable scores. (163)

B. Sample Assignments

Appendix B: Assignment Example One

First Essay Assignment

First Drafts Due: Monday, February 16th at 2 PM

Small Group Tutorials: Wednesday, February 18th & Thursday, February 19th

Final Drafts Due: Monday, February 23rd at 2 PM in Babbidge Library Video Theatre 2

Available Texts

Isle of Flowers- Jorge Furtado

“A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey”- Robert Smithson

La haine- Mathieu Kassovitz

The America Play- Suzan-Lori Parks

For this essay, you will cover the topic of “garbage,” or the aspects of culture that societies attempt to discard and forget. You can choose from a number of tasks:

--> Using Smithson’s essay as a model, take photographs of some of the “monuments” (keeping Smithson’s use of this word in mind) of UConn. Discuss any significant aesthetic decisions you made: what did you include in your photographs or what did you leave out? What do your “monuments” potentially reveal about UConn? Do these revelations contrast the usual stories about UConn? If yes, then how and why? Use Smithson’s essay and Furtado’s film as lens texts to help your discussion transform from a conversation about UConn into cultural self-representations? A NOTE: In this essay, discuss your photographs as if they were a text like Smithson’s essay.

--> So far, the texts we’ve studied deal with oppressed populations in various societies. Take two texts and discuss how the oppressed persons in those texts are portrayed. What might be the political and ethical implications of such portrayals? What gets included and left out of such portrayals? What are the possible reasons for this? How would a change in the oppressed persons’ representations change the text?

--> Contemporary forms of media play a prominent role in the texts we’ve studied, from the collaged materials of Furtado’s film to Smithson’s discussions of books, cinema, and photography to *La haine*’s news reporters and references of American popular culture to the Hole of History in *The America Play*. Using two of these texts, discuss how the media influences the way we perceive ourselves and the rest of the world. How much control does the media have over us and are there ways to combat its influence? Do any of the texts contain strategies for such a combat?

--> You can pursue your own individual project. If you choose to do this, you are to consult with me immediately.

Punctuality Requirements: No papers will be accepted after 2 PM on Monday, February 23rd.

Small Group Tutorials: These sessions will last 1 ½ hours. On the date the first drafts are due, you will bring 4 copies of your essay, 3 for your other group members and 1 for me.

Formatting Requirements: This essay must be at least 5 full pages. The pages should be double-spaced and have one-inch margins. You should use Times New Roman, size 12. The first page should just have your name and the title of your essay. You should have a Works Cited Page in one of the following formats: MLA, Chicago, or APA. Any essay not meeting these formatting requirements will automatically receive an F.

Appendix B: Assignment Example Two

ENGL 1010-006, PAPER #1

The first chapter of *Ways of Seeing* discusses the ways that art is seen and viewed in modern culture. John Berger examines how the trappings of modern society – museums, reproduction, photography, and so on – have created certain ideas in our heads and changed the ways that we view pieces of artwork. He calls this process “mystification.” He performs this examination by taking a number of specific pieces of artwork (i.e., *Regents of the Old Men’s Alms House*, *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist*, *Wheatfield with Crows*) and talking about the specific effects of mystification of them.

We also read two essays by Berger, “The Eaters and the Eaten” and “The Suit and the Photograph.” Though he never uses the term “mystification” in either essay, they would seem to exhibit a similar process of thinking to what Berger did with artwork in *Ways of Seeing*, but with food and suits. Similarly, I would like to see you apply Berger’s ideas about mystification and the effects of modern society to another area. Concepts such as literature, music, movies, education, communication – whatever else you can think of. (Don’t do food unless you have an extremely different take to Berger’s own. You may do clothing so long as you don’t do suits.) How have reproduction and other aspects of modern society changed the way we view these things? Could you say that they have been mystified? Ideally, I think you would focus this paper by selecting one or two specific examples of these areas and giving them a thorough going-over.

In writing your paper, it would be best to start by imagining that you are John Berger. Based on your reading of *Ways of Seeing*, what would he say about the topics under discussion? Once you have examined that, step outwards. Obviously we are applying his concepts to something they weren’t designed to apply to. Does this work? Does this tell us anything about the concepts themselves? Just don’t evaluate what you are applying the concepts to, evaluate the concepts themselves.

Rough Draft Due: January 29th

Small Group Tutorials: February 3rd – 5th

Final Paper Due: February 10th

Page Requirements:

Rough Draft – 5

Final Paper – 6

An ideal paper will both quote sufficiently from John Berger to establish the ideas that you are dealing with and represent substantial thought on your own part. A clear, specific, arguable thesis is also essential. Be sure to include a Works Cited page, even on your draft.

Appendix B: Assignment Example Three

ENG 1010

Essay #1

Please write a 4-6 page essay in which you use the ideas explored in Susan Bordo's "Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body" to analyze a selected commercial advertisement of your choice. Obviously, this assignment requires several steps. To begin, select a commercial advertisement that you find particularly interesting and revealing from a cultural standpoint. You may pluck one from a magazine or newspaper or any other mainstream source. Then, consider the quote used in your previous assignment or perhaps some of the other insightful passages from Bordo's essay: "So the next time you see a Dockers or Haggard ad, think of it not only as advertisement for khakis but also as an advertisement for a certain notion of what it means to be a man" (193). Or: "We live in an empire ruled not by kings or even presidents, but by images" (205).

This should get you going in the right direction. Examine every facet of the selected commercial advertisement via the lens of Bordo's assertions. What does this ad say about what it means to be a man or woman? What does it say about gender roles and appearances in general, our sense of beauty and power? To what extent do these ads define us, our dreams and desires? Do we judge and identify others and are we constantly being judged and identified by how closely we mirror these images of the Ideal Man or Woman? Consider your ad in the history of commercial advertisements? How have these images changed over the years and how have these changes altered our perception of ourselves and others? Look closely at your ad and ask yourself what factors determine these consumer trends – race, class, ethnicity, creed, etc.?

Don't forget that there are many different directions you can run with this. Consider some of the assertions Bordo makes towards the end of her piece as you shape your essay. Is it true that our own culture "is one without 'limits' and seemingly without any fear of hubris. Not only do we expect perfection in the bodies of others (just take a gander at some personal ads), we are constantly encouraged to achieve it ourselves, with the help of science and technology and the products and services they make available to us" (211)? If you agree with this claim, consider some of the implications Bordo discusses in her essay. Do you agree that sex appeal is largely determined by this cultural mantra? Is there any way to escape these images or are we all, to some extent, victimized by them?

Again, do not think of these questions as anything more than navigational guides or prompts. You do not need to limit yourself to them by any means. I encourage independent thought and would rather see you aim for the moon and fall a bit short than settle for what you think I am looking for (believe me, I am not looking for anything; if I knew definitive answers to these questions, or knew of anyone who did, I would not be assigning this paper). Feel free to bring in any of the articles we discussed in class, your own observations or any other reputable source into the discussion. It goes without saying that your papers should be typed, double-spaced, and in font that will not further contribute to the deterioration of my vision or insult my elevated sense of aesthetics.

Appendix B: Assignment Example Four

English 1011

Fourth Essay Assignment

We have been considering the role of place in shaping identity in Alfred Kazin's *The Walker in the City*, and can now apply this dynamic to our discussion of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. In Kazin's memoir he records his thoughts on the subway ride home from Manhattan to Brooklyn: "But why that long ride home at all? Why did they live there and we always in 'Brunzvil'? Why were they there, and we always here? Why was it always them and us, Gentiles and us, alrightniks and us?" (Kazin 99). In Ali's novel, Nazneen remembers her mother telling her that "[i]f God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (Ali 60). Later, Chanu voices a similar distress to Kazin's in describing his "tragedy" (Ali 88) as a Bangladeshi immigrant in London:

I'm taking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. (Ali 88)

Think about what parallels there might be between Kazin's double consciousness as a depression-era Jew in New York and Chanu's and Nazneen's as Muslim Bangladeshis in London. What insight can these texts in relation to each other offer about the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities in assimilating to a new culture?

Write an essay that discusses some interactions between place, identity, gender, and culture in Kazin and Ali and also uses Rebecca Solnit's essay as a frame of reference for your analysis of Nazneen and her friends. What part does the city and modern life play in her process of transformation and transgression? You might also consider how either Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Azar Nafisi's memoir contributes to your discussion of Ali, gender, and culture.

Writing goals:

Continue to work on defining the roles each text will play in your essay. Work on building connections between texts through analyzing the key terms and imagery of one in terms of the other(s). Notice that this assignment asks you to consider Kazin in relation to Ali and then to think about Solnit and/or Satrapi and Nafisi as a way to talk about gender, culture, and place. In the background, you still have a focus in your essay on the common thread of urban life that is represented to some extent in all three texts. This focus can help hold together your discussion of place, identity, gender and culture throughout your essay as a whole.

A five complete page rough draft is due in class on Tuesday, November 18th and a seven complete page final draft is due on Thursday, December 4th in class.

Appendix B: Assignment Example Five

Appropriating Others' Voices: Satire, Parody, & Collage

“Plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in the idea of progress. It clasps the author's sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea.”

- Comte de Lautréamont

KEY TERMS

irony, sarcasm, sardonic, wit, black humor, satire, parody, collage, montage, kitsch, camp, appropriation, adaptation

TEXTS

Futurama “A Big Ball of Garbage”

Monty Python's Flying Circus “Face the Press”

An anthology of Raymond Pettibon illustrations

Mike Kelley, excerpts from *Half a Man* and *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*

Hannah Höch photomontages

John Heartfield photomontages

William S. Burroughs- “Thanksgiving Prayer” & “When Did Stop Wanting to Be President?”

The Minutemen- “Political Song for Michael Jackson to Sing”

Black Flag- “TV Party”

Jonathan Swift- “A Modest Proposal”

Caetano Veloso- “Tropicália” & “Panis et Circencis”

Joaquim Pedro de Andrade- *Macunaíma*

Andy Warhol paintings

IMPORTANT PROJECTS & DEADLINES

Monday, March 30th— You will need to email me a topic that you wish to adapt. Adaptation can take a variety of formats (see the list of key terms above). You won't have to decide how exactly you will adapt a topic yet, but you will need to have a topic established.

Wednesday, April 1st— Information Literacy Session (held in Undergraduate Computer Classrooms on the 1st Floor in Babbidge Library). After the librarian gives you a general introduction, you will spend the rest of the class researching information on the topic you wish to adapt.

Monday, April 6th— We will Joaquim Pedro de Andrade’s *Macunaima* today in Video Theater 2 in Babbidge.

Wednesday, April 8th— Group Presentations . . .tutorial groups will give five minute presentations on one of these topics: Situationist International and . . . Groups will be graded on the quality of information given and how effectively they engaged the class. Visuals and multimedia always help in this regard. Each group will provide me with two sheets: the first will describe how each member contributed to the presentation while the second will list all the sources used and a paragraph analyzing the quality of information of each source (also its potential pitfalls).

Wednesday, April 15th— You will need to provide me with a third essay project proposal and an annotated bibliography of at least three sources.

Monday, April 20th— First drafts of your last essays will be due (the assignment is below). For the first draft, you will need to have your creative adaptation finished as well as five pages of your essay draft.

Monday, April 27th & Wednesday, April 29th— Individual presentations. . .you will spend five minutes describing your creative project to the class and what about your topic made you adapt it. How did you choose your particular method of adaptation? Also, share with the class interesting details about your topic and your adaptation.

Wednesday, April 29th— Final drafts of the third essay will be due.

FINAL EXAM IS TO BE ANNOUNCED

THIRD ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

This essay will have three tasks. At the end, you should have a creative project and a 10 page essay.

Task 1: This is the most interactive and demanding part: adapt a cultural artifact/aspect. This can happen in many ways. Take an event, document, monument, symbol, group, person, system, or tendency of a culture and change it into something else. This can happen using a variety of tools: parody (think Monty Python), satire (Jonathan Swift), homage (honoring by updating and keeping relevant). Just as we have studied adaptations in a variety of media (film, paintings, essays, music), your own pieces can use any media you deem necessary. If it's rewriting a news article, then so be it. If it's creating a song, great. Taking a picture, doing a spoken word piece, making a short YouTube-like video, painting a portrait, etc. The key is that your piece contains a commentary on the entity you're adapting, an insertion of your own voice.

While the works that we've studied have used adaptation to dismantle a cultural artifact/aspect, your project doesn't necessarily need to have that aim.

Task 2: Gather some detailed information about the cultural artifact/aspect that you are adapting. This research should help not only with understanding context; it should give you more to respond to in your actual adaptation (For example, think of how understanding the Manson murders and J. Edgar Hoover's personal history helped Raymond Pettibon comment on American public life). You should have at least four sources with at least two print sources.

Task 3: You have adapted and researched a part of culture. Now what? A discussion about how adaptations transform our relationships with cultural artifacts/aspects might be helpful. First, discuss some preliminary concerns: Why did you choose this cultural artifact/aspect? Why did you adapt it in this particular way?

Next, use your adaptation and at least two of the texts/projects we've covered to discuss if/how adaptations change the way we perceive our role in society. Some points one could consider: Pay attention to certain methods/tendencies that are used in these adaptations. Also, think about the differences between the original's ideology and the adaptation's ideology. What are the intentions of the adapter(s)? Who are the audiences for the adaptations? What tools does the adapter use to communicate his or her ideas? What about the original makes an adaptation so necessary/useful? Also, think about what solutions or lack of solutions are offered and what about the target gets left out of the discussion in each piece. What aspects of the adaptation could lead to change? Where does it fall short?

Administrative Reminders: As always, no late papers will be accepted and any essay not meeting the following formatting requirements will receive an F: at least 10-full pages, double-spaced, 1 inch margins, Times New Roman font, size 12.

Appendix B: Assignment Example Six

"There is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life." --Karl Popper

Paper #4: Looking at Yourself as a Part of History

The Concept

For this eight to fifteen-page paper you will write a piece **loosely modeled** on what Susan Griffin does in "Our Secret," a chapter we will be reading from her book *A Chorus of Stones*. In the chapter Griffin says, "I do not see my life as separate from history." Using the year of her birth as her focal point, Griffin tells a story about her family intermixed with strands of historical, technological, and biological discourse that help readers understand the people and events (primarily related to World War II) that shaped the world she lived in. On a narrower scale, we will attempt to do something similar, mixing our own stories (and/or those of our families) in with information from other discourses to create a miniature picture of a historical moment and our place in it . . .

Brainstorming and Researching

You will be required to use two outside sources for this assignment, and we will discuss the research process—how to conduct a search, where to find resources, how to judge the validity of a source, etc.—together with the help of a university librarian. You will be turning in a bibliography to me of five sources, then select at least two of these to use in your paper.

You might begin with the year of your birth or some other year important to you or your family to initiate ideas for the essay. Ideas for the searches you might conduct can then grow out of this as you discover strands with which to anchor and complement your ideas. We will note the strands Griffin uses, and I will be doing a demonstration on my own project to guide you in this (strands include things like writings about history/historical figures, political events, pop culture, science, geography, inventions, discoveries, etc.). The way the strands typically work is that one is directly related to the topic of the paper (in Griffin's case, Heinrich Himmler and painful secrets), and the other, while connected, acts more as a metaphor (think of how Griffin used the development of the cell and of the missile), but there is flexibility in these choices. Basically, you write your personal story and interweave at least two outside sources connected to your story. Examples of things students have done in the past include a paper that connected the drug king Pablo Escobar to the student's father's story with facts about the landscape of Columbia acting as metaphor; one student wrote on the current economic crisis by paralleling it with her parents' divorce and using an episode from "The Simpsons", which debuted the year of her birth, as an illustration of what happens to families in divorce. Another student wrote about her own experience with domestic abuse, comparing it to factual evidence about the topic, and then intermixed an article about dog fighting that she felt illustrated how abuse feels. Again, there is no one way to do this; I am simply providing examples to show what different directions this project can take.

While having some ideas before you begin researching certainly might facilitate the process, don't be afraid to begin without much of a notion or to change your ideas as you conduct your research. There may be a back and forth accommodation between writing and researching as you go.

You will be required to cite your sources more formally than Griffen does, so it is important that you take notes as you research. We will also discuss MLA citation forms and the Works Cited page in class.

Drafting

There are various ways to begin drafting the essay. For some, it is easiest to begin writing while the research process is still going on; that way, if you discover something in the writing of your part in history that you feel would be nicely supplemented by a particular outside source, you may have time to locate an appropriate source before the paper is due. For others, planning it all out ahead of time and shaping your writing around the sources may be the best strategy.

While this paper does not have a traditional structure or thesis statement, I am asking you to conclude the essay with a paragraph that sums up how the strands work with your part of the story to illustrate a fragment of history.

Evaluation Criteria for the Essay

The paper should do the following:

- provide information both private and public that illuminates something about history (remember the present is history in the making)
- clearly indicate to your reader the strands used to form the essay
- demonstrate that you, not your sources, are controlling the paper
- move clearly between your own writing and the writing of your sources (not to exceed 25%)
- clearly cite sources, giving credit to avoid plagiarism
- use MLA format to present the paper, including in-text citations and a Works Cited page
- provide a closing summary of what is learned by looking at yourself in history
- avoid errors that distract reader's attention

Bring in three copies of your rough draft (minimum of two pages) for credit (15 pts) on the day it is due. It is necessary that you make copies so that you can workshop your paper. No copies—no credit. Final drafts should be in proper MLA form and must be at least eight pages (including Works Cited page) to receive a passing grade. Give your paper an appropriate and original title.

Rough Draft due:

Bibliography due:

Final Draft due:

Paper Value: 200 pts total. Ten points will be subtracted for each class day your final paper is late.

C. Bibliography

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