

## **Assessing Upper-Division Writing Intensive (GWAR-Approved) Courses** Best Practices for Individual and Program-level Assessments

This best practices guide to assessing writing focuses specifically in two areas:

- a) individual instructors assessing the writing of their students in a single course, and
- b) academic programs assessing GWAR-approved courses to prepare for program review.

### **Instructor Level Assessment**

*This section significantly adapted from [University of Nebraska-Lincoln Writing Center](#).*

Best practice has shown that assessment of student writing is most effective when it is not solely a task undertaken by the instructor after writing has been submitted. Instead, it is helpful to think of assessment as a process with criteria introduced to students early on and returned to during and after feedback. As the Executive Committee on College Composition and Communication argues in its position statement on writing assessment, “Best assessment practice is informed by pedagogical and curricular goals, which are in turn formatively affected by the assessment.”

The following are some suggestions throughout the assessment process:

*Be clear and explicit with students about expectations.* For instance, rubrics are useful ways to show how differences in written work are related to performance on certain criteria. Students can come to understand the assignment rubric by collectively applying it to a sample or model text early in the process; they can also learn how to give feedback using this sample. (See the CI Student Writing Guide for [sample student papers](#) in some disciplines; also see the [AACU Written Communication Value Rubric](#) and the [CSUCI GE Rubric for Written Communication](#)). In addition, rubrics can be collaboratively built with students or shared with students as part of feedback prior to their final submission. Students’ understanding of criteria that are assessed on rubrics is increased with explicit instruction and modeling in elements of the genre. For example, see this [guide to writing a literature review](#).

*Provide feedback early in the writing process.* For instance, if an assignment has a draft due before the final submission, students should receive the majority of the instructor’s feedback on the draft. Feedback on drafts often has more impact on revision than feedback on a final product, because students can apply draft feedback immediately.

*Facilitate multiple sources of feedback.* Students should be encouraged to request feedback from peers or tutors, a practice which benefits both the instructor’s time and students’ understandings. Be aware that students may enter class with a wide range of peer feedback experiences, not all of them positive or productive. It is best to provide models and/or explicit discussion of expected

processes and goals for peer feedback before assigning it. For example, MIT provides this useful [6 minute video explaining peer review for students](#).

*Faculty responses to students' work can take various forms, and the form of feedback may depend on the stage of the writing process. For instance, faculty can provide:*

- Verbal feedback to students during class or in office hours meetings;
- Local written feedback which focus on just a few specific moments in the margin of the paper (such as grammar, spelling, unexpected turns in argument);
- Global written feedback which focuses on the overall piece rather than specific moments within it. These comments are often reserved for the end of the paper, such as comments on the piece's organizational structure or focus as well as what the reader learned overall.
- Comments within a rubric. Rubrics often help with clarifying and visualizing how effectively students are meeting the goals of the writing assignment and where their writing can be most improved.

*Do not burden students with excessive feedback.* Too much feedback can be overwhelming. Instead, focus on a few (two to three) issues and offer students concrete strategies for revision, along with a small number of more local issues.

*Remember that the student is in control of the paper.* Suggest open-ended alternatives for the revision and help students assess their own writing and the advice they receive about it. Students have indicated that they greatly appreciated guided questions more than generic praise or critiques such as “well done”; “needs work.” For more on students' attitudes toward feedback, check out the video “[Beyond the Red Ink: Teachers' Comments through Students' Eyes](#).”

### **Academic Program-Level Assessment**

*This section adapted from [PROGRAM-Based Review and Assessment by the University of Massachusetts Amherst](#).*

When deciding what to assess in GEAR-approved courses, programs will need to consider what resources are available to them, particularly time and personnel to conduct the assessment. Utilizing more than one method can provide triangulated data that gives insight into more than one feature of the course. For example, a program might select one direct measure (samplings of student writing) and one indirect measure (asking students to complete an online survey). Randomizing the assessment so that a smaller sample is reviewed can make assessment more manageable given the resources of the program. Taking notes during meetings where data is reviewed and analyzed can provide useful documentation of the process and results.

Below are some suggestions of assessment methods that particularly address writing:

- **Content analysis of randomly sampled student writing:** the program decides what traits of writing are most important as well as when and where the writing will be collected. Samples of students can be assessed over time at several key points (for example, a class from their first semester, the GWAR-approved class, and their Capstone class) or at multiple points; a rubric or list of desirable characteristics is developed and applied;
- **Course-embedded assessment:** Instructors of the GWAR-approved course(s) design a signature assignment prompt, processes and pedagogy; this signature assignment is collected from random samples of students across the courses. Advantages include increased consistency in courses with multiple sections and the opportunity for instructors to collaborate through holistic scoring. Scores and instructor observations on student progress are maintained as assessment evidence;
- **Curriculum analysis:** For programs with a wide range of GWAR options offered, a periodic systematic collection of course syllabi and assignments for all GWAR-approved course options offer the advantage of providing a method for reviewing the connection between learning objectives and course assignments; syllabi with course schedules included can provide insight into whether revision and feedback opportunities are built into the semester. A disadvantage is that the course syllabus is a plan for the semester but may differ from what is enacted in practice;
- **Faculty and student surveys:** While this method has the limitations inherent in self-reported data and typically low response rates, if a program chooses to implement them strategically and selectively, surveys of students and faculty in GWAR-approved courses can provide specific information about attitudes and understandings related to writing. These can also be used selectively in a pre-post methodology to see how these understandings may have changed during the semester. In another variation, programs may invite randomly selected graduating seniors to participate in individual exit interviews as a way to learn more about their experiences;
- **Focus groups:** Programs can gather randomly selected students from GWAR-approved courses in focus groups, which are structured discussions led by a student leader or faculty member to learn more about the understandings and attitudes of students in those courses. While students are gathered to discuss primarily the GWAR-approved course, programs can also make use of the opportunity to ask more general questions about program identity, sequencing, and communication. Notes and a sign-in list from these focus group meetings can be used as assessment evidence in a Program Review report. For a specifics to walk through the process, check out this [Focus Group Guide](#) from the University of Texas at Austin.
- **Institutional data:** Utilizing institutional data sets can provide helpful ways to provide data on the success rates (as measured by GPA) among students who took GWAR-approved courses as they move into senior year courses. A comparison group could be prior year students who did not take the program-designated GWAR-approved course. This data set could be potentially useful to programs in showing a correlation between GWAR and success in a subsequent course, like Capstone, that may draw upon writing skills. However, it may be

difficult to disentangle other variables such as the influence of the UDIGE writing courses on the comparison group;

- ***Culminating assignment:*** This method assesses samples of student work from a program culminating assignment that is designed to make use of the writing skills that have been developed in the GVAR-approved courses. One example of a performance assessment would be to provide faculty with a short rubric prior to program Capstone poster sessions. Rubrics contain one or more items related to writing skills and competence. Faculty complete the rubric on individual student posters and the program reviews and discusses the collected evaluations at a program meeting. The rubrics and notes from the discussion serve as assessment evidence in the Program Review;

- ***Portfolio evaluations:*** Some programs utilize portfolios as a method of demonstrating student learning and accomplishments in targeted areas. Requiring students to select and submit an assignment that demonstrates writing proficiency provides the program with a regular opportunity to assess the GVAR-approved courses. Once portfolios are collected, program faculty conduct a selected content analysis of the GVAR assignments (see first bullet in this list). Programs can also request that students generate a reflective essay as part of the portfolio that discusses specific learning in writing skills and competencies gained in the GVAR-approved course or more broadly throughout the program.

### **Disciplinary Resources**

Assessing Upper Division Writing in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Information and Computer Sciences, and Physical Sciences with a common scoring rubric (from the Campus Writing Coordinator at University of California Irvine)

<http://writing.uci.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2016/04/UDW-report.Summer-2010.pdf>

Brief art history survey to assess students' confidence, motivation, and goals for writing

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/examples/courselevel-bycollege/hss/tools/ReynoldsWritingAssessmentSurvey.pdf>

Association of American Colleges and Universities on signature assignments

<https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/Signature-Assignment-Tool.pdf>

CSU Long Beach Assessment Office on signature assignments and rubrics

<https://www.ced.csulb.edu/offices/assessment-office/creating-rubric>

Assessment Strategies in Science classes

<https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/assessment/strategies.html>

CI Student Writing Guide

<https://www.csuci.edu/writing-ci/guide/>

## **References**

Statement on writing assessment provided by the Conference on College, Composition, and Communication (CCCC) Executive Committee on Assessment (reaffirmed 2014):

<http://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment>

Individual instructor assessments adapted from University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Assessing Student Writing. <https://www.unl.edu/writing/assessing-student-writing>. Updated 2017.

Program level assessments adapted from PROGRAM-Based Review and Assessment: Tools and Techniques for Program Improvement, published by UMass Amherst, Fall 2001.

[https://www.umass.edu/oapa/oapa/publications/online\\_handbooks/program\\_based.pdf](https://www.umass.edu/oapa/oapa/publications/online_handbooks/program_based.pdf)