

## Memo

From: Mark Lencho  
Member, *ad hoc* Committee on Writing Assessment for General Education  
To: Steve Friedman  
Chair, Ad Hoc General Education Writing Assessment Team  
Re: Results from the Spring 2004 Writing Assessment  
Date: January 5, 2005

- **Background**

The assessment of student writing from the fall, 2004 semester represents the fifth round of writing assessment aimed at evaluating the students' mastery of the set of objectives for the General Education Program at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Previous assessments have helped in the development and refinement of the rubric used for the current assessment, according to which we evaluate student writing in terms of the three primary traits "thinking," "voice," and "literacy."

What began in 1999 as the assessment of student writing in the General Education capstone course "World of Ideas" (WOI) was broadened in the spring of 2001 to include the assessment of short, impromptu writing from World of Ideas and Freshman English 101 (101). For the current assessment, the comparative dimension was developed a step further. For the second time, the assessment team evaluated term papers—sustained writing in the range of four to seven pages and incorporating research—from both 101 and 390, mixed together and all addressing similar topics. However, this time the final writing assignment was fully integrated into the instruction that occurred over the course of the semester in both 101 and WOI. Thus, classroom activities during the semester served to support the writers in both courses, and, we hope, helped them "put their best foot forward" on the final writing assignment for the semester.

- **Collection Procedures**

The papers were gathered primarily from the classes of one instructor who taught both 101 and WOI. This same instructor also helped students in both classes develop their papers on the same topic—a person that the student most admired. World of Idea sections are oriented around particular themes (e.g., "The Good Life," "Community," and "The Human Condition") so that the paper topic, in this case, was situated in the context of the individual's relationship to society, a core feature of "The Human Condition." We also collected papers from other instructors who taught either 101 or WOI, but we tried to match 101 and WOI courses on the same theme for the final paper. So, for example, if we had access to papers from a WOI class that focused on the community, we also tried to counter with papers from a 101 class on the community. In the end, we compiled a set of 10 papers—five from 101 and five from WOI—that were mixed together so that it was not apparent whether a particular paper came from 101 or WOI. This represented a great improvement over previous attempts to compare 101 and WOI papers because now, at least on the face, the papers looked similar and were written on similar themes.

- **The Scoring Procedure**

Previously, all papers were scored by the same three individuals who have been scoring papers since the beginning of the assessment—all from the Department of

Languages and Literatures. For the current scoring, three new raters were added—one each from Languages and Literature, History, and Philosophy and Religious Studies. Meetings were held in the spring, 2004, to calibrate raters and revise the rubric. The papers were assigned a randomly generated number; none of the raters was aware of the origin—either 101 or WOI—of any of the papers. In addition to the six faculty raters, a rater from upper-level campus administration was recruited to participate in the scoring process, in the hope that he would become more familiar with both the writing assessment process and the caliber of writing produced by our students.

- **Summary of the Data**

The rubric consists of six possible score where 1=fundamentally deficient, 2=seriously flawed, 3=limited, 4=adequate, 5=strong, and 6=outstanding. For all raters, the average scores across the three criteria, for the two groups of papers were:

<b>101</b>	<b>WOI</b>
Thinking=3.2	Thinking=4.2
Voice=3.5	Voice=4.4
Literacy=3.0	Literacy=4.0

For the three raters who had scored papers since the beginning of the assessment in 1999, the average scores were:

<b>101</b>	<b>WOI</b>
Thinking=2.8	Thinking=3.8
Voice=2.6	Voice=3.4
Literacy=2.8	Literacy=3.5

- **Noteworthy**

Prior to this year, the average scores across criteria for 101 tended to be just below “limited” while those for WOI tended to be just above “limited”. The margin of improvement from 101 (freshman-level) to WOI (junior-level) was relatively small—about .3. These averages improve significantly for the current scoring—especially when at the averages for all raters. If expanding the pool of readers promises to give a more accurate reflection of the institutional culture, we can see that in our case it has “corrected” our assessment in a positive direction: new raters tended to be more lenient than the three original raters. But even when we restrict our attention to the original scoring team, scores still show some improvement. While the averages for the 101 papers are still just below “limited”, the improvement index has increased to the point where the WOI papers are solidly in between “limited” and “adequate”.

- **Next Steps**

The increase in improvement from 101 to WOI might be attributed, in part, to greater efforts made to integrate the assessment into the activities that comprise both courses which may have better prepared student to write stronger final papers compared to the past. Scoring more 101 and WOI papers in 2005 will help us determine if the improvement is sustained. There have been no systematic efforts on campus to improve student writing since the assessment began in 1999. Due, in part, to the information provided by the assessment, an *ad hoc* writing-across-the-curriculum committee has been meeting for about a year now. Further, writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-across-

the-major have been featured topics at LEARN Center workshops, and faculty from outside the campus have been invited to present on these two topics—most notably Terry Beck from UW-La Crosse where there has been a special focus on improving student writing. These efforts, combined with better integrating assessment into the curriculum, appear to be positive steps that will ultimately contribute to improving student writing at UW-Whitewater.