



2009 Capstone Paper Assessment Report
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1. Introduction

Since all students at Northwest College are required to take a capstone course to graduate, in 2006 we started using capstone courses for assessing the Oral Communication and Writing all-college outcomes. In Spring 2007, our first assessment of Writing outcomes was conducted. After some college-wide initiatives aimed at improving student writing, we conducted our second assessment in Spring 2009.

2. Procedure

2.1 Development of the Rubric

For the 2007 capstone study, Rob Koelling and Jennifer Sheridan, with feedback from other Humanities Division members, developed a rubric for assessing capstone papers. The rubric was based on the following all-college outcomes:

1. Students will produce informative, analytical, and critical prose to respond to a particular task or audience.
2. Students will produce writing that conforms to discipline-specific conventions.
3. Students will use appropriate research skills in at least one substantial writing assignment.
4. Students will observe the conventions of standard written English.

These outcomes were the basis for the four categories of assessment on the rubric (Appendix A):

- Analysis (appropriate thesis, organization, level of analysis, etc.): based on outcome 1
- Research (choice and incorporation of sources): based on outcomes 2 and 3
- Documentation (in-text and Works Cited entries): based on outcomes 2 and 3
- Conventions (professional presentation, grammar, mechanics, usage, etc.): based on outcomes 2 and 4.

For each category, a paper could receive a score of 1 (poor), 2 (acceptable), or 3 (good).

The same rubric was used again for the 2009 study so that results from both years could be compared.

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2.2 Assessment Training

Papers were assessed by two teams; each team had a faculty member from the Humanities Division and a faculty member from another division, in this case Physical Life & Health Science and Social Science & Education. In addition, teams were divided so that each had a relatively new faculty member and a more seasoned faculty member.

Three capstone papers from a previous year were used for training and calibration. Each reader was given a copy of each paper, and on May 11, 2009, all four faculty members met to discuss the rubric and to practice applying it to the three sample papers.

2.3 Assessment

The goal of the first capstone assessment project was to collect copies of all capstone papers and to randomly select 50 for assessment. However, our rubric is not easily applicable to all capstone writing projects. Since the rubric is designed to assess academic research papers based on the all-college Writing outcomes, it would be difficult to apply it to portfolios, personal reflective writing, etc. Out of the 29 capstone courses, seven instructors opted out for this reason, and four others did not provide papers for unknown reasons.¹ This left papers from 18 courses for the assessment.

Papers were randomly selected (using a table of random numbers) from each course so that each would be proportionately represented in the sample. For example, SOSOC 2395 papers comprised about 5% of the total number of papers collected; thus they also made up about 5% of the sample chosen. Ultimately, a sample of 54 papers was selected. Each paper was assigned a number. Then the paper was photocopied.

One pair of readers was assigned to read the odd-numbered papers; the other pair read the even-numbered papers.² Each reader filled out one rubric for each paper.

¹ Courses for which instructors opted out were BOTK 2950-80, EDUC 2100-01 and 02, GRAR 2750-01, JOUR 2270-01, and PHTO 2720-01 and 02. We also did not receive papers from AGECE 2020-01, CMAP 2720-01, ENTK 2685-01, and PSYC 2000-01.

² Because two readers were capstone instructors, adjustments were made so that they were not assessing papers written by their own students.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to keep track of scores. We did not expect to see many cases in which a paper would receive one rating of “good” and one rating of “poor” for any of the four categories of the rubric, and this discrepancy occurred in only two cases. Those papers went to a third reader (the English faculty member from the other team of readers). The two ratings that were closest in agreement to each other were used in calculating results.

3. Results

For each capstone paper and each category, the readers’ scores were averaged. Each paper had an overall average score and an average score for each category. We first looked at the overall averages and found that 59% of the papers had an average score between a 2 and a 3. In other words, 59% of the papers had an average score that ranged from “acceptable” to “good.” The remaining 41% of the papers had an average score between 1 and 1.99.

It is more useful, though, to look at the average scores for the individual categories of the rubric:

- 80% received a score between 2 (“acceptable”) and 3 (“good”) in the Analysis category.
- 64% received a score between 2 and 3 for Research.
- 63% received a score between 2 and 3 for Documentation.
- 67% of the papers received the same score for Conventions.

While the readers were required to assign a score for each category to each paper, they had the option of identifying a particular rubric category as “not applicable” (N/A) to individual papers (in such cases, the score of “1” was assigned in that category). We did this when it seemed clear that the assignment given to the students did not (for example) seem to require a research component.

When the scores of N/A were excluded, the numbers were slightly different for all categories:

- 88% received a score between 2 and 3 for Analysis.
- 72% received a score between 2 and 3 for Research.
- 74% received a score between 2 and 3 for Documentation.
- 72% received the same score for Conventions.

See Appendix B for detailed results.

4. Comparison to 2007

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An important purpose of this study was to determine if any improvement had been made in meeting the all-college Writing outcomes since 2007. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the comparison, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

PERCENTAGE OF PAPERS RECEIVING SCORES OF 2.0-3.0

CATEGORY	2007	2009
Analysis	67%	80%
Research	59%	64%
Documentation	41%	63%
Conventions	73%	67%

Table 1

PERCENTAGE OF PAPERS RECEIVING SCORES OF 2.0-3.0 (AFTER REMOVING "N/A" SCORES)

CATEGORY	2007	2009
Analysis	74%	88%
Research	79%	72%
Documentation	53%	74%
Conventions	73%	72%

Table 2

4.1 Analysis Category

As Charts 1 and 2 indicate, while a smaller percentage of papers received a score of 3.0 in 2009 than in 2007, the 2009 scores were, overall, better. In 2007, 67% of all papers received a “good” or “acceptable” score; this increased to 80% in 2009. Similar improvement was indicated when excluding papers for which one or more reader marked the Analysis category as “not applicable” (74% versus 88%).

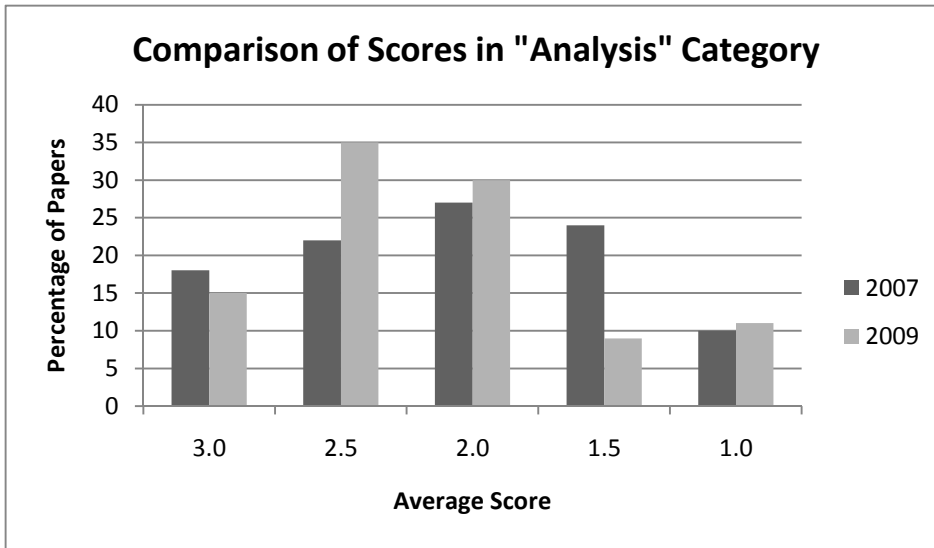


Chart 1

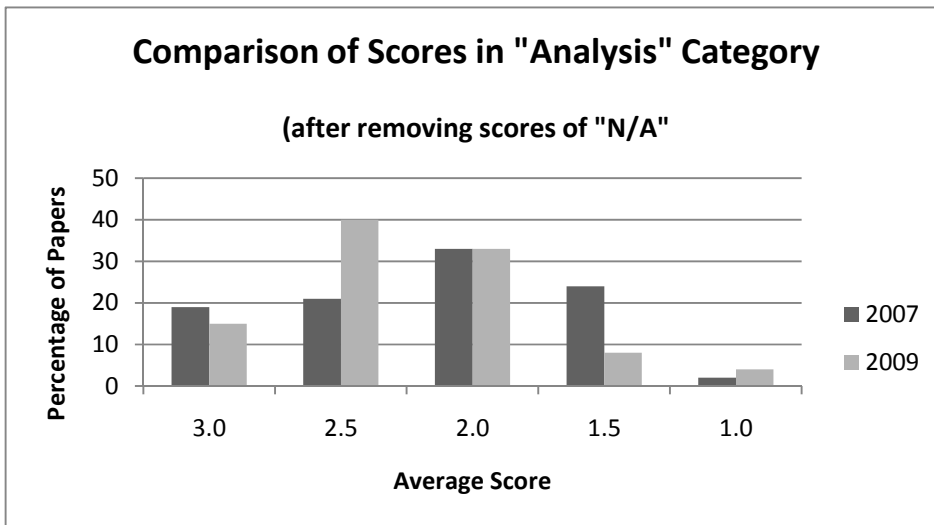


Chart 2

4.2 Research Category

The results for the Research category of the rubric were less definitive. There was a slight improvement in this category when looking at all papers, including those that did not seem to have research as a required component of the assignment given by the capstone instructor. In 2007, 59% of all papers received acceptable or good scores in the Research category; 64% of 2009 papers received the same scores. However, when looking only at papers for which research was clearly part of the assignment, the 2009

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papers fare slightly worse; 79% of such papers received acceptable or good scores in 2007, but this went down to 72% in 2009.

See Charts 3 and 4 for further comparison.

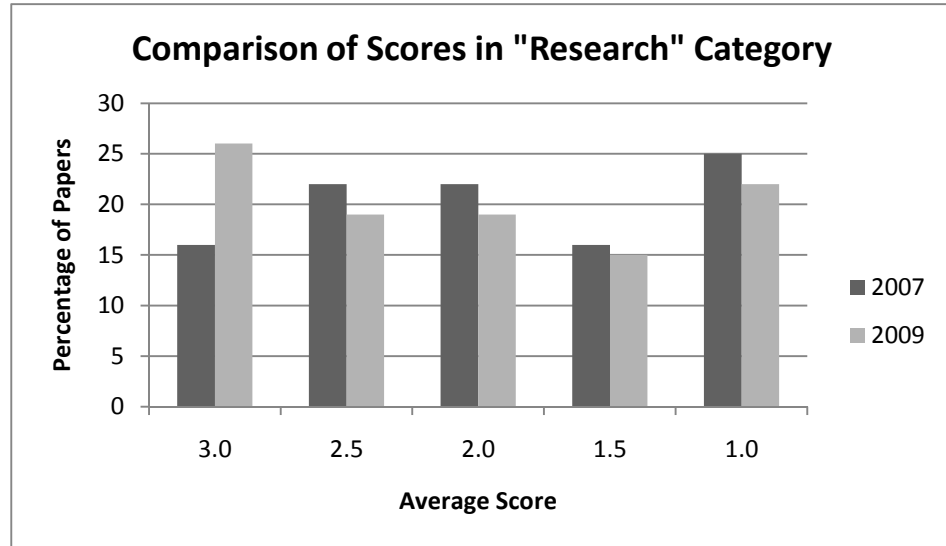


Chart 3

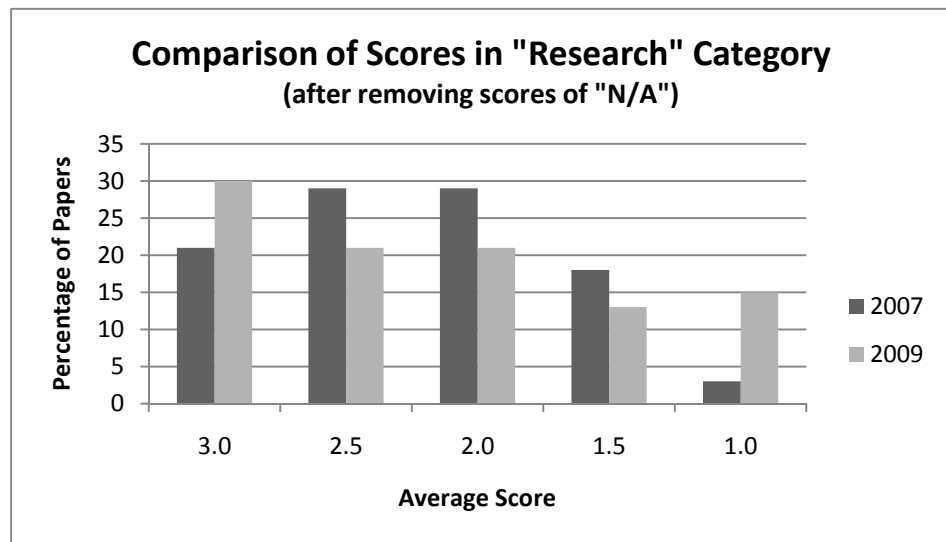


Chart 4

4.3 Documentation Category

In 2007, we identified correct and appropriate documentation of sources as the component of student papers which was most in need of improvement, and in 2009, this was the area in which we

saw the most improvement. In 2007, only 41% of all papers received good or acceptable scores for this category; the number increased to 63% in 2009. When excluding the papers for which readers marked the Documentation category as "N/A," these numbers change to 53% (in 2007) and 74% (in 2009).

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Charts 5 and 6 provide further comparison.

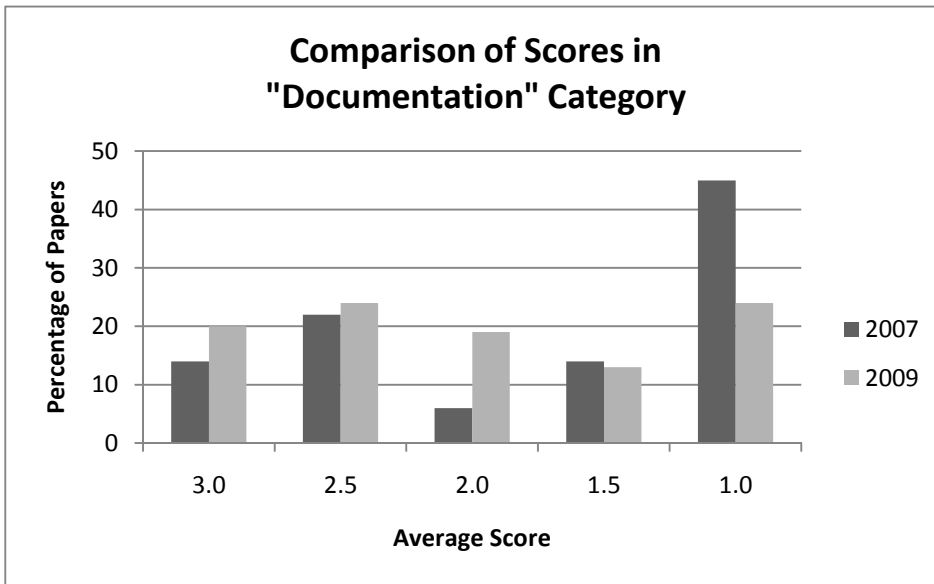


Chart 5

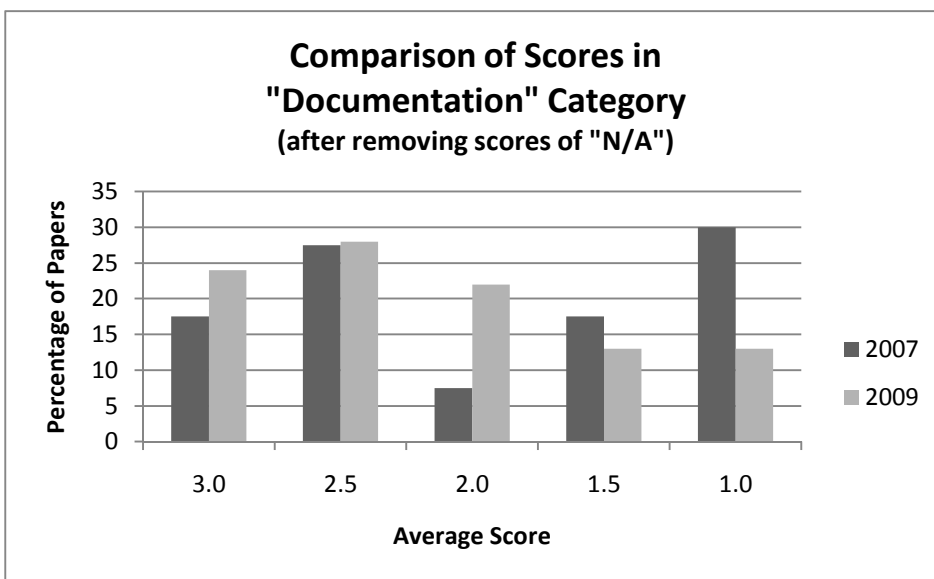


Chart 6

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4.4 Conventions Category

In this category, which includes document design and issues of grammar and mechanics, papers received slightly lower scores in 2009 than in 2007. In 2007, 73% of all papers received good or acceptable scores for Conventions; this went down to 67% in 2009. One reader indicated "N/A" for this category for some papers. When excluding those papers, the 2009 percentage goes up to 72% (again compared to 73% from 2007).

See Charts 7 and 8 for more detailed comparison.

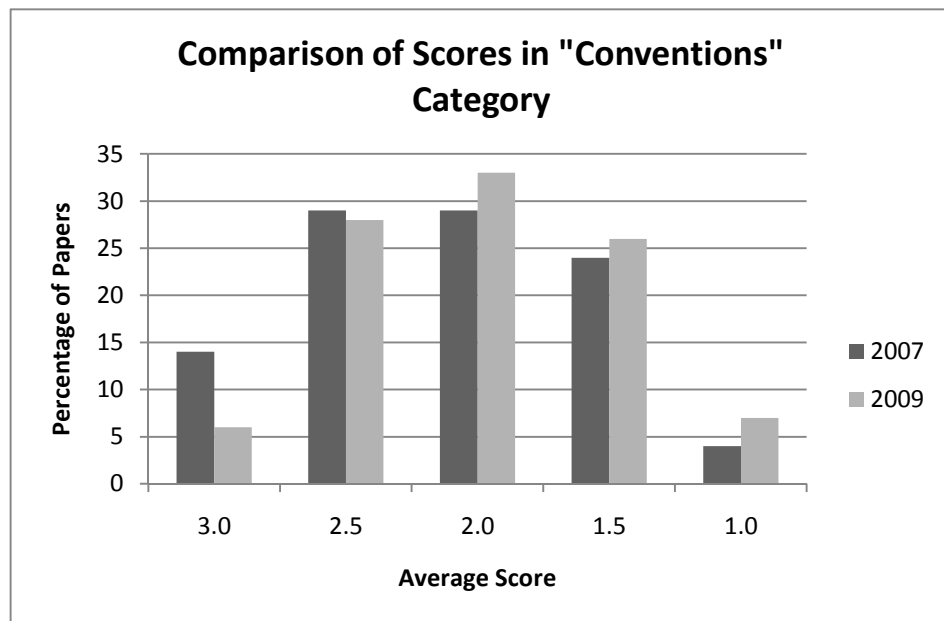


Chart 7

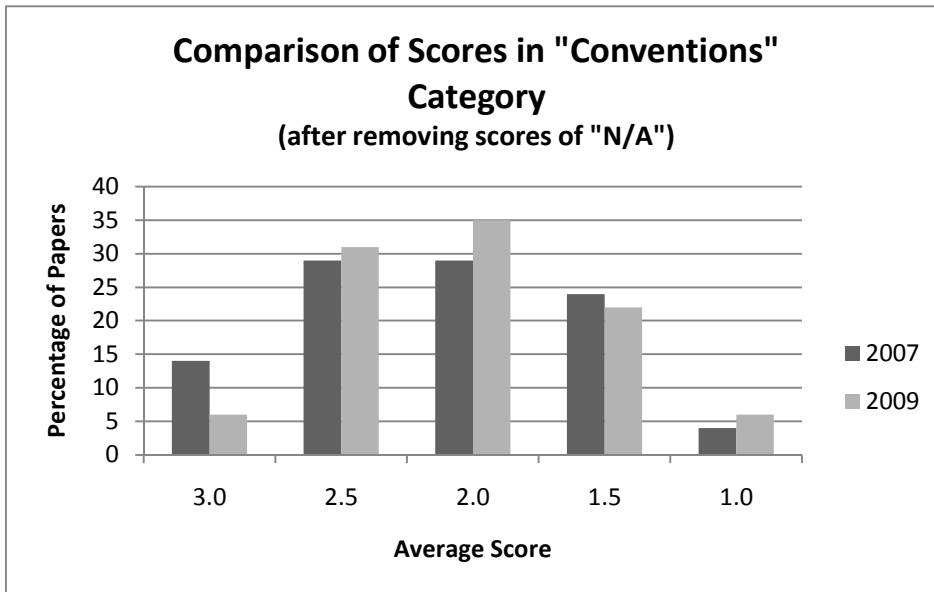


Chart 8

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the majority of students in the capstone courses are producing papers that meet the all-college Writing outcomes. Results also indicate significant overall improvement in organization, analysis, development of ideas, and documentation of sources from 2007 to 2009. The 2009 capstone papers appeared slightly weaker than the 2007 papers in terms of effective and appropriate incorporation of sources, document design, and grammar and mechanics.

There are several possible explanations for the changes between 2007 and 2009. It is possible that the improvements are the direct result of efforts by capstone instructors, library staff, and writing tutors to help students write stronger papers and correctly document sources. Even the lower scores in the research and conventions categories could be explained in this way. If students were encouraged to focus on analysis and documentation, they may have given less attention to other issues. This is a common phenomenon with writing students.

Another explanation for the changes could be the incidental differences between the 2007 and 2009 studies. The two studies did not include papers from the exact same classes. It's also important to keep in mind that we did not have the exact same *number* of papers from each class. For example, in the 2007 study, 17% of the capstone papers assessed were from SOSC 2395; only

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5% of the papers assessed in 2009 were from that same class. We also used different readers for the 2007 and 2009 papers. Even though efforts are made to standardize readers' scores, it is impossible to guarantee that the 2009 readers had the exact same standards as the 2007 readers.

Finally, it is important to note that our rubric was not easily applicable to all of the capstone papers. We received papers from 18 classes, or 62% of the capstone courses taught. Five of those 18 classes produced student writing that our rubric was not entirely applicable to. In other words, one could argue that the results of the assessment only provide useful information for about 13, or 45%, of the 29 capstone courses.

Now that we have used the rubric twice in a row, it can be redesigned, but it seems an impossible task to get the rubric to both reflect the all-college Writing outcomes *and* be applicable to the wide range of writing that students currently produce in capstone courses. Some students write academic research papers, but others compose business plans, engage in personal reflective writing, solve math problems, etc. If we will continue to use the capstone courses for assessment of all-college Writing outcomes, we may want to have serious, college-wide discussion about how writing assignments in those courses reflect the outcomes.