



2007 Capstone Paper Assessment Report
submitted by Jennifer Sheridan
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1. Introduction

Since all students at Northwest College are required to take a capstone course to graduate, it was determined that capstone courses might be an appropriate site for assessing all-college outcomes, particularly the Oral Communication and Writing outcomes. In Spring 2006, Communications Division faculty assessed the oral presentation component of capstone courses for the first time. In Spring 2007, members of the Humanities Division were charged with the task of assessing the written component of the courses.

2. Procedure

2.1 Development of the Rubric

A rubric that could be used to assess papers from all capstone courses was designed by Rob Koelling and Jennifer Sheridan with some preliminary feedback from the rest of the Humanities Division and 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, editing, etc.): based on outcomes 2 and 4.

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

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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 Science and Visual and Performing Arts. In addition, teams were divided so that each had a relatively new faculty member and a more seasoned faculty member. (Coincidentally, this also created teams that each had a male and a female faculty member.)

Because few capstone papers were collected from 2006, we used those papers for training and calibration (rather than for assessment). They were divided into five piles based on the course (Agriculture, Communications, Computer Applications, Music History, and Social Science). The papers in each pile were arranged in alphabetical order by author's last name. The fourth paper from each pile was chosen for assessment training (with one exception: there was only one Computer Applications paper, so that one was used for training). Each assessor was given a copy of each paper.

On May 16, 2007, all four faculty members met to discuss the rubric and to practice applying it to the five sample papers.

2.3 Assessment

The plan was to collect copies of all capstone papers from Spring 2007 and to randomly select 50 of those papers for assessment. However, when we asked capstone instructors for copies of student papers, it quickly became clear that some of the courses required writing projects that would not lend themselves to our assessment rubric. (Since our 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.) Therefore, we advised capstone instructors to notify us if they thought their students' writing projects should not be included in the assessment. Out of the 21 capstone courses taught during the semester, four (ART 2479, BADM 2395, EDUC 2100, and PHTO 2720) were excluded from the assessment process because instructors declined having their papers included. For similar reasons, we excluded GRAR 2750 and JOUR 2270. Finally, we did not receive papers from AGECE 2020 or PSYC 2000. This left papers from 13 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, SOSC 2395 papers comprised about 17% of the total number of papers collected; thus they also made up about 17% of the sample chosen. Ultimately, a sample of 53 papers was chosen. Each paper selected for assessment was assigned a number. Then the paper was photocopied.

One pair of readers was assigned to read the odd-numbered papers (totaling 27); the other pair read the even-numbered papers (totaling 26). Each reader filled out one rubric for each paper.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to keep track of scores. While some discrepancy in ratings was expected, we did not in any case expect to see one rating of “good” and one rating of “poor” for the same paper in any of the four categories of the rubric. However, this discrepancy did occur in the case of 13 papers. 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.

After completing the assessment, all four faculty members met (on July 10, 2007) to discuss the process and results (discussed below).

3. Results

Of the sample of 53 papers selected, two were ultimately excluded from the assessment. One “paper” was actually the assignment rather than the paper written by a student. The second paper was excluded because, even after three readers, there was not enough agreement about the scores the paper should receive. Thus, 51 papers were used in calculating results.

For each capstone paper and each category, the assessors’ scores were averaged. Each paper, then, had an overall average score and an average score for each category. We first looked at the overall averages and found that 45.1% of the papers had an average score between a 2 and a 3. In other words, 45.1% of the papers had an average score that ranged from “acceptable” to “good.” The remaining 54.90% of the papers had an average score between 1 and 1.99.

It seemed more useful, however, to look at the average scores for

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the individual categories of the rubric. In this way, we could identify a specific category (or categories) that might be lowering the overall average scores. Also, while the assessors were required to assign a score for each category to each paper, assessors 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.

The average scores for each category, then, were calculated twice—once including all scores and once excluding the scores of “1” that were also identified as “N/A.” For the first set of scores:

- 72.56% of the papers received a score between 2 (“acceptable”) and 3 (“good”) in the Conventions category.
- 66.67% received a score between 2 and 3 for Analysis.
- 58.83% received a score between 2 and 3 for Research.
- 41.19% received the same score for Documentation.

When the scores of N/A were excluded, the numbers were different for the Analysis, Research, and Documentation categories. In this case:

- 73.81% of papers received a score between 2 (“acceptable”) and 3 (“good”) for Analysis.
- 78.95% received a score between 2 and 3 for Research.
- 52.50% received the same score for Documentation.

See Appendices B and C for detailed results.

4. Conclusion

Overall, analysis of the results indicates that the majority of students in capstone courses are producing papers that are analytical, well-developed, well-researched, and carefully written, edited, and proofread. This means that the majority of papers in capstone courses are meeting the following all-college Writing outcomes:

- Students will produce informative, analytical, and critical prose to respond to a particular task or audience (outcome 1).
- Students will produce writing that conforms to discipline-specific conventions (outcome 2).

- Students will observe the conventions of standard written English (outcome 4).

The largest area of concern is in the Documentation category, since 58.84% of papers scored below “acceptable” in this category (47.5% if we exclude papers receiving an N/A in this category). This category of the rubric reflects the following outcome:

- Students will use appropriate research skills in at least one substantial writing assignment (outcome 3).

For a paper to receive an acceptable or a good score in the Documentation category, the paper needed to indicate material from sources through the use of in-text citations and a Works Cited page (or bibliography). We did not look for any particular style of documentation; we were simply concerned that a style sheet of some kind had been used.

Papers received low scores in the Documentation category for various reasons. Eleven of the 30 papers receiving low scores for Documentation appeared to be written in response to an assignment that didn’t require incorporation and documentation of research. Some papers that appeared to be well-researched lacked in-text citations and/or Works Cited/bibliography pages. Other papers had citations but followed no clear style sheet. In some cases, it was obvious that information had been pulled verbatim from sources without the use of quotation marks, sometimes without citations.

While the assessment procedure did not require assessors to try to identify or track cases of plagiarism, we think the large number of low scores in the Documentation category highlights how serious the issue of plagiarism is. It was obvious that some cases were of unintentional plagiarism resulting from poor documentation; however, we were concerned about papers that lacked documentation entirely or that appeared to contain large chunks of text from sources.

After assessing the papers, we discussed possible explanations for the low Documentation scores. There is some concern that students may be coming to Northwest College with credit for ENGL 1010. This is the course in which students tend to get the most

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practice with research and documentation, but we don't know how much experience students are getting if they take the course elsewhere. Another concern is that many students don't seem to practice their research skills between taking ENGL 1010 and their capstone courses. Indeed, Robert Rumbolz revealed that he spent a large portion of his Music Technology capstone course in "writing remediation." While he feels that his students' papers were significantly stronger because of this, he also had to sacrifice Music Technology course content to teach the writing skills. Finally, we discussed the reality that some students will opt for plagiarized material when the stakes are high (e.g. when taking a class required for graduation) and when the chances of "getting caught" are low. We agreed that an anti-plagiarism program such as Turnitin (www.turnitin.com) would be especially useful in holding students accountable for their writing. Turnitin would work both as a deterrent against plagiarism and as a way of revealing plagiarized content in student papers.

Finally, we discussed the limitations of our assessment. It's important to keep in mind that this was the College's first attempt at assessing capstone papers. Redesigning the rubric and/or assessment process may be necessary.

We should also note that only 13 of the 21 capstone courses (or 62%) were represented in the sample of papers assessed. Of those 13 courses, five (ENTK 2685, EQST 2820, PEPR 2200, MATH 2310, and WELD 2985) 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 eight, or 38%, of the 21 capstone courses.

While it was difficult to apply the rubric to papers that were not traditional academic research papers, it seems an impossible task to re-design the rubric so that it both reflects the all-college Writing outcomes *and* can be applied to the wide range of writing that students currently produce in capstone courses. Some students write academic research papers, but others compose portfolios, 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, then there needs to be serious, college-wide discussion about how writing assignments in those courses reflect the outcomes.