How to Assess and Improve Student Writing
A Guide to Best Practice

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Define "Writing"

▸ Not just grammar/punctuation
▸ Development and expression of ideas in writing
▸ Many genres, media, technologies
▸ Enmeshed with critical thinking, information literacy, problem-solving, etc.

Define "Good Writing"

National statements:
- Focus
- Organization
- Ethics
- Information/Sources
- Multi-media/quantitative
- Sentences/paragraphs
- Grammar/punctuation
- Process

Define, Cont.

- Get EVERYONE involved in defining writing, articulating the goals for "good" writing, and taking responsibility

How can Writing be Assessed?

Direct: Standardized tests
              Student papers
Indirect: Student/alumni reports
              Employer feedback
              Document actions that
                  research links to
                  writing improvement

A Common Misstep in Assessment

"How about if we…"

‣ Compare first–year and final–year writing using a standardized test and/or scoring of papers/portfolios

NOPE, won't work in most situations

Why Won't It Work?

- Purpose
- Validity
- Reliability
- Population
- Link results to your actions?
- Show what to work on?

Okay, then, What CAN We Do?

Use assessment so serve your purposes and shape your story

Your Story
(& Outline for Report to Accreditors)

1. Based on assessment data, we decided to work on writing and built a sense of urgency.
2. We consulted research and best-practice literature.
3. We evaluated our current efforts.
4. We acted.
5. We assessed the results of our actions.

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Assessment Methods

- Reports from departments: What should the institution work on?
- Standardized test
- Student/alumni responses
- Student work evaluated by faculty

Bottom line: MANY faculty must be involved in data collection/analysis

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Example #1

- Writing Program studied 25 students through 4 years: all their writing, interviews

- Report: not enough writing, not intellectually demanding

- Nothing happened.

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Example #2

▸ Faculty committee rubric-scored a sample of writing that used sources across disciplines.

▸ Report: Many students used a limited set of strategies, plagiarized.

▸ Nothing happened.

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Example #3

- CLA Scores and NSSE Scores showed student writing needed work.

- Provost shared data with department chairs.

- Nothing happened.

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Example #4

- Departments were asked to identify learning outcomes that the institution should work on.

- Faculty committee analyzed: writing was the most frequently mentioned.

- Provost appointed task force to make recommendations; provided funding and support.

Assess, Decide, Urgency: Example #5

- Alumni survey: writing most important goal, but least well achieved.

- Results were widely discussed.

- Faculty committee analyzed a sample of student writing—yep, it needed work.

- Institution launched extensive program

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Step 2: Consult Research, Best Practice Literature

Research: Students improve when:
- Lots of writing, language-rich classes
- Believe writing important
- Believe they can improve
- High standards
- Helpful guidance & feedback
- Learn effective processes
- Learn mindfulness/metacognition, transferable skills

Step 2: Consult Literature, cont.: ESOL Students

- Combat stereotypes and discrimination
- Help faculty deal with ESOL needs
- Offer support services
- Value literacies ESOL students possess
- Address cultural expectations about plagiarism and collaboration

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Step 3: Evaluate Current Efforts

Questions: How much writing/revision? Type? Feedback? Attitudes? What helped you? Would help you?

‣ Student/alumni surveys, focus groups, interviews
‣ Syllabi analysis, faculty survey/interviews/focus groups
‣ Data from student support services, e.g. tutoring, library, writing center, ESOL

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Step 4: ACT!

Goal: In many classes, students:

- See that writing is important/necessary
- Safe, supportive, yet rigorous environment; instructor believes students can improve
- Read, read, read, in language-rich environment
- Write frequently, requiring higher-order thinking
  - MORE...

Step 4: ACT! Cont.

Goal: In many classes, students:
- Learn multi-media forms and technologies
- Get helpful guidance, feedback, chances to revise
- Linear mindfulness (metacognition) and principles applicable across contexts
- Have easy access to support services (writing center, ESOL)

Step 4: ACT!

Challenge: Change pedagogy without substantial new resources or faculty

Step 4: ACT!

Research: Faculty CAN and DO change pedagogy. (Walvoord, p. 39)
When they perceive:
‣ Disjuncture between expectation and reality
‣ Administrative and colleague support
‣ Value to themselves
‣ A way to do it

Step 4, cont: Common Actions

‣ Faculty development
‣ "Writing-Intensive" courses
‣ Departmental responsibility
‣ Staff to help in classes
‣ Linked courses
‣ Required demonstration of skills
‣ High-quality first-year composition
‣ Support: writing center, ESOL

Step 4, cont: Traits of Successful Programs

- Strong faculty ownership
- Strong director
- Strong administrative philosophical and financial support, but willingness not to micromanage.
- Reward structure that values teaching

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Step 5: Assess Results of Actions

- MAY change student self-reports on specific aspects, e.g. number of papers and revisions, frequency of feedback, perception of growth as a writer (e.g. the NSSE, augmented with WPA/NSSE questions).

Step 5: Assess Results of Actions

- UNLIKELY to change institution-wide standardized test scores or retention, unless part of wider effort.

- CAN change written products, processes, and attitudes in classes or programs.

- Then aggregate the results.

Step 5: Assess Actions, cont.

Indirect: faculty self-reported adoption of pedagogy that research has indicated will enhance student writing:

▸ We asked faculty who had participated in the faculty development whether they had changed their pedagogy in line with what had been developed in the workshops. X% of them replied that they had done so.

Step 5: Assess Actions, cont.

Indirect: Ask students about their learning and classroom pedagogy

▸ We asked students in the courses where faculty were using workshop-developed strategies:
  ◦ How did the course help your writing?
  ◦ Suggestions for improvement?
▸ Asked same question about the major/program as a whole

Step 5: Assess Actions, cont.

Direct Measures:
- In a year-long seminar, faculty
  Evaluated student writing
  Then made changes in pedagogy
  Evaluated student writing again

- X% of the faculty documented improvement in student writing.

Step 5: Assess Actions, cont.

Direct Measures:
- After changes in the program, we asked outside scorers to blind score a mixed set of before/after senior seminar papers, using the same rubric.
- The average score had improved X%.

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Resource

▸ Walvoord, B.E. *Assessing and Improving Student Writing in College: A Guide for Institutions, General Education, Departments, and Classrooms*. Jossey-Bass, 2014.