Writing Assessment Report 2013

Karla Sanders

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Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report  
AY 2013

Number of Readers: 17  
Number of Portfolios: 233  
Number of Papers: 697

Methodology

In Fall 2005, volunteers were solicited from the faculty and staff. Readers were required to be full-time at Eastern, to have completed a master’s degree or higher, and to teach at least one undergraduate course each year. Twenty-three readers were trained at a 1 ½-day workshop by Dr. Robert O’Brien-Hokanson, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Communication Ability Department at Alverno College. Readers came from all four colleges, the School of Continuing Education, the Center for Academic Support and Achievement, and Booth Library. A second training was held in October 2008 and a third in October 2010; Dr. Karla Sanders delivered these trainings based on the work completed by Dr. O’Brien-Hokanson.

The following 2013 readers were trained at one of these sessions; they represent all four colleges and CASA:

Ronan Bernas, Psychology, COS  
Jay Bickford, Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education, CEPS  
Tim Croy, Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education, CEPS  
Jonelle DePetro, Philosophy, CAH  
Bill Feltt, English, CAH  
Angie Jacobs, Communication Studies, CAH  
Karla Kennedy-Hagan, Family & Consumer Sciences, LCBAS  
Wendy Long, Office of Testing and Evaluation, CASA  
Jeannie Ludlow, English/Women’s Studies, CAH  
James Ochwa-Echel, Africana Studies, CAH  
Betsy Pudliner, Family & Consumer Sciences, LCBAS  
David Richardson, Art, CAH  
Jeff Snell, Management, LCBAS  
Gordon Tucker, Biological Sciences, COS  
Traci Worby, Kinesiology & Sports Studies, CEPS  
Diana Wyatt, School of Technology, LCBAS  
Zhiqing Yan, Chemistry, COS

Readers were urged to look at writing patterns across the portfolios rather than focusing on each individual document submitted to the portfolios. The reading guide asks readers to provide an assessment of writing ability for complete portfolios across seven aspects of writing: focus/purpose, organization, development, audience, style, mechanics, and use of sources. Readers were also asked to assess each portfolio overall.

A sample of 10% of the completed portfolios are read each year; readers were given a month to read their portfolios, were given access to a secure web site and were assigned to read 14 portfolios that were chosen at random from the completed portfolios. After reading their set of portfolios, readers were asked to complete a reader’s observation sheet and to attend one of three focus groups held at the end of February to discuss student writing as displayed in the portfolios.

The qualitative data that follow represent the discussions at the focus groups as well as information taken from the readers’ guides and observation sheets; all information has been collated and summarized by the
Executive Director of the Center for Academic Support and Assessment. A draft of this report was disseminated via email for readers’ comments. Changes to the report were made based on those comments. The percentages given for each assessment of the various areas of writing are taken from a compilation of scores given by the readers for each portfolio, not each document.

The following data are divided into the categories assessed by the readers. Each section gives the readers’ impressions of the portfolios as a whole and the final section offers potential uses for the data in terms of improving the curriculum/pedagogy. Where appropriate, readers’ written and verbal comments have been quoted to support the general conclusions that have been drawn. Percentages refer to the percentage of portfolios that were rated in the categories described.

**Portfolios Overall**

| Strong Portfolios:  | 24% |
| Adequate Portfolios: | 59% |
| Weak Portfolios:     | 17% |

This year broke the increase we had experienced for the past two years in the number of strong portfolios overall with a 7% drop from AY12. This is the lowest percentage of strong portfolios that the readers have reported since AY10 and is the second lowest number since we began the portfolio reading process. Overall, the portfolios displayed adequate writing skills but lacked originality of ideas and creative expression.

Readers’ comments as well as their quantitative ratings indicate that student writing at Eastern is overwhelmingly adequate.

Long-time readers indicated that the changes to EWP requirements made in 2008 have had positive results for the enthusiasm shown by writers for their subjects. “I tended to notice that students generally had more enthusiasm for what they were writing as a general trend than I’ve seen in any previous years. They really seemed to be owning what they were writing. Even in senior seminar submissions, they seemed more interested in what they were writing.” Another reader concurred, “Requiring a first year and a senior seminar paper, they weren’t writing about anything they cared about. When you read papers in the student’s major or minor, you get a little more commitment and interest to it. I think that is a fair thing to evaluate their writing on, something they care about.” They also noted the inclusion of the writing assignment description was helpful to their evaluation process.

Readers stated that traditional papers with a beginning, supporting analysis, and conclusions were in the minority in favor of more reflections and paraphrasing of books, journal articles, or movies. They also commented on length of papers and found that the better papers tended to be the longer ones. Shorter papers were more likely to have issues with introductions and conclusions, logical structure, and a clear-cut thesis. “The shorter pieces might encourage the students not to set things up. Whereas the longer papers, they had to start thinking about the structure and how to present the thesis or argument. If there were longer papers submitted, they would have to deal with more content, and they would have to think about the structure more.” Many readers agreed with this statement, and one added, “I have to agree with that about the development of ideas because they aren’t bringing in all the facts. A lot of papers that I had were three to four pages. Just fact, fact, fact, and one sentence conclusion, and that’s it. I think it hindered some of their abilities to hit focus, critical thinking, and the development of ideas.” One reader said that he had no papers longer than eight pages and the average was three to four pages.

Lack of development and a dearth of critical thinking were the biggest issues readers discussed. One reader said she was attending a faculty development workshop on incorporating critical thinking into writing assignments. “I thought I built critical thinking into my assignments, but I am finding out that my students are incapable of doing it. I want to know what I can do better to lead them up to that point to be able to do it. But, I don’t know the answer to that yet.” Readers indicated that “students are terrified to
think or oppose someone who is supposed to be an expert. That is the one thing our students do. Say, well, this particular author says this, and how do we feel about that? They day, I don’t know, they’ve done the research, and I suppose they’re right. They don’t want to question. They aren’t going to challenge it, and I think that is where we struggle the most in our classes.” Readers also indicated that students’ seemed to favor black and white thinking with no grey areas. “I don’t see a lot of acknowledgement that certain issues are unresolved.”

One reader suggested that many papers felt like “the students were showing proof of reading” rather than worrying about a reader being able to track down a source or understand the writer’s viewpoint. Another reader summed up his collection of portfolios in this way, “In previous years of reviewing, I have found more than a few ‘strong’ portfolios. This time, most fell into the ‘adequate’ category, often bordering on weak. Very little critical analysis, with supporting arguments, was found. Grammar and punctuation errors were many. The portfolios I read often had examples of stating one’s opinion as if it were fact, and evidence of trying to sound scholarly without supporting analysis.”

The sections that follow discuss the strengths and weaknesses readers found in portfolios by writing trait followed by a section on ways to improve writing through pedagogy or curriculum changes.

**Focus/Purpose**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus/Purpose</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong</strong> (Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout):</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adequate</strong> (Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions):</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weak</strong> (Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose):</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Poor</strong> (Very little or no evidence of focus):</td>
<td>2%</td>
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The percentage of portfolios rated as strong for maintaining a focus and establishing purpose fell by 8% this year and thus increased the percentage deemed adequate by 11%. While fewer portfolios were strong in this area, focus remains one of the stronger aspects to student writing at EIU based on the portfolio samples. The lowest percentage of portfolios assessed as “strong” was in AY08 at 23% with the highest last year at 32%.

Readers indited that longer papers seemed better at creating a sense of purpose and sticking to their focus. “This year it seemed like the short papers never found the focus. They were all over the place the whole time. The longer papers and the ones that had headings were more focused and organized. They stayed on target the whole time.” Most readers agreed with this statement, but found that the goal or purpose was a bit large or nebulous oftentimes. “I wanted to know what the overall goal was here. What were they attempting to do? I felt they were just starting big on a topic. They were staying on topic, but I could never figure out what the goal was.” Several readers agreed with this comment and indicated that the assignment and the purpose of the writing was hard to discern from what the students had written. Readers said that many papers began in media res and never let the audience in on what was trying to be accomplished.
Organization

**Strong** (Consistent use of structure in ways that enhance presentation of ideas/information): 22%

**Adequate** (Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure): 62%

**Weak** (Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization): 15%

**Poor** (Very little or no sense of structure or organization): 1%

Last year’s 25% of portfolios rated as “strong” for organization was the highest percentage received, so the 3% drop for this year was not unexpected. Two-thirds of the portfolios are routinely ranked as “adequate” for organization. Readers report that students rarely write intentionally with regards to organization. If one were to cut paragraphs apart, it would be impossible to re-assemble the papers again in the original order based on logical progression or transitions. “There was no cohesion between different points. To get into that transition, you have to summarize, define, and demonstrate, but there would be no lead-in to the next point. That is where there is no transition to the depth.”

“The batch that I read were pretty much adequate to weak in organization. What I wanted to see was more flow from paragraph to paragraph, and setting up the purpose in the first paragraph at the beginning was lacking across the board.” Readers also indicated that conclusions were the weakest element to organization followed by a lack of thesis statements and topics sentences. “Conclusions suffered drastically. They might write a sentence or two, but they don’t really summarize anything they were attempting to do.”

Readers indicated that many papers failed to have a logical sequence with ideas deliberately following upon each other. “They were all separate, independent paragraphs that didn’t really work together for a purpose or a conclusion.” Students also failed to use ideas or stories to their best advantage. “I had some that started with a great story and then moved into the actual topic of the paper and never came back to the story. Why did you tell me about this?”

Organizational tools like headings were helpful for many readers. “When students used headings, their papers were substantially more developed; the focus was center stage throughout the writing. Even in these papers, there were areas that sometimes lost focus due to length and quality; however, I found that most of the lack of focus was in papers that read as information, small assignments. Development also suffered in these smaller, more informal assignments.
Development

**Strong** (Ideas consistently developed in depth and supported with rich and relevant details): 21%

**Adequate** (Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details): 47%

**Weak** (Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details): 30%

**Poor** (Very little or no development of ideas or use of supporting evidence): 2%

Development remains one of the weakest traits in student writing as displayed by the portfolios. This year’s readings dropped 3% in the strong category, but perhaps more importantly, the portfolios rated as weak rose by 5% to 30%. Adding the “weak” and “poor” portfolio ratings together, we see that a third of the portfolios are below adequate in development of ideas and arguments. These numbers indicate the issues with critical thinking skills that have been raised in previous readings and through other assessment endeavors.

Readers indicated that developing an argument and using details and supporting evidence was a weak area throughout the portfolios. “I am seeing this with my own students and it baffles me. Because when they write papers I think you’re in college and you should be using supporting evidence automatically. Every time we do a paper, I am asked, ‘Do we need to cite sources?’ ‘Yes!’ I am seeing it in the portfolios, too. Lack of evidence and if they cite something, it isn’t done well.”

Several readers also discussed the shortness of many submissions was an issue with development. “After three or four pages, they had so many facts they wanted to give you they didn’t have time to develop it.” Readers concurred and another added, “Development is going to suffer if there isn’t any length. I know some people disagree with that, but I think if you don’t have a sufficiently long paper, you aren’t going to develop those ideas. Yes, there is evidence in outside sources, but they are just recording what someone else said, but there’s no criticism, no support, defense, or evaluation. Those kinds of things are really missing. The authors of these papers were really interested in these topics and I would have liked to have read more about what they thought and were writing about, but it was more reportive.” Another reader noted that he could not help but think of Bloom’s taxonomy as he read, and he found some synthesis, but “precious little evaluation” just a lot of summarization.

Readers also noticed that students had difficulty creating their own arguments and justifying a stand on a controversy. Such portfolios lacked details and the craft of argumentation. “It was clearer in the longer pieces. In the self-reflection papers or the opinion papers, there would be no supporting evidence or examples, just their opinions in general would be used to support their own ideas. It would be nice to see a bit more examples.”
Audience

**Strong** (Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone): 30%

**Adequate** (Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience): 55%

**Weak** (Little or no awareness of audience): 15%

**Poor** (No sense of writing for an audience): 3%

With each reading, faculty have indicated that it is often difficult to discern any reader other than the instructor for the course unless the genre of the paper demanded that an audience be identified, such as in a letter or report for a company. Twenty-three percent of portfolios were assessed as “strong” in audience awareness, which was a 7% drop from the previous year, while the percentage rated as “weak” grew by 3% to 18%.

“I say generally no audience beyond the professor. ‘You want me to say this about this topic, so I will say this for you, and here it is.’ I don’t think they go beyond that.” Some faculty indicated that students may be afraid to risk their grades by stepping outside the box, “I wonder if they even think they should? I wonder if it even occurs to them to go beyond. ‘You want me to say this? I’ve said this.’ I don’t know if they even feel they need to go beyond that to show you. Once in a while you get a paper and say, ‘Wow, this is really good,’ but most of them are very middle of the road.”

Readers suggested that the strongest writers displayed a sense of writing for a reader beyond the professor and for a reason beyond a class assignment, but these documents were rare in the portfolios.

**Style**

**Strong** (Sophisticated use of language (sentence structure, word choice) that enhances presentation of ideas/information): 15%

**Adequate** (Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information): 60%

**Weak** (Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic): 24%

**Poor** (Use of language that is highly inconsistent or indeterminate): 1%
In the eight years of reading completed portfolios, few portfolios are ever rated “strong” in regards to style. The highest score was 20% in AY07, and this year the percentage dropped by 4% from the previous year to 15%. Nearly two-thirds are ranked as “adequate” with 24% assess as “weak,” which is the highest percentage over the course of the portfolio readings. Readers describe the majority of papers as using simple sentence construction, few transitional words, and unsophisticated, simplistic diction. Students’ styles do not display a strong sense of vocabulary nor do they display strong revision skills.

Issues with vocabulary were common complaints among the readers in terms of writing style. Faculty readers were not sure if this issue was a result of not proofreading and editing or a genuine lack of diction. “It seemed like they were trying to write more scholarly, but they weren’t using the right words or context to understand what they were saying.” Over-use of clichés and repetition were other style errors noted.

A lack of the student’s own voice was also a weakness noted by a number of readers. Some faculty noted that students following a style particular to a certain discipline were more successful than students not following a particular style. For example, readers noted that papers employing the scientific method often did well.

Readers doubted whether students’ writing skills were at the level to make stylistics choices such as intentionally using first or third person, the formality of the tone, and so forth. “I wonder if they are exposed to styles of writing through courses. We need to emphasize that you can frame your style in different ways: a scientific style, an informational one. Do we teach that for a variety of different styles? Some started out conversational and then got heavy into research, which isn’t appropriate.”

Mechanics

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Readers indicated that most portfolios contained mechanical errors, but the majority of papers were not incomprehensible due to these errors. The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” in mechanics rose from 23% in 2012 to 28% in 2013, and the percentage described as “adequate” dropped by 6%. All readers felt that students needed to do a better job at proofreading and revising rather than simply relying on spellcheck. Many readers felt that the submissions were first drafts and had not been significantly revised.

The majority of papers and portfolios possessed mechanical errors but only 17% negatively affected the students’ abilities to communicate. Readers noted that punctuation, especially when to use a comma, still needs work in many papers. Readers felt that students were not revising their papers and trying to correct these errors; they said that most papers read like first drafts. Conjunctions were also targeted as being incorrect in many papers, and ending sentences with a preposition was another common mistake.
“I don’t read a lot of papers where I don’t know what that sentence means. For the most part, it [use of mechanics] is pretty good. There are problems, but for the most part, they can write. They’re not developing their own thinking, and I don’t see them critiquing anything. It looks like they are not being asked to think.”

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<th>Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Mechanics</th>
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<td>AY08</td>
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<td>Strong</td>
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<td>Adequate</td>
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**Sources**

**Strong** (Ability to integrate ideas/information from sources into own writing in meaningful and appropriate ways): 35%

**Adequate** (Some effective integration of ideas/information from source): 52%

**Weak** (Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information): 13%

Of the 233 portfolios read, 209 portfolios (90%) included at least one paper incorporating outside sources compared to 94% from the previous year. The portfolios assessed as strong decreased by 4% from 2012 and the weak portfolios related to sources increased by 7%.

Issues relating to sources included an inconsistency with in-text citations and missing works cited or bibliography pages. “A lot of them had references cited at the end, but there was nothing in the paper. I knew when something was an actual quote from something, but not from where it came. I don’t know if that is the teacher or what they want for the assignment, but we have to have consistency because when they get a job, they will have to argue their points. You have to take documentation to back up your argument and that was missing from a lot of papers. I don’t know if they understand in text citations versus creating a bibliography.”

Another reader commented that students have difficulty incorporating quotes or others’ ideas smoothly into their own prose, “There is a tendency to list sources or quotes and cut and paste from the source instead of paraphrasing.” Students also tended to agree with all external sources rather than propounding their own opinion, “They have to agree with everything. You don’t have to agree with it. Develop your backbone.” Introducing quotes and explaining their relevancy was a weakness. Students have the tendency to let quotes speak for themselves, but do not place them in context or provide an introduction to whom is being quoted. “I want to prove X, so here’s a quote on X, which is an improvement from what I’ve seen in the previous years. But, they don’t necessarily set it up, and they almost never explain the quote. They let the quote do their work as writers. I know sometimes it’s better to let a fact stand without re-thinking it and explaining it, but in the humanities, we always try to do that. I find even in our humanities papers, they aren’t doing that.”

Some readers noted that students do not appear knowledgeable about the validity of sources and do not value primary sources over secondary or tertiary ones. One reader gave the following example, a student cited a blog where the blogger was talking about ideas she had read in the New York Times and other news outlets, which were reporting on studies. The student did not try to find the original journal article
to cite the original source. Students rely on searching the internet for sources rather than using the library and finding journal articles and scholarly texts.

Using Data to Develop Curriculum & Improve Pedagogy

After reading all of their portfolios, readers were asked to indicate ways in which the information gleaned from the readings could be used to develop curriculum and/or improve pedagogy. Many readers are quoted in this section to preserve the intent of their suggestions. The predominant theme involved encouraging faculty to make changes in writing requirements/assignments and course curriculum through sharing EWP data from the readers. Another theme that appeared was the importance of being intentional about teaching writing and critical thinking across the curriculum and as part of the major.

Readers indicated that faculty may need to be more directive in writing assignments and perhaps use models to show good writing with solid development and critical thinking. “The deficiencies in development and style can be remedied by exposing the students to good models of writing. This can be achieved by assigning more reading in the curriculum. Likewise, argumentative writing is a function of familiarity with and knowledge of the topic. When students are not familiar with a topic (thus lacking knowledge of content of a specific domain), they are unable to develop a thesis. Likewise, when students do not know how to think or do not know what is required in thinking (e.g., that one must justify one’s opinions), they are unable to achieve the same. Students should be exposed to in-depth discussion of issues.” Another reader, also from the sciences, indicated that he shows his students a good paper and talks about what makes it a good example, and then shows a mediocre one and discusses “how it is different from the good term paper. I think we have been content driven, and now we have to have some of the grade being about the expression and writing context as well.”

Another reader suggested using peer reviews as part of the writing assignment assessment to help students with issues of style and mechanics.

Readers thought that faculty could also work with students on getting back to the fundamentals of writing. “I’d focus on the fundamentals of framing your writing: a clear introduction, clear transitions, supporting sources for your opinions. Only a few portfolios evidenced finesse with varying sentence structures, embedding more information into sentences and making them flow well.” Another faculty member concurred, and added, “We need to convince professors and instructors that revision = more than proofreading, that students can be taught to use sources correctly, and that audience does not = ‘me the Professor.’ These will help. It would also probably help to have workshops on creating good writing assignments. So many of the essays seemed to be written to answer a single question, to prove knowledge or understanding to a professor who wanted to make sure students were doing work. In other words, the assignments themselves may not have a clear sense of purpose or audience, which would make it unlikely that the students’ work would.”

In addition to the weaknesses discussed concerning specific writing traits, some readers felt that the writing in the portfolios showed little improvement, and little learning, over the course of a student’s college career. “There was no evidence of learning. It was all this is what I thought the first day I walked
into class and this is what I think now, and I don’t see any evidence that there was any kind of synthesizing of what you’re saying. But, it may be just the assignments. That’s why I don’t know if I was more upset with the student or the assignment.”

Along with being more intentional with good models of papers and specific assignments, several faculty suggested that more faculty development on aiding professors and instructors to teach writing and critical thinking and to develop assignments to foster such skills would be helpful. One reader noted that the Writing Center was hiring a new GA specifically to work with faculty on writing assignments, how to do revision, developing rubrics for evaluations, and so forth. “We can critique output,” he noted, “but what are we going to do with input?” One professor explained that her department was working on input also, and at the suggestion of a student they had devised a departmental journal where students revise papers written for class and submit to the journal in hopes of winning a $50 prize. They have added scholarships to help support this effort. “Those kinds of things will help students participate in activities that will improve their critical thinking, but you need the resources for them.” Another faculty member indicated that his department was doing something similar for undergraduates as well as graduate students with an on-line departmental journal, but it was hard to keep momentum going.

Some readers thought we should require students to submit at least one longer paper to the EWP. “I think we should require at least one 10-15 page paper for the EWP portfolio. It would be research or persuasive. It would have to address an opponent’s point of view or include substantive research of some other kind. But, the length would require some kind of development of thought.”

Overall, the portfolio readers displayed great consensus of thought concerning the strengths and weaknesses displayed across the portfolios; this is especially remarkable considering that they all read different portfolios and come from vastly different disciplines across the University. Readers stated that we cannot expect student writing and critical thinking to improve if we are not more intentional about teaching these skills. Ways to do this differed, but the need to re-focus our pedagogy on basic skills was universally acclaimed.