



Writing Forum

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What are the criteria for papers at Grinnell?

- developed and revised by faculty writing seminar 1997-99; approved by faculty 2000.

I. Structural Coherence

A. Central Claim: Can the reader identify in this piece of writing a central claim (e.g. philosophical assertion, research finding, textual interpretation, thesis, contention) which is supportable as opposed to declaration of established fact or of unassailable personal belief? If non-analytical, does the piece have a focus or central idea that guides its structure?

B. Unity: Does the piece keep its focus, as opposed to straying into digression or bifurcating into divergent paths?

C. Introduction and Conclusion: Does the opening passage announce the principal question to be addressed, while at the same time establishing the rhetorical mode and diction (speaker's voice addressing an implied audience)? Does the closing passage leave the reader with a clear sense of the central claim? As appropriate, does it suggest implications of this claim?

D. Development: Does every part stand in some definable relation to the central claim or structuring idea? Do the sentences and paragraphs in this piece of writing form an effective sequence, connected and arranged so that each part seems reasonably to follow from what preceded it?

II. Conventions

A: Mechanics: Does the piece demonstrate competence in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and standard idioms of written English? Does the manuscript's appearance conform to standard guidelines?

B. Citations/Graphics: If present, do the quotations, footnotes, and non-narrative features (figures, equations, tables, etc.) appear in conventional format? Does this material effectively support the central claim?

C. Academic Discipline: As appropriate, does this piece of writing conform to the conventions of professional writing within a specific academic discipline?

III. Intellectual Engagement

Finally, does this piece reveal a writer who is curious and involved – someone who reflects and questions? Does this writer acknowledge implications and internal tensions, rather than oversimplifying the subject or covering the assignment in a perfunctory manner? Behind this piece of writing, can one perceive a mind attentive to subtleties of language and to the complexity of the material under analysis?

The History of Writing Assessment at Grinnell

by Claire Hassett-Moisan & Helyn Wohlwend

According to composition theorist Kathleen Blake Yancey, over the last fifty years academics have assessed writing in three main ways. In the nineteen fifties and sixties, writing assessment consisted of administering objective tests that indirectly measured writing abilities by measuring students' mastery of grammar and usage. The second phase, in the seventies and eighties, tried to measure writing more directly. Borrowing from the Advanced Placement Program, assessors asked students to write essays responding to directive prompts and scored them with standardized methods. Today, experts see such tests as artificial and

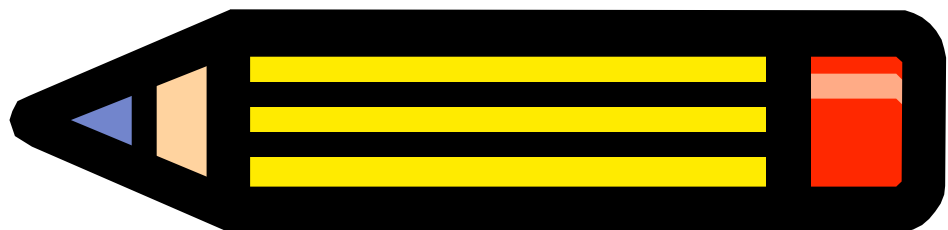
inadequate to the objective of measuring progress over time. Current writing assessment tends to take a more holistic approach; it either assesses individual writers using multiple writing samples from a variety of rhetorical modes, or it performs a more programmatic assessment.

The history of writing assessment at Grinnell is informed by the three phases identified by Yancey, but the college's implementation of writing assessment is uniquely Grinnellian. In 1997, when asked by the NCA to perform a college-wide self-evaluation of teaching and learning, the Executive Council decided to focus on student writing, the only discipline universal in the Grinnell curriculum and a

skill the college emphasizes in its mission statement.

"The College aims to graduate women and men who can think clearly, who can speak and write persuasively and even eloquently..."

In the summer of 1997, the Writing Advisory Committee launched the first college-wide assessment of student writing. It asked faculty enrolled in a summer writing seminar to generate a set of criteria with which to evaluate writing and then use these criteria to assess and compare a tutorial paper and a senior paper of comparable length and scope (*see sidebar*). Thus, this first assessment was a sort of



Grinnell College Writing Lab

Phone: 641-269-3117

Email: writingl@grinnell.edu

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hybrid of Yancey's three phases. It not only sought to measure discrete elements of writing, albeit holistically and within the context of an authentic writing assignment, but also sought to measure progress over four years; that is, it combined an individualistic and a programmatic approach. One of the things faculty learned during this summer seminar was that comparing two solitary, decontextualized papers was almost as artificial as the AP test. They wanted more information about the students in order to make a more comprehensive assessment of their progress, and so in following summer seminars, while the faculty continued to compare a tutorial and senior paper, they also took into account the tutorial evaluation, grades from the students' four years, and an interview in which the student evaluated the learning process. In short, assessors created a sort of bare-bones portfolio by which to evaluate students. This portfolio grew in 2000 and 2001 to include a self-evaluative component, as seniors were asked to rewrite and comment upon their tutorial paper.

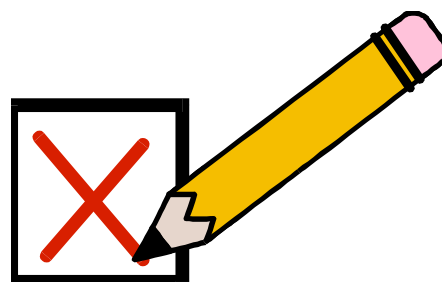
While there was a certain attraction at Grinnell to the idea of including students in the assessment process, especially as our peer institution Carleton was moving to establish a campus-wide portfolio, and while having supplementary information undoubtedly helped give faculty a more complete picture of an individual student's writing, neither of these trends was helping to achieve the objectives of Grinnell's assessment program: to determine how much progress large

numbers of our students make in their four years here. In order to evaluate this progress effectively, the Writing Advisory committee decided in 2002 to analyze writing from a larger sample of students at several points in their academic career. The current writing assessment project will ask tutorial professors to use a short on-line form based on the 1997 criteria to evaluate their students' writing early in the freshman year (*see sidebar*). Students will be evaluated a second time in a randomly-selected writing-intensive course in their fourth semester and then again in their seventh or eighth. The Writing Advisory Committee is well aware that, as in past assessment programs, professors will read and respond to student writing in unique ways; however, the size of the student sample should help even out these variations. And even though the size of the sample will undoubtedly shrink in the fourth and eighth semesters, the current assessment project will provide the campus with a quantifiable measure of progress. The information culled from this assessment will not only be used to achieve NCA accreditation; the Writing Advisory Committee will also share the results with the faculty and use these results as a springboard for campus-wide discussions on how we teach writing at Grinnell.



**And what is writ is writ,—
Would it were worthier!**

— Lord Byron,
*Childe Harold's
Pilgrimage*,
Canto iv, Stanza 185



On-line Assessment Form

Assessors are asked to identify the student whose work they are assessing. They then rate the student on the criteria below using this scale:

- **Consistently Excellent**
- **Generally Adequate**
- **Variable Quality, Usually Some Problems**
- **Student Needs Significant Work On This**

CRITERIA

1. **Written work has a clear central claim, idea, or focus.**
2. **Written work maintains its unity of focus.**
3. **Opening passages announce the central question or claim.**
4. **Closing passages leave the reader with a clear sense of the central claim or focus.**
5. **Each paragraph advances the central claim or intensifies the central focus.**
6. **Sentences and paragraphs form a reasonable and clearly connected sequence.**
7. **Written work demonstrates competence in standard grammar, punctuation, spelling, and idioms.**
8. **Information is used to support a central claim and is presented in conventional and appropriate formats (quotations, footnotes, figures, etc.).**
9. **Writing reveals a narrative voice that is engaged intellectually with the topic.**
10. **Writing acknowledges and grapples with the complexity of the material.**

11. **Comments (optional):**