Mom Was Right: Use Logic

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As an adolescent, my mother would admonish me to "Use logic!" It was rather comical to a 13-year-old boy because, at that point in time, my mother seemed to be the most illogical person in the world. But it turns out that mom might have been right after all.

The importance of "using logic" was reiterated for me as I looked through the most recent results from the Writing Advisory Committee's ongoing writing assessment program. A student's ability to organize and structure his or her work stood out as a very important element of being an effective writer. This observation is based on faculty responses to an assessment questionnaire that was used to gather information about the writing abilities of Tutorial students.

Based on previous writing assessment work by many faculty members at Grinnell College, the 2002-03 Writing Advisory Committee devised a set of questions to help dig deeper into the question of how student writing skills develop while in college. The instrument utilizes principles that have the widespread support of the faculty, thus providing criteria consistent with college-wide standards. The assessment form explores ten dimensions of writing skill (see back).

The first phase of this project was completed last fall. Each Tutorial instructor was asked to assess each of her or his students using the evaluation form. The second phase of the project took place this fall to again gather information about Tutorial students. The broader writing assessment plan involves a review of student writing at three stages during a student's time at Grinnell (first, fourth, and seventh semesters). Thanks to the strong response of Tutorial instructors, the college now has an inventory of diagnostic measures for 88 percent of all Tutorial students over the past two years (750 students).

The faculty assessments show that, in the aggregate, writing with an engaged, narrative voice is a strong suit for entering students. Nearly three-quarters of the students were considered to be *generally adequate* or *consistently excellent* in terms of having a clear central claim, idea, or focus. A third of entering students were judged as having *variable quality* or *needing significant work* on grammar. Staying focused and connected tended toward the bottom of skill mastery.

In looking for patterns in the results, dimensions of structural coherence gathered at the top of the list of skills for students who were rated as being pretty good writers overall. Roughly speaking, the more accomplished writers appeared to be exhibiting good control over their writing. Middling writers tended to be assessed as having enthusiasm but perhaps in need of more structure. Students who were rated as generally needing work on their writing skills were often weakest in their abilities to demonstrate central claims. While the overall population of student writers at Grinnell tends to be pretty good at making central claims (see the preceding paragraph), there is a subpopulation of new students who could apparently benefit from extra assistance to build this skill.

Helping students focus their writing is an essential part of developing the craft, as instructors already know. But it is good to pause and recall that these skills are both teachable and learnable. Developing a clear, logical approach to writing is, of course, important. Furthermore, mother would be proud. ❖

Assessment Criteria

Structural Coherence

1. Written work has a clear central claim, idea, or focus. [CENTRAL CLAIM]
2. Written work maintains its unity of focus. [MAINTAINS UNITY]
3. Opening passages announce the central question or claim. [OPENING]
4. Closing passages leave the reader with a clear sense of the central claim or focus. [CLOSING]
5. Each paragraph advances the central claim or intensifies the central focus [STAYS FOCUSED]
6. Sentences and paragraphs form a reasonable and clearly connected sequence. [CONNECTED]

Conventions

7. Written work demonstrates competence in standard grammar, punctuation, spelling, and idioms. [GRAMMAR]
8. Information is used to support a central claim and is presented in conventional and appropriate forms (quotations, footnotes, figures, etc.). [USE OF INFO.]

Intellectual Engagement

9. Writing reveals a narrative voice that is engaged intellectually with the topic. [ENGAGEMENT]
10. Writing acknowledges and grapples with the complexity of the material. [COMPLEXITY]

The response options regard whether the student's writing is "consistently excellent," "generally adequate," "variable quality, usually some problems," or "student needs significant work on this."

Response frequencies

Figures represent the percentage of students who received each respective rating.

Questionnaire Item	Student needs significant work on this	Variable quality, usually some problems	Generally adequate	Consistently excellent
1. Central claim	5.7	22.0	49.1	23.2
2. Maintains unity	6.9	29.1	47.6	16.4
3. Opening	5.7	23.7	48.5	22.0
4. Closing	7.2	28.9	46.9	16.9
5. Stays focused	6.4	35.3	45.6	12.7
6. Connected	10.0	32.3	42.0	15.7
7. Grammar	10.4	20.9	44.1	24.5
8. Use of info.	4.7	25.3	50.8	19.2
9. Engagement	4.7	19.1	48.0	28.3
10. Complexity	6.7	23.9	47.6	21.9

Frequencies for students who were rated on all dimensions (n=750). Figures may not appear to add to 100% due to rounding.