

**STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLAN**  
**General Education Goal: Writing Effectiveness in the Core Curriculum**

*Subcommittee Members:*

**Bill Downs, Chair (Political Science)**

**Mike Binford (Political Science)**

**Rashid Naim (Political Science)**

**Bob McBath (History)**

**Layli Phillips (Women's Studies)**

**Draft Proposal**

**I. Description of the Outcomes that Define the Goal.**

As approved by the Georgia State University Undergraduate Council (1/30/04) and the University Senate (2/13/04), Goal I.1 of the University's General Education Goals states, "Students communicate effectively using appropriate writing conventions and formats."

The Assessment Team recognizes and understands the inherent complexity of writing assessment. There is an impressive multidisciplinary literature that testifies to the enormity and vulnerabilities of any assessment program (cf., Cooper and Odell, 1977; Jones et al., 1995; Godshalk 1966). Indeed, we are confronted immediately by twin concerns: (1) How is it possible to assess written work across disciplines without common assignment parameters? and (2) How can we apply a single set of criteria to judge written work regardless of discipline?

Mindful of these concerns, the Assessment Team nevertheless believes that writing effectiveness is amenable to measurement and that the University is ultimately accountable for undergraduate student achievement in this area. As such, the purpose of this proposal is to recommend mechanisms for systematic assessment of how well courses in the General Education core are actually achieving Goal I.1. The proposal recommends administration of a pilot assessment in select Summer 2004 courses, to be followed by a wider assessment project in Fall 2004. Findings from the assessment of student achievement of this learning outcome will form the basis for suggested changes to procedures and/or curriculum.

For purposes of establishing a baseline, we adopt the following broad definition of writing effectiveness:

*Effectiveness* is defined as the ability to write with a clear purpose, appropriate organization, sufficient detail or evidence, appropriate tone, and the proper use of mechanics. Effective communication through writing also entails the ability to summarize and document sources, to write intelligently about topics without quoting sources extensively, and to construct concise statements, arguments, or theories.

This working definition of goal-related outcomes is generally consistent with the "measurable outcomes" for Goal I identified by the University Senate on 3/22/01

<http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwapa/goalsassessmentofgeneraleducation.html>

According to the Senate-approved guidelines, to demonstrate writing as a tool for effective communication we can look for and assess:

- statements of purpose
- integration of ideas into a larger body of knowledge
- clarity of organization
- quality of argument
- proper use of documentation
- coherence
- subject mastery
- levels of formality
- learning through sequential drafts

The Assessment Team recognizes also that writing is a context-driven activity. Students write for particular audiences and for particular purposes. As such, writing assessment has to be discipline-sensitive. While broad performance categories may be identified, successful writing in one discipline may be distinct in some facets from that in another discipline. The task of identifying outcomes that define the goal of effective writing is, by necessity, a search for least common denominators—broad elements that should be observable at satisfactory levels in all writing. Among these are:

*Content*—inclusion of ideas, facts, and arguments relevant to the assignment;

*Organization*—ordering and connection of ideas, facts, and arguments;

*Reasoning*—logical development of ideas and arguments;

*Rhetoric*—expression of ideas, facts, and arguments in a manner appropriate for the situation;

*Disciplinarity*—expression of ideas, facts, and arguments in a manner appropriate for the discipline;

*Conventions*—presentation of ideas, facts, and arguments according to the conventions of standard written English.

Constructing reliable and valid measures of these goal-related outcomes constitutes the challenge of the remainder of this draft proposal.

## **II. Description of the ways in which courses to be assessed contribute to this goal.**

Across the University's core curriculum, there are 30 courses from 13 departments that are self-identified by those respective departments as contributing directly to Goal I.1. These are:

### *Area A (Essential Skills)*

Engl 1101, 1102

Math 1101, 1220, 2212, 2215, 2211, 2420

### *Area B (Institutional Options)*

Phil 1010

*Area C (Humanities and Fine Arts)*

Engl 2210, 2120, 2130  
Phil 2010  
Spch 2050  
Film 2700  
Thea 2040  
ForL 1002, 2001, 2002

*Area D (Science, Mathematics, and Technology)*

Geol 1121, 2001  
CSc 1010  
Math 1070, 1220, 2420

*Area E (Social Sciences)*

Hist 1111, 1112, 2110  
Pols 1101, 2401  
Econ 2100  
WSt 2010

For purposes of the pilot assessment project to be conducted in Summer 2004, we have selected a sample of four courses from three of the above named departments. Of course, research on writing effectiveness focuses disproportionately on how students learn to write in first-year writing and composition classes. Much less effort has, however, been devoted to writing performance outside of English departments in what are traditionally deemed “content” courses. With this deficiency in mind, we sample from courses in Political Science, History, and Women’s Studies. The courses are deliberately chosen to sample from both high-enrollment and low-enrollment courses in the core’s Area E (Social Sciences). The frequency, length, and quality of writing in high-enrollment/large section courses (120-200 students) are likely to be considerably different than what would be found in low-enrollment/small section courses (< 45 students) and ideally we would like to be able to test for differences. In administering the pilot assessment, we limit the sample to courses in a single area (Social Sciences); clearly, the challenge of assessing across all the respective areas of the core will remain. It is hoped, however, that refinement of an assessment tool will be facilitated by an initial limited sample rather than confounded at the outset by excessive breadth.

The following courses constitute the sample for our pilot assessment:

**HIST 2110 Survey of U.S. History**

During the period 2002-2004, this thematic survey of US history from the country’s origins to the present ranked first among all core courses in terms of total enrollment (10,716). This makes it an ideal—and perhaps indispensable—candidate for us to use in capturing a cross-section of the undergraduate student population and its abilities in the area of writing effectiveness. In accordance with the Department of History’s own articulated core skills required of all students (Historical Mindedness, Multidimensional Analysis, Historical Context, Textual Interpretation, and Presentation), HIST 2110 encourages students to “demonstrate the ability to create, organize, and support in written form an historical thesis or argument” ([http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/A&S/History\\_Assessment\\_Plan.htm](http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/A&S/History_Assessment_Plan.htm)) This goal is facilitated by the relatively small sections taught. There are nine sections of this course offered in Summer 2004.

### **POLS 1101 American Government**

This introduction to American politics and government is a high-enrollment course, capturing an effective snapshot of undergraduates from across the University's fields of study. During the period 2002-2004, this course ranked second among all core courses in terms of total enrollment (10,224). Like HIST 2110, more than half of the students in POLS 1101 are Freshmen. There are six sections of the course offered in Summer 2004, each with enrollments as large as 60 students. In Fall and Spring semesters the course has multiple sections of up to 200 students, making this course representative of the challenges faced by instructors attempting to achieve General Education goals in large classes. Assessing the class size-learning outcomes relationship should provide some indication of the need for additional graduate student assistance.

### **POLS 2401 Global Issues**

Like HIST 2110 and POLS 1101, POLS 2401 Global Issues attracts a multidisciplinary student audience. Like POLS 1101 the class sections can be large (120 students), but unlike its counterparts Global Issues is a mid-range enrollment course (4,630 students in fiscal 2002-2004). POLS 2401 also distinguishes itself by having participated actively in the University's Writing Across the Curriculum program. Instructors often require students to write for a range of purposes—e.g., issue background papers, advisory policy memos, and argumentative opinion/editorial type essays. WebCT has been used effectively as a means of peer review and incorporation of instructor feedback on sequential drafts. There are three sections of this course offered in Summer 2004. These sections will be 48 to 56 students in size. Written assignments will include a substantial group project in which groups of 8-10 students will collaborate on preparing a written report. Each student will be writing a specified section of the report. There will also be a second writing assignment in the form of an argumentative piece in favor of or against a policy position. Between them these assignments will allow us to assess several different types of writing related skills related to both informative and argumentative writing.

### **WST 2010 Introduction to Women's Studies**

WST 2010 is the entry-level women's studies course at Georgia State University and can be used to fulfill the General Education Requirement in Section E of the Arts and Sciences core curriculum at Georgia State University. Students who take this course may proceed with a Women's Studies major or minor or they may proceed with other disciplinary courses of study with enhanced knowledge of women, gender, and feminism. WST 2010 is a 3-hour course. WST 2010 seeks to meet General Education Goal I.1 in the following ways:

- Fostering written communication through the use of essay exams and multimedia group presentations;
- Fostering collaborative writing through multimedia group presentations
- Students may engage in peer review of written assignments
- Fostering critical thinking in written expression through exposure to critical theory (feminism), interdisciplinary content and methods, and real-world social problem-solving situations
- Incorporation in writing of salient contemporary issues, particularly as they pertain to women, gender, sex and sexuality, feminism/womanism, race, and class.

To assess the degree to which these learning outcomes have been achieved, instructors who teach WST 2010 already use the following methods:

- Course-embedded assessment, including, but not limited to, homework assignments,

individual and group projects (written, creative, and technology-based).

- Essay tests, quizzes, and other examinations.
- Portfolio evaluation (such as scrapbooks or research portfolios).
- Students' self-assessment of learning in the course.

There are two sections of this course offered in Summer 2004.

### **III. Description of the assessment methods.**

The Assessment Team recognizes that there are multiple methods available to evaluate the effectiveness of student writing across multiple disciplines, although none is deemed uniquely or universally accurate. Written work can be assessed (1) by sampling evidence of actual performance, (2) by accumulating evidence of skills self-reported by students, and (3) by relying on evidence of skill-building reported by instructors. Our assessment plan focuses predominantly on the first method and is supplemented by the last method; we avoid, at least at this stage of the project, the pursuit of evidence of skills self-reported by students themselves.

We also recognize that writing in the general education core comes in multiple varieties: research papers, essay exams, laboratory reports, online discussion postings, collaborative group reports, book reviews, journals and others. The wide variety of writing types confounds the effort to provide meaningful, comparable assessments across disciplines.

Methodologically, the potential value of this pilot study is to (1) determine the ease/difficulty with which faculty members are willing to construct comparable writing assignments that facilitate assessment across sections of the same course, (2) develop valid and reliable scoring criteria, (3) evaluate the time needed to evaluate student writing across the core curriculum.

Sampling Evidence of Actual Performance. In relying extensively on sampling evidence of actual student performance in written communication, we make use of subcommittee members teaching the selected courses in Summer 2004. Faculty member Michael Binford will teach a section of POLS 1101, Rashid Naim will teach two sections of POLS 2401, and Layli Phillips will teach a section of WST 2010—each will coordinate our efforts in their respective course area. For purposes of comparison, we enlist the services of Bob McBath in the Department of History to coordinate evidence of writing effectiveness in HIST 2110. McBath is teaching HIST 1112, not HIST 2110, in Summer 2004. It is important to avoid having all writing samples come from courses taught directly by members of the Assessment Team, so it is here that McBath's role is crucial.

Our goal is to collect samples of two basic types of writing—*informative writing* (“writing to learn”) and *argumentative/critical writing* (“writing to communicate”) from a random sample of students in each of five course sections. The Assessment Team will confirm prior to the start of the Summer 2004 semester that students in the selected course sections will be submitting evidence of informative writing (essay exam response) and argumentative/critical writing (out-of-class writing assignment). The Team will then meet in June and July to devise a scoring guide for evaluating writing samples. In this process, the Team will produce a set of “anchor papers” that represent each level of writing in our scoring guide.

Evidence of Skill-Building Reported by Instructors. The Assessment Team will collect and evaluate the syllabi from every section of the selected courses taught in the regular Summer session. This means collection and analysis of 20 syllabi for collective review. Here the objectives will be to determine:

1. Is any requirement of student written work stipulated in the course syllabus?

2. What type(s) of writing is/are incorporated into the course requirements?
3. What paper lengths are required?
4. Are instructor feedback and/or peer review as part of a process of sequential drafts indicated?
5. What portion of a student's grade weight is determined by effective written communication?

In addition to the collection of course syllabi, the Assessment Team will collect assignment details from participating instructors. We recognize that written work is more effectively assessed if the assignment (as worded when given to the student) is provided.

#### **IV. Description of the data collection and analysis procedures.**

We propose to collect a total of 30 samples of student written work to evaluate. 15 writing samples will be from essay exam responses, representing informative writing (Type I Writing). 15 writing samples will come from out-of-class assignments of no fewer than 2 pages and no more than 10 pages in length, representing argumentative/critical writing (Type II Writing). This means that each participating instructor will randomly select three essay exam responses and three writing assignment samples for collective assessment by the team.

The process of random selection is as follows: the instructor collects the written work of the first three students listed alphabetically in their respective course rolls on GoSolar. The stipulation is that we limit our sampling for this pilot to Freshmen only. Collection of written work for Types I and II Writing will come from the same set of three students. In order to assure confidentiality, the students' names shall be removed from the papers.

Analysis of the writing samples will typically depend on 4-person groups (excluding, where necessary, the faculty member whose own student's work is under consideration). In practice, this means that Downs and McBath will evaluate all 30 writing samples, while Binford and Phillips will be responsible for assessing samples and Naim 18.

Building upon an established system developed at Kansas State University in that institution's own assessment of writing effectiveness in the General Education core (Smit et al., 2000), the Assessment Team proposes a six-point scoring scale, in which a "6" is the highest score and "1" is the lowest. This scale avoids both a middle score and association with a five-point scale that might be seen as analogous to the A-B-C-D-F grading system.

##### *Scoring Guide for Writing Samples*

When rating the writing sample, the following six different criteria should be considered: purpose, content, organization, details/evidence, tone and mechanics.

Explanation of criteria:

**Purpose:** The purpose of the writing is stated directly in the first few paragraphs of the writing, or the purpose can be easily inferred from the opening paragraphs.

**Content:** The content of the writing is substantial. The information presented is new and interesting, and it is what is asked for in the assignment. The arguments show a command of the issues and present relevant evidence and clearly thought out reasoning.

**Organization:** The organization, form, or structure of the writing is clear, easy to follow and appropriate to the genre of writing. Generally, the beginning of the writing sets up expectations that the rest of the writing meets. Transitions from idea to idea and leaps of thought are clearly indicated.

**Details/Evidence:** The writing is well developed and shows a solid grasp of the type of evidence and level of detail needed for the assignment. The information is accurate and appropriate. The arguments are complete, logical and convincing.

**Tone:** The language is appropriate for the intended audience or type of discourse.

**Mechanics:** The mechanics should be appropriate for the writer's purpose and the audience. Mechanics often include:

*Diction:*

Appropriate choice of words for the purpose, audience and genre.

*Sentence Structure:* Sentences should be grammatical unless there is a reasonable stylistic reason for using an alternative structure.

*Punctuation:*

Punctuation should follow the general rules for the genre or writing style of the piece.

*Usage:*

The writer should use the tense that is appropriate for the genre and context. First person may be used in some types of writing while third person may be more appropriate in others. Whether the active or passive style is used depends on the document.

## **6      The writing is *excellent* overall.**

**Purpose:** the purpose of the writing is stated directly in the first few paragraphs of the writing, or the purpose can be easily inferred from the opening paragraphs.

**Content:** The content of the writing is substantial. The information presented is new and interesting, and it is what is asked for in the assignment. The arguments show a command of the issues and present relevant evidence and clearly thought out reasoning.

**Organization:** The organization, form, or structure of the writing is clear and very easy to follow. The beginning of the writing sets up expectations that the rest of the writing meets. Transitions from idea to idea and leaps of thought are clearly indicated.

**Details/Evidence:** The writing is well developed and shows a solid grasp of the type of evidence and level of detail needed for the assignment. The information is accurate and appropriate. The arguments are convincing.

**Tone:** The language is appropriate for the intended audience or type of discourse.

5        The writing is *very good* overall. It is similar to writing rated "6." The purpose of the writing is fairly easy to determine but may not be explicitly stated or found in the first couple paragraphs. Writing demonstrates the author's ability to present clear information and fully developed arguments. However, the writing may occasionally lack sufficient detail or evidence. There is some form of organization or structure but at times it may be somewhat difficult to follow. The writing is generally appropriate for the type of assignment and intended audience but may occasionally be slightly off target.

4        The writing is *good* overall. The writing is competent and has more strengths than weaknesses. However, quality may be uneven and may consistently have one or two problems. The purpose of writing may be fuzzy. The content should generally provide adequate information but this may be presented in a conventional or uninteresting way. Some level of organization is attempted but the writing occasionally goes off track or becomes difficult to follow. Sufficient details and evidence for an argument should be present but irrelevant information may be included or the argument

may be unconvincing as a whole. The writing may at times call into question the writer's command of the material or understanding of the audience or genre.

**3** The writing is *fair* overall. It is similar to writing rated "4." However, several problems may consistently occur. The purpose of the piece may be unclear. Although the writing provides some appropriate information, there is also a substantial amount of irrelevant or uninteresting content. The writing may be underdeveloped and not follow a clearly defined structure. An argument may be presented, with some supporting evidence, but the level of detail is insufficient or the reasoning appears flawed. The writing raises consistent questions about the writer's command of the material or understanding of the audience or genre.

**2** The writing is **weak** overall. The writing clearly has more weaknesses than strengths. The writing may indicate some purpose or demonstrate a minimal level of organization. However, overall the writing seems pointless and simply a mechanical response to an assignment. Any arguments are unconvincing and the writing does not appear to know how to use evidence or reasoning to support the arguments. The writing seriously calls into question the writer's command of the material or understanding of the audience or genre.

**1** The writing is **poor** overall. This writing lacks the occasional good points of a "2." The writing seems completely pointless or unrelated to the assignment. The content appears to be a random collection of facts or ideas without any clear connections or organization. Arguments that are presented lack any evidence or reasoning and seem unrelated to any purpose or audience. The writing demonstrates no sense that the writer understands the material, the audience, or the genre. The writing is so formulaic and

undeveloped that is seems as if the writer put it together with little thought or effort.

0 The writing does not fit the requirements and **cannot be assessed**. It may, for example, be plagiarized or contain a kind of writing not called for in the project description.

#### **V. How Results Will Be Used.**

The Assessment Team will meet in August to evaluate the procedures and results of the summer pilot project. Based upon the limited summer experience, revisions and refinements will be suggested and incorporated into the larger assessment project to be administered in the Fall 2004 semester. Copies of the Assessment Teams recommendations will be forwarded to the General Education Assessment Chair as well as to the Chairs of the Political Science, History, and Women's Studies Departments. Upon completion of the Fall semester assessment project, a full set of recommendations regarding procedural and curricular changes and resource needs will be provided to the Provost, GEA Chair, and departmental chairs. The recommendations will also be posted on the Center for Teaching and Learning website.

## REFERENCES

Cooper, Charles R. and Lee Odell, eds. *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*. Buffalo, NY.: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1977.

Jones, Elizabeth et al. *National Assessment of College Learning: Identifying College Graduates' Essential Skills in Writing, Speech and Listening, and Critical Thinking*. US. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995.

Gdshalk, Fred I., Francis Swineford, and William E. Coffman. *The Measurement of Writing Ability*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1966.

David Smit et al. "Assessing the Writing of Students in General Education at Kansas State University." Report of the General Education Portfolio Assessment Subcommittee (June 30, 2000).