

Assessing Student Writing at Bucknell

[Introduction](#)

[The Process and Timeline](#)

[The Survey](#)

[Definition of Criteria](#)

[Question 1: Addressed intended audience](#)

[Question 2: Met assigned purpose of writing](#)

[Question 3: Structured sentences and paragraphs into a cohesive whole](#)

[Question 4: Used language appropriate for the writing task](#)

[Question 5: Punctuated and spelled correctly](#)

[Question 6: Revised his/her work](#)

[Question 7: Edited his/her work](#)

[Question 8: Showed improvement in his/her writing](#)

[Question 9: Demonstrated an understanding of the expected writing conventions](#)

[Question 10: Used evidence consistent with expectations](#)

[Request for comments](#)

Introduction

Thank you for your support of the Assessment of Student Writing Project. This is an important first-time opportunity for the institution to learn about the efficacy of our Writing Across the Curriculum Program. Since the Program was established in 1983, we have occasionally examined various forms of data on the teaching and evaluation practices associated with the teaching of writing, but this study will be the most comprehensive examination of the Program to date.

Your assessment of the writing of selected students in your writing courses is an essential component of this project. Without your valuable input, we will not be able to draw university-wide conclusions about how our writing program is working and make changes for the future.

As you might imagine, however, attempting to standardize faculty assessment of student writing is difficult in a Writing Across the Curriculum Program because both disciplinary writing conventions and individual faculty expectations vary.

This short user's manual is designed to accomplish two goals. First, we wish to give you an overview of the Assessment of Student Writing Project timeline and the process we are using for this program evaluation. Second, and more importantly, we want to give you some definitions that should guide your assessments of your selected student's/students' writing so that, insofar as is possible, all faculty members who complete the survey can be working with the same criteria and thus increase the inter-rater reliability of our instruments.

The Process and Timeline

Two hundred students from the class of 2011 will be followed during their four years at Bucknell, with assessments of their writing by faculty members occurring at various

intervals. We began in the fall, 2007, by administering the Shell Writing Self Efficacy Scale (1989) and gathering some demographic data on all 200 students. Subsequently, during their W1 course (which is either their Foundation Seminar or an ENGL course), faculty members will be asked to assess the selected students' writing after an initial assignment has been completed (by October 15) and again at the end of the semester (by December 27).

Timeline:

August, 2007	Initial demographic data and Shell Writing Self-Efficacy Scale collected in W1 FOUN/ENGL courses
September, 2007	First evaluation of student writing by faculty members (W1)
December, 2007	Second evaluation of student writing by faculty members (W1)
April, 2008	Third evaluation of student writing by faculty members (W2) [for those students enrolled in a W2]
December, 2008	Fourth evaluation of student writing by faculty members (W2) [for those students enrolled in a W2]

Continue this timeline until all 200 students have completed both required W2 courses.

December, 2010	Fifth evaluation of student writing by faculty members in either W2 course or other writing-based course
April, 2011	Sixth evaluation of student writing by faculty members in either W2 course or other writing-based course
May, 2011	Repeat initial student survey from August, 2007

A similar faculty assessment will be conducted on each of the selected students at the end of their first and second W2 course, and again during the spring of their senior year. We will also be administering the Shell Writing Self Efficacy Scale (1989) to these same students during their senior year for comparison purposes.

The 200 students from the class of 2011 have been randomly selected. Because this is a program evaluation, students are not able to opt out of participating. We request that all faculty members who are asked to complete an evaluation of a selected student's writing do so in order to make our data as complete as possible.

Because these students will take various W courses throughout their four years and because so many faculty members participate in the Writing Program, we anticipate that nearly every faculty member will at some point be involved in the Assessment of Student Writing Project. The scope of the project makes the definition of criteria for this user's manual all the more important. Change based on the text in September

The Survey

We are most concerned with gaining a measure of selected student's/students' expository and mechanical skills, as well as the development of their revising and editing practices,

and their facility with academic writing conventions. As such, this survey asks ten questions about the writing you have seen from your selected student's/students'.

When answering these questions, **please consider the final draft of the most substantial formal writing assignment you have had in class to make your assessment of the selected student's/students' writing.** Also, please be certain to indicate the type of writing assignment you are using for this assessment (or write in the type if not available). This is a critical first step so that we know what sort of writing assignment is being used and the types of expectations that might accompany such an assignment.

This assessment project aims to assess student writing over four years at Bucknell; in order to standardize these assessments, *please evaluate your selected student's/students' writing against the writing you would expect of a graduating senior.* For instance, a very strong piece of writing produced by a student in your course should be compared not to the work of her peers in the course, but rather to work that might be produced by a graduating senior.

What follows are the definitions of criteria that we are using in this survey. We will be describing the end points of the metric (1-not at all achieved; 5 – fully achieved); instructors should use their judgment when selecting a rating between these end points.

Definition of Criteria

[Question 1: Addressed intended audience](#)

[Question 2: Met assigned purpose of writing](#)

[Question 3: Structured sentences and paragraphs into a cohesive whole](#)

[Question 4: Used language appropriate for the writing task](#)

[Question 5: Punctuated and spelled correctly](#)

[Question 6: Revised his/her work](#)

[Question 7: Edited his/her work](#)

[Question 8: Showed improvement in his/her writing](#)

[Question 9: Demonstrated an understanding of the expected writing conventions](#)

[Question 10: Used evidence consistent with expectations](#)

Definition of Criteria

Question 1: Addressed intended audience

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your student's/students' completed the chosen assignment in a way that is consistent with the imagined audience and did so consistently throughout the paper. In some cases, the audience might be you, the faculty member or other experts in your field. Other writing assignments might ask students to take a position on an issue central to the dialogue of the course and thus might imagine their classmates as the audience. Still other writing assignments might imagine the audience to be lay people or another specific group. For instance, if the student were to write an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, the audience would likely be educated non-specialists on the topic.

Because assignments can vary in requiring a clearly defined audience, it is important that students either address the assigned audience consistently or demonstrate that they have conceived of an appropriate audience for the paper and have been consistent throughout the paper in addressing this audience.

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the intended audience was evident and consistent throughout the selected assignment; a 1 would indicate that the intended audience was unclear or inconsistent throughout the entire assignment.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 2: Met assigned purpose of writing

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your student/student met the expectations of your assignment. For instance, you might have had several goals for an assignment; if the student met only one of your three expectations, that would be best indicated by selecting “2-moderately achieved” on this survey.

The following is an example of the stated goals of a particular writing assignment. Take a minute to read through the text:

The goals of this assignment are complex and varied. First, the hope is that students will explore, perhaps for the first time, their racial/ethnic/class identity development and come to some tentative conclusions about how that growth has occurred--what has assisted it and what has limited it. Second, students should demonstrate how their racial/ethnic/class identity has influenced and affected their relationships, beliefs about others, and their behavior. Third, writers should explore the relationship between their racial/ethnic/class identity and their continued growth and development as adults.

If a selected student met none of these goals in his/her paper, then that student would earn a “1-not achieved at all” on this survey. Meeting two of three purposes of the writing assignment would earn the student a “4-mostly achieved”; meeting all three purposes would earn the student “5-fully achieved.”

Faculty members with a different number of goals for the selected assignment would scale their response accordingly.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 3: Structured sentences and paragraphs into a cohesive whole

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your student/students 1) composed coherent sentences, 2) arranged these in an understandable order that created cohesive paragraphs, 3) constructed paragraphs that included topic sentences and concluding sentences that moved logically to the next paragraph and 4) used an organizational structure that was compatible with your assignment.

A 5 would mean a pattern of consistently effective sentences and paragraphs; a 1 would indicate that the student’s writing was completely disjointed.

Question 4: Used language appropriate to the writing task

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student's/students' paper offers evidence that s/he considered the words that would best communicate the paper's purpose or argument to his/her intended audience.

With regard to word choice relative to the intended audience, please consider the following two sentences:

- A) For years the indigenous body politic of South Africa attempted to negotiate legal enfranchisement without result.
- B) For years the indigenous people of South Africa negotiated in vain for the right to vote. (Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook for Writers 4th ed.*, p. 189)

Sentence A might contain words most appropriate for an intended audience of political scientists; sentence B might contain words most appropriate for the ordinary reader or lay public.

In many cases, choosing appropriate language means avoiding jargon, euphemisms and “doublespeak.”

Further, with regard to appropriate word choice, please consider the following two sentences:

- A) When our progenitors reach their silver-haired and golden years, we frequently ensepulcher them in homes for senescent beings as if they were already among the deceased.
- B) When our parents become old, we frequently entomb them in old-age homes as if they were already among the dead. (Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook for Writers 4th ed.*, p. 191).

Composition specialist Diana Hacker suggests that confident writers are more likely to find their own voice and rely less on fanciful language that often obscures their intended meaning. “The writer of the original sentence had turned to a thesaurus...in an attempt to sound educated. When such a writer gains enough confidence to speak in his or her own voice, pretentious language disappears” (Hacker, *The Bedford Handbook for Writers 4th ed.*, p. 191).

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the language used in the paper was completely appropriate for the intended audience and was consistent throughout; a 1 would indicate that the language used in the paper was completely inappropriate for the intended audience or was inconsistent throughout.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 5: Punctuated and spelled correctly

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your student(s) used punctuation and spelling in a way that either supported the purpose of the paper or was so distracting that it prevented effective communication.

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the punctuation and spelling used in the paper were completely appropriate for the intended audience and were consistent throughout the selected assignment; a 1 would indicate that the punctuation and spelling used in the paper were completely inappropriate for the intended audience or were inconsistent throughout the entire assignment.

**Note: for the purpose of this assessment project, we distinguish between revising and editing despite the fact that in practice these activities might not be fully separable. The following text for questions six and seven define revising and editing separately only for the purpose of this assessment.*

Question 6: Revised his/her work

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student(s) reconsidered the organization, argumentation, and/or the evidence used in his/her paper and significantly improved the work in subsequent drafts. In contrast to editing, revision allows writers to consider global concerns in writing: strengthening the content, sharpening the focus, improving the organization, clarifying points of view and/or refining the tone (Hacker, 1994).

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the student reconsidered her/his work as a whole and made changes that improved the quality of the work; a 1 would indicate that either the student failed to revise his/her work or that the revisions made did not improve the paper. Responding with a N/A indicates that the faculty member did not require revision.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 7: Edited his/her work

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student(s) reworked the paper to improve grammar, punctuation, spelling, and mechanical accuracy.

Scoring a 5 on this objective indicates that the student edited her/his work carefully and made changes that improved the quality of the work; a 1 indicates that either the student failed to edit his/her work or that the editing did not improve the paper. Responding with an N/A indicates that the first draft of the paper was error free.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 8: Showed improvement in his/her writing

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student(s) demonstrated in the chosen paper that his/her writing had become stronger, and as such is a more holistic measure of improvement in writing competency. Such demonstrations

would suggest greater ability to incorporate the following elements of effective written communication: 1) audience, 2) language choice, 3) organizational awareness, 4) sentence/paragraph cohesion and 5) the process of writing as a means of effective communication.

Scoring a 5 on this objective indicates that the selected student became more adept on at least four of the five areas described above in the criteria; a 1 indicates that the student became adept at only one element of the criteria described above or did not demonstrate proficiency in any of the areas of the criteria.

For instance, if a student seemed only to reduce the number of mechanical/technical errors in his paper, while failing to meet other writing criteria, that student's writing would be best described with a 1.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 9: Demonstrated an understanding of the expected writing conventions

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student(s) wrote the final paper in ways that were consistent with the writing conventions of your field, with attention to disciplinary tone (often evidenced by correct usage of person [i.e. first or third], voice [i.e. active or passive], and patterns or formats [i.e. standard organizational and reference formats such as APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.]).

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the conventions the student used in the assignment were completely appropriate for the discipline and were consistent throughout the selected assignment; a 1 would indicate that the conventions used in the assignment were completely inappropriate for the discipline or were inconsistent throughout the entire assignment.

[Back to Criteria](#)

Question 10: Used evidence consistent with disciplinary expectations

This question asks you to determine the degree to which your selected student(s) used forms of evidence (such as reasoning, facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, expert opinion, textual references) in ways that were appropriate for the disciplinary conventions that framed the paper assignment.

For instance, in some types of literary analysis, it is important for writers to support their interpretations of the work with specific evidence, such as explication of passages from the text. Other disciplines, such as theoretical work in education, rely more on expert opinion and on drawing logical conclusions about the application of various theories in schools.

Scoring a 5 on this objective would indicate that the evidence the selected student(s) used was completely consistent with the disciplinary conventions informing the assignment; a 1 would indicate that either the student did not provide any appropriate evidence for the

assignment or that the evidence used was consistently inappropriate given the disciplinary conventions shaping the assignment.

After you have finished evaluating your selected student's/students' writing, there are several other questions about the pedagogy and process of teaching writing you are planning to use. Please take just a few minutes to respond to these questions as well.

Request for Comments

Thank you so much for your help in completing the evaluations of student writing for the project. The Composition Council understands that this requires more time from your busy day. Please feel free to share your reactions and suggestions about this survey and others in the future with Sue Ellen Henry, Associate Professor and Director, University Writing Program.