

# Assessment Findings from Instructors: Written Communication

## Introduction:

The General Education Assessment Team conducted an original, in-depth scientific study to determine how to better support our students in achieving the core competency of Written Communication (WC).<sup>1</sup> This report conveys the results from faculty who teach writing in their courses, including faculty from the Humanities and Business & Technology Departments. Results from tutors who specialize in helping students gain writing skills at the Academic Success Center (ASC) and/or as tutors embedded in English courses that contain a writing lab were completed and shared with the College in October of 2016 and are posted on the Assessment Team web site: <https://www.capitalcc.edu/capital-community-college-assessment-team-website/>.

## Executive Summary:

**Writing Instructors** were strongly unified<sup>2</sup> in their **desire** for:

1. **Movable desks in classrooms** to facilitate a variety of different formats for learning and class activities, including seminar-style discussions where all students face each other, small group work, and working in pairs. See Section D in the Summary of Findings below for details and recommended actions.
2. **More collaboration with the ASC**: shared professional development opportunities and meetings with writing tutors (a common suggestion was one per semester).
3. **Professional development opportunities** that focus on:
  - a) active learning strategies and teaching techniques, and
  - b) identifying struggles of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and effective strategies for helping 1<sup>st</sup> year students. See Section J in the Summary of Findings for more on this topic.
4. **Mandating that IDS 105 (or a similar 1<sup>st</sup> Year Navigation Course) be required** for our students, with an option to place out of the course by students who are well prepared for college in various ways. We recommend that Academic Leadership review the suggestions included in Section K in the Summary of Findings for possible future action.

**Writing Instructors** were strongly unified in their **concern** about:

1. **Class size**. A brief sample of instructor feedback on this issue:

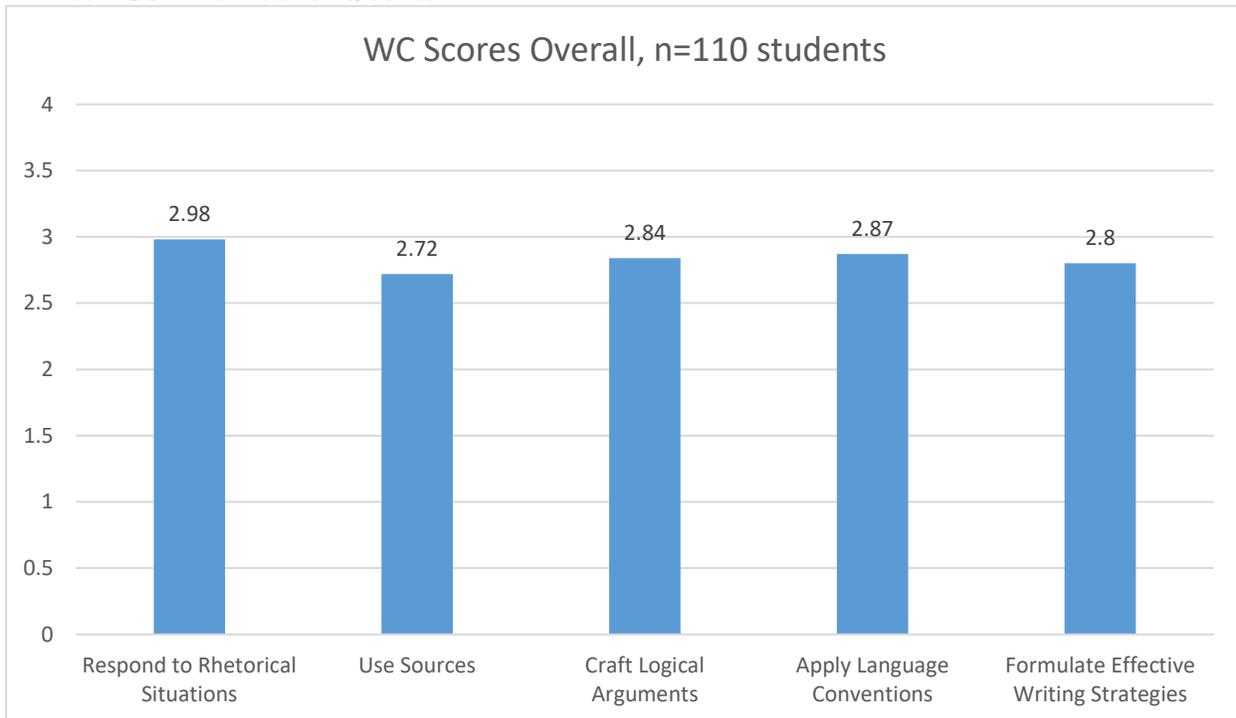
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<sup>1</sup> See appendices for a description of the research design, implementation schedule, and scientific methods used for this study, including data collection instruments. For example, the WC Rubric was developed by the Assessment Team to assess student performance on writing skills across disciplines. This study continues the use of the New Assessment Process that was first used with faculty in Quantitative Reasoning and Tutors in Written Communication. For descriptions of the New Assessment Process, including research design based on Grounded Theory and methods of data collection and analysis, see documents posted in the 2016-17 report: <https://www.capitalcc.edu/capital-community-college-assessment-team-website/>.

<sup>2</sup> Any use of the phrase “strongly unified” in this document refers specifically to any issue where there was agreement among at least 12 of the 14 instructors who participated in the focus group sessions.

- “...representatives from the 4 yr schools in our CSCU system were shocked to hear some CC’s have upwards of 27 students! It is a best practice to keep writing intensive courses capped at 20 for credit level courses and even lower for developmental courses....”
  - “Class size is very important. When we overload English classes it puts a strain on addressing work thoroughly and promptly.”
  - “...training students to write well requires a drafting process and thoughtful feedback. Classes of 25 or larger make it difficult for the instructor to implement and maintain these intensive teaching strategies. Students in classes of 15-20 are more likely to succeed.”
  - “...I have up to 28 [students] each semester....If this continues, students and parents will consider other schools.” We recommend that Academic Leadership host or promote opportunities for faculty to contribute their perspectives on this issue, and work collaboratively with faculty to cultivate learning conditions where student needs can be more fully met.
2. **The ways that students’ lives get in the way of attending and/or preparing for class.** Effective strategies for improving class attendance and getting students to prepare for class were reported by faculty and are summarized in Sections B and C below.

**Written Communication Scores**



See attached Written Communication Rubric for identification of the skills that were assessed in sub-competencies WC 1-5. The rubric is calibrated so that Level 3 is considered a “competent” level of skill for a rising junior.

## Summary of Findings:

### **A. Problems that Hinder Students' Learning:**

Writing instructors identified the same key problems that hinder students learning as were identified by math instructors. The top concerns for writing instructors are:

1. Poor attendance
2. Did not prepare for class
3. Inability to apply prior learning from previous semesters

### **B. Class policies that promote attendance:**

Many instructors use a variation on this theme: Give a quiz on the reading assignment at the beginning of class (one quiz per week for a class that meets once per week; no make ups, drop lowest 2 grades, with a weight of 20% of the final semester grade). This policy not only leads to better attendance, but good class discussions.

Several instructors said the participation grade is a certain percentage of the final semester grade, must be present to participate. Some also include graded in-class activities without letting students know beforehand which days will have in-class assignments.

### **C. Class policies that promote students coming to class prepared:**

Many instructors use the following strategies:

1. Homework is due on Blackboard before class. (Could include discussion posts to say whatever they want about the reading, quiz questions on the reading; Blackboard timestamps all entries and uploaded documents.)
2. Have a quiz at the beginning of class, or plan a number of quizzes or in-class assignments, which are not announced ahead of time but are worth points toward the student's grade.

### **D. Classroom Space and Equipment for Teaching Writing Skills:**

The physical space in which class and / or lab sessions occur was a topic of importance to writing faculty. All 14 instructors identified movable chairs as important for their classrooms. This allows for switching among a variety of learning activities, including students working individually, in partners, in small groups, and whole class discussions. Many instructors of writing classes arrange the desks in a circle or semicircle so all students can see each other to establish a seminar-style discussion, but at times need students to be able to view the screen.

Many writing instructors placed an emphasis on decentralized learning. This means that they would like more facilities that allow students to interact with each other within groups (e.g., low-tech solutions such as several white boards placed around the room, or high-tech solutions such as computers).

Multiple instructors also requested that the technology in the classroom be more reliable (e.g., instructor work station) or updated (white boards instead of chalk boards), and that the walls be decorated with posters or artwork.

**E. Space for Adjuncts:**

All four adjunct instructors in the focus groups expressed that if there were a private office to sign out to meet with students, they would use it. They expressed concern that the adjunct office is too cramped and not private to discuss student concerns and problems that prevent them from coming to class (private issues, personal issues, even academic issues are confidential). Additionally, sometimes others in the adjunct office request quiet while they are speaking with students, so not everyone is on the same page as to how the shared office space should be used.

**F. Reform of Developmental Education:**

The majority of instructors at Capital consider Capital's approach to PA 12-40 to be "overwhelmingly positive," and some characterize Capital's response as the best in the state. The introductory writing course that was developed, ENG 101 P, is a 6-credit hour class that contains a lab. It is regarded as a better situation than our previous developmental offerings for students who are at that particular skill level; our students in ENG 101P are performing at a higher level than the students who took the analogous combination of developmental courses in the past. Beginning in Fall 2017, all students who test into developmental courses will take either ENG 101 P or ENG 095, which will be a 6 credit hour class that covers both writing and reading. There will be no developmental reading course.

**G. Embedded Tutors in Classes that Contain a Writing Lab:**

Instructors who have worked with embedded tutors in lab classes have generally found them to be helpful to students in various ways. When asked what could allow the embedded tutors to be even more helpful, many responses focused on assigning the tutor to the class earlier and allowing instructors to meet with tutors earlier, and many responses suggested allowing tutors to spend time in class instead of only the lab.

**H. Library Presentations on Research Skills:**

All 14 participants of the WC Instructor Focus Groups have had presentations by library staff. The predominant recommendations made by writing instructors are:

1. Ensure students are able to make progress on their assignments during the presentation by planning with library staff in advance to accommodate the particular instructor's assignment and conducting the session in the library classroom or a computer lab to allow students to perform searches related to their paper topics.
2. Library staff should guard against cancellations because the presentation is helpful for the research assignment, but not necessarily other assignments that come later in the semester.

**I. Writing Across the Curriculum / Reinforcing Writing Skills in All Classes:**

Many writing instructors hope and/or expect that faculty in other disciplines will reinforce student writing skills. The most popular suggestion for faculty in non-writing intensive courses was to add informal writing assignments and in-class writing activities.

**J. Professional Development:**

The best days and times for professional development among writing instructors is Monday or Wednesday afternoons, with a start time of 1:00 or 1:30 pm. The four most popular topics of interest for professional development among writing instructors are:

- Active learning strategies & teaching techniques.
- Identifying struggles of 1<sup>st</sup> year students, effective strategies for helping 1<sup>st</sup> year students.
- Psychology of struggling students; techniques to help students who are having difficulty learning new material.
- Teaching writing skills, with a focus on pedagogy.

**K. Detailed Summary of a College Success or 1<sup>st</sup> Year Navigation Course Requirement:**

All 14 participants said yes, IDS 105 should be a required course, given caveats and exemptions. Note that in an earlier set of focus group sessions, a majority of participating Quantitative Reasoning Instructors also expressed a desire for a mandatory College Success or 1<sup>st</sup> Year Navigation Course in similar fashion to the Written Communication Instructors, with the same types of caveats and suggestions for course redesign. Given that the concern has been expressed by faculty in multiple departments, we recommend that Academic Leadership review the suggestions below and consider possible actions to take to follow up with faculty regarding this concern.

Summary of various responses from writing faculty:

- a) It is necessary, but needs to be more rigorous, more academic; include everything it currently has, with different faculty teaching different units students will get an overall perspective on what college is.
- b) Only if some students can place out of it due to already having a degree or life experience, then yes.
- c) Yes—the “first year experience” is valuable—or embed elements of the first year experience in all 100-level classes.
- d) It should be taken in the first year, not at the end. It is successful at UConn, offered the summer before freshmen year.
- e) Exempt status could depend on Accuplacer score—anyone assigned to developmental coursework would be required to take it, others could be exempt.
- f) If it is required, then the course would need to be redesigned so it is transferable to B.A. programs.
- g) Yes—or something like it; could include career exploration, thinking of your major.
- h) As a module in navigating the college, registering for classes, etc.
- i) We would need a mechanism to make sure it happens, and early, such as a registration block to make sure it is taken within the first 15 credits.
- j) Yes; required unless the student has a track record of being a successful college student, then they could place out of it or substitute a different course.

Scale Outcomes	4 Highly Competent	3 Competent	2 Minimally Competent	1 Not Competent
1. Respond to Rhetorical Situations	<p><b>Student writing consistently responds to rhetorical situations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses the purpose of the writing task.</li> <li>• Engages a specific audience.</li> <li>• Adapts writing to the situation.</li> <li>• Uses a variety of appeals (e.g., logical, ethical, emotional) to influence the audience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing frequently responds to rhetorical situations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses the purpose of the writing task.</li> <li>• Engages a specific audience.</li> <li>• Adapts writing to the situation.</li> <li>• Uses a variety of appeals (e.g., logical, ethical, emotional) to influence the audience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing sometimes responds to rhetorical situations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses the purpose of the writing task.</li> <li>• Engages a specific audience.</li> <li>• Adapts writing to the situation.</li> <li>• Uses a variety of appeals (e.g., logical, ethical, emotional) to influence the audience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing does not respond to rhetorical situations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses the purpose of the writing task.</li> <li>• Engages a specific audience.</li> <li>• Adapts writing to the situation.</li> <li>• Uses a variety of appeals (e.g., logical, ethical, emotional) to influence the audience.</li> </ul>
2. Use Sources	<p><b>Student writing consistently demonstrates:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of credible and appropriate sources.</li> <li>• Comprehension of main ideas and supporting details.</li> <li>• Analysis of and response to complex writing.</li> <li>• Summary, paraphrase, and quotation of others' ideas differentiated from student's own.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing frequently demonstrates:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of credible and appropriate sources.</li> <li>• Comprehension of main ideas and supporting details.</li> <li>• Analysis of and response to complex writing.</li> <li>• Summary, paraphrase, and quotation of others' ideas differentiated from student's own.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing sometimes demonstrates:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of credible and appropriate sources.</li> <li>• Comprehension of main ideas and supporting details.</li> <li>• Analysis of and response to complex writing.</li> <li>• Summary, paraphrase, and quotation of others' ideas differentiated from student's own.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing does not demonstrate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of credible and appropriate sources.</li> <li>• Comprehension of main ideas and supporting details.</li> <li>• Analysis of and response to complex writing.</li> <li>• Summary, paraphrase, and quotation of others' ideas differentiated from student's own.</li> </ul>

Scale Outcomes	4 Highly Competent	3 Competent	2 Minimally Competent	1 Not Competent
3. Craft Logical Arguments	<p><b>Student writing consistently crafts a logical argument that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents a controlling idea or thesis.</li> <li>• Is persuasive (when appropriate), and</li> <li>• Supported by evidence, and</li> <li>• Organized appropriately and uses transitions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing frequently crafts a logical argument that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents a controlling idea or thesis.</li> <li>• Is persuasive (when appropriate), and</li> <li>• Supported by evidence, and</li> <li>• Organized appropriately and uses transitions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing sometimes crafts a logical argument that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents a controlling idea or thesis.</li> <li>• Is persuasive (when appropriate), and</li> <li>• Supported by evidence, and</li> <li>• Organized appropriately and uses transitions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing does not craft a logical argument that:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents a controlling idea or thesis.</li> <li>• Is persuasive (when appropriate), and</li> <li>• Supported by evidence, and</li> <li>• Organized appropriately and uses transitions.</li> </ul>
4. Apply Language Conventions	<p><b>Student writing consistently demonstrates application of language conventions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate diction, tone and formality.</li> <li>• Application of conventions of Standard American English, including: mechanics, usage, grammar, syntax, and spelling.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing frequently demonstrates application of language conventions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate diction, tone and formality.</li> <li>• Application of conventions of Standard American English, including: mechanics, usage, grammar, syntax, and spelling.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing sometimes demonstrates application of language conventions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate diction, tone and formality.</li> <li>• Application of conventions of Standard American English, including: mechanics, usage, grammar, syntax, and spelling.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Student writing does not demonstrate application of language conventions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate diction, tone and formality.</li> <li>• Application of conventions of Standard American English, including: mechanics, usage, grammar, syntax, and spelling.</li> </ul>
5. Formulate Effective Writing Strategies (Demonstrated through multiple drafts or a reflection paper on the writing process.)	<p>Student writing <b>consistently</b> demonstrates evidence of planning, proofreading, reflecting, and revising.</p>	<p>Student writing <b>frequently</b> demonstrates evidence of planning, proofreading, reflecting, and revising.</p>	<p>Student writing <b>sometimes</b> demonstrates evidence of planning, proofreading, reflecting, and revising.</p>	<p>Student writing <b>does not</b> demonstrate evidence of planning, proofreading, reflecting, and revising.</p>