

CHAPTER 5: EVALUATION OF ESSAYS

What Do Teachers Want?

Because all writing, no matter how personal, attempts to communicate with some audience, writing is a social art. And all writers — whether students writing to develop their skills, amateurs writing to satisfy personal ambition, or professionals writing to support themselves — need to get some reaction to their writing. One form of reaction students get is from peer review. By critiquing one another's papers constructively in workshops, student writers gain immediate insight into the effectiveness of their argumentation and prose. Peer review is an important part of the assessment of students' work, for it allows students to get feedback from a range of real readers; the process of responding to other students' essays helps students to become good critics of their own and of others' writing. This skill is important to much college work and is often cited by employers as being crucially important to the world of work. Because peer review is an important skill cultivated in First-Year Writing, the capstone Electronic Portfolio includes a demonstration/discussion of the writer's Peer Review process. Students also receive comments and other feedback on some drafts and on graded essays from their First-Year Writing teachers; this feedback, along with peer review commentary, is important to the job of revising graded essays for inclusion in the ePortfolio.

Another form of reaction students get to their writing is from their teachers. How teachers grade a written project should interest all students. First, they should understand that no exact correlation exists between the number of marks, or even comments, on a paper and the grade that paper receives. A composition does not begin as a "100" and then lose points as the teacher finds mistakes. Although errors can seriously damage the overall effectiveness of a piece of writing, to write well students must do more than merely rid their work of grammatical and mechanical errors. Effective communication depends primarily on rhetorical concerns; in other words, how effectively does the writing assignment being evaluated meet the needs of a particular audience and accomplish a particular purpose?

To ensure consistency and good communication across the Program, all FYW classes use a common FYW Grading Rubric, designed by a volunteer committee of teachers here in our English Department, which explains in detail our criteria for different grades. There are four basic categories:

- Competent/Credible/Complete, which describes compositions that are satisfactory and passing and therefore fall into the "C" range;

- Skillful/Persuasive, which describes compositions that are well above average – clearly superior to competent work – and fall into the “B” range;
- Distinctive, which describes compositions that stand out from even very competent work in a singular or important way and therefore fall into the “A” range;
- Ineffective, which describes work that, for different reasons, does not meet the basic criteria for competency.

Teachers and peers will offer comments and feedback to help you improve your work during successive stages of the drafting process. But when your instructor grades the final draft of your project, she or he will decide, first of all, which of the four categories the composition falls into, using the particular criteria listed under each category for guidance. If your project has Unity, Evidence and Development, and follows basic rules for Presentation and Design, it has earned a C. If in addition, your project also has Coherence and Audience Awareness, you have entered the “B” range, and so forth. Once the instructor has commented on your work and determined the general category into which your work falls, he or she will then decide holistically what place in the given point spectrum your grade falls. For instance, if the project has Unity, Evidence, Presentation/Design, and is beginning to develop good Coherence, the instructor may determine that it falls toward the lower end of the Skillful/Persuasive spectrum (80-89 points): in such a case, your composition might earn an 82 or 83. If your project has, in addition to the qualities detailed above, a strong personal voice that clearly demonstrates Audience Awareness through its ability to communicate with “real people,” it might earn an 87 or 88.

Of course, there is no exact mathematical formula for determining grades. For instance, it is always possible that a project that contains a few grammatical errors (Presentation/Design) or changes or loses direction at one or more points (Unity) excels so clearly in more advanced criteria – say, a sense of voice showing a clear Audience Awareness or an especially complex and original or imaginative argument – that the instructor decides it really should earn a B. In general, though, students should expect to satisfy all of the criteria for the Competent/Credible/Complete category in order to receive a passing grade.

The FYW Grading Rubric gives both students and teachers a common vocabulary for talking about writing quality and a set of important criteria for evaluating projects and/or compositions that are submitted for a grade during the semester and also those revised works submitted in the capstone electronic portfolio. Some instructors use a special template in Emma that links comments to criteria of the FYW Grading Rubric (which helps students to understand their grades). Students can also use the Rubric to

assess the progress of their own work as they move through the drafting process. Finally, as the Rubric indicates, teachers may include special requirements that affect students' final grades, adding or subtracting points based on those special, stated requirements. If you excel in these extra requirements or fail to meet them, your grade may be raised or lowered accordingly.

What Grades on Compositions Mean

In more specific numerical terms, the meaning of grades is defined by the undergraduate version of the University of Georgia Bulletin: <http://www.bulletin.uga.edu/>. The meaning of grades according to the First-Year Writing Program is defined as follows:

- C Competent / Credible / Complete (70-79)
- B Skillful / Persuasive (80-89)
- A Distinctive (90-100)
- D Ineffective (60-69)
- F Extremely Ineffective (<60)
- W Withdrew
- I Incomplete

Plus / Minus Grading

Plus and minus grades are assigned only to a student's final average for the course. For the final course grade, the numerical range for each plus/minus grade is as follows:

- A 4.0 (92-100)
- A- 3.7 (90-91)
- B+ 3.3 (88-89)

| | |
|----|-------------|
| B | 3.0 (82-87) |
| B- | 2.7 (80-81) |
| C+ | 2.3 (78-79) |
| C | 2.0 (70-77) |
| C- | 1.7 (68-69) |
| D | 1.0 (60-67) |
| F | 0.0 (<60) |

FYW Grading Rubric

Here is the actual rubric that your teacher will use when evaluating your essays and often will encourage you to use when critiquing your peers' essays and making judgments about your own work.

Student's Name _____ Teacher _____

Project # _____ Special Assignment Requirements _____

Conference _____

"Enter a pertinent quote here." (Teachers can self-select)

Writing Center _____

_____ **Competent/Credible/Complete**

If you meet these first three standards, you are writing competently and you will earn a grade of "C." (70-79)

1. **Unity**

- Contains a center of gravity, a unifying and controlling purpose, a thesis or claim, which is maintained throughout the composition.
- Organizes writing around a thesis or according to the organizational requirements of the particular assignment (e.g., summary, narrative, argument, analysis, description, etc.)

2. **Evidence/Development**

- Develops logical and relevant supporting detail and/or evidence.
- Includes more specific, concrete evidence (or details) than opinion or abstract, general commentary.

3. **Presentation and Design**

- Follows guidelines for Standard English grammar, punctuation, usage, and documentation.

- Meets your teacher's (or the MLA's) and the First-year Composition program's requirements for length and/or format.

Skillful/Persuasive

If you meet all of the competency standards above and, in addition, achieve coherence and exhibit audience awareness, you are writing skillfully and you will earn a grade of "B." (80-89)

4. Coherence

- Uses words and sentences, rhythm and phrasing, variations and transitions, concreteness and specificity to *reveal and emphasize the relationship* between evidence and thesis.
- Explains how, why, or in what way the evidence/detail provided supports the claim/ point /thesis/topic ideas.
- Incorporates evidence from outside sources smoothly, appropriately, and responsibly.

5. Audience Awareness

- Demonstrates a sense that the writer knows what they are doing and is addressing real people.
- Reflects a respect for values that influence ethos (e.g., common ground, trustworthiness, careful research).

Distinctive

If you meet all of the competency standards, achieve coherence and exhibit audience awareness, and, in addition, demonstrate a mastery of one or more features of superior writing, you are writing distinctively and you will earn a grade of "A." (90-100)

6. Distinction

- Your writing stands out because of one or more of the following characteristics: complexity, originality, seamless coherence, extraordinary control, sophistication in thought, recognizable voice, compelling purpose, imagination, insight, thoroughness, and/or depth.

Essay Grade _____ +/- Points for special assignment requirements _____ =

| |
|--------------------|
| Final Grade |
|--------------------|

Ineffective

If your work does not meet competency standards, either because you have minor problems in all three competence areas (1-3 above) or major problems in one or two competence areas, you will earn a grade of "D" (60-69) or "F" (<60), and you should schedule a conference with your teacher.

Understanding the First-Year Writing Grading Rubric's Vocabulary

The FYW Grading Rubric is the First-year Composition program's standardized guide for evaluating student writing. Many teachers use an electronic version of this Rubric and to mark compositions with coded electronic tags and inserted comments, while other teachers attach, clip, or staple a paper copy of the Rubric, along with their handwritten notes, directly to student work. Whether paper or electronic, teachers depend on the standard Rubric's language to guide their evaluation of student compositions; students must depend on the Rubric's language to understand their teachers' comments. Finally, the Rubric's common vocabulary helps students comment

on one another's work and to make judgments about their own projects. The Rubric helps to keep all parties on the same page! In order to help students and teachers use the Rubric most effectively, we discuss some of the key terms in the following sections.

Competent/Credible/Complete

In order to receive a passing and satisfactory grade of "C," students' work needs to meet the three principal criteria of Unity, Evidence/Development, and Presentation and Design.

1. Unity = Staying on topic and providing structure "Contains a center of gravity, a unifying and controlling purpose, a thesis or claim, which is maintained throughout the composition."

First-year compositions can be organized in many different ways. Compositions may have an implicit or explicit thesis, or they may simply have a unifying purpose or theme. In any unified composition, however, every sentence and every word will contribute in some way towards the exposition and development of the "main" idea.

Notice that at the level of Competency "unity" does not require a particularly complex, clever, or imaginative thesis, nor does unity require strong coherence. Typically, a thesis can be described as having two parts: a topic plus a comment about that topic. For example, if my thesis were "cats are annoying," the topic would be "cats" and the comment would be "are annoying." In a composition with such a thesis, unity only requires that every sentence be related to either the topic ("cats") and/or the comment on that topic ("are annoying"). Teachers and peer reviewers sometimes need to read between the lines to notice an underlying or implied unity. For instance, sometimes a writer includes an apparently unrelated detail, such as "Cats often have long, fluffy fur." The writer may need to add just a word or two (perhaps adding a word or two about annoying shedding, allergies, or long cat hair on couches!) to firmly demonstrate the detail's underlying unity with the topic "annoying."

"Organizes writing around a thesis or according to the organizational requirements of the particular assignment (e.g., summary, narrative, argument, analysis, description, etc.)."

Simply put, to "organize writing around a thesis" or other central point means that the composition reveals, under examination, an overall organizational plan or strategy. To evaluate organization, a reader might ask questions such as these: Could this work be outlined? Does each paragraph play a role in developing the thesis? Does the work have a definite beginning, middle, and end? An organized composition might use logical, spatial, chronological, or even associational order — but the strategy will be employed to suit the topic and the purpose of the writing project.

2. Evidence/Development = Providing support (examples, details, or specifics) "Develops appropriate, logical, and relevant supporting detail and/or evidence."

This criterion asks you to note whether the writer uses examples and/or other evidence to support their argument, position, or idea and whether that evidence is fairly used, accurate, and relevant. Depending on the type of writing assignment, good evidence may include anecdotes, images, descriptions, dialogue, quotations (from primary and/or secondary sources), graphs, and/or charts; typically, evidence will include quotations from a variety of sources — often including the texts read in class. In this case, you are evaluating the quality of evidence provided and sources used. To evaluate the quality of evidence, a reader might ask questions such as these: Did the writer use examples accurately and not take them out of context? Were selected quotations clearly related to the writer’s argument? Was the source of the evidence credible? For a descriptive or narrative assignment, readers might ask if a particular scene is described with accurate, concrete, and specific details.

“Includes more specific, concrete evidence (quotations, interviews, charts, statistics, details, description, observation, and dialogue) than opinion or abstract, general commentary.”

This criterion asks you to gauge quantity of evidence. To evaluate the quantity of evidence, you might ask questions such as these: Has the writer made many general claims about a topic without supplying specific supporting evidence? What is the ratio of sentences providing opinions compared to sentences providing support (giving examples, quotations, and details)? Typically, readers hope to find a good deal more evidence than opinion. On the other hand, you might ask: Does the writer string together a long series of quotations and facts into lists or lengthy quoted passages? Is there too much unincorporated and unexplained evidence?

3. Presentation and Design = Correctness and formatting issues
“Follows guidelines for standard English grammar, punctuation, usage, and documentation.”

To meet this criterion, here is a general rule of thumb: To pass at the level of Competency, a paper should contain two or fewer major errors plus four or fewer minor errors per 250-words (250 words is about a page). If there are no major errors, a composition should have eight or fewer minor errors per 250-words. All the major errors have to do with either sentence boundary recognition or Standard English grammar issues. For our purposes, the major errors are:

- Comma Splice
- Fragment
- Fused Sentence
- Subject/Verb Agreement
- Pronoun/Antecedent Agreement

All other errors are considered minor errors. If a student’s paper has more errors than the standard described above, the paper is not meeting competency guidelines for a final draft. Remember, however, that this standard is just a guideline. Simply lacking a large

number of errors does not necessarily make a project “Competent” or passing. As we point out in the Introduction to this section: “A composition does not begin as a ‘100’ and then lose points as the teacher finds mistakes.”

“Meets your teacher’s (or the MLA’s) and the First-year Composition Program’s requirements for length and/or format.”

The standard format and documentation requirements for First-year Composition follow those for MLA formatting. Teachers, however, may have special requirements, which might include the use of specialized or alternative style sheets (such as CBE, CSE, APA, or Chicago), images, graphs, video, particular fonts, minimum word counts, bibliographies, appendices, notes, abstracts, etc.

4. Coherence = The “Flow” “Uses words and sentences, rhythm and phrasing, variations and transitions, concreteness and specificity to reveal and emphasize the relationship between evidence and thesis.”

In general, while students can achieve unity by creating a strong thesis and staying on topic, they create coherence by focusing their reader’s attention on the relationship between thesis and evidence (or theme and detail). Creating Coherence is about controlling emphasis.

Students may use diction (word choice) to emphasize the thesis-to-evidence connection by choosing words carefully, by repeating key words and phrases, by avoiding the repetition of unimportant words and phrases, and by using transitional phrases accurately. Writers can also use syntax – that is, sentence structure – to direct emphasis by varying sentence structures, by employing syntactical effects such as parallelism and antithesis, or simply by changing sentence length or reversing normal Subject-Verb-Object sentence patterns. In evaluating coherence, you may ask these questions: Has the writer used syntax and diction to create links and bridge gaps between his or her thoughts? Does the writer use transitional phrases and words frequently and accurately to help the reader follow the writer’s thinking from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph? Does the writer’s use of repetition, parallelism, figures of speech, and rhythm help to emphasize main points, or does the writer’s choice of diction and syntax distract the reader from the main ideas?

“Explains how, why, or in what way the evidence/detail supports a point/claim/thesis/topic ideas.”

Writers need to include explanations. In fact, in an argumentative essay, writers usually need to explain – sometimes at length – why each detail or item of support is included. Only rarely does evidence speak for itself. Coherence develops as writers explain how each part of their arguments’ evidence provides support for their theses.

“Incorporates evidence from outside sources smoothly, appropriately, and responsibly.”

The writer will consistently incorporate quotations and references to other outside sources into her own sentences. Coherent writers move often between paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting brief passages from different sources. Few, if any, quotations are “hanging” — that is, standing alone in separate sentences; instead, they are embedded in the writer’s own sentences, usually with explanatory remarks linking the quotations to the topic or thesis. Lengthy quotations, serial quotations, or long summaries rarely occur in a “Skillful” writer’s essay.

**5. Audience Awareness = Writing should speak to real readers
“Demonstrates a sense that the writer knows what they are doing
and is addressing real people.”**

Showing that a writer “knows what their doing” means that the writer works to develop his or her credibility (ethos). He or she might demonstrate particular knowledge or research concerning a topic, demonstrate comfort and familiarity with appropriate jargon or professional vocabularies, or simply use sound logic and clear reasoning in his or her discussion. Credibility can be developed in many ways.

“Reflects a respect for values that influence ethos (e.g., common ground, trustworthiness, careful research).”

Respect for an audience and values can be shown at every level. A reader evaluating writing for respect might ask these questions: Has the writer chosen an appropriate level of formality in his or her diction — avoiding the “too formal” for an audience of close friends, the “too familiar” with teachers or general audiences? Has the writer avoided unnecessary jargon or slang? Has the writer avoided sexist or racist language? Is the writer’s choice of supporting examples and evidence appropriate, fairly used, relevant, and judiciously applied? Does the writer show a high level of integrity about facts and correctness at every level? Does the writer implicitly and explicitly show courtesy and good will towards readers whose opinions may differ? Does the writer acknowledge counter-arguments and other positions?

6. Distinction: A few words about distinction “Your writing stands out because of one or more of the following characteristics: complexity, originality, seamless coherence, extraordinary control, sophistication in thought, recognizable voice, compelling purpose, imagination, insight, thoroughness, and/or depth.”

No single quality reveals distinction; that’s why we’ve listed so many possibilities. A paper should meet standards in all five of the other criteria before it is considered for “Distinction.” This does not mean that students’ papers must necessarily excel in all five criteria (although many will and most will excel in three or more criteria), but papers should be average or better in every category and should not be deficient in any category when being considered for Distinction. The FYW Grading Rubric was designed by a volunteer team of instructors who carefully examined a range of essays, deciding what qualities papers at different grade levels share in common. Based on that work, we now

have a common vocabulary that students and teachers can use to understand how to succeed in First-Year Writing.

The Flexible Block Rubric

First-year Writing is currently changing rubrics from the Standard FYW Rubric described in this chapter to a new model, the Flexible Block Rubric, which will become the program's only assessment rubric beginning Spring 2022. For Fall 2021, your instructor might continue to use the Standard Rubric outlined later in this chapter, or they might be incorporating the new rubric structure for one, some, or all of your projects.

If your instructor is using the new Flexible Block Rubric, they will provide guidelines and the rubric itself, but here's a quick overview. For each project assessed with the Flexible Block Rubric, your instructor will select between three and six criteria (called "blocks") from the list below to help them assess your writing. As they read your work, they'll consider how much revision your draft or project will need to make that category exemplary, then they'll rate that block from a one (indicating that nearly all of the draft would need to be revised) to a five (indicating that the category needs little to no revision). As you consider how to revise your work, use these ratings as a guide to help you decide where to spend your time and energy.

Keep your project's rubric in mind as you write: these categories will be the things your instructor is looking for as they read your writing. You can find a list of possible rubric blocks below (though your project will only be assessed on a few of these), and all projects assessed with the Flexible Block Rubric will include the "Process" block.

Significance: the writer makes clear how, why, or in what way the evidence/detail provided supports the text's central purpose. A significant text moves beyond merely presenting evidence to gesture towards a larger point; answers "so what?" Significance in a research paper might involve discovering a new idea or phenomenon, significance in a personal reflective narrative might involve a personal realization, and significance in a persuasive essay might show the reader the real-world importance of the paper's central issue. In any case, it should provide an immediate answer to the question "Why is this important?"

Evidence: how the writer supports a claim: outside sources, anecdotes, sensory details, and/or multimodal evidence (e.g. images, sound, video, etc.) could all count as evidence depending on the assignment's genre. Effective use of evidence also assumes the writer has evaluated the sources' credibility, timeliness, and appropriateness for the genre of writing.

Organization: the way a text is structured with the writer's purpose and audience in mind. Organization should be intentional and includes both macro-level organization (i.e., how the text works overall) and micro-level organization (i.e., how the paragraphs are organized and how the sentences within them fit together).

Style: how the writer uses words and sentences to create a tone, character, or moment-to-moment impact on the reader. Effective style varies depending on the genre, audience, and purpose of the text, and no single style will be useful or preferable for all writing.

Argument: how the writer convinces the reader of something. An effective argument depends on the genre. In academic writing, arguments tend to be inquiry-based or conversational, as they attempt to build knowledge by questioning existing knowledge and proposing alternatives. In nearly all genres, however, a strong argument is non-obvious and something with which a reasonable person could disagree.

Multimodality: how the writer chooses multimodal elements for the text and how they combine different modes in a single text. Different sources define modes differently, so they might include: linguistic, aural, visual, spatial, and gestural modes, or written, oral, visual, electronic, and nonverbal modes. In any case, multimodality involves the intentional use of non-textual elements. Some sample descriptions follow, though instructors are free to add descriptions of modes not covered here.

- Visual Design: how the writer uses visual elements like contrast, alignment, framing, color, and other features to deliver or enhance meaning.
- Audio Design: how the writer demonstrates an awareness of sonic rhetorical strategies such as voice, music, silence, sound effects, and sound interaction, with careful attention to crafting the project for *listeners* (as opposed to readers)
- Choice and Interactivity: how the writer makes the reader or player an important part of the text's execution. An effective interactive text should give the user a sense of agency, power, or influence over the text. Navigation of the text's choices should involve non-trivial effort and intentionally designed consequences for the choices offered.

Audience Awareness: how the writer works to reach the actual or potential audience of the text. This is an intentionally broad, holistic block and could address multiple areas including style, multimodality, organization, etc.

Genre Awareness: how the writer follows recognizable forms in their writing, with attention to rhetorical situation and audience expectations. Genres are not static, so the writer may choose to challenge or stray from genre conventions, but when the writer does so, such moves are made intentionally. Attention to appropriate citation style and approach to using sources is also part of many genres.

Rhetorical Awareness: attention to the rhetorical situation: the particular circumstance of a given instance of communication, including exigence (the need or reason to communicate), context (the circumstances that give rise to exigence), rhetor (the originator of the communication), and audience (the auditor, listener, or reader). Like "Audience Awareness," this is a broad block, but unlike "Audience Awareness," it has more to do with fitting the text to the whole situation than to the audience alone.

Process: the variety of activities that go into writing/designing which often include planning, drafting, revising, peer reviewing, proofreading, and publishing.

Reflection: how the writer studies their own experiences, processes, behaviors, and tendencies. Reflection is more than simply recounting previous experiences; it should involve serious thought and commentary on what the writer has *discovered* through their own experiences.