

# Undergraduate Program Assessment: Rhetoric, Research, Writing

Department of English, California State University, Los Angeles

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Prepared by the Department of English Ad-hoc Committee on Assessment

Lise Buranen  
Jim Garrett  
Aaron Sonnenschein (chair)

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## Learning Outcomes for the Undergraduate English Major

Listed below are the learning outcomes currently used by the Department of English.

### A. Literary coverage

Students will demonstrate familiarity with the major writers, historical periods, and genres of British and American literature, and demonstrate an awareness of the connection between texts and their historical and cultural context.

### B. Literary analysis

Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze and interpret a text with attention to its genre, formal and rhetorical features, and historical and cultural contexts.

### C. Theory and critical perspectives

Students will understand the history of critical theory and demonstrate the ability to apply theoretical approaches to texts.

D. Linguistics

Students will demonstrate knowledge of the grammatical structure of English and recognition of standard and nonstandard varieties.

E. Rhetoric, research, and writing

Students will understand the writing process and use their understanding of audience, purpose, form, and other rhetorical concepts to produce rhetorically and stylistically effective writing. Additionally, students will demonstrate the ability to conduct research in the field and effectively incorporate this research into their analysis and writing.

## Assessment Plan for Learning Outcomes

Using the five program-level learning outcomes identified above, the department has adopted the following assessment schedule:

Year A: Rhetoric, Research, and Writing

Year B: Linguistics *and* Theory and Critical Perspectives

Year C: Literary Coverage *and* Literary Analysis

In 2009-2010, the department assessed the student learning outcomes collectively identified as rhetoric, research, and writing.

## Assessment of Rhetoric, Research, and Writing

The assessment team chose two instruments to assess student attainment of the learning outcomes associated with rhetoric, research, and writing: student surveys and writing samples. The surveys would indicate students' attitudes towards writing and their ability to self-assess. The writing samples would indicate student abilities.

To determine whether students made progress in the program, surveys were administered in ENGL 340 classes and in ENGL 492 classes. Students are advised to take ENGL 340 early in their program and ENGL 492 late in their program, so these two courses roughly represent baseline and capstone.

### Student Attitudes and Self-Assessment

Students in two sections of ENGL 340 in the fall term and students in ENGL 492 in the fall and winter terms completed the same survey. The survey was administered at the beginning of the term and was intended to measure how student attitudes changed as they progressed through their undergraduate degree program.

The survey instrument (included as an attachment) was divided into two parts. Part I sought to measure students' perceptions of and attitudes towards writing. Students were instructed to use the scale Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree to describe their response to each of nine statements. The

responses were tabulated by assigning the value of 1 to Strongly Agree, 2 to Agree, 3 to Disagree, and 4 to Strongly Disagree and calculating the average for each question. The results of Part I are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Results of Part I of the Student Survey**

	ENGL 340	ENGL 492	Change	Pct Change
1. Writing helps me think more clearly.	1.53	1.49	-0.04	-3%
2. Writing helps me make sense of the subject matter in my courses.	1.69	1.51	-0.18	-11%
3. I feel that good writing skills are important for success in my chosen field.	1.11	1.27	0.16	14%
4. My high school and/or previous college work has adequately prepared me for the writing I have to do as a college student.	2.00	2.16	0.16	8%
5. Students learn more in courses where writing is required.	1.66	1.84	0.18	11%
6. I work hard on my writing.	1.69	1.54	-0.15	-9%
7. I am a good writer.	1.97	1.59	-0.38	-19%
8. If I didn't have to write for school, I wouldn't write anything.	3.22	3.08	-0.14	-4%
9. I have confidence in my ability to handle most writing assignments.	1.97	1.51	-0.46	-23%

For every question except question number eight (and possibly question number four), we would expect student responses to be lower rather than higher and we might also expect that they would move lower as they spent more time in the program. The first three questions attempt to gauge students' perceptions of writing and more specifically the value of writing. Unsurprisingly, students who major in English place a high value on writing and that perception doesn't change significantly as they move through the program. Question number four, which asks about preparation for the college, shows that students are less sure of how adequately they were prepared for college writing and that the uncertainty concerning their how well they were prepared increases as they progress through the program. The most important finding of the survey, though, is found in student responses to questions seven and nine, which both address student confidence. At the end of their program as compared to the beginning, students are significantly more likely to strongly agree with the statements "I am a good writer" and "I have confidence in my ability to handle most writing assignments." In short, when students complete the program they are increasingly confident in their abilities as writers and more likely to consider themselves good writers.

Part II of the survey asked students to identify the sources of problems in their writing and writing process. Students were again asked to use the scale Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree to describe their response to each of 16 statements that completed the phrase “I have problems with my writing because . . .” The responses were tabulated by assigning the value of 1 to Strongly Agree, 2 to Agree, 3 to Disagree, and 4 to Strongly Disagree and calculating the average for each question. The results of Part II are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Results of Part II of the Student Survey**

	<b>I have problems with my writing because . . .</b>	<b>ENGL 340</b>	<b>ENGL 492</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Pct Change</b>
10.	I don't understand what the assignment is asking me to do.	3.06	3.27	0.21	7%
11.	I don't know what kind of format to use.	3.06	3.43	0.38	12%
12.	My thesis is too broad, or unclear.	2.69	2.95	0.25	9%
13.	I have trouble identifying what I'm trying to accomplish with my writing.	2.94	3.03	0.08	3%
14.	I have trouble imagining who my readers are and what their needs are.	2.92	3.43	0.52	18%
15.	I don't know how to do research.	3.06	3.35	0.30	10%
16.	I don't know how to use and document information from books and magazines.	3.08	3.43	0.35	11%
17.	I have trouble putting ideas from books into my own words.	2.92	3.43	0.52	18%
18.	I don't have enough vocabulary to discuss the ideas.	3.08	3.41	0.32	10%
19.	I don't know how to organize the material.	2.94	3.27	0.33	11%
20.	I don't know how to support my arguments.	2.97	3.41	0.43	15%
21.	My style is too simple, or repetitive.	2.92	3.22	0.30	10%
22.	There are too many grammatical errors.	3.11	3.16	0.05	2%
23.	I am not fluent enough in English to do the assignments properly.	3.58	3.65	0.07	2%
24.	I can't catch all the errors in my papers when I proofread.	2.72	2.84	0.12	4%
25.	I don't have enough time to spend on the assignment.	2.94	2.57	-0.38	-13%

The results of Part II are less straightforward than the results of Part I. For every question we would expect higher averages rather than lower averages and increases rather than decreases as students move through the program (i.e. progress from ENGL 340 to ENGL 492). These expectations are realized in student responses to most of the Part II statements. At the beginning of their program, students feel less confidence about theses and proofreading, and more confidence in their fluency in English. In response to the remaining statements, students' self-identification falls within a very narrow range (2.92-3.11).

By the end of their program, students express high levels of confidence in response to eight of the sixteen statements (averages of 3.35 or above). Students at the beginning of ENGL 492 mostly believe that they have few problems with format (question 11), audience (question 14), research (locating and using sources) (questions 15-17), evidence (question 20), fluency (question 23), and adequate vocabulary (question 18). Students express less confidence about their ability to understand assignments (question 10), organize (question 19), and use an effective style (question 21). Students express the least confidence (relatively speaking) on thesis (question 12), rhetorical purpose (question 13), grammatical correctness (question 22), and proofreading skills (question 24).

Questions 13 and 14 offer an interesting contrast. Question 13 addresses the rhetorical concept of purpose and question 14 addresses the rhetorical concept of audience. While students begin the program with approximately equal levels of confidence in their understanding of these ideas, by the end of their program they have significantly improved their confidence in their understanding of audience while their comfort with purpose has not improved.

### Evaluation of Student Writing

The committee evaluated student essays from ENGL 340 and ENGL 492. Eighteen student essays from Professor Michael Calabrese's Fall term ENGL 340 and thirteen essays from Professor Bidhan Roy's Winter term ENGL 492 were read by the committee with help from Professor Christopher Harris. A rubric was developed for the purpose of assessing the program-level student learning outcomes in rhetoric, research, and writing. (See the attachments for a copy of the rubric.) After sample scoring and discussion, two readers scored each essay in the eight categories below using a four-point scale.

1. Argument
2. Evidence
3. Audience Awareness
4. Evaluation and Use of Sources
5. Quote, Paraphrase, Summary
6. Documentation Conventions
7. Style
8. Grammar and Other Conventions

After reviewing samples from ENGL 340 and ENGL 492, it became clear that the writing tasks represented by the samples were not comparable. The ENGL 340 essays were three-page explications of short lyric poems while the ENGL 492 essays were end-of-the-term research papers. In response to these differences, the readers decided not to score the ENGL 340 essays in the “research” categories of the rubric (“Evaluation and Use of Sources,” “Quote, Paraphrase, Summary,” and “Documentation Conventions), but to score the ENGL 492 essays in these categories.

Table 3 compares the average score assigned by readers to each of the eight categories.

**Table 3: Average Scores of Sample Essays**

<b>Category</b>	<b>ENGL 340</b>	<b>ENGL 492</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Pct Change</b>
Argument	2.21	2.67	0.46	21%
Evidence	2.23	2.87	0.64	29%
Audience Awareness	2.23	2.50	0.27	12%
Evaluation and Use of Sources		2.53		
Quote, Paraphrase, Summary		2.57		
Documentation Conventions		2.67		
Style	1.97	2.73	0.76	38%
Grammar and Other Conventions	2.69	2.97	0.27	10%

The four points on the rubric correspond to levels of competency exhibited in the writing. A score of “4” denotes superior writing, “3” denotes good writing, “2” denotes adequate writing, and “1” denotes poor writing.

In all categories where comparisons are possible the average score assigned by readers increased suggesting that student writing improved. In four of the five categories scored for ENGL 340 essays, student writing was generally seen as earning a “2” on the rubric, the score denoting minimum competency. In five of the eight categories scored for ENGL 492 essays, student writing was seen as approaching “3” or good writing.

While student writing clearly improves as students progress through their undergraduate programs, the relatively low average scores assigned to ENGL 492 essays should occasion reflection. Because average scores can be deceptive, the individual scores assigned by readers to each essay were tabulated. The breakdown of scores is shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Breakdown of Scores Assigned to ENGL 492 Samples**

Category	Essays Assigned This Score			
	1 (Poor)	2 (Adequate)	3 (Good)	4 (Superior)
Argument	0	15	9	6
Evidence	0	9	16	5
Audience Awareness	0	19	9	2
Evaluation and Use of Sources	2	9	12	7
Quote, Paraphrase, Summary	0	15	13	2
Documentation Conventions	3	8	15	4
Style	0	10	18	2
Grammar and Other Conventions	0	8	18	4

Ideally all aspects of student writing would be scored either 3 or 4 by evaluators. Short of that ideal, we might as a program decide on some goal for program success, such as that seventy or eighty percent of all students would demonstrate good or superior writing in all categories. As Table 5 shows, achieving such a goal will require considerable attention and effort.

**Table 5: Percentage of Scores Assigned to ENGL 492 Samples**

Category	Essays Scored as Adequate or Poor	Essays Scored as Superior or Good
Argument	50%	50%
Evidence	30%	70%
Audience Awareness	63%	37%
Evaluation and Use of Sources	37%	63%
Quote, Paraphrase, Summary	50%	50%
Documentation Conventions	37%	63%
Style	33%	67%
Grammar and Other Conventions	27%	73%

Table 3 suggested that students have shown significant improvement as they have progressed through the program. Table 4 suggests in absolute terms that virtually all students achieve at least adequate competency in six of eight categories, and virtually all students achieve at least adequate competency in all eight categories. This achievement is tempered by the knowledge that most students begin the program already having achieved adequate competency in most if not all eight categories. Table 5 suggests that the department would be hard-pressed to meet an

alternative definition of program success that focused on a preponderance of students achieving at levels higher than minimum competency, and yet students attaining high levels of achievement is surely one of the primary goals of any program.

Regardless of program goals, the data presented above suggests that students completing the undergraduate program in English would benefit from additional attention to the aspects of their writing included in the rubric under the categories “Audience Awareness,” “Argument,” and “Quote, Paraphrase, Summary.”

### Comparison of Student Self-Assessment with Essay Scoring

As discussed earlier, when students assessed their own writing and writing process they expressed confidence with their understanding of audience, their ability to do research, their ability to paraphrase, and their knowledge of documentation conventions. They expressed less confidence in their understanding of thesis and purpose and their ability to identify errors in their writing.

The evaluation of student writing taken from the end of their undergraduate careers suggests almost the opposite. Only in the “Argument” category do the student self-assessments and the evaluation of student writing agree. Students feel they need more work in understanding how to argue effectively and this perception is supported by a review of their writing.

That same review, however, suggests that students are incorrect in their self-assessment of their understanding of audience, their ability to do research, their ability to paraphrase, their knowledge of documentation conventions, and their ability to identify error. Audience awareness emerged as the weakest aspect of student writing, followed closely by attention to appropriate use of other texts. The presence of error in student writing, however, was barely a factor. Students entering the program already possessed well-above adequate competency. Students finishing the program averaged “good” in this category and 73% of the essay scores in this category were either a “3” (good) or a “4” (superior).

## Recommendations

Based on the data presented in this report, the committee makes the following recommendations:

1. The department should consider placing greater emphasis on rhetoric-based writing instruction in the undergraduate degree program. Increased emphasis could take a variety of forms including but not limited to
  - a. Designing writing assignments that specifically address the writer's purpose, audience, and genre.
  - b. Responding to student writing with an emphasis on the rhetorical situation: What is the writer's purpose and how effective is the writer in meeting it? Who is the audience and how effectively does the writer meet their needs? How effectively does the form fulfill the purpose for this audience?
  - c. Encouraging the use of the Writing Center by English majors.
  - d. Encouraging the formation by students (possibly with faculty supervision) of reading groups, peer review groups, writing workshops and other kinds of writing communities.
  - e. Developing generic course materials on rhetoric that might be used in any course in the undergraduate program.
  - f. Adding rhetoric-based writing instruction to a specific course or to specific courses in the undergraduate program.
  - g. Adding a course in rhetoric and rhetorical theory to the undergraduate program either as an elective or a requirement.
2. The department should consider placing greater emphasis on research projects appropriate to an undergraduate degree program. Increased emphasis could take a variety of forms including but not limited to
  - a. Assigning research projects in more undergraduate courses.
  - b. Collaborating with the library to develop course-specific research portals.
  - c. Developing generic course materials on information literacy and research competencies that might be used in any course in the undergraduate program.
  - d. Adding research writing instruction to a specific course or to specific courses in the undergraduate program.
  - e. Adding an undergraduate thesis to the undergraduate program either as an elective or a requirement.

## Attachments

### Beginning of Term Survey

**Instructions:** Please answer the following questions. All data collected contains no identifying information and will be used by the Department of English to assess the effectiveness of the program.

#### Part I

The following statements use the scale Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Please circle the response that comes closest to your feelings.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Writing helps me think more clearly.	1	2	3	4
2. Writing helps me make sense of the subject matter in my courses.	1	2	3	4
3. I feel that good writing skills are important for success in my chosen field.	1	2	3	4
4. My high school and/or previous college work has adequately prepared me for the writing I have to do as a college student.	1	2	3	4
5. Students learn more in courses where writing is required.	1	2	3	4
6. I work hard on my writing.	1	2	3	4
7. I am a good writer.	1	2	3	4
8. If I didn't have to write for school, I wouldn't write anything.	1	2	3	4
9. I have confidence in my ability to handle most writing assignments.	1	2	3	4

#### Part II

The following statements use the scale Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Please circle the response that comes closest to your feelings.

<b>I have problems with my writing because</b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
10. I don't understand what the assignment is asking me to do.	1	2	3	4
11. I don't know what kind of format to use.	1	2	3	4
12. My thesis is too broad, or unclear.	1	2	3	4
13. I have trouble identifying what I'm trying to accomplish with my writing.	1	2	3	4
14. I have trouble imagining who my readers are and what their needs are.	1	2	3	4
15. I don't know how to do research.	1	2	3	4
16. I don't know how to use and document information from books and magazines.	1	2	3	4
17. I have trouble putting ideas from books into my own words.	1	2	3	4
18. I don't have enough vocabulary to discuss the ideas.	1	2	3	4
19. I don't know how to organize the material.	1	2	3	4
20. I don't know how to support my arguments.	1	2	3	4
21. My style is too simple, or repetitive.	1	2	3	4
22. There are too many grammatical errors.	1	2	3	4
23. I am not fluent enough in English to do the assignments properly.	1	2	3	4
24. I can't catch all the errors in my papers when I proofread.	1	2	3	4
25. I don't have enough time to spend on the assignment.	1	2	3	4

Undergraduate Program Assessment: Rhetoric, Research, and Writing

Assessment Rubric: Rhetoric, Research, and Writing

	Superior 4	Good 3	Adequate 2	Poor 1
<b>Rhetoric</b>				
Argument	<p>The argument is clear, sophisticated, and insightful.</p> <p>The essay is consistently and effectively focused on the argument at both the paragraph and discourse levels.</p> <p>The essay is logically and appropriately organized with each part clearly contributing to the purpose.</p> <p>The argument is clearly and effectively developed through use of specific details, explicit argumentation, and illustrative cases.</p>	<p>The argument is clear and thoughtful.</p> <p>The essay is generally focused on the argument at both the paragraph and discourse levels, though there might be moments where focus lapses.</p> <p>The essay is logically organized with each part clearly or implicitly contributing to the purpose.</p> <p>The argument is developed through use of specific details and examples, though the relation between evidence and claim might occasionally be implicit.</p>	<p>The argument is somewhat clear, but might be perfunctory or obvious.</p> <p>The essay is not always focused on the argument, with significant lapses of focus either at the paragraph or at the discourse level.</p> <p>The essay is organized mechanically or the relation between parts is not clear.</p> <p>The argument makes some use of specific details and examples, though the relation between evidence and claim might be implicit or the evidence might be inappropriate or irrelevant to the claim.</p>	<p>The argument is unclear, is inappropriate, or is missing.</p> <p>The essay lacks focus to the extent that the reader is unable to determine the purpose of individual parts.</p> <p>The essay is inappropriately organized or the organization cannot be determined.</p> <p>The argument is not supported with evidence, or the evidence used might be inappropriate.</p>
Evidence				
Audience Awareness	<p>The essay demonstrates the writer's full awareness of and effective responses to the needs of an audience through appropriate development that acknowledges and addresses the possibility of disagreement and counter-claims. Furthermore, the writer maintains a consistent and appropriate tone/voice and makes effective use of transitions, topic sentences (or other paragraph focusing strategies), and other "readerly" cues.</p>	<p>The essay demonstrates the writer's awareness of and need to respond to the needs of an audience. The essay might include some acknowledgement of counter-claims, be mostly consistent and generally appropriate in tone/voice, and make use of transitions, topic sentences (or other paragraph focusing strategies), and other "readerly" cues.</p>	<p>The essay contains some evidence of the writer's awareness of and need to respond to the needs of an audience. The essay might not include any acknowledgement of counter-claims, be inconsistent or occasionally inappropriate in tone/voice, or make limited use of transitions, topic sentences (or other paragraph focusing strategies), and other "readerly" cues.</p>	<p>The essay contains little or no evidence of the writer's awareness of and need to respond to the needs of an audience. The essay will probably not include any acknowledgement of counter-claims, be wholly inconsistent or inappropriate in tone/voice, and/or make limited or no use of transitions, topic sentences (or other paragraph focusing strategies), and other "readerly" cues.</p>

Undergraduate Program Assessment: Rhetoric, Research, and Writing

	Superior 4	Good 3	Adequate 2	Poor 1
<b>Research</b>				
Evaluation and Use of Sources	Research sources are accurately represented and made integral to the argument. The use of sources moves beyond mere claim-and-support to a thoughtful engagement with diverse and differing critical perspectives.	Research sources are relevant, appropriate, and accurately represented with some attention to differing opinions and/or the range of critical perspectives.	Research sources are mostly relevant and appropriate, but limited to those that support the writer's argument. Little or no attention is given to different opinions, or such opinions are given only cursory treatment.	Research sources are irrelevant, inappropriate, inadequately or inaccurately represented, or missing altogether.
Quote, Paraphrase, Summary	Paraphrases and direct quotes are clear, accurate, and fully and effectively contextualized. Summary is used judiciously and effectively. The use of sources is clearly integral to the argument.	Paraphrases and direct quotes are clear, accurate, and appropriately contextualized. Summary is used appropriately. Sources are well-integrated into the essay.	Paraphrases and direct quotes are mostly clear and accurate with some minimal or implicit attempt at contextualization. Summary might be over-used. Sources are mechanically or somewhat poorly integrated into the essay.	Paraphrases, direct quotes, and summary might be unclear, inaccurate, and/or not contextualized at all. Sources are poorly integrated or not integrated at all into the essay.
Documentation Conventions	Sources are documented consistently and appropriately with some attention to using documentation conventions to enhance readability and contribute to the argument.	Sources are documented consistently and appropriately.	Sources are documented, though there might be some inconsistency in form or neglect of conventions.	Sources are not documented, or the documentation might be so confused or incomplete as to render it useless.
<b>Writing</b>				
Style	The writing is very clear and effective, utilizing a broad range of stylistic choices to engage the reader. The writing is marked by its effective <i>ethos</i> created through felicitous diction, an engaging tone, and rhetorical sophistication.	The writing is clear and effective, and generally interesting to the reader, though at times somewhat undistinguished. The writing is marked by appropriate diction, an effective tone, and some rhetorical sophistication.	The writing is mostly clear and at times effective, but not particularly engaging. Limited vocabulary and lack of rhetorical sophistication might lead to overly repetitious diction and repetitive sentence patterns.	The writing is unclear and at times unintelligible. Misuse of words, lack of syntactic variety, and inattention to the needs of readers make the essay difficult to read.
Grammar and other conventions	The essay contains few if any errors and is presented conscientiously and professionally.	The essay contains some minor errors, and might show limited awareness of the importance of professional presentation.	The essay contains errors, some of which are serious or frequent enough to confuse or distract the reader. These errors and/or problems with format suggest the writer is indifferent to or unaware of the effect of error on <i>ethos</i> .	The essay contains errors, some of which are so serious that meaning is lost. The presentation is so poor that the writer's <i>ethos</i> is severely damaged.