

TO: CWRU Writing Faculty
FROM: T. Kenny Fountain (Director of the Writing Program)
Megan Jewell (Director of Writing Resource Center & Portfolio Committee Co-Chair)
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SUBJECT: **SAGES Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee Report: Summary**
DATE: August 21, 2017

Executive Summary

The 2017 SAGES Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee, consisting of 14 faculty members from across the university, read and evaluated 1115 student portfolios submitted between May 2016 and May 2017.

The committee's overall holistic assessment found 76% of students' portfolios to be Proficient or Acceptable, which is higher than the previous two years' numbers (2015: 68%, 2016, 73%; Table 14). The committee found that 19% of students were writing at the Proficient, or highest, level. **In the holistic scoring section, 83% of students scored Proficient or Acceptable in terms of Engagement**, a measure indicating an awareness of audience as well as the successful presentation of a problem or question. **The highest-scoring category, Readability, was assessed at 81% Proficient or Acceptable** (see Table 14), with only 2% of portfolios falling in the Unacceptable range. The criterion of Readability has been in previous years students' consistent strength.

Points of interest and concern to the committee are as follows:

1. The 2017 holistic results, as in previous years, suggest strong positive programmatic influence on student writing, but continue to show **students' lowest scoring Proficient scores are in the areas of Argument and Evidence** (Table 14). The committee found that students more frequently **tend to summarize, rather than analyze, sources** and use them mostly to **provide factual information rather than to form synthesized arguments**.
2. The committee found a **strong correlation between students' evidence use and the types of sources they cited**. Students who cited more peer-reviewed scholarly sources were more often ranked at the Proficient and Acceptable levels than students who did not incorporate peer-reviewed sources in their essays. The committee concluded that students in SAGES courses should be given more opportunities to work with peer-reviewed scholarly sources, and they should receive additional writing instruction on the written genres that most often include such sources.
3. In the reflective essays, the committee found that a large number of **students did not directly connect the communication skills and critical thinking skills they build in SAGES to their work in Departmental Seminars, Capstone Courses, post-graduate work, and in the workplace**. Thus, the committee concluded that students would benefit from additional instruction about the SAGES curriculum and its outcomes as well as the transferability of the communication and thinking skills students develop in SAGES courses.
4. **Therefore**, the committee's major recommendation is that students must become more adept at their critical use of sources, not only to better analyze and incorporate scholarly, peer-reviewed sources, but also to consider how they might use evidence from those sources in ways other than providing factual support for their claims.
5. **The committee also noted that in all categories the majority of percentages remained the same or minimally varied (less than 5% maximum) from both the 2015 and 2016 findings**. This three- year consistency in assessment prompted two major committee recommendations: (1) to explore the establishment of programmatic benchmarks and targets for writing in First-Year and University Seminars; and (2) to conduct a smaller, supplemental review of instructor syllabi (and perhaps other course materials) to gather insights on the classroom context for student performance, particularly in the rubric categories of Engagement, Argument, and Evidence.

The 2017 Portfolio Assessment Committee: Jean Burns (Biology), Cara Byrne (English), Robert Calton (English), Christine Cano (Modern Languages), Angela Ciccia (Psychological Sciences), Ana Codita (English), Corbin Covault (Physics), Colin Drummond (Engineering), Narcisz Fejes (English), John Flores (History), Jane Marek (Nursing), Vasu Ramanujam (Weatherhead)

Recommendations for Seminar Leaders

As was the case in 2015 and 2016, this year's recommendations for writing instruction primarily focus on strengthening instruction in argumentative writing with a specific emphasis on using peer-reviewed scholarly materials persuasively as evidence. Committee members felt that more classroom time should be exclusively devoted to teaching source/evidence use and other argumentative skills, such as thesis construction.

The 2017 committee wishes to stress the following best practices as continued recommendations from 2015 and 2016: inclusion of SAGES learning outcomes on syllabi and discussion of them with the class, the use of recommended writing texts, sequenced writing assignments leading to the research essay, and stronger collaborations with writing instructors, the Writing Resource Center (WRC), and Portfolio Coordinator.

Committee members wish to make the following recommendations to instructors:

1. **Transfer:** Instructors should, beginning in First-Year Seminars and continuing in University Seminars, emphasize the concept of transferability, specifically the ways in which the communication and critical thinking skills that students build in SAGES are directly relevant to their work in Departmental Seminars and Capstone Courses, disciplinary courses, post-graduate work, and in the workplace. To those ends, instructors should devote some classroom time to reviewing the SAGES program outcomes and/or employ its writing rubric in writing assessment.
2. **Peer-Reviewed Scholarly Sources:** Students should be exposed to peer-reviewed scholarly sources, and they should be given more opportunities to read, use, and cite those types of sources. Given the strong correlation found between Proficient essays and the use of peer-reviewed scholarly sources, the committee believes that students' exposure to them will strengthen their abilities in Engagement, Argument, and Evidence.
3. **Portfolio Requirements:** Instructors should mention the portfolio requirement more frequently to their students. Additionally, in teaching the value of reflection and/or other writing skills, such as attention to audience, instructors should remind students that reflection is more than summarizing the content of the papers or claiming to have improved in critical thinking, but being able to demonstrate such skills to a reader.
4. **Structure of Arguments:** Instructors should help students understand that arguments are composed of arguable **claims**, supported by a plausible set of **reasons**, which in turn are based on clear and appropriate **evidence**. Instructors should emphasize that claims need to be clearly and precisely articulated, and that reasons and evidence need to be analyzed and synthesized into the argument rather than merely used to provide factual information or insufficiently support a writer's claims.
5. **Counterarguments & Alternative Positions:** Additionally, instructors should also help students see the benefit of presenting and addressing counterclaims, opposing viewpoints, alternative positions, and counterevidence. Instructors should remind students that addressing counterarguments does not weaken, but, rather, can usefully strengthen their own positions.
6. **Thesis Statements:** Instructors should spend class time instructing students how to write appropriate thesis statements that clearly articulate the overriding claim or major argument of the essay. The committee recommends providing students with models of thesis statements in order to make the conventions of academic writing more explicit.

The full report is available at <http://writing.case.edu/documents/sages-portfolio-reports>