

The College of Wooster
Critical Writing Assessment Plan
February 19, 2008

I. Introduction

Writing has a variety of purposes and there are a variety of writing styles. This plan is designed to assess “critical writing.” It is intentionally structured to produce a significant amount of data in order to answer the following primary question:

Do students improve in their critical writing ability as they advance through the curriculum?

There are three sets of reasons why this approach to assessing writing at the College is valuable: 1) “critical writing” is an important aspect of Wooster’s conception of liberal arts education; 2) this approach avoids many practical problems that arise in attempting to assess writing; and 3) this approach, while initially quite simple, has the potential to foster deeper analysis of students’ writing abilities.

1) *Critical Writing at Wooster:*

While Wooster students engage in many forms and styles of writing, it is useful to focus assessment, at least initially, upon “critical writing” because this form of writing is crucial to Wooster’s understanding of a liberal arts education. Wooster’s curriculum from the FYS to I.S. is designed to foster critical and independent inquiry.

One of the cornerstones of Wooster’s curriculum is the *First Year Seminars in Critical Inquiry*. The Learning Objectives for FYS exemplify the connection that the College recognizes between critical thinking and critical writing:

Students are expected to develop the abilities, especially the writing skills, that are essential to critical thinking. These abilities include interpreting complex texts, constructing an argument, supporting the argument with evidence, and defending the argument orally. Critical thinking also requires the ability to appreciate and critique multiple perspectives, including one’s own. (*A Wooster Education*).

The Learning Objectives of FYS also indicate the importance of developing each student’s ability to construct an argument or thesis, support it with evidence, consider alternative perspectives, and critically reflect upon the various perspectives.

At the other end of Wooster’s curriculum is our capstone experience — *Independent Study*. The central goal of I.S. is independence of thought, and it is constructed in relationship to a disciplinary context. Nevertheless the Learning Objectives of I.S. again reflect the importance of critical inquiry and the sharing of ideas with the larger community, many times in the form of a written thesis:

The kind of independence which Wooster seeks to inspire is epitomized in the program of Independent Study, in which students are required to demonstrate their capacity for critical inquiry, their ability to create new knowledge in a disciplinary context, and the necessary skills to share their learning with a larger community. (*A Wooster Education*).

2) *Practical Issues:*

This method of assessing writing will measure “serious writing” (i.e., writing as part of a course grade) in a consistent manner and not “significantly” increase faculty workload. In addition, an operational definition of critical writing is easy to specify. (Please see Appendix A.) In contrast, defining what counts as “creative writing,” as some faculty involved in the Teagle Project can affirm, is quite difficult. Moreover, this method of assessing writing will immediately provide a statistical snapshot of current student writing across the curriculum and throughout the student body.

3) *Potential for Future Analysis:*

Certainly the first questions we can ask will be the simplest: Does writing improve as students advance through the curriculum? Seniors should thus have on average the best writing. If they don’t, we can begin to tease apart the data to see where the problems may lie.

This method will result in hundreds of student essays being assessed annually from students in just about every category of the student body (e.g., first-year men, science majors, or women humanities students). Because it provides a rich database with a diverse set of variables it creates the opportunity to investigate secondary questions related to differences between groups of students. In addition, repeating this process over the years will give us data with “time significance.” Eventually we can ask questions such as whether our students are writing better now than they did five years ago, or if certain subgroups among the students have improved in response to particular initiatives.

The result of this course-embedded assessment methodology will be continual cross-sectional assessment of student critical writing at the College.

II. Student Learning Goals

This assessment is designed to measure the following fundamental goals of critical writing as students progress through the writing curriculum at the College.

1. Thesis: Identification and Construction

Students will be able to identify and formulate theses.

2. Evidence: Collection and Presentation

Students will be able to present and evaluate evidence effectively.

3. Communication: Organization and Expression

Students will be able to develop, organize, and express ideas in an organized, clear, and interesting manner.

III. Methods of Assessment

Students’ critical writing will be assessed using a direct measure. A rubric with a seven-point scale from 0 to 6 has been developed with seven traits: thesis, organization, argumentation, critical reflection, clarity, grammar and mechanics, and style. (Please see Appendix A.) The following methodology will be employed to assess critical writing.

- a. The Dean of the Faculty (DOF) will identify a set of courses at the college that enroll a broad cross-section of students in terms of class rank and major. These courses should have no prerequisites, be taught at least once a year, and preferably but not necessarily have high enrollments (30 or more). Courses that come to mind include introductory, survey, and other non-majors courses.
- b. The DOF will contact faculty who teach the identified courses, describe the critical writing assessment project, and invite them to participate. A list of faculty who agree to participate and the courses that they teach will be given to the Director of Writing (DOW).
- c. The goal for the 2008-09 academic year is to collect approximately 200 essays to assess, 100 in the Fall and 100 in the Spring semester.
- d. The DOW will provide the faculty with the general guidelines of the assignment and the Critical Writing Rubric that will be used in the assessment. The assignment should be completed by the twelfth week of classes each semester.
- e. The DOW will work with the Director of Web Services to create an online version of the Critical Writing Rubric and a corresponding electronic data file for the scoring of the rubric.
- f. In each course there will be a critical essay assignment constructed by the professor to be graded as part of the regular course material. The target length of the essay will be two pages or about 900 words. The essay will be generated by a prompting question designed to provoke a reasoned argument by the student. The essay will have course-specific content, but it will still be possible for an outsider to follow the argument and assess the organization, argumentation, critical reflection, clarity, style, and grammar.
- g. The faculty member for the course will have copies of the ungraded essays delivered to the DOW, who will ensure that each essay is given a unique number and that the name of the student and course from which the essay was collected is recorded in a database along with this number. The student name is then removed from the essay for blind review.
- h. The anonymous essays are delivered to members of the Writing Advisory Board (WAB) or some other trained body of faculty and staff for assessment using the online Critical Writing Rubric. Each paper will be assessed by two readers and the scores for each category will be averaged.
- i. Within a week of the end of each semester, eight to ten faculty members will gather to assess the essays in a single day. Writing Advisory Board

faculty members will be invited first, and then other faculty will be invited. In the morning, faculty members will be trained in the use of the rubric, and essays will be scored in the afternoon. Each participating faculty member will receive a \$150 stipend, and coffee and lunch will be provided.

- j. The WAB will develop a set of criteria to determine whether two sets of scores on the same essay are too divergent, requiring a third reader. The scoring will be monitored in real time to determine which essays will require a third reader or whether a recalibration session is necessary. The Director of Educational Assessment (DEA) will monitor the scores and assign a third reader if the scores are too divergent. If a third reader is required, then an average of the three scores will be calculated. The electronic file with the scores will be forwarded to the DEA.
- k. The DOW will also request that the Registrar add the following data items to the database of course names, unique student identifiers, and student names: gender, race, class year, gpa, major (if available), class rank, and any other data item that may help with further analysis. The Registrar’s Office will forward the completed database to the DEA, who will merge this file with the file with the essay scores.
- l. A summary report will be written by the DEA in consultation with the DOW, who will oversee the distribution of the report to EPC, the Assessment Committee, the WAB, and the faculty who teach the courses that are included in the critical writing assessment project.

IV. Feedback Mechanism

Based on the findings of the summary report, the Educational Policy Committee will work with the Director of Writing and the Writing Advisory Board to make writing curriculum decisions regarding the teaching of critical writing at the College. If changes are warranted, these changes will be communicated to the faculty.

Figure 1: Chart Mapping Measure, Goals, and Feedback Mechanism

Critical Writing Assessment					
Measure	Goals			Courses	Uses of Information
	1	2	3		
Critical Writing Rubric	X	X	X	Introductory and Non-Majors Courses Identified by EPC	EPC and WAB will use the findings to recommend changes to the writing curriculum and communicate these changes with faculty.

Appendix A: Critical Writing Assessment Rubric
(Blind Review)

Paper Code: _____

Date Reviewed: _____

Reader : _____ (Initials)

1. Thesis

The essay contains a clear thesis.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

2. Organization

The essay has logically ordered paragraphs.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

3. Argumentation

The essay provides good reason(s) for accepting the thesis.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

4. Critical Reflection

The essay acknowledges objections to the thesis and provides appropriate replies.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

5. Clarity

The essay presents ideas and arguments with clarity and precision.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

6. Grammar and Mechanics

The essay uses correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

7. Style

The essay appropriately integrates elements such as vocabulary, phrasing, and punctuation to support the thesis in an engaging and interesting manner.

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____ 6 _____

6 = No problems in this area so that quality is truly exceptional.
5 = Only a few minor problems so that quality is very good.
4 = Only a few problems so that quality is good.
3 = Some problems, but they do not markedly detract from overall quality.
2 = A sufficient number of problems so that quality is low.
1 = A number of significant problems so that quality is very low.
0 = So many problems so that quality is severely undermined.