

## Assessment Redesign and Programmatic Identity at Valdosta State University

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In this case study, I outline a redesigned assessment plan for the first-year writing program at Valdosta State University. Previous program assessments focused on single criterion writing issues, such as comma placement, MLA formatting, or source integration. As a newly hired first-year writing program coordinator, I designed a holistic assessment that would allow the Composition Committee to assess broader categories, such as rhetorical knowledge, as defined by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0). This case study outlines the redesign process and considers assessment as a method for establishing programmatic identity within writing programs.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A fundamental course within VSU's core curriculum, ENGL 1101 is assessed every academic year by the Composition Committee, under the guidance of the General Education Council. One challenge in designing an assessment plan for a program is negotiating faculty attitudes and assumptions about the role of assessment. For those uninvolved in the assessment process, it can be easy to dismiss assessment as a metaphorical box to be checked or as unnecessary oversight of instructors' teaching. However, my main objective in redesigning our ENGL 1101 assessment was to reimagine assessment as a way to establish a stronger identity as a writing program. Moreover, moving away from a single criterion assessment method allowed us to learn more about what was being taught in the program and how to better establish a recognizable curriculum across all sections of ENGL 1101.

In previous semesters, there were no required assignments or standardized curricula in place within the writing program. Instructors benefit from the academic freedom this curricular flexibility allows, but as a program, it was clear some standardization was necessary in order to complete a holistic assessment. As a writing program coordinator, I was wary of mandating a standardized curriculum within a program that has traditionally allowed instructors to have complete freedom in designing and selecting which assignments they teach in their courses. To negotiate these competing needs of the program and the instructors who teach within it, I designed a common assignment (a rhetorical analysis essay) and supporting materials to accompany the assignment, including a glossary of terms, scaffolding activities, rubric, and reflective assignments. The rhetorical analysis essay was chosen because most instructors were already teaching some variation of rhetorical analysis in their classes. In this way, our newly designed assessment plan fulfilled the needs of core curriculum assessment and Gateways to Completion initiatives, but through collaboration with these programs, it also allowed us to establish our own autonomous identity as a program with specified outcomes and assignment parameters.

### METHODS

As stated previously, in Summer 2020 a common assignment was designed for the purpose of program assessment. Prior to this assessment redesign, there were no standard assignments or standard curricula mandated within all sections of ENGL 1101. This common assignment, a rhetorical analysis essay, was chosen because most faculty in the department were already teaching some variation of rhetorical analysis in their courses. During Summer 2020, I introduced the common assignment to instructors. Sample assignment sheets were provided, along with the rubric used for the assessment, a glossary of the key terms that should appear in the analysis, and an outline for the assignment. Instructors also received access to a digital repository of scaffolding materials and supporting readings. Instructors were not required to use the sample assignment sheets provided. Instead, we opted to let them alter the assignment as they desired, as long as the assignment employed the rhetorical terms in the provided glossary. The common assignment was designed as an effort to begin establishing curricular coherence in ENGL 1101 without encroaching upon the academic freedom of individual instructors. All instructors were free to sequence the assignment within their course as they saw fit.

Data was collected at the end of Fall 2020. All faculty teaching one or more sections of ENGL 1101 were asked to select three rhetorical analysis samples at random from each section of ENGL 1101. A Graduate Assistant removed all identifying information from samples and organized samples by section letter. From these submitted samples, 94 samples were randomly selected for a 90% confidence rating. I ensured at least one section from each instructor was represented in the total 94 samples. Immediately following the Fall 2020 semester, the essays were scored by four members of the Composition Committee. Each essay received blind scores from two separate raters, after which essays with a discrepancy between summative scores were assigned to and rated by a third reader/committee member. All essays were read in their entirety and scored using the Rhetorical Analysis rubric developed in consultation with the Composition Committee.

## OUTCOMES

The outcomes of our assessment were useful in understanding our varying levels of student proficiency, as I explain below. But the outcomes were also useful in identifying ways the writing program can better establish programmatic identity through curricular redesign and continued holistic assessment of that curriculum. Table 1 provides an analysis of assessment data for a total of 50 sections of ENGL 1101, taught by 25 instructors, and including 94 student essays. Tables 2 and 3 provide analysis based on course modality (face-to-face and online).

**Table 1**

*Analysis of Assessment Data from 94 Student Essays Across 50 sections of ENGL 1101*

Category	Number	Percentage
Exceeds Expectations	16	17%
Meets Expectations	30	31.9%
Approaches Expectations	38	40.4%
Fails to Meet Expectations	10	10.6%

†90% confidence level

**Table 2**  
*Analysis by Modality (Face-to Face) Based on 56 Submissions*

Category	Number	Percentage
Exceeds Expectations	6	10.7%
Meets Expectations	21	37.5%
Approaches Expectations	24	42.9%
Fails to Meet Expectations	5	8.9%

**Table 3**  
*Analysis by Modality (Online) Based on 38 Submissions*

Category	Number	Percentage
Exceeds Expectations	10	26.3%
Meets Expectations	9	23.7%
Approaches Expectations	14	36.8%
Fails to Meet Expectations	5	13.2%

As evidenced in the analysis of data by modality (Tables 2 and 3), there was little variation in proficiency between face-to-face instruction and online. Regardless of modality, most essays ranged between B-level (Meets Expectations) and C-level (Approaches Expectations), with the majority of essays falling into the C-level category. There are several factors to consider in the analysis of these results, however.

Due to the pandemic, there were not as many opportunities for faculty training sessions as there might have been in a normal semester. Additional training would have better helped faculty understand the common assignment in ways that reading the instructional materials did not. Without the added stress of a pandemic, more and better compliance with assessment procedures might have occurred. It should also be mentioned that “face-to-face” instruction varies greatly in the context of the Fall 2020 semester. These face-to-face classes ranged from flex, hybrid, and socially distanced classrooms where the normal collaborative pedagogy characteristic of first-year writing courses could not take place. For example, these classes typically rely on grouped, active learning strategies and discussions rather than lectures. Social distancing and mask-wearing made this kind of active learning challenging within face-to-face classes. Therefore, designating these courses as “face-to-face” does not capture the complexity of instructional practice or the constraints faced by both students and instructors. In addition, there was an enrollment surge among first-year students in Fall 2020.

## PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

To ensure that there is alignment between the objectives of ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102, the composition committee will also implement and assess a common assignment for ENGL 1102 this coming academic year. This assignment will encompass the major outcomes of the ENGL 1102 course: research and citation. The lessons learned from our ENGL 1101 assessment will be essential in introducing this new assessment plan to faculty. More training and early implementation will be necessary in order to avoid some of the limitations of our previous ENGL 1101 assessment. Now that the pandemic restrictions have been lifted, there are more faculty teaching and working on campus. This will make training sessions easier to conduct, and it will also help us better establish community among our first-year composition faculty. These efforts are made in an attempt to help our faculty see the role assessment plays in establishing a programmatic identity that is recognizable to the university and to our incoming and current students.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The assessment revealed great variation in how faculty understand and teach rhetorical analysis in first-year writing. For example, some samples revealed that literary texts were assigned as a part of this project; this is not aligned with the goals of a rhetorical analysis project. Although scaffolding materials and instructional materials were provided for instructors to use, more instruction could be provided for the implementation of these resources within courses. More work could be done to help instructors and students understand rhetorical knowledge in the context of the composition class. Foregrounding rhetorical knowledge as a major outcome of the composition course ensures that students view these courses as more than an introduction to grammar and style. While mechanics and basic writing practices are central to writing courses, these courses also provide foundational knowledge that can be transferred to a range of writing contexts, both inside and outside of the classroom. By teaching students that instances of everyday writing and speaking are in fact public rhetoric, we also help connect the classroom to the world beyond it.

The collected data suggest there is a need to move gradually toward curricular coherence as a writing program. A more standard curriculum could in turn help us create a stronger and more visible programmatic identity. The various essays submitted for assessment ranged in length, development, topic, scope, and demonstration of rhetorical knowledge. Such variation is representative of the variation of instruction students are receiving in first-year writing. Students may struggle to transfer knowledge from ENGL 1101 to ENGL 1102 (and to other courses) if we do not ensure that they are receiving a coherent curriculum across all sections of each course.

Instructors have a right to academic freedom, but students should also receive a similar (though not identical) experience in all sections of ENGL 1101 and ENGL 1102. Suggestions for mitigating this variation might include a universal textbook required of all sections; currently, instructors are free to select their own textbooks. A universal textbook could also further the goal of better establishing programmatic identity.

Additionally, the parameters of all common assignments developed moving forward should be more well-defined (word count, supporting materials, rubrics, assignment sheets). Instructors were given flexibility with this common assignment, and this resulted in a lot of discrepant scoring among raters. For example, it was difficult to score a shorter essay high in terms of analytical engagement, because engagement usually involves sustained development that cannot be reached in two pages. As a long-term goal, we should plan to develop a range of syllabi from which instructors can choose. These syllabi could vary in theme but would move through the same three basic skills: personal/literacy narrative, rhetorical analysis, argument, for example. Standardizing the curriculum on a small scale like this would make training incoming instructors easier as well. Providing a range of syllabi from which to choose would allow instructors some freedom in their curricular choices, but it would also better ensure curricular coherence across sections.