

Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report Fall 2005

Number of Readers:	23
Number of Portfolios:	312
Number of Papers:	973
Number of Portfolios w/ 2 submissions:	110
Number of Portfolios w/ 3 submissions:	47
Number of Portfolios w/ 4 submissions:	155

Method:

Volunteers were solicited from the faculty and staff. Readers were required to be full-time at Eastern, to have completed a master's degree or higher, and to teach at least one undergraduate course each year. Twenty-three readers were trained at a 1 ½-day workshop by Dr. Robert O'Brien Hokanson, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Communication Ability Department at Alverno College. Readers came from all four colleges, the School of Continuing Education, the Center for Academic Support and Achievement, and Booth Library. Readers were:

Ronan Bernas, Psychology
Kim Black, Bachelor of General Studies
Rosemary Buck, English
Melanie Burns, Family and Consumer Sciences
Janet Cosbey, Sociology/Anthropology
Tim Croy, Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education
Jonelle DePetro, Philosophy
Jeff Duck, Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education
Carol Jean Dudley, English
Jerry Eisenhour, Theater Arts
Rose Gong, Secondary Education
Karla Kennedy-Hagen, Family and Consumer Sciences
Zhiwei Liu, Biological Sciences
Gail Lockart, Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education
Wendy Long, Center for Academic Support and Achievement
Daiva Markelis, English
Bill Slough, Mathematics and Computer Sciences
LeAnn Smith, English
Jeff Snell, Management
Scott Tremain, Chemistry
Gordon Tucker, Biological Sciences
Richard Wilkinson, Family and Consumer Sciences
Bob Wiseman, Booth Library

At the training, readers were urged to look at writing patterns across the portfolios rather than focusing on each individual document submitted to the portfolios. The reading

guide asks readers to provide an assessment of writing ability across seven aspects of writing: focus/purpose, organization, development, audience, style, mechanics, and sources.

Readers were given access to a secure web site and were assigned to read 13-14 portfolios that were chosen at random from the completed portfolios. A sample of 10% of the completed portfolios were read; readers were given a month to read their portfolios. Dr. O'Brien Hokanson developed a reader's guide to help direct the reading of the portfolios. After reading their set of portfolios, readers were asked to complete a reader's observation sheet and to attend one of four focus groups to discuss student writing as displayed by the papers in the portfolios.

The qualitative data that follows represents the discussions at the focus groups as well as information taken from the reader's guides and observation sheets; all information has been collated and summarized by the Director of the Center for Academic Support and Achievement. The percentages given for each assessment of the various areas of writing are taken from a compilation of scores given by the readers for each portfolio, not each document. The following data are divided into the categories assessed by the readers and their impressions of the portfolios as a whole, the potential uses for the data in terms of improving the curriculum/pedagogy, and their ideas for changes to the EWP itself. Where appropriate, readers' written and verbal comments have been quoted to support the general conclusions that have been drawn.

Portfolios Overall

Strong Portfolios: 26%

Adequate Portfolios: 53%

Weak Portfolios: 21%

In looking at the levels of submissions across the portfolios, readers noted that in portfolios with four submissions, the first submission was likely to be the strongest paper in terms of all aspects of writing. The weakest papers were likely to come from the senior seminars. "There was just more depth to the first submissions, and there was a lot more research put into them. But, it seemed predominantly the fourth submission was weak. You could almost tell a paper was going to come from a senior seminar because it was short, it was rarely very lengthy, and many times it was a list of things," commented one reader.

Several readers liked that the portfolios contain different levels of papers. Different levels were "where we saw some depth in their freshman and sophomore levels. It would be boring to read the same levels all the time. The fourth submission was typically the lightweight one," explained a reader.

Several readers also indicated that it was difficult to assess papers that were two pages or less. “When it was short, it was hard to discern if it was good. At least when I had three or four pages I could see what their style really was.”

Most readers found that the writing in the portfolios showed that Eastern students can write adequately while a few were strong writers and a few displayed weak writing. “Overall, EIU students can write. They’re not perfect, but they can write. And there were some that were stellar. They just had a finesse. They had writing down from the freshman class through the senior submission. But I only had one portfolio that the student just didn’t have a good English base. You really had to struggle to find out what they were writing about.” Another reader concurred, “Overall, the portfolios were mostly average. There was more variety than I would have thought. They seem more comfortable with writing than I’ve seen in the past. I’d like to think people are taking writing as a routine thing because they like it and not because they have to.” Another reader agreed, but commented that student writing is “adequate but there’s a lot of room for growth. It’s not worse than other places I’ve been. Maybe we should be giving harder assignments.”

Overall, readers felt that more portfolios fell between adequate and strong than adequate and weak. “I don’t think students see the writing process as important, that they are thinking ‘I’m on my way to becoming a better writer.’ I think it’s more were you [their professors] satisfied?” A colleague agreed, and noted, “I kept asking myself is this the best they can do? Did they choose their best paper to turn in?” Readers were mixed on whether it was important for students to submit their best papers or their most typical papers.

The sections that follow discuss the strengths and weaknesses readers found in portfolios by area of writing.

Focus/Purpose

Strong: 26%
Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout

Adequate: 53%
Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions

Weak: 21%
Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose

Creating a sense of purpose or sustaining a focus for a piece of writing were traits that readers found to be adequate to strong. “Most of my portfolios had a clear and consistent focus; a few were strong and one was weak. This tells me that students understand the role of the thesis statement and the importance of making sure all statements in the paper directly correlate to that thesis statement,” explained one reader.

Some students could create a sense of purpose from the beginning through the entire paper; however, many either established a focus at the beginning of the paper but then did not mention the purpose of the writing again or they waited until the reader had read the whole document to be clear about why they were writing. Readers commented that for the most part they could tell where a paper was going in the first few sentences or could see a purpose after reading the paper in its entirety. “Most submissions had strong sense of purpose. Many were focused,” remarked one reader.

Some readers indicated that certain papers were difficult to follow because readers did not know what the assignment was. However, one reader noted that, “I was able to make sense of the purpose of writing as it stood on its own—more than I thought that I would.” Another reader commented that after reading several portfolios, he could see how different students were responding to what appeared to be the same assignment.

Organization

Strong: 25%

Consistent use of structure in ways that enhance presentation of ideas/information

Adequate: 54%

Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure

Weak: 21%

Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization

Focus groups were split on the topic of organization. Two groups found organization not to be a significant problem across several portfolios although they did note that the structure tended to be relatively elementary using markers such as “first,” “second,” “third,” and so forth, rather than more sophisticated methods of transition. These readers also agreed that portfolios with only two submissions tended to have weaker papers in terms of organization. Portfolios with four submissions showed a greater ability to structure their ideas.

The other two groups found several problems with organization including problems with paragraphing, a tendency to ramble and go off on tangents, and not providing direction for readers in terms of lacking strong thesis statements or topic sentences throughout the paper. Making strong transitions was also a problem for many students. Papers that were comparison/contrasts were often weak in the analysis of the ways in which the items/ideas/topics/events that were being compared and contrasted were similar or different. Readers surmised that students seemed to be writing without outlines to support their organizational structure. Some papers seem to be padded in order to reach a length requirement. The groups that found organization to be a major problem indicated that the majority of portfolios were weak to adequate in structuring their papers.

Development

Strong: 27%

Ideas consistently developed in depth and supported with rich and relevant details

Adequate: 42%

Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details

Weak: 32%

Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details

Readers noted that students who had difficulty sustaining focus or a sense of purpose also had issues with development and those whose papers were weak in terms of organization showed little evidence of development. Each focus group indicated that sophisticated development of ideas or the ability to create a solid argument were rare qualities in the portfolios. Students did not always indicate where their information came from and some had the tendency to try to argue two sides to an argument or even talked themselves out of taking their original stance as they wrote.

All in all, many papers lacked detail or enough evidence to make a strong case if students were writing an argument. “I wouldn’t say all in all that the papers had a lot of detail,” explained one reader. Another commented that “papers had quotes coming out of nowhere with the students not saying where they came from or why they were significant.” Many students did not seem to know how to support their position or had not thought out the entire process, especially when given a research paper assignment. Students had difficulty justifying assertions and using outside sources for support. “They could not articulate the connection between sources they were using and what their own paragraph was about,” observed one reader. When they were not using outside sources, many students had difficulties with building arguments or supporting their own ideas with relevant reasons or explanations.

Style

Strong: 16%

Sophisticated use of language (sentence structure, word choice) that enhances presentation of ideas/information

Adequate: 63%

Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information

Weak: 20%

Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic

Most readers found issues with style in the majority of their portfolios with most portfolios falling in the adequate to weak categories. Style issues included using first person when that was not an appropriate choice for the information that the student was

trying to convey and shifting from objective to subjective tone. The majority of students did not display a facility with using style to enhance presentation. Many students tended to write as they speak using colloquial language rather than academic language; styles were very casual, more akin to language used in emails than formal, academic papers. “Lots of short, choppy sentences. Repetitive sentence structures were common,” stated a reader.

Each focus group used the same words to describe students’ style: “lack of sophistication.” Students whose papers displayed a sophisticated or mature writing style were rare, but readers noted that these students had a strong style throughout the levels of writing.

Whereas most students’ writing employed an informal style, some students in an attempt to use an academic voice ended up using words whose meaning they clearly did not understand. One reader summed up style issues, “Language is not being used in an effective way. They could use better language in a more precise or sophisticated way. There wasn’t anything really grammatically wrong with many of them, but language just wasn’t strong for what they wanted to say. There was a lack of academic vocabulary; they go for the simplest word” rather than the best word.

Readers noted that papers following a particular genre or professional style—laboratory reports, business memos—where students had been given a format to follow tended to be better in terms of style and organization than more traditionally academic papers where most students seemed to be writing to the faculty member in a more conversational or informal style than most readers would like to see.

Audience

Strong: 20%
Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone

Adequate: 66%
Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience

Weak: 13%
Little or no awareness of audience

Readers indicated that the majority of papers seemed to have no audience other than the faculty member, so audience awareness or the ability to write for a specific audience was not apparent. Some exceptions were noted. Several readers read papers where students were writing letters to a politician or were preparing business plans for companies; these kinds of assignments showed an awareness of writing to an audience other than the professor. If the assignment asked the student to write to a specific audience, students could adapt their style to that audience. But if the assignment didn’t seem to give the students an audience, the default was the professor, and little effort was made to write to a specific audience.

Mechanics

Strong: 31%

Few, if any, errors in mechanics relative to length and complexity of documents

Adequate: 52%

Some errors in mechanics that do not interfere significantly with communication

Weak: 17%

Patterns of errors in mechanics that affect clarity and/or credibility of writing

While some readers were disturbed by the number of mistakes in the portfolios, issues with mechanics were not of great concern to the majority of readers. Although student papers did not display perfect mechanical and grammatical abilities (examples of misusing “whether” and “weather” and “there” and “their”), these issues were listed as some of the stronger elements across the portfolios. Some readers speculated that the use of grammar and spelling tools on the computer may have aided students. “I was pleasantly surprised that there weren’t more mechanical errors—having read some master’s papers. And, I think, ‘these are undergrads and they didn’t make nearly as many mistakes mechanically or usage kinds of things as I expected,’” explained a reader.

Some readers expressed concern over the revision process: there is no way to know what revisions were made by the instructor and what ones were made by the students. It was noted that much of revision is probably at the sentence level with instructors making corrections and students simply typing in what their faculty members have revised.

Sources

Strong: 30%

Ability to integrate ideas/information from sources into own writing in meaningful and appropriate ways

Adequate: 52%

Some effective integration of ideas/information from source

Weak: 18%

Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information

Readers noted that it was difficult to determine how well students use sources because some students do not turn in a works cited list with their papers although many papers seemed to be using “no apparent method to the quotation.” Noted one reader, “Integrating others’ ideas into their papers and not actually doing the mechanics correctly is a concern. It’s very serious; they can get expelled for that.” Other readers indicated that while many papers did use some sort of outside sources, very few used more than two or three sources. More sources were used in the first two submissions than in the latter two submissions; readers surmised that the upper-division faculty may be more

focused on content than on how well students were writing. “It seemed like they just put quotes into the paper; they weren’t always set up or used as support or evidence,” explained a reader. Some readers found the use of outside sources to be one of the stronger aspects of student writing.

Using Data to Develop Curriculum & Improve Pedagogy

After reading all of their portfolios, readers were asked to indicate ways in which the information gleaned from the readings could be used to develop curriculum and/or improve pedagogy. Many readers are quoted in this section to preserve the intent of their suggestions.

Writing Instruction in the Classroom and Curriculum

Several readers focused on ways faculty could use this information to change how they talked about writing in the classroom. “The more students write, the better they write. The more students write, the more comfortable they are with writing, the more natural it seems. Students could be encouraged to develop simple ideas completely, rather than superficially cover a lot of material.” Another reader concurred with this and urged faculty to take a strong leadership role in discussing writing beyond English 1001G. “Simply expecting them to write every year isn’t enough; we aren’t teaching them how to write once they pass 1001. The question I ask is why? Passing 1001 doesn’t mean that all skills have been taught or even learned; a passing grade means that the bare minimum can be done. But to stop teaching those skills when the student has several more years of college isn’t helping them. So, I think this will show that we need to add a few steps to this portfolio writing process. Reading them will also show the students that we take their success very seriously and want them to succeed. If they know we are now paying attention, they might begin to try harder and do better.”

Another colleague urged a new emphasis on research writing. “These portfolios should let us detect and compensate for weakness in the development of student writing ability. For example, it is obvious from my readings that many of our students lack the higher level skills of organization and development of ideas in their writing while most of them are relatively well-equipped with the basic writing skills, e.g., mechanics. This is especially obvious to me in one of the research papers, where the author reviewed one by one the few studies examined instead of conducting a synthesizing analysis and presenting accurate information about what is known, what is not known, and what needs to be done, although the writer wrote relatively well in terms of grammar and vocabulary.”

Some readers thought that these data show that a change to the curriculum requirements is warranted. “I would urge another writing course—or perhaps an on-line program that students **MUST** complete before their junior year. Based on what I found (and find in my classes), students need work in simple grammar, punctuation, and **VOCABULARY**.” A colleague agreed that additional writing instruction might be in order, “I think students might just need a refresher course on **HOW** to write a paper—basic concepts like

proofreading, spell checking, etc. As readers we were given specific areas to look at: focus, organization, sources, etc. Maybe students need to be aware that these are the types of ideas that are being looked at when someone reads their paper. Even if the paper isn't for their portfolio, I suspect that most instructors have some, if not all, of these same general ideas in mind when grading student papers." Another colleague made similar suggestions with a focus on smaller classes and more faculty involvement in writing across the curriculum. "1. Smaller classes that allow more time for individual conferencing and built-in revision strategies to assist students in moving their writing and thinking to a higher level. The level of writing observed in general is appropriate at the high school level. 2. More interest in WAC interdisciplinary discussions among faculty about characteristics of academic discourse and its requirements."

One reader urged that the data be shared across the University with all faculty because effective writing is the responsibility of all faculty. "The evidence collected needs to be made known in a summary format to all teachers at EIU so that they can help promote the right use of grammar in students' writing for every course. I don't think helping students to write well is the business of the writing intensive courses only. It should become the responsibility of every instructor."

Writing and Critical Thinking

Several readers commented during the focus groups and on their summary sheets that it was difficult to separate the way students write and the way they think. One reader indicated a need for faculty to encourage students to stretch their critical thinking muscles through writing with the possibility of requiring a critical thinking course in the future. "I really thought there would be more persuasive/argumentative papers. Given the important role that persuasion plays in our society, I think there should be at least one paper that evinces some kind of ability to speak to an important issue today. I'm not quite sure how this might be useful in developing curriculum, but emphasizing the importance of holding a position might not be too difficult to achieve. Simply talking to teachers about how argument might be incorporated into their courses might be effective. I question the Senior Seminar as an effective tool for improving student writing. The 4th year papers were often summaries and were probably the least-developed writings. I would like to have seen more critical thinking in the portfolios. Developing a course in Critical Thinking and having it be writing intensive might be an idea to consider."

Another reader suggested workshops or changes in assignments for students linked to critical thinking, "1. Training should be done on how to argue and think critically first. Writing follows. 2. Students should be asked to read more primary sources and not just secondary sources (e.g., textbooks). This will expose them to a whole range of writing styles. These sources can act as models for developing 'style.' 3. In other words, no matter how we teach them to write, if they don't read and think well to begin with, their writing will not improve." Yet another reader concurred and suggested, faculty need to give "exercises to develop depth of understanding and critical analysis. Many students tended to stumble when trying to synthesize knowledge from multiple sources. It seemed like the outside sources drove the writing, not the student's own ideas. Only some

writing was very creative, maybe exercises to develop this could be useful. Unfortunately, it seems like some writing assignments simply ask students to summarize facts, so there is not much 'meat' to assess writing."

Other readers suggested workshops be developed for faculty on helping students revise, incorporate critical thinking into their writing, proofreading and editing. Noted one reader, "Faculty should not sign off on EWP submissions until mechanical problems have been adequately addressed and corrected. I think faculty should all spend some time in their courses discussing examples of acceptable writing and require students to come to office hours or help sessions when needed." Another reader suggested development activities for students in the classroom as well as for faculty. "Perhaps using the writing rubric in classes as a teaching aid for students. Having rubric learning sessions for professors as well." One reader asked, "Do students see enough 'good' examples of other writing to form good models?"

Suggested Changes for the EWP Process

In addition to asking readers for their advice on using the data gleaned from the EWP readings for improvement of student writing, we also asked readers to provide ideas on improving the EWP itself and the reading process. Their suggestions for changes to the EWP itself follow:

- Short papers weren't as valuable. It was hard to distinguish between adequate and weak portfolios if they were short. Setting a minimum page requirement for submissions could alleviate this issue. Several readers complained about lists being accepted for submission.
- It was hard to tell what some references were because there was no reference page. It would be helpful to encourage instructors not to sign off on submissions if there is missing documentation.
- Add a reflection piece where students talk about their writing/submissions. This could take the place of the papers currently being produced in senior seminars. "Self-analysis was also missing. Assignments that ask students to reflect on what they've written/argued/accomplished would be good. Having seniors reflect on their learning experiences at Eastern might be a more fruitful alternative to the Senior Seminar paper."
- Require that at least one submission be a research paper. "I think we need something that investigates student ability just to do the mechanical work of citation. This is important. Clearly, integrating the ideas is important, but we need to emphasize the importance, too, of CITING the material and ideas of others and of doing so correctly. That is why maybe requiring a research paper is a good idea. It would then provide information about citation abilities AND integration abilities of our students."

- Do not accept papers written in a language other than English or pieces that are poems.
- Several readers noted that some judgments were difficult to make since it was unknown what assignment students had been given. Other readers had no problem with this, “Other readers voiced concerns that if we didn’t have assignments we may not be able to properly judge a piece of writing. I didn’t find that to be the case for me. I felt that it was pretty straightforward whether or not a writer could convey his/her message strongly, adequately, or weakly without having the instructor’s assignment. That was a relief to me!”
- Rating portfolios with only two submissions was difficult. Could students be required to submit at least three documents?
- Gather information on how many times papers were revised. One reader noted that it was impossible to tell how much revision was completed by the instructor.

Suggestions for changing the assessment of full portfolios were few. Reader comments follow:

- “The process was easy to do and worked well. It was easy to stop and go.”
- “I thought the process was really well organized and easy to do. I had no problems at all and I think the form is really very helpful.”
- “I thought the in-service was handled very well. The person who did the training handled all the different disciplines and kept us going. And your idea of getting someone from outside was excellent because we probably wouldn’t listen as well to someone from within.”
- A couple of readers noted they needed help understanding how to evaluate scientific writing. One reader from the sciences noted, “I had one submission by a science major whose scientific/technical writing was excellent! I’m not sure it would be as highly praised (it was strong) if it was read by a reader outside the sciences.”
- “There were times that it was difficult deciding between weak and adequate in terms of the final assessment. Most often this was because there wasn’t one essay in the portfolio that swayed me or was stronger than the others.”
- A couple of readers have difficulty discerning between the categories under organization while others had problems understanding the differences among the audience categories.
- Include a save function for the on-line forms.