

Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report Fall 2007

Number of Readers: 19
Number of Portfolios: 186
Number of Papers: 580

Number of Portfolios w/ 2 submissions: 62
Number of Portfolios w/ 3 submissions: 40
Number of Portfolios w/ 4 submissions: 84

Method:

In Fall 2005, 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 for Fall 2007 were trained in Fall 2005; they include:

LeAnn Athey, English
Ronan Bernas, Psychology
Rosemary Buck, English
Kim Redfern, Bachelor of General Studies
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
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
Jeff Snell, Management
Scott Tremain, Chemistry
Richard Wilkinson, Family and Consumer Sciences

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 for complete portfolios across seven aspects of writing: focus/purpose, organization, development, audience, style, mechanics, and use of sources. Readers were also asked to assess each *portfolio* overall.

A sample of 10% of the completed portfolios are read each year; readers were given a month to read their portfolios. Readers were given access to a secure web site and were assigned to read 9-10 portfolios that were chosen at random from the completed 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 held in early November to discuss student writing as displayed by 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. A draft of this report was disseminated via email for readers' comments. Changes to the report were made based on those comments. 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 readers' 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: 27%

Adequate Portfolios: 58%

Weak Portfolios: 18%

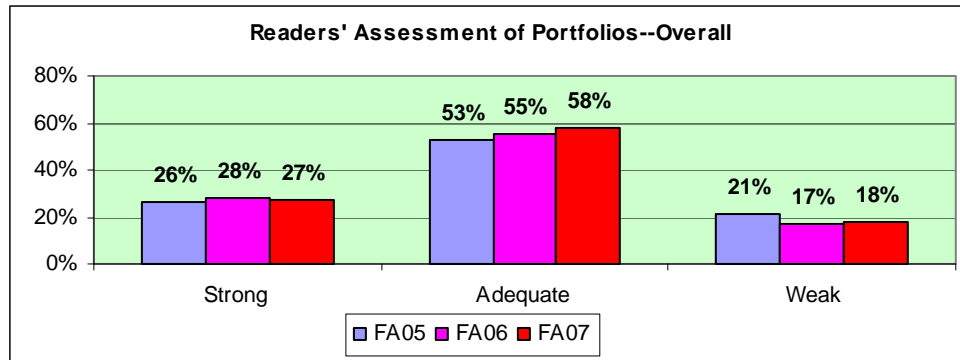
Overall, readers were left with the impression that the portfolios this year were stronger than in previous years.

Readers noted how difficult it was to judge short pieces, such as a one or two page paper. "I really believe that papers that are required to be of a greater length, by and large, are better written papers. Maybe this is true because more work is involved on the part of the student." There was also quite a bit of discussion on allowing papers to be submitted in a language other than English. Several readers suggested that this should not be allowed in the EWP because then there were not enough submissions written in English to be able to assess the student's English skills. Other problems encountered include papers written in a list or lesson plan format. Some readers indicated a desire for students to submit their best papers that showed their best writing. "I think it's interesting which paper they do pick. They seem to like having a choice. And, I think they take writing more seriously than they used to—at least that's what I hear in my classes. Maybe it's the mechanics of turning one in [to the EWP]."

Few trends were noted in the levels of the papers this year. Several readers indicated that the senior seminar papers seemed to be improving over the ones read the first year. Some readers saw improvement over the four submissions while others maintained that the first submission was more polished than later submissions. "It is noticeable to mention that several of the portfolios I reviewed show significant improvement through the years, especially in the areas of organization, development, and style." Other readers noted that strong writers started out writing well and continued that throughout their submissions.

The chart below compares the readers' assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. The percentage of portfolios judged to be strong overall fell by 1% from 2006 to 2007 while the percentage rated adequate rose by 3%. The portfolios judged to be weak

overall increased by 1%. The ratings for the portfolios overall have fluctuated the least of any of the categories scored by the readers over the last three years.



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

Focus/Purpose

Strong: 23%
Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout

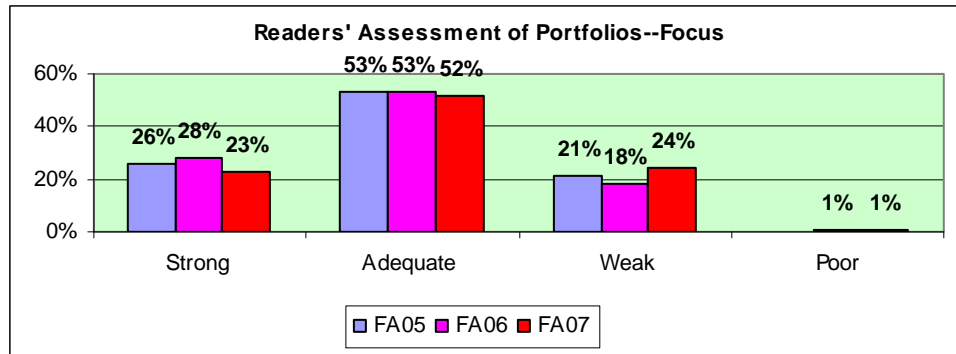
Adequate: 52%
Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions

Weak: 24%
Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose

Poor: 1%
Very little or no evidence of focus

Although the numbers given to portfolios that developed a strong sense of focus/purpose dropped slightly this year, focus group participants remarked that overall developing a sense of purpose was one of the strengths they saw in student writing. One reader remarked that “I think maybe faculty are improving their assignments to be more direct in telling their students what they should be writing about because I saw some pretty good development, focus, and purpose, and it all goes together.”

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. The percentage of portfolios that were deemed strong dropped by 5% as the number evaluated as weak in this area rose by 6% from the previous year.



Organization

Strong: 22%

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

Adequate: 61%

Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure

Weak: 15%

Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization

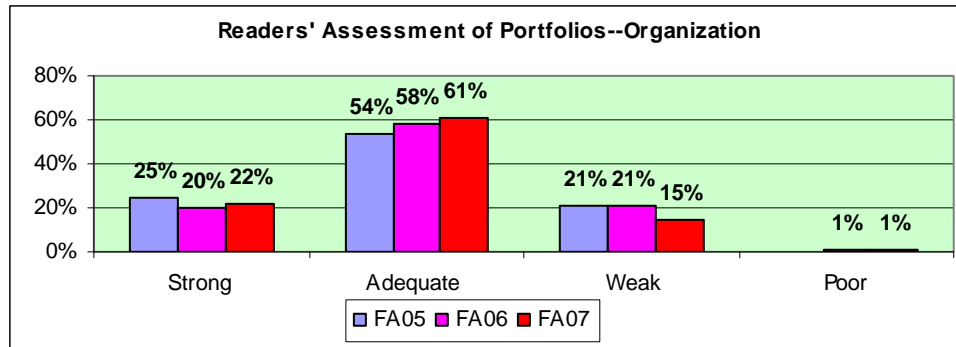
Poor: 1%

Very little or no sense of structure or organization

In terms of organization readers noted that students tended to write stronger introductions than conclusions; concluding paragraphs tended to be short and seemed to be thrown on as an afterthought. “Their conclusions were almost like an afterthought. They put two or three sentences on the last paragraph. They often had a very good introduction and focus and purpose, and they got to the end, and they were happy to be done.”

Readers also noted that traditional thesis statements or topic sentences in paragraphs were not common, but that students’ tended to stay on topic in their papers and did not deviate from their primary purpose. Some readers noted that there were not many transitions between paragraphs to help guide the reader. “I wasn’t remarking really clear transitions, evidence of a solid thought out outline, where there’s a building of an argument in terms of some sort of hierarchical order, where it’s evident that certain ideas are more important than others. I did see some evidence of organizational skills, but I would say at a superficial level rather than at a sophisticated level.” Readers indicated that there were few papers that attempted to use the scientific method or follow APA guidelines for paper organization, but the ones that attempted to use such organizational patterns were strong to adequate.

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. In Fall 2007 the percentage of portfolios assessed to be strong in organization increased by 2% from the readings in Fall 2006 while the percentage in the weak category dropped 6% from the previous two readings. This year also saw an increase of portfolios placed in the adequate category for organizational skills.



Development

Strong: 23%

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

Adequate: 41%

Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details

Weak: 33%

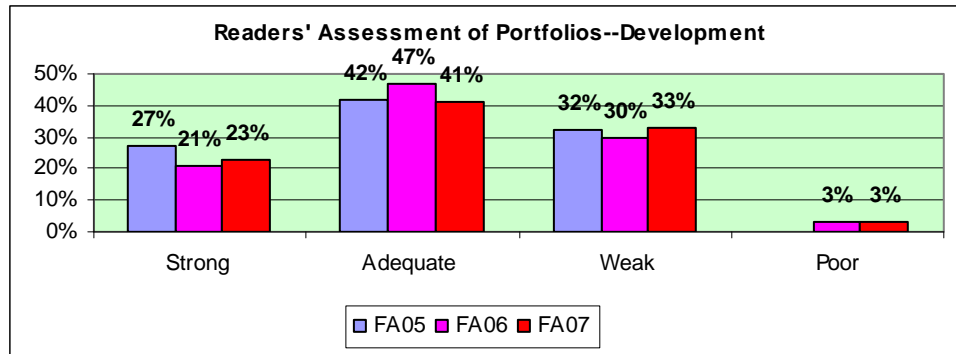
Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details

Poor: 3%

Very little or no development of ideas or use of supporting evidence

As in past years, readers indicated that development was one of the weakest among the portfolios; several readers linked a lack of development to poor critical thinking skills. “They’re very good at summarizing material that they’ve read, but very poor at expressing their own opinion. They say ‘this is how I feel,’ and that’s it.” Another reader commented that this problem with writing could be linked to the kind of papers that are submitted: “Maybe it’s the submissions we’re getting. Because the submissions are short and you need length in order to develop things. The ideas are not developed in depth.” Readers agreed that for strong development, longer papers were necessary and some documents like lab reports were not meant to develop ideas.

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. In Fall 2006 readers determined that 23% of portfolios were strong in the category of development which is an increase of 2% from the previous year. The percentage of portfolios falling into the adequate range dropped by 6% while those assessed as weak increased by 3%. For the second year in a row, this topic is second to sources for the most portfolios assessed as poor.



Style

Strong: 18%

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

Adequate: 57%

Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information

Weak: 23%

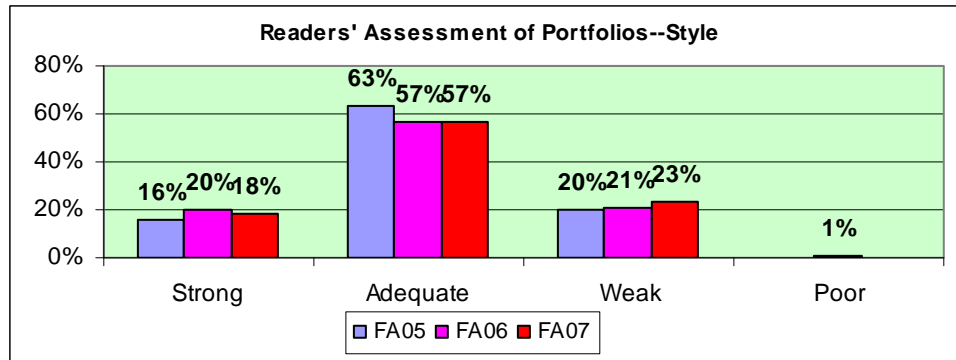
Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic

Poor: 0%

Use of language that is highly inconsistent or indeterminate

Style continues to be one skill that remains largely adequate across the portfolios. Several readers noticed that papers written in a business style were “very professionally done.” Other papers were written in a less formal style than one would expect to see in college writing. Readers called the styles they encountered in the portfolios “simplistic,” “colloquial,” and “conversational,” rather than academic. Vocabulary was found to be weak or less precise than readers would like to see. “I thought that for college students, they could have a more extensive academic vocabulary. The style was often too simplistic. By the time they get to their senior year, they should be subordinating, they should be using a variety of sentence length, instead of simple words like ‘good’ to describe everything.”

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. Portfolios considered strong by readers in Fall 2007 dropped by 2% over those read in 2006 while those falling into the adequate range remained the same from the previous year; the weak portfolios increased by 2%.



Audience

Strong: 19%
Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone

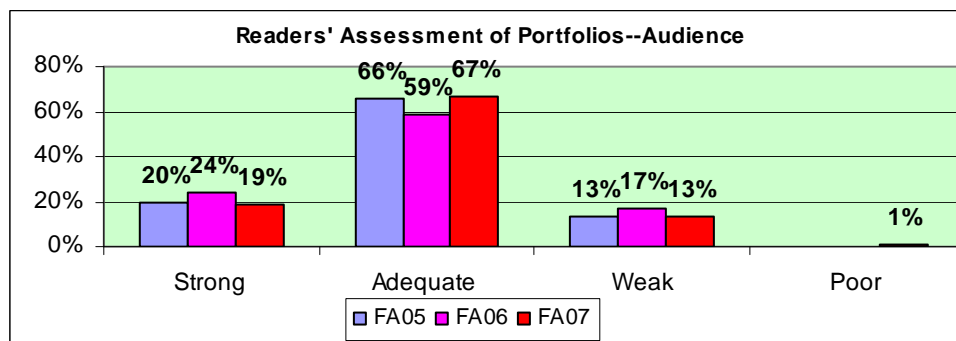
Adequate: 67%
Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience

Weak: 13%
Little or no awareness of audience

Poor: 1%
No sense of writing for an audience

With each reading, faculty have indicated that it is often difficult to discern any reader other than the instructor for the course unless the genre of the paper demanded that an audience be identified, such as in a letter. “I just didn’t see any awareness of audience at all. Whether it was the instructor or anyone else. They’re just writing for themselves, I think.” Readers noted that the best writers did well with audience awareness, but for the majority of student writers, it was hard to tell anything about the audience from the paper itself.

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. Strong portfolios decreased by 5% in 2007 from 2006 while those considered adequate went up by 8% and the percentage deemed weak fell by 4%. This is the first year that some portfolios were deemed poor by readers.



Mechanics

Strong: 34%

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

Adequate: 49%

Some errors in mechanics that do not interfere significantly with communication

Weak: 16%

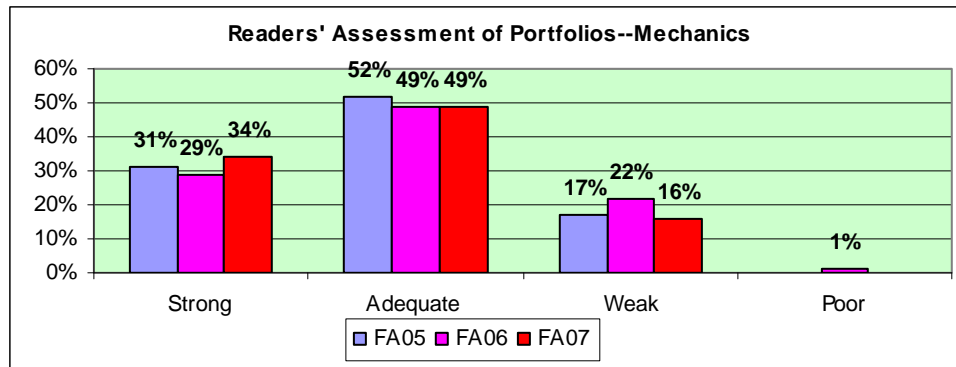
Patterns of errors in mechanics that affect clarity and/or credibility of writing

Poor: 0%

Large numbers of errors in mechanics affecting almost all aspects of the writing

Several readers cited mechanical usage as the greatest strength of Eastern writers as shown in the portfolios. Little discussion was had in the focus groups related to mechanics. One reader, however, noted that students “were consistent in their mistakes throughout their submissions. I had one that left off the ‘d’ of a word that should have ended in ‘ed’ throughout all their submissions.” Most readers concurred with this assessment. Common mistakes noted were subject verb agreement, comma errors, and confusing possessives with plurals.

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. Strong portfolios increased by 5% from 2006 while adequate remained the same and weak decreased by 6%. Each year this category of writing skills has had the highest percentage of portfolios rates as strong.



Sources

Strong: 20%

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

Adequate: 50%

Some effective integration of ideas/information from source

Weak: 21%

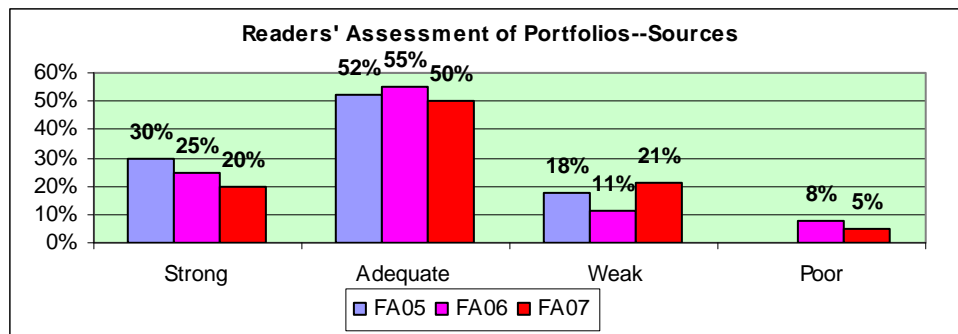
Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information

Poor/NA: 5%
No attempt to integrate ideas/information from sources

Readers remarked that they had a difficult time telling how well students had used their sources because there were few papers that seemed to require outside sources or the sources cited page was missing from the paper. Several readers commented on the problems students had with know how to cite sources: “I think they know they need to cite these things, but they are not doing it effectively at all.” Other readers suggested that students are not required to use these skills very often: “Among English majors I can get seniors who are still not putting any of this in any documentation format or are shaky on how to cite. But, I think we just aren’t requiring a lot of research papers. I have seniors who say this is the only one I have written now. A senior. That’s pretty bad, you know.” Some readers indicated that students were using graphs or pictures clearly created by others, but these sources were not cited.

Several readers cited research and use of sources as the weakest aspect of the portfolios. “My biggest concern is in the area of research. I found obvious cases of plagiarism. A number of students talk about things they have read without included internal citations and without including a works cited page. In addition, when students do show a works cited page, it is obvious that the students have not considered credibility in terms of sources they choose from the internet. A number of students do not know how to document sources appropriately from the internet.”

The chart below compares the readers’ assessment of the portfolios read across the first three years of readings. Portfolios deemed to be strong in the use of sources fell 5% from 2006 to 2007 while the number rated as adequate fell by 5%. This is the category that received the highest percentage of poor ratings.



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. The predominant theme involved encouraging faculty to make changes in writing requirements and course curriculum through sharing EWP data from the readers. Readers noted that they had seen an improvement in senior seminar papers over the past three years, and they speculated that this was a result of faculty being more intentional with expectations in assignments.

Several readers suggested additional writing instruction at the upper division or a change in the instruction taking place in the WI courses. “I still say that we need to have writing intensive courses that focus on writing, taught by instructors who are experts in the field of writing. These

students need guidance in composition, not just given an assignment and then graded on it without guidance! I know it is hard to teach students how to write, and in all actuality, most should know how. But we have students who obviously slip through the cracks and need help in the upper division level. The WI courses are a great idea, but the instructors who teach them need to be willing, and able, to help the students who struggle with writing!”

Several readers suggested sharing EWP results with students and faculty more directly and encouraging students and faculty to attend writing workshops on topics such as revising, evaluating sources, and plagiarism. They also suggested that faculty need to hold students accountable to be good writers and to correct their errors. Readers recommended that we encourage faculty to ask students to do more research and to do analysis more than summarization in their writing.

One reader indicated the belief that students who read a variety of well-written pieces will learn to become better writers more readily than students who do not read or who read only textbooks.

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; again, several quotes from the reader observation forms are given here to preserve the integrity of the comments:

Several readers reiterated the issues of paper length and papers not written in English. The following quote illustrates the opinion of many of the readers: “Papers submitted in a foreign language should not be allowed. Also, with only two submissions you cannot make any real determination of any student’s writing ability.”

Some readers requested a 5-point scale rather than the current 4-point scale in use. Others suggested a way to assess technical or discipline-specific writing would be helpful or further clarification of the rubric categories. Other readers felt the observation sheets covered what they were looking for in student writing.

“I would like a category that asks for evidence of critical, independent thinking, logical reasoning that the writing of the paper demonstrates, something that asks the reader to consider whether there has been some sophisticated thinking behind the writing of the paper versus simply a piece of writing just to get the task done.”

Several readers indicated a preference for encouraging instructors to include an assignment sheet with the paper.