

Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report AY 2019

Number of Readers:	10
Number of Portfolios:	129
Number of Papers:	387

Methodology

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. A second training was held in October 2008, a third in October 2010, a fourth in January 2014, and a fifth in January 2017; Dr. Karla Sanders delivered these trainings based on the work completed by Dr. O'Brien-Hokanson.

The following 2019 readers were trained at one of these sessions; they represent the following departments:

Anna Cromwell, Music, CLAS, 2017
Karen Drage, Technology, LCBT, 2017
Terri Fredrick, English, CLAS, 2017
Angie Jacobs, Communication Studies, CLAS, 2008
Colleen Kattenbraker, Kinesiology & Sports Studies, CHHS, 2017
Nicole Mulvey, Communication Disorders & Sciences, CHHS, 2014
Jeff Snell, Management, LCBT, 2005
Tim Taylor, English, CLAS, 2014
Gordon Tucker, Biological Sciences, CLAS, 2005
Marjorie Worthington, English, CLAS, 2014

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. They completed a reading guide for each portfolio. 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, were given access to a secure sharepoint file, and were assigned to read 12-13 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 two focus groups held in February to discuss student writing as displayed in the portfolios.

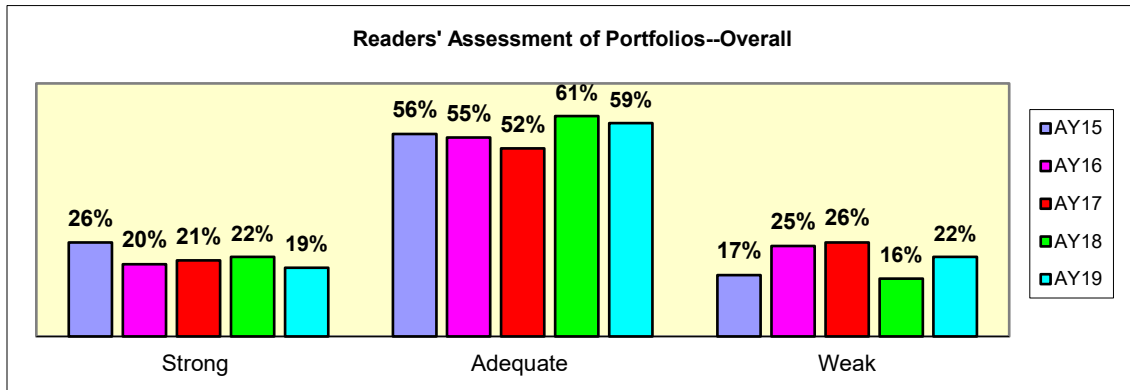
The qualitative data that follow represent the discussions at the focus groups as well as information taken from the readers' guides and observation sheets; all information has been collated and summarized by the Executive Director of the Academic Success Center. The percentages given for each assessment of the various areas of writing are taken from a compilation of scores given by the readers for **each portfolio**, *not* each document, on the reading guide.

The following data are divided into the categories assessed by the readers. Each section gives the readers' impressions of the portfolios as a whole and the final section offers potential uses for the data in terms of improving the curriculum/pedagogy. Where appropriate, readers' written and verbal comments have been

quoted to support the general conclusions that have been drawn. Percentages refer to the percentage of portfolios that were rated in the categories described.

Portfolios Overall

Strong Portfolios: 18.6%
Adequate Portfolios: 58.91%
Weak Portfolios: 22.48%

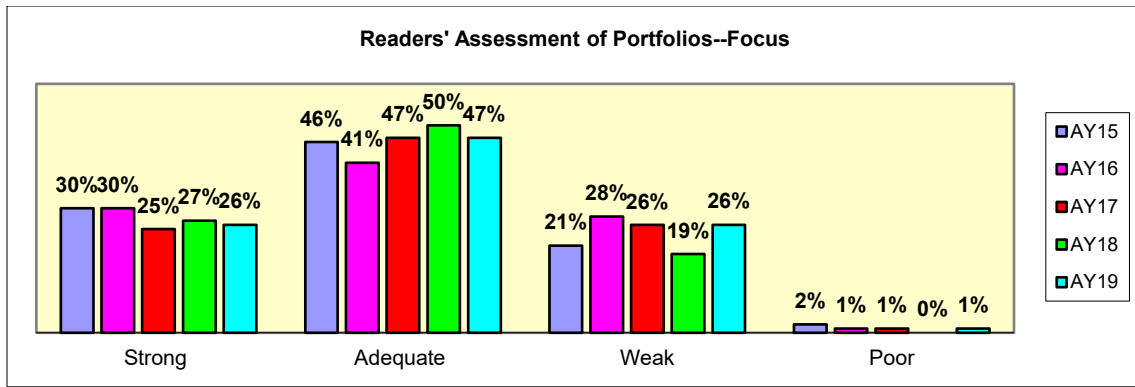


The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” continues to go down while the percentage rated as “weak” grows with a large majority of nearly 60% deemed to be “adequate.” While these ratings display a nearly perfect bell curve, only 19% of completed portfolios display strong writing skills, which is troubling.

“Focus/purpose seems to be adequate to strong across most portfolios. Students seemed to be doing a good job of stating their thesis/purpose and staying focused on their topic throughout their writing. Students seemed to struggle a little with organization and development. While there was some organization, it seemed that they organized by what popped into their head at that moment. Only a few portfolios demonstrated ‘strong’ development of ideas.” Other readers concurred, and one said, “What struck me most is how few of the portfolios included writing that evidenced high levels (or any level) of critical thinking. Most of the essays I encountered included writing that was largely descriptive. Research is used, but it is used as it would be in a high school book report. There was very little analysis, synthesis, or argumentation in any of the essays I read. In that context, most of the writing seemed adequate and much more competent than what I generally encounter in an average ENG 1001/1002 student; however, I wonder what the students’ writing would have looked like had they been asked to perform higher levels of **thin**king.” Readers agreed that the majority of papers in the portfolios were students reporting on journal articles, experiences, or people; very few papers asked students to analyze, evaluate, or persuade.

Focus/Purpose

Strong (Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout): 25.58%
Adequate (Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions): 46.51%
Weak (Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose): 25.58%
Poor (Very little or no evidence of focus): 1.55%

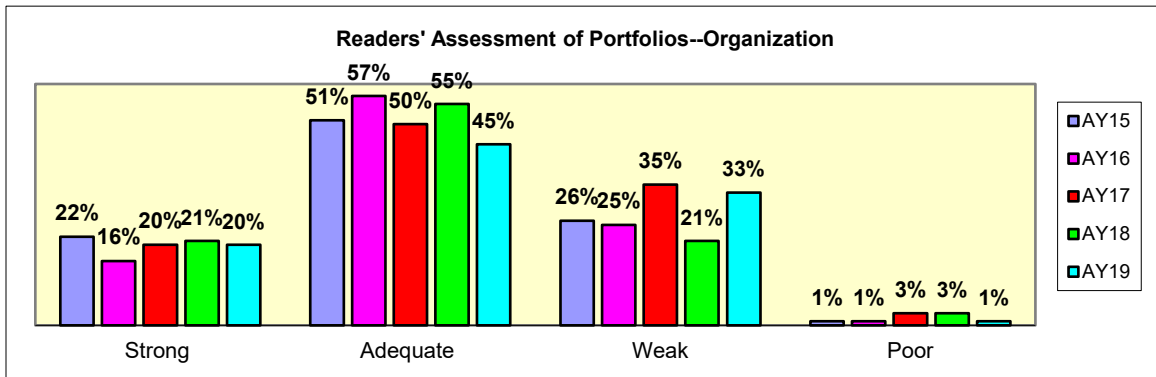


The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” in terms of focus and/or purpose dropped by only 1% this year while those deemed “adequate” dropped 3%. The percentage rated as “weak,” however, rose by 7%.

While focus or creating a sense of purpose was one of the stronger traits displayed in the portfolios sampled this year, readers still indicated that students sometimes struggled to get to the point of their writing early in the paper. Readers noted that focus was more predominant than purpose because the majority of papers tended to be reporting on information rather than analytical or persuasive in nature. The better papers continued the purpose/focus throughout the paper through the use of unified paragraphs and sign posts that explained why they were telling the readers what they were telling them.

Organization

Strong (Consistent use of structure in ways that enhance presentation of ideas/information):	20.16%
Adequate (Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure):	44.96%
Weak (Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization):	32.56%
Poor (Very little or no sense of structure or organization):	0.78%

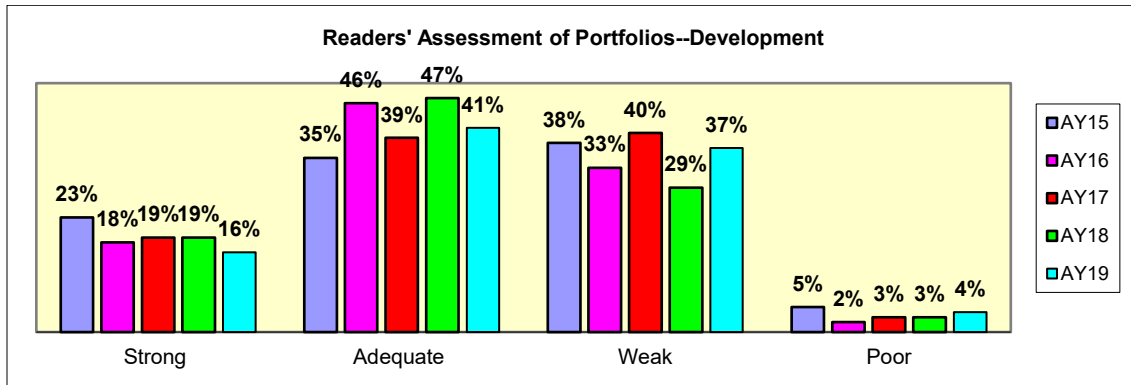


Organization is a skill that seems to be becoming more problematic. This year a third of the portfolios were rated as “weak” or “poor” in this area, and only a fifth were considered “strong.” Issues related to organization include a lack of clear introductions and conclusions, and a sense of organizing ideas for a specific reason. “I am still seeing some problems with absence of an obvious introduction and conclusion in the papers that really need to have these. Also, paragraphs that are too long and should obviously be split.” One reader noted that many papers are one giant block, and she has to tell her own students why they should paragraph and what the structure of a paragraph should do. Readers indicated that students did not usually employ creative transitions, but instead used obvious transitions such as, “my first example” or “secondly” or left transitions out entirely. Readers called students’ transitions “clunky,” “stilted,” and “ham-fisted.” Readers also indicated that it was rare to read papers that felt intentional about the organization as opposed to what simply popped into the writers’ heads as they wrote; some

indicated that students seemed to be writing in stream-of-consciousness style without re-writing for a more logical organizational pattern.

Development

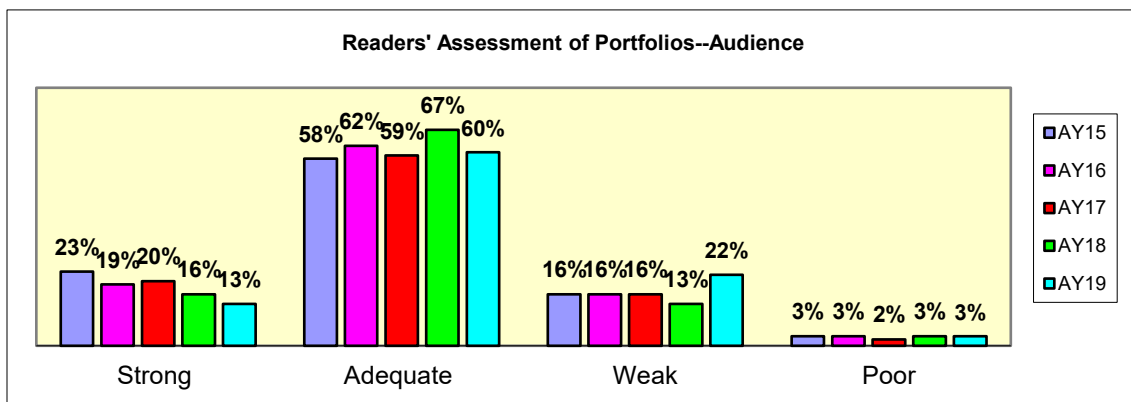
Strong (Ideas consistently developed in depth and supported with rich and relevant details):	16.28%
Adequate (Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details):	41.09%
Weak (Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details):	37.21%
Poor (Very little or no development of ideas or use of supporting evidence):	3.88%



As with past readings, development remains one of the weaker traits as displayed by the EWP submissions with 37% rated as “weak” and an additional 4% as “poor.” Only 16% were given a rating of “strong,” and 41% were considered “adequate.” If instructors only focused on one writing trait to improve, development is the one that could use the most work and is connected to critical thinking as well as writing. All the readers indicated issues with development and noted that few papers or even portfolios showed signs of students being asked to think critically in the writing assignments. “Much of these are just reports, regurgitating information they’ve read. Or, they are personal essays, discussing their health history or career goals. Very little analysis is required—where students read and synthesize information and draw conclusions about it.” Several readers indicated that “development was frequently illogical.” Readers noted that many papers were “data dumps” where students were giving a lot of information gleaned from sources without analysis or going into much depth.

Audience

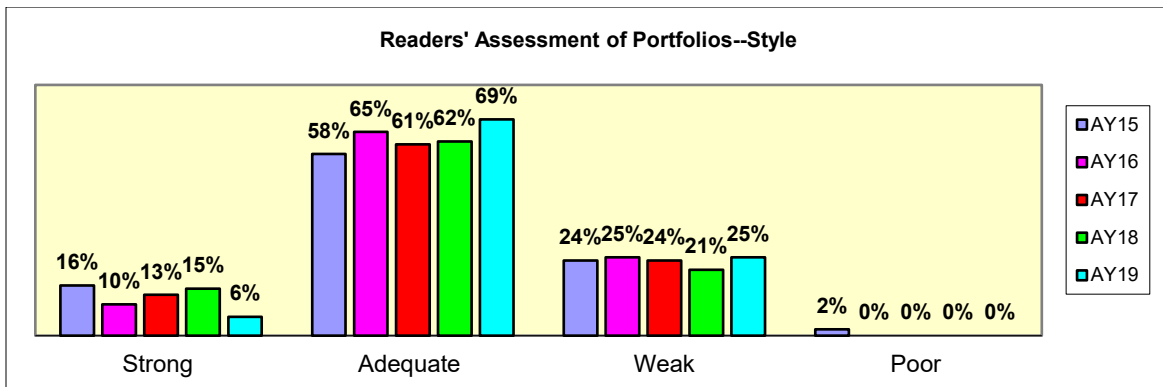
Strong (Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone):	13.18%
Adequate (Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience):	60.47%
Weak (Little or no awareness of audience):	22.48%
Poor (No sense of writing for an audience):	3.10%



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 or report for a company. Only 13% of portfolios provided a strong sense of audience through a distinctive voice. Sixty-percent of the portfolios were “adequate” and seemed to be writing to the faculty member while 22% were “weak” and 3% were “poor.” “Weak” or “poor portfolios in terms of audience display issues with providing the reader with needed information and may lack clarity. Readers are left with questions or wondering why they read the piece. “Most documents lacked a sense of audience. It appeared that the writers had an audience of one—the instructor.” Readers noted that most assignments seemed to call for students to show what they know to a faculty member and students were fully aware that was what they were doing in their papers. Several faculty members indicated that if we really want students to write for an audience outside of the classroom, then we need to give more assignments asking students to practice this skill.

Style

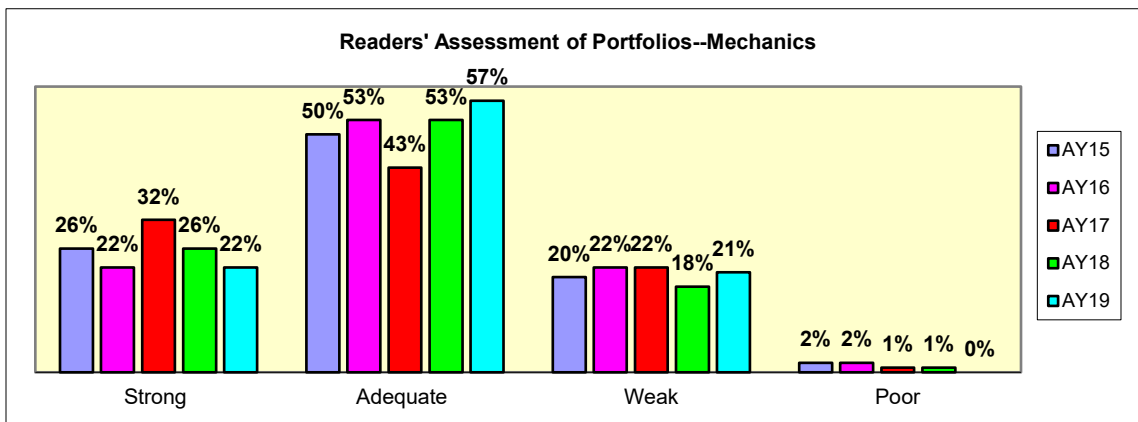
Strong (Sophisticated use of language (sentence structure, word choice) that enhances presentation of ideas/information):	6.2%
Adequate (Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information):	68.99%
Weak (Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic):	24.81%
Poor (Use of language that is highly inconsistent or indeterminate):	0%



In the twelve years of reading completed portfolios, few portfolios are ever rated “strong” in regards to style, and this year is the lowest percentage yet at only 6%. More than two-thirds of the portfolios are ranked as “adequate” with 25% assessed as “weak”. Readers described the majority of papers as using simple sentence construction, few transitional words, and unsophisticated, simplistic diction. Students’ styles do not display a strong sense of vocabulary nor do they show strong revision skills; these are weaknesses that have been noted several focus group years in a row. “It was like a weird mashup between formal language and informal, which indicates a complete unawareness of voice.” Students’ styles are usually clear and to the point but lacking in both eloquence and elegance. “Students used conversational phrases too often and didn’t maintain appropriate tone.” Readers indicated that many submissions lacked a college level of style; the portfolios showed mostly simple, declarative sentences with little variety in terms of structure or vocabulary.

Mechanics

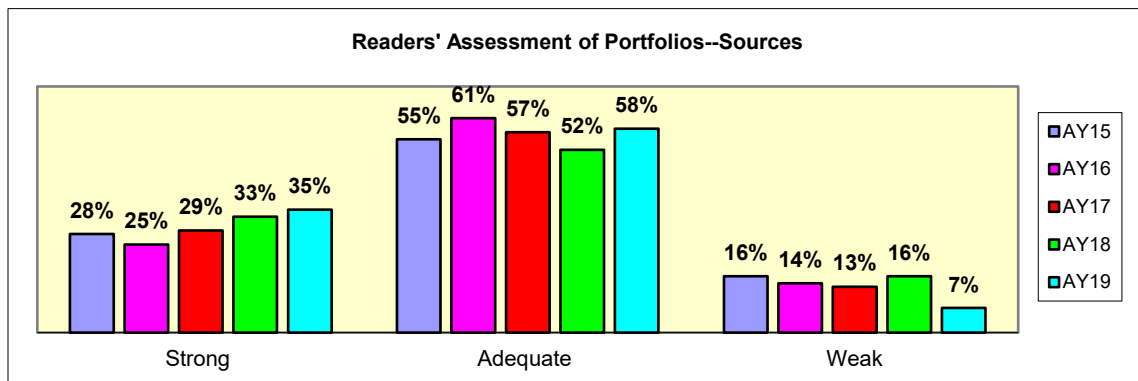
Strong (Few, if any, errors in mechanics relative to length and complexity of documents):	21.71%
Adequate (Some errors in mechanics that do not interfere significantly with communication):	57.36%
Weak (Patterns of errors in mechanics that affect clarity and/or credibility of writing):	20.93%
Poor (Large numbers of errors in mechanics affecting almost all aspects of the writing):	0%



Readers indicated that most portfolios contained some mechanical errors, but the majority of papers were not incomprehensible due to these errors. The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” in mechanics dropped 4% from the previous year and 10% in the last two years, and the percentage described as “adequate” rose by 4% while those assessed as “weak” rose by 3%. All readers felt that students needed to do a better job at proofreading and revising rather than simply relying on spellcheck. Some questioned whether revision was still part of the writing-intensive courses. Common errors included sentence fragments, run-on sentences, errors in tenses, and problems with antecedents. Students also displayed issues with proper comma usage and using periods where they needed commas.

Sources

Strong (Ability to integrate ideas/information from sources into own writing in meaningful and appropriate ways): 34.51%
Adequate (Some effective integration of ideas/information from source): 58.41%
Weak (Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information): 7.08%



Of the 129 portfolios read, 113 portfolios (87.6%) included at least one paper incorporating outside sources; this is a 5% decrease from last year. The portfolios assessed as strong increased by 2% from 2018, those rated as “adequate” increased by 6%, and the weak portfolios related to sources decreased by 9%, indicating that use of sources is getting stronger. Indeed, readers felt that using sources was one of the stronger traits in the portfolios. Students seemed to know they were supposed to cite sources and did so. Papers that were weaker with sources tended to use only one source for a paper or not integrate a quote within the paragraph. In fact, lack of integration or fully using the sources to their advantage was the biggest complaint readers expressed related to student use of sources. Students “were attempting to put them [sources] in, but had no idea how to integrate them. I’m going to take my idea and throw in a

quotation and cite it, and not really talk about its relation to my idea.” Another reader concurred and called them “hit and run quotes. ‘Here’s my quote, moving on!’”

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. This year all readers agreed that the main focus for curriculum and pedagogy development should be critical thinking in student assignments. In their responses written before the focus groups after reading their portfolios and in both focus groups, all readers indicated a greater need for more critical thinking in the submissions and thus in the assignments given to students.

Assignments may be the key to students producing more impressive papers. “My takeaway was that you get what you ask for. And, we need to ask for stronger critical thinking through our assignments. I read 39 papers and 22 were basically informative research reportage. It doesn’t seem they’re being asked to do higher levels of critical thinking. I think that’s something as faculty we really need to focus on is pushing our students and guiding them in ways with our assignments toward those goals.” Another reader concurred and admitted that as a classroom teacher she sometimes spends so much time correcting sentence-level issues that it becomes hard to focus on larger issues like incorporating critical thinking. All readers indicated that they had very few papers where students seemed to be asked to do an in-depth analysis. The majority of the sample portfolios included assignments where students reported on a topic or reflected on an experience or reading. “I would continue to stress development of ideas as this seems to be the biggest struggle across all portfolios (both in this year’s batch and the past few years). I’m seeing more students use sources (although proper citation still seems to be lacking), and there is a clear attempt to develop ideas in most portfolios. Students just seem to lack full understanding of how to develop an idea beyond naming a source or going beyond providing simple examples. This should be a priority focus in our classes.”

Readers suggested a workshop on writing incorporating critical thinking and including examples of good student writing could be helpful for faculty who have not been taught how to teach students to write. “Writing is such an important component of effective communication. Helping students articulate thoughts and responses through writing will benefit them!”

Another reader suggested faculty should encourage students to use outlines to help organize their thoughts and ideas before writing.