Assessment Report
English Discipline
Fall 2012

After applying for and receiving a 750.00 mini-grant from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, the English discipline hired two outside readers, Laura Neary and Steven Westergan, to read and evaluate ENGL 305 and ENGL 489 essays from the English Major Portfolios collected from students graduating with an English major in 2011-2012.

In this assessment cycle, we are focusing on these three learning outcomes:

Graduating majors will be able to:

1. write coherent, argumentative theses for critical essays,
2. construct a convincing academic argument, and
3. effectively use a variety of critical and theoretical resources, as well as close attention to a primary text, to develop these arguments.

Readers were asked to evaluate the essays on a 1-6 point scale (1 = unacceptable and 6 = excellent) for quality of thesis, quality of argument, and quality of research skills. They were given a detailed assessment rubric (included) to help guide their evaluations (See page 5).

We hope to see all samples earning a score of 4.0 or better for each category.

Results:

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## Observations:

Reader 2 provided consistently lower scores than Reader 1 for every category. The largest area of disagreement was in the quality of research category.

Reader 2’s average score for quality of research falls below 4.0.

Reader 1’s and Reader 2’s average scores for quality of thesis and quality of argument are all over 4.0.

Quality of thesis received the highest averages from each reader.

3/22 portfolios failed to meet the 4-point threshold for quality of thesis.

3/22 portfolios failed to meet the 4-point goal for quality of argument.

5/22 portfolios failed to meet the 4-point goal for quality of research.

## Readers’ Observations and Suggestions

On December 13, 2012, I met with Laura Neary and Steve Westergan to discuss their thoughts and impressions after the reading process. They agreed that the area we might want to focus more concerted attention on in future English courses (especially at the 300 and 400 levels) is research skills. (Both of them thought that, for the most part, all of the writers showed the ability to write a critical thesis and to construct a successful academic argument.)

Specifically, both Steve and Laura thought that some of the writers didn’t work with the research materials in any satisfying depth. Instead, these writers seemed to be simply using quotes from research sources in order to echo their own arguments, without questioning those sources or engaging them with critical sophistication. (Superficial” was the word that came up more than once during this discussion;
students don’t grapple with their critical sources, and sometimes don’t choose the best or the most interesting of passages to pair with their close readings or arguments.)

Laura and Steve suggested that, as we do in our introductory courses, perhaps we could spend some time in upper level courses revisiting the “expected moves” of academic argumentation, asking students to follow general “templates” for successful integration of research sources into an existing argument. At the same time, we could also push students to dig more deeply into their critical sources, seeing them as “voices” in an ongoing academic conversation about their chosen subject or text. Finally, we might also make a concerted effort to spend more time in upper level courses surveying some of the key critical material about the texts we’re reading together.

At the end of our discussion, we thought about what sort of attention we want to (or should) spend on mechanics – punctuation, grammar, and polish. Most of the essays were fairly clean, but a few stood out as too messy for senior level work.

Discussion of Results

On December 14, 2012, we met as a discipline to discuss the scores for these categories. We discussed the need to figure out how our students are learning and practicing the research process. Where should we place the emphasis on research – in the first years of courses or in the last years? And how should we approach the research process in the classroom – should we create tiered assignments, should we offer “templates,” or should we create writing workshop opportunities for critical writing?

In their self reflective essays, some graduates wanted more opportunities to take “grammar” courses, and we discussed this as well. We considered the possibility of creating a 200 level expository writing workshop that would be designed for the general major, or the English major with the secondary education certification. In this course, we could provide some strategies for incorporating research into academic argument.

We also talked about what we are doing well – teaching the thesis and academic argumentation, as well as close reading. We noted that the lower scores in some categories might also come from a difference in expectations from outside readers and talked about coming up with norming examples for future outside readers: examples of 6 level essays, for instance. We want to stress the positive aspect of these scores – most of our majors are graduating with the skills we want them to possess, due in no small part to the training they receive in our classrooms.

Action Plans

We finished our meeting with a number of action plans for the near future.
1. Everyone teaching ENGL 150 will meet to discuss our syllabi for the course in the hopes of ensuring consistency across sections, especially in the researched argument unit of the course. In particular, we are going to create a researched argument assignment that is fairly similar in each course.

2. We are in conversation with the new Director of Library Instruction incorporate some sort of research methods presentation in more of our English courses.

3. We are going to set up reading models for future assessment readers.

4. We are going to meet as a discipline to talk about how we can fine tune research instruction in the ENGL 489 capstone course. We would also like to think about adding a presentation component to the course, as MFL already does.

5. We are going to think more carefully about designing a 200 level expository writing workshop.

**Ongoing Assessment Work**

At the moment, every member of the discipline is reading all of the self evaluative essays from the last batch of portfolios. Each member is scoring each essay on a scale of 1-6. We will meet again next semester to discuss the results and to determine what, if anything, we will do with that information.
Assessment Rubric

Quality of Thesis

- **Excellent**: The thesis inserts itself into an existing conversation and the writer uses the elements of *They Say/I Say* to set up this conversation and his or her claim. The thesis is clearly stated, concrete and developed. It includes the “so what?” or significance of the claim and indicates its relevance to a reader.
- **Good**: The thesis inserts itself into an existing conversation and the writer uses the elements of *They Say/I Say* to set up this conversation and his or her claim. The thesis is clearly stated, concrete and developed. It might not include the significance or relevance of the claim.
- **Adequate**: The writer uses the elements of *They Say/I Say* to set up his or her claim. The thesis is clear and somewhat concrete but might not be fully developed. It probably doesn’t include the significance or relevance of the claim for a reader.
- **Weak**: The writer does not use elements of *They Say/I Say* to set up his or her claim. The claim itself is not clearly stated, is vague, or undeveloped. The writer doesn’t take into account the significance or relevance of the claim for a reader.
- **Unacceptable**: The thesis is absent, too vague to be understood or adequately developed, or cannot be argued (because it states the obvious, for instance, or because it is too far-fetched or inappropriate).

Development of Argument (use of illustrations and explanations from the text and research sources)

- **Excellent**: The essay uses the best examples from the novel and from research sources to develop each of its supporting points. The reader is not left asking questions. All of the research sources are valid academic sources and the writer clearly understands them. The writer anticipates objections to his or her claims.
- **Good**: The essay uses, in most cases, the best examples from the novel and research sources to develop its supporting points. There may be a few spots where more evidence, or more appropriate evidence, could be used, but the reader finishes the essay convinced of the argument’s validity. Most of the research sources are valid academic sources and the writer clearly understands most of them. The writer anticipates objections to his or her claims.
- **Adequate**: The essay uses research sources and evidence from the novel to support its central claims. The evidence may not be the best or most appropriate in each case. The reader might be left asking a few questions, and some of the supporting points may not be as convincing as they could be. At least ¾ of the research sources are valid academic sources. The writer uses most of them to good effect but may reveal a lack of understanding in places. The writer anticipates some objections to his or her arguments.
- **Weak**: Some of the essay’s supporting claims are not illustrated with evidence from the novel or research sources. The reader is left with questions about the validity of the argument. The research sources are, for the most part, not valid academic sources. The writer reveals a lack of understanding when using academic sources or writing about the novel. The writer doesn’t anticipate any objections to his or her argument.
- **Unacceptable**: The writer does not use the novel or research to illustrate his or her supporting claims. The research sources are not academic. The writer reveals a lack of understanding when using academic sources and when writing about the novel. The writer doesn’t anticipate any objections to his or her argument.

Quality of Organization
• **Excellent**: The essay is quite reader-friendly. The writer uses clear transitions between well-organized paragraphs, and links each new idea back to the thesis or central argument. The argument itself is arranged in the most persuasive order.

• **Good**: The essay is reader-friendly. For the most part, the writer uses clear transitions between well-organized paragraphs. These transitions may not be the most graceful, but they get the job done. The argument is well organized but might not be in the most persuasive order.

• **Adequate**: The essay assumes a reader and attempts to be reader friendly but may not be successful on this level. The essay uses transitions and topic sentences. Each paragraph is fairly well organized, though the order of thoughts in each may not be the most persuasive, and the order of the argument itself may be less than effective.

• **Weak**: The essay is not reader-friendly. The essay does not use clear transitions between ideas or topic sentences. Paragraphs may contain more than one central idea and lack a logical order for thoughts. The sense of an argument may be lost in the body of the essay. Some supporting points or evidence may not be incorporated into the argument as a whole.

• **Unacceptable**: The essay shows no sense of a reader. It does not use transitions or topic sentences. It does not link each new idea back to a central argument. The argument itself betrays a lack of logic.

**Style**

• **Excellent**: The essay reveals the writer’s mastery of the elements of writing, particularly word choice (diction), sentence structure and verb tense. The tone of the essay is consistent and appropriate. The reader gets a clear sense of the writer’s individual “voice” or presence on the page, and that presence is a positive addition to the essay’s argument. Ultimately, that is, the writer’s “voice” is in service to the argument, and contributes to its success.

• **Good**: The essay reveals the writer’s ability to choose words well and to vary his or her sentence structures. The tone of the essay is consistent and appropriate. The reader begins to get a clear sense of the writer’s “voice” but that may be inconsistent. The essay may suffer from a shift in verb tense (present to past) once or twice.

• **Adequate**: The essay reveals a writer who is still developing diction and sentence structures. The tone of the essay may be inconsistent or inappropriate in places. There may be no sense of an individual writer’s “voice.” The essay may suffer from verb tense problems.

• **Weak**: The essay suffers from poor diction or incorrect sentence structures. The tone of the essay may be inconsistent or inappropriate. There is no sense of an individual writer’s “voice.” The writer shows no awareness of verb tense.

**Mechanics (Spelling, punctuation, grammar, citation format, typos)**

• **Excellent**: The essay suffers from no careless errors. The writing is clean and sophisticated. There are no punctuation or grammatical errors. The parenthetical citations and Works Cited page are correctly formatted.

• **Good**: The essay suffers from no careless errors or persistent grammatical or punctuation errors. The writing is clean, for the most part, and the citations and Works Cited pages are correctly formatted.

• **Adequate**: The essay suffers from few careless errors and few grammatical or punctuation errors. The citations and Works Cited pages are mostly correct.

• **Weak**: The essay suffers from careless errors and grammatical errors. The writer spells the author’s name incorrectly. There are consistent errors in punctuation. The citations and Works Cited pages are incorrectly formatted.

• **Unacceptable**: The essay does not contain parenthetical citations or a Works Cited page. There are consistent grammatical and punctuation errors. The essay contains quite a few careless errors.