

# Written Communication Assessment at the University of Arizona

Fall 2022

## Overview

The first assessment of Written Communication at the University of Arizona (UArizona) reflected the mission outlined by the ABOR Tri-University Committee on Assessment, and it followed an evidence-based model. The **assessment objective** was to understand students' achievement of learning outcomes for written communication as identified in the ABOR Tri-University Written Communication Assessment rubric. The UArizona assessment included 728 samples of student writing:

- 364 from students entering UArizona (early-career);
- 364 from juniors and seniors at UArizona (late-career).

## Who Participated in Scoring Student Writing?

- In total, 50 instructors from multiple colleges and departments participated at different stages of the assessment.
- 22 instructors, consisting of 13 UArizona faculty and nine Graduate Assistant Teachers (GATs), were trained as evaluators.
  - Half of the evaluators were instructors in the Writing Program at UArizona
  - Half represented departments across the disciplines.

## What Student Writing Samples Were Assessed?

- 364 early-career samples from the UArizona Foundations Writing placement system.
  - These samples were written by early-career students who were newly enrolled, matriculated with 25 or fewer units completed, spanning a wide range of colleges and programs.
  - The samples were reflective writing tasks written by first-year students as part of the Foundations Writing placement.
- 364 late-career student writing samples from a variety of disciplines in fall 2021.
  - Instructors in five different colleges and fourteen programs provided student writing samples from upper-division courses, representing late-career students who were in their junior or senior year and had completed 75 or more units.

## What Did We Learn?

### Guidelines for Interpretation of the Data

- For all 728 samples of writing, a score of 2 or greater indicated meeting or exceeding expectations ( $\geq 2$ ).

- Early-career and late-career samples should not be directly compared; rather, these different sample groups represent snapshots of student writing at different stages of learning.
- Generally speaking, the WC1 rubric category “Context of & Purpose for Writing” becomes increasingly complex over the course of a student’s career.
  - Whereas early-career students in this assessment were asked to reflect on their writing experiences to explain their placement request, late-career students are often expected to compose documents according to specific, established guidelines within a field or profession. In writing studies, these professional types of writing are called “genres.”
- All evaluators completed online training in advance of scoring student artifacts. Then, evaluators scored artifacts across two weeks asynchronously through the digital assessment platform Watermark (May 16 - May 28, 2022). During this time, faculty participated in calibration training at three different synchronous sessions (May 16, May 18, and May 20). Our team carefully trained and calibrated evaluators, which resulted in strong inter-rater agreement and rater engagement.

### Early-Career Samples

- As seen in Fig. 1, the majority of students are getting the highest or second highest mark at their grade level (3 or 4), with the averages of each rubric category exceeding “Meets Expectations” ( $\geq 2$ ).
- Early-career artifacts show achievement in writing exceeding what is expected for students entering the university from secondary school settings ( $\geq 2$ ).
- A majority of the artifacts demonstrated an awareness of the writing situation and purposeful attention to structure, language, and use of information.
- Early-career artifacts showed less proficiency developing a nuanced understanding from various sources of information.

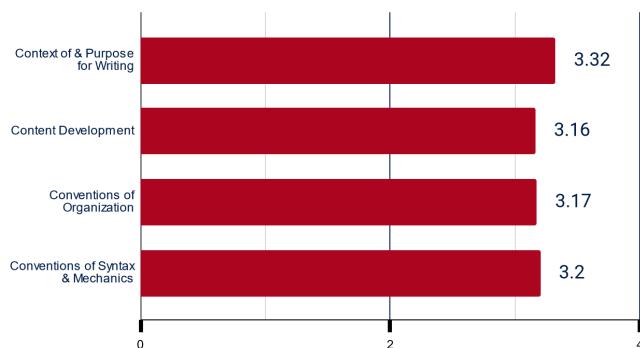
Fig. 1: Early-Career Communication Scores (n=364)



## Late-Career Samples

- As seen in Fig. 2 below, late-career artifacts demonstrate comparable student achievement in writing late in their undergraduate careers: these assignments are far more complex than the reflective writing done by early career students. The late career writing includes a range of genres, or types, of writing.
- As students are exposed to a variety of disciplinary genres throughout their college careers (Lindenman, 2015; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011), the implications from our data illustrate that students are effectively communicating in writing in upper-division contexts.
- The score for WC1, Context and Purpose, illustrates faculty efforts in helping to support students' rhetorical dexterity across genres and students' ability to grapple with complex writing tasks.
- These are the essential first steps in mastering genre awareness (Tardy, 2009) and can support students' ability to comprehend other aspects of writing, such as conventions of organization.
- Late career students are consistently writing above the passing mark, emerging from novice writers to advanced practitioners of writing. These numbers were consistent across gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other stratified data which did not yield significant differences.

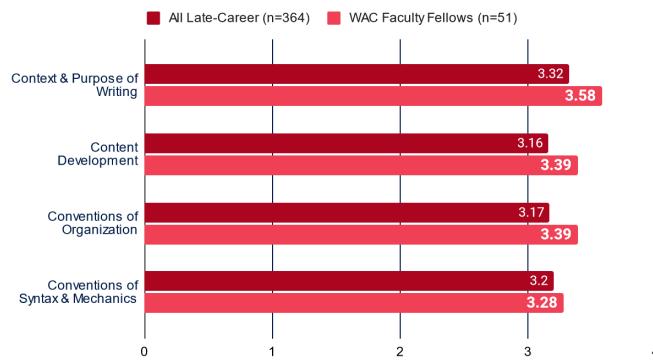
Fig. 2: Late-Career Communication Scores (n=364)



## Samples from Classes Taught by Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Faculty Fellows

- A small subset of late-career artifacts were collected from students enrolled in courses taught by instructors who participated in the 2021 Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Faculty Fellows training.
- The WAC training provided resources to instructors about the following: organizing writing assignments more effectively; scaffolding writing assignments; designing meaningful writing assignments; and embedding peer tutors to provide support to students in the class.
- As seen in Fig. 3 below, a subset of late-career artifacts collected from students enrolled in courses taught by instructors who participated in the 2021 Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Faculty Fellows training showed significantly stronger results ( $p = .02$ ) in this assessment on two rubric dimensions (context and purpose of writing, conventions of organization).

Fig. 3: Comparing Late-Career and WAC Faculty Fellows



## Implications and Recommendations

- **Connected Curriculum**
  - More can be accomplished by training faculty and students to make explicit connections across Foundations Writing, General Education (GE) writing, and writing in the major.
  - We recommend that undergraduate students complete two GE courses with a Writing Attribute, which provides the foundation for establishing sequenced writing courses in Foundations Writing, GE, and the majors, with the goal of connecting across these domains and building explicitly upon one another (Melzer, 2014; Wardle & Roozen, 2016).
- **WAC Training**
  - Faculty across the curriculum deserve more training in how to teach writing in their courses.
  - Results from a 2020 survey of 348 UArizona instructors showed that instructors are less prepared to define genre, purpose, and audience as elements of effective writing when teaching writing. However, instructors' survey responses showed that expectations for writing differ based on the discipline with some common patterns in Professional and Applied Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts, and Natural Sciences.
  - The GE Writing Attribute policies offer a first step for doing so. However, there is little explicit support in other contexts, especially writing emphasis courses in the major.
  - More resources are necessary to sustain ongoing faculty training, including initiatives like the WAC Faculty Fellows in which faculty receive stipends for extended training and professional development.