

Writing 2010 Assessment Report, 2014-2017

Prepared by Dr. Jennifer Andrus
Department of Writing and Rhetoric
Director of First-Year Writing

1. Introduction

The Department of Writing and Rhetoric completes a major assessment of the first-year writing series (WRTG 1010 and 2010) every three-years. The first-year writing series culminates in Writing 2010 (WRTG 2010), making it the ideal site for assessment of the series of two classes. The present first-year writing assessment reports on academic years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017. This assessment has four goals:

1. Develop and refine a set of Threshold Competencies for the First-Year Writing series.
2. Assess how well students' writing meets the threshold competencies at the end of WRTG 2010.
3. Communicate student writing competency to university community, including faculty, administrators, parents, students, and other universities in the Utah system.
4. Revise curriculum to improve and support low-achieving threshold competencies.

We know that regular, program assessment is necessary to understand whether we are teaching students what we think we are teaching (Odell, 1981). Program assessment requires that programs make explicit expected learning outcomes. Or put differently, we need to assess first-year writing, in order to determine whether students are learning what we think they are learning (Huot, 1996). Such assessment creates and maintains consistency across sections, which is especially important in a large service course like this one. Regular assessment also makes program goals and outcomes transparent for stakeholders in the larger university community, namely students, administrators, faculty in other departments, advisors, and the like.

The assessment reported on here includes two ways of measuring success in WRTG 2010. The first way of measuring success in first-year writing is an outcomes-based assessment, developed to assess the multitude of competencies that go into successful academic writing. To that end, we complete a general reading and rating of a large sample of the final papers submitted to a WRTG 2010 course. The rating is completed by two anonymous raters.

Using threshold competencies, or a measurement of the performance in a set of writing competencies, we identify specific strengths and weaknesses in student writing, allowing us to make changes to the curriculum that will bolster student learning in those particular areas. "Threshold concepts are concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice" (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015). According to Adler-Kassner & Wardle (2015), threshold concepts have four characteristics:

1. "Learning them is generally transformative
2. "Once understood, they are often irreversible and the learner is unlikely to forget them.
3. "They are integrative, demonstrating how phenomena are related, and helping learners make connections
4. "They tend to involve forms of troublesome knowledge [...] that is 'alien' or counterintuitive" (Adler-Kassner & Wardle).

Threshold concepts, thus, are those that are fundamental to a field of learning, that change student thinking, and that we hope will become second nature. They are broad and will help students in a variety of writing situations as they work across the curriculum. That is, threshold concepts extend beyond a single writing or learning situation, helping students adapt to the new writing and learning situations that they will encounter in the University setting. The threshold concepts analyzed in this report are: source use, synthesis, research, rhetorical awareness, cohesion, and style & mechanics.

The second way we assess student success in first-year writing is taking a close look at the grade range for all students who complete WRTG 2010. These figures come from the OBIA office. These numbers offer a picture of general trends in student success over a five-year period. This information is useful to get sense of the overall

strength of a curriculum. For example, if the percentage of students who need to retake the class because of failure and withdrawal rate is too high, a shift in the curriculum is warranted.

2. Assessment Model: Threshold Competencies

In many courses, a grade on a final exam can indicate how well students are achieving in a particular course. Writing requires an additional assessment, in the form of an anonymous rating of the final paper against program outcomes, for a number of reasons. Writing instruction is unique in that it involves teaching a process of writing and invention and a set of behaviors, all of which are difficult to assess (Haswell, 2001; Yancey, 1999; Yancey & Huot, 1999). We are looking for a cluster of writing competencies and behaviors that can only be assessed by abstractly reading the papers against a standard that parses out and sees the relationship between the competencies. The intangibles in writing assessment are further compounded by the fact that writing improvement is cumulative—it happens with practice over time. It can take years for the instruction in a first-year writing course to mature (Wardle, 2007; Downs & Wardle, 2007). Added to these complicating factors is the fact that WRTG 2010 and WRTG 1010 are required courses that are taught to more than 1500 students, yearly. Program level writing assessment thus requires analyzing writing from across the sections of WRTG 2010 to see, in general, what competencies with writing students have when they complete WRTG 2010.

There are a number of different ways of assessing writing, developed in writing studies. Holistic, Analytical, and Primary Traits, all of which score on a point scale. Holistic scoring takes an entire piece of writing, determining as a whole, how well the document meets the outcomes criteria; analytic scoring lists out individual criteria, assigning each criteria a score; primary traits sits in the middle, assessing how well a document accomplishes a number of writing traits, while considering the relationship between those traits (Lloyd-Jones, 1977). While holistic scoring accounts for the ways in which different elements in a piece of writing work together, rhetorically, it doesn't provide a fine enough account of what is working and what is not working in a piece. Where analytic scoring gives very specific feedback, it doesn't provide a sense of how well the criteria work together, rhetorically speaking (Odell & Cooper, 1980). Primary traits assessment takes account of both the big picture and the specifics.

The first-year writing assessment uses a primary traits model combined with a threshold competency model, in order to get a sense of the big picture that is developed by looking closely at specific competencies. Primary traits allow us to identify key traits that combine criteria so that each trait gets a score, giving us insight into the students' performance on a number of rhetorically salient elements of a composition. For example, students may be strong on sentence structure but less so on synthesis. Primary traits assessment allows us to see this without losing the connections between elements of a text that lead to its ultimate success.

Primary traits assessment works well in combination with a threshold competency model, which also takes an accounting of specific competencies that are desired in a piece of writing. I borrow the concept of threshold competencies from management research, where a threshold competency is that ability that "a person requires in order to be minimally competent" at a task or a job (Skulmoski & Hartman, 2001, p. 61). I revise the concept here to explain and describe student writing and behaviors. For the purposes of this report, a competency is a root ability that those who have completed first-year writing should meet at a particular threshold in order to be said to be proficient in that competency or trait.

The Dept. of Writing and Rhetoric has developed a set of six threshold competencies. The Threshold Competencies for Academic Argumentation that we teach in WRTG 2010 are:

1. Source Use
 - Sources used as evidence,
 - Sources used are varied,
 - Sources support claims and sub-claims,
 - Sources are appropriately attributed
2. Synthesis
 - Text combines sources,

- Sources are integrated in a number of ways, including direct quotation and paraphrase,
 - Connections are drawn across sources,
 - Text creates a network of sources relevant to present argument
3. Rhetorical Awareness
 - Thesis indicates the rhetorical purpose of the text,
 - Text shows awareness of and accommodation to audience,
 - Text shows awareness of writing context,
 - Word choice and paper features are appropriate for genre,
 - Argument is situated in an academic conversation,
 - Argument contributes to an academic conversation
 4. Research Skills
 - Sources are quality
 - Research from a variety of media and type of sources
 5. Textual Cohesion
 - Paper structure is obvious,
 - Ideas are developed cohesively,
 - Arguments are well developed across the paper,
 - Transitional sentences and phrases are used,
 - Main claim and supporting claims progress logically
 6. Style & Mechanics
 - Academic tone,
 - Conventions of standard, written, edited English,
 - Spelling,
 - Punctuation,
 - Citation style

These threshold competencies are the course outcomes that are required on the syllabus for every section of WRTG 2010 taught at the U of U. While there are many ways of teaching WRTG 2010, the general course outcomes require all sections to teach toward the same goals.

These threshold competencies function as learning outcomes—expected competencies, abilities, skills, and behaviors that those who complete WRTG 2010 should meet, at least at a minimal threshold (2 on the 4 point scale).

3. Method

3.1 Assessment Tool Development

The assessment tools described here were developed over a three-year period. (The full assessment rubrics are in Appendix 1.) After using an initial primary traits rubric for the first rating session, it was revised to streamline it for the raters and to get a more nuanced account of writing competencies of students at the end of the semester. Both rubrics used the same 4-point scale, described in more detail below.

The first version developed and used in Fall 2014 is similar to the format of other first-year writing rubrics. The 4-point scale for the first rubric was:

4: Excellent, 3: Above Average, 2: Adequate, 1: Needs Improvement.

The primary traits assessed in the 2014 assessment were:

1. Source Use: Keywords—Academic argument, thesis, synthesis, research, source use, source quality, source attribution, evidence supports claims, evidence drawn from sources, audience awareness
2. Cohesion & Structure: Keywords—Paper structure, idea cohesion, transitional sentences and phrases, logic & organization, claim structure

3. **Style & Mechanics: Keywords**—Academic tone, conventions of standard, written, edited English, spelling, punctuation, citation style

This rubric takes a rhetorical and academic argumentation approach to first-year composition, focusing on the research, the use of sources, evidence based reasoning, and formal features of academic writing conventions and arguments. What we found in the first rating session is that the scores for the first trait, source use, were lower than expected. This led me to wonder what about source use in particular were students not getting.

The rubric for the initial rating session was revised in Spring 2015. This rubric reconceives of the assessment in terms of Threshold Competencies, describe above. That means that we have determined the competencies that students need to meet in order to adequately succeed in academic writing in other courses in the university. The 4-point scale for the second rating session was revised to the following:

4: Excellent, 3: Adequate, 2: Minimal, 1: Infrequent.

Ideally, the group of papers rated should meet the competency between Adequate (3) and Minimal (2) for each trait in order to hit the so called, threshold, for that trait for WRTG 2010.

In order to better understand the ways students were using sources, source use being fundamental for academic writing, I refined the Source Use trait from the initial rubric, making it into four traits: Source Use, Synthesis, Rhetorical Awareness, and Research Skills, with Cohesion and Style remaining stable. The second rubric, then, measures the following six competencies:

1. **Source Use:** Sources used as evidence, Sources used are varied, Sources support claims and sub-claims, Sources are appropriately attributed
2. **Synthesis:** Text combines sources, Sources are integrated in a number of ways, including direct quotation and paraphrase, Connections are drawn across sources, Text creates a network of sources relevant to present argument
3. **Rhetorical Awareness:** Thesis indicates the rhetorical purpose of the text, Text shows awareness of and accommodation to audience, Text shows awareness of writing context, Word choice and paper features are appropriate for genre, Argument is situated in an academic conversation,
4. **Research Skills:** Sources meet academic standards for quality, Research from a variety of media and type of sources
5. **Textual Cohesion:** Paper structure is obvious, Ideas are developed cohesively, Arguments are well developed across the paper, Transitional sentences and phrases are used, Main claim and supporting claims progress logically
6. **Style & Mechanics:** Academic tone, Conventions of standard, written, edited English, Spelling, Punctuation, Citation style

This rubric gives us a better picture as to where the breakdown in source use is happening. This closer look allows for a revision of the curriculum, train instructors, and increase support measures that better meets the needs of students.

3.2 Assessment Procedure

Following writing assessment best practices, we assessed a cross-section of papers from across sections of WRTG 2010 at the end of Fall and Spring semesters. Instructors¹ were asked to submit a range of six papers—two top, two middle, two bottom—from every section of the course that they taught. The initial paper selection is

¹ Instructor compliance with assessment protocols has been an issue.

subjective, but it ensures that we get a range of papers from the perspective of those who teach the course, leading to a more complete picture of the range of accomplishment with writing than a random sample would.

The papers were submitted to the Dept. secretary who numbered the papers and put them into two spreadsheets. One has the teacher name and the numbers of the papers from that teacher. The other just has the paper number and the scores for each trait for each rater. The secretary prepares hardcopies of the papers for rating, including a rating sheet attached at the back of each paper.

The papers are rated in a group rating session. Before the rating session, I read through the group of papers and select the norming papers. The assistant WPA and I read through the papers and score them on each trait. The rating session begins with a norming session, in which all of the raters read and score the selected papers, and we have a group discussion to push the raters into a similar way of reading and rating the papers. I solicited raters from the writing program faculty and instructors and paid them hourly for their participation in the rating session.

The rating session followed these procedures.

1. Competency Threshold review: I hand out a hard copy of the Primary Traits Rubric to each rater, and we review what they mean and discuss examples of the trait.
2. Norming: We read and discuss each norming paper so that we all agree on the requirements for a particular score on each paper. This ensures a more consistent and reliable score.
3. Rating: Each paper is read and rated for each of the primary traits by two readers. If the readers' scores differ by more than one point (a 2 and a 4, for example) on any trait, the paper is read again by a third rater.
4. Re-norming as needed: Mid-rating, I re-norm based on questions asked by raters and my spot checks of scoring, in order to keep raters scoring the same traits in the same way.

When the rating session is over, the papers are given back to the secretary who inputs the scores. The scoring spreadsheet is then sent to me for analysis.

4. Findings and Analysis

In the initial rating (Fall 2014), we found that students' performance is the lowest on features of academic argumentation, especially synthesis and source use. In the second rating (Spring 2015), we found that source use and synthesis had the lowest numbers, while rhetorical awareness and research skills were relatively high. I describe the findings in detail below.

4.1 FALL 2014

Fall 2014, we rated 147 papers. The Overall Average was determined by averaging all of the scores given across the traits by both raters. Students perform quite differently in the different traits. Where they do well with style, as indicated by the fairly even Minimal (1.5-2) and Threshold (2.5-3) figures, Cohesion has far papers in the 1.5-2 range than the 2.5-3 range. Argument also has more papers in the minimal to low range

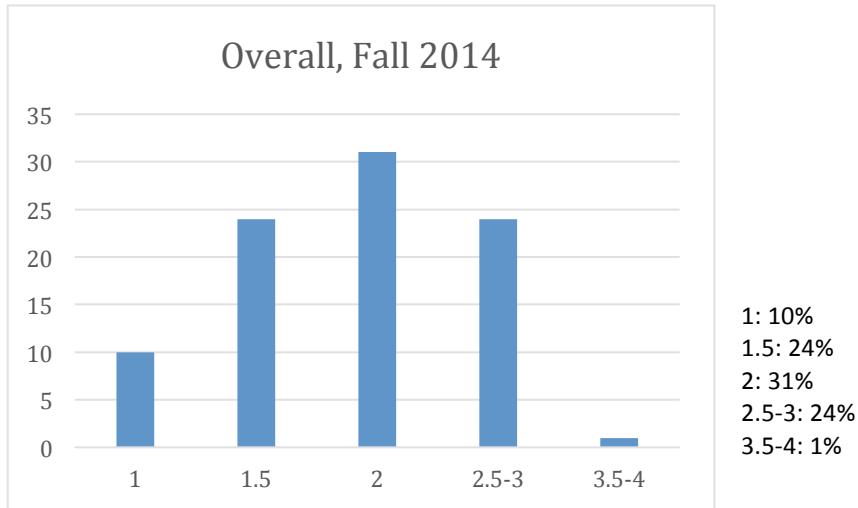


Figure 1: Overall Average, Fall 2014

Figure 1 shows the overall average for papers assessed in Fall 2014. What we see here is that the most students, 31%, are meeting the expectations of the course in the minimal range. 25% are at or above the threshold range and 31% fall below the minimal range. The question, then, is which features of writing are driving down these scores. The following charts and figures give a fuller picture of that breakdown.

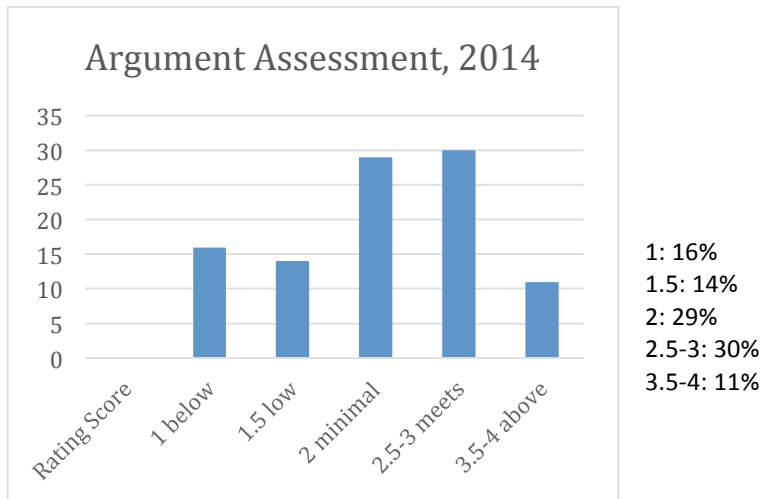


Figure 2: Argument

Argumentation is one of the key competencies taught in first-year writing. It is also a competency made up of a number of smaller skills, behaviors, and abilities. In the Fall 2014 assessment, the numbers for the Argument

competency are good, with 41% at or above the competency threshold, 29% minimally meeting expectations, and 30% falling short of the threshold competency. More than half of the papers, then, only minimally met or did not meet the threshold for this trait.

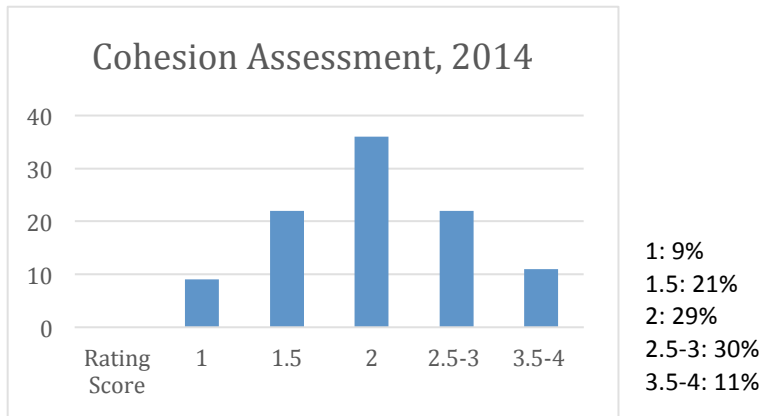


Figure 3: Cohesion

The story in cohesion looks very similar to the one in argument, with 41% meeting or exceeding the threshold competency range, 29% minimally meeting expectations, and 30% below the threshold. In this case, more papers are close to the minimal range—21%—than with argument. These numbers mirror those of argument, indicating that papers with better argument structures are more cohesive and vice versa.

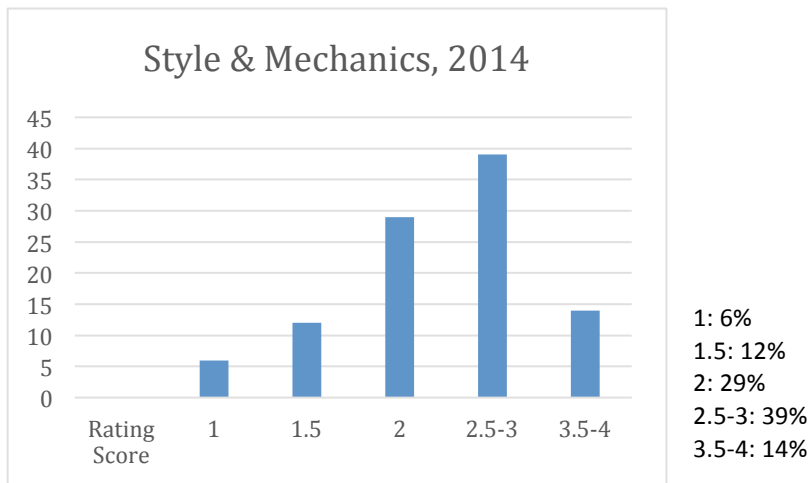


Figure 4: Style & Mechanics

Style & Mechanics is where papers do the best in this assessment. 53% of the papers met or exceeded the competency threshold level, with 29% minimally meeting the threshold. Only 18% fell below the threshold.

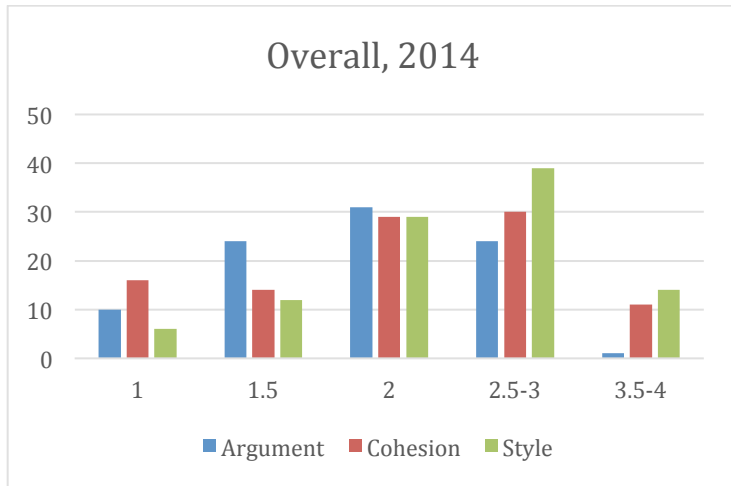


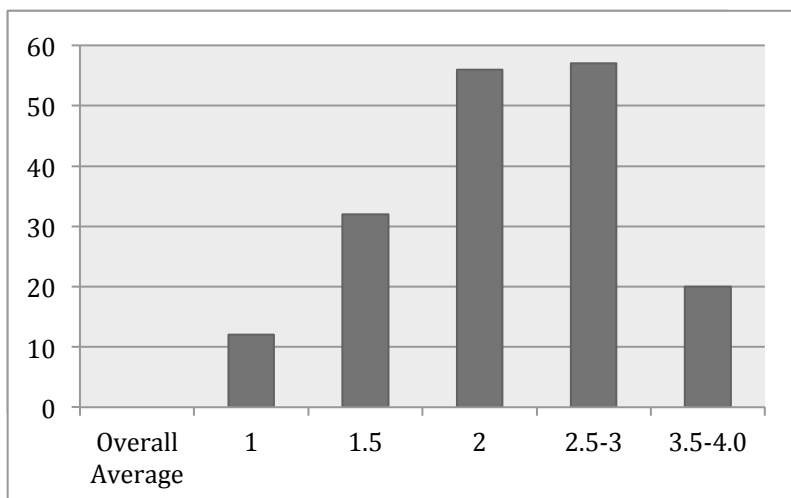
Figure 5: Argument, Cohesion, Style & Mechanics, 2014

Taken together, this assessment indicates that students are meeting expectations for lower-order concerns of style and mechanics, but struggling with the more difficult, higher order concerns like argument and cohesion. In order to better understand this trend, the assessment tool was revised to better capture what is going on with issues of argument and cohesion, using a finer-grained assessment.

4.2 SPRING 2015 Assessment

Recall that we used a 4-point scoring scale, and that each paper was scored by two raters, who each gave independent scores for each of the traits measured in that assessment tool. The threshold for adequate competency is a 3 and a two indicates minimal competency. Thus, an average of 1 shows that the paper did not meet competency expectations for that trait, while a 4 shows that it exceeded competency expectations. If a paper with an average score of 1.5 received a 1 by one rater and a 2 by another for that trait. Similarly a 2.5 received at least on 3 and a 3.5 at least one score of 4. In order to see how well the papers meet competency thresholds, I have grouped the averaged scores this way:

- **Below:** averaged score of 1, the paper below the threshold for that competency/trait
- **Minimal:** averaged score range of 1.5-2, the paper minimally/borderline meets threshold for that competency/trait
- **Competency Threshold:** averaged score range of 2.5-3, the paper meets threshold for that competency/trait
- **Exceeds:** averaged score of 3.5-4, the paper exceeds threshold for that competency/trait



Overall

1: 7%
 1.5: 18%
 2: 32%
 2.5-3: 32%
 3.5-4: 11%

Minimal Competency: 32%
 Competency+: 43%

Figure 6: Overall Average Scores, 2015

As the graph above shows, 32% of the papers rated minimally meet the competency thresholds for WRTG 2010, with another 18% borderline competent. 43% of the papers rated meet or exceed the competency threshold. (NOTE: Overall scores are averages of all traits given by both raters.) We would like more students in the 2.5-3 range.

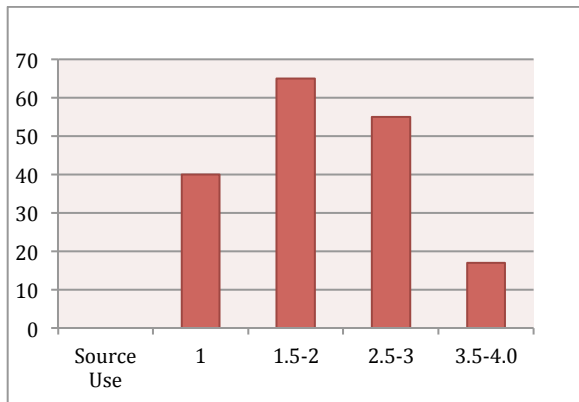


Figure 7: Source Use

1: 22% 1.5-2: 37% (Min Comp: 37%)
 2.5-3: 31% 3.5-4: 10% (Comp +: 41%)

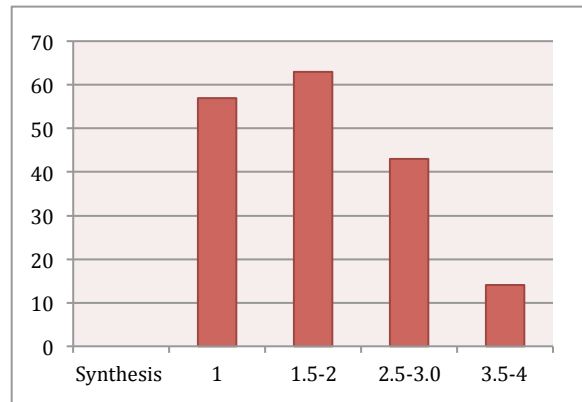


Figure 8: Synthesis

1: 32% 1.5-2: 36% (Min Comp: 36%)
 2.5-3: 24% 3.5-4: 8% (Comp +: 32%)

Though at least 37% of students are minimally meeting the threshold for the Source Use competency, many of those are borderline (1.5) and 22% are not meeting the threshold. 41% are at or above the threshold for the source use competency. The problems meeting the threshold are even more pronounced for the Synthesis competency, with 36% minimally meeting the standard and 32% at or above the threshold standard. With this competency we also see 32% below even minimal competency, the most in the entire assessment. Synthesis is thus identified as the competency that needs the most curricular support. This means that just less than half of students are not sufficiently attributing sources, using sources to support claims, nor are they using a variety of sources, or combining and synthesizing sources to show the reader where the argument fits in with other research on the same topic.

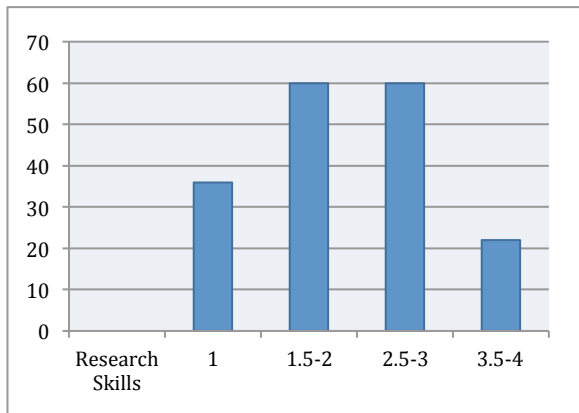


Figure 9: Research Skills

1: 20% 1.5-2: 34% (Min Comp: 34%)
 2.5-3: 34% 3.5-4: 12% (Comp +: 44%)

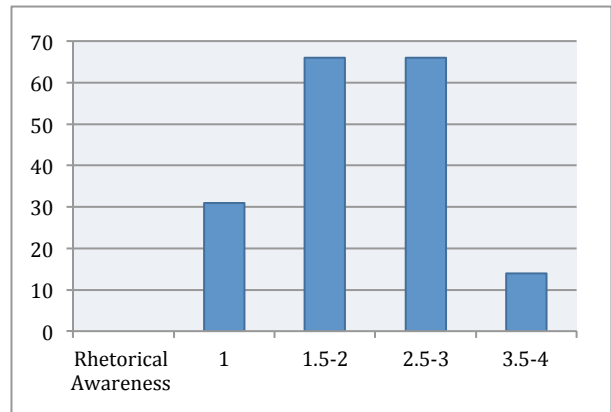


Figure 10: Rhetorical Awareness

1: 18% 1.5-2: 37% (Min Comp: 37%)
 2.5-3: 37% 3.5-4: 8% (Comp +: 45%)

Students are stronger in the Research Skills competency. 44% are finding varied and high quality resources, and about 34% are making progress in doing secondary research. This is interesting, given the middling source use scores. This means that students are finding sources but struggling to figure out how to read, make sense of, and make use of the sources. We know that synthesis comes with comprehension and ownership over the material. Students can do the research, but they run into problems using the information and sources that they find.

Another competency in which students are by and large meeting the competency threshold is Rhetorical Awareness. 45% are at or above the 2.5 competency threshold and another 37% are minimally meeting the standard. This means that students' prose uses features of academic argument, it oriented to an audience, using appropriate generic features and tone.

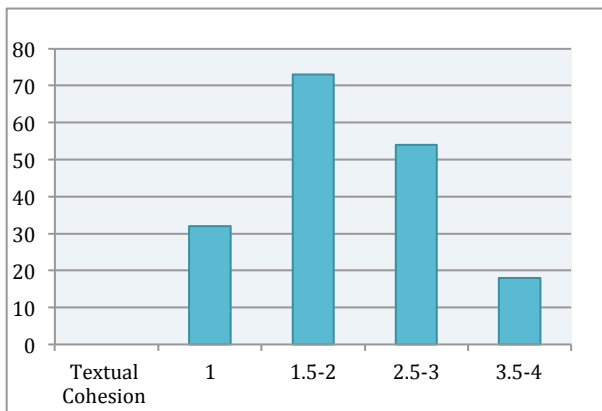


Figure 11: Textual Cohesion

1: 18% 1.5-2: 41% (Min Comp: 41%)
 2.5-3: 31% 3.5-4: 10% (Comp +: 41%)

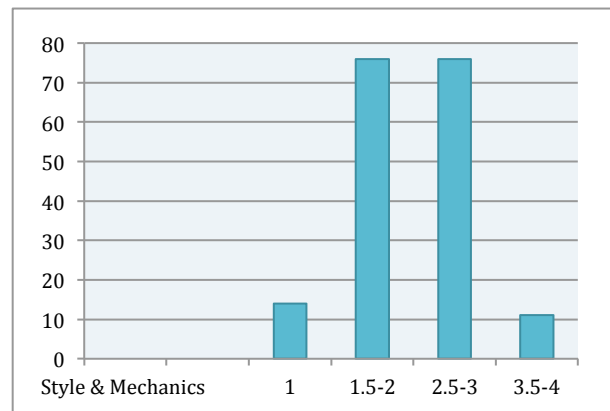


Figure 12: Style & Mechanics

1: 8% 1.5-2: 43% (Min Comp: 43%)
 2.5-3: 43% 3.5-4: 6% (Comp +: 49%)

In terms of overall organization, textual cohesion, and mechanics, there are mixed results. 82% of students meet the competency threshold, but half of that, 41%, are in the minimal or borderline range. This means that student writing is using some techniques of textual cohesion and structure—transition sentences and phrases, overall logical structures, connections between claims and subclaims—but many students aren't using them consistently.

The Style and Mechanics competency has the highest competency scores, with 49% meeting or exceeding the threshold competency and only 8% receiving a score of 1. This shows us that at the sentence level, papers are coming together, with clause structures and punctuation that are mostly correct, according to the expectations of standard, written, edited English. This also means that students are learning to use academic citation styles.

5. OBIA Data: Grade distribution

The assessment and related curriculum revision have had some positive effects in WRTG 2010, in particular in the area of overall grade improvement. As the following chart shows, the DWE grades have come down significantly, with more students passing the class. Passing the class reduces the number of students who have to retake the class, reducing the so-called bottleneck that we were seeing in WRTG 2010 and WRTG 1010.

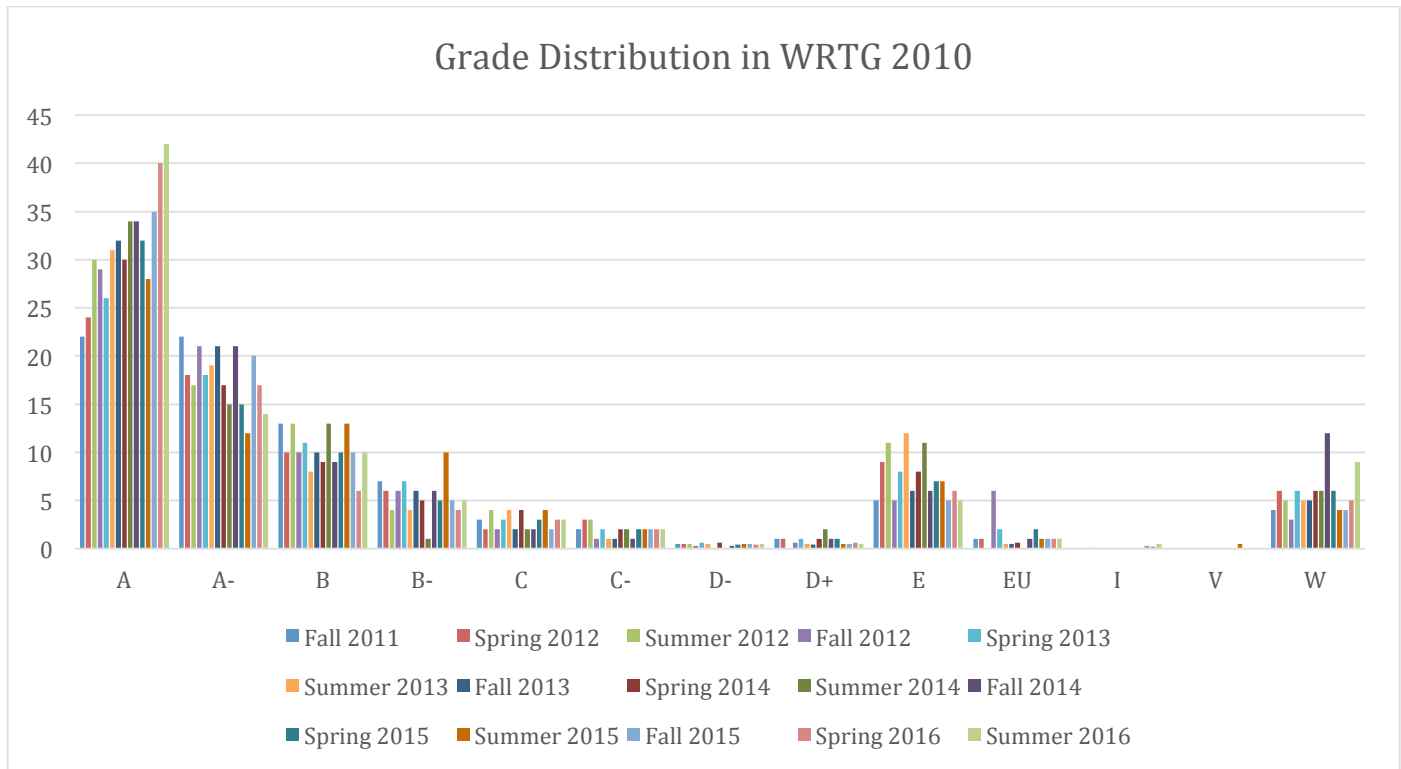


Figure 13: Grade distribution, Fall 2011-Summer 2016

We will know more about improvements in student ability when we complete the assessment of 2017-2018 at the end of Spring 2018.

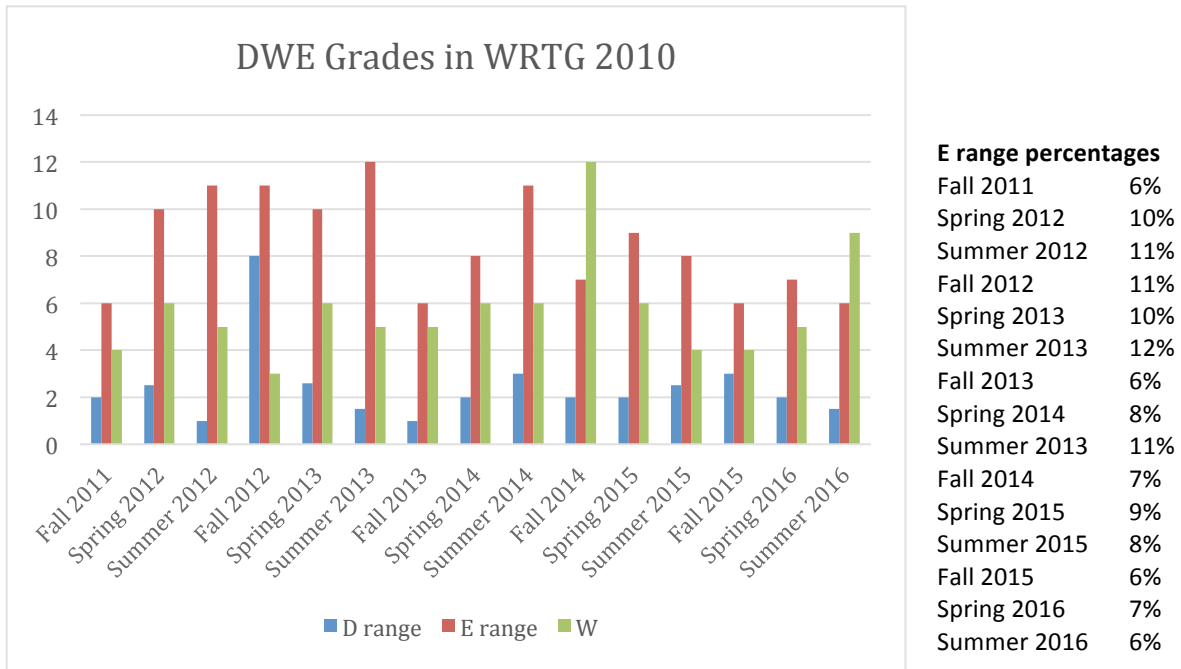


Figure 14: D, E, W grade distribution, Fall 2011-Summer 2016

Notice the E range grades. In 2012 and 2013, they were between 13% and 10%. Now they are down at 6%, meaning that the vast majority of students who take WRTG 2010 pass it. Similarly, the D range grades have also improved, moving from 2% and 3% down to 1.5%.

For WRTG 1010, the story is similar. We see a drop in E grades over the last 5 years, with fairly flat D-range grades.

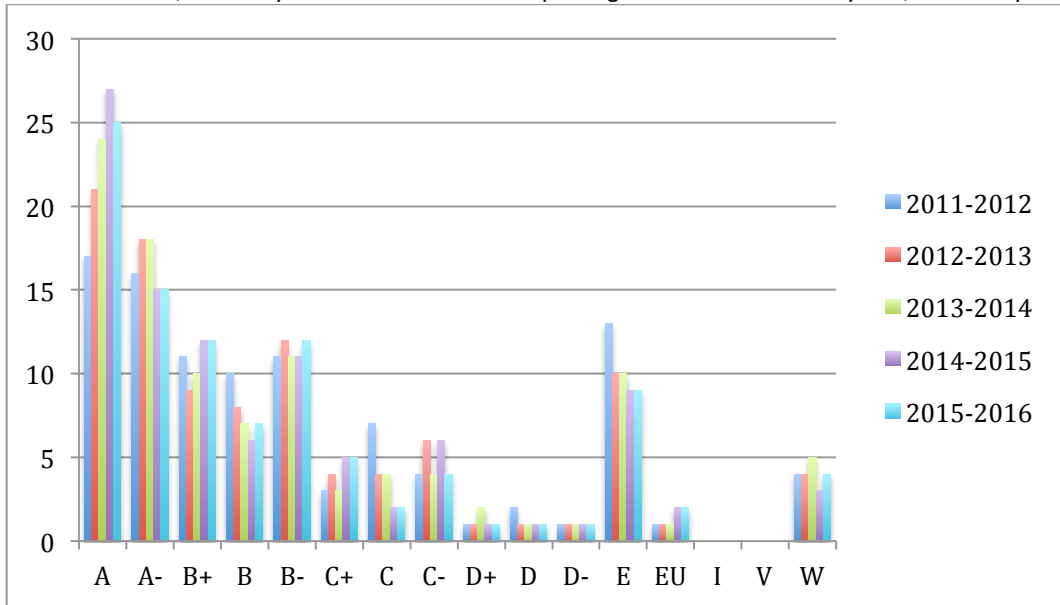


Figure 15: Grade distribution, Fall 2011-Spring 2016

E range percentages

2011-2012: 13%
2012-2013: 10%
2013-2014: 10%
2014-2015: 9%
2015-2016: 9%

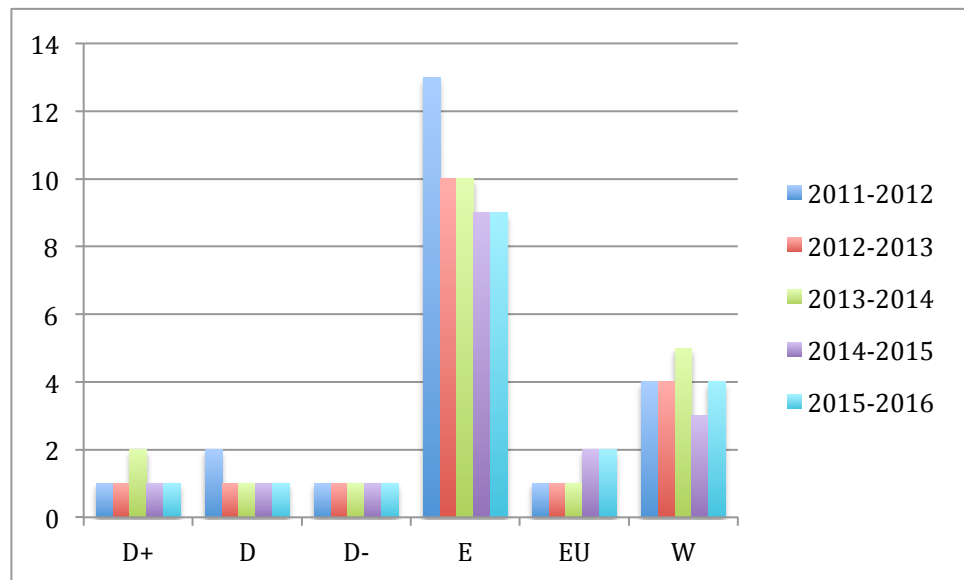


Figure 16: D, E, W grade distribution, Fall 2011-Spring 2016

As you can see from figure 16, the grades have improved, with the E grade falling 4 percentage points—from 13% to 9%. Fewer students are getting caught repeating WRTG 1010, which is good for the student and the writing program alike.

6. Curriculum Revision and Teacher Training

6.1 Curriculum

The assessment of WRTG 2010 showed that students are underperforming in the areas that we know are fundamental for academic writing—using sources and synthesizing them. The current curriculum has been developed with those topics in mind. Writing 2010 is designed to provide students with the foundational practices and capabilities needed to read and write academic arguments proficiently. Academic writing isn't a solo endeavor, in which the author sits and comes up with ideas by him or herself. Instead, WRTG 2010 is framed to think about academic writing as joining a conversation, embodied in existing research. Students are taught through a series of assignments to read, comprehend, and synthesize a body of research. Students are taught that strong academic writing is founded on strong research and reading skills, which allow students to:

- read the arguments and ideas about a topic that have already been writ,
- demonstrate knowledge of the prior research through accurate and fair summary,
- synthesize prior research, arguments about and approaches to the topic,
- contribute your own argument to the conversation,
- situate your argument in the existing body of research on the topic, and
- support your argument using evidence.

The assignments in the course walk students through this process twice, once with a group of readings on a topic that the teacher selects, and then once with added research skills with a group of readings on a topic that the student themselves selects. The following is the assignment series for the course:

- Synthesis 1: Conversation Map: For synthesis 1, students read a number of articles about a topic as a class. Students discuss the argumentative strategies used and identify the ways that the articles are in conversation with one another, sometimes more explicitly than others. Students create a synthetic “map” of the scholarly conversation, by creating a visual representation the research conversation. They also write a three-page paper in which they synthesize the arguments made by the various articles in the topical, scholarly conversation.
- Annotated Bibliography: In groups, students select a topic and work together to research it. As a group, they collect 21 articles, books, visuals, etc. on the topic (seven sources per group member) and make a

bibliography using APA style. Finally, they annotate each entry with a three+ sentence summary of the argument the article makes.

- Synthesis 2: Literature Review: After submitting the Annotated Bibliography as a group, students individually write a literature review of the sources collected as a group. A literature (lit) review is a common and important academic genre, in which students learn to review and synthesize research on the topic. Synthesis 2 will then explain, describe, and define the multiple positions to take within the particular scholarly conversation as well as the stakes associated with each position.
- Argument Campaign
 - Academic, Researched Argument: The contribution paper will work directly out of synthesis 2 to contribute an argument to the ongoing conversation researched in groups.
 - Visual, Non-Academic Argument: In addition to the contribution paper, students create one companion piece to accompany or otherwise present the argument made in the formal academic paper: a direct mail, postcard, pamphlet, postcard, white paper, etc.
- Presentation: After writing and contributing a single-authored academic paper and a companion composition, students join-up with their research groups again to write and give a 10-minute presentation on the topic.
- Portfolio: At the end of the semester, students create a Portfolio in which they collect and present all of the work completed in the semester. They also revise one previously graded essay and write a portfolio analysis that reflects on and explains what they learned over the semester.

As you can see, synthesis and source use are foregrounded and taught in a variety of ways across the semester

In addition to revising the curriculum, I have developed an accelerated half-semester version of both WRTG 1010 and WRTG 2010. This version of the course has been very successful, with a high pass rate and correlatively, very low DWE grades. This version of the required writing courses allow wily students to complete their writing requirements in one semester rather than two semesters.

6.2 Teacher training

These findings have led to innovations in teacher training. First of all, participating in the assessment, as many of the teachers do, helps them understand not only the stakes of writing instruction, but also the larger goals and standards for the program. Having read and rated more than 20 papers, instructors leave the assessment with a better sense of the focus and requirements of WRTG 2010. Using the assessment rubric and working on anonymous papers really drives home the major concepts and behaviors that drive WRTG 2010, helping instructors understand what they should be focusing on in their classrooms.

In addition to the lessons learned directly from the assessment, these findings have required me to adjust the curriculum for the new instructor training. Now in addition to the typical discussions of pedagogy, we have more and targeted instruction in teaching source use and synthesis, including reading articles on source use, synthesis, best pedagogical practices, and grade norming. New teachers develop a robust tool kit for teaching and assessing source use and synthesis, following along with the scaffolding that is built into WRTG 2010 itself. Instructors are themselves asked to participate in writing assignments that require synthesis and strong source use. As they experience the processes themselves, they are asked to reflect on the process, thus influencing how they teach synthesis in their classes.

7. Implications and Conclusions

The present report has shown that WRTG 2010 is successfully teaching students at the University of Utah. The failure rate (E grade) in the course has dropped significantly over the last five years, from 10% and 11% in 2012 to 6% in 2016. In 2016, 76% of the students enrolled in WRTG 2010 completed the course with a grade sufficient to fulfill the W2 writing requirement, up from 63% in 2012.

Students who successfully complete WRTG 2010 are learning difficult and important academic writing competencies, namely Source Use, Synthesis, Rhetorical Awareness, Research Skills, Textual Cohesion, and Style & Mechanics. Of those, they excel in style and mechanics (49% at or above threshold), research skills (44% at or above threshold), and rhetorical awareness (45% at or above threshold), while they struggle more with source use (41% at or above threshold), synthesis (32% at or above threshold), and textual cohesion (41% at or above threshold).

The curriculum and teacher training have been revised to target the competencies of synthesis and source use. These competencies are scaffolded throughout the course, beginning with the very first week, and building across the course of the semester.

This final section of the report will discuss some of the implications for upper-division writing courses. It will also look forward to consider the work of writing assessment in broader terms and look forward to future assessments.

7.1 Upper division courses

The behaviors and competencies taught in WRGT 2010 are intended to prepare students for upper-division writing courses. To better understand what that means in real terms on this campus, a needs assessment was completed. I interviewed thirteen faculty members from across campus and a variety of disciplines who regularly teach classes that fulfill the upper-division writing requirement at the U of U. My study aimed at getting a sense of 1) what faculty valued about writing, 2) what they wanted to see in written assignments 3) what kinds of writing they assigned, and 4) where students ran into trouble successfully completing those assignments. The following is a list of key words that came out of discussions in those interviews. The number indicates how many times the topic or concept came up in those interviews.

<p><u>7 discussions</u> Argument</p>	<p><u>5 discussions</u> Evidence data Source use quotation citation</p>	<p><u>4 discussions</u> Flow connection organization structure</p>
<p><u>3 discussions</u> polished revised Logical progression of ideas</p>	<p><u>2 discussions</u> analysis mechanics Synthesis Reading Paragraphing clear/clarity research</p>	

The most important value for faculty teaching upper-division writing, then, is argument, with evidence, data, source use, quotation, and citation following closely. These are all source use skills that are taught in WRTG 2010. The next group of important concepts are flow and organization, or cohesion issues. Recall that Source Use and Cohesion have historically been two of the most difficult competencies for students to master. Mentioned less often are issues like clarity and mechanics, which students are more likely to gain mastery over. The following is the same set of writing concepts, organized according to the WRTG 2010 writing competencies.

<u>Source Use</u> evidence and data source use, quotation, citation analysis reading	<u>Synthesis</u> synthesis	<u>Rhetorical Awareness</u> argument revision
<u>Research Skills</u> research	<u>Textual Cohesion</u> flow and connection organized structure logical progression of ideas paragraphing	<u>Style & Mechanics</u> polished mechanics clear/clarity

What this shows is that WRTG 2010 is teaching the concepts that are core to many of the upper-division courses taught across campus. Taken with the assessment data laid out above, this means that students are getting a start on mastery of these concepts in WRTG 2010, but that the work of instruction in these competencies will need to be maintained in upper-division writing courses. That is to say, because these concepts are so difficult, upper-division professors will need to take some time in class for explicit and ongoing instruction in these competencies in order for students to be successful. Put another way, assigning writing just is not enough. There will need to be overt instruction in these issues in order for students to reach the threshold level for these competencies. Learning to write is a multi-semester and multi-course endeavor. Learning to write takes place over time and over a number of different writing situations (Haswell, 2000; Wardle, 2007).

7.2 The work of first-year writing: New places for assessment

In first-year writing courses, what we teach students is how to take a body of knowledge, read it, comprehend it, synthesize it, and finally to compose it. Our work then, as Adler-Kassner & Wardle (2015) put it, then, is to teach students to compose knowledge in ways that comport with the body of knowledge, the reader, and the context, among other things. This is a tall order and easier said than done. This report has explained and described the ways that texts demonstrate fluency in a set of six threshold competencies. Here, I will briefly comment on the less/intangible behaviors, skills, and concepts that are in many ways the real work of WRTG 2010, but that are difficult if not impossible to represent with a single piece of writing. That is, there is a whole host of rhetorical knowledge that students get in WRTG 2010 not represented in the above assessment. These behaviors and knowledges are difficult to assess but are particularly meaningful in the development of a writer, particularly important for academic writing.

The following list of less tangible concepts captures just a few of the behaviors, skills, and competencies that students gain in WRTG 2010:

- “Writing is a socio-rhetorical activity” (Roozen)
Writing is an activity that takes place between people. Writers are always attempting to accomplish a particular task, in an often ill-defined context, for a particular audience. Thus writing is essentially rhetorical, coping with chance difficulties and social relationships.
- “Writing is a knowledge-making activity” (Estrem)
Writing is undertaken to *do* something; it is an activity. Very often the activity is to bring together a body of knowledge and present it cohesively for a reader. Students are asked to make sense of new knowledge in and through writing.
- “Writing addresses, invokes, and/or creates audiences” (Lunsford)
Writing is for an audience, but the concept of audience is unstable. Any text will both address an audience, but it will also work to re/construct that audience, based on the information presented and the contexts in which the writing and reading take place. Every piece of writing invokes the audience that the author imagines, analyzes, and copes with.

- “Writing expresses and shares meaning to be reconstructed by the reader” (Bazerman)
Writing is written to be read. Writing is for a reader, who will do the hard work of recreating the meaning that has been carefully constructed by the writer. Coping with the reader is a feature of every text. Meaning is negotiated between the writer, the reader, and the text. It doesn’t reside in any individual location.
- “Writing Mediates Activity” (Russell)
Writing is a technology—a set of tools that allow us to communicate with others across time and space. Writing mediates, or comes in between and facilitates the relationship between people, using text. In this way, writing is active; it is productive and relational. Writing helps to create and communicate information and meaning between people.
- “Writing enacts and creates identities (Scott)
Writing is a way of creating and communicating an identity. It is a vulnerable act that requires an individual to bring their own views, ideologies, and beliefs into contact with another person. Because writing is value-laden, it is always highly personal, making the stakes high for both the writer and the reader.
- “Revision is central to writing” (Downs)
Revision is a key behavior for creating well-formed, organized text that another person can pick up and read. The revision that is key has to do with the rhetorical foundations of the text—the context, content, audience, topic, larger conversation, developing knowledge.

My point in bringing up such behaviors, skills, and competencies is to highlight the fact that we teach many things in WRTG 2010 that can’t be easily assessed in an assessment such as the one described here (future and ideal assessments described in the following section). Further, these issues and concerns that go unassessed are those that will help students assess and properly respond to the writing situations that they will encounter in their time at the U of U. For example, understanding audience in a nuanced and complete way will allow students to understand professors that they will write for in the future. Similarly, internalizing the need for and importance of revision will help students do better on papers in future classes, because they will have naturalized the process of drafting and revising into a more complete and robust draft. Drafting and revision in particular would be difficult to assess in a standard assessment such as the one described and applied here.

7.3 Next Steps

In this section, I will describe an ideal assessment and some of the elements of this assessment that will be implemented in the next assessment.

Portfolio Assessment: A portfolio method would be ideal. Benefits: An ideal portfolio would include both formal writing (major papers and drafts), informal writing (daily writing and prewriting), a revised paper, and a reflection paper. This would allow view into what students do across revision, how they plan papers, and how they are thinking through the processes of writing and composition. Costs: A portfolio assessment is labor intensive, costing a significant amount to pay the raters for their work. A portfolio assessment also takes longer, leading to rater fatigue and creating the need for more re-norming.

Reflection Paper: A key part of any portfolio is a reflection paper, or a paper in which the student reflects on what s/her learns in WRTG 2010. Benefits: The reflection paper typically punctuates the portfolio, but it would also be helpful to read and assess this paper apart from the portfolio. This paper gets at the metaknowledge that students learn—how well they can explain what they know about and can do with writing. This would help us better understand what students know about the threshold competencies that they have learned. Costs: Reflection papers are notoriously hard to assess, because they introduce subjectivity that troubles the assessment rubric.

Surveys: A survey would allow us to get at attitudes and values of students. Benefits: Better understanding the values and attitudes of students would allow us insight into how students are uptaking, integrating, and internalizing the lessons about rhetorical writing, writing as a social practice, writing as

ideological, writing as identity construction, and the like. Added to a standard assessment, a survey would give much needed, deep context for the final numbers, adding dimension to the threshold competencies analysis that we already do. Costs: We would not be able to correlate threshold competency assessments directly with survey data. We would attempt to get most of the WRTG 2010 students to take the survey, while only a sample of student papers are assessed.

For the next round of assessment, we will add a survey that will be distributed to all WRTG 2010 students, allowing us to get at some more of the more or less tacit knowledge that students acquire in WRTG 2010. This survey will be crafted to get at the socio-rhetorical knowledge that students gain in a writing class.

7.4 Conclusions

This report has shown that we are successful in the first-year writing program at the U of U. Most students are at least minimally meeting the threshold for the competencies taught in the first-year writing program (source use, synthesis, rhetorical awareness, cohesion, research, style & mechanics), with between 35% and 41% meeting or exceeding the threshold, depending on the competency. We have significantly reduced the DWE figures and increased retention and completion of both WRTG 1010 and WRTG 2010 over the last 5 years.

For future assessment periods, we suggest an augmented assessment, which would include a reflection paper and a survey distributed to all students who complete WRTG 2010. These additions would give us access to a broader spectrum of rhetorical competencies learned in first-year writing at the U of U. Please contact Jennifer Andrus (j.andrus@utah.edu) with any questions or for more information.

Works cited

Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (2015). *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

Bazerman, C. (2015). Writing expresses and shares meaning to be reconstructed by the reader.

Downs, D., & Wardle, E. (2007). Teaching about writing, righting misconceptions:(Re) envisioning" first-year composition" as" Introduction to Writing Studies". *College Composition and Communication*, 552-584.

Estrem, H. (2015). Writing is a knowledge-making activity. In Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (eds), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

Haswell, R. H. (2000). Documenting improvement in college writing: A longitudinal approach. *Written communication*, 17(3), 307-352.

----- (Ed.). (2001). *Beyond outcomes: Assessment and instruction within a university writing program* (Vol. 5). Greenwood Publishing Group.

Huot, B. (1996). Toward a new theory of writing assessment. *College composition and communication*, 47(4), 549-566.

Lloyd-Jones, R. (1977). Primary trait scoring. *Evaluating writing: Describing, measuring, judging*, 33-66.

Lundsford, A. (2015). Writing addresses, invokes, and/or creates audiences. In Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (eds), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

Odell, L. (1981). Defining and assessing competence in writing. *The nature and measurement of competency in English*, 95-138.

Odell, L., & Cooper, C. R. (1980). Procedures for evaluating writing: Assumptions and needed research. *College English*, 42(1), 35-43.

Roosen, K. (2015). Writing is a social and rhetorical activity. In Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (eds), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

Russel, D. R. (2015). Writing mediates activity. In Adler-Kassner, L., & Wardle, E. (eds), *Naming what we know: Threshold concepts of writing studies*. University Press of Colorado.

Skulmoski, G. J., & Hartman, F. T. (2009). Information systems project manager soft competencies: A project-phase investigation. *Project Management Journal* 41(1), 61-80.

Wardle, E. (2007). Understanding "transfer" from FYC: Preliminary results of a longitudinal study. *Writing Program Administration* 31(2), 65-85.

Yancey, K. B. (1999). Looking back as we look forward: Historicizing writing assessment. *College composition and communication*, 50(3), 483-503.

Yancey, K. B., & Huot, B. (1999). *Assessing Writing across the Curriculum: Diverse Approaches and Practices. Perspectives on Writing: Theory, Research, Practice. Volume 1*. Ablex Publishing/JAI Press Inc.

Appendix 1:

2014 Rating Form

	4: Excellent	3: Above Average	2: Adequate	1: Needs Improvement
<p>Source Use</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic argument Thesis, Synthesis, Research Source use, Source quality, Source attribution, Evidence supports claims, Evidence drawn from sources, Audience awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paper indicates strong use of research skills through reference to source material The paper thoroughly synthesizes relevant literature The paper contributes an argument to the literature on the topic The paper has an obvious and consistent thesis The thesis is well-situated in relevant literature The thesis is supported with verifiable evidence from reliable sources Evidence is drawn from a variety of quality sources Ideas, evidence, and words are attributed to the source from which they were drawn All information in the paper is relevant to the thesis The paper has strong indications that it was accommodated to an (academic) audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paper indicates some use of research skills through reference to source material The paper mostly synthesizes relevant literature The paper contributes an argument to the literature on the topic The paper has an clear and consistent thesis The thesis is situated in relevant literature The thesis is supported with evidence that is mostly verifiable from sources that are typically considered reputable and reliable Evidence is drawn from a somewhat homogeneous variety of sources Sources used are mostly quality Ideas, evidence, and words are attributed to the source from which they were drawn All information in the paper is relevant to the thesis The paper has indications that it was accommodated to an (academic) audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paper indicates use of limited research skills through reference to source material The paper synthesizes literature that is typically relevant On occasion, the paper lists and summarizes rather than synthesizing The paper focuses on the topic but with an unclear argumentative position The paper has a thesis that remains consistent for the majority of the paper with some wavering The thesis is mostly related to relevant literature but not explicitly situated The thesis is mostly supported with evidence from sources that are more or less reliable Evidence is drawn from a homogeneous sources with questionable quality Ideas, evidence, and words are mostly attributed to the source from which they were drawn Most information in the paper is relevant to the thesis The paper has some indication that it was 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paper indicates use very limited research skills through very reference to limited and homogenous source material The paper lists or summarizes rather than synthesizing prior research The paper does not include a representation of prior research on the topic The paper thesis is weak or absent The thesis is opinion The thesis is supported by opinion Evidence is limited Evidence is drawn from unreliable or unverifiable sources Many ideas, evidence, and words are not attributed to the source from which they were drawn The paper has no indication that it was accommodated to an (academic) audience or the audience is not appropriate for the course

			accommodated to an (academic) audience	
<p>Cohesion & Structure</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper structure, • Idea cohesion, • Transitional sentences and phrases, • Logic & organization, • Claim structure <p>Cohesion & Structure, cont'd.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction is substantive, providing thorough and relevant context and background information • The introduction defines all of the key terms and concepts • The introduction creates a clear and logical structure for the paper • The structure established in the introduction is followed • The structure is strong throughout the paper, maintained at the sentence and phrase level • There are transitional sentences and phrases between paragraphs • Ideas are organized logically at paragraph and whole paper levels • The body of the paper includes sub-claims that provide support for the thesis and reinforce the argument established in the introduction • The sub-claims are well-reasoned and organized • Paper draws conclusions that follow from the claim structure of the argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction provides strong context and background for the paper • The introduction creates logical structure for the paper • The introduction defines a significant portion of the key terms and concepts • The structure established in the introduction is mostly followed in the body of the paper • The structure is maintained with transition sentences and phrases • Paragraphs are mostly connected with transitional sentences and phrases • Ideas are organized logically at paragraph and whole paper levels • The body of the paper includes sufficient sub-claims to provide support for the thesis and mostly reinforce the argument established in the introduction • The sub-claims are mostly well-reasoned and organized • Paper draws conclusions that follow from the claim structure of the argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction provides minimal background and context for the paper • The introduction minimally creates a structure for the paper • The introduction defines most of the key terms and concepts • The structure established in the introduction is somewhat followed • The structure is somewhat maintained with transition sentences and phrases • Paragraphs are somewhat connected with transitional sentences and phrases • Most sub-claims reinforce the argument established in the introduction • Ideas are mostly organized logically at paragraph and whole paper levels • The body of the paper includes some sub-claims to provide support for the thesis, more or less reinforcing the argument established in the introduction • The sub-claims are not well-reasoned • The sub-claims are not organized • The evidence is lacking in relevance and strength • Paper makes an effort at drawing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction is brief and/or overly general and does not create a structure for the paper • The introduction does not sufficiently define key terms and concepts • The introduction does not establish a structure for the rest of the paper • The organization of the body is not structured in a way that logically supports the thesis • The paper lacks strong transition sentences and phrases, especially between paragraphs • There are not sufficient sub-claims to support the thesis • Sub-claims are not connected to the argument logically • Claims and sub-claims are not supported with evidence • Claim structure lacks organization • Ideas are not organized logically at paragraph and whole paper levels • Paper lacks a conclusion or the conclusion is significantly off topic

			conclusions from the presentation of claims and sub-claims, though not all conclusions may follow from the paper	
<p>Style & Mechanics</p> <p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Academic tone, o Conventions of standard, written, edited English, o Spelling, o Punctuation, o Citation style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tone is academic • The word choice and organization fully follow written academic conventions • The paper has few if any spelling or punctuation errors • The grammar of Standard Written English—verb agreement, etc.—is nearly perfect • Source material is correctly referenced all of the time • There is a works cited page • The paper correctly uses in-text parenthetical citations • An academic citation style has been applied consistently across the paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tone is mostly academic • The word choice and organization mostly follow written academic conventions • The paper has some spelling or punctuation errors • The grammar of Standard Written English—verb agreement, etc.—is very good • Source material is correctly referenced most of the time • There is a works cited page • The paper uses in-text parenthetical citation • An academic citation style has been applied consistently across the paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tone is somewhat academic • The word choice and organization follow written academic conventions on and off • The paper has many spelling and/or punctuation errors • The grammar of Standard Written English—verb agreement, etc.—could be improved • Source material is referenced, with a few errors • There is a mostly complete works cited page • There are in-text parenthetical citation, but with some errors • An academic citation style has been applied nearly consistently across the paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tone is not academic • The word choice and paper structure shows a lack of knowledge of written academic conventions • The spelling and/or punctuation errors disrupt readability • The grammar of Standard Written English—verb agreement, etc.—has many errors • There is not a works cited page, or the works cited is very incomplete or incorrect • Source material is often not referenced • There is not sufficient use of in-text parenthetical citation • There is not an obvious academic style applied in the paper

2015 Rating Form

Competency	4: Excellent	3: Adequate	2: Minimal	1: Scarce
7. Source Use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources used as evidence, • Sources used are varied, • Sources support claims and sub-claims, • Sources are appropriately attributed 				
8. Synthesis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text combines sources, • Sources are integrated in a number of ways, including direct quotation and paraphrase, • Connections are drawn across sources, • Text creates a network of sources relevant to present argument 				
9. Rhetorical Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis indicates the rhetorical purpose of the text, • Text shows awareness of and accommodation to audience, • Text shows awareness of writing context, • Word choice and paper features are appropriate for genre, • Argument is situated in an academic conversation, • Argument contributes to an academic conversation 				
10. Research Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources are quality • Research from a variety of media and type of sources 				
11. Textual Cohesion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper structure is obvious, • Ideas are developed cohesively, • Arguments are well developed across the paper, • Transitional sentences and phrases are used, • Main claim and supporting claims progress logically 				
12. Style & Mechanics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic tone, ○ Conventions of standard, written, edited English, ○ Spelling, ○ Punctuation, ○ Citation style 				

