

**2009 Writing Assessment  
for  
Lower- and Upper-Division Writing**

**Final Report**

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This report presents the summaries of our assessment of both lower- and upper-division writing courses for the 2008-2009 academic year. The full reports are also included as attachments. Through the mechanisms of the Lower-Division Writing Committee (which the CWC chairs) and the re-convened Writing Advisory Board, the CWC will share the result of these assessments and discuss potential curricular revisions where weaknesses have been found.

Lower-Division Writing

The 2009 Lower-Division Writing Assessment was designed with three goals in mind: (1) to assess the degree to which the Lower-Division Writing Rubric captured shared writing expectations across lower-division writing courses, (2) to assess the quality of student writing produced through the different trajectories for completion of the lower-division writing requirement, and (3) to determine whether students' language background impacts the quality of student writing.

The Lower-Division Writing Assessment Rubric, an amalgamation of both nationally and locally used writing rubrics, proved to be a useful tool for assessing the quality of research-based writing, which is the primary writing genre produced in completion of UCI's lower-division writing requirement. For writing products that are creative or explicative in nature, such as those produced in Writing 30 or Writing 31, the rubric proved to be an inadequate tool for capturing and assessing writing quality. In reviewing the reliability coefficients, the rubric proved to be most reliable in capturing the writing quality of Writing 39C and FIP papers, and most reliable in capturing writing quality associated with the language use category. While the rubric was found to be a reliable tool for research-based writing products, modifications will further strengthen its ability to effectively capture the quality of student writing. The readers noted a high degree of overlap between the rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking and analysis categories, noting that writing products can demonstrate critical thinking both through the effective communication of an idea (rhetorical knowledge) and the use of evidence to enhance the effectiveness of that communication (critical thinking and analysis); in its current formulation, the rubric only associates critical thinking with the critical thinking and analysis category. The variability in reliability coefficients by course suggests that rubric

modifications here may prove helpful to further understanding student writing skills as well as the shared and unique gains students achieve as a function of their lower-division writing trajectory.

The review of student writing products found that students are able to demonstrate the quality of writing expected upon completion of the lower division writing requirement. While writing quality was fairly similar across lower-division writing trajectories, Humanities Core papers achieved the highest scores in 11 of the 12 writing traits contained within the lower-division writing rubric. Significant differences were found in 2 of the writing traits contained within the critical thinking and analysis category with Humanities Core papers demonstrating a higher level of achievement in the source/evidence credibility and/or relevance and the documentation writing traits. Papers produced in Writing 39C and FIP achieved nearly identical assessment scores, with FIP papers being stronger in the language use category and Writing 39C papers being stronger in the critical thinking and analysis category. Overall, all papers produced in fulfillment of the lower-division writing requirement were strongest in the rhetorical knowledge category and weakest in the structure and organization category. These results suggest that while different lower-division writing trajectories seem to yield similar overall writing gains, there are some differences worthy of further investigation. The results of this project unfortunately do not clarify the degree to which the observed differences in writing quality are a function of course length, instructional methods, or characteristics of the student population.

Finally, writing quality differed as a result of students' language background. Overall, papers produced by students who grew up in households speaking only English achieved slightly higher assessment scores on all twelve writing traits contained within the lower-division writing rubric. Significant differences in writing quality were observed, however, in only one of the twelve writing traits, language eloquence. While these results are not surprising, in that we would expect for students who grew up in households where English is the primary language to demonstrate higher levels of achievement in writing quality, it is important to note that the differences as a function of language status are rather small, and only in one instance were found to be statistically significant.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations emerge:

While the Lower-Division Writing Rubric proved to be a valuable tool for assessing research-based writing products. Refinements to the rubric that allow both for greater clarity and distinctiveness to be made between the skills associated with rhetorical knowledge and analysis and evidence will help to strengthen the rubric's effectiveness in capturing writing quality among research-based writing products. Equally, and perhaps more importantly, because the rubric was found to be ineffective for assessing creative or explicative writing products this project raised questions about the shared writing expectations across genres, how to effectively capture these, and what modifications can be made to the rubric that both capture shared expectations and illuminate the unique gains achieved as a function of students' lower-division writing trajectory.

In addition to any modifications which may be made to the rubric, a greater understanding of the ways in which courses in fulfillment of the lower-division writing requirement and their assignments provide students with the opportunity to learn, practice, achieve, and demonstrate the agreed upon lower-division writing skills and abilities is needed.

There are some differences in the quality of writing produced by students as a result of their language background. This project found that students who grew up in households speaking either only another language or both English and another language achieved slightly lower writing quality scores, with significant differences emerging around the language eloquence writing trait. While these findings suggest that language background does not seem to be impacting student writing quality as much as perhaps has been generally assumed to be the case, it is recommended that writing quality as a function of students' language background continue to be monitored in future writing assessment projects.

### Upper-Division Writing

The 2009 Upper-Division Writing Assessment was designed with three goals in mind: (1) to assess the degree to which the Upper-Division Writing Assessment Rubric captured shared writing skills and techniques across academic disciplines, (2) to assess the quality of student writing produced in upper-division writing courses, and (3) to determine whether such student characteristics as first language and transfer vs. high school status impact the quality of student writing. The Upper-Division Writing Assessment Rubric, modified following the 2008 Pilot Assessment Project, proved to be a useful tool for assessing the quality of writing produced in upper-division courses. While the rubric was found to be both a reliable and valid tool, improvements to the instrument will further strengthen its ability to effectively capture the quality of student writing produced in upper-division writing courses, specifically as they related to the "Development and Structure" and "Generic and Disciplinary Conventions" categories. The review of student writing showed that the quality of student writing is lower than had been expected. While the papers were consistently strongest in the use of generic and disciplinary conventions, approximately 80% of the papers only showed some evidence of achievement of all four writing categories. The papers were found to be weakest in either critical thinking and analysis or use of evidence/research, the two primary categories by which a student demonstrates their ability to craft and detail the paper's purpose and argument. In addition to the low quality of the papers, the low reliability scores for the development and structure and generic and disciplinary conventions categories suggests that the goals for upper-division writing may not be consistent across courses. Finally, the differences observed in the writing quality produced by students was different as a result of their enrollment status, with significant differences being observed in writing quality between transfer students and those who enrolled at UCI directly from high school in the area of use of evidence and research.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations emerge:

While there is great value in the distinctiveness of upper-division writing courses as a result of the given discipline's approach to writing, it is critical that agreement be reached on the goals of the upper-division writing requirement. The Upper-Division Writing Assessment Rubric is an effort to reflect that need. The findings from this year's project point to the complexity of this task, and the need for a greater understanding of how the discipline shapes the organization and structure of the writing. As an example, it would be helpful to modify the rubric to include some quality descriptors related to the use and representation of data and visuals within students' writing and its relationship to the development of the paper's argument and its overall ability to analyze and effectively utilize evidence.

In addition to making modifications to the rubric so as to most accurately capture what constitutes writing quality across disciplines, upper-division writing courses and assignments need to provide students with the opportunity to practice, achieve, and demonstrate the writing skills and abilities reflected by the rubric, most notably critical thinking and analysis and the use of evidence and research.

There are some differences in the quality of writing produced by students as a result of their enrollment status, as had been the case in the 2008 Pilot Assessment of Upper-Division Writing. This project found that transfer students are more likely to produce lower quality writing products than their peers who enrolled at UCI directly from high school, with significant differences being observed in the "Use of Research/Evidence" category. It is recommended that both the reasons why these differences exist and strategies for minimizing these differences in writing skills be explored.