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STUDENT WRITING: USING ASSESSMENT AS A TOOL TO STANDARDIZE AND IMPROVE UPON KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

Data show student writing quality is a problem nationwide – in college, in the workplace, and across academic disciplines (Clark, Luo & Smith, 2020; Gubala et al., 2020). Journalism and mass communications programs in particular grapple with this issue. Quality writing is consistently ranked among the top skills employers desire from new hires in our professions (Eschenfelder, 2020; Ferrucci, 2018; Wenger et al., 2018).

Some journalism schools use a grammar test to determine which students to accept into or matriculate through their programs. At first glance, it seems like a sensible approach. Such benchmarks, however, can have negative consequences, potentially excluding students from underserved communities who grew up using different syntax or speaking styles. Diverse voices with powerful stories to tell can be lost in the shuffle.

USC is the flagship institution for the state of South Carolina. Since the Covid-19 crisis began,

we've witnessed an influx of in-state students, affecting the number of students attending our university and its demographic makeup. We are, for example, encountering more students from rural communities and regional community colleges. It is our responsibility to serve all comers – to accept them into our programs (with or without SATs or ACTs) and educate them to the best of our ability. That can be a challenge when it comes to teaching students to write well. Developing this critical skill takes time, dedication, and plenty of repetition.

When it comes to writing, knowing when, where and how to best assess student learning is another challenge. USC's School of Journalism & Mass Communications (hereafter SJMC) measures students' writing abilities at three levels:

1. during a freshman/sophomore-level required writing class,
2. during for-credit internships (typically completed during students' junior or senior years), and finally
3. when external professionals evaluate students' capstone portfolios (typically completed during their senior year)

Since 2016, we've been dismayed by low post-test scores in our entry-level course. Digging deeper into those scores and identifying a path forward is the purpose of a pilot study the authors conducted between the Fall of 2019 and Spring 2023.

GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION VERSUS WRITING

JOUR 291 (Writing for the Mass Communications) is a survey-style course primarily focusing on three writing styles: Inverted Pyramid journalistic writing for the web/print, writing for broadcast news, and writing for public relations. The course is required of all SJMC majors and is a pre-requisite for upper-division classes in their chosen major.

Until recently, the method we employed to assess student learning in this course (for accreditation purposes) was a 30 item, multiple choice test that evaluated their development on grammar, punctuation, word choice/usage, etc. All students in all sections of the course took the same test to establish a benchmark for student writing ability. For years, mean scores improved negligibly from pre-test to post-test. Some instructors took issue with using such an instrument as a measure of writing ability. To assess a student's writing abilities and their growth over time, they argued, students should write.

In 2019, we launched an experiment with hopes of accomplishing two goals: (1) improve the assessment of student writing in JOUR 291, and perhaps, simultaneously, (2) help streamline

the course so that no matter who was teaching it (full- or part-time, advertising instructor or public relations practitioner), the curriculum would remain relatively similar from section to section.

In 2019, we began a multi-year program to change our assessment practices. Instead of a multiple-choice test, the authors of this paper (both members of the SJMC's Assessment Committee) crafted a new plan to measure entry-level students' ability to write an inverted pyramid-style story.

1. Students would attempt to write the story during the first week of classes (pre-test) with no impact on their grade, and again approximately 6-8 weeks into the course (post-test) as a graded assignment.
2. All students received the same set of facts/writing prompt regardless of which section of the course they were taking.
3. The pilot test rubric was a 6 x 3 box grid with six categories of evaluation – lead writing, story organization, use of quotes, attribution & neutral expression, grammar & AP style, and format – at three possible skill levels (below expectation, meets expectation and exceeds expectation). Each box provided instructors guidance of what might lead to a score in that particular area (See Appendix, Rubric #1).
4. Instructors would grade the work themselves using the rubric, then submit both pre- and post-test scores via Excel spreadsheet to the Assessment Committee members for analysis.
5. The prompt would be changed each se-

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Table 1: New Inverted Pyramid Rubric

CRITERIA	LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT			
	Poor	Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Excellent
Applies the Inverted Pyramid Structure (Weight 25%)	25% <i>Type a description</i>	50% <i>Type a description</i>	75% <i>Type a description</i>	100 % A lead model as taught in JOUR 291 is employed. Most important information is in the lead. Information that follows flows in a narrative structure from most important to least important.
Applies the voice of news writing (Weight 25%)	25% <i>Type a description</i>	50% <i>Type a description</i>	75% <i>Type a description</i>	100 % Sentences are short - in the range of 19 words. Paragraphs are short. In the range of 1-3 sentences. Neutral, objective copy is written in past tense, active voice. Clear language is emphasized; jargon is avoided.
Applies the correct use of sourcing (Weight 25%)	25% <i>Type a description</i>	50% <i>Type a description</i>	75% <i>Type a description</i>	100 % Information is attributed correctly. Quotes are punctuated correctly. Quotes convey emotion, interpretation and color. Transitions add information and do not parrot quoted information.
Applies correct grammar and style conventions (Weight 25%)	25% <i>Type a description</i>	50% <i>Type a description</i>	75% <i>Type a description</i>	100% Attributions are correct for print/web Grammar, spelling, syntax and convntions are employed as expected in a 200-level college course. Submission is proofread, AP style is employed correctly.

mester to avoid the potential of students sharing.

The rubric was pre-tested in two sections in Fall 2019 (with a single instructor), then again in four sections (with two instructors) in Spring 2021. The two instructors compared notes on the assessment process and agreed that the first rubric was difficult and time - consuming to deploy. Collaboratively, these two instructors – both long-time teachers with extensive experience in the course – revised the rubric into a much simpler instrument (See Table 1). According to Timmerman et al. (2010), a collaborative process such as this increases substance and consistency of grading within a course – particularly classes staffed by multiple instructors or graduate teaching assistants – and provides a common metric for assessing to what extent the curriculum is

achieving programmatic goals.

The new rubric language encouraged instructors to evaluate the desired qualities in an inverted pyramid print / web style news story holistically on a scale of 1-to-4 (where 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, and 4=excellent). A [training video](#) was also provided on how to use the rubric. Rubric language was provided for only the top criteria of excellent. This new rubric was tested again by the same two instructors in Spring 2022 and found to be far easier and less time consuming to use. As Table 2 demonstrates, compared to the previous assessment method, an entirely different picture of student learning emerged.

Students showed remarkable growth. Mean scores on the inverted-pyramid style story grew by more than 16% in the Fall of 2019, 18% in the 2021-2022 academic year, and by nearly 29% in

Table 2: USC-SJMC Writing Assessment Process

Assessment Method	Grammar / Punctuation / Word Usage Test						Inverted Pyramid Writing		
	16/17	17/18	18/19	20/21	F19	21/22	F19 (Pilot 1)	21/22 (Pilot 2)	22/23 (Pilot 3)
	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Pre-Test Mean Scores	66 (216)	61 (214)	58.7 (423)	59.04 (575)	68.78 (300)	69.35 (397)	57.10 (35)	62.53 (149)	54.11 (344)
Post-Test Mean Scores	74 (222)	68 (207)	68.38 (412)	67.88 (556)	74.40 (285)	72.54 (350)	73.21 (38)	80.74 (143)	83.04 (341)
(Percentage Change)	↑ 8 %	↑ 7 %	↑ 9.68 %	↑ 8.84 %	↑ 5.62 %	↑ 3.19 %	↑ 16.11 %	↑ 18.21 %	↑ 28.93 %

Table 3: Individual Rubric Elements (2022/2023)

Rubric Elements	Story (IP) Organization	News Voice	Sourcing	Grammar / Style / Mechanics
(2022/2023)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Pre-Test	55.16 (344)	51.45 (344)	56.32 (344)	53.77 (344)
Post-Test	84.16 (341)	82.7 (341)	84.31 (341)	80.28 (341)
(Percentage Change)	↑ 29 %	↑ 31.25 %	↑ 27.99 %	↑ 26.51 %

the most recent academic year. Although the SJMC faculty set a benchmark of 70% (or put another way, “passing knowledge”) for the assessment tool in this entry-level course., post-test averages have been above 80% in the past two academic years.

Using this method, we’ve also been able to capture a more nuanced look at which specific writing elements students improved upon. Whereas Table 2 reflects mean scores on the test as a whole, Table 3 breaks that data down into its component parts.

When we analyze our students’ ability to use proper grammar, syntax and journalistic conventions/mechanics, clearly, they are able to meet and exceed our expectations in this 200-level college course. Mean scores improved from a failing grade (below 50% on average) to greater than 80%.

DISCUSSION

The picture isn’t entirely rosy. While mean scores show students are, on the whole, doing well with grammar and journalistic writing mechanics, some students still struggle mightily.

Some instructors are struggling, too – not with the grammar, but with finding the time to deliver sufficient, targeted instruction in standard English usage while, simultaneously, teaching three distinct journalistic-writing styles.

To address those concerns, the SJMC designed and implemented a set of grammar modules to add supplementary support in this area. Students can now watch YouTube videos on the use of active voice, pronouns, commas, subject-verb agreement, colons and semicolons, and sentence structure (plus additional modules on several journalistic writing conventions). Additionally, we are currently workshopping quizzes on these topics that individual instructors can embed in their courses via our Learning Management System. Students who demonstrate ongoing challenges with standard English usage, sentence construction and punctuation are referred by their instructors to the Student Success Center and the Writing Center.

MOVING FORWARD

Overall, our Assessment Committee is highly satisfied with this new approach to analyzing

writing in this entry-level course. So, too, are many of the course's instructors who believe this assessment method captures a more representative, holistic view of student writing growth over time. Our work is not done, however. Moving forward, our assessment committee plans to run additional analyses on a range of independent variables, including:

Whether scores are higher/lower for certain faculty members (enabling the Assessment committee to provide feedback and ensure reliability of the rubric's use across sections),

Whether students who transfer from community colleges or other campuses in our state system fare the same as students accepted to USC as freshmen, and

Whether the course's delivery method (8-week v. 16-week, face-to-face v. online, synchronous v. asynchronous, etc.) affects post-test scores, as Hanff (2022) did when examining assessment practices of online and blended coursework amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

And to streamline the data collection process for the assessment committee and instructors, we are examining ways to make the process even easier for our instructors to grade, download and forward results to our assessment committee for further analysis using our LMS (Blackboard

Ultra). As many assessment experts have learned, the easier you make it for instructors to use assessment tools, the more "buy in" you can build.

CONCLUSION: CLOSING THE LOOP

Finally, data such as this cannot live in a vacuum. Given that JOUR 291 is a pre-requisite to upper-division coursework, it must be shared and discussed within the program. We have already presented the data to our full faculty, so our colleagues know how we're tinkering with assessment and why. The SJMC's Assessment Committee plans to provide a fuller breakdown of the data to instructors before the start of the Fall of 2023 semester, helping them see the "big picture" of student writing across sections and identify potential areas on which to focus their energies and instructional time in semesters to come.

By sharing and discussing this report, we hope the SJMC faculty can continue to work collaboratively and diligently to improve our measures and methods of assessment. While acknowledging that issues of student competency in writing go beyond what might be accomplished in a single course, we remain vigilant in addressing student deficiencies in our introductory writing course. 📶

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APPENDIX: RUBRIC #1 (FALL 2019 & FALL 2020)

CRITERIA (pg. 1)	LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT		
	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
LEAD (Weight 25%)	0 to 69 % Lead is factually incorrect. Lead is far too long. Lead is one of the incorrect models (Topic Lead, Question Lead, Quote Lead).	70 to 89 % Lead correctly incorporates the facts in the prompt but does not provide an engaging entry point for readers. Correct lead model is employed. Word count may be somewhat high.	90 to 100.00 % Lead is original, correctly incorporates the facts in the prompt and is written to engage the reader in continuing the story. Only correct lead models are employed. Word
ORGANIZATION (Weight 25%)	0 to 69 % Most elements of good story organization are missing. Submission may be a mere reordering of facts from the prompt as opposed to a narrative story.	70 to 89 % Transitions, additional information and quotes are not well organized. Transitions parrot words from quotes. Story lacks a clear narrative thread. Facts are present but not in an organized story form.	90 to 100 % TAQ model is followed. <i>Transitions</i> are the writer's product. Transitions lead the reader from time to time, thought to thought and place to place. Story has an identifiable <i>narrative</i>
USE OF QUOTES (Weight 20%)	0 to 69 % Quotes may be missing. Submission may feature copy-and-paste of all quotes from the prompt rather than carefully selected portions. Punctuation may be incorrect or missing.	70 to 89 % Quotes may be long. Quotes may not start their own lines and their own paragraphs. Quotes may feature more factual information that could be better paraphrased. Punctuation may appear outside of quote marks. Incorrect punctuation may be used.	90 to 100 % Quotes are 1-3 sentences expressing human emotion, interpretation or color. Quotes start their own lines and their own paragraphs. Punctuation of quotes is correctly placed inside the
ATTRIBUTION & NEUTRAL EXPRESSION (Weight 10%)	0 to 69 % Lacks attribution; incorrect attribution used; many unattributed statements make the piece more commentary than news writing.	70 to 89 % Most attributions are correct for print/web style writing as taught in the class. Some attributions may be at the beginning of sentences. Attribution words other than said are used. Some unattributed statements inject the writer's opinion into the piece.	90 to 100 % Attributions are correct for print/web style writing as taught in the class -- ends of sentences, nested inside multi sentence quotes. The attribution said is used. The writer's opinion does not appear in the piece.

CRITERIA (pg. 2)	LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT		
	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
GRAMMAR & AP STYLE (Weight 10%)	0 to 69 % Submission includes numerous errors in AP Style or grammar. Submission is well below the level of university classroom work.	70 to 89 % Submission includes some errors in AP Style or grammar. Submission is not at the level of university classroom work.	90 to 100 % Submission meticulously conforms to the AP Style information provided on names and numbers. Submission meticulously conforms to correct grammar as taught in the class. Grammar, syntax and conventions are appropriate for work submitted in the university classroom.
FORMAT (Weight 10%)	0 to 69 % Not double spaced. Lacks clear, short, journalistic paragraphs. Includes many typos.	70 to 89 % May not be double spaced. Lacks clear, short, journalistic paragraphs. Includes some typos.	90 to 100 % Double-spaced; clear, short, journalistic paragraphs. Word document or PDF uploaded correctly. The submission is meticulously proofread.