Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report
AY 2018

Number of Readers: 13
Number of Portfolios: 165
Number of Papers: 492

Methodology

In Fall 2005, volunteers were solicited from the faculty and staff. Readers were required to be full-time at Eastern, to have completed a master's degree or higher, and to teach at least one undergraduate course each year. Twenty-three readers were trained at a 1 ½-day workshop by Dr. Robert O'Brien-Hokanson, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Communication Ability Department at Alverno College. Readers came from all four colleges, the School of Continuing Education, the Center for Academic Support and Achievement, and Booth Library. A second training was held in October 2008, a third in October 2010, a fourth in January 2014, and a fifth in January 2017; Dr. Karla Sanders delivered these trainings based on the work completed by Dr. O'Brien-Hokanson.

The following 2018 readers were trained at one of these sessions; they represent all four colleges and CASA:

> Melissa Caldwell, English, CAH, 2017
> Anna Cromwell, Music, CAH, 2017
> Karen Drage, Technology, LCBAS, 2017
> Terri Fredrick, English, CAH, 2017
> Rose Gong, Secondary Education & Foundations, CEPS, 2005
> Angie Jacobs, Communication Studies, CAH, 2008
> Abbey Lesko-Youngberg, Disability Services, 2017
> Colleen Kattenbraker, Kinesiology & Sports Studies, CEPS, 2017
> Nicole Mulvey, Communication Disorders & Sciences, COS, 2014
> Jeff Snell, Management, LCBAS, 2005
> Tim Taylor, English, CAH, 2014
> Gordon Tucker, Biological Sciences, COS, 2005
> Marjorie Worthington, English, CAH, 2014

Readers were urged to look at writing patterns across the portfolios rather than focusing on each individual document submitted to the portfolios. The reading guide asks readers to provide an assessment of writing ability for complete portfolios across seven aspects of writing: focus/purpose, organization, development, audience, style, mechanics, and use of sources. They completed a reading guide for each portfolio. Readers were also asked to assess each *portfolio* overall.
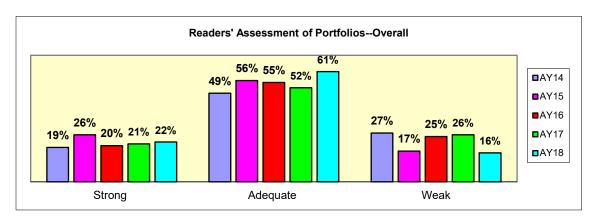
A sample of 10% of the completed portfolios are read each year; readers were given a month to read their portfolios, were given access to a secure sharepoint file, and were assigned to read 12-13 portfolios that were chosen at random from the completed portfolios. After reading their set of portfolios, readers were asked to complete a reader's observation sheet and to attend one of two focus groups held in February to discuss student writing as displayed in the portfolios.

The qualitative data that follow represent the discussions at the focus groups as well as information taken from the readers' guides and observation sheets; all information has been collated and summarized by the Executive Director of the Center for Academic Support and Assessment. The percentages given for each assessment of the various areas of writing are taken from a compilation of scores given by the readers for **each portfolio**, *not* each document, on the reading guide.

The following data are divided into the categories assessed by the readers. Each section gives the readers' impressions of the portfolios as a whole and the final section offers potential uses for the data in terms of improving the curriculum/pedagogy. Where appropriate, readers' written and verbal comments have been quoted to support the general conclusions that have been drawn. Percentages refer to the percentage of portfolios that were rated in the categories described.

Portfolios Overall

Strong Portfolios: 21.82%
Adequate Portfolios: 61.21%
Weak Portfolios: 15.76%

Overall, readers indicated that their impressions were that portfolios were adequate. Only 22% were assessed as "strong" and 16% as "weak." These ratings indicate that students can communicate in writing, but there is room for improvement.

According to reader ratings, the weakest areas were development, organization, and style while the strongest areas were mechanics, focus, and use of sources. One reader summed up student writing, "All of the writers were able to convey ideas—having the ability to focus. None of them were so bad that I couldn't follow. I was able to get all the ideas presented in their writings, and understand their organization and idea development. However, the strong ones were able to hook and retain my attention through better writing style (more formal and use a variety of vocabulary), clarity, creative ideas, and clever word usage; while some were too casually written (plain tone as if in a casual conversation) and did not pave the way for the audience to ride along. There are no disastrous grammatical errors that completely block communication. They need to be more serious in the area of style—knowing that their tone and voice in writing can either keep or lose the reader. Also, the sense of audience should be strengthened."

Readers saw very little growth across the portfolios; strong writers remained strong writers, and weak writers improved very little across the three submissions. Better writing came from longer, research papers. "I consistently encountered informal, conversational language in the papers. Many students seem unable to distinguish between appropriate tone and inappropriate tone. Sentence structure is another area of weakness. However, many papers in my portfolios were well-organized."

The majority of the papers were informative with arguments submitted more rarely. "Most essays read like book reports and lack analysis. Use of sources is often perfunctory, and it is rare to see true synthesis of ideas or creative/critical thought displayed by the writer. This is especially odd given the vast majority of the essays I read seemed to be from upper division courses and/or from courses in the student's major."
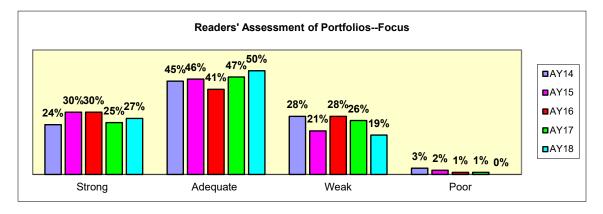
Focus/Purpose

Strong (Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout**):**   27.27%
Adequate (Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions**):**   50.30%
Weak (Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose):   19.39%
Poor (Very little or no evidence of focus):   0.0%

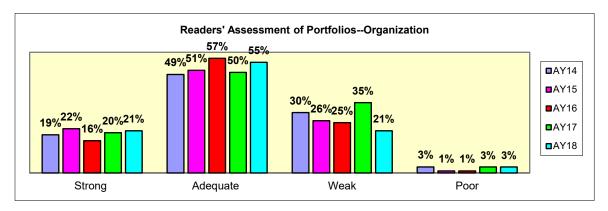**Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Focus**

The percentage of portfolios rated as "strong" in terms of focus and/or purpose rose by 2% this year while those deemed "adequate" went up by 3%. Only 19% of the portfolios were evaluated as "weak" and none were rated "poor" for focus or purpose.

While focus or creating a sense of purpose was one of the stronger traits displayed in the portfolios sampled this year, readers still indicated that students sometimes struggled to get to the point of their writing early in the paper. "I think the focus is good, the purpose is there; it's just taking a little longer to get to it." Many students, however, did attempt to grab readers' attention at the beginning of the paper. Readers noted that students tended to be somewhat prescriptive with sentences such as "in this paper I will. . . ." Readers indicated that focus/purpose was an overall strength, "Maybe they didn't develop it very well, or got really lost in the middle of the paper in terms of development, but the focus was there."

Organization

Strong (Consistent use of structure in ways that enhance presentation of ideas/information**):**   20.61%
Adequate (Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure):   54.55%
Weak (Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization):   21.21%
Poor (Very little or no sense of structure or organization):   3.03%

Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Organization

The same percentage of portfolios was rated as "strong" as "weak" in regards to organization. Over half of the portfolios were "adequate" with their organization, and only a quarter had issues with this skill.

Readers indicated that quite a few students were using the five-paragraph structure often taught in high schools. Several readers indicated that the overall organization was easy to follow, but students sometimes got lost within a paragraph and could use help with transitions and moving smoothly from one topic to another. Some papers seemed to be following a structure given to the student by the faculty member, and a few used headings that were meaningful and aided in clarity. "There is still real difficulty for some students to use transitions to get to the next idea. So, there was a lot of chunking: here's a really great idea; here's another really great idea. But, those ideas didn't flow logically together, but there was a clear introduction, body, and conclusion."

Development

Strong (Ideas consistently developed in depth and supported with rich and relevant details):   19.39%
Adequate (Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details):   47.27%
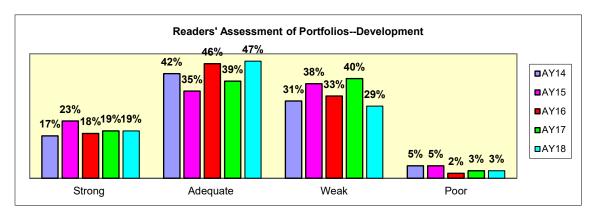**Weak (**Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details):   29.09%
Poor (Very little or no development of ideas or use of supporting evidence):   3.03%

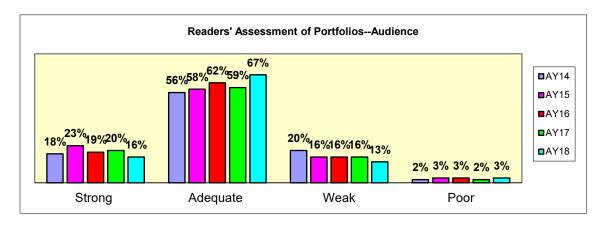Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Development

Development remains one of the weaker traits as displayed by the EWP submissions with 29% rated as "weak" and an additional 3% as "poor." Only 19% were given a rating of "strong," which has remained consistent the last few years, and 47% were considered "adequate." If instructors only focused on one writing trait to improve, development is the one that could use the most work and is connected to critical thinking as well as writing.

Readers noted that there were very few assignments that seemed to ask students to do in-depth critical thinking submitted to the EWP. They speculated that students might not submit these papers because they got lower grades than they did on the reflection pieces that required less depth and development. Several pieces were critiquing something—a movie, piece of art, book—and students routinely failed to establish criteria against which to assess their chosen piece. The majority of papers were informative although a few attempted to apply a concept to a case study or a theory to a classroom observation.

Readers indicated that student papers often lacked supporting details and evidence of making connections among ideas presented. One reader suggested that students were better at using outside evidence than creating an argument on their own. Another concurred and offered that many papers lacked the depth or integration needed to truly create a solid argument. Some students used the same quote in different parts of the same paper while others relied on quotes from external sources to do all the work without explaining why those ideas were important.

Audience

Strong (Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone):   16.36%
Adequate (Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience):   66.67%
Weak (Little or no awareness of audience):   12.73%
Poor (No sense of writing for an audience):   3.03%

Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Audience

With each reading, faculty have indicated that it is often difficult to discern any reader other than the instructor for the course unless the genre of the paper demanded that an audience be identified, such as in a letter or report for a company. Only 16% of portfolios provided a strong sense of audience through a distinctive voice. Two-thirds of the portfolios were "adequate" and seemed to be writing to the faculty member while 13% were "weak" and 3% were "poor."

One reader commented on the lack of writing for an audience other than their professor, "I feel like I saw a lot of dumping of information with limited realization of who's reading it and why they might need to engage their readers." Readers indicated that terms that need to be defined are not always explained, and some papers begin in the middle of a conversation as if picking up from a classroom discussion. One reader provided this example from a student paper, "As you know, I like to write about 'The Office.'"

Readers noted that most assignments seemed to call for students to show what they know to a faculty member and students were fully aware that was what they were doing in their papers. Several faculty members indicated that if we really want students to write for an audience outside of the classroom, then we need to give more assignments asking students to practice this skill. "I think that people maybe underappreciate how difficult it is for our students to imagine different audiences. Writing for a specific audience is a very important skill, and it's not an easy skill either. I don't know if we talk about that enough in general."
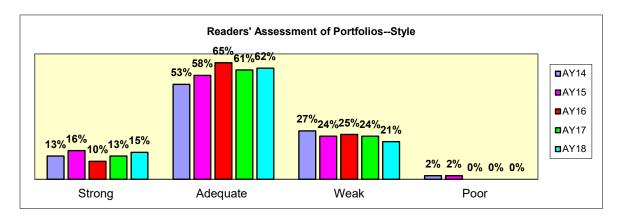
Style

Strong (Sophisticated use of language (sentence structure, word choice) that enhances presentation of ideas/information): 15.15%
Adequate (Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information): 61.21%
Weak (Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic): 21.21%
Poor (Use of language that is highly inconsistent or indeterminate): 0%

Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Style

In the thirteen years of reading completed portfolios, few portfolios are ever rated "strong" in regards to style, and this year is no exception with 15% in this top category. Nearly two-thirds of the portfolios are ranked as "adequate" with 21% assessed as "weak". Readers describe the majority of papers as using simple sentence construction, few transitional words, and unsophisticated, simplistic diction. Students' styles do not display a strong sense of vocabulary nor do they show strong revision skills; these are weaknesses that have been noted several focus group years in a row.

Many readers used the same word to describe the style of the papers in the portfolios—casual and serviceable. "The best ones were the ones that used a very formal writing style, aware of the audience and serious in terms of the writing." Many readers agreed and wished for a more "elevated" style that was less dry.

Mechanics

Strong (Few, if any, errors in mechanics relative to length and complexity of documents):   26.06%
Adequate (Some errors in mechanics that do not interfere significantly with communication):   52.73%
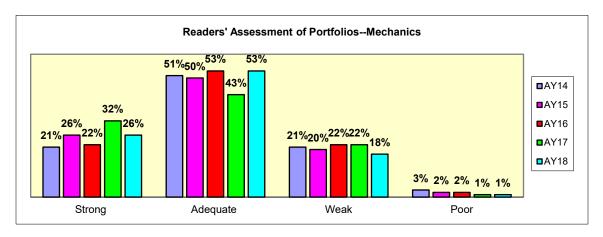**Weak** (Patterns of errors in mechanics that affect clarity and/or credibility of writing):   18.18%
Poor (Large numbers of errors in mechanics affecting almost all aspects of the writing):   0.61%

Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Mechanics

Readers indicated that most portfolios contained some mechanical errors, but the majority of papers were not incomprehensible due to these errors. The percentage of portfolios rated as "strong" in mechanics dropped 6% from the previous year, and the percentage described as "adequate" rose by 10% while those assessed as "weak" dropped by 4%. All readers felt that students needed to do a better job at proofreading and revising rather than simply relying on spellcheck.

Common errors included sentence fragments, run-on sentences, errors in tenses, and problems with antecedents. Readers noted that papers that were written by returning adult students made fewer errors than our tradition-aged students; they speculated that this was because they had been out in the work world and were used to making corrections.
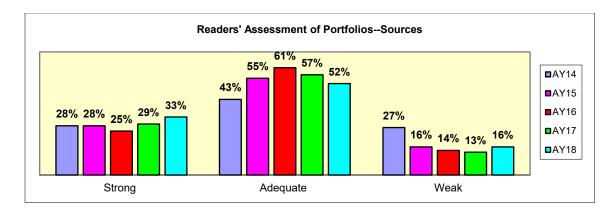
Sources

Strong (Ability to integrate ideas/information from sources into own writing in meaningful and appropriate ways):   32.68%
Adequate (Some effective integration of ideas/information from source):   51.63%
Weak (Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information):   16.34%

Readers' Assessment of Portfolios--Sources

Of the 165 portfolios read, 153 portfolios (92.73%) included at least one paper incorporating outside sources. The portfolios assessed as strong increased by 4% from 2017, those rated as "adequate" decreased by 5%, and the weak portfolios related to sources increased by 3%.

Readers felt that using sources was one of the stronger traits in the portfolios when it was present. Students seemed to know they were supposed to cite sources and did so. Papers that were weaker with sources tended to use only one source for a paper or not integrate a quote within the paragraph. "Citing sources need to be a priority in writing-intensive courses. The documents were descriptive in nature. There were very few documents that went beyond reporting the findings of the research. Students should be able to analyze and synthesize the information," explained one reader. Several readers indicated that students were using different style manuals as appropriate for their field, which is a strength.

While readers indicated that students seemed to know they needed to cite sources as support, they did not see students using those sources to their best advantage. "Sometimes writers worked with sources with a great deal of depth, but most times there was not the kind of commentary and depth that one would want to see out of a college student. For me, critical thinking is about wallowing in complexity, and many of the papers used sources but didn't do much wallowing."

Using Data to Develop Curriculum & Improve Pedagogy

After reading all of their portfolios, readers were asked to indicate ways in which the information gleaned from the readings could be used to develop curriculum and/or improve pedagogy. Many readers are quoted in this section to preserve the intent of their suggestions.

Readers indicated that encouraging students to write more formally and to cut out colloquialisms in their papers is something that all faculty could do relatively easily. "The topic of using appropriate language, that's easier to teach and correct if we as a faculty make our students aware, point this out." Another reader concurred and commented that style and audience awareness go together, and we need to promote awareness of writing for an audience outside of the classroom and asking students to choose a style for that particular audience as students will have to do in the real world as professionals.

Assignments may be the key to students producing more sophisticated papers. Readers suggested giving students an audience in the field with the instruction to write in a formal style for a professional would give students practice at this skill. Many papers were simply information dumps with little purpose other than to show what the student knows or thinks. Reflection pieces tended to be opinions without the use of criteria or in-depth analysis to move into higher order critical thinking realms. Readers were unclear whether students were asked to think critically and were often unable to do it or were rarely asked to do that in written assignments. "My portfolios were more opinion-based or more personal reflections, with no desire, really, to look beyond that."

One issue with development involved opinion versus provable facts. "I think it's just an indication of where we are in our society, but treating their opinion as fact. That, because it's their opinion, it must be as valuable as a fact." Another reader agreed, and added, "And, not knowing the difference between stating an opinion and stating an idea or an argument that's backed up by evidence. Is it because they don't know the difference between someone's opinion and someone's researched findings? I think it's the latter. They just simply have never considered the fact that this person might say something based upon years of research, and this person might say something by glancing through Facebook, and there should be a different weight applied to these two, and that's part of our job to point that out, and get them to look at it." Another reader agreed, and added, "I would hope professors strive to craft writing assignments to address high-level critical thinking tasks and use the writing process (multiple drafts, peer review, chances for revision) as a way to get the best writing out of our students. Students learn to write more effectively by undertaking the revision process. How an instructor facilitates revision is up to them."

Faculty are encouraged to take this information and make changes to their assignments and/or approaches to teaching writing and commenting on student papers. Small changes to assignments, mandatory revision, and requirements about style and use of sources could help improve student writing at Eastern.