

General Education Report

Written Communication

September 1, 2020

## Summary

The Department of English within the College of Arts and Sciences supports three degree programs at Howard University. In addition to one undergraduate and two graduate degrees, they offer several undergraduate courses that serve the larger Howard student body. These courses provide the University with opportunities for undergraduate students to learn and develop Written Communication skills.

## Context

Howard University General Education 21 (HUGE 21) is a set of 21 general education learning outcomes decided by faculty in 2017. The outcomes are met through curricular and co-curricular student experiences including classes and coursework, high-impact learning opportunities, student activities, employment, and alternative experiences. Each semester, Howard University looks at student work or data related to students' experiences and determines the degree to which students have met one or more of these outcomes.

Outcomes are measured on a rotating basis across all undergraduate schools and colleges. Of the 21 outcomes, 5 (Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Quantitative Literacy, Information Literacy, and African Diaspora Awareness) are measured every other year, and the other 15 (Creative Thinking, Ethical Reasoning, Inquiry and Analysis, Qualitative Literacy, Technology, Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Historical Awareness, Intercultural Knowledge and Foreign Language Competency, Science and Environmental Consciousness, Physical and Mental health, Teamwork, Entrepreneurship and Financial Literacy, Civic Knowledge and Engagement, Foundation and Skills for Life-Long Learning, and Integrative and Applied Learning) are assessed at least once each 7-year cycle.

In instances where the outcome is measured by extant data, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (IRA) partners with a department, faculty member, or staff member to analyze data and report on a chosen general education outcome. In other cases, IRA partners with programs and units to identify how to capture data related to a chosen outcome.

In order to measure "Written Communication," IRA requested extant data from the English Department in the College of Arts and Sciences.

### Written Communication

According to HUGE 21, the Written Communication outcome will be met if

A Howard graduate will use varied writing technologies, texts, data, and images to develop and express ideas clearly in writing. The graduate will also write in a variety of genres and styles for diverse audiences through iterative experiences across the curriculum.

As Sparks, Song, Brantley, and Liu(2014) suggest, “Written communication is considered one of the most critical competencies for academic and career success” (p. 1). Sparks et al. (2014) go on to suggest that “in order to interact successfully with others in academic, workplace, and community settings, individuals must be able to communicate—to convey or exchange information, knowledge, and ideas—clearly and effectively” (p. 1). A learning competency that stretches across all disciplines, written communication, like critical thinking and oral communication, enjoys a broad and inclusive definition. The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines written communication as

the development and expression of ideas in writing. Written communication involves learning to work in many genres and styles. It can involve working with many different writing technologies, and mixing texts, data, and images. Written communication abilities develop through iterative experiences across the curriculum. (AAC&U, n.d.)

Written communication is usually assessed by looking at sub-competencies within the larger general education outcome. Some of these sub-competencies include an understanding of form or medium, organization, style, content, argument, grammar, mechanics, and an understanding of audience (Sparks et al., 2014).

The Department of English serves undergraduate students throughout the University through several open enrollment courses, primarily for first- and second-year undergraduate students. In an effort to understand the impact of this department, and the degree to which Howard students are exposed to Written Communication, this document reflects a pilot assessment of students enrolled in two of the department’s most popular courses (ENGL 103 and 105) and looks at the degree to which the students were successful in meeting the written communication competency on five dimensions used for grading and feedback in the course. This report is a pilot report to better understand the impact of the department’s courses on Written Communication.

Students in ENGL 103 focus on argument building. Some of the competencies in the class include:

- Write effective argumentative essays that contain valid evidence, avoid logical fallacies, and refute and/or accommodate opposing views;
- Collect, synthesize, and access research data systematically; interpret findings; use research data to reinforce an effective argument; understand the form and function of the conventions that govern the research paper;
- Learn what plagiarism is and how to avoid it;
- Review and conquer grammar and style issues as needed;
- Practice substantive revision of written work based on teacher/peer feedback

According to the syllabus, students in ENGL 105 are taught to “employ language rather than guns as the weaponry of self-realization, human rights, and the freedom to live productively and compassionately.” Among other things, students in the class should be able to:

- Understand, identify and implement key rhetorical concepts such as audience, context, and purpose to both analyze and compose a variety of texts;
- Develop facility in responding to a variety of formal assignments calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, formality, design, and/or structure;
- Understand and implement a variety of technologies or digital platforms to address a range of audiences and tasks, showing openness to and flexibility in new ways of thinking;
- Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, and timeliness) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources;
- Practice applying citation conventions systematically in writing;
- Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, collaborating, and editing;
- Revisit and revise expository and argumentative essays that evidence high levels of critical thinking, depth of detail, and content awareness;

The courses are designed as lecture-based courses which invite the students to engage in a portfolio assignment while simultaneously working on signature papers that help them develop their written communication skills.

### **Methodology**

In the spring of 2020, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment met with the Chair of the Department of English to discuss capturing information on students in English courses. Together, we discussed several courses that were “outward-facing” courses, serving many non-major students. Two of these courses (ENGL 103 and ENGL 105) were required by most students at the university as part of their general education requirements. Though ENGL is used throughout this paper, these courses are also listed as ENGW.

In addition to the Chair, IRA met with three faculty members and requested the rubric scores for two papers across their classes in recent semesters. The faculty members were able to choose the papers. We only asked that one paper be early in the semester and the other be late in the semester. Of the three faculty approached, two completed the data request. We received scores for 88 ENGL 103 papers and 99 ENGL 105 papers. A spreadsheet with de-identified student scores was sent along with the paper prompt, rubrics, and syllabi for each class.

### **Artifacts**

Two English instructors (one for ENGL 103 and one for ENGL 105) submitted the rubric scores for two papers across several sections. The resulting data set was comprised of 187 graded papers. The papers varied in topic and requirements, but the standard grading rubric was the same. The five dimensions of the grading rubric were

- Organization: Overall & Written Paragraphs,
- Development A: Analysis and Supporting Evidence,
- Development B: Rhetorical Strategies and Documentation,
- Style: Language Control (Syntax & Diction), and
- Grammar and Mechanics (Punctuation).

Each dimension was rated as Novice, Developing, Skilled, Highly Skilled, and Masterful. Each rating corresponded to a range of point values that was also used for the final score.

### **Results**

As all papers were de-identified, we cannot report the exact class or major of the piloted students; however, we can give this data for courses offered in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 for comparison.

The table below shows the distribution of students in each college or school who took ENGL 103 and/or ENGL 105 in during Fall 2019 and Spring 2020. Please note that as some student may have retaken the class or taken both in sequence, some students may be “double counted.”

College/School	Number of Students
Cathy Hughes School of Communications	157 (10%)
College of Arts and Sciences	857 (53%)
College of Engineering and Architecture	182 (11%)
College of Nursing and Health Sciences	131 (8%)
School of Business	255 (16%)
School of Education	26 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1608 (100%)</b>

Though ENGL 103 and ENGL 105 are often taken by freshmen (82%), sophomores (14%), juniors (2%), and seniors (2%) also take the course.

The table below shows the distribution of students by classification.

Classification	Number of Students
Freshman	1314 (82%)
Sophomore	228 (14%)
Junior	39 (2%)
Senior	27 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1608 (100%)</b>

Looking at all papers as unique data points, we were able to understand the degree to which students were meeting the different components of written communication as assessed by the Department of English’s rubric.

The table below shows the five dimensions and the percentage of students that met each according to faculty-submitted ratings.

	Novice	Developing	Skilled	Highly Skilled	Masterful
<b>Organization</b>	1%	3%	11%	29%	56%
Development A	2%	6%	16%	36%	40%
Development B	3%	9%	25%	36%	27%
Style	1%	5%	17%	45%	33%
Grammar and Mechanics	1%	6%	12%	49%	32%

Using “Skilled” as a target assessment and “Highly Skilled” and “Masterful” as above target, the following percentages of students met each dimension: 96% met or exceeded target for Organization, 92% met or exceeded target for Development A, 88% met or exceeded target for Development B, 94% met or exceeded target for Style, and 93% met or exceeded target for Grammar and Mechanics, .

As the papers assessed were early and late papers in the semester, the data as collected also give us the opportunity to compare how students improved from one paper to the next.

The tables below show the percentage of students meeting each competency level for Paper 1 and Paper 2. As the student scores cross sections and courses, the paper prompts were not the same.

Paper 1	Novice	Developing	Skilled	Highly Skilled	Masterful
Organization	0%	4%	15%	27%	54%

Development A	1%	7%	21%	41%	29%
Development B	1%	12%	30%	36%	21%
Style	1%	4%	23%	44%	28%
Grammar and Mechanics	0%	7%	14%	51%	28%

Paper 2	Novice	Developing	Skilled	Highly Skilled	Masterful
Organization	2%	2%	8%	31%	57%
Development A	3%	4%	11%	31%	51%
Development B	4%	6%	20%	37%	32%
Style	1%	5%	10%	46%	38%
Grammar and Mechanics	2%	5%	11%	46%	35%

	Novice	Developing	Skilled	Highly Skilled	Masterful
Organization	Increase	Decrease	Decrease	Increase	Increase
Development A	Increase	Decrease	Decrease	Decrease	Increase
Development B	Increase	Decrease	Decrease	Increase	Increase
Style	---	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Increase
Grammar and Mechanics	Increase	Decrease	Decrease	Decrease	Increase

Looking at the changes between the first and second papers, we can see that there was an increase across all dimensions in the percentage of students who scored “Masterful.” There was also, however, an increase in all but one dimension in the percentage of students who scored “Novice.” Considering the percentage of students who scored at target (Skilled) or above (Highly Skilled or Masterful), we see that there was an increase in Development A (92% to 93%) and Development B (87% to 90%), a decrease in Style (95% to 94%), and no change in Organization or Grammar and Mechanics.

### Implications

The Department of English at Howard University serves the majority of undergraduate students through ENGL 103 and ENGL 105. Among other learning outcomes, these courses contribute to students abilities in written communication. Looking at the data in this pilot study, we see that students are meeting or exceeding target in all five dimensions (Organization, Development A, Development B, Style, and Grammar and Mechanics). Additional work can be done in the area of Development B (Rhetorical Strategies and Documentation). Additionally, we see that moving from one paper to the next, more students are able to meet the “Masterful” rating.

### **Suggested Improvements**

As a pilot, this small study helped to establish some basic information about the degree to which students are meeting the written communication learning outcome. Moving forward, we hope to include additional courses and additional sections of these courses. Additionally, we are relying on faculty assessments for this data. Providing additional information on the calibration of ENGL 103 and ENGL 104 lecturers would bolster the integrity of the data sources.

While proof that students are meeting targets in written communication is important, it is equally important to understand how the classroom experience at Howard University contributes to these competencies. In this way, looking at a student-by-student growth in each dimension will help clarify the degree to which classes are helping them with the attainment of this outcome.

Finally, we recognize that though the Department of English contributes to the outcome of Written Communication, other courses, departments, and colleges/schools contribute to the same learning outcome. In addition to assessing student competency in “service” courses, Written Communication can be assessed in discipline-specific and capstone classes.

### **References**

Sparks, J. R., Song, Y., Brantley, W., & Liu, O. L. (2014). Assessing written communication in higher education: Review and recommendations for next-generation assessment. *ETS Research Report Series, 2014(2)*, 1-52.