

2019 WRITTEN COMMUNICATION ILO ASSESSMENT REPORT, WESTMONT COLLEGE

PRELIMINARY REPORT SHARED INTERNALLY IN 2020; REVISED IN 2021 WITH ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

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With thanks to Manuela Long, Assistant to Dean Nazarenko (for data management and preliminary analysis);
to Anna Darby, Records System Specialist (for additional data management);
and to Tim Loomer, Director of Research, Planning, and Implementation (for statistical analyses, 2021).

In Spring 2019, we assessed our Written Communication ILO: *Graduates of Westmont College will write effectively in various contexts*. In 2020, a preliminary report was discussed with the Academic Senate and the English department. In Spring 2021, Tim Loomer (our new Director of Research, Planning, and Implementation) provided additional statistical analyses. In March 2021, Sarah Skripsky presented key findings to the full faculty. This report summarizes the assessment's design and implementation, quantitative data and interpretation, qualitative feedback from faculty, and conclusions and recommendations.

I. Assessment design and implementation:

The Written Communication ILO assessment focused on direct assessment of 164 writing samples from 157 senior students (representing 54.5% of our 288 graduating seniors). Thanks to effective buy-in from faculty and students in all three academic divisions, our student writing sample in this cycle of Written Communication assessment was much larger and more representative of our student body than in Spring 2012, when we scored writing portfolios from 22 students representing 7.3% of 301 graduating seniors (as reported [here](#)). Quantitative data from our Spring 2019 assessment is more meaningful than in the past cycle, suitable for influencing pedagogy as well as policy. In addition to the quantitative data we generated when scoring the 164 samples, qualitative feedback from the 16 colleagues who read those samples contributed to our understanding of students' performance and our recommendations for meaningful next steps, as discussed in the concluding section of this report.

When designing this Written Communication ILO assessment, we collaborated with the assessment team for the Christian Understanding, Practices, and Affections (CUPA) ILO, a team led by Lisa DeBoer. These two teams' assessments of senior writing samples helped us gain insight into Westmont students' development as writers as well as their ability to relate Christian faith to their major disciplines. Additional details are in [the CUPA Assessment Report](#).

In Fall 2018, we developed the assessment design by sharing two faith-learning writing prompts with all faculty for early feedback on the suitability of these prompts for integration in upper-division courses. In Spring 2019, these faith-learning assignments and other relevant writing assignments (as preferred by various departments) were integrated in 13 upper-division courses, typically Capstone courses with a substantive writing assignment. The variety of writing prompts offered faculty the flexibility to assign what was best for their courses. (See Appendix 1 for the faith-learning writing prompts.)

Though a variety of student writing was collected and scored, the ideal writing sample for assessing the Written Communication ILO (i.e., writing effectively in various contexts) was a sample generated when a participating student responded to two similar questions while writing for the

benefit of two distinct audiences.¹ As detailed in Appendix 1, those questions were typically “What does it mean to be a Christian in your major discipline?” and “What is the value of your major discipline in the Christian life?” The respective audiences for these two essays were (1) academics (i.e., members of an academic discipline/guild, largely secular) and (2) Christian church members (e.g., an adult Sunday school class).

In some cases, we gathered only one writing sample from each student rather than two samples with distinct audiences. The latter scenario helped us better judge how well the same student could write for *various contexts*, but even a single sample could be assessed for its contextual, rhetorical choices and so was still included in the assessment. Whether a student was responding to one or two writing prompts, the responses from each student were treated as one sample.

Student responses to the faith-learning writing prompts typically allowed us to assess those writing samples for Christian Understanding, Practices, and Affections (CUPA) as well as Written Communication criteria. Different rubrics were used to assess CUPA vs. Written Communication. (See Appendix 2 for the Written Communication rubric.)

While the CUPA rubric was scored by an instructor of record for each student in the participating courses, the Written Communication rubric was scored 2-3 times for each writing sample by an interdisciplinary team of 16 faculty and staff. We assigned writing samples to the readers with the closest areas of disciplinary expertise. That team of 16 participated in a norming session for the Written Communication rubric that increased inter-rater reliability throughout our assessment. During the scoring of the full set of writing samples (n=164), each student’s sample was scored at least twice. When two raters’ scores of the same writing sample differed by more than 1 point on a 5-point scale for a given criterion, that sample was scored again by a third rater. The three sets of scores were then compared, and the scores from the 2 rubrics with the strongest levels of agreement were retained. This process strengthened the reliability of our quantitative data.

Faculty from all three academic divisions participated in this assessment and were led by Sarah Skripsky, Lead Assessment Specialist for Written Communication. These faculty fell into two overlapping groups: those participating as instructors of relevant courses, and those participating as scorers of the writing samples.

We are grateful that 15 faculty members participated by recruiting the seniors in their 13 upper-division courses (typically, Capstone courses) to submit writing samples. These seniors represented all 3 academic divisions (Humanities, Natural and Behavioral Sciences, and Social Sciences); their instructors did extra work to ensure that writing assignments suitable for the assessment were integrated in these Spring 2019 courses and that those writing samples were collected successfully.

Humanities courses and faculty:

1. Art 195: Lisa De Boer
2. Communication Studies 196: Greg Spencer
3. English 192: Sarah Skripsky
4. Philosophy 195: Jim Taylor
5. Religious Studies 125: Telford Work

¹ For the purpose of contributing the CUPA assessment, these questions were related to Christian faith. To serve upper-division courses, the questions were focused on each student’s major discipline.

Natural and Behavioral Sciences courses and faculty:

6. Biology 197: Jeff Schloss
7. Chemistry 195: Stephen Contakes and Michael Everest
8. Computer Science 195: Don Patterson
9. Kinesiology 195: Ogechi Nwaokemeleh and Russell Smelley
10. Physics 195: Ken Kihlstrom

Social Sciences courses and faculty:

11. Economics & Business 195: Rick Ifland
12. Education 109: Jane Wilson
13. Sociology 195: Felicia Song

Some of these instructors joined the group of 16 colleagues who served on the assessment team that collectively read and scored each writing sample 2-3 times during a two-day workshop in May 2019 and shortly thereafter. Most of these colleagues submitted final grades for their Spring 2019 courses shortly before turning to the substantial task of scoring senior essays for this assessment. These colleagues also engaged in the first round of analysis: discussing the writing samples' quality, reviewing preliminary scoring results, and making recommendations for teaching. For their diligent and skillful work, we are truly grateful.

1. Lisa De Boer, Ph.D.; Art
2. Stephen Contakes, Ph.D.; Chemistry
3. Theresa Covich, Ph.D. in English; Library
4. Steve Julio, Ph.D.; Biology
5. Cheri Larsen Hoeckley, Ph.D.; English
6. Yi-Fan Lu, Ph.D.; Biology
7. Kya Mangrum, Ph.D.; English
8. Enrico Manlapig, Ph.D.; Economics & Business
9. Carmen McCain, Ph.D.; English
10. Jana Mayfield Mullen, Ph.D. in the History of Christianity (also M.Div. and MSLIS); Library
11. Tatiana Nazarenko, Ph.D. (also M.Ed.); Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness
12. Ogechi Nwaokemeleh, Ph.D.; Kinesiology
13. Sarah Skripsky, Ph.D.; English
14. Maryke van der Walt, Ph.D.; Mathematics
15. Paul Willis, Ph.D.; English
16. Cassie Wicoff Wiltsey, M.Ed.; Career Development and Calling

II. Quantitative Data and Interpretation

As noted earlier, participating seniors from 13 upper-division courses from all three academic divisions submitted a total of 164 writing samples. After the Written Communication rubric was normed during a faculty workshop, each student's sample was scored 2-3 times by members of an interdisciplinary team of 16 colleagues. When a sample produced two scores that conflicted by a margin of more than 1 on a given criterion, that sample was reviewed and typically scored a third time, and the most reliable scores were retained in the data set.

The following data table (Figure 1) summarizes the results of that process, highlighting students' performance on the 5 relevant criteria on a 5-point scale in which 5 is the best score on each criterion. Data sets include the overall group of participants as well as disaggregated groups based on students' (1) gender, (2) self-reported racial/ethnic identity, and (3) potential completion of our introductory Composition course (ENG 002), which fulfills Westmont's General Education requirement in Writing for the Liberal Arts (WLA) and includes attention to the writing process and rhetorical situation. To honor a condition of participation for some departments, we have not disaggregated the data based on participating courses, though some department chairs have requested this data from Dean Nazarenko for department-level program review.

Summary Results based on 5 Written Communication criteria					
			Disaggregated data sets*		
Criteria	Total Possible Score	Average by Criterion (n=164#)	Females (n=92)	Males (n=65)	
Rhetorical Awareness	5	3.210		3.313	3.065
Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility	5	3.035		3.095	2.949
Content/Message	5	3.272		3.318	3.207
Form/Organization	5	3.193		3.239	3.128
Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation	5	3.205		3.291	3.084
Average of 5 criteria scores		3.183		3.2512	3.0866
Criteria	Total Possible Score	Average by Criterion (n=164#)	White Students (n=97)	Students of Color (n=53)	
Rhetorical Awareness	5	3.210	3.291	3.118	
Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility	5	3.035	3.095	2.939	
Content/Message	5	3.272	3.378	3.094	
Form/Organization	5	3.193	3.240	3.104	
Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation	5	3.205	3.273	3.080	
Average of 5 criteria scores		3.183	3.2554	3.067	
Criteria	Total Possible Score	Average by Criterion (n=164#)	ENG2 completers (n=46)	No ENG 002 (n=93)	
Rhetorical Awareness	5	3.210	3.243	3.142	
Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility	5	3.035	3.015	3.005	
Content/Message	5	3.272	3.222	3.25	
Form/Organization	5	3.193	3.083	3.218	
Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation	5	3.205	3.032	3.263	
Average of 5 criteria scores		3.183	3.119	3.1756	
# = 164 writing samples were scored from participating upper-division and Capstone courses.					
Of those 164 samples, 14 were submitted by 7 students, each of whom were enrolled in 2 participating courses.					
* = Some participants did not submit the demographic information necessary to disaggregate their results.					
However, their results are still included in the average scores for the overall data set (column C).					

Figure 1: Summary Results Table with Disaggregated Data Sets (Spring 2019 Sample)

We retained the same Written Communication rubric from the last cycle of assessment in 2011-2012 with attention to the same 5 criteria. However, it would be unwise to make a comparative analysis of the two quantitative data sets since the two writing samples scored using the same rubric were very different. As mentioned earlier, the Spring 2019 sample was much larger and more representative of our student body, whereas the 2011-2012 sample was more limited and was affected strongly by volunteer bias. Scores in the Spring 2019 assessment are predictably lower than in the previous assessment, in which a disproportionate part of the sample was produced by our highest-performing seniors.

However, the results of our Spring 2019 assessment were encouraging in indicating that, *on average, a representative group of seniors earned Satisfactory (3) or better scores on all 5 criteria of written communication* that we measured. This satisfactory level of performance is shown in the *average of all 5 criteria scores* in the total sample (3.183, n=164) as well as the *average score for each criterion* (ranging from 3.035 on “Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility” to 3.272 on “Content/Message”). The relative weakness in

students' performance on Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility is discussed in Section IV when setting benchmarks for the next assessment cycle.

When reviewing our 3 disaggregated data sets, we were also encouraged to see that *participating seniors in each demographic group averaged Satisfactory (3) or better scores when we averaged their performance on all 5 criteria*. In keeping with Grade Point Average (GPA) differences at our institution, female participants outperformed male students in Written Communication scores (3.2512 vs. 3.0866, $\text{delta} = 0.1646$), and “White” students outperformed “Students of Color” (3.2554 vs. 3.0670, $\text{delta} = 0.1884$).

In part, these differences in writing performance are related to students' overall academic performance. Indeed, based on his Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Tim Loomer found that students' cumulative GPA explained approximately 20.5% of the variability in the sum of the 5 criteria scores for Written Communication; in other words, students' cumulative GPA and their sum Written Communication scores are moderately correlated. (He found a correlation of ~ 0.4578 between these two variables [R-squared] with a P-value of ~ 0.0180 for the overall regression.) See Figure 2, which shows the linear relationship between GPA and Written Communication scoring.

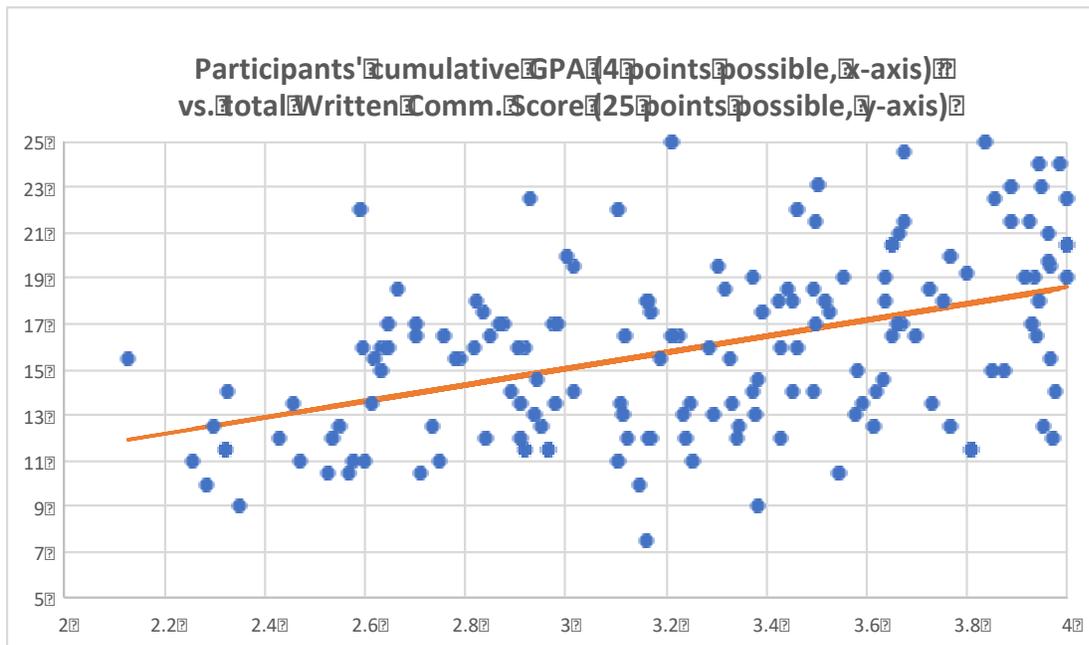


Figure 2: Scatterplot showing correlation of ~ 0.4578 ($\sim 20.5\%$ predictive relationship) between cumulative GPA and the sum of average Written Communication scores

This degree of correlation between GPA and Written Communication scoring is encouraging in suggesting that our methods of measuring Written Communication competence have been reliable—as well as in suggesting that Written Communication competence is indeed important for students' academic success as measured by GPA. (Since GPA is a significant predictor of both student retention and persistence to graduation, it follows that Written Communication is also important to those outcomes.) In comparison to how GPA was judged to be $\sim 20.5\%$ predictive of seniors' Written Communication scores in Spring 2019, a weaker correlation was shown between

GPA and Westmont seniors' Critical-thinking Assessment Test (CAT) scores in Spring 2020 (i.e., GPA was only ~7% predictive of CAT scores).² This comparison is addressed in Section IV.

To return to the relationship between GPA and students' performance in the Written Communication ILO assessment, "White" students outperformed "Students of Color" (SOC) in their cumulative GPA as well as all on 5 criteria scores for Written Communication (see Figure 3). Between these groups, the most significant difference in Written Communication criterion scoring was on Content/Message, on which "White" students outperformed "Students of Color" by a difference of 0.284 (3.378 vs. 3.094). This difference in Content/Message writing performance is statistically significant ($p = 0.0485$); though moderately correlated with students' overall academic performance, it is a more striking difference than the performance gap between these groups on other Written Communication criteria.

Written Comm. Criteria / Demographics	Average of CUM GPA	Average of Written Comm. Scores
Content/Message	3.247	3.272
Students of Color	3.138	3.094
White	3.311	3.378
(blank = students without identifying info.)	3.190	3.143
Form/Organization	3.247	3.193
Students of Color	3.138	3.104
White	3.311	3.240
(blank = students without identifying info.)	3.190	3.214
Rhetorical Awareness	3.247	3.210
Students of Color	3.138	3.118
White	3.311	3.291
(blank = students without identifying info.)	3.190	2.786
Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility	3.247	3.035
Students of Color	3.138	2.939
White	3.311	3.095
(blank = students without identifying info.)	3.190	2.929
Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation	3.247	3.205
Students of Color	3.138	3.080
White	3.311	3.273
(blank = students without identifying info.)	3.190	3.214
Grand Total	3.247	3.183
<i>The category "Students of Color" (SOC) includes students identifying as American/Alaskan Native, Asian or Asian American, Black or African America, and/or Hispanic/Latinx.</i>		
<i>The disaggregated data sets for "White" students (n=97) & "Students of Color" (n=53) exclude data from 7 students ("blank") from the total sample for whom we lack identifying data.</i>		

Figure 3: GPA vs. Written Communication scores, disaggregated by ethnicity

² See footnote 8 in page 3 of the [Critical Thinking ILO Assessment Report](#).

Several hypothetical causes for this significant difference in students' Content/Message writing performance include: (1) writing assignments which may privilege majority/"White" epistemologies over minority epistemologies; (2) better access to textbooks and other required content resources among majority/"White" students; and (3) minority students' potential reluctance to seek academic support³. In Section IV, we note ways to address this Content/Message performance gap; we also suggest more strategic approaches to demographic sampling in future assessments.

Performance gaps and student success remained key concerns when reviewing our disaggregated data based on gender (Figure 4); that review identified two main points of interest: (1) a gendered gap in Rhetorical Awareness scores and (2) the greater variability in males' scores.

Written Comm. Criteria		FEMALE	MALE	DELTA	df =	t =	p =
Content/Message							
	Average	3.318	3.207	0.111	155	0.808	0.4206
	SD	0.717	1.006				
	n	92	65				
Form/Organization							
	Average	3.239	3.128	0.111	65	0.827	0.4096
	SD	0.74	0.94				
	n	92	65				
Rhetorical Awareness							
	Average	3.313	3.065	0.248	65	1.775	0.0778
	SD	0.766	0.983				
	n	92	65				
Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility							
	Average	3.095	2.949	0.146	65	1.077	0.2832
	SD	0.754	0.942				
	n	92	65				
Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation							
	Average	3.291	3.084	0.207	65	1.518	0.131
	SD	0.793	0.906				
	n	92	65				

Figure 4: Written Communication scores, disaggregated by gender

Though females typically scored higher than males on all 5 criteria, the largest performance gap was in Rhetorical Awareness (delta = 0.248). While the p-value in this case (0.0778) does not cross the threshold for statistical significance (i.e., it is still greater than 0.05), this delta still suggests that male students may find it more challenging than females to discern differences in audience and context when communicating. As noted by Dean Nazarenko in a March 2021 assessment team meeting, these findings are consistent with recent neuroscientific studies indicating that women typically have better verbal and linguistic abilities than men [including rhetorical competencies], while men typically

³ Cf. Chapter 6 of *Whistling Vivaldi* (2010), in which psychologist Claude M. Steele makes the case that minority students are more likely to persist in individual "efforting" [or striving] rather than to engage in help-seeking behaviors.

have better spatial awareness. With these generalizations in mind, it is unlikely that earning a degree from Westmont will entirely bridge this typical gap between men and women in rhetorical competencies. However, we should offer high-quality instruction that affords all students opportunities to develop competency in Written Communication and other rhetorical competencies (e.g., Oral Communication, another ILO).

In addition, we are concerned about the greater variability in the Written Communication scores of male students (Figure 4). As Tim Loomer observed in a March 2021 assessment team meeting, “The most interesting thing [in the gender-disaggregated data set] is the difference in the standard deviation of the female and male groups Males are consistently higher [in standard deviation scores], which means there is greater variability in the [Written Communication scores] of the males.” After reviewing the raw data, Loomer suggested that this greater variability “is probably due to males earning the lowest scores [1s and 2s] with [greater] frequency [than females].” As Loomer also noted, males earning the lowest scores more often than females suggests that there are some male students who are “just barely getting by” in college writing assignments but are still persisting to graduation based on other academic competencies.

One potential barrier for male students’ improvement in Written Communication competencies is their greater reluctance (compared to females) to seek academic support such as writing center tutoring.⁴ In this sense, male students show some similarity with “Students of Color” (SOC) in their tendency to persist in individual “efforting” [or striving] rather than to engage in help-seeking behaviors (cf. footnote 3 on Claude Steele’s analysis). We address strategies for recruiting male students into academic support services within our recommendations in Section IV.

Despite some causes for concern, our Written Communication assessment does suggest a positive trajectory for students who are placed into our introductory writing course (ENG 002). As shown in Figure 5, we disaggregated the senior-level data set to better understand how our ENG 002 course contributes to students’ development as effective writers as they near graduation. ENG 002 students typically enter Westmont with a lower academic profile (LAP) in English studies than their peers—and are thus required to take ENG 002 to fulfill our Writing for the Liberal Arts (WLA) General Education requirement. With that distinction in mind, ENG 002 is a course intended to help students bridge opportunity gaps in their rhetorical development, gaps which can be significant barriers to student success in Westmont’s writing-intensive curriculum. It is not surprising that ENG 002 completers scored slightly lower than the overall sample of students on 3 of 5 of our Written Communication criteria (Figure 5); instead, it is encouraging that this student population was largely able to bridge the gaps in Written Communication competence they faced when entering college.

⁴ Cf. Tipper, Margaret O. “Real Men Don’t Do Writing Centers.” *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1999, pp. 33–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43442835>. 2021.

<i>Written Communication criteria</i>	<i>Written Communication scores by placement</i>		<i>DELTA</i>	<i>df =</i>	<i>t =</i>	<i>p =</i>
	<i>ENG 002 completers</i>	<i>Students without ENG 002</i>				
<i>Content/Message</i>						
Average	3.222	3.25	-0.028	148	0.183	0.855
SD	0.801	0.871				
n	46	93				
<i>Form/Organization</i>						
Average	3.083	3.218	-0.135	148	0.911	0.364
SD	0.798	0.834				
n	46	93				
<i>Rhetorical Awareness</i>						
Average	3.243	3.142	0.101	148	0.643	0.5215
SD	0.855	0.88				
n	46	93				
<i>Rhetorical Sensitivity/Mobility</i>						
Average	3.015	3.005	0.01	148	0.066	0.9474
SD	0.868	0.825				
n	46	93				
<i>Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation</i>						
Average	3.032	3.263	-0.231	148	1.550	0.1234
SD	0.832	0.824				
n	46	93				

Figure 5: Written Communication scores, disaggregated by ENG 002 completion

Overall, we were encouraged to see that the scores of seniors who had once placed into ENG 002 were nearly indistinguishable from peers who had placed out of that course. Based on this data set (Figure 4), Tim Loomer noted that “there is no significant difference” between the scores of two disaggregated groups as they near graduation: namely, ENG 002 completers and those who were not required to take ENG 002 (including Advanced Placement [AP] and honors students). **In other words, ENG 002 seems to be doing what it is intended to do: namely, equipping those incoming students with a greater need to develop as college-level writers to develop effectively as college-level writers.**

Indeed, the student group that completed ENG 002 was able to outperform the non-completing group on 2 of the 5 Written Communication criteria—specifically, those criteria measuring rhetorical abilities (Figure 5). That result makes sense in that ENG 002 includes a substantial focus on rhetorical concepts (related to the Rhetorical Awareness criterion in Appendix 2) as well as practice adapting one’s writing to varied rhetorical situations (related to the Rhetorical Sensitivity/Mobility in Appendix 2). However, the result is still impressive given that these two groups tend to have a distinct gap in academic preparation as incoming students.

Of course, we did not create a control group based on Writing for the Liberal Arts (WLA) placement, one that would include students who placed into ENG 002 but did not complete the course prior to graduation; it would be unethical to withhold an introductory composition course from a subset of students most likely to benefit from that course. However, based on the moderate correlation between GPA and Written Communication scores, we can reasonably assume that incoming LAP students in a control group would’ve scored lower than those who completed ENG

002. Again, these indicators support the effectiveness of ENG 002 as a WLA requirement for qualifying students.

Given that ENG 002 completers performed better in Rhetorical Awareness and Rhetorical Sensitivity/Mobility than non-completers, it may make sense to revise our Writing Competency placement methods to offer a larger group of students the opportunity to take ENG 002. We discuss this proposal in Section IV.

In addition to the quantitative analysis of student scores discussed in this section, we gathered qualitative feedback from participating faculty and staff, who contributed to a more holistic understanding of student development, Written Communication, pedagogical strategies, and our institutional dynamics. Those contributions are discussed in the following section, and they inform our concluding recommendations as well.

III. Qualitative Feedback from Faculty

Qualitative feedback from participating faculty and staff, primarily those Mayterm 2019 workshop participants contributing to Written Communication ILO assessment by norming the rubric and scoring student writing samples, is summarized here:

1. Students benefit from **audience-specific writing practice**. While the structure of our Writing-/Speech-Intensive General Education requirements (with requirements both inside and outside the major discipline) ensures that each Westmont graduate has crafted written and oral communication for courses in more than one department, we are unsure how often students are being asked to write for **audiences other than professors**. While seniors in this study typically performed at a satisfactory level on all Written Communication criteria, **Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility (criterion IB) merits improvement in teaching and curriculum design**. That relative weakness is consistent with our previous Written Communication ILO assessment, likely due to the demanding nature of this criterion (regardless of the different profiles for the two student samples, as noted in Section I). See related recommendations in Section IV.
2. We reflected on multiple implications of combining the CUPA and Written Communication ILO assessments in the design of the two faith-learning writing prompts. Though most implications were positive, concerns about unintended consequences were raised.
 - a. Among the encouraging aspects of this assessment, one colleague was encouraged that the faith-learning writing tasks helped equip seniors to be “prepared to give an answer” about Christian faith (paraphrasing I Peter 3:15), especially in relation to their major studies and vocational paths.
 - b. However, these writing tasks were likely more meaningful and motivating to students who identify personally with the Christian faith. Though the writing prompts were designed to be within reach of all Westmont students (who all complete Religious Studies courses, attend chapel services, etc.), students who do not personally identify with Christian faith may have been less motivated or equipped to complete the writing tasks well—and may have ended up scoring lower.
 - c. Another colleague raised a concern that having seniors write about the relationship between Christian faith and their major discipline may contribute to graduates’ anxieties about faith and/or vocation.
 - i. Yet another colleague wondered how we might help students to “transfer” and synthesize relevant knowledge between various courses and experiences.

This colleague expressed concern that some students had not remembered (or at least mentioned) significant faith-learning frameworks and readings, etc. from before their senior year. In other words, some students seemed to be constrained to a given course or semester rather than responding out of the fullness of their education and experience. While this concern relates more to CUPA development than Written Comm. development, it merits mention in relation to students' holistic experience and the potential adoption of a required writing portfolio, as discussed in Section IV.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

After discussing this Written Communication ILO assessment with various stakeholders (the assessment team, the Provost, the Academic Senate, the English department, and the full faculty), multiple recommendations emerged. These recommendations range from creating a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Coordinator position to provide administrative vision and support for WAC, to revising curricular structures and placement methods, to incentivizing use of academic support services, to setting benchmarks and other expectations for the next cycle of Written Communication assessment.

Administrative vision and pedagogical development for WAC; writing portfolio option

The primary, holistic recommendation emerging from this assessment was to create a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Coordinator position to help “close the loop” on this assessment and offer more consistent support for writing-intensive courses. In 2020, outgoing Provost Mark Sargent formalized that new position for the 2021-2022 academic year, and Sarah Skripsky was appointed as the first WAC Coordinator. In that letter of appointment, Sargent noted four main themes for WAC work: (1) prioritizing the teaching of Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility in writing-intensive (WI) courses; (2) contributing to WLA/WI curriculum mapping, course standards, and relevant program review; (3) reviewing ENG 002 (WLA) placement and practices; and (4) “cultivating a liberal arts culture of writing . . . [with] a vision for us to equip our graduates to become *faithfully present* writers in their churches and workplaces . . . us[ing] writing with both power and sensitivity . . . [to] become catalysts for good.” To support this vision, Sargent created an annual budget of \$2000+ to support WAC faculty development activities such as workshops on assignment (re)design and effective response to student writing—making WI instruction more effective and sustainable.

Within WAC assignment (re)design workshops, **attention should be given to how students benefit from audience-specific writing practice, including writing assignments that invoke audiences other than professors;** [John Bean's RAFT and TIP model](#) is an instructive tool for such effective design. Since seniors in this study performed comparatively lower on Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility than on other criteria, that criterion merits special attention in our teaching and programmatic WAC decisions. With this goal in mind, we may **consider adopting a writing portfolio requirement** at the junior or senior level: encouraging successful “transfer” of knowledge between WI classes, supporting effective development in various Written Communication competencies, and even encouraging metacognitive reflection in a holistic memo to accompany each portfolio (as was piloted in our 2012 Written Communication ILO assessment).

Also within WAC assignment (re)design workshops, **attention should be given to the potential barriers for success for LAP students, male students, and Students of Color (SOC), among others.** Assignments that integrate anti-racist frameworks and which are supported by open-access and/or library resources are strongly encouraged; such design strategies work against the privileging of majority/“White” epistemologies and work for equal access to textbooks and other vital resources.

Curricular recommendations

This assessment provides substantive evidence for retaining ENG 002 (Composition) as a foundational course in college writing. Given that the course has been effective in helping incoming students bridge gaps in writing competence, we are revisiting ENG 002 placement methods to ensure that we are offering this valuable course to enough students. In Spring 2021, the English department reviewed a proposal from Sarah Skripsky, then the department chair, for revising ENG 002 placement in response to this Written Communication ILO assessment as well as recent changes in standardized testing such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT); that proposal met with initial support from the English department and will soon be under review by the Academic Senate. While retaining some aspects of current placement practices, the proposal would move Westmont toward Directed Self-Placement (DSP), a method well established in other writing programs. As demonstrated at other institutions, implementing DSP can assist students with more accurate self-assessment as writers and, in turn, direct them in discerning their placement into the most appropriate and beneficial writing-intensive (WI) courses (whether ENG 002 or more advanced courses such as ENG 104). By reducing reliance on standardized testing for course placement, DSP also empowers the student (increasing engagement in the selected course) and contributes to anti-racist practices.

Our current WLA placement methods are fairly lenient in allowing students to “place out” of ENG 002, which can place a heavier burden for writing instruction on other writing-intensive (WI) faculty and courses. While our GE program requires writing-intensive courses beyond WLA both inside and outside one’s major, the WLA requirement (ENG 002 or equivalent) plays a vital role in preparing students for more demanding WI courses; thus, effective WLA placement is vital for student success and the sustainability of other WI courses, which are already labor-intensive for faculty as well as students.

One complication with students’ ENG 002 completion is its uncertain timing: i.e., the course may be delayed nearly indefinitely by students who do not prioritize it or who may experience writing anxiety. This assessment suggests that ENG 002 is valuable enough to students’ rhetorical development that it should be prioritized by incoming students. With that benefit in mind, **we should require ENG 002 in a logical sequence:** i.e., requiring that a student earn a “C” or better in ENG 002 or an equivalent WLA course either (1) to achieve junior status or (2) to enroll in other writing-intensive (WI) courses at Westmont.

Either change would benefit students as well as faculty (who are otherwise teaching advanced, writing-intensive courses to some students who have not yet satisfied Writing Competency, another situation which does not make sense pedagogically). Moreover, to allow faculty teaching ENG 002

to prepare students for other WI courses as well as for other rhetorical contexts, **we should cap ENG 002 (WLA) sections at 15-18 students (instead of 20).**⁵

Despite its importance, ENG 002 is not a one-shot “cure” for all writing woes; rather, it should be understood as a *gateway* to more advanced writing courses, or a *foundation* for students’ ongoing rhetorical development at Westmont. While ENG 002 and all of our Writing-Intensive (WI) General Education courses have a special role to play in students’ development, all faculty who assign writing should recognize the opportunities for their courses to contribute to that development.

Yet another recommendation is to decouple Writing-Intensive and Speech-Intensive courses, placing them in separate General Education categories. While Written Communication and Oral Communication competencies have some overlap, their conflation in the structure of our curriculum does not always serve students and faculty well. For instance, students who take COM 015 (Public Speaking) to satisfy a Writing-/Speech-Intensive (WSI) GE requirement outside their major may have much to gain from that course; however, they do not necessarily improve their performance across all Written Communication criteria, such as development in Form/Organization and Style conventions. Decoupling WI and SI courses in our GE will allow for clearer and more effective review and planning in both categories, each of which is related to an ILO that merits its own methods and cycle of assessment.

That proposed decoupling would enable more effective mapping of WI courses in particular (for WAC planning)—with special attention to course sizes and staffing. While some writing-intensive (WI) courses have appropriate faculty-student ratios of 1:15, other WI courses have 30-50 students assigned to a single instructor. This 1:30+ ratio simply does not make sense pedagogically for WI courses. Such large WI courses are neither ethical nor sustainable unless supported by faculty co-instructors and/or by undergraduate tutors trained in writing instruction. With these contexts in mind, we should revisit our lengthy list of WSI courses to identify which courses both (1) should be retained as *writing-intensive* (WI) courses and (2) have problematic faculty-student ratios without sufficient tutor support. **For courses which meet both of these criteria, we should strive to reduce the faculty-student ratio and/or provide sufficient tutor support.**

Based on best practices in other WAC programs, **we should cap most writing-intensive (WI) courses at 15-25 students per instructor.** Reducing course caps for large WI courses would increase the quality of instruction by “right-sizing” faculty workload for those courses, which require careful attention to students’ rhetorical development. Reduced course caps for WI courses may require funding from the Center for Student Success (CSS) or other sources in order to hire more teaching faculty—or may prompt innovations to reassign current faculty. Some departments may need to divide large WI courses into two sections (or, in order to retain a Capstone cohort, assign a larger section to two co-teachers).⁶ Such adjustments in course caps and staffing are vital to ensuring

⁵ Course caps of 15-18 are consistent with best practices in other WAC programs such as the University of Denver (which [implemented](#) a cap of 15 for each course in its four-course writing requirement).

⁶ There is **precedent for co-taught writing-intensive (WI) courses** in our Augustinian Scholars Program, in which the two first-year honors courses (IS-010H in fall and IS-020H in spring) are capped at 38-40 per section, with two faculty assigned as co-teachers to each section. Once a week, those co-teachers typically take turns lecturing to those cohort sections. During a second weekly meeting, those co-teachers then split the cohort to offer closer attention to smaller seminars (“labs”) of 18-20 students each. **This model allows for integrity of the cohort experience as well as integrity in writing instruction, and this model could be applied to Capstone courses emphasizing cohort experiences.**

that faculty members are not given unsustainable workloads—and that students are given sufficient attention in their Written Communication development, which this assessment has shown to be correlated with GPA as a key indicator of academic success. **Similar concerns about WI instructor workloads were raised in the 2012 Written Communication ILO assessment report; these concerns merit urgent attention.**

Academic support for Written Communication

As we foster an ethical and sustainable context for writing instruction, **we should continue to promote academic support for all students as they develop Written Communication competencies**; such support is available one-on-one from peer tutors in the writing center (Writers' Corner) as well as from faculty during office hours and from reference librarians at the Research Help Desk. Such support should be well publicized, and LAP students in particular should be given incentives and/or accountability for making use of these services.

Given scholarly attention to resistance to academic support among some male students and Students of Color (SOC), those student populations should also be given incentives and/or accountability for participation. Dean Nazarenko suggests that not only faculty, staff, and tutors but also **athletic coaches should play a role in relevant publicity, incentives, and accountability.**

In Section II of this report, we noted that students' cumulative GPA explained approximately 20.5% of the variability in the sum of the 5 criteria scores for Written Communication; in comparison, our latest Critical Thinking ILO assessment showed a markedly lower correlation (approximately 7%) between students' Critical Thinking scores and their cumulative GPA. **How might we account for significantly higher correlation between students' cumulative GPA and their Written Communication scores—and what are the implications for academic support?** Assuming that Westmont values these two competencies (Written Communication and Critical Thinking) nearly equally (and that faculty reward students' cumulative GPA nearly equally for their performances in both competencies), three hypotheses emerge to account for that gap in correlation. All three of these hypotheses may be true:

- (1) Our Critical Thinking ILO assessment methods may have been less effective than our Written Communication assessment methods in measuring competency in each area.
- (2) Critical Thinking competence may have been partially measured within the Content/Message criterion scores (etc.) of students participating in our Written Communication assessment. In other words, Critical Thinking may be a kind of subset of effective Written Communication performance.
- (3) **Written Communication may be an area of academic performance in which hard-working students can overcome some initial weaknesses in critical thinking (and relevant content/message creation, etc.) within the course of the writing process.** Such overcoming may be enabled in at least two ways. First, students may improve in critical thinking (and content/message creation, etc.) as a “product” or benefit of a robust writing process (invention, drafting, revision, and editing). Second, that process (which may be much less compressed than a timed exam of 1-2 hours, as in the case of the CAT) offers a *site of opportunity* for students to receive academic support from professors and tutors who can sharpen their thinking beyond what a student can achieve within even the most robust writing process when constrained by individual “efforting” (striving) rather

than engaging with a faculty mentor or another adept collaborator. While students may benefit from academic support at various stages of preparing for an exam such as the CAT, the writing process itself (with various stages of performance and accountability) may better “set the stage” for collaboration between a student and a mentor. **We should make the most of these process-based opportunities—and also help students recognize those opportunities’ value (in part, by recruiting students into faculty office hours, into the writing center, and into other tutoring sessions).**

Benchmarks and future assessments

This assessment has given us greater understanding of graduating seniors and helped us consider benchmarks to guide our teaching as we prepare for future assessments. In reference to the same 5-point scale used in this assessment, **our benchmark for future Written Communication ILO assessments is for 75% of all seniors to score 3, 4, or 5 (average or above) across all 5 Written Communication criteria.** This benchmark is data-driven and reasonable. A targeted area for improvement is the category “Rhetorical Sensitivity/Mobility,” criterion 1B, in which approximately 71% of seniors met this benchmark (scoring 3, 4, or 5).⁷ On the other 4 criteria, the proposed benchmark (75% of all seniors scoring 3, 4, or 5) was achieved in this assessment, and it is feasible to aim for similar or better results in the next cycle of assessment.

In future Written Communication ILO assessments, it would be wise to do the following:

1. Recruit a stratified sample from seniors in which we had more participants representing various minority groups; doing so would help us better to understand and serve Students of Color (SOC), supporting their success in Content/Message construction and other Written Communication criteria. According to Dean Nazarenko, we particularly need to learn more about our growing cohort of Latinx students, especially those who are first-generation college students.
2. In keeping with this suggestion and recent work by our Center for Student Success, in future ILO assessments, it would be also useful to disaggregate data for other groups such as first-generation college students, transfer students, non-native English speakers, international students, and students who entered Westmont with a Low Academic Profile (LAP)⁸.
3. A future assessment could also target first-year writers (rather than graduating seniors) with particular attention to LAP students and male students; doing so would help us better understand their rhetorical development as well as barriers to success in that crucial first year. If we later reviewed the cases of those LAP males who both did and did not persist to graduation, we would better understand potential barriers to success that might merit WAC program revision.

⁷ As defined in the Written Communication rubric, to earn an average/satisfactory score [3 of 5] on Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility, a writer must “[d]emonstrat[e] an **average ability to shape writing strategically** to suit particular audiences and purposes” so that the “[w]riting sample(s) would be **somewhat compelling** to target audience(s), showing rhetorical sensitivity” (see Appendix 2). This is a reasonable standard for at least 75% of our seniors to achieve.

⁸ Within a Spring 2021 report from the Center for Student Success, students with a Low Academic Profile are identified when entering Westmont based on these indicators: *For first-years: high-school GPA < 3.0 and/or SAT < 1000; for transfer students: incoming college GPA < 3.0.*

APPENDICES:

- Appendix 1: Faith-Learning Writing Prompts (templates for adaptation during CUPA and Written Communication ILO assessments)
 - Appendix 2: Written Communication Rubric
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Appendix 1: Faith-Learning Writing Prompts (recommended, not required)

2018-2019 CUPA-W prompt with note to faculty

Lisa De Boer and Sarah Skripsky

2018-2019 CUPA-W Assessment Project (assessment of Christian Understanding, Practices, and Affections [CUPA] and Written Communication)

Writing prompt for adaptation in Spring 2019 senior/capstone courses

Framing language:

*The biblical narrative arc is one of creation, fall, and redemption. We begin in a garden and end in a city. Finding our place in this grand story requires our heads, hearts, and hands. Consider your own hopes and vocational goals. In particular, how does your major discipline intersect with this story about the world and our place in it? **With these considerations in mind, write two responses aimed at two different audiences.***

Dual-audience writing prompts:

- **Prompt for Audience 1: academic/professional (professionals, teachers, and students in your major discipline).** *What does it mean to be a Christian in your major/field/discipline? As you answer this question, engage with concepts and language valued in your major/field/discipline.*
- **Prompt for Audience 2: the church.** *Imagine being asked to speak at a local church about the value of your major/field/discipline in Christian life. As you create talking points that answer this question, engage with concepts and language valued in the church. Be attentive to an audience with a range of education and experiences.*

Note: *You may answer these prompts regardless of your faith identity. You are welcome to draw on personal examples, but you are not required to do so.*

Appendix 2: Written Communication ILO rubric (2 pages)

Westmont College, Written Communication Rubric, Spring 2019

CRITERIA	Excellent (5)	Strong (4)	Average (3)	Weak (2)	Poor (1)
1A. Rhetorical Awareness	Demonstrates excellent awareness of particular audiences and purposes for writing.	Demonstrates strong awareness of particular audiences and purposes for writing.	Demonstrates average awareness of particular audiences and purposes for writing.	Demonstrates weak awareness of particular audiences and purposes for writing.	Demonstrates poor awareness of particular audiences and purposes for writing.
1B. Rhetorical Sensitivity and Mobility	Demonstrates an excellent ability to shape writing strategically to suit particular audiences and purposes. Writing sample(s) would be highly compelling to target audience(s), showing rhetorical sensitivity.	Demonstrates a strong ability to shape writing strategically to suit particular audiences and purposes. Writing sample(s) would be compelling to target audience(s), showing rhetorical sensitivity.	Demonstrates an average ability to shape writing strategically to suit particular audiences and purposes. Writing sample(s) would be somewhat compelling to target audience(s), showing rhetorical sensitivity.	Demonstrates weak ability to shape writing strategically to suit particular audiences and purposes. Writing sample(s) are unlikely to be compelling to target audience(s).	Demonstrates poor ability to shape writing strategically to suit particular audiences and purposes. Writing sample(s) are very unlikely to be compelling to target audience(s).
2. Content/ Message	Could publish. Demonstrates excellent control of content/ message : can construct a central message that includes highly purposeful and inviting ideas, insightful arguments and reasons to accept them, and relevant/substantive supporting material—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Strong control of content/ message : can construct a central message that includes purposeful and inviting ideas, insightful arguments and reasons to accept them, and relevant/substantive supporting material—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Average control of message : can construct a central message that includes somewhat purposeful and inviting ideas, insightful arguments and reasons to accept them, and relevant/substantive supporting material—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Weak control of message: falls short of constructing a central message that includes purposeful and inviting ideas, insightful arguments and reasons to accept them, and relevant/substantive supporting material—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Poor control of message: clearly fails to construct a central message that includes purposeful and inviting ideas, insightful arguments and reasons to accept them, and relevant/substantive supporting material—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.
3. Form/ Organization	Could publish. Demonstrates excellent control of form: shows outstanding success at organizing messages strategically, creating meaningful transitions, and introducing/ concluding effectively—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Strong control of form: successful at organizing messages strategically, creating meaningful transitions, and introducing/ concluding effectively—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Average control of form: moderately successful at organizing messages strategically, creating meaningful transitions, and introducing/ concluding effectively—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Weak control of form: shows below average ability to organize messages strategically, create meaningful transitions, and introduce/ conclude effectively—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.	Poor control of form: clearly fails to show ability to organize messages strategically, create meaningful transitions, and introduce/ conclude effectively—as appropriate for audience/ purpose.

<p>4. Style: Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation</p>	<p>Could publish. Demonstrates excellent control of style: shows outstanding ability to manipulate grammar, syntax, and punctuation—as appropriate for audience/purpose.</p>	<p>Strong control of style: shows above average ability to manipulate grammar, syntax, and punctuation—as appropriate for audience/purpose.</p>	<p>Average control of style: shows moderate ability to manipulate grammar, syntax, and punctuation—as appropriate for audience/purpose.</p>	<p>Weak control of style: shows below average ability to manipulate grammar, syntax, and punctuation—as appropriate for audience/purpose.</p>	<p>Poor control of style: clearly fails to show ability to manipulate grammar, syntax, and punctuation—as appropriate for audience/purpose.</p>
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