2020-2021 COM2 and COM3 Assessment:
Exploring Student Success
with Purpose, Audience, and Structure

In Spring 2021, a group of twelve instructors (across COM1, COM2, and COM3 courses) participated in evaluation of a sample of student work collected from 37 Fall 2020 COM2 and COM3 courses.[1]

Purpose and Method

The primary goal of the assessment was to evaluate student work in relationship to COM Learning Outcome 3, which focuses on students' ability to create structures and language appropriate to a specific audience and purpose.

Two central questions drove the assessment:
➔ How well do student documents indicate skill with audience awareness, document <u>purpose</u>, and appropriate <u>structures</u>? (quantitative)
➔ What do readers notice about relative strengths and weaknesses of student efforts? (qualitative)

Though assignment descriptions were not collected as part of this assessment, evaluators were also asked to indirectly evaluate the assignment quality: How well does this assignment seem to position students to engage with disciplinary, professional, or interdisciplinary audiences, purposes, and structures?

Most student documents were read by at least two evaluators, but evaluators were *not* asked to reach consensus on scores, in part to capture and reflect the ways that different readers respond to texts in differing ways.

Quantitative Findings

Overall, across all student work, evaluators found 83.2% of student work to be "excellent" or "adequate" in developing structures in support of a clear purpose. Similarly, they rated 83.3% of student work as "excellent" or "adequate" in matching the writing to the needs, values, and expectations of the audience.

Additionally, Table 1 reveals a potentially problematic key finding: evaluators rated students' structures and audience responsiveness, on average, slightly *higher* in intermediate (COM2) courses than in advanced (COM3) courses. Additionally, evaluators rated assignments in COM2 courses as slightly *better* than those in COM3 classes at encouraging students to generate texts appropriate to a specific disciplinary, professional, or interdisciplinary setting.

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[1] Participating instructors came from a range of disciplines: Janissa Martinez, Leighkaren Labay, Nicole Foss (English); Francesca King (Writing Center/English); Marian Karch Helm (English Language Center); Alyssa Canepa (LeaRN/Bridge Program); Emily Brown (ECTL); Tracey Eckersley (Art Education); Rachel Sailor (Art History); Bailey Patterson (Communication); Sarah Lee (Family and Consumer Science); Urszula Norton (Plant Sciences); and Manasseh Franklin (Environment and Natural Resources)

Table 1. Group averages by course level			
	Purpose*	Audience*	Assignment**
COM2	2.51	2.36	3.32
COM3	2.29	2.31	3.09

* Purpose/Audience scale of 3 (with 3 = excellent)
** Assignment scale of 4 (with 4 = encourages students to make extensive use of vocabulary, format/formatting, graphics, etc. specific to a clear and narrow disciplinary, professional, or interdisciplinary setting.

There are at least four possible explanations for this trend:
- COM2 courses (which are often open to students across a range of majors) may do a better job of articulating to students the specific audience and format expectations, since instructors may not assume a common base of student knowledge.
- Evaluators may have struggled more to rate COM3 work outside their own fields of expertise. *If* COM2 writing took the form of more common academic genres (e.g., essays, lab reports, or speech outlines), the evaluators may have found these works more familiar than more advanced texts in COM3 courses.
- Lack of access to the assignment descriptions may have hindered the evaluators' ability to match the student work to the instructor expectations. As one evaluator noted, "Evaluating without assignment guidelines does feel a bit like a shot in the dark, but it was also interesting to try to see what was working in the assignment without the guidelines."
- Increased freedom (of topic and/or format) in upper-level courses may increase student engagement but may also make it harder for students to clearly set or recognize the appropriate audience for their work.

Regardless of the cause, this difference points to opportunities for improvement. Similarly, evaluator rating of students' *tone* indicates another opportunity for targeted teaching. Specifically, evaluators were asked to rate students' tone as "spot on," "generic," "stretching," or to provide an alternate description. Forty-six percent of texts were rated as "spot on," 39% were rated as a bit too general for the audience and purpose, and 8% were rated as "stretching" (that is, being a bit overdone for the setting). **The fact that nearly 2 in 5 texts were found to use a relatively generic tone** suggests that students may still be struggling to match the vocabulary, conventions, and construction patterns of the setting. In a broader sense, this is important because it **suggests not only that students are struggling with the *language* of the course but also with deeper *conceptual understanding*.**

Qualitative/Subjective Responses
Beyond the quantitative results that we gathered, evaluators were also asked to capture their thoughts about the texts *as* they read, and they discussed their experience in groups *after* they completed the rating task. Trends that emerged from these discussions include the following:
- ***Frustration with unfamiliar genres.*** Though faculty often have the attitude that "clear" writing is a universal metric, the evaluators for this project often acknowledged their difficulty assessing genres outside of their own disciplines.

- ***The instructor's role.*** One evaluator wondered whether their rating of student work was more indicative of the student or of the instructor, noting, "It was hard to know whether the student or the instructor had produced poor work."
- ***Assignment type.*** Some assignment types seemed to set students up for greater success than others. For example, one evaluator noted that an engineering "consultant" report they read seemed to provide a clearer sense of audience (both for the student and for the reviewer as an outside reader).
- ***Process***. Some evaluators wondered how the assignment had been introduced to students: Was it simply assigned without further discussion? Did it include intermediate due dates and tasks? Was there time for iterative clarification as students developed ideas and content?
- ***Variety.*** Evaluators were surprised at the range of genres that students were asked to perform. Especially for evaluators who work primarily with lower-level students, this experience helped them to appreciate the diversity of formats, sourcing expectations, audience types, and other conventions that students face in advanced courses and beyond.
- ***Student control.*** Evaluators noted that some assignments were quite narrow/prescriptive (such as a "fill in the blanks" workshop in a COM3) while others allowed much more flexibility. One evaluator felt that COM3 courses should "hand the reins over" to students to allow them more space to reach higher levels of thinking. Similarly, other evaluators felt that templates and outlines had clear benefits in the short term, they wondered if focal disciplinary skills would transfer beyond the structure.
- ***Audience analysis.*** One evaluator group noted that leading students into clearer audiences--and audience analysis--may make the writing easier to do, and in turn may produce clearer learning/demonstration of learning. For example, they noted that students who really "got" the audience (in public speaking) may have more fun with the speeches. They wondered if a prospectus or audience analysis activity on the front end of a project would help generate more audience awareness and, thus, better learning.
- ***Multimedia.*** Evaluators noted that tables and graphics sometimes seemed to help students think through their knowledge and/or craft clearer structures in their writing. Others noted that students often seemed to lack a clear understanding of conventions for multimedia genres they were asked to write (such as web pages). In both cases, evaluators wondered whether more explicit instruction around multimedia might help students clarify their content knowledge *and* produce work that was more effective for its audience and purpose.

Questions for Consideration

This assessment provokes several useful questions for instructors who wish to improve students' thinking through written, oral, and other communication activity:

- Are the audience(s) for my assignments clear? Do I make them explicit? Do I help students anticipate audience knowledge, values, expectations?
- Do my assignments ask students to engage in appropriate structures of the discipline -- not just genres, but methods, formats, shapes of thinking?
- What are my assumptions about the value of a template for student work? When is a template appropriate, and when might it interfere with student writing/thinking?
- Are my assumptions about students' familiarity with discipline-specific genres reasonable?
- How do I introduce and lead up to the full assignment? Do I make the audience, purpose, structure, tone and timeline clear?