

# A Practical, Pithy Guide to Quantitative Scoring Assessment at a SLAC

Joel Haefner

Illinois Wesleyan University

jhaefner@iwu.edu

[1. Introduction](#)

[2. Targeting a cohort and planning an assessment cycle](#)

[3. Collecting papers](#)

[4. Building the rubric](#)

[5. The scoring session](#)

[6. Analyzing the data](#)

[7. Costs](#)

[8. Appendix: Text of email to faculty requesting help collecting papers](#)

[9. Appendix: Sample consent form](#)

[10. Appendix: The Illinois Wesleyan Rubric](#)

[11. Appendix: The Illinois Wesleyan Scoring Guide](#)

## 1. Introduction

This guide had its origin in frustration: I was looking for a concise summary of how to conduct a quantitative scoring session online, and couldn't find one. So I thought I'd write one. It's the result of our experiences at Illinois Wesleyan University, where we were fortunate to land a \$170,000, three-year grant from the Mellon Foundation to revamp and improve our WAC program. The grant allowed us to buy release time for a Program Director, Dr. Mary Ann Bushman, and to pay for a consultant, Dr. Bill Condon, an internationally-recognized compositionist and assessment expert. The methodology for creating a rubric and the mechanism for the scoring event are his doing, and we gratefully acknowledge his guidance and expertise. The plan for which students to target when and what kind of an assessment cycle we wanted to establish was ours, with input from Bill. You should really take a look at *A Guide to College Writing Assessment*, by Peggy O'Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2009). The current Conference on College Composition and Communication position statement on assessment (revised March 2009) can be found at:

<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment>

I find the numbers interesting and useful, particularly in catalyzing the scientists and social scientists on campus. But the real usefulness of quantitative assessment, any kind of assessment, is three-fold: it establishes a common language for talking about student writing and the teaching of writing; it gives shape and direction to your faculty development plans; and it is outcomes-based assessment that is solid fodder for accreditation self-studies.

## 2. Targeting a cohort and planning an assessment cycle

The first step, once you've decided that you and the administration have the will, energy and money to establish an assessment program (and accreditation is a powerful incentive), you'll need to settle on which student group you want to target, and when you want to assess their work. Here are some common-sense alternatives:

- a. Assess a random sample of all students, from freshmen to seniors
- b. Assess a randomly-chosen group of students and assess that same group from freshman to senior class ranking
- c. Assess students in particular class, regardless of class ranking
- d. Assess different classes of students, i.e., freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors

There are doubtless other alternatives, but these are what come to mind. The important point is that what cohort you target is going to be unique for your campus, mainly because the curriculum of each small liberal arts college varies, even in small ways. Some schools don't have a common freshman writing-centered seminar; that makes targeting freshman writers different from schools that do have such seminars. Some schools may require a writing-centered senior capstone class, which makes it easy to target that ranking. Some schools may adopt a philosophy of stressing writing throughout the curriculum instead of designating writing intensive classes, and that too changes the character of any assessment effort. And funds and willpower may dictate how often you assess. While annual assessment seems like a good plan, a two-year assessment cycle may be what your school settles on, for financial or other reasons.

At Illinois Wesleyan, we decided on a three-year cycle of annual assessments, alternating between targeting freshman writers, mid-career (sophomore and junior) writers, and senior writers. This was dictated partly by our curriculum: we require a freshman seminar, one writing intensive course before the end of the sophomore year, and another writing intensive course before graduation.

### **3. Collecting papers**

This is probably the most daunting part of the whole process, but once you work out a good system, find a reliable student worker, and get the faculty on board, it can work pretty well. We have found (and it's been the experience of other schools that joined us in a Teagle Foundation-funded assessment grant) that appealing directly to the students is pretty hopeless, unless it's a follow-up and a last-ditch attempt to get papers. The most effective way to collect papers is to identify classes where there will be significant student writing and appeal directly to faculty to cajole, browbeat, and otherwise coerce students to send in their papers. Since we want to assess the whole writing program, and since the program's curricular presence is the freshman seminar and subsequent writing intensive courses, we just follow the curriculum: freshman writing samples are collected at the end of the seminar, mid-career samples from writing intensive classes populated mainly by sophomores and juniors, and senior samples mainly from capstone

courses, most of which are writing intensive. (This last category means you'll be collecting llooonnnggg papers.)

Before you start, you'll have to undergo an IRB review. On our campus, this was very painless, but it's something that has to be done every year. Before you submit the application (for a waiver, usually, since publication is unlikely), adapt the standard consent form and save yourself a time-consuming back-and-forth with the IRB people. Our permission form is very simple, but it seems to satisfy the IRB requirements.

I send an email to all the faculty teaching the targeted classes early in the semester, say, the second or third week. This email, with the consent form attached, asks faculty to urge their students to participate, names an email address to which to send papers, and asks faculty to send their assignments to that same email address, and to indicate if the paper went through a revision process. This email gets repeated throughout the semester. A new group of classes will be targeted in the spring semester, so a new mailing list and a new series of emails goes out then.

We set up a gmail account for handling student paper and faculty assignment submissions. When the papers come in, they're assigned a random number and stored in folders we've set up through our campus portal service, which is Banner software (many schools have this; yours may too). The student worker (who does all this) creates a spreadsheet keeping track of the class, professor, and whether revised. The student also has to check to see if that student falls in our targeted group; sometimes we get seniors when we target mid-career students, for example. At the end of the first semester, and in fact at any point in this process, the student worker has to strip all identifying text off the papers, print the random number assigned to the paper at the top, and print and attach the accompanying assignment. In May, when the assessment event rolls around, the student worker has to make sure there is one or two copies of each paper, with assignments.

Number of copies of each paper needed: depending on which scoring method you use (see 5.c below), you'll need one or two copies of each paper. To save money and trees, consider the one-copy model.

The student worker is crucial. This is someone who has to be organized, responsible, and diligent, with excellent computer and math skills. I was very lucky to find, as a freshman, a computer science/math major who was in my freshman seminar. He's even a good writer.

A good target is 60 papers. Thirty papers would be a bare minimum. If one is persistent over the academic year, it shouldn't be impossible to hit 60 papers.

#### **4. Building the rubric**

This is Bill Condon's methodology. It bears a lot of resemblance to Bob Broad's qualitative methodology (*What We Really Value*). This process occurred during the first morning of our

two-day assessment event. Bill systematized the results of this procedure over the lunch period. Look at *A Guide to College Writing Assessment* for models and more help.

- a. Divide your group of readers into two groups (we have 8, so two groups of 4). Identify three papers from your collection, and give each group copies of those three papers. Each group should appoint a secretary.
- b. Have each group member read through one paper silently
- c. Have the group read that same essay aloud, one paragraph at a time, shifting readers with each paragraph
- d. Read the paper aloud again, paragraph by paragraph; each reader stops to summarize the paragraph he/she just read. No judgments!
- e. As a group, discuss the strengths in the essay, locating the strengths in the text. Secretary takes notes.
- f. As a group, discuss the needs in the essay, locating those needs in the text. Secretary takes notes.
- g. Repeat this procedure for the other two papers.
- h. Still in small groups, one person from the group (with the secretary taking notes) categorizes or “chunks” the comments. A whiteboard is useful here, so you may want to reserve several classrooms.
- i. Reconvene the whole cadre of readers and discuss categorizations. Nominate qualities either as competent or excellent as one step in developing the rubric
- j. During the lunch break, the program director, writing center director, or someone else comfortable with this process (or two persons) generate a draft of a scoring rubric. The IWU version is appended.
- k. After the lunch break, spend an hour or 90 minutes discussing and reviewing the rubric, but don't get bogged down in revising every sentence. Changes can be made easily on a computer with projection. After a mid-afternoon break, one copy of the rubric should be ready for each reader, plus scoring guides for each reading (roughly the number of papers to be read times 2.2, let's say).

## **5. The scoring session**

This follows what Bill Condon calls the consultant method. There are other ways of structuring this, of course.

If this is your first scoring session, you'll want to start by building your rubric, as above. The late-afternoon segment will begin actual scoring, as described below.

If this is a scoring session where you have already generated a rubric, you'll want to spend the morning introducing the scoring procedure and revising the rubric. The rubric should be a living document, open to revision, but really major revisions are going to screw up your year-to-year statistical comparisons. We ended up dividing one dimension into two separate dimensions, and

adding another dimension to evaluate how the paper fits the assignment. (I think we have too many dimensions.) The revisions should be incorporated over lunch and the scoring guides and rubric printed.

The scoring guides are just “outlines” of the full rubric, with the narrative description of each dimension excised. The scoring guide is used for each reading, and should be on one page (duplex, if necessary), with slots at the top for the paper number and the reader’s initials. As the reader considers the score for each dimension for a specific paper, he/she can consult the full rubric description.

You may want to pass around a sheet which matches a reader’s name with his/her initials, because the scoring guides call for reader’s initials. This can save you some agony later.

Before I outline the actual scoring procedure, I think it’s very important to allow 30-45 minutes at the very end of the scoring event for readers to a) write down elements of student writing (or different dimensions of the rubric) that need particular strengthening—that is, where do we need to focus our teaching of writing? and b) have a group discussion of those “weak elements” and what kind of faculty development events, or classroom/curricular strategies, might address them. This activity, in my opinion, closes the feedback loop: the narrative, anecdotal observations of the readers shape faculty development and create common concerns and language for faculty teaching writing.

The scoring procedure:

- a. Read in pairs. Each pair takes a group of papers, say 6-8.
- b. Each reader reads a paper silently, individually. Using the scoring guide, the reader scores each dimension, along with a holistic score.
- c. Once both readers have read a paper in their set, they should confer and come up with a consensus scoring guide, signing both initials to it. If you’ve printed only one copy of each paper, readers could read two papers at a time, then confer on those two papers. If you’ve printed two copies of each paper, both readers can read a paper simultaneously then confer on that one paper. Alternatively, reader pairs can read through a whole set of papers and then consult on each, one by one. All three scoring guides are considered in the data set.
- d. If the two readers can’t come up with a consensus score on that paper, that is, if their holistic score is more than two points apart, the paper goes to arbitration. There should be two “super-readers” available (those supervising the scoring event) to arbitrate. This reader reads the paper (without looking at the earlier scores) and scores the paper individually. He then consults with the pair of readers and discusses his scores. The arbitrator’s scoring guide, along with the two original scoring guides, goes into the completed scoring guides stack.
- e. There should be at least four stacks of documents: a stack for completed scoring

guides; a stack for papers never scored; a stack for papers scored once (that is, having undergone a reader-pair scoring once); a stack of papers for papers scored twice; and maybe, if time allows, a stack of papers scored three times. When readers have finished scoring a set of papers, they put all their scoring guides into the completed scoring guide stack and the scored papers into the appropriate scored-once, scored-twice, etc. stack.

f. It is traditional at paper scoring sessions for the organizers to pass around chocolate-covered coffee beans at least twice.

g. Recalibration: if this is a two-day event, at the beginning of the second day, the readers need to be “recalibrated.” This can work in a variety of ways, but it’s probably most efficient for readers to team up in pairs (different pairs from the preceding day) and score two papers, consulting on each. Then the whole group should reconvene to discuss the scores for those two papers (every reader should score the same two papers during recalibration). These completed scoring guides should be included with all the other completed scoring guides; they’re perfectly legitimate scores. Recalibration can occur at any point roughly midway through a scoring event.

## **6. Analyzing the data**

Our first time through we just created an Excel spreadsheet and calculated averages for each dimension. For rudimentary numbers, this will work. But pretty quickly you’ll see the advantages of calculating standard deviations, too, and adding several other variables, and for all that a database makes more sense. My student worker, bless him, created our database in Access, because it was readily available and pretty easy to use. I am not blessed with mathematical acumen, but for your database each reading must have a unique key number. Other slots in that record should include the random number assigned to the paper, the reader’s initials, whether or not the paper was revised, and plenty of slots for other variables you might want to add later, such as the student’s class ranking or GPA—but for those data bits you’ll need the assistance of the registrar’s office and have a good reason for including them. (Adding demographic data may alter your IRB proposal, too.) Again, I think it’s important to keep in mind why you’re assessing—which has to be to improve the teaching of writing on campus, and realistically since most of those teachers are in the humanities, they’re only going to relate to numbers up to a certain point.

### **[Add here the fields for each record from our database]**

How you disseminate the results of your assessment will vary according to your campus culture and dynamics. But I think it is important to present the assessment data annually. It can be part of a faculty development workshop; a lunch-time meeting; part of a faculty senate meeting; etc. I do think it’s important that the data be discussed face-to-face instead of simply being dropped as a document on the faculty. Some faculty may be bewildered by the numbers; others may get bogged down in the validity of the procedure or the dataset. The important thing is to have a

common conversation and to keep that conversation going, a continuing self-reflection about how we teach writing.

## 7. Costs

- a. Paper collection. One student worker, 3 hours per week, 28 weeks, at 8.25 per hour: 693.00
  - b. Printing. 60 papers averaging 5 pages each, 1 copy of each, plus assignments, at 5 cents per page for printing, rounding up: \$40
  - c. Faculty stipend. We used 8 readers for six hours for two days and paid them \$250 (which was generous). Total cost: \$2000.00
  - d. Analysis of data; entry into database. This took about 20 hours of student work, for a total of 165.00.
- Grand total: \$2908.00

## 8. Appendix: Text of email to faculty requesting help collecting papers

Dear John,

As you probably know, the Writing Program at IWU is engaged in an ongoing assessment effort to determine how well we teach writing and to guide our faculty development efforts. Last May we looked at a group of Gateway papers, and this spring we would like to evaluate sophomore and junior papers. Next year we hope to assess senior student writing, and then begin the cycle again, sustaining a continuing assessment plan. These assessment events have been funded by the Mellon Foundation grant for the improvement of writing on our campus.

So, we're asking you to help us collect papers from your XXX 356 class. These papers should be from a paper late in the semester. We will also need two other bits of information: first, the assignment; and second, whether this paper had gone through a revision process--i.e., if a draft had been submitted and commented on by you, a peer, or the Writing Center and then revised. Here's the procedure:

1. Have your students sign the attached permission form. For those who agree to the terms, proceed to step 2. Please send the signed consent forms to me via campus mail.
2. Have your students agree to email their papers to the following email address: [xxx@gmail.com](mailto:xxx@gmail.com)

3. Please email your assignment to: [xxx@gmail.com](mailto:xxx@gmail.com). Please also indicate if students had a chance to revise the paper submitted.

We really appreciate the extra time and effort that this takes; we know (and experience ourselves) you have an incredibly busy schedule. These papers, and our assessment effort, are crucial in helping us determine in which direction our program should be guided.

9. Appendix: Sample consent form

**Permission to use writing for training and research purposes**

Your name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

I understand and agree that my instructor, \_\_\_\_\_, may use samples of my writing for training or research purposes only, with the provision that my name will be removed from any writing sample and that I will not be identified in any other way, in the text or otherwise. I further understand that I may withdraw this permission at any time by emailing or writing to Joel Haefner at [jhaefner@iwu.edu](mailto:jhaefner@iwu.edu).

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to the terms above.

\_\_\_\_\_ I decline the terms above.

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Appendix: The Illinois Wesleyan Rubric

**Scoring Rubric for Writing at Illinois Wesleyan University**

**Revised 13 May 2010**

This guide sets out several dimensions of writing that faculty agree describe “good writing” and that students must develop in order to succeed at writing in their academic work. Academic work includes but is not limited to such activities as argumentation; observation; interpretation; developing proofs, theorems, and case statements; model building; analysis; and creative projects. Faculty in various disciplines are invited to *adapt* this scoring guide to fit the contexts of their disciplines, the courses they teach, and the assignments that they present in those courses.

Each dimension identified below is accompanied by descriptors for a range of performance exhibited in actual student work.

**1. Writer recognizes from readings, experience, data, or observation a problem, question, or issue to address.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Does not identify a problem, question, or issue or identifies an inappropriate or insignificant problem, question, or issue. May be confused or represent the problem, question, or issue inaccurately. Writer limits the task to the simplest conception of the task as presented in the assignment.		Identifies a problem, question, or issue and presents it clearly, if simply. Identifies the significance of the topic and the paper's purpose. May recognize some of the nuances, but does so inconsistently. Writer's perspective on the issue is clear, though it may be incomplete.		Writer chooses a challenging task. Identifies the main problem, question, or issue, as well as embedded or implicit ones; and identifies them clearly, addressing their relationships to each other. Recognizes the nuances of the problem, question, or issue. Project is coherent and properly limited or circumscribed. Writer fully acknowledges own perspective and takes account of it in developing a complex, sophisticated position that is important to the work.	

**2. Writer locates question, problem, or issue in an appropriate context**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Writer considers issue, problem, or question in isolation from context(s) or considers context only briefly and inadequately. Topic seems to be considered independent of surrounding contexts.		Writer applies acquired knowledge to a specific problem, question, or issue. Writer attempts to account for events, observations, etc, and their consequences and implications. Writer attempts to account for origins of continuing phenomena. Writer makes connections to writer's existing knowledge as well as to common knowledge and knowledge gained from source materials.		Writer demonstrates complex sensitivity to context(s) of issue, problem, or question. Important constructs and complex concepts are well articulated. Writer addresses an appropriate variety of contexts: historical, scientific, technological, aesthetic, personal, etc. Writer understands tensions among context(s) and frames project to accommodate those tensions.	

**3. Writer develops an organization that accommodates the purpose and audience for the paper.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Text seems to develop at random or may be marked by repetition or redundancy. Information may be presented without an apparent organizing principle, or the organizing principle may work against the reader's needs.		Writer uses clear logic in structure of argument, building case step by step. Structure of project is clear though perhaps mechanical. Paper demonstrates overall unity and coherence. Focus of each paragraph is relatively discrete, and transitions between paragraphs are almost uniformly present. Organization promotes writer's ability to communicate the significance of the project. Writer relies on coherent reasoning in developing the work.		Writer develops a consistent organization that grows out of the opportunities, demands, and limitations of the topic.  Verbal and conceptual links between paragraphs and sections of the project are artful. Organization supports complex exploration of problem, question, or issue and incorporation of wide-ranging sets of information.	

**4. Writer develops a body of evidence that supports the project's purpose and accommodates its audience's needs.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Choices of information and evidence seem inappropriate to the task, purpose, and audience. Writer displays little logic or reason in the work and fails to recognize any weaknesses or		Overall, information and evidence seem appropriate to the task, but there may be some inconsistency. Writer provides accurate and consistent interpretations of information. Writer uses a variety of		Writer has sought widely for information and has made appropriate choices of information and evidence that both support the writer's perspective and help the audience understand the work.	

limitations in it.	information, including well-chosen quotes, data, primary and secondary materials, where applicable. Writer develops evidence consistently with the internal logic of the project.	Writer mines difficult sources well, and subtly develops a body of evidence. The project displays and emerging appreciation for what constitutes good scholarship. The writer evaluates and analyzes evidence, considering and addressing its limitations.
--------------------	---	--

**5. Writer is clearly intellectually or imaginatively engaged with the project**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Writer demonstrates little engagement with the work. The treatment remains shallow, over-simplified, and limited in focus and usefulness. Treatment is over-simplified		Writer displays ambition in engaging the task, in places pushing her treatment to greater depth and complexity, approaching it with a spirit of exploration, or expanding the focus as needed in order to do the task justice. Treatment is complex in some parts but not in others, or the level of complexity throughout is adequate but in need of development.		Student is fully engaged in the work, pushing to achieve full depth and complexity, fully exploring and where necessary expanding the boundaries of the task. Treatment is complex, sophisticated, nuanced. Writer grapples with significant issues.	

**6. Writer follows citation conventions appropriate to the project.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Student fails to acknowledge intellectual debt and does not cite sources, or cites them inconsistently, inadequately, or incorrectly.		Writer engages with sources, using outside materials ethically, acknowledging intellectual debts, and citing sources adequately.		Writer's engagement with outside knowledge is full, complex, and evident in accurate acknowledgement and citation. Writer smoothly integrates sources into text, making sophisticated use of quotation,	

		paraphrase, summary, etc, as needed.
--	--	--------------------------------------

**7. Writer follows language conventions and conveys style appropriate to the rhetorical situation.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Student may misrepresent evidence, information, or other source material. Control of style and syntax is weak or inconsistent. Errors of grammar and mechanics are distracting or confusing to the reader.		Writer demonstrates clear control of appropriate levels of discourse and of context. Control of language conventions is secure, though writer may make some errors that do not detract from the paper's meaning. The writing is well formed and follows the conventions of Standard American English.		Writer reaches for a more sophisticated level of diction, syntax, semantics, and rhythm. Language elegantly and/or energetically conveys the main idea and rhetorical strategy of the essay.	

**8. Audience**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Writer seems unaware of perspectives other than her own or may not make an effort to address them seriously. Work may be incompatible with the audience, failing to connect with or alienating reader.		Essay accommodates a range of readers. Writer takes steps to engage readers whose perspectives may be in conflict with the writer's. Writer evokes reader's interest in the project.		Writer fully engages with alternative perspectives and with the needs of readers whose points of view may differ with the writer's. Project teaches reader something valuable. Writer seems to engage reader in conversation about topic. Writer takes time to explain or elucidate new or difficult issues.	

**9. Writer considers conclusions, implications, and consequences that flow from the paper.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Conclusion may be missing, unclear, or insufficiently connected to the rest of the essay.		Conclusion is clear and provides closure to essay. Conclusion is thoughtful and honest, and it is connected to the line of reasoning developed in the essay. Conclusion brings the “So what?” question to a resolution.		Conclusion provides closure to the essay, and at the same time extends the essay to a natural conclusion or establishes an outward movement, raising possibilities for further consideration. Writer fully considers implications and consequences, as appropriate to task and content.	

**10. Writer’s essay responds to the objectives and expectations of the assignment**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6
Writer fails to address or only addresses tangentially the objectives, requirements, expectations, and topic(s) of the assignment.		Writer addresses some of the objectives and requirements of the assignment. The focus of the paper is mostly on the assigned topic(s), but may cover unrelated or loosely related topics.		Writer fulfills all the objectives, requirements, and expectations of the assignment. The essay concentrates appropriately on the assigned topic(s), or, if the topic was the student’s choice, that topic was appropriate to the general subject area of the assignment.	

**11. Holistic Impression**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

11. Appendix: The Illinois Wesleyan Scoring Guide

Paper number \_\_\_\_\_

Reader's initials \_\_\_\_\_

**1. Writer recognizes from readings, experience, data, or observation a problem, question, or issue to address.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**2. Writer locates question, problem, or issue in an appropriate context**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**3. Writer develops an organization that accommodates the purpose and audience for the paper.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**4. Writer develops a body of evidence that supports the project's purpose and accommodates its audience's needs.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**5. Writer is clearly intellectually or imaginatively engaged with the project**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**6. Writer follows citation conventions appropriate to the project.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**7. Writer follows language conventions and conveys style appropriate to the rhetorical situation.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**8. Audience**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**9. Writer considers conclusions, implications, and consequences that flow from the paper.**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**10. Writer's essay responds to the objectives and expectations of the assignment**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6

**11. Holistic Impression**

Emerging		Developing		Mastering	
1	2	3	4	5	6