



Assessing Writing at Saint Mary's

Introduction to the W Program

Written expression has a prominent role in Saint Mary's Statement of Philosophy and Purpose ("Through their years at Saint Mary's, students acquire. . . the capacity to communicate with precision and style") and its new College-wide Learning Outcomes ("A Saint Mary's student communicate her ideas, insights, thought processes, and conclusions with accuracy, competence, and style in various media and contexts"). While the College seeks to encourage students to develop as writers throughout their College career, students typically focus on their writing in meeting their Basic W and Advanced W requirements.

- The Basic W entails completing a semester- or year-long writing-intensive course offered in one of several disciplines. Basic W courses are Gen Ed courses that meet for an extra hour each week and emphasize writing and revising. Students compile a portfolio of their written work, and two outside readers evaluate the portfolio and consult with the instructor, who makes the final decision about whether the student has the basic competence needed for her future college work. Portfolios are evaluated using a rubric that specifies five areas: thesis, development, support, style, and mechanics. Students who are judged not to have achieved basic competence take a W course in another discipline.
- The Advanced W is required in each major and aims to show the student's ability to write well within the discipline. Requirements vary and often take the form of a significant research paper or a portfolio of essays from courses taken in the major.

Both the Basic and the Advanced W are overseen by the Writing Program Steering Committee (SC), including faculty from varied departments, administrators, and the Director of the Writing Center, and coordinated by two tenured co-directors. In addition, the Writing Program Committee (WPC), composed of all past, present, and future instructors of Basic W courses, along with administrators and the Writing Center Director, meets monthly for formation.

Rubric

- Components include thesis, development, support, style, and mechanics, with an area for comments.
- Readers are encouraged to give valuable feedback to students.
- Data indicate that rubric is being used consistently between readers.

What do the data indicate?

- National and institutional data indicate that Saint Mary's students are strong writers when entering the College and continue to improve.
- Component scores on the rubric and the overall recommendation scores between readers are correlated pairwise.
- Scores were significantly lower on most rubric components and overall scores in fall 08 compared to spring 08, even though the fall 08 class is more academically qualified.
- Comment analyses of reader comments indicate common themes for each component.
- Academic qualifications in both admission and achievement at SMC (once enrolled) are correlated to component scores, recommendation scores, and success in the W.

Who is at risk for not receiving the W?

- Students receiving a reader recommendation of No W or borderline have lower SAT, ACT, and high school GPA's when entering SMC compared to students who received a pass or strong pass recommendation.
- Students in the bottom quartile in SAT composite, SAT writing, H.S. GPA and SMC cumulative GPA are less likely to receive their W.

Where do we go from here?

The W Program has focused on four areas for assessment and improvement:

- Using the rubric: Since we began our project, we've asked portfolio readers—who work in pairs—to make changes to the way they use the rubric: discussing what they see in the student's writing, being sure their feedback is consistent (agreeing within one point), and giving formative feedback that will support students in their future growth as writers. Readers are being recruited personally to try to assure the most committed and competent evaluators. As we gather more data about portfolio reading, we're considering changes to the rubric.
- Enhancing faculty formation: We've put more emphasis on our monthly formation meetings, developing training materials and an orientation for new W faculty, developing a Blackboard site to make teaching materials available, and planning campus-wide formation events to help faculty support students in their ongoing growth as writers.
- Surveying students: As we continue to gather data on both the Basic and Advanced W's, we're considering the views of Basic W students and encouraging them to develop their own goals for their writing. Since Basic W students have expressed a lack of confidence about mechanics, we're addressing that topic in our current faculty formation sessions.
- Changing the culture. Revising published materials, organizing campus-wide formation on teaching writing, and interviewing departments about how they work with writing are initiatives designed to promote writing across the curriculum.