



# Basic Proficiencies in Written Communication

---

November, 2005

AS APPROVED by Faculty Senate February 1, 2006

This recommendation is submitted in response to the guidelines of the Undergraduate Education Initiative, a campus-wide review of FSU's undergraduate curriculum, as approved by the Faculty Senate in February, 2005.

## **Membership**

The following FSU faculty members served on the planning group for the establishment of criteria for basic proficiencies in written communication:

Dr. Ron Barry, Biology;

Dr. Skott Brill, Philosophy;

Dr. Rochelle Smith, English.

Dr. Jim Limbaugh, Assistant to the Provost, served as convener and facilitator.

## **BASIC PROFICIENCIES IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

### **The Case for Basic Skills in Written Communication**

Our General Education Goals cite a focus on attainment of core skills by students—specifically, to “become proficient in ...writing” and to “communicate information and ideas effectively.” Developing students’ skills in writing is an important goal for the University and is also an issue on a national level.

The desire to strengthen the writing skills of students was one of the first identified during the establishment of priorities for the recommendations of the Undergraduate Education Initiative, because it became obvious very early in the “fact-finding” stage that faculty wanted students to develop their writing skills more fully.

The desire to focus on writing by college students is not limited to local concerns, however. The National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges, established in 2002 by the College Entrance Examination Board, was created in response to the Board’s plans to offer a writing assessment as part of the new SAT. In the Commission’s report, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution* (2003), the need to write effectively was

cited by more than 90% of midcareer professionals surveyed as a skill of primary importance in day-to-day work (p. 11). However, universities and colleges have a particular challenge to present graduates with the ability to write concisely and correctly: “Recent analyses indicate that more than 50% of first-year college students are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors” (p. 14). In addition, skills of first-year students in other necessary components of writing proficiency—thesis development, understanding of audience, organization of content—have been found to be chronically deficient.

The Commission emphasized in its report that the need to establish and measure basic skills of our students in written communication is exacerbated by a rapidly changing world. In support of this premise, Brandt (1995) observes, “What is unprecedented about literacy learning . . . in the current climate is not so much a demand for literacy that seems chronically to outstrip supply, but rather the challenges faced by all literacy learners in a society whose rapid changes are themselves tied up so centrally with literacy and its enterprises” (p. 651). In exploring further issues of writing literacy, Brandt states that the explosion of technology, give[s] a complex flavor even to elementary acts of reading and writing today.

Contemporary literacy learners--across positions of age, gender, race, class, and language heritage--find themselves having to piece together reading and writing experiences from more and more spheres, creating new and hybrid forms of literacy where once there might have been fewer and more circumscribed forms. (p. 651)

As the result of the imperative that our students achieve a basic level of literacy in written communication, and in tandem with external mandates to identify students’ basic skill levels (as detailed below), the University will use the definition of written communication, as outlined in a following section, to help students develop skills in written communication and to guide assessments of student learning outcomes.

### **External Mandates**

The development and assessment of core skills in general education also responds to the requirements of two external entities: The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) and the Middle States Association of Higher Education.

MHEC has mandated that all Maryland institutions of higher education establish specific definitions and benchmarks regarding college-level skills in seven basic areas. In addition to written communication, these skills include oral communication, critical thinking, scientific reasoning, quantitative reasoning, technological literacy, and information literacy. Said benchmarks are to be assessed on a regular basis and reported to MHEC every three years, beginning in 2007.

The University's accrediting agency, in its revised standards, also specifically mentions the need to assess students' skills in written communication. The accreditation standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education state that an institution's program of general education must be designed "so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills" including those cited above (*Characteristics of Excellence*, 2002, -p. 37).

### **Definition**

The following definition has been formulated by members of the faculty planning group for written communication and represents the collaborative opinions of faculty from three different disciplines.

To be considered proficient in basic writing at Frostburg State University, students must demonstrate control over the following aspects of writing.

1. *Thesis*: Students should be able to formulate a thesis statement based in part on analysis and evaluation of appropriate source material.
2. *Support*: Students should be able to support a thesis by synthesizing their own ideas (reasons, evidence, and/or arguments) with the ideas of others.
3. *Organization*: Students should be able to organize the support logically according to the demands of content.
4. *Language*: Students should be able to express their ideas in writing that is readable (clear, concise, and coherent) and correct (relatively free of distracting errors of grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and usage).
5. *Rhetorical Knowledge (Audience and Purpose)*: Student should demonstrate an awareness of the rhetorical situation—understanding how audience and purpose shape all of the above.

Please note that this definition is subject to continual review and refinement as assessment results are analyzed in light of institutional learning goals.

### **Connection to Undergraduate Institutional Learning Goals**

Frostburg State University's definition of written communication supports the following Undergraduate Institutional Learning Goals:

- Core Skills...specifically, "comprehend and critically interpret information in written and oral forms" and "communicate information and ideas effectively."

## **Assessment Strategies**

Assessment of basic proficiencies in written communication initially will be administered through Freshman Composition (English 101).

A “framework rubric” for use in embedded (graded) assessments of basic skills (see Attachment A) has been constructed which allows for maximum flexibility in its use; i.e., the format can be adjusted to allow for grading/point variances by each using faculty.

Assessments will begin in the spring of 2006 in English 101. The grading rubric will be applied to an assigned essay no earlier than the tenth week of each semester. The rubric will then be collected and used as the basis for ascertaining development of basic skills by students in written communication. Information learned from the pilot assessments will contribute to further review and refinement of the internal definition of written communication.

Reports on student performance in the aggregate (not by individual class) will be shared with appropriate University constituencies.

## **Internal Benchmarks**

Frostburg State University will report to its various constituencies (both internal and external) that its students are considered proficient in written communication if 70% of students being evaluated using the aforementioned rubric achieve a “meets standards” rating on all five criteria identified in the definition.

---

## **References**

- Brandt, D. (1995). Accumulating literacy: Writing and learning to write in the twentieth century. *College English* 57(6), pp. 649-668.
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2002). *Characteristics of excellence in higher education: Eligibility requirements and standards for accreditation*. Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.
- National Commission on Writing (2003). *The neglected “R”: The need for a writing revolution*. College Entrance Examination Board.

*Submitted by Jim Limbaugh, Assistant to the Provost  
October 2006: Basic Skills section extracted from original guidelines since writing-intensive criteria will be re-written during the 2006-2007 academic year as per directions from the Provost.*

**Evaluation Rubric for  
Basic Proficiencies in Written Communication**

**Basic Rubric:**

	<b>Meets Expectations</b>	<b>Below Expectations</b>
<b>Thesis</b> Students should be able to formulate a thesis statement based in part on analysis and evaluation of appropriate source material.		
<b>Support</b> Students should be able to support a thesis by synthesizing their own ideas with the ideas of others.		
<b>Organization</b> Students should be able to organize the support logically according to the demands of content and audience expectations.		
<b>Language</b> Students should be able to express their ideas in writing that is readable (clear, concise, and coherent) and correct (relatively free of distracting errors of grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and usage).		
<b>Audience and Purpose</b> Students should demonstrate an awareness of the rhetorical situation-- understanding how audience and purpose shape all of the above.		