

Context and Process: In fall 2014, the Department of English, Literature and Reading (ELR) underwent the process of reconceptualizing its exit process for English 101 in order to better reflect its commitment to assessing student learning, critical thinking, critical reflective practice and professional development. This process revealed a profound commitment to critical thinking as integral to writing (generally) and assessment of student writing in English 101 (specifically). Then, the ELR assessment committee developed a new tool for the summative assessment of English 101 student writing competencies via a “critical essay.” This process required the development of a competency-based rubric for determining the degree to which students achieve success relative to the student learning outcomes of English 101.

In spring 2015, we drafted a department-relevant definition of critical thinking using the words and phrases most commonly used by the participants in a survey administered in October 2014. In addition, we reviewed the ELR department mission and student learning outcomes, both of which can be found [here](#). Moreover, we considered the newly developed Wilbur Wright College definition of critical thinking, which asserts that it is “a process of identifying patterns or ideas within a set of ideas, texts, and/or points of view; interpreting or explaining that pattern; and justifying that interpretation or explanation as meaningful” (*AQIPment Newsletter*, Fall 2014). The departmental definition of critical thinking is: [that it is] the process of dialoging with and identifying patterns in texts; reflecting on and questioning one’s own assumptions and those of others; and communicating clearly while thinking deeply and logically. A well-practiced critical thinker engages in a transformative process of assessing information through analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Critical thinking encourages creative exploration, civic engagement as well as academic and professional competence.

At the end of spring 2015, faculty teaching English 101, after having met with their cohort members and chairs for the purpose of discussing and workshopping critical essay assignments that met the requirements shared earlier in the term, assessed their students’ final critical essays using the English 101 Critical Essay Rubric. Exemplars of each level of competencies were discussed among members of cohorts; all completed rubrics were submitted for analysis.

Limitations: Rubrics from 40% of English 101 sections were available for analysis. Additionally, the results might seem to comment primarily on consistencies or the lack thereof among faculty assessments of student learning, rather than on student learning itself. This was, in part, due to a desire to allow for greater instructor freedom with critical essay assignment design. Thus, the use of the rubric was normed within cohorts but not across all sections offered.

Conclusions: Although these data have been analyzed only preliminarily and must be discussed with the ELR Assessment Committee for fullest interpretation and additional limitation notation, there are some preliminary findings of note. At the end of English 101, based upon these data: **(1)** most students are performing at the competency level of “Advanced Apprentice” in all critical thinking-associated criteria; **(2)** while “Critical Thinking” decreases slightly in “Advanced Apprentice” and “Emerging Scholar,” competency in “Exposition + Argument” and “Organization + Development” increases; **(3)** as competency increases in the three critical thinking-associated criteria, facility in “Mechanics” decreases with the exception of the “Advanced Apprentice” level; **(4)** “Critical Thinking” achieves its highest competency at “Beginning Apprentice” level; **(5)** as expected, there is a strong correlation among the three critical thinking-associated criteria across all competencies, which affirms our original supposition that these three areas were interrelated in college-level writing; and, **(6)** overall, at the time of the final critical essay, there are more students performing at higher competency levels across all criteria, which might have important implications for English 102-readiness.

Interventions: The ELR Assessment Committee is in the process of determining the appropriate intervention based upon the findings of this project. Although not certain, it is likely that we will combine the results from the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 assessment project because they will use the same instrument and there is a strong indication of correlation among the criteria assessed. We are likely to seek an intervention that is holistic and reflects our departmental focus on writing as a process.