

## **Writing Competency Assessment: Summary Report for 2009-2014**

In the Competency Area of Writing, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) assesses annually the following student learning outcomes:

1. Students are able to distill a primary argument into a single, compelling statement.
2. Students are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner based on primary argument.
3. Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns (e.g., narration, example, comparison/contrast, classification, cause/effect, definition).
4. Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.
5. Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple secondary sources.
6. Students are able to give a clear purpose and audience.

MTSU uses multiple measures to evaluate the extent to which its students have attained the writing competency outcomes and to determine if the level of attainment is acceptable.

### **Course-Embedded Assessment of Writing Competency**

In compliance with Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) requirements, the General Education Writing Outcomes are assessed annually in ENGL 1020, Research and Argumentative Writing. All undergraduates are required to complete ENGL 1020, where one of the course requirements is a major research essay. A random sample of approximately 100 essays is chosen each year for assessment of the General Education Writing Outcomes. An English Department faculty committee assesses the sample of essays using a common rubric with criteria linked to the General Education Writing Outcomes (See Appendix). The distribution of student performance is reported for the percentage of students performing at the superior, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory levels.

In 2013-14, for example, all 1020 instructors were asked to submit one copy of a research essay (specifically the essay requiring the most research) submitted by each student. A pool of 1,638 essays was collected. A computer-generated randomizer ([www.random.org/lists](http://www.random.org/lists)) was used to decrease the original pool of 1,638 essays to a pool of 250 essays that were double blinded by clerical staff, using cover-up tape. The assessment organizer then double checked that the pool of 250 essays matched the data generated by the clerical staff. The computer-generated randomizer was used again on these 250 essays, and the first 150 essays from the randomized pool were chosen as the final sample. Out of the original 1,638 essays, 100 essays—6.11% of the total essays—were chosen for the final sample and grading session. The next 50 essays picked by the randomizer were considered for the grade norming session, and five essays dealing with proposed changes in the MTSU community (from five different instructors) were chosen as the grade-norming samples. On assessment day, twelve faculty participants attended a training and grade-norming session. The grade-norming and training session began with a

discussion of the assessment rubric to make certain all criteria were understood. The participants then evaluated the five sample essays, after which the assessment organizer led a discussion that focused on general similarities and differences in rubric scores, a review of the ENGL 1020 guidelines, and questions about the rubric, essays, or process. By the end of the grade-norming and training session, all participants came to an agreement about the correlation of the grading rubric and sample essays. The twelve faculty participants at six different levels (GTA, adjunct, instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor) then assessed the 100 essays, with each essay being read twice and scored with the assessment rubric approved by the MTSU General Education Committee and TBR (see Appendix). Inter-rater reliability for the 2013-14 assessment project ranged from 51% to 83%, dependent on the assessment objective. Each objective, except the one on rhetorical patterns, was within an acceptable range of inter-rater reliability based on composition studies models.

The MTSU Department of English has set a goal that no more than 25% of students will perform at the Unsatisfactory level on each of the writing competency outcomes. MTSU students' attainment of the outcomes is also benchmarked against information provided by the TBR identifying the statewide average for all TBR universities. MTSU students' attainment of the writing outcomes has shown fluctuations, both positive and negative, over the past several years, and the English Department continues to take a long-range view of how to improve both the writing skills of MTSU students and the teaching of writing at MTSU.

Results of the Writing outcomes assessment for the past five years are represented in the following table, which indicates the percentages of students performing at the Superior, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory levels on each outcome.

<b>Writing Outcomes 2009-2014 Summary</b>	<b>Superior</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	<b>Statewide TBR University Average Rate of "Unsatisfactory"</b>
1. Students are able to distill a primary argument into a single, compelling statement.	2009-10: 11.0% 2010-11: 11.5% 2011-12: 7.5% 2012-13: 9.0% 2013-14: 6.1%	2009-10: 54.5% 2010-11: 61.5% 2011-12: 50.5% 2012-13: 55.5% 2013-14: 53.3%	2009-10: 34.5% 2010-11: 27.0% 2011-12: 42.0% 2012-13: 35.5% 2013-14: 40.5%	37%
2. Student writers are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner based on primary argument.	2009-10: 15.0% 2010-11: 12.0% 2011-12: 8.5% 2012-13: 11.0% 2013-14: 3.3%	2009-10: 43.0% 2010-11: 62.0% 2011-12: 52.5% 2012-13: 44.0% 2013-14: 44.4%	2009-10: 42.0% 2010-11: 26.0% 2011-12: 39.0% 2012-13: 45.0% 2013-14: 52.2%	29%

3. Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns (e.g., narration, example, comparison/contrast, classification, cause/effect, definition).	2009-10: 12.5% 2010-11: 11.5% 2011-12: 5.5% 2012-13: 10.0% 2013-14: 6.7%	2009-10: 57.5% 2010-11: 48.5% 2011-12: 37.0% 2012-13: 61.0% 2013-14: 55.0%	2009-10: 30.0% 2010-11: 40.0% 2011-12: 57.5% 2012-13: 29.0% 2013-14: 38.3%	34%
4. Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.	2009-10: 9.5% 2010-11: 13.5% 2011-12: 6.5% 2012-13: 8.0% 2013-14: 2.7%	2009-10: 50.0% 2010-11: 51.0% 2011-12: 48.0% 2012-13: 53.5% 2013-14: 46.1%	2009-10: 40.5% 2010-11: 35.5% 2011-12: 45.5% 2012-13: 38.5% 2013-14: 51.1%	33%
5. Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple secondary sources.	2009-10: 4.5% 2010-11: 12.0% 2011-12: 4.5% 2012-13: 10.0% 2013-14: 2.7%	2009-10: 41.5% 2010-11: 43.5% 2011-12: 47.0% 2012-13: 47.0% 2013-14: 54.4%	2009-10: 54.0% 2010-11: 44.5% 2011-12: 48.5% 2012-13: 43.0% 2013-14: 42.8%	39%
6. Students are able to give a clear purpose and audience.	2009-10: 19.0% 2010-11: 37.5% 2011-12: 4.5% 2012-13: 9.5% 2013-14: 3.9%	2009-10: 59.0% 2010-11: 41.0% 2011-12: 50.0% 2012-13: 55.5% 2013-14: 44.4%	2009-10: 22.0% 2010-11: 21.5% 2011-12: 45.5% 2012-13: 35.0% 2013-14: 51.7%	This outcome is not measured by other TBR schools

### Indirect Assessment of Writing Outcomes

Indirect assessment of the Writing outcomes includes survey data from the Alumni Survey, Graduating Senior Survey, and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

**Alumni Survey:** Alumni are asked to rate the impact of their MTSU education on their skills in “writing clearly and effectively.” They rate this impact using the following scale:

1 = Very little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very much.

The score from the 2010 Alumni Survey was 2.98, and the score from the 2012 survey was 2.91.

The Alumni Survey was not administered in 2013 or 2014.

**Graduating Senior Survey:** One survey question asks students to rate how much their MTSU experience contributed to their “writing skills.” The percentage of seniors who responded positively was 87% in 2011-12, 85% in 2012-13, and 88% in 2013-14.

**NSSE:** A question related to the development of writing skills asks students to rate how much their MTSU experience contributed to their knowledge and skills in “writing clearly and effectively.” MTSU seniors rate this impact using the following scale:

1=Very little 2=Some 3=Quite a bit 4=Very much.

The score from the 2011 NSSE survey was 2.94, and the score from the 2014 survey was 2.93 (compared to the 2014 national NSSE average score of 3.05).

### Evidence of Improvement Based on Analysis of the Results

Results of indirect measures indicate that students and alumni feel their MTSU coursework prepares them to write clearly and effectively. The assessment of student writing in ENGL 1020, however, indicates several challenges. Based on the successful collection of assessment data for the last seven years, the English Department has raised standards and revised the pedagogy used to teach English 1020. An effective program assessment has both structure and fluidity, and the English Department’s plan has both in that they can now use the same criteria and process each year, but can also expect that as changes are made, data and results will not be stagnant and will show both positive and negative fluctuations as course standards change. The English Department continues to take a long-range view of how to improve the teaching of writing at MTSU, and each year focuses on outcomes of concern from the previous year’s assessment.

The department has undergone two recent major curriculum changes in ENGL 1010 (Expository Writing—the first course in the composition sequence) and ENGL 1020 (Research and Argumentative Writing), and the new curricula have not yet been adopted by all instructors. One of the main problems in a large department like MTSU’s English Department is the number of instructors who teach both 1010 and 1020. Positive change from the curriculum changes is not immediately seen in the results of the assessment due to the following: (1) not all instructors at the adjunct, lecturer, and tenure-track/tenured faculty ranks following through with full curriculum changes (which will be rectified with the annual Lower Division review of syllabi for 1010 and 1020); (2) the high number of adjuncts that the department hires each semester to offer enough courses for the students seeking 1010 and 1020 (which will be rectified by providing clear instructions upon hiring about the requirements and objectives for 1010 and 1020); (3) all graders for the assessment project having changed to the new curriculum, and many other instructors (whose student papers were in the sample) haven’t made this change. This provided a disconnect between the graders (who are following the new curriculum in their courses and in their grading) and the papers (some followed the new curriculum and some didn’t) [which will be rectified with the annual Lower Division review of syllabi for 1010 and 1020].

The English Department has initiated a number of interventions to improve student attainment of the writing competencies. Below is a summary of some of these interventions:

1. Each year, the assessment organizer and Lower Division Director have disseminated results of the assessment studies to the faculty.
2. English Lower Division Curriculum Meetings are held before the beginning of each fall and spring semester. These meetings function like mini composition conferences with whole-group presentations and break-out sessions. Approximately 70 faculty members attend these meetings each semester.
3. The department revised the ENGL 1020 curriculum to be more closely aligned with the General Education Outcomes. The revised course is a research and argumentative course that focuses on Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), rather than one that focuses on literary analysis, to stimulate more student interest and more student experience in research and argumentation. The Lower Division Committee selected new textbooks for ENGL 1020 that have a Writing Across the Curriculum focus and that better support the General Education Learning Outcomes; selected new handbooks for both ENGL 1010 and 1020 that emphasize the distinctions between the two courses; and used the Syllabus Review to encourage more required reading and additional reading instruction in both ENGL 1010 and 1020 and more classroom workshops and peer review opportunities.
4. The department has focused on the outcome associated with student management and coordination of basic information (Writing Outcome 5) by formalizing the requirement for all ENGL 1020 instructors to take their classes to the library for at least one class period for a librarian-led introduction to conducting research.
5. The English Lower Division Director and the English Lower Division Committee continue to investigate the role departmental grade inflation may play in less than adequate writing assessment scores by reviewing ENGL 1010 and 1020 syllabi and meticulously noting how each syllabus (for GTAs, adjuncts, and instructors) represented and fulfilled the Course Objectives. The results were given to each instructor with a request to revise any deficiencies. This syllabus review continues each year. The Syllabus Review is also used to encourage more required reading and additional reading instruction in both ENGL 1010 and 1020 and more classroom workshops and peer review opportunities.
6. The department now provides more intensive oversight of General Education faculty. Course objectives, syllabi, assignments, and grading are reviewed in the annual evaluation of each GTA, adjunct, and instructor in the department. Contingent faculty (adjuncts and FTTs) complete a self-evaluation checklist every semester that clarifies expectations for teaching general education courses (including an expectation to participate in two professional development activities per semester) and asks instructors to state their primary teaching goal for that semester.

7. The Lower Division Director and GTA coordinator have organized essay grade norming sessions for adjuncts, instructors, and GTAs.
8. The Lower Division Director has emphasized the 1020 course objectives for new hires and returning GTAs, adjuncts, and instructors by creating two new web pages—General Education Faculty Resources and Lower Division FAQs—that include the course objectives, teaching and learning objectives, sample syllabi and assignments, general information for General Education faculty, and specific assistance with grading, developing effective assignments, and judging written work in Gen Ed courses. Course objectives, syllabi, assignments, and grading are all reviewed in the annual evaluation of each GTA, adjunct, and instructor in the department.
9. The department has further customized the new handbooks for ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020 to emphasize the course objectives, the General Education Learning Outcomes, and the resources available to MTSU composition students. Dr. Jason Vance, information literacy librarian from the campus library, contributed customized screen shots of library search engines that are particular to our university for the 1020 handbook, *Research Matters at MTSU*.
10. The department has adopted a new curriculum for ENGL 1010 (Expository Writing) with a focus on Literacy for Life to better prepare students to transfer writing and thinking skills to other general education courses, courses in their majors, and the workforce. This revised curriculum should better prepare students for the rigors of ENGL 1020.
11. Department faculty participated in a campus-wide General Education course redesign initiative to adopt high student–engagement pedagogies as a technique to improve student success. ENGL 1010 was redesigned in 2013-14, and ENGL 1020 will be redesigned in 2015.
12. The department has actively encouraged tenure-track and tenured faculty to include ENGL 1020 on their teaching requests.
13. The department hosted Dr. Cheryl Ball as the Peck Composition Series speaker in spring 2014 and Dr. Andrea Lunsford as the Peck Composition Series speaker in spring 2013, both of whom are experts on multi-modal writing. Since the new ENGL 1010 focus on Literacy for Life entails including more reading and writing of multi-modal projects, their visits sparked an interest in both multi-modal writing and the Literacy for Life focus of ENGL 1010. The department faculty believe this new ENGL 1010 curriculum will better prepare students for ENGL 1020.

14. The department provided new opportunities for professional development for adjuncts and full-time instructors by establishing an MTSU Foundation account with grant monies donated by Bedford/St. Martin's, publishers of our new 1010 handbook *Easy Writer*, and McGraw-Hill, publishers of our new 1020 handbook, *Research Matters at MTSU*. The Lower Division Committee evaluated applications for travels funds for faculty to attend the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English, and other conferences that allowed faculty to focus on improving their teaching of writing. Recipients received travel expenses and returned to the department to host information sessions and/or lead workshops on composition topics.
15. Faculty are encouraged to apply for professional development grants at Lower Division and TA curriculum meetings. Information about particular conferences, workshops, and seminars is disseminated via the faculty listserv.
16. The department established adjunct and FTT teaching awards, funded by the grant monies described above. This recognition of some of the best teachers of writing in our department is a critical step in acknowledging the important work the members of our department do.
17. The department developed a project that sends general education faculty into area high schools to learn about the kinds of writing students do before they come to MTSU. This three-year outreach project provides information about how writing is being taught to students before they reach MTSU. This project allows essential information to be exchanged between local high schools and the MTSU English Department.
18. The department faculty continue to study how Common Core, the new standards for K-12 education, present opportunities to rethink the TBR learning outcomes for general education courses. English Department faculty participated in a Faculty Learning Community focused on the relationship between Common Core and General Education teaching and learning at MTSU, an initiative funded by the MTSU Provost's Office. These English Department faculty and faculty from Speech and Theatre are working on a revision of the official course proposals for ENGL 1010 and COMM 2200, using the Common Core standards for reading, writing, language arts, and speaking as a foundation for a more rigorous college-level curriculum in general education communication courses.
19. The department faculty emphasized the need for freshman writing courses to follow the guidelines of the National Council of Teachers of English with regard to class size. At the request of the English Department, the MTSU General Education Committee endorsed that the previous class size of 25 students per freshman writing class fall into NCTE

guidelines: “No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Students cannot learn to write without writing. In sections larger than 20, teachers cannot possibly give student writing the immediate and individual response necessary for growth and improvement.” Most sections of ENGL 1010 and 1020 are now limited to 20 or fewer students.

20. The department continues to emphasize the need for sufficient reassigned time for the Lower Division Director so he or she can focus necessary attention and time to the mentoring of temporary ENGL 1020 instructors.

### **Summary**

Along with other Tennessee Board of Regents schools, MTSU has identified college-level general education competencies, one of which is writing. Development of the competencies is supported in MTSU’s General Education courses. To ensure that MTSU’s General Education courses are college-level, the courses are approved at multiple levels and undergo periodic review. Although indirect measures indicate that MTSU students are achieving the writing competency at an acceptable level, course-embedded assessment of the writing competency continues to show challenges. In response, the MTSU English department has implemented major changes in curriculum and instruction in both of the composition courses required in General Education—ENGL 1010 (Expository Writing) and ENGL 1020 (Research and Argumentative Writing).



## APPENDIX

### Writing Competency Rubric

Writing Outcomes	Superior	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
1. Students are able to distill a primary argument into a single, compelling statement.	The description of “Superior” for each outcome is anchored in the “Standards for Judging Written Work in General Education Courses”—Grades of A and B (see following pages).	The description of “Satisfactory” for each outcome is anchored in the “Standards for Judging Written Work in General Education Courses”—Grade of C (see following pages).	The description of “Unsatisfactory” for each outcome is anchored in the “Standards for Judging Written Work in General Education Courses”—Grade of D or lower (see following pages).
2. Student writers are able to order major points in a reasonable and convincing manner based on primary argument.			
3. Students are able to develop their ideas using appropriate rhetorical patterns (e.g., narration, example, comparison/contrast, classification, cause/effect, definition).			
4. Students are able to employ correct diction, syntax, usage, grammar, and mechanics.			
5. Students are able to manage and coordinate basic information gathered from multiple secondary sources.			
6. Students are able to give a clear purpose and audience.			

## Standards for Judging Written Work in General Education Courses

### MTSU English Department

Effective writing:

1. Achieves its purpose
2. Considers and adapts to its intended audience
3. Adequately develops ideas through the use of specific details
4. Carefully constructs and organizes ideas, sentences, and paragraphs
5. Effectively uses language, including correct grammar and mechanics
6. Demonstrates correct MLA, APA, or CMS documentation skills

Grades on essays written in English 1010 and 1020 range from A to F, and they are evaluated according to the criteria defined below:

### PASSING

**A** An **A** paper is rated **SUPERIOR** and shows originality of ideas and control of coherence, unity, development, and flow. A controlling main idea is readily apparent and is supported well with clearly developed examples and details. Paragraphs are structured well and include a variety of sentence structures and the use of transitions. Sentences show a superior command of word choice appropriate for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. There are very few minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

**B** A **B** paper is rated **ABOVE AVERAGE** and has an interesting topic with an obvious structure or plan but lacks full competency in coherence, unity, development, and/or flow. A controlling main idea is apparent and is supported with examples and details. Paragraphs are structured well and include some sentence variety and transitions. Sentences show a command of appropriate word choice for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are usually appropriate with very few major or minor errors.

**C** A **C** paper is rated **AVERAGE** and has a clear topic but lacks originality and full competency in coherence, unity, development, and/or flow. A controlling main idea is used but lacks some necessary supporting details and examples. Paragraphs show some structure but may not use a variety of sentence styles or structures. Some transitions are used but may not be appropriate for content. Sentences show a limited command of appropriate word choice for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. The paper may have a few major errors or frequent minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

### NOT PASSING

**D** A **D** paper is rated **WEAK** and has a poorly defined central idea that shows little insight and/or lacks full competency in coherence, unity, development, and/or flow. Sentences are sometimes unrelated to the main idea and give only limited supporting details and examples. Transitions are present but most are lacking or inappropriately used. Sentence structure is frequently correct; however, sentence style and patterns are usually repetitive forms. Word choice is often inconsistent, incorrect,

and inappropriate for audience, topic, purpose, and point-of-view. Major and distracting minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling are obvious.

**F** An **F** paper is **VERY WEAK** and may have no clear main idea. Sentences do not support a main idea and do not provide specific details or examples. Sentences are faulty in style and not readable in parts. Transitions and sentence variety are quite limited or unused. There are frequent serious errors and excessive minor errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

**0** A **ZERO** paper is rated **UNACCEPTABLE** and does not follow the framework or address the topic given. This score is also given to those papers that deliberately use explicit language that attacks the assignment or topic. It is also frequently given to plagiarized papers.

*Please note: Though instructors may assign the grade of **D** on individual assignments, your course grade must be **C- or better** to earn credit in the course. **D** is not a passing grade in English 1010 or 1020.*