



CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY EST. 1826

TO: Kim Emmons, Director of Composition
FROM: Erika Olbricht, SAGES Instructional Coordinator and Chair of the SAGES Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee
SUBJECT: **2018 SAGES Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee Report—SUMMARY**
DATE: 15 August 2018

The 2018 SAGES Writing Portfolio Assessment Committee, consisting of 14 faculty members from across the university, read and evaluated 1123 student portfolios submitted between May 2017 and May 2018. The full report can be found at writing.case.edu. **The 2018 Portfolio Assessment Committee:** Michael Benard (Biology), Marc Buchner (Engineering), Jennifer Butler (Psychological Sciences), Lisa Camp (Engineering), Eric Chilton (English), Corbin Covault (Physics), Cristián Gómez Olivares (Modern Languages) Caitlin Kelly (English), Jane Marek (Nursing), Gabrielle Parkin (English), Beverly Saylor (Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences), Geneviève Sauv  (Chemistry), John Wiehl (English)

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The committee's overall holistic assessment found **69% of students' portfolios to be Proficient or Acceptable**, which, while somewhat lower than last year's 76%, is in line with the previous two years' numbers (2015: 68%, 2016, 73%; see table 17). The committee found that **18% of students were writing at the Proficient, or highest, level**. The highest-scoring category, Readability, was assessed at 77% Proficient or Acceptable (see table 17), with only 2% of portfolios falling in the Unacceptable range.

The 2018 holistic results, as in previous years, suggest strong positive programmatic influence on student writing, but continue to show that **students' lowest Proficient scores are in the areas of Argument and Evidence**. The committee found that students are too often unable to truly weigh and incorporate evidence from their sources, leaving some papers with weak evidence for poorly-constructed arguments. Students tend to use their sources mostly to provide factual information rather than integrating them into the writer's argument as evidence or pushing against those sources to present counterarguments or opposing viewpoints.

The committee's major recommendation is that seminar leaders continue to develop students' understanding of academic argumentative writing, particularly the sequence of claims-reasons-evidence and counterarguments as the essential elements of a writer's persuasive argument.

Recommendations for Seminar Leaders

As has been the case since we started reading research essays in depth, **this year's recommendations for writing instruction primarily focus on strengthening instruction in argumentative writing** with a specific emphasis on counterargument, evidence use, and reasoning. In order to emphasize these skills, students should be creating arguments that engage the deep ideas in the course topic and field.

Importantly, the committee wishes to stress that **SAGES seminars must be treated as writing courses** that are meant to teach writing skills deliberately; sometimes students reported in their reflective essays that they did not receive enough writing instruction and that feedback on their written work was lacking.

The committee identified the following **best practices** as continued recommendations from previous years' reports: inclusion of SAGES learning outcomes on syllabi and discussion of them with the class, the use of recommended writing texts, sequencing writing assignments leading to the research essay in University Seminars, giving feedback on papers that helps students become better writers, giving students the chance to revise based on that feedback, and cultivating stronger collaborations with writing instructors, the Writing Resource Center (WRC), and Portfolio Coordinator.

Committee members wish to make the following specific recommendations to instructors; some of these are repeated from previous years:

1. Instructors should ensure students have practice reading and writing arguments composed of arguable **claims**, supported by a plausible set of **reasons**, which in turn are based on clear and appropriate **evidence** that students must weigh in their reasoning. Instructors should emphasize that claims need to be clearly and precisely articulated, and that reasons and evidence need to be analyzed and synthesized into the argument rather than merely used to provide factual information or insufficiently support a writer's claims.
2. Instructors should help students understand the role of counterclaims, opposing viewpoints, alternative positions, and counterevidence in argumentative writing by showing how such counterarguments are addressed in scholarly works. Assignments in the sequence leading to the research paper, for example, should help students leverage counterarguments as they work to articulate their own point of view. Instructors should remind students that addressing counterarguments does not weaken, but can usefully strengthen their own positions.
3. Instructors should, beginning in First-Year Seminars and continuing in University Seminars, emphasize the concept of transferability, specifically the ways in which the communication and critical thinking skills that students build in SAGES are directly relevant to their work in Departmental Seminars and Capstone Courses, disciplinary courses, post-graduate work, and in the careers they choose. To meet those ends, instructors should devote some classroom time to reviewing the SAGES program outcomes and/or employ its writing rubric in writing assessment in order to help students understand the connectedness of the various classes within the SAGES curriculum and the transferability of skills taught in the seminars.
4. Instructors should encourage students to use campus resources that can help them succeed specifically with writing (the Writing Resource Center's consulting services and its workshops for students) and more generally with academic skills (Educational Services for Students, or its new equivalent).
5. Instructors should mention the portfolio requirement more frequently to their students. Additionally, in teaching the value of reflection and/or other writing skills, such as attention to audience and purpose, instructors should remind students that reflection is more than summarizing the content of the papers or claiming to have improved in critical thinking, but being able to demonstrate such skills to a reader. Instructors can help students chart and reflect on their writing skill development in their classes, which will also help with the transferability of such skills.