



Assessment of Students' Written Communication Skills at Lehman College

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1. Why do we assess students' written communication skills at Lehman College?

- At Lehman, we are committed to providing students with an education that will prepare them to be successful in their professional lives. Good written communication skills are essential, regardless of the path that our graduates take after they leave Lehman.
- Development of students' written communication skills is one of Lehman's seven institutional learning goals (<http://www.lehman.edu/office-academic-programs/general-education.php>). These goals were adopted by the College Senate in 2015-16 to represent the knowledge, skills, abilities, and habits of mind expected of all Lehman graduates.
- The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) requires that all Colleges demonstrate, based on defensible standards, whether students are making progress toward meeting learning goals. How can we say with any degree of certainty that are students are being well served if we do not engage in ongoing, systematic assessments of writing?

2. How do I assess my students' written communication skills?

- Lehman College has adopted the **AAC&U Value rubrics** for Written Communication as the tool used to assess student writing (<https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/written-communication>). This rubric breaks down the goal into five measurable criteria and allocates benchmarks to measure levels of proficiency. For more information about rubrics click at <http://www.lehman.edu/institutional-research/assessment/Assessment-Rubrics.php>.
- Select one writing assignment in your course that requires students to state and defend a thesis statement, hypothesis, or a claim. Students should be expected to write a minimum of five pages on this assignment. You can assign a letter or numerical grade (for the student's course grade) and score the paper using the written communication skills rubric (for college-wide assessment purposes). It is up to you to decide whether you will use the rubric to help *grade* your assignment; you can do that based on your own criteria.
- In order for us to be able to aggregate student scores in a meaningful way, we ask that you use **Blackboard** to create your writing assignment and to score student work. Please contact Stephen Castellano (email: stephen.castellano@lehman.cuny.edu; phone: 8658) if you need help with Blackboard.

- We have created PDFs and short videos with **step-by-step instructions** how to create an assignment in Blackboard and on how to use the rubric to score student work. Click <http://www.lehman.edu/institutional-research/assessment/Assessment-Rubrics.php>.

3. What is a meaningful assignment to assess students' written communication skills?

The quality of student work often reflects what you ask them to do. It is far more likely that students will submit quality papers if you are specific about your expectations. The central question guiding the rubric is "How well does writing respond to the needs of audience(s) for the work?" Based on these observations, here are some recommendations:

- Make sure that you ask students are asked to submit papers that are long enough to adequately assess their writing. It is not possible to this based on very short papers, blogs, or short reflection pieces.
- Be specific regarding the context and audience. Are you asking for a persuasive paper, a research paper, an expository paper, a literature review, a case study, an experiment write-up, a project report, or something else? (For more information see <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/3/>).
- Encourage students to make use of available resources to gain further insights into the genre and improve their writing skills (e.g. Lehman College Writing Center at <http://www.lehman.edu/academics/instructional-support-services/ace-writing.php> or Purdue Online Writing Lab at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/3/>)
- Take your time to develop an assignment that provides specific instructions to students. Consider the following:
 - a. What is the minimum number of credible resources students should include and in what style should they be cited?
 - b. Which structure do you expect and what should the various sections include (or exclude)?
 - c. Break down the task into manageable steps.
 - d. Emphasize that you expect a critical discussion and logically flowing arguments.
 - e. Make sure that students know if you expect them to develop their own viewpoint based on comprehensible reasoning.
- Ask students to submit a draft of the paper by a due date. Provide specific feedback on the draft. Such "scaffolded" assignments are required for all LEH courses.
- We highly recommend sharing the rubric (and your grading criteria) with your students. This will give students a clearer sense of your expectations.written communication skills. You might consider attaching a copy of the rubric to your syllabus (see Appendix) and referring to it as you provide feedback on assignments that are not scored and submitted for the College's assessment data base.
- Provide students with annotated examples of excellent and inadequate work.
- Consult "What makes a good writing assignment?" <https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/assignments/>.

4. What do I need to know about scoring the rubric in a meaningful way?

- Even though scoring an assignment based on the rubric is somewhat subjective, we have seen during the past semesters that instructors often gave higher ratings on the rubric than samples would support. It is highly unlikely that the majority of students in lower level courses have already achieved the highest possible level of proficiency. Remember that **THIS ASSESSMENT WILL NOT BE USED TO EVALUATE YOUR TEACHING.**

- We ask you to be realistic when assigning the scores. Please do not think that you are doing students a favor by inflating the scores on the rubric. The rubric scores are not students' grades and are not reflective of your teaching skills.
- Students in lower division courses are typically expected to earn 2s and 3s (or lower) rather than 3s and 4s. Even seniors with adequate skills would largely be earning 3s. Remember that scoring an assignment with a "4" means that the student, in your opinion, has reached the highest possible level of written communication proficiency.
- You consider the level of the course (100, 200, 300, or 400) when you grade the paper. The scoring for the written communication rubric for our assessment, however, should be based on an absolute scale with "4" reflecting the highest possible level of proficiency for an undergraduate student at the end of his/her studies. As a result, a student in a lower level course may receive a good grade for a paper and at the same time receive a low score for the assessment. We hope that eventually, students will score 3s in their senior year, but we certainly do not want to delude ourselves with inflated numbers.
- If you have additional questions, please refer to a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), which are accessible at www.lehman.edu/institutional-research/assessment/documents/Rubrics-FAQs.pdf.