English and Creative Writing (ECW) Assessment Report
AY2021-22

Course: Writing & Rhetoric I (ENGL 111)

Summary

The ECW Department elected to assess student writing in Writing and Rhetoric I, the first course in a two-course college writing requirement. This course is taken by most of the incoming first year students every fall.

The assessment design was for students to produce written responses to similar writing prompts. At two different weeks in the semester, students were assigned a Quiz (with a grade assigned for submission to create an incentive) with a writing prompt and given 60 minutes to complete their brief response. In order to make the prompts as similar as possible, students were presented with public apologies (in the form of Tweets)[1] from two well-known actors, attempting to apologize for previous behavior.

These prompts were administered in fourteen sections, taught by four faculty members. A panel of three full-time faculty members assessed the student work, employing a rubric based with three of the four course learning objectives of the WRI course. In addition, a fourth area ("clear and effective prose)" was added. Prior to the review, the panel had a norming session with anchor samples to encourage inter-rater reliability. The rubric had five levels, ranging from 1 = "Significantly Lacking" to 5 = "Excellent."

The Rubric Categories:

1. The response thoughtfully employs key concepts related to writing and rhetoric to describe and evaluate other authors' rhetorical choices.
2. The response acknowledges the affordances of a variety of genres, media, platforms, and technologies used in public apologies, and evaluates whether other authors effectively align affordances with goals.
3. The response acknowledges and explains why conventions for structure, arrangement, paragraphing and mechanics might vary across contexts.
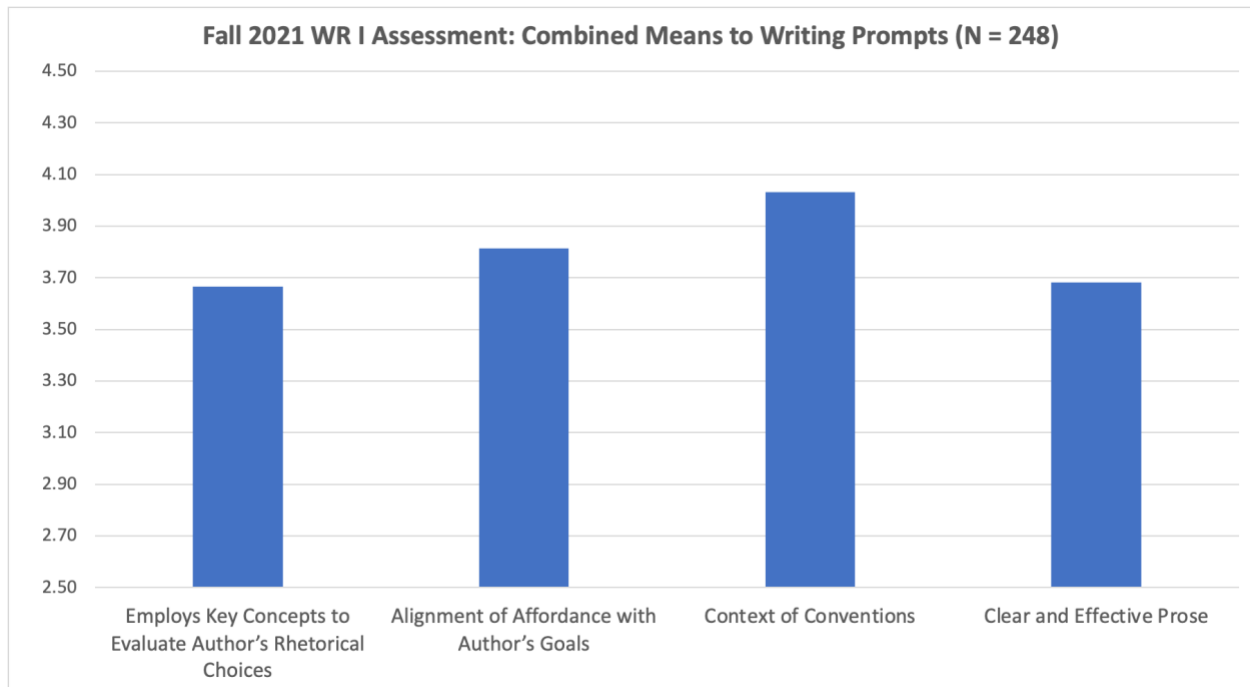4. The response uses clear and effective prose.

The Results

---

[1] These prompts appear in full as Appendix A

	Employs Key Concepts to Evaluate Author's Rhetorical Choices	Alignment of Affordance with Author's Goals	Context of Conventions	Clear and Effective Prose
Prompt A (N=123)	3.59	3.71	3.97	3.58
Prompt B (N =125)	3.75	3.92	4.10	3.78
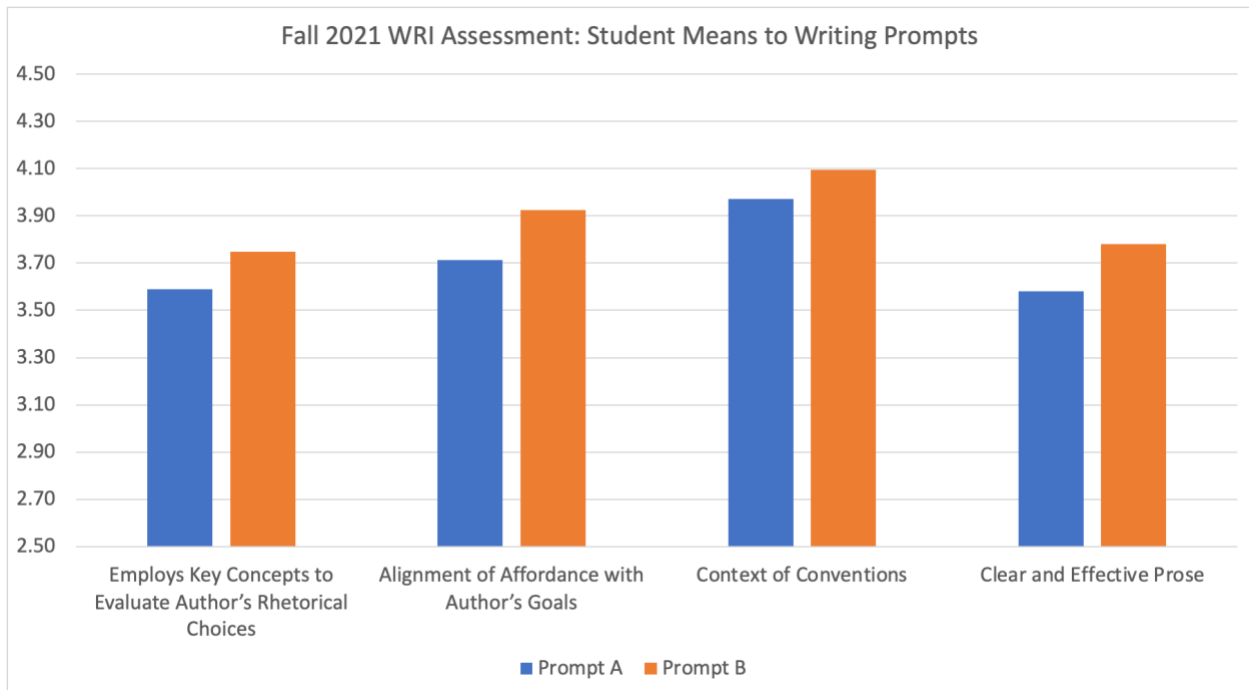
The combined means over both prompts were:

	Employs Key Concepts to Evaluate Author's Rhetorical Choices	Alignment of Affordance with Author's Goals	Context of Conventions	Clear and Effective Prose
Two Prompt Means	3.67	3.81	4.03	3.68

Fall 2021 WR I Assessment: Combined Means to Writing Prompts (N = 248)

Students performed highest in "Context of Conventions," followed by "Alignment of Affordance with Author's Goals, and then more or less equally on "Employs Key Concepts to Evaluate Author's Rhetorical Choices" and "Clear and Effective Prose."

When asked to comment and reflect on the results, the panelists shared the following observations.

What surprised you about the student work?

Panel Member 1:
I think I was actually pleasantly surprised by the relatively high level of sophistication in the analyses they did. I assumed when I started into scoring that I was going to see a lot that just slipped into opinions about the incident, about whether or not x actually did y, but these students did a good job keeping their attention on the apologies themselves. I'd also say that, just on reflection (not based on anything empirical), the gap between the strongest and weakest responses was not as great as I expected—or, I would conjecture, as it was when I led program assessments [in the past].

Panel Member 2:
Initially, I was surprised by students' lack of engagement with the SL [Shia Lebeouf] apology. What I noticed in students' writing was uncritical acceptance of the effectiveness of SL's apology. Many student responses seemed to reason that SL was drunk, he said he was sorry, and he hasn't been drunk in public since the apology. Students didn't seem to consider the seriousness of the offense, or the actual words of his apology. As I mentioned in the debrief, I

think students used a kind of shorthand to evaluate and analyze his apology because they were influenced by his reputation. SL is more popular and well known than KS [Kevin Spacey]. I think this made students less interested in or willing to examine the more contentious elements of SL's apology. They seemed willing to accept that SL's public apology initiated a personal transformation, not just an attempt at image repair.

Panel Member 3:
I was surprised by students' willingness to engage with the Kevin Spacey prompt on an analytical level. Students were able to evaluate the apology with reference to the context and Spacey's rhetorical options for crafting the apology. This demonstrates that students can draw on key concepts to navigate or evaluate very difficult, high-stakes situations.

What didn't surprise you about the student work?

Panel Member 1:
I think I could have told you pretty much what students would say in response to these questions, and they definitely said that. Our students have a strongly and widely shared set of beliefs. I think the sample is perhaps more interesting from that standpoint—for insight into our students' shared values. Is this a stronger community than we might think? Or is it just a lack of intellectual/political diversity?

Panel Member 2:
I wasn't surprised at students' ability to critique the apology of KS. First, the offense he's accused of is grave and serious. I could see in many students' responses that viewed KS as a kind of monster. Students pointed to important parts of KS's statement where he seemed to be hedging, not telling the truth, deflecting blame, and using the genre of the public apology as a way to simply restore his image. Generally, students seem better at critiquing and saying why something is not persuasive (they get more practice in this kind of writing, I think) than explaining why they believe something.

Panel member 3:
I wasn't surprised that students' performance was lowest on 'employs rhetorical concepts to evaluate authors' rhetorical choices' and 'clear and effective prose'. These aspects of students' writing were adequate, but not outstanding.

How does your work on this project inform the WR curriculum?

Panel Member 2:
Generally, I thought our students did well (I know my scores were the lowest!), but I've been reading and writing about the rhetoric of apology for several years so I may have been expecting too much. After almost ten years of teaching the key concepts, I wonder if we need to re-examine and recommit to our pedagogy. Almost everyone teaching in our program seems to

really like the curriculum of WR I, but I found myself wondering how students are learning about ethos and other concepts. I wonder if I was missing something. I also wonder about the types of writing assigned in WR I. I know students use rhetorical analysis in class activities and assignments, but again, I'm not sure how this varies from class to class and over time. Is the kind of writing students were asked to produce in the assessment worth more attention in our course? The writing students did for this assessment was supposed to be more polished than a first draft, but it seemed as though some students did not revise or carefully consider their responses.

Panel Member 3:
In FYW, we tend to emphasize using the concepts to generate writing. The focus is very much on students' own writing and textual production. With social media putting everyone's rhetorical choices on display, I would like to see slightly more attention to using the concepts to analyze and evaluate other authors' choices. I would like to see students transfer this knowledge to an understanding of how their own writing might be understood and evaluated, perhaps including a bit more attention to editing and proofreading in our curriculum.

Next Steps

The panel also discussed possible next steps for assessment. There was consideration for repeating this process, with two parallel prompts, randomly assigned at different parts of the semester. Another option was to assign the same prompt at different times in the semester. Both might serve as ways to explore student growth. A third option was to allow students to access their responses from an earlier time in the semester and ask them to revise and improve their original work, which is an integral component of the course.

This project and the results will be presented at a meeting of WR faculty prior to the start of the Fall 2022 semester.

Appendix A: The Writing Prompts

Instructions
This response exercise asks you to consider why writing matters in a public apology. Please read the scenario and respond in writing to the question prompt. Before you open the quiz, we recommend that you open your word processing program and prepare a blank document. Once you open this quiz, you will have 60 minutes to write and submit your response through Canvas as a .doc file.

Prompt A: LeBeouff

SCENARIO

In 2017, actor Shia LaBeouf was arrested in Georgia for obstruction, disorderly conduct and public drunkenness. Police stated that LaBeouf used "profanities and vulgar language" during his arrest. Media outlet TMZ released a video of the arrest, which included a racist rant.

After he was released from jail, LaBeouf posted the following apology to Twitter:

> I am deeply ashamed of my behavior and make no excuses for it. I don't know if these statements are too frequent, or not shared often enough, but I am certain that my actions warrant a very sincere apology to the arresting officers, and I am grateful for their restraint. The severity of my behavior is not lost on me.
>
> My outright disrespect for authority is problematic to say the least, and completely destructive to say the worst. It is a new low. A low I hope is a bottom. I have been struggling with addiction publicly for far too long, and I am actively taking steps toward securing my sobriety and hope I can be forgiven for my mistakes.

WRITING PROMPT

Apologies can be public or private, and can be communicated, among other options, in writing, spoken, or through gesture (such as giving the wronged party flowers). Was a public apology *in writing* effective in this situation? Please explain your answer.

Your finished response should be about 250 words. Please write out your thoughts in complete sentences and paragraphs. We would like you to organize, edit and proofread your response for readability.

Prompt B: Spacey

SCENARIO

In 2017, actor Anthony Rapp reported that actor Kevin Spacey had made unwanted sexual advances toward him when Rapp was 14 years old.

In response to the allegations, actor Kevin Spacey tweeted the following:

Kevin Spacey ✓
@KevinSpacey

I have a lot of respect and admiration for Anthony Rapp as an actor. I'm beyond horrified to hear his story. I honestly do not remember the encounter, it would have been over 30 years ago. But if I did behave then as he describes, I owe him the sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior, and I am sorry for the feelings he describes having carried with him all these years.

This story has encouraged me to address other things about my life. I know that there are stories out there about me and that some have been fueled by the fact that I have been so protective of my privacy. As those closest to me know, in my life I have had relationships with both men and women. I have loved and had romantic encounters with men throughout my life, and I choose now to live as a gay man. I want to deal with this honestly and openly and that starts with examining my own behavior.

- Kevin Spacey

WRITING PROMPT

Apologies can be public or private, and can be communicated, among other options, in writing, spoken, or through gesture (such as giving the wronged party flowers). Was a public apology *in writing* effective in this situation? Please explain your answer.

Your finished response should be about 250 words. Please write out your thoughts in complete sentences and paragraphs. We would like you to organize, edit and proofread your response for readability.