

FWIS 173 Learning Rubric

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The main objective of this rubric is to provide you with targets for your own learning in this course. As you read the descriptions of each of the Four Capabilities, think about whether they would be fitting descriptions of your own work and, if not, about what steps you could take to improve the fit.*

Because learning is a process, be aware that you might slide backwards as well as move forwards; that is, having seemed to grasp a skill at a certain point in the semester, your later work might reveal to you and to me that your grasp was not yet firm. Throughout this rubric, mastery of a skill refers, by definition, to *sustained* competence, so do not relax your efforts to learn and improve as soon as you decide (or hear from me) that you are showing signs of mastery. While I intend these descriptions primarily as a help to you, I will also use them when assessing your progress towards mastery of the Four Capabilities. In that sense, the rubric will also determine your course grade.

1. Position Taking

Take complex, original positions that derive logically from available evidence and account for other plausible positions.

Emerging Practice: When you are just beginning to learn how to take positions in your writing, you may find yourself producing work that merely shares information or reports on positions that other writers have already taken. Novice writers make lots of *points* in their work without connecting them together to stake out a coherent, complex position to which *all* the points contribute. A piece of writing with lots of “points” but no “position” also tends to rely on assertion and generalization. Instead of showing *why* something is the case, novice writers simply say that it *is* the case, relying on imprecise appeals to common sense or overly simplistic theories of explanation, instead of on specific available evidence and logical reasoning. They pay little if any attention to alternative interpretations or explanations of the same evidence, either because they have not considered opposing views or because they stick to making statements with which few reasonable people would ever disagree.

As you begin to *develop competence* with taking positions, you’ll start to produce work that moves from *premises* to *conclusions* instead of moving through an unordered list of points, though your conclu-

* Parts of this rubric, especially the points on communication and self-reflection, are directly indebted to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, second edition (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2005). I’d also like to thank Jenn Borgioli Binis for helpful feedback that improved the section on Effective Communication.

sions might still be the conclusions of others more than your own, and your writing may still have some loose ends—stray points that do not clearly contribute to advancing your overall position. Your conclusions are capable of provoking disagreement, though they
45 may be oversimplified, and they follow logically from your premises, though you may make some unwarranted leaps in logic (e.g., confusing correlation with causation, making anachronistic or universalizing inferences instead of contextualized ones, assuming a necessary precondition for something is a sufficient cause, adopting a mecha-
50 nistic or always-predictable model of human behavior, and so on).

You'll make sure to substantiate your premises and conclusions with evidence, though you may struggle to base your claims on *specific* evidence from the material available to you, and you may still generalize beyond what the evidence allows. You realize you need evidence, but
55 you may ignore the most relevant available evidence for a particular claim. Competent writers also acknowledge plausible alternative positions, though they may mischaracterize the opposition, dismiss opponents as biased (“ad hominem”), or address only the weakest counterarguments (the “straw man” fallacy). As you work on all
60 these things, you may show flashes of mastery (especially after receiving specific coaching or feedback), but you may still struggle to put together a position on your own or to recognize the hallmarks of a strong position in another person's writing.

Students who have *mastered* the art of position-taking produce
65 work that demonstrates a personalized, thoughtful grasp of a subject and develops a powerful, sophisticated defense of a contestable view. While demonstrating a capacious understanding of the evidence and claims that are needed to defend their view, masterful writers are discerning; they have clearly grappled with all the available material,
70 but in the end they marshal only the points most needed to advance their position. Those points are well integrated into a coherent, complex case that is sensitive to all or almost all of the subject's relevant texts and contexts. That case is carefully calibrated by specific evidence; masterful writers do not claim more—or less—than what the
75 available material allows. At the same time, however, they are able to synthesize multiple pieces of evidence and texts into a fresh, illuminating take that does not simply reproduce what has already been said by others. Game recognizes game, so as you begin to master these skills, you'll also be able to notice them at work in other
80 pieces of writing. Because of that, you will not only show awareness of alternative positions, but you will also be able to identify the *best* counterarguments against your view and address them fairly and seriously without abandoning your position.

2. Audience Awareness

85 *Persuade or inform varying audiences based on an awareness of their expectations, prior knowledge, and possible beliefs.*

Practiced writers and presenters analyze their audiences and address them accordingly. But in the beginning, *novice* writers are often so focused on *what* they know or want to say that they forget to think
90 about *whom* they are addressing.

For example, in their eagerness to share in detail what they know, novice writers may spend too much time on facts the audience already knows, or they may develop their points for longer and in a different tone than the audience expects. On the other hand, a novice
95 writer may assume too much about what the audience knows or expects and therefore neglect to explain unfamiliar topics, to choose understandable words, to cite sources correctly, or to persuade the audience that the author's subject is important. Such examples of mismatch between an author's work and the audience's expectations
100 typically arise when the author has thought more about content than the audience. Sometimes beginners go to the opposite extreme, however; they have thought so much about the audience's beliefs that they bend over backwards to say what the audience wants to hear. In these cases, a novice writer may make powerful appeals to the audience's emotions and beliefs, but in ways that actually detract from
105 the author's reasoning, distract the reader from the main issue at hand, and limit the work's persuasiveness to other audiences.

As you *develop competence* in audience awareness, your work will show signs that you have thought about the purpose and context
110 for your writing. If you are writing because you have been given a specific prompt, you make sure to answer that prompt directly. On the other hand, if you don't have a specific prompt, then you make sure to explain the purpose for your writing or speech. You show the readers why this subject matters to them now, and why you are particularly equipped to tell them about it. Competent writers also
115 analyze and abide by the audience's expectations concerning citation practices, length of writing or presentation, and format. Despite these good habits, writers who are developing their awareness of audience may still choose words or tones that are not entirely appropriate
120 for the setting at hand (e.g., the use of either formal vocabulary or informal slang in cases where the other would be more apt). You may also still have trouble consistently striking the right balance between sticking to your points and speaking to the audience's desires and needs.

125 *Masterful* awareness of audience involves all the signs of compe-

tence already mentioned, as well as the ability to make wise judgments about how much to allow your readers or listeners to influence your appeals. As you master this skill, you'll use knowledge of the audience's prior beliefs to persuade, but not to pander. You will calibrate your tone, level of detail, and background information to the audience at hand, while also being sure to provide a clear motive for writing.

3. *Effective Communication*

Convey your ideas verbally with correct grammar, clear organization, fluid style, and appropriate degrees of emphasis.

Whether communicating in writing or orally, effective communication requires ongoing attention to multiple levels of your presentation, from the level of the sentence all the way up to the level of the presentation as a whole. Communication is ineffective when it violates rules of correct communication and/or veers from widely accepted principles about how to present ideas.

Novice communicators are often more focused on *what* they are saying than on *how* they are saying it. They present their ideas in a way that makes sense to them, usually by putting points in the order in which they came to mind. They are good at cataloging or listing their ideas (i.e., "this, that, and the other"). But this "stream of consciousness" or serial ordering may not make sense to readers and audiences, who need to see the logical relationship between ideas (i.e., "this and that, despite the other; therefore, this"). Audiences also typically look for the most important points in particular places, such as the "early" and "late" parts of a paragraph, section, or overall work. *Novice* communicators ignore such conventions, as well as others governing word choice, grammar, and punctuation, because they are so eager to get their ideas out there. But readers and audiences struggle to get that message because of the many grammatical errors and haphazard choices about structure. Relatedly, communicators who are more focused on what to say than on how to say it may leave their presentations cluttered with typographical errors, "first takes," and too many filler words like "um's" or "also's"—the sorts of things that more competent writers remove through a process of revision and redrafting.

As you gain *competence* in communication, your writing will be structured so as to *highlight* and *develop* a central idea or theme. Key points are stated "early" or "late" in the text and/or its constituent parts, though some of your points may still be "buried" where they are hard to find, and you may still struggle to put your points in

logical order instead of in a random sequence. Paragraph breaks, signposts, and navigational words (such as “such as,” “however,” “nonetheless,” “moreover,” “next,” and “in sum”) help to move the reader through the text at a steady pace. Such pauses signal emphasis as well as the relationship of the emphasized point to the overall position. You usually convey your points with precise words and fluent sentences that engage the reader’s interest, though the length and complexity of some sentences may still interfere with clarity. The amount of emphasis given to different points will be appropriately balanced, though may some points may still be unnecessarily repeated or abbreviated. Your work will show a good grasp of standard writing conventions and grammatical rules, though you may still struggle with one or two recurring grammatical problems. Through revision of your own work, you begin to minimize repetition, locate typos and run-on sentences, and carefully source quotations from or allusions to other authors.

Masterful style means being able to “pull together” all of these skills with minimal coaching or feedback. A masterful writer has internalized these writing conventions so that proofreading errors and unclear passages tend to be very few in submitted assignments. Only a few minor touch-ups would make the text suitable for publication or presentation in an appropriate “real world” venue. When audiences hear or read someone who has mastered the art of effective communication, they have little difficulty grasping the communicator’s points and reasoning; whether one glances at the work as a whole, or zooms in to look carefully at the details, it is clear that each word, sentence, paragraph or section has been the result of a deliberate decision in service of a unified goal.

4. *Self-Reflection*

Honestly identify areas for improvement in your own understanding, and then execute and evaluate strategies for addressing them.

Students without the habit of critical self-reflection are good at judging their own work by two criteria: whether the work was done, and whether significant effort was expended to do it. So focused are they on those criteria that they often spend less time evaluating their progress towards the learning objectives in a class. Students without a habit of self-reflection are also very good at taking strong positions and sticking by them, but as a result they may not think critically enough about how their own unexamined assumptions, settled convictions, habits of thinking, or gaps in knowledge might prevent a more complex understanding. Often, students of this sort

respond to feedback with defensiveness or redirection; non-reflexive thinkers hold that someone else is always wholly to blame for their own failure to understand or persuade.

Self-reflective students, on the other hand, are constantly questioning their own convictions and thinking in order to sort out warranted beliefs from prejudices. They are aware of and accurately assess the limits of their own knowledge, and they recognize unique styles or beliefs that might unjustifiably color their understanding. They hold their views provisionally, in the sense that they are willing to change their minds when evidence or logic demands it. They are aware that there may be multiple ways to accomplish a task and think hard about which way would be best. Most of all, they can engage in effective “meta-thinking” about their own learning, qualitatively evaluating their own work by criteria such as those described in the other parts of this rubric.

Evidence for the mastery of this skill is easiest to see when students are asked to evaluate their own learning progress, as you will be in the course. If your responses to such questions show awareness of changes in your own thinking, and you can effectively link those changes to the specific skills we are aiming to develop in the course, you are demonstrating self-reflection. Moreover, even in everyday exchanges with me and your peers, you show that you regularly reflect on the meaning of what you have learned. Constructive criticism is not only welcomed, but assimilated and applied, when warranted, in new contexts. When questions are posed or suggestions are made, you are able to consider them and attempt a response. In all of these ways, self-reflective students are wise, circumspect, and characterized by intellectual integrity; they take responsibility for their own learning and demonstrate a willingness to develop and use new skills.