

**Direct Assessment of Junior-level College Writing: A Study of Reading, Writing, and Language
Background among York College Students Enrolled in WRIT 30-**

Report of a study co-sponsored by the Student Learning subcommittee (Shao-Wei Wu, Institutional Research, chair) of the York College Outcomes Assessment Committee and by the Writing Across the Curriculum program (Jonathan Hall, English, Coordinator). Dr. Hall designed the study, managed its implementation, and wrote the discussion sections of this report. Dr. Wu performed statistical analysis of the data. Funding support provided by the WAC Program from CUE budget.

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Direct Assessment of Junior-level College Writing: A Study of Reading, Writing, and Language Background among York College Students Enrolled in WRIT 30-

Overview

This report focuses on assessment of WRIT 301/302/303. It examines connections between the two Writing Samples and the Education and Language Background survey.

Major Findings: A pre-test (W1)/post-test (W2) direct writing assessment of WRIT 301/302/303 showed that the most dramatic progress in this junior-level writing research course was made by students in the following groups:

A. Transfer students:

- W1: Transfer students' mean score was significantly lower (30.2) vs. York only students (34.5).
- W2: No statistically significant difference between the groups. (See tables pp.3-4)

B. Multilingual Students and Students who learned to read and write English outside the United States:

- W1: scores on the Education and Language Background Survey (ELB) negatively correlated strongly with W1 totals and individual dimensions of the writing rubric: 83% of possible correlations at 0.05 level.
- W2: Correlations decreased by 70% by W2. (See tables in Appendix B, pp.12-13)

The study: The study was conducted in Fall 2010. Students in 9 sections of WRIT 301/2/3 (taught by 6 faculty members) completed four instruments:

- ELB: Education and Language Background Survey includes 14 primary questions constructed on a 5-point scale such that a pattern of answering "1" to each question would signify a monolingual English speaker educated entirely in the U.S., for a minimum total of 14. A pattern of answering "5" to each question, for a maximum total of 70, would imply a multilingual speaker who had fairly recently immigrated to the U.S. Both answers to individual questions and the ELB total were correlated with W1 and W2.
- W1 (Pre-test) and W2 (Post-test): Two Writing Samples, each based on a reading and a prompt, each scored by two readers, including their classroom instructor, on a 9-dimension scale that included categories such as critical reading, writing from sources, and development of a student's own ideas.
- [Reading and Writing Survey: questions about students reading and writing processes and habits (will be discussed in a separate report)]

All writing samples and surveys were completed by students outside of class and submitted via Blackboard. Writing scores from readers were also submitted via Blackboard, and the results downloaded to a spreadsheet and then into SPSS for statistical analysis.

**I. Pre-test/Post-test Writing/Reading Comparison
Transfer Students vs. York-only Students**

Note: YELLOW shading throughout indicates statistically significant differences (P<0.05)

A. Writing Assignments total score comparison between those who started at York and those who transferred in.

Significant difference at the 0.05 level between Juniors who started at York and those who came to York with 60 or more credits on writing assignment one (pre-test). No significant difference was found between the three groups on writing assignment two (post-test).

		N	Mean	Std	
W1TOTAL	York	29	34.4	5.9	P < 0.05
	< 60 credits	16	34.6	8.5	
	>= 60 credits	42	30.2	7.3	
	Total	87	32.4	7.4	
W2TOTAL	York	30	36.2	6.5	
	< 60 credits	16	38.0	5.3	
	>= 60 credits	41	33.4	7.6	
	Total	87	35.2	7.1	

B. Difference between writing assignment one (pre-test) and writing assignment two (post-test) within each group

Those who started at York with 60 credits or more scored significantly higher on post-test than pre-test. No significant difference was found between the two tests for those who started at York and those who transferred in with less than 60 credits.

		Mean	N	Std	
York	W1TOTAL	34.9	26	6.0	P < 0.01
	W2TOTAL	35.5	26	6.6	
< 60 credits	W1TOTAL	34.1	13	8.3	
	W2TOTAL	37.2	13	5.3	
>= 60 credits	W1TOTAL	30.9	38	7.1	
	W2TOTAL	34.0	38	7.3	

Note: Means differ slightly from Table I to Table II because II includes only students who completed both W1 and W2 while I includes those who completed one or both.

C. Individual Dimensions on Pre-test

The rubric for scoring the Writing Samples W1 and W2 contains 9 dimensions, each of which has six levels. The first column contains the variable name and a brief descriptor; for full text see the rubric.

Similar to I.A. above, the results show significant differences between the groups on W1 (6 of 9 dimensions), but the gaps have greatly diminished (only 1 dimension) on W2.

W1		N	Mean	Std	Minimum	Maximum
01CONTROL Control (Holistic)	York	29	3.9	.8	2.5	5.0
	< 60 credits	17	4.1	1.1	2.0	6.0
	>= 60 credits	42	3.4	1.0	1.0	5.0
	Total	88	3.7	1.0	1.0	6.0
03CRIREAD Critical Reading	York	29	3.9	.9	2.5	5.5
	< 60 credits	17	3.8	1.1	2.0	6.0
	>= 60 credits	42	3.3	1.0	1.0	5.0
	Total	88	3.6	1.0	1.0	6.0
04RELASSI Relation to Assignment	York	29	3.7	.8	2.5	5.0
	< 60 credits	17	3.6	1.2	1.5	5.5
	>= 60 credits	42	3.0	.9	1.0	5.0
	Total	88	3.3	1.0	1.0	5.5
05WRITSOU Writing from Sources	York	29	4.1	.9	2.5	5.5
	< 60 credits	17	3.9	1.0	2.0	5.5
	>= 60 credits	42	3.4	1.0	1.0	5.0
	Total	88	3.7	1.0	1.0	5.5
07STYLEWR Style	York	29	3.9	.6	2.5	5.0
	< 60 credits	17	4.3	.8	3.0	6.0
	>= 60 credits	42	3.6	.8	1.5	5.0
	Total	88	3.8	.8	1.5	6.0
08MECHCON Mechanics & Conventions	York	29	3.8	.7	2.0	5.0
	< 60 credits	17	4.3	.9	3.5	6.0
	>= 60 credits	42	3.7	.8	2.5	5.0
	Total	88	3.8	.8	2.0	6.0

D. Individual Dimension on Post-test

W2		N	Mean	Std	Minimum	Maximum
05WRITSOU Writing from Sources	York	30	4.0	.9	2.0	6.0
	< 60 credits	16	4.2	.6	3.0	5.0
	>= 60 credits	41	3.6	1.0	2.0	6.0
	Total	87	3.8	.9	2.0	6.0

II. Education and Language Background (ELB) Survey in Relation to Writing Samples W1 and W2

A. Education and Language Groups and W1 / W2

There are 14 primary questions on the Education and Language Background Survey (ELB). Each is constructed on a 5-point scale, where 1 is the answer that would be given by a monolingual English speaker who has always lived and been educated in the United States, and 5 would be an answer given by a new immigrant or a speaker more comfortable with language other than English. Thus possible totals range from 14 to 70 and students may be grouped as follows.

Junior W1

ELB Groups	Label	N	%	W1 Mean	SD	Min	Max
14-27 (1.0-1.9)	JLG1	40	54.1%	34.8	6.1	20.5	50.5
28-41 (2.0-2.9)	JLG2	17	23.0%	35.0	6.2	26.0	45.0
42-55 (3.0-3.9)	JLG3	14	18.9%	27.4	7.5	13.5	38
56-70 (4.0-5.0)	JLG4	3	4.1%	22.8	6.3	18.0	30.0
Total		74	100%				

Juniors in JLG3 and JLG4 scored significantly lower on W1 than FLG1 and FLG2 and also lower than JLG1 and JLG2, with JLG4 lower than JLG3

Junior W2

ELB Groups	Label	N	%	W1 Mean	SD	Min	Max	JLGW2-JLGW1
14-27 (1.0-1.9)	JLG1	40	54.1%	35.5	6.1	24.0	45.5	1.69
28-41 (2.0-2.9)	JLG2	17	23.0%	36.8	7.2	27.0	52.5	1.85
42-55 (3.0-3.9)	JLG3	14	18.9%	34.8	7.9	22.5	47.5	7.43
56-70 (4.0-5.0)	JLG4	3	4.1%	29.0	5.3	23.5	34	6.17
Total		74	100%					

The mean for students in all language groups increased from W1 to W2.

But it increased most dramatically for students in language groups JLG3 and JLG4:

JLG3 improved by 7.43% and JLG4 improved by 6.17%. (again, a small sample, esp. for JLG4)

Students with higher ELB scores did score lower on the initial WS,

BUT they also improved more dramatically during the course, from W1 to W2.

B. Correlations between ELB and W1 / W2

Multilingual students and Students with substantial non-U.S. education histories, as measured by the Education and Language Background survey (ELB), were likely to score lower not only on the totals of W1 but also on numerous individual dimensions of the rubric

Answers on the Education and Language Background Survey (ELB) **strongly negatively correlated with the scores on the first writing assignment (W1)..**

Altogether, there were 150 possible correlations: a grid (see table below) of 15 x 10: where 15 includes the 14 primary questions on the ELB plus the ELB total, and the 10 includes the 9 dimensions of the W1 score from the rubric plus the total W1 score. **Of those 150 possible correlations, 125 (83%) were found to be correlated at the 0.05 level**, and some of those were found to be correlated at the even more rigorous 0.01 level.

On W2, however, **70% of these strong correlations disappeared. Only 18 (12%) of the Question/Dimension intersections were statistically significantly correlated.**

This pattern is consistent with the patterns of the “ELB Groups” analysis.

See the tables in Appendix B:

The first table shows correlations between ELB questions / ELB total and Writing Sample 1. Shaded areas indicate statistical correlation at the 0.05 level. Correlation at the 0.01 level is indicated by **.

The second table shows the results from the same analysis of ELB and W2. Here we see that many of the correlations have disappeared below the statistically significant level.

III. Discussion:

This report has found that WRIT 30- benefits most directly some of our most vulnerable students:

- 1) transfer students making the transition from community colleges or elsewhere and**
- 2) multilingual students and immigrants who learned to read and write English in another country.**

In this final section of the report, I will discuss these findings in the context of several specific questions from the Education and Language Background survey, specifically (in order of discussion), questions #18 (transfer status), #10 (where students learned to read and write in English), #7 (high school attendance, U.S. or elsewhere), #3 (language identity), #4 (bilinguality), and #1 (born in U.S. or elsewhere). These questions, with results both from the WRIT 30- study and, for comparison, a study involving first-year York students a year earlier, may be found in the Appendix A. I'll also refer to #2, which asked students born outside the U.S. to supply the name of their country of birth.

A. Prevalence and Performance of Transfer Students

The junior-level research writing course Writing 30-is a distinctive feature of York College's spiral writing curriculum. For students who start at York, it should be their fourth writing course, after ENG 125 and two lower-level writing intensive courses (though some students put off their lower-level WI courses). But one of the lessons of this study is that only 35% of the students enrolled in this course began at York as first-year students. Since students with even a few transfer credits are likely to have taken first-year composition elsewhere, it is a fact that instructors and administrators be aware of (from the ELB):

Only about 1/3 of the students in the WRIT 30- classroom will have taken York's ENG 125, and about half of them are exempt from taking lower-level writing intensive courses. This means that for almost 2/3 of our students, WRIT 30- is the only writing course they are required to take at York before taking an upper-level writing intensive course in their major, for which WRIT 30- is a prerequisite.

So transfer students are the very substantial majority in WRIT 30- enrollment. What this study shows about transfer students, beyond their sheer prevalence, are two things:

- 1) Transfer students begin their career at York less well-prepared in writing, reading, and critical thinking than our home-grown York students.** We have made some strides in recent years in raising admissions standards, and in working on our ENG 125 and lower-level WI courses. But the transfer students have taken neither: they need a pedagogical intervention at this point in their career to help prepare them for the demands of upper-level writing courses in their major.
- 2) WRIT 30-, on the basis of this study, seems to be fairly effective at providing that intervention.** The gap between transfer students and those who began their academic careers at York has greatly narrowed and nearly disappeared by the writing sample at the end of the course.

As we consider how York should adapt to the new Pathways general education requirements, we should keep these facts in mind. Pathways will lead us to create a second semester of first-year composition—an idea which had already been proposed through our own General Education process—but this innovation

will not help our mainstream population: transfer students. Only a writing course positioned at the junior level will do that.

This is not to say that we must necessarily keep WRIT 30- in exactly its current format. Already our Gen Ed proposal contemplated making consolidating WRIT 301/302/303 into just WRIT 303 Academic Research, recognizing the existing reality that students were registering for whatever section fit their schedule rather than the nominal title of the course. Various innovations are possible: it may be, for example, that **some departments and majors may wish to take over the function of providing junior-level writing instruction for their own students**. If so, the Writing Program could provide support, training in writing pedagogy, and oversight to such a project, while continuing to offer the more general WRIT 303 for departments who prefer that option.

It is undeniable that York is only allowed 6 credits beyond the Pathways core, and that these credits represent an important resource across the campus. But it is beyond argument that our entering transfer students require some active writing instruction upon their arrival, and that **upper-level writing intensive courses in every major would be much more difficult to teach successfully without the preparation provided by WRIT 30-**.

2. Prevalence and Performance of Multilingual Students and those who learned to read and write in English outside the U.S.

For purposes of comparison, I include here results from the same survey given to first-year students in an earlier study in Fall 2009. Taking ELB questions #10, #3 #4 , and #1 together (see Appendix), we see that there are two distinct issues that arise for students, instructors, and administrators in WRIT 30-:

1) Multilinguality: While juniors are more likely than first-year students to have been born outside the U.S., they are also less likely to identify themselves as multilingual.

Among both first-year students and juniors, there is a substantial group of students—approximately 10% in both cases—who say that they “grew up speaking another language and have been speaking primarily English for seven years or less” (ELB, Q4). Since research indicates that it can take seven years or so before students are ready to develop academic skills in a second language, students in this group may be at risk and warrant further study and possible pedagogical interventions. These are students who would show up in

Education and Language groups #3 or \$# (JLG3 and JLG4—see II.A above).

The good news is that the mean for these students in JLG3 and JLG4 did show a marked improvement over the course of WRIT 30-, by 7.43 points and 6.1 points respectively, in both cases a more dramatic increase than the other two language groups. Further good news is that for JLG3 this put them right within the overall mean for the course. For JLG3, the bad news is that even with this improvement, these students still lagged behind the overall mean for W2, at 29.0 vs. the overall mean for W2 of 35.2. Still this was a very small sample (-3), so it’s hard to draw overall conclusions.

While both juniors and first-year students present a 10% minority of students who may require additional support and/or instruction due to continuing language learning issues, overall, despite a much higher proportion of recent immigrants than first-year students, juniors are much **more likely to describe themselves as monolingual English speakers (43.3% to 31.1% for FY students, ELBQ#1)** So

there is much more going on here than issues relating to writing in a “second language.” Thus while there are, as we have seen, serious “second language writing” issues for about 10% of the junior population, for a much larger proportion who are relatively recent immigrants, the issues are different, pointing to divisions **within** “English” rather than between English and another language. In order to explain this we need to look to students’ educational history.

2) Educational History:

juniors were 17% more likely than first-year students to choose the following response to ELB#10: “I learned to read and write in English in an elementary school in an English-speaking country outside the U.S.” 24.2% of juniors chose this response—a huge number. But the choice of this response raises more questions than it answers. Specifically, it leads us to ask:

a) How did the educational systems in which students studied define “learned to read and write”? How do these definitions continue to exert effects on students’ writing, reading, and critical thinking practices today?

b) In the cultural context into which these students were born, what, exactly, is the meaning of “English”? How might these connotations—and students’ later experiences with multiple “Englishes”—affect what they do when asked to complete a reading, writing, and critical thinking assignment in our classrooms?

a) **Educational systems:** How did the educational systems in which students studied define “learned to read and write”? How do these definitions continue to exert effects on students’ writing, reading, and critical thinking practices today?

Compared to our first-year students, **juniors are much less likely, by 28.5%, to have learned to read and write in a U.S. elementary school; in fact less than half of them did.** Furthermore, another ELB Question reveals that

18.6% of juniors did not attend a U.S. high school at all, and that an additional 14% attended a U.S. high school for less than 4 years. (ELB#7)

While the U.S. elementary and secondary education system has well-documented shortcomings, students who come through it are nevertheless certainly inculcated with U.S. educational values and procedures. They are familiar with U.S. pedagogical methods, and have had at least some practice with common genres of classroom writing in U.S. educational culture.

Juniors are less likely than first-year students to have come up through the U.S. school system. **Juniors are much more likely to be immigrants than first-year students—though 1/3 of first-year students are immigrants—a high number in itself—among juniors it is 59%.** They are also much more likely than first-year York students to be immigrants, and they are also more likely to identify as monolingual English speakers. Among juniors **the pattern of immigration is predominantly from English-speaking countries** (ELBQ#2), including the Anglophone Caribbean islands and mainland (especially Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad), and also post-colonial Asian and African countries, where English is a main component of the educational system (such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and the Philippines).

In the context of cultural diversity, we may add that many of the countries mentioned above operate on pedagogical principles that are at least somewhat different from the U.S. norm, and at minimum will require a period of adjustment for our students whose primary and secondary education has taken place abroad. Some students will require more than just time, however; in cases where they come from an

educational system that has not fully prepared them for a higher education system such as ours which puts a premium of reading, writing, and critical thinking, we will have to think about how to develop better ways of supporting such students and helping them to succeed at York.

b) **Multiple Englishes:** In the cultural context into which these students were born, what, exactly, is the meaning of “English”? How might these connotations—and students’ later experiences with multiple “Englishes”—affect what they do when asked to complete a reading, writing, and critical thinking assignment in our classrooms?

Researchers in the area of linguistic diversity are increasingly recognizing that a category such as “monolingual English speaker” is too broad to tell us everything that we need to know about a student’s language use. As English becomes a global language, there are multiplying varieties of “English” around the world (in fact there always have been, we are just recognizing them now), and our students bring their various “Englishes” to their classroom experience at York.

Even within an immigrant’s student’s country of birth, the meaning of “English” may be far from unitary. The submerged issue here is often one of class and/or of cultural identity. In Nigeria, for example, being a “first-language English speaker” is a marker of membership in an urban elite, while various “pidgen” varieties signify provinciality and/or lower class status. In Jamaica, to take another example, the educational system promotes a standardized “Jamaican English,” though for many students their native dialect is Jamaican “Creole” (or “Patois”), which is often stigmatized within the educational system. When students from any of these complex “English-speaking” backgrounds come to the U.S. and then to York, they may find differences in language use that range from the relatively straightforward (e.g. U.S. rather than British spellings) to more complex differences in diction or intonation, to larger issues involving rhetorical structures and genres. Furthermore, they may encounter in U.S. instructors subtle variations in attitudes that may range from annoying (e.g. frequently being called upon to repeat what they say in class due to pronunciation differences) to insidious (e.g. instructors’ usually unconscious assumptions that difference implies deficit). U.S. instructors of good will may find that they accidentally press psychic buttons from a student’s early experience and cultural training, triggering responses stemming from previous stigmatization or class differentiation.

So a student’s identification as a “native English speaker” and even a “monolingual English speaker” does not necessarily signify that there are no “language issues” to be dealt with in the college writing classroom. Exactly where these linguistic minefields are to be found is a matter for further research into the experience of our student population, which can lay the groundwork for developing better methods of instruction and support which take these complex linguistic identities, even within “English,” into account.

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Appendix A Selected Questions and Results from the Education and Language Background Survey

%	18TRANSFER–Transfer status
34	York is the only college I have attended.
3.1	I completed less than ten credits at another college before enrolling at York.
16.5	I completed more than ten credits but less than sixty credits before transferring to York
35.1	I completed an Associates degree at a community college before coming to York
11.3	I completed more than sixty credits at another college before transferring to York
100	Total ELB 18 18TRANSFER

10RWLNENGL	1st yr %	Junior %	Which statement best describes how you learned to READ and WRITE in English?	Jun - 1st yr
1	74.8	46.3	I learned to read and write in English in a United States elementary school.	-29
2	7.2	24.2	I learned to read and write in English in an elementary school in an English-speaking country outside the U.S.	17
3	6.3	10.5	I studied English fairly seriously in another country before coming to the U.S. and I was a proficient reader and writer of English when I arrived.	4.2
4	10.8	11.6	I studied some English in another country before coming to the U.S., but I would not describe myself as a proficient English reader and writer at that time.	0.8
5	0.9	7.4	I did not study English until I arrived in the U.S. after the age of 12.	6.5
Total	100%	100%	ELB Question 10	

07HIGHSCHO	1st yr %	Junior%	For my high school education (or equivalent)...	
1	87.8	67	I attended a U.S. high school for four years.	-20.8
2	5	5.2	I attended a U.S. high school for three years	0.2
3	0.9	6.2	I attended a U.S. high school for two years	5.3
4	0.9	3.1	I attended a U.S. high school for one year.	2.2
5	5.4	18.6	I did not attend a U.S. high school.	13.2
Total	100%	100%	ELB Question 7	

03 LANGIDEN	1st yr %	Junior%	Which statement best describes your background?	
1	31.1	43.3	English is the only language that I speak.	12.2
2	19.8	12.4	I use a language other than English in some situations, but I would not describe myself as fluent in it.	-7.4
3	16.7	10.3	I speak a language other than English fluently, but am more comfortable in English.	-6.4
4	25.2	26.8	I am equally comfortable speaking English and another language.	1.6
5	5.9	7.2	I am more comfortable speaking another language than I am speaking English.	1.4
Total	100	100	ELB 03LANGIDEN	

04BILINGUA	1st yr %	Junior%	Which statement best describes your background?	
1	25.9	38.1	English is the first and only language I have learned.	12.2
2	20.5	15.5	I began speaking English as a child and have only a very limited proficiency to speak or to understand in another language or languages.	-5.0
3	28.2	24.7	I learned English and another language simultaneously as a child.	-3.4
4	15	10.3	I grew up speaking another language but have now been speaking primarily English for more than seven years.	-4.7
5	10.5	11.3	I grew up speaking another language and have been speaking primarily English for seven years or less.	0.9
Total	100	100	ELB 04BILINGUA	

01USYNBORN	1st yr %	Junior%	Which statement best describes your background?	Jun-FY%
1	66.2	41.2	I was born in the United States and have lived here all my life.	-25
2	1.8	1	I was born in another country, but have lived in the U.S. since before the age of 2.	-0.8
3	7.2	5.2	I was born in another country, but came to the U.S. between the ages of 2 and 6.	-2.1
4	6.8	12.4	I was born in another country and came to the U.S. between the ages of 6 and 12.	5.6
5	18	40.2	I was born in another country and came to the United States after the age of 12.	22.2