

Electronic Writing Portfolio Readings Report AY 2020

Number of Readers:	11
Number of Portfolios:	130
Number of Papers:	390

Methodology

In Fall 2005, volunteers were solicited from the faculty and staff. Readers were required to be full-time at Eastern, to have completed a master's degree or higher, and to teach at least one undergraduate course each year. Twenty-three readers were trained at a 1 ½-day workshop by Dr. Robert O'Brien-Hokanson, Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of the Communication Ability Department at Alverno College. Readers came from all four colleges, the School of Continuing Education, the Center for Academic Support and Achievement, and Booth Library. A second training was held in October 2008, a third in October 2010, a fourth in January 2014, and a fifth in January 2017. A sixth training was held in January 2020. After the initial training, Dr. Karla Sanders delivered these trainings based on the work completed by Dr. O'Brien-Hokanson.

The following 2020 readers were trained at one of these sessions; they represent the following departments:

David Bell, Booth Library, 2020
Melissa Caldwell, English, CLAS, 2017
Karen Drage, Technology, LCBT, 2017
Mark Dries, History, CLAS, 2020
Terri Fredrick, English, CLAS, 2017
Colleen Kattenbraker, Kinesiology & Sports Studies, CHHS, 2017
Nicole Mulvey, Communication Disorders & Sciences, CHHS, 2014
Bryan Murley, School of Communication & Journalism, CLAS, 2020
Jeff Snell, Management, LCBT, 2005
Tim Taylor, English, CLAS, 2014
Marjorie Worthington, English, CLAS, 2014

Readers were urged to look at writing patterns across the portfolios rather than focusing on each individual document submitted to the portfolios. The reading guide asks readers to provide an assessment of writing ability for complete portfolios across seven aspects of writing: focus/purpose, organization, development, audience, style, mechanics, and use of sources. They completed a reading guide for each portfolio. Readers were also asked to assess each *portfolio* overall.

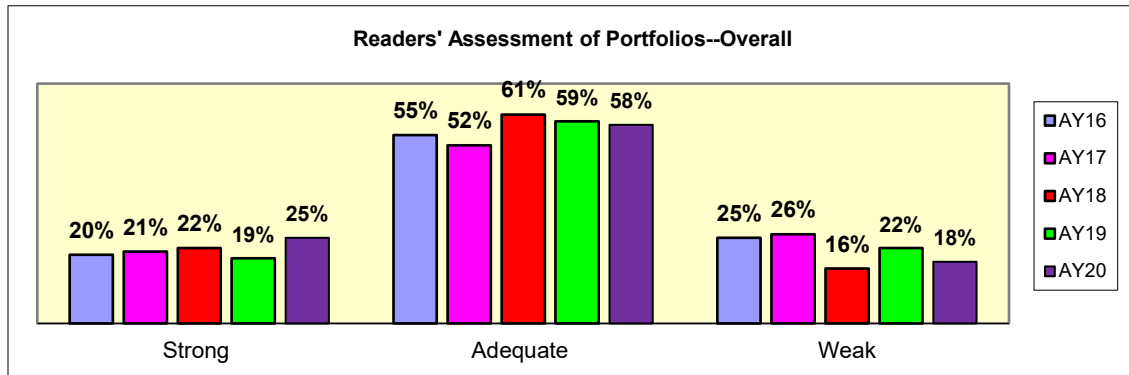
A sample of 10% of the completed portfolios are read each year; readers were given a month to read their portfolios, were given access to a secure file in One Drive, and were assigned to read 12 portfolios that were chosen at random from the completed portfolios. After reading their set of portfolios, readers were asked to complete a reader's observation sheet and to attend one of three focus groups held in March to discuss student writing as displayed in the portfolios.

The qualitative data that follow represent the discussions at the focus groups as well as information taken from the readers' guides and observation sheets; all information has been collated and summarized by the Executive Director of the Academic Success Center. The percentages given for each assessment of the various areas of writing are taken from a compilation of scores given by the readers for **each portfolio**, *not* each document, on the reading guide.

The following data are divided into the categories assessed by the readers. Each section gives the readers' impressions of the portfolios as a whole and the final section offers potential uses for the data in terms of improving the curriculum/pedagogy. Where appropriate, readers' written and verbal comments have been quoted to support the general conclusions that have been drawn. Percentages refer to the percentage of portfolios that were rated in the categories described.

Portfolios Overall

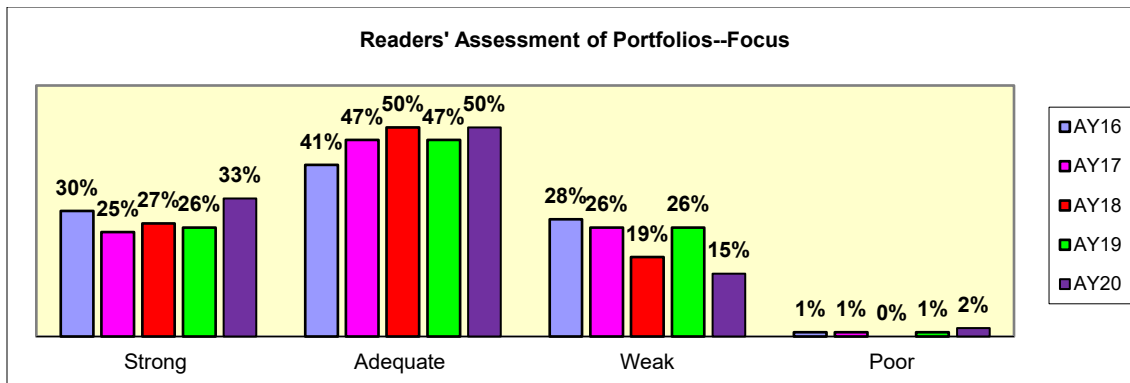
Strong Portfolios: 24.6%
Adequate Portfolios: 57.6%
Weak Portfolios: 17.6%



The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” rose this year, and several readers reported that this year’s portfolios seems stronger overall than last years. The majority of portfolios remain “adequate” with fewer portfolios overall were rated as “weak.”

Focus/Purpose

Strong (Consistently strong sense of focus/purpose throughout): 33.08%
Adequate (Clear focus/purpose in most or all submissions): 50.0%
Weak (Some evidence of ability to focus on a purpose): 15.38%
Poor (Very little or no evidence of focus): 1.54%

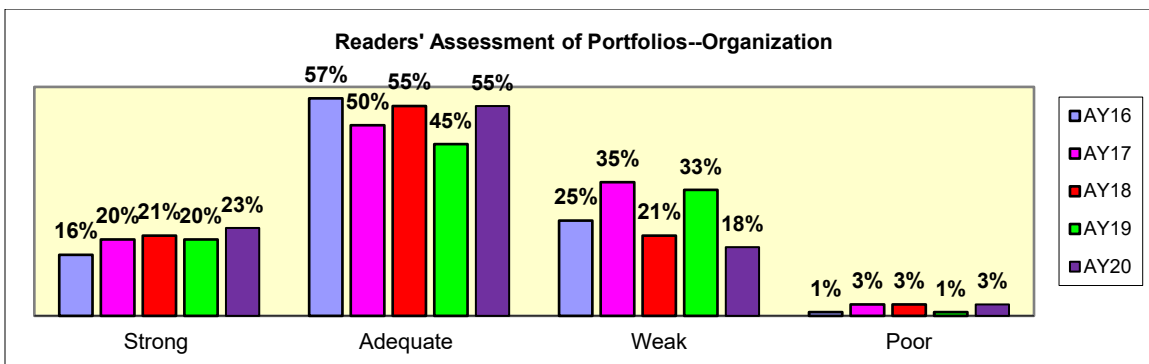


The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” in terms of focus and/or purpose rose by 7% this year. A number of long-time readers indicated that they thought students’ ability to stay on task and to focus on a given topic had gotten better over the years. Some made the distinction between focus and purpose and

indicated that students’ sense of having a specific purpose to writing was limited to completing an assignment, but they could stay focused on the topic given. Portfolios rated as “adequate” in this category also went up this year while those evaluated as weak were at an all-time low at 15%. One reader noted, “There were some that were really good at establishing focus, but a lot of times they were clearly responding to an assignment. So, it’s almost as if they start in the middle. Because there’s not a lot of setup of what their purpose is. They just start doing whatever it is that they are supposed to do. And that is probably fine in the classes that they’re in, because they’re given a specific assignment and they’re doing that assignment. But when you come in as an outside reader, it’s not always clear. there were a lot of them that did not do that. But, they knew what their purpose is, but it’s opaque to me as a reader.” Several readers indicated that many papers included a great deal of data-dumping without students selecting key points or sources that were the best to create their point. This was cited as a purpose as well as an organization and development issue. One focus group discussion centered on teaching students how to make choices for what information was crucial to include for one’s ultimate purpose.

Organization

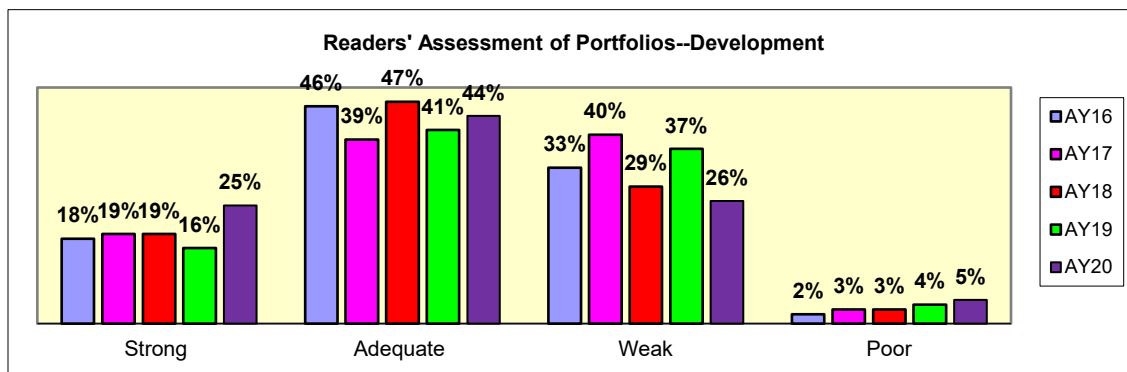
Strong (Consistent use of structure in ways that enhance presentation of ideas/information):	23.08%
Adequate (Logical organization and/or clearly identifiable structure):	55.38%
Weak (Inconsistent sense of structure and/or lapses in organization):	18.46%
Poor (Very little or no sense of structure or organization):	3.08%



While the percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” has gone up by 3% points, the largest increase in this category is the 10% increase in those deemed “adequate” coupled with the sharp decrease in the weak percentage. Since readers have noted that focus and organization often go hand-in-hand, an increase in this trait makes sense with the increase in focus numbers. Although there are fewer weak portfolios in terms of organization and readers noted that papers were easy to follow, few portfolios displayed sophisticated organizational methods that enhanced the writings. Readers indicated that overall they could follow the papers in the portfolios, but information and arguments did not seem to be structured in a purposeful way to lead a reader to a conclusion. Students seemed to be doing a great deal of data-dumping, eager to share everything they knew about a topic with their professor, rather than putting together a structure to enhance their purpose or to drive home their points. Transitions were described as “rudimentary.” One reader explained organizational issues in this way, “But what I got is that you could slice out any one topic, and as long as you took that transition sentence with it, you were okay. It didn’t implicate the rest of the paper in any way. It feels like the students are ready to take that next, more sophisticated, step, where what does it mean to truly integrate ideas together rather than just coupling between separate train cars.” Papers with headings or those following prescribed rules like scientific papers tended to have stronger organization than those without.

Development

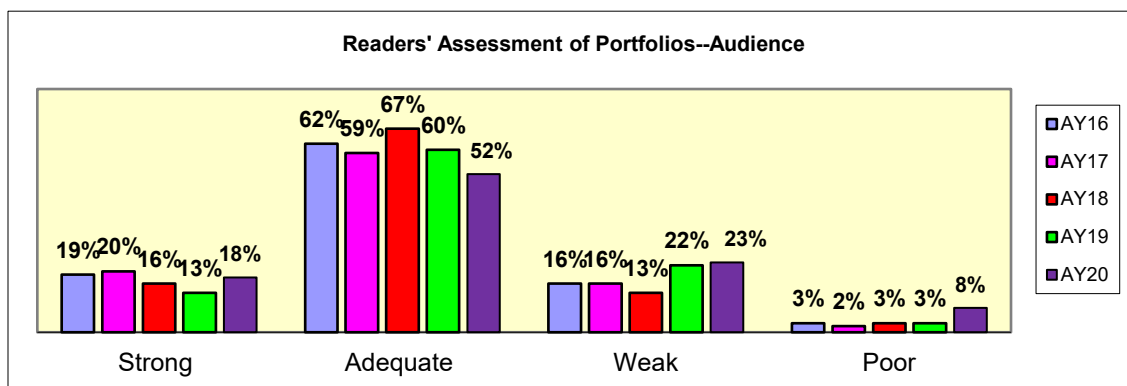
Strong (Ideas consistently developed in depth and supported with rich and relevant details):	25.38%
Adequate (Ideas developed in depth with appropriate supporting evidence/details):	43.85%
Weak (Some development of ideas and use of supporting evidence/details):	26.15%
Poor (Very little or no development of ideas or use of supporting evidence):	4.62%



Development has traditionally been one of the traits rated the poorest by our readers, but this year saw a 9% increase in the number of portfolios rated as “strong” and a corresponding 11% decrease in those deemed “weak.” One reader stated, “I thought this was strong this time. All the papers seemed to have lots of details. I had very few claims that were completely unsupported.” Many readers, however, indicated that few papers provided analysis of a subject. “I mean the point of college is kind of wallowing in complexity. And I didn’t see a lot of that. I saw a lot of reportage. You need to craft assignments that make students look at messy issues and kind of make it their own. And somehow confront complex issues or concerns in your discipline instead of just reporting what others say. I had a paper about the psychological effects of prayer and meditation, which was interesting, but it didn’t move to a different level because it didn’t stake a claim. I’m looking for what are the psychological underpinnings of praying or meditation and what does that mean to a larger society?” Students then, were able to offer details, including information from sources, to support their topics, but it was rare to see a strong argument that delved deeply into an issue.

Audience

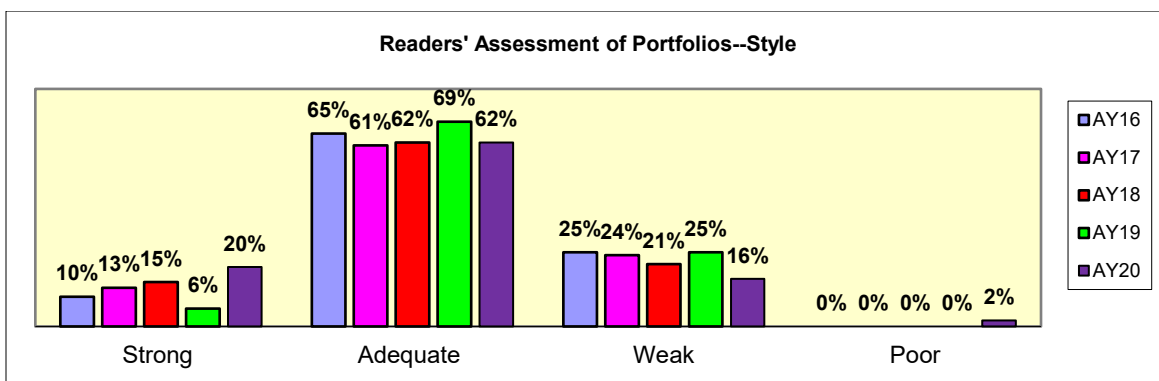
Strong (Sophisticated sense of audience—e.g., distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone):	18.46%
Adequate (Some awareness of and/or attempt to communicate with audience):	51.54%
Weak (Little or no awareness of audience):	23.08%
Poor (No sense of writing for an audience):	7.69%



Like several other categories, this trait saw an increase in strong portfolios. But, there is also a decrease in adequate portfolios and an increase in those evaluated as “poor” in terms of audience. Readers acknowledge that most papers seem to have one audience: the professor who gave the assignment. One reader explained that giving students a real audience related to one’s field might help students engage with material in new ways. “So, we’re writing for the teacher. We’re not writing for someone who might view it differently. It’s written for the teacher, which I get. You’re trying to get students to learn your discipline, or the issues with the discipline. But if you had a different conception of who the audience is, it might lead to something totally different.” Some readers suggested that faculty give assignments where there is not a right answer, where students might grapple with multiple sides to an argument, so that they could imagine an audience that did not agree with them and write from that perspective.

Style

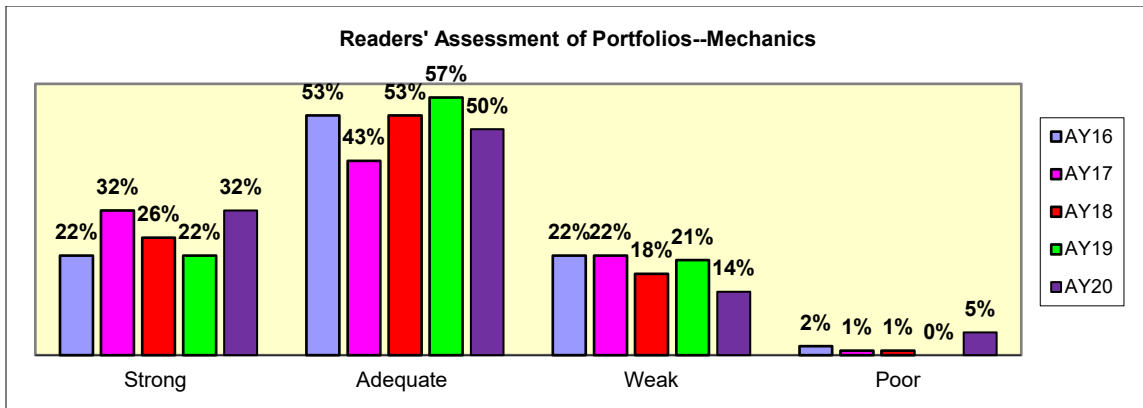
Strong (Sophisticated use of language (sentence structure, word choice) that enhances presentation of ideas/information):	20%
Adequate (Appropriate use of language that effectively conveys ideas/information):	61.54%
Weak (Use of language that is awkward, unnecessarily complex, and/or overly simplistic):	16.15%
Poor (Use of language that is highly inconsistent or indeterminate):	2.3%



In the twelve years of reading completed portfolios, few portfolios are ever rated “strong” in regards to style, but this year that percentage has grown considerably to 20%. Approximately two-thirds of the portfolios are ranked as “adequate” with 16% assessed as “weak” and only 2% as “poor.” Readers indicated that while most portfolios did not display a sophisticated sense of style, they were understandable and appropriate for college-level assignments. One reader summed up style, “Most were adequate, they did what they needed to do, in terms of style. Nothing extremely impressive, but they did the job.” Readers noted that improvements in style could be made if students had a richer vocabulary and used a variety of sentence structures. Some students interspersed formal language with colloquialisms and conversational asides. Issues with style that readers would like to help students avoid included the use of clichés and dictionary definitions to begin a broad discussion.

Mechanics

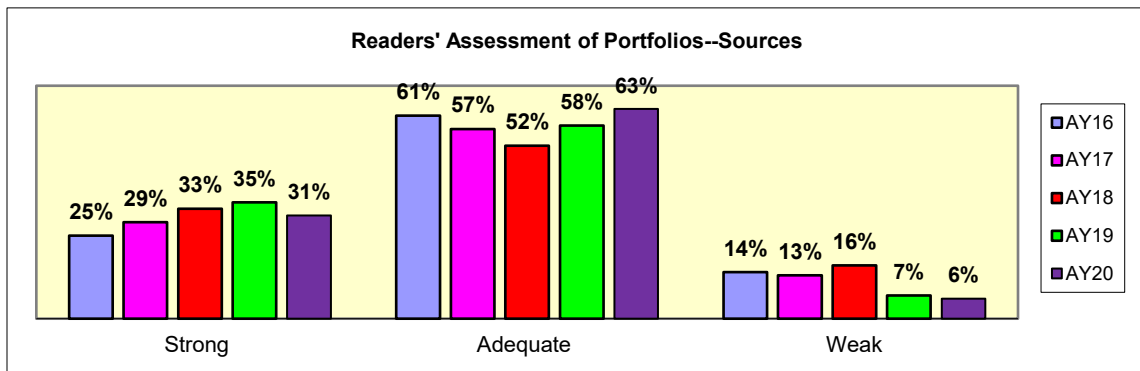
Strong (Few, if any, errors in mechanics relative to length and complexity of documents):	31.54%
Adequate (Some errors in mechanics that do not interfere significantly with communication):	50.0%
Weak (Patterns of errors in mechanics that affect clarity and/or credibility of writing):	13.85%
Poor (Large numbers of errors in mechanics affecting almost all aspects of the writing):	4.62%



Mechanics is the trait that most readers found to be stronger than others with 82% of portfolios in the “strong” or “adequate” categories. Readers indicated that most portfolios contained some mechanical errors, but the majority of papers were not incomprehensible due to these errors. The percentage of portfolios rated as “strong” in mechanics rose by 10% from the previous year, and the percentage described as “adequate” dropped by 7% while those assessed as “weak” decreased by 7%, but the percentage deemed “poor” rose by 5%. Readers indicated that many errors involved improper employment of comma rules and auto-correction that picked the wrong word to change for a misspelling.

Sources

Strong (Ability to integrate ideas/information from sources into own writing in meaningful and appropriate ways): 30.63%
Adequate (Some effective integration of ideas/information from source): 63.06%
Weak (Inappropriate/ineffective integration of ideas/information): 6.31%



Of the 130 portfolios read, 111 portfolios (85.3%) included at least one paper incorporating outside sources; this is a 2% decrease from last year. The portfolios assessed as strong decreased by 4% from 2019, those rated as “adequate” rose by 5%, and the weak portfolios related to sources decreased by 1%. Readers, however, indicated that students seemed to choose sources that were legitimate for their disciplines and seemed to understand the need to cite those sources in some way. Readers noted that students need practice integrating sources into the rest of the paragraph or paper because quotes tended to stand alone or be dumped into a paragraph with little set-up or follow-up. Students also tended to use quotations rather than paraphrasing when citing sources; this sometimes led to very long quotes full of little useful information.

Using Data to Develop Curriculum & Improve Pedagogy

After reading all of their portfolios, readers were asked to indicate ways in which the information gleaned from the readings could be used to develop curriculum and/or improve pedagogy. For several years, readers have noted that the majority of writing assignments given to students ask for reporting rather than advanced critical thinking like in-depth analysis or evaluation.

One reader suggested more faculty development through writing across the curriculum. “We need to start focusing on WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) by giving people who don’t write much in their own discipline a sense of what writing can do for students and their development, that they can learn how to do analysis, to think critically, to draw conclusions. That they can do that in writing. Not just spew back whatever it is they read, which is not a good use of anyone’s time.”

Readers noted that many papers showed students’ working out what they thought as they wrote. “I think that a lot of the writing just seems stream-of-consciousness so there wasn’t a lot of critical thinking. There was no major thinking process before the writing began. It was just like, I have to write about something. But that may have been the nature of some of the papers I had, if they were just a question and a particular topic.” Several readers found a number of papers that were “writing to learn” assignments where students went out and experienced something and then wrote a reflection piece on that new experience. These papers were more prevalent than research papers where students engaged in an issue in-depth. Several readers also had quite a few comparison papers in their portfolios. These assignments tended to rely on description and observation rather than any critical thinking.

Creating assignments where students are asked to place themselves into real world settings related to their class discipline is a way to strengthen skills like writing for an audience and development for an audience with a particular knowledge base. Two of the three focus groups discussed ways to craft assignments to be more creative for students in these ways.

Readers also suggested building more revision into assignments and coursework to force students to revise, which might improve on style and issues like transitions and weak conclusions. “Overall, the portfolios support the view that students write their assignments and they turn them in with little or no preparation prior to writing and little or no editing after achieving the desired length. In order to push students to think critically about structure, evidence, and audience, professors may consider integrating revision into the writing process—either as a follow-up assignment or as a second phase of the initial one. While this would appear to add to the grading time, a quick read of a second draft would reveal the extent to which a student implemented the suggestions made on the first.” One reader thought that writing courses in the disciplines would help improve student writing.

Other suggestions for helping students review papers included asking them to read their own work aloud or ask other students to do so in order to find awkward phrasing and mistakes.