

SEAS WRITING COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT, SPRING 2002

Putting the Evaluations in Context: Comments and Reflections from the Evaluators

While the evaluators agreed that the descriptions for the different levels of competency were appropriate, they also assumed that strong competence was not the highest level of achievement that student writers might reach. Thus, a score of 4 indicated that the evaluator judged a particular thesis as exhibiting either strong or superior competence.

In making their judgments, the evaluators often focused on the writer's ability to communicate effectively with non-expert audiences. They emphasized the importance of contextualizing the subject of the thesis to clarify its economic, social, cultural, and human significance and its applications in the world beyond the expert community. Success or lapses in this ability, which the evaluators usually referred to as "translation," often correlated to textual features such as definitions, organization, and transitions, all of which were taken as evidence of awareness of non-expert audiences.

No theses were assigned a score of 1 (incompetence or occasional competence). This result is not surprising given that fourth-year students produce theses as a final graduation requirement supervised by faculty over the course of the academic year.

In distinguishing between theses demonstrating strong competence and those demonstrating reasonably consistent competence, the evaluators noted the following differences:

- 1.) The strongly competent theses demonstrated more energy and engaged the reader more forcefully. They gave the sense that the writer was fully engaged in solving the problem being addressed. They developed the context of the project well and translated very effectively for the non-expert reader. In contrast, the reasonably consistently competent theses either (a) did not develop the context in enough depth to make a real connection between the reader and the subject or (b) did not sustain the process of translation throughout the document even though they communicated with the non-expert at the outset.
- 2.) The strongly competent theses used "return and remind" strategies to lead the reader throughout the document, especially at beginnings and ends of chapters. They sustained a strong line of development throughout the document. They also used headings and other signaling devices effectively. The consistently competent theses used organizational devices with reasonable consistency but did not use them as skillfully as the strongly competent theses.
- 3.) The strongly competent theses had strong conclusions that established the significance of the project and connected the project to its impacts and next steps. They emphasized the applications of the project and gave readers a sense of the trajectory of the project and of its connection to the world outside engineering. The reasonably consistently competent theses tended to portray the project somewhat in isolation from human and social context.

- 4.) The reasonably consistently competent theses sometimes had a mechanical quality to them. For example, they provided background information or history because they knew it was something they were supposed to do, but the background or history did not seem organically connected to their understanding of the problem or context of the project.
- 5.) The reasonably consistently competent theses sometimes had poor transitions or quotes not adequately integrated into the text and frequently had weak abstracts.

In distinguishing between levels of developing competence and reasonably consistent competence, the evaluators noted the following differences:

- 1.) The theses that demonstrated developing competence tended to be weaker in the areas of orienting the reader and making transitions among parts of the thesis. For example, the chapters did not seem clearly linked to each other.
- 2.) The theses that demonstrate developing competence showed a lack of variety in sentence structure, which interfered with coherence.
- 3.) The theses that demonstrated developing competence did not show as much care as they might with details of proofreading, mechanics, and document layout. They tended to have repeated errors and a pattern of inelegant or repetitive sentence structure.
- 4.) The diagrams seemed borrowed from other sources and did not apply exactly to the topic they were being used to develop.