

**Understanding Rhetorical Knowledge in Students' Writing from
ENG 096 to ENG 101/097 to ENG 102:
A Pilot Assessing for Purpose and Audience**



Unit assessment for English

Prepared by Kristin Marie Bivens, PhD

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Introduction

Popular conceptions of rhetoric give the field and its attendant practices in composition or writing a bad rap. When in fact, “Rhetoric is a complex discipline with a long history: It is less helpful to try to define it once and for all than to look at the many definitions it has accumulated over the years and to attempt to understand how each arose and how each still inhabits and shapes the field” ([Bizzell & Herzberg, 2011](#)). They continue:

Rhetoric has a number of overlapping meanings: the practice of oratory; the study of the strategies of effective oratory; the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade; the study of the persuasive effects of language; the study of the relation between language and knowledge; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and, of course, the use of empty promises and half-truths as a form of propaganda. Nor does this list exhaust the definitions that might be given.

Rhetorical knowledge includes--among other qualities--an awareness of audience and purpose. Writing with a clear purpose, and [“understanding and being able to analyze rhetorical situations can help contribute to strong, audience-focused, and organized writing.”](#)

Rhetoric’s role in composition or writing is well-established, which is why it is evident throughout the HWC writing curriculum, as well as the focus of this report’s assessment project. In fact, the 2011 [general education assessment report of effective writing](#) recommended that “the data presented [in the report] demonstrates that only a proportion of our students are meeting the . . . SLOs,” including “Compose texts across multiple disciplines and for various audiences, occasions and purposes” (p. 24)--that is, rhetorical knowledge. In this way, the general education SLO embodies and orients the rhetorical knowledge SLOs from ENG 096, ENG 101, and ENG 102.

Since ENG 096, ENG 101, and ENG 102 have final assessments built into these courses, instead of creating more writing to assess for rhetorical knowledge learning outcomes, this assessment project relies on existing writing assessments to understand how students meet a rhetorical knowledge learning outcome present across these writing courses. Since *ENG 096* launched its revised curriculum (spring 2018) for developmental reading and writing, its final assessment requires that students gather a selection of *revised papers* from ENG 096 and compile those papers in a portfolio. In *ENG 101*, students complete the *Exit Essay* (or Exam) at the conclusion of the semester; and the final assessment for *ENG 102* includes an *argumentative research paper*.

Department buy-in and outcome definition

Prior to beginning this assessment project in spring 2019, I discussed and shared information about the assessment project with the then director of developmental English (Prof. Maria Ortiz) and then English department co-chairs (Profs. J-L Deher-Lesaint and Sarah Liston), as well as communicated via email with an associate dean (Dr. Asif Wilson) regarding this project.

Since spring 2019, I have conversed with the director of developmental English (Prof. Jennifer Meresman) and the English department co-chairs (Dr. Rosie Banks, Prof. Maria Ortiz, and Prof. Megan Ritt). I have also briefly emailed with Dean Asif Wilson. I have been in steady contact with Prof. Willard Moody and other faculty regarding acquiring existing

assessment data for ENG 096, ENG 101, and ENG 102. Further, I shared information with colleagues as I encountered them throughout the semester, including at the English department meeting on Zoom on April 20, 2020. Most closely, though, I have worked with the incoming English department liaison, Prof. Ukaisha Al-Amin.

There has been steady interest in the project since it was launched in spring 2019. The longitudinal look at existing rhetorical knowledge ENG 096, ENG 101, and ENG 102 learning outcomes includes *purpose* and *audience* (two mainstay rhetorical situation/knowledge elements) integral to writing instruction and learning to write collegiately. The learning outcome was chosen because it exists in the entire course sequence. In other words, a rhetorical knowledge learning outcome currently exists on departmental syllabi for 096, 101, and 102, which is why the rhetorical knowledge outcome was chosen for this assessment.

Assessment research and design

Using rhetorical knowledge learning outcomes (see Table 1) and existing assessment data for each course (see Table 2), with assistance from the HW institutional researcher, Sandy Vue, I identified a purposeful sample of students who met the specific criteria (see Table 3).

Course	Rhetorical Knowledge Learning Outcome
ENG 096	Analyze rhetorical strategies used in course readings with an emphasis on: developing voice, tone, <i>audience</i> , and <i>purpose</i> .
ENG 101	Analyze how <i>audience</i> and <i>purpose</i> dictate an essay's content, structure, and style.
ENG 102	Analyze how <i>audience</i> and <i>purpose</i> dictate information included, the order of information, voice, language, and style.

Table 1 English course sequence and rhetorical knowledge learning outcomes.

Course	Existing Assessment
ENG 096	Revised Essay from Portfolio
ENG 101	Exit Essay
ENG 102	Research Paper

Table 2 English course sequence and existing assessment.

Based on the sampling criteria (items 1-3 from Table 3) 41 students¹ met criteria 1-3. To provide for similarity in learning environments, only students who passed these ENG 096, 101, and 102 in traditional 16 week courses were included. At the time of this writing, I have acquired 2 of the 41 students' complete existing assessment writings. That means, only 2 complete assessment artifacts for ENG 096-101-102 have been located. These 2 complete assessment writings were the focus of a pilot in spring 2020.

¹ In total and through fall 2019, I have identified 49 students who have taken and passed the 096-101-102 sequence.

Purposeful Sampling Criteria	
1.	student has taken and passed ENG 096 at HW in a traditional classroom (no online, no mini session, no hybrid)
2.	student has taken and passed ENG 101 or ENG 101/197 or ENG 101/097 at HW in a traditional classroom (no online, no mini session, no hybrid)
3.	student has taken and passed ENG 102 at HW in a traditional classroom (no online, no mini session, no hybrid)
4.	student has turned in/taken the exit assessments (see Table 2) for each class and the assessment has been located/supplied

Table 3 Student purposeful sampling criteria.

Pilot assessment tools and processes

The Writing Assessment Project Pilot Instructions explain the process for HWCAC participants to complete the pilot using the Rhetorical Knowledge Decision Tool for Audience and the Rhetorical Knowledge Decision Tool for Purpose. The entire pilot was designed to be digitally administered, which turned out to be serendipitous due to COVID-19 (DTC19). The HWCAC participants were provided the Writing Assessment Project Pilot Instructions and asked to read 2 pieces of student writing, then assess each of the 2 pieces of writing for either audience or purpose (Table 4).

Audience	Purpose
Does the writer define terms and concepts?	Does the writer identify a purpose or thesis statement in their first paragraph?
Does the writer explicitly acknowledge a reader?	Does the writer explicitly state a guiding idea in their introduction?
Does the writer make statements that indicate the reader's knowledge?	Does the writer repeat or refer back to their guiding idea in the body paragraphs?
Does the writer explicitly forecast the essay's organization in the introduction?	Does the writer implicitly address why they wrote the essay?
Does the writer include appropriate content?	Is it clear the writer either summarized, analyzed, synthesized, or evaluated?
Does the writer format their essay into logical, manageable chunks?	Does the writer return back to aspects of their guiding idea in the first sentence of most paragraphs?
Does the writer employ grammatical and mechanical correctness?	

Table 4 Rhetorical knowledge audience and purpose questions for readers.

Administer specific assessment

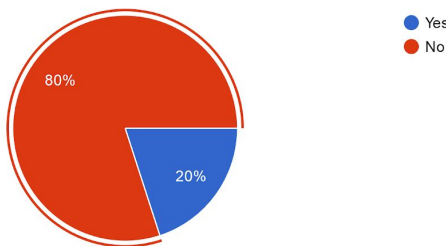
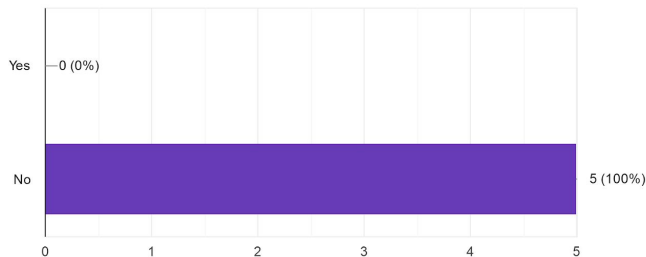
Since the project relies on existing writing assessments for ENG 96, 101, and 102, a specific assessment was not administered. Instead, the project uses artifacts from these writing courses (Table 2).

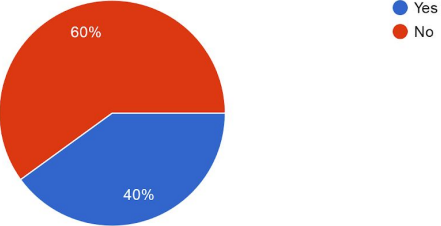
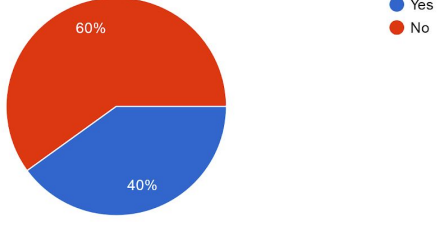
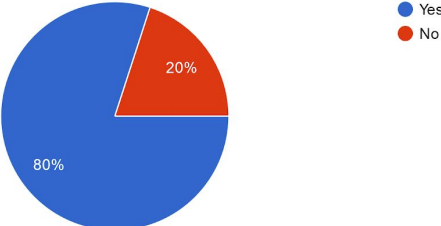
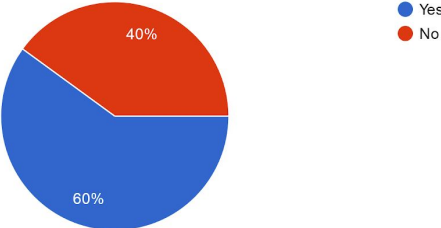
Data analysis

In the section that follows, the pilot results are presented for both writing sample A's and writing sample B's rhetorical knowledge assessment for audience and purpose. There are 7 audience questions and 6 purpose questions. Based on the open call for pilot participants from the entirety of the HWCAC and HWC departments, there were 5 responses from faculty graders for writing sample A (audience and purpose) and 6 responses for writing sample B (audience and purpose).

Writing Sample A: Audience

For writing sample A, the student's rhetorical knowledge for audience is reported (Table 5). Please note that writing sample A includes the revised ENG 096 essay; ENG 101 exit essay; and ENG 102 argumentative research essay in aggregate for a holistic interpretation of the student's rhetorical knowledge of audience.

A.Audience										
<p>Does the writer define terms and concepts?</p>	<p>Does the writer define terms and concepts?</p> <p>5 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>1</td><td>20%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>4</td><td>80%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	1	20%	No	4	80%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	1	20%								
No	4	80%								
<p>Does the writer explicitly acknowledge a reader?</p>	<p>Does the writer explicitly acknowledge a reader?</p> <p>5 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>0</td><td>0%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>5</td><td>100%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	0	0%	No	5	100%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	0	0%								
No	5	100%								

<p>Does the writer make statements that indicate a reader's knowledge?</p>	<p>Does the writer make statements that indicate a reader's knowledge? 5 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>40%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>60%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	40%	No	60%
Response	Percentage						
Yes	40%						
No	60%						
<p>Does the writer explicitly forecast the essay's organization in the introduction?</p>	<p>Does the writer explicitly forecast the essay's organization in the introduction? 5 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>40%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>60%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	40%	No	60%
Response	Percentage						
Yes	40%						
No	60%						
<p>Does the writer include appropriate content?</p>	<p>Does the writer include appropriate content? 5 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>80%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>20%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	80%	No	20%
Response	Percentage						
Yes	80%						
No	20%						
<p>Does the writer format their essay into logical, manageable chunks?</p>	<p>Does the writer format their essay into logical, manageable chunks? 5 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>60%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>40%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	60%	No	40%
Response	Percentage						
Yes	60%						
No	40%						

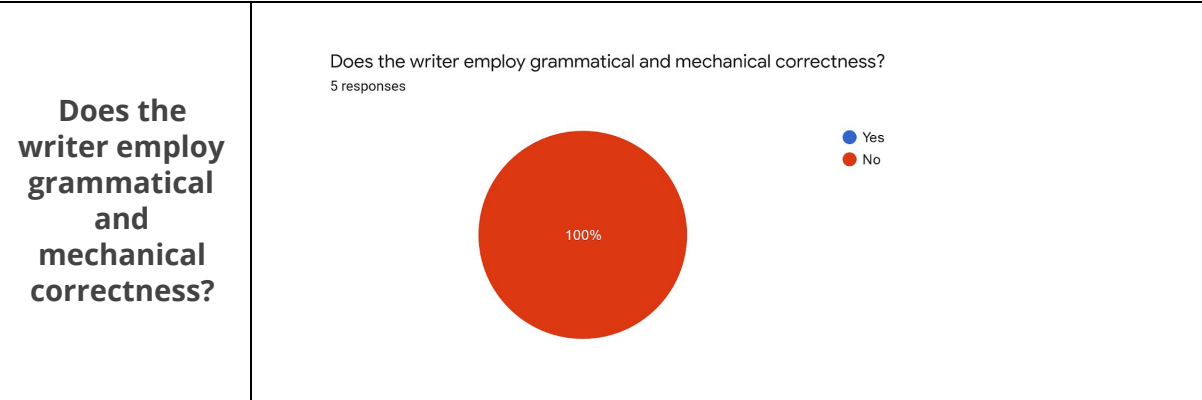
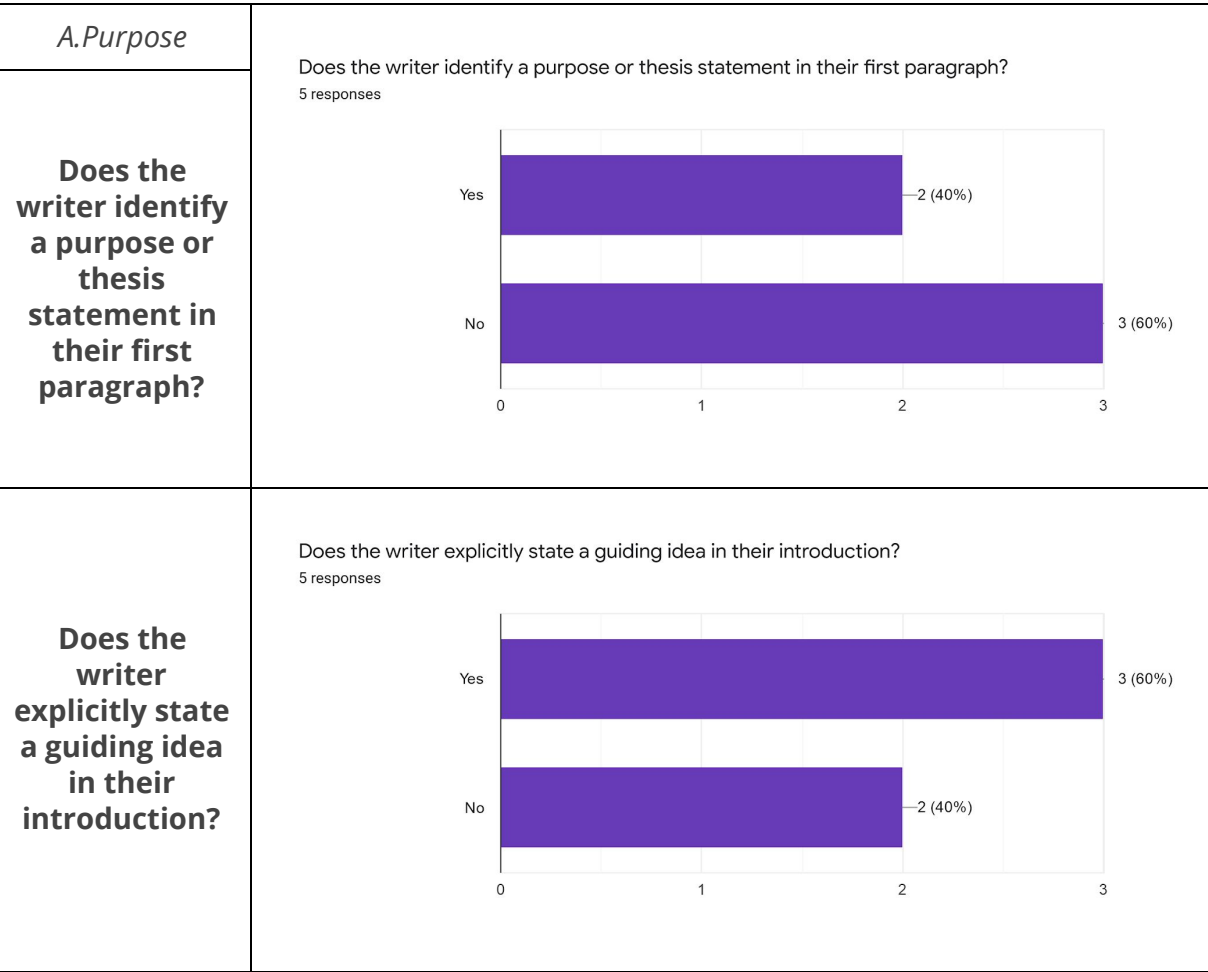


Table 5 Student A's pilot results for rhetorical knowledge/audience.

Overall, there were several questions with a clear consensus regarding whether writing sample A met the audience component of the rhetorical knowledge SLO; however, it is noted that the student who wrote writing sample A did not meet the threshold for rhetorical knowledge for audience.

Writing Sample A: Purpose

For writing sample A, the student's rhetorical knowledge for purpose is reported (Table 6) in aggregate for a holistic interpretation.



<p>Does the writer repeat or refer back to their guiding idea in the body paragraphs?</p>	<p>Does the writer repeat or refer back to their guiding idea in the body paragraphs?</p> <p>5 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>3</td><td>60%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>2</td><td>40%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	3	60%	No	2	40%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	3	60%								
No	2	40%								
<p>Does the writer implicitly address why they wrote the essay?</p>	<p>Does the writer implicitly address why they wrote the essay?</p> <p>5 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>1</td><td>20%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>4</td><td>80%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	1	20%	No	4	80%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	1	20%								
No	4	80%								
<p>Is it clear the writer either summarized, analyzed, synthesized, or evaluated?</p>	<p>Is it clear the writer either summarized, analyzed, synthesized, or evaluated?</p> <p>5 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>3</td><td>60%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>2</td><td>40%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	3	60%	No	2	40%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	3	60%								
No	2	40%								

Does the writer return back to aspects of their guiding idea in the first sentence of most paragraphs?

Does the writer return back to aspects of their guiding idea in the first sentence of most paragraphs?

5 responses

A horizontal bar chart with a white background and light gray vertical grid lines at intervals of 0.5. The x-axis is at the bottom, labeled with integers 0, 1, 2, and 3. There are two horizontal bars, both colored purple. The top bar is labeled 'Yes' on the left and extends to the 3 mark on the x-axis, with the text '3 (60%)' at its right end. The bottom bar is labeled 'No' on the left and extends to the 2 mark on the x-axis, with the text '2 (40%)' at its right end.

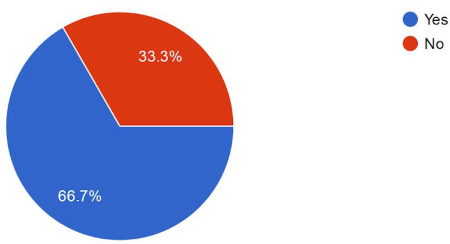
Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	3	60%
No	2	40%

Table 6 Student A's pilot results for rhetorical knowledge/purpose.

Overall, although there is not a clear consensus for regarding whether writing sample A met the purpose component of the rhetorical knowledge SLO, it is noted that the student who wrote writing sample A did somewhat meet the threshold for rhetorical knowledge for purpose.

Writing Sample B: Audience

For writing sample B, the student's rhetorical knowledge for audience is reported (Table 7). Please note that writing sample B includes the revised ENG 096 essay; ENG 101 exit essay; and ENG 102 argumentative research essay in aggregate for a holistic interpretation of the student's rhetorical knowledge of audience.

<i>B.Audience</i>	<p>Does the writer define terms and concepts? 6 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>66.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>33.3%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	66.7%	No	33.3%
Response	Percentage						
Yes	66.7%						
No	33.3%						
<p>Does the writer define terms and concepts?</p>							

<p>Does the writer explicitly acknowledge a reader?</p>	<p>Does the writer explicitly acknowledge a reader?</p> <p>6 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>2</td><td>33.3%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>4</td><td>66.7%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	2	33.3%	No	4	66.7%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	2	33.3%								
No	4	66.7%								
<p>Does the writer make statements that indicate a reader's knowledge?</p>	<p>Does the writer make statements that indicate a reader's knowledge?</p> <p>6 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>83.3%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>16.7%</td></tr></table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	83.3%	No	16.7%			
Response	Percentage									
Yes	83.3%									
No	16.7%									
<p>Does the writer explicitly forecast the essay's organization in the introduction?</p>	<p>Does the writer explicitly forecast the essay's organization in the introduction?</p> <p>6 responses</p> <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>66.7%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>33.3%</td></tr></table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	66.7%	No	33.3%			
Response	Percentage									
Yes	66.7%									
No	33.3%									

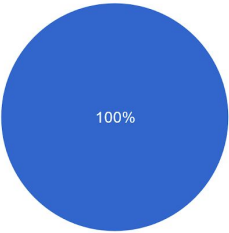
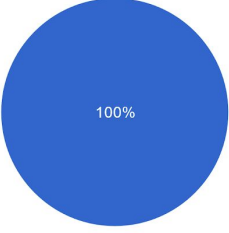
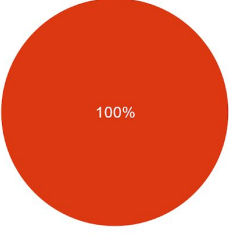
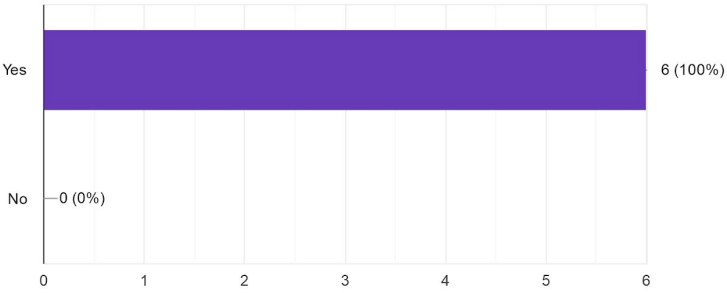
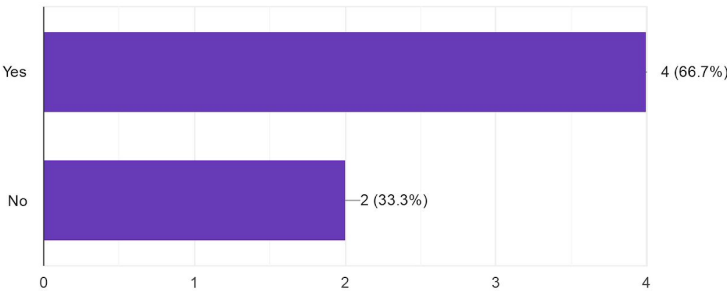
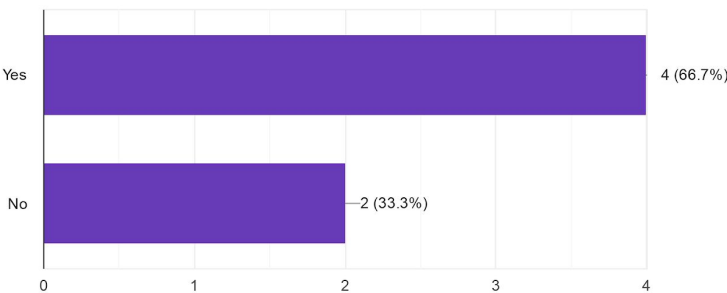
<p>Does the writer include appropriate content?</p>	<p>Does the writer include appropriate content? 6 responses</p>  <p>100%</p> <p>● Yes ● No</p>
<p>Does the writer format their essay into logical, manageable chunks?</p>	<p>Does the writer format their essay into logical, manageable chunks? 6 responses</p>  <p>100%</p> <p>● Yes ● No</p>
<p>Does the writer employ grammatical and mechanical correctness?</p>	<p>Does the writer employ grammatical and mechanical correctness? 6 responses</p>  <p>100%</p> <p>● Yes ● No</p>

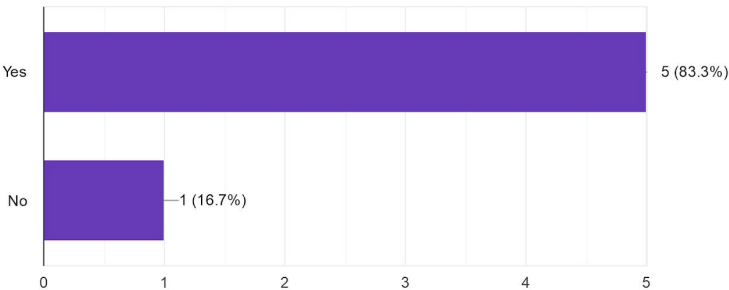
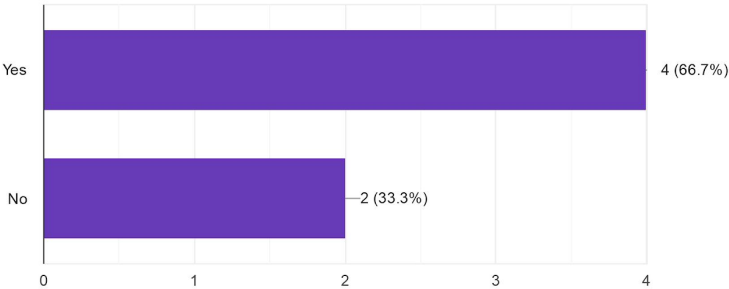
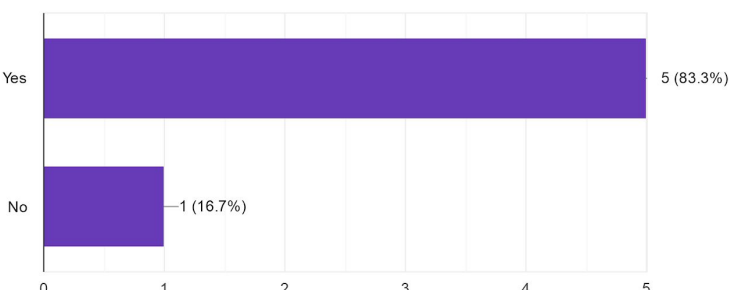
Table 7 Student B's pilot results for rhetorical knowledge/audience.

Overall, although there were several questions without a clear consensus regarding whether writing sample B met the audience component of the rhetorical knowledge SLO, it is noted that the student who wrote writing sample B does better meeting the threshold for rhetorical knowledge for audience.

Writing Sample B: Purpose

For writing sample B, the student's rhetorical knowledge for purpose is reported (Table 8) in aggregate for or a holistic interpretation of the student's rhetorical knowledge of purpose.

<i>B.Purpose</i>										
Does the writer identify a purpose or thesis statement in their first paragraph?	<p>Does the writer identify a purpose or thesis statement in their first paragraph?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>6</td><td>100%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>0</td><td>0%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	6	100%	No	0	0%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	6	100%								
No	0	0%								
Does the writer explicitly state a guiding idea in their introduction?	<p>Does the writer explicitly state a guiding idea in their introduction?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>4</td><td>66.7%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>2</td><td>33.3%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	4	66.7%	No	2	33.3%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	4	66.7%								
No	2	33.3%								
Does the writer repeat or refer back to their guiding idea in the body paragraphs?	<p>Does the writer repeat or refer back to their guiding idea in the body paragraphs?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>4</td><td>66.7%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>2</td><td>33.3%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	4	66.7%	No	2	33.3%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	4	66.7%								
No	2	33.3%								

<p>Does the writer implicitly address why they wrote the essay?</p>	<p>Does the writer implicitly address why they wrote the essay?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>5</td><td>83.3%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>1</td><td>16.7%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	5	83.3%	No	1	16.7%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	5	83.3%								
No	1	16.7%								
<p>Is it clear the writer either summarized, analyzed, synthesized, or evaluated?</p>	<p>Is it clear the writer either summarized, analyzed, synthesized, or evaluated?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>4</td><td>66.7%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>2</td><td>33.3%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	4	66.7%	No	2	33.3%
Response	Count	Percentage								
Yes	4	66.7%								
No	2	33.3%								
<p>Does the writer return back to aspects of their guiding idea in the first sentence of most paragraphs?</p>	<p>Does the writer return back to aspects of their guiding idea in the first sentence of most paragraphs?</p> <p>6 responses</p>  <table><tr><th>Response</th><th>Count</th><th>Percentage</th></tr><tr><td>Yes</td><td>5</td><td>83.3%</td></tr><tr><td>No</td><td>1</td><td>16.7%</td></tr></table>	Response	Count	Percentage	Yes	5	83.3%	No	1	16.7%
Response	Count	Percentage								
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No	1	16.7%								

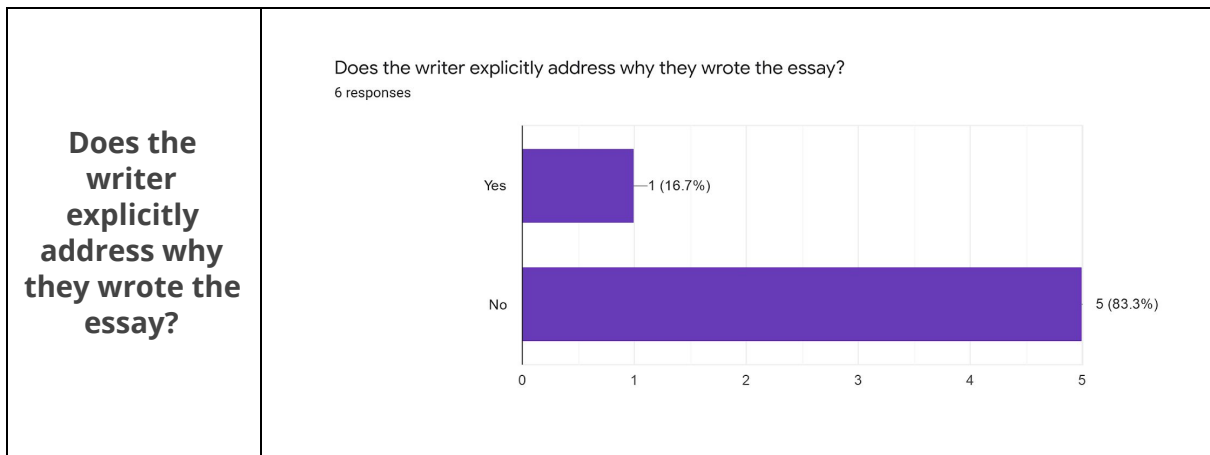


Table 8 Student A's pilot results for rhetorical knowledge/purpose.

Overall, there is mostly a consensus regarding writing sample B meeting the purpose component of the rhetorical knowledge SLO. Further, it is noted that the student who wrote writing sample B did meet the threshold for rhetorical knowledge for purpose.

To further contextualize the pilot results, the pilot process, and assessment tool, a separate survey solicited feedback from all faculty participants who were invited to assess using these rhetorical knowledge assessment tools. The aim was to not only gather feedback on the process, but also to understand the time investment and gather advice from moving out of the pilot phase into English department-wide assessment.

Based on the pilot, the 8 faculty participants who replied to the survey reported the instructions were clear and 7 faculty completed the assessment in fewer than 20 minutes, while 5 reported they completed the assessment in fewer than 15 minutes. The faculty participants also noted that training or norming would have been helpful prior to the pilot. In fact, in my estimation, norming would help to contribute to consensus building regarding responses. Of course, some of the inconsistency in answering the questions might be attributed to only two of the pilot participants teaching English.

Before these tools can be used to assess writing across the college, I recommend a norming session be held with faculty scorers who teach these ENG courses, both full- and part-time alike. This norming session can be used--not to quibble over terminology--but to train the faculty scorers so the assessment of these student writings are scored reliably. From there, I recommend college-wide norming and assessment of all kinds of student-writing to understand how rhetorical knowledge is displayed in lab reports, discussion board posts, or essays.

Supporting evidence-based change

To echo the [spring 2019 report](#), at this time, the most pressing recommendation is to *encourage ENG 096 faculty to digitally store their students' final portfolios* and for *ENG 102 faculty to digitally store their students' research papers*. However, DTC19, the ENG 096 and ENG 102 final assessments will be digitally available, which will be helpful gathering these assessments for the continuation of this project and *increasing the purposeful sample size*.

As a preliminary finding that aligns with the [general education assessment of effective writing from 2011](#), I suggest *writing faculty re-emphasize the role of rhetoric--audience awareness and writing with a clear purpose that reflects that audience's information needs--and*

rhetorical knowledge in their writing instruction. To do so, writing faculty might emphasize instruction that encourages students to write for a particular audience by

- Defining terms and concepts.
- Including appropriate content.
- Explicitly acknowledging a reader.
- Formatting writing into logical, manageable chunks.
- Making statements that indicate a reader's knowledge.
- Employing grammatical and mechanical correctness.
- Explicitly forecasting the essay's organization in the introduction.

Conclusion

The tradition of rhetoric continues to shape writers and writing, teaching and learning. Rhetorical knowledge includes a collection of proficiencies regarding audience and purpose that those who teach writing endeavor to impart to their students. The motivation of this report is echoed in the idea that "[understanding and being able to analyze rhetorical situations can help contribute to strong, audience-focused, and organized writing](#)," which is a goal of most writing and writing instruction. Although there are no current active programs in the English, Speech, and Theater department, by understanding how our students use rhetorical knowledge in the existing writing course sequence, I am hopeful to build a writing program in the department rooted in rhetoric.

Appendices

[Writing Assessment Project Pilot Instructions](#) (spring 2020)
[Rhetorical Knowledge Decision Tool Audience](#) (spring 2020)
[Rhetorical Knowledge Decision Tool Purpose](#) (spring 2020)
[Writing Assessment Project Feedback](#) (spring 2020)