As part of a larger initiative undertaking assessment of the University Studies Program, a committee of English faculty has been formed to undertake assessment of the Basic Skills area of College Reading and Writing. The committee has been developing an assessment plan since December and is now ready to solicit samples of student writing from Fall 2005 and Spring 2006 sections of English 111.

Our charge is to deliver a report on the assessment of this area by June 1, 2006.

The committee asks for your participation in this effort. We have made every effort possible to design an assessment initiative that is as unobtrusive to your classroom teaching as is possible. Data we collect will be completely anonymous and used only for the purpose of improvement of the program and curriculum.

We hope— but certainly do not require—that you will be able to participate in the following activities, each of which we detail further below:

1. Assigning an argumentative essay in the first week(s) of the term.
2. Assigning another argumentative essay in the last week(s) of the term.
3. Responding to a short (one- or two-page) questionnaire.

In the pages that follow, we provide more details about the project, including:

- General Notes: the Initiative, the Essay Instructions, Scoring Guide, and Questionnaire
- A Timeline of Related Assessment Activities
- Handout: Instructions for Administering the Assessment Essays
- Handout: Instructions for the English 111 Essay Assignment
- Scoring Guide to be used by the Reviewers
- Questions and Answers on the Initiative
Our assessment effort asks that English 111 students write two separate essays as indicated above, one in the first week(s) of the term, the second in the last week(s) of the term. We will provide identical instructions for each (attached), with the expectation that students will write on a different topic, based on different readings, in the second essay. The committee will sort, randomize, select, assess, analyze, and report on these at a later date; we expect to be able both to assess individuals’ development over the term and to establish baseline data about their end-of-term performance.

We expect that most participating instructors will likely use the first essay as an ungraded assignment for diagnostic purposes, and then to assign the second as a graded essay in their course. We recommend that students be given the assignment in advance of the due date (in other words, we cannot use handwritten in-class essays), and we will request that students submit two copies of each essay: one for your normal classroom purposes, and the other to submit to the committee for review.

**Essay instructions:** The attached essay instructions have been designed so that they can be simply distributed as a class handout—or modified or expanded as each instructor may desire. (We will make available a Word copy for those who wish to modify its language.)

As you can see, the instructions ask that students compose documented argumentative essays based on their reading of source material. As long as students are provided the basic language of these instructions, instructors may see fit to modify the assignment to suit their own purposes, such as increasing the length of the assignment or adding additional criteria.

With either or both assignments, you may ask your students to read material to which they have regular access as a matter of course in your class—such as a chapter from a topically-arranged reader, perhaps, or by requiring that they conduct their own library research, as many of you do. Or, alternatively, the committee can provide reading material from *CQ Researcher*, to which our library subscribes via electronic access, upon request.

**Scoring Guide:** We have attached a copy of a draft of the scoring guide we will use in assessing the essays. As is our charge, the guide addresses (most of) the USP outcomes for the course. The committee will review, test, and, if necessary, revise the guide this summer. You may choose to use, or modify, the guide to suit your own purposes as you see fit.

**Questionnaire:** The committee will distribute a questionnaire to English 111 instructors during fall semester of 2005 and will welcome your contribution. The questionnaire will likely address some basic questions regarding common course practices, such as the number, types, and lengths of formal and informal writing projects assigned; the amount, types, and range of the reading required; and the kinds of classroom practices employed in the course. We expect that we will be able to summarize and publish the results of the questionnaire early in the spring semester of 2006.
Timeline of Related Assessment Activities

April 2004: University Studies Program Assessment Plan approved by Faculty Senate and Accepted by Administration.

Fall 2004: Senate appoints faculty members to assessment committees for Basic Skills areas of USP, including College Reading and Writing (2004-2006).

Spring 2005: Committees meet with USP and Assessment Directors, review charge, and begin research. Area committee chairs attend AAC&U conference on general education assessment. Each area committee begins meeting separately to formulate plans and activities for collection and assessment of data. Basic Skills: College Reading & Writing committee develops plan for assessment in its area.

April 2005: Basic Skills: College Reading & Writing committee presents plan to English Department.

Summer 2005: Committee tests plan in selected summer sections of English 111; reviews, tests, and refines scoring guide; provides updates to faculty on developments.

Fall 2005: During Faculty Development Days (Aug. 22-26), committee meets with participating faculty to review activities.

Near start of semester, participating faculty assign first essay.

Near midsemester, participating faculty complete questionnaire.

Near end of semester, participating faculty assign second essay.

Committee begins review of essays and questionnaires.

Spring 2006: During Faculty Development Days (Jan. 5-11), committee meets with participating faculty to review activities.

Near start of semester, participating faculty assign first essay.

Near end of semester, participating faculty assign second essay.

May 2006: During Faculty Development Days (May 8-10), committee—with assistance from paid, trained scorers—completes review and analysis of essays.

June 2006: Final report on activities due.
Instructions for Administering the Assessment Essays

1. Select any set of readings you think appropriate to the class and the assignment. If you wish, you may instead elect to have the committee provide readings from CQ Researcher. Email J Paul Johnson at pjjohnson@winona.edu for copies.

2. Provide your students with a copy of the instructions for the essay assignment. Indicate on the assignment sheet the readings assigned and the due date. If you would like a Word copy, so that you can modify or add to the instructions, contact pjjohnson@winona.edu.

3. When students submit their essays, collect one copy from each student, place the set in the folder we provide you, and leave them in J Paul Johnson’s mailbox. Please include along with the stack of papers a copy of the instructions you provided to students. (Note: you may elect to block out the students’ names, or the committee can do so for you.) The other set of essays is for you to keep for your own purposes.
Instructions for the English 111 Essay Assignment

Required reading for this assignment:

Your task is to analyze carefully the rhetoric and structure of the assigned material, and write an essay that articulates and supports a clear position on an issue raised by the reading.

Imagine your audience to be a college-educated community of learners interested in your position.

Use a recognized format for presentation and citation (such as MLA, APA, etc.). You may make use of a handbook, dictionary, or other additional resources as appropriate. Appropriate length: approximately four double-spaced pages or 1000 words.

You should strive to …

- construct a coherent essay based on a critical reading of the assigned texts;
- formulate intelligent claims and make purposeful, appropriately documented use of authoritative sources as supporting evidence;
- adapt the structure, content, and tone of your writing to the knowledge and attitudes of your audience;
- use vivid, concrete language; concise, varied sentences; unified, cohesive paragraphs; gender-inclusive English; and a college-level vocabulary; and
- proofread, edit, and correct your final copy for common errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage.

Please submit TWO copies of this assignment on the assigned date: __________. INCLUDE YOUR TECH ID NUMBER AT THE TOP OF YOUR FIRST PAGE.
Questions and Answers on the Initiative

*Why are we bothering? What can we hope to learn?*

The university is obligated to report on its assessment of University Studies, and the Assessment Plan noted above has been approved by Senate and accepted by the Administration. Other committees are undertaking the assessment of the other Basic Skills areas, and assessment of the Arts & Science Core classes will begin next year as well. But more pertinent to teaching faculty is the potential to learn how well our students are progressing through the required class. From this initiative, we should gain meaningful data about ...

- the success with which English 111 students achieve the course objectives;
- the improvement students demonstrate in achieving those objectives;
- course objectives which are met more consistently than others; and
- classroom practices that help students meet those objectives.

We hope that the department can make good use of the data we collect in determining possible areas for curricular or pedagogical improvement.

*What will the final report address?*

As detailed in the University Studies Program Assessment Plan, the final committee report is to address the following:

- the number and percentage of students involved;
- a description of the process of data collection and analysis;
- results of the current-year assessment; and
- suggestions for improvement or action based on the results.

The committee’s responsibility will be to provide copies of the finished report to the University Studies Subcommittee and to the department by June 1, 2006. The report, along with others provided by committees assessing the other three Basic Skills areas, will be furnished to the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools as an appendix to a progress report on the development, implementation, and assessment of University Studies, due September 1, 2006.

*What if I don’t participate?*

We will hope to be able to collect essays from as many 111 sections as can participate, but we recognize that some sections may not be able to accommodate us. Our goal is to be able to cull a randomized sample of essays from as large a pool of sections as possible.
What if I agree to participate, and then back out? Or what if I agree to participate but encounter difficulties in accommodating the initiative?

Your first obligation is to the integrity of your own classroom teaching. If you cannot reasonably accommodate our requests, we understand. We have aimed to make the assessment as unobtrusive as possible, but we recognize as well that what we ask may simply not be feasible for all instructors.

What if I can only respond to your questionnaire, and not to the request for papers—or vice versa?

Either of these contributions will be greatly welcome.

What if I can only accommodate the first assignment, and not the last—or vice versa?

Since we aim to collect data on students' improvement from the first to the last, in these scenarios we would not be able to use the papers from your class.

If I agree to participate, what's in it for me?

First, you will have, based on the first diagnostic essay, a helpful indication of each of your students' strengths and weaknesses with the kinds of reading and writing skills emphasized in the course. Second, you will be able to gauge, in comparing each of your students' first paper with the last, his or her development over the semester with each of the stated criteria. Since the results of the study will provide the department with an overall picture of students' levels of accomplishment and progress with each of those same criteria, you will be able to compare your students' results with those of others. (However, the committee will not be assessing the results by section; nor can we promise to provide complete results from each participating section, since we will be reading a randomized sample of the essays we collect.)

A last benefit is one that is too often implicit in discussions of assessment initiatives. Frequently, they can have the benefit of bringing faculty together in discussion of common goals and practices. These discussions are valuable in their own right.

What will I have to do to get started?

Whenever you are planning your 2005-06 English 111 courses, please consider the possibility of including a diagnostic essay and a later argumentative essay. (To our knowledge, many 111 instructors do so already.) The committee will provide reminder messages as the summer progresses, an informational meeting before classes begin in the fall, and updates on the initiative throughout the year. A handout providing simple instructions is provided.