

***UNF Writes and Self-Talk—***  
**How to Assess Your Level of Compositional Skill**

**I: Holistic versus Trait-Specific Evaluation**

At the Olympic games, many events, like gymnastics or diving, are judged holistically. The athlete performs a routine or engages in a complex set of maneuvers and receives a single score. This single score is a global or holistic judgment about the overall level of the athletic performance, each individual aspect of which may or may not be executed with the same degree of bodily coordination, precision, control, fluidity, elegance, grace, or other dimension of expertise. As television audiences wait for the score, commentators break down the performance into its component parts and evaluate one or more of its individual features or traits. In doing so, commentators provide an inside view into the way athletes and their trainers talk to themselves and each other about what the athlete has done well and needs to keep doing well, what the athlete needs to do differently and why, and how the athlete can better integrate all of his or her movements into a continuous performance that is masterful at any one moment or in any one element of as well as throughout its execution.

When one writes a paper, one produces a piece of writing that has numerous components. An instructor may comment on some of these components—word choice, for example, the presence or absence of appropriate and adequate supporting evidence, stylistic grace, and so on—but usually assigns an overall grade.

In ENC 1101, your instructors will evaluate your writing on several specific components—for example, thesis, logic, evidence, mechanics, intellectual mastery, and perhaps others. In order to help you understand how your instructor talks to himself or herself about your writing, we have devised what we call “self-talk” rubrics. These are statements that define different levels of sophistication with respect to different aspects of writing. We offer these

statements as guides for talking to yourself about your own writing. If you will use these statements in this way, you will increase your chances of being able to step back from your writing and read it with the eyes and hear it with the ears of others—your instructors, for example. People who write well have learned how to talk to themselves in the way that expert editors talk to themselves (or might if they took the time to put into words what they recognize is poorly written and could be revised in certain ways) as they read.

If you do not learn how to talk to yourself in something of the way that your professors do when they read student work, you will be at the mercy of your instructors. They make professional judgments about your work. If you want to achieve the compositional skills that your instructors have and that lead them to their judgments about your particular work, you will increase your chances of success if you understand what they are looking for and why—which is to say, if you understand how they talk to themselves about the level of expertise you have or have not achieved with regard to specific features of your writing as well as with regard to your overall compositional excellence.

Here, then, are five examples of “self-talk” rubrics:

**Rubric 1: Thesis (or Central Idea)**

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Essay fulfills all the requirements of Rating 5 and achieves a level of artistic mastery which may be marked by an innovative, authentic, and provocative thesis.	6
Essay contains an analytic statement that is clear; that elaborates on multiple implications; that identifies non-obvious (surprising, counter-intuitive) complexities of meaning and implications; and that does so at a sophisticated level.	5
Essay contains an analytic statement that is clear and that elaborates on multiple implications.	4
Essay contains an analytic statement that is clear and that only elaborates on one or two implications.	3
Essay contains an analytic statement that is clear but that does not elaborate on implications.	2
Essay contains a minimal statement that summarizes rather than analyzes or interprets.	1
Essay does not provide a clear thesis.	0

### Rubric 2: Logic (Logical Coherence and Development)

Trait	Rating
All the requirements of Rating 5 for all ideas are fulfilled and further the writing achieves a level of artistic mastery which may be marked by innovative, authentic, and provocative structure.	6
Almost all ideas are logically developed and directly linked to an analytical thesis that identifies non-obvious (surprising, counter-intuitive) complexities of meaning and implications. Almost all ideas are connected at the sentence and paragraph levels with appropriate use of transitional words and phrases. Almost all paragraphs are clearly focused on the development of the thesis.	5
Almost all ideas are logically developed and directly linked to an analytical thesis. Almost all ideas are connected at the sentence and paragraph levels with appropriate use of transitional words and phrases. Almost all paragraphs are clearly focused on the development of the thesis.	4
Most ideas are logically developed and directly linked to an analytical thesis. Most ideas are connected at the sentence and paragraph levels with appropriate use of transitional words and phrases. Most paragraphs are clearly focused on the development of the thesis.	3
Some ideas are logically connected and linked to an analytical thesis. Transitional words and phrases at the sentence and paragraph levels are used inconsistently. Some paragraphs are clearly focused on development of the thesis.	2
A few ideas are logically connected, but they are not linked to a thesis. Paragraphs lack focus, organization, and transitions.	1
The ideas are not logically connected; lack of transitions hinders understanding.	0

### Rubric 3: Evidence

Trait	Rating
Student fulfills all the requirements of Rating 5 and further achieves a level of artistic mastery which may be marked by innovative, authentic, and provocative use of evidence.	6
Student incorporates and analyzes a range evidence that is significant, sufficient, and appropriate for the rhetorical situation; student also incorporates and analyzes some evidence that seems to contradict the overall purpose, claim, argument or rhetorical situation and components.	5
Student incorporates and analyzes much evidence that is significant, sufficient, and appropriate for the rhetorical situation.	4
Student incorporates and analyzes some evidence that is significant, sufficient, and appropriate for the rhetorical situation.	3
Student incorporates evidence, but evidence is limited (significant, sufficient, appropriate) for the rhetorical situation or limited in analysis.	2
Student incorporates a single source of evidence and/or evidence lacks analysis.	1
Student incorporates no evidence.	0

#### **Rubric 4: Mechanics (Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation, Spelling)**

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Writing is error free and further achieves a level of artistic mastery which may be marked by innovative, authentic, and provocative style.	6
Writing contains 0 errors and entails masterful syntax, diction, and tone.	5
Writing contains 0-1 errors (i.e. deviations from Edited Standard Written English) on any one page.	4
Writing contains 2 errors on any one page.	3
Writing contains 3 errors on any one page.	2
Writing contains 4 errors on any one page.	1
Writing contains 5 or more errors on any one page.	0

#### **Rubric 5: Intellectual Mastery (of Any Concept)**

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Rating</b>
Student fulfills all the requirements of Rating 5 and further achieves a level of artistic mastery which may be marked by innovative, authentic, and provocative thinking.	6
Student provides a detailed definition and analysis of the concept, discusses important implications and complications concerning it, provides more than one illustration and a complex understanding of the concept.	5
Student provides a detailed definition of the concept, discusses important implications and complications concerning it, and provides more than one illustration.	4
Student provides a more detailed definition and illustration of the concept.	3
Student provides a simple definition and illustration of the concept.	2
Student provides a simple definition of the concept but does not illustrate it or specify its significance or any complications concerning it.	1
Student incorrectly defines or misapplies or otherwise indicates a faulty understanding of the concept.	0

## **II: Why These Rubrics and Not Others?**

In fact, there are many possible traits for which “self-talk” rubrics could be devised. We have focused on the above five because they specify important features of a type of writing—the thesis-driven analytic essay—that you will be required to do throughout your college career.

It is important to understand that no one just “writes.” One always writes in some genre and for some audience with certain goals in mind rather than others and under certain constraints (a deadline, for example, or a length requirement or restriction).

There is no single way to write well because there is no single kind of writing. Different

kinds of writing involve different features, elements, or components—different “traits.” Some kinds of writing—the analytic essay, for example—require the author to formulate a thesis, to develop one or more arguments in order to elucidate the meaning, implications, and importance of the thesis, and to provide appropriate and adequate evidence in support of the argumentation.

Experiments and lab reports require the writer to formulate an hypothesis, to conduct an investigation that follows a precise procedure, to collect and analyze data and discuss its pertinence with respect to the hypothesis, and draw conclusions.

How-to manuals and “instructions” of all sorts require the writer to explain, step by step, what the reader must do in order to bring about the outcome that the manual or instructions are designed to help you achieve.

Other types (“genres”) of writing involve different requirements and can be broken down into different “traits.”

Thus, other rubrics could be devised for any “trait” that an instructor wishes students to master—for example, *conventions of style* (such as MLA or APA), or *conventions of a particular genre* (for example, a summary paper, a research paper, a contract, a letter of reference, a personal statement for an application to law school), *originality*, *persuasiveness*, *sophistication of vocabulary*, *sentence clarity*, and so on.

Again, we have presented five rubrics that distinguish among seven levels of achievement on five aspects of a basic genre of paper—a thesis-driven analysis—which will be assigned in many of the courses you will take between now and graduation. These rubrics can be used to assess your own writing as well as the writing of others—including the writings in this reader.

### **III: Why Seven Levels?**

We have specified seven levels per trait to make explicit that the levels of intellectual

achievement or mastery are not necessarily the same as the levels for particular grades. Some faculty might regard a rating of 4 on “Level of Intellectual Mastery” as earning a student an A. Some faculty might regard a rating of 5 as necessary for an A. In either case, however, just because a student earns an A does not mean that he or she has achieved the highest level that might be possible.

Athletes understand that what constitutes the equivalent of a top grade changes as one enters at higher and higher levels of competition. Each successive level requires increasingly sophisticated skills. In Little League, to hit a home run a player must hit the ball 180 feet and clear a fence that is approximately four feet high. In the major leagues, a player must hit the ball 270-400+ feet and clear fences that are much higher. In track and field, the best female high school athletes can vault 12+ feet; the best female Olympic pole vaulter has cleared over 16.5 feet; and the world record holder has ascended over 20 feet. What is true of baseball and pole vaulting is true of all sports: every athlete readily recognizes that the “bar” is raised as one moves from high school to college and beyond. In each of the above five rubrics, the highest level points to an artistic understanding and performance of any trait much as the Olympian record holders are the artist of their sports.

#### **IV: The Value of Writing Well**

Years ago the Small Business Association (SBA) reported that the single most important factor in the success of small businesses is the communication abilities of the business owner and his or her workers, and that the single most important sub-factor is the ability to write well. In 2006, the SBA “Journalist of the Year,” Jerry Chautin, declared that the “ability to convey your thoughts in writing is essential to communicating with employees and convincing prospective customers. Inability to do so greatly increases the probability of failure. In fact . . . the capacity to clearly communicate your vision is the No. 1 skill necessary for business success.” [1] More

recently, the Isenberg School of Business at the University of Massachusetts offers the following statement of the value of its program in business communication: “No skill is more crucial to business success than the ability to communicate effectively. With today’s dynamic workplace, where technology presents new efficiencies—and new challenges—for communication, your ability to think critically, craft messages and reach audiences will be put to the test. The Business Communication Program will prepare you for these challenges.” [2] A quick search of the internet will disclose countless affirmations of the link between writing ability and success in any activity that involves communicating complex information.

More generally, people who can write clearly and cogently have opportunities to influence the world in small ways (writing clear instructions, for example, on how to assemble or trouble-shoot some device) and large (formulating a sound policy in language that ordinary citizens can understand). They have opportunities to provide information that, because it is clearly organized and clearly articulated, others can readily grasp and use in their daily lives. They have opportunities to put into words what others can sense or intuit but not know how to say, or to clarify what is imprecise and blurred, or to make explicit what is implicit, and so on.

Here, then, is to your success in learning how to write well and then still more expertly and to the opportunities that your skill may create for you.

### **Notes**

1. Jerry Chautin, “Clear, Concise Writing Important for Success in Business,” The HeraldTribune (10 September 2006). <http://www.heraldtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060910/COLUMNIST07/609100486>. Accessed 11 July 2009.
2. See <http://www.isenberg.umass.edu/businesscommunication/>. Accessed 11 July 2009.