Academic Writing in a Liberal Arts Curriculum in Asia: Culture and Criteria

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Western-heritage academic writing—which presents an argument with logical reasoning and supporting evidence within particular rhetorical forms—has for centuries been an integral part of liberal arts education in North America and Western Europe. In Asia, where liberal arts education and its concomitant emphasis on critical thinking is gaining momentum at the university level, there are significant challenges in implementing a pedagogical and curricular model so fundamentally different from the students' secondary school experience. At International Christian University, the first liberal arts university in Japan, students are guided through this paradigmatic and cognitive shift from what could be loosely called the Confucian-style transmission model to the Socratic argumentative model in their first-year English program. In this paper the authors—writing teachers and liberal arts educators—argue that clear and coherent rubrics for evaluating writing are an invaluable aid in helping students make this transition: Explicit criteria make the cultural and educational assumptions of students' new context more transparent and help them understand and internalize the principles of good academic writing. This paper introduces two problematic rubrics used in their English for Liberal Arts curriculum and contrasts them with a third that they recommend be used—due to its simplicity and focus—across courses and curricula (with individual adaptation) in a liberal arts setting. In the main, the authors argue against excessive emphasis on discrete grammar-related language usage in assessing writing and providing feedback and instead for an emphasis on the ideas presented and their logical, critical, and creative exposition.

1. Introduction

Academic writing—that is, writing that elaborates ideas by positing an argument with logical support—has been an integral part of western liberal arts education for centuries. In Asia, however, this common rhetorical model with its emphasis on critical inquiry and evidence-based support has been adopted relatively recently and only at select institutions. At those universities, educators face particular challenges in implementing a curricular and cultural model fundamentally different from the students' secondary school experience. An in-depth study of university students at a major English-medium university in Hong Kong, for instance, found that among all of the challenges that students faced in their academic experience "writing was the participants' principal source of difficulty" (Evans and Morrison 2011, 391). At International Christian University, the first liberal arts university in Japan, students' first-year English courses attempt to guide them through this transition from conceiving knowledge as something that is transferred from teachers to students in the transmission model of Confucian education to knowledge as something that is shaped and made in a creative epistemological process (Wadden

et al. 2012). This reconceptualization of the means and methods of education (i.e., the nature of knowledge creation and academic performance) presents a formidable challenge even in countries and cultures, such as the United States, in which students' high school experience includes some exposure to Socratic methods (such as question and answer exchanges in the classroom) yet whose college education may differ significantly as students are required to move beyond comprehension and memorization to engage in critical inquiry and cultivation of the intellect (Meiland 1981). Such a transition is even more of a challenge for students whose secondary education has occurred in cultures—and schools—with deep-seated educational ideals and assumptions that are far different from those of the western liberal arts tradition.

In teaching academic writing in a liberal arts setting in Japan, we have found that one way to help bridge this cultural and cognitive divide is to present students with clear criteria that make the cultural and educational assumptions of their new context more transparent; in reality, this means making memorable rubrics for evaluating writing that help the students to understand and internalize what their teachers believe to be the criteria for good academic writing. In our case and context, the principles of academic writing are critical thought and sensitive analysis, in addition to appropriate rhetorical form. In this brief paper, we present such a simplified rubric and contrast it with other criteria used to evaluate writing. In general, we argue that students' English education at the university level may be best served by placing greater emphasis on ideas presented coherently with logical, critical, and creative support and less emphasis on discrete grammar-related language usage.

2. Academic Culture

Japanese students entering a liberal arts college arrive largely unprepared for a fundamental shift in pedagogical orientation (Wadden and Hale 2013). As in other parts of East Asia, these students come from a tradition of prescriptive learning where knowledge is seen as something "given" to students by teachers, often referred to as the "teacher as knower" model. In such a model, students are assessed not on how creatively or persuasively they can express themselves or engage in reasoning, but rather on their ability to recall and re-present concepts and ideas in pre-packaged form, often in mediums such as multiple-choice examinations (Cheung et al. 2003; Marginson 2011; Saeki, Fan, and Van Dusen 2001). In such a system, prowess at standardized tests like university entrance exams, TOEFL, and TOEIC is the indisputable measure of one's learning. In Japan, for example, the washback effect of the nationwide Center Test, the results of which are used by many universities (and which has an English component), has a massive impact on high school language education as well as the billion-dollar college prep industry. The TOEIC exam in business has also spawned a vast commercial test-prep sector. It is not surprising, then, that students entering a liberal arts university in such a context require considerable "re-education" in terms of not only their understanding of what education should be but also what is expected of them as members of an academic community. Perhaps the skill area in which this challenge is most clearly visible is in academic writing, where students must produce writing and demonstrate thought—based upon argument—that differs substantially from their previous experience.

Clear criteria therefore are important because they communicate to students—in a coherent and explicit way—what exactly teachers value in assessing their writing. In many international contexts where English is a foreign language, there is a widespread tendency to over-emphasize the mechanics of writing, especially grammar, punctuation, usage conventions, and word choice. This is understandable because many writing teachers in East Asia are native English speakers with applied linguistics or TESOL backgrounds; they naturally assume their expertise lies with

linguistic structure, mechanics, and overall accuracy. However, when promoting the principles and pedagogy of a liberal arts education, we believe accuracy should be secondary to the ideas expressed in the writing, as well as the creative, critical analysis that supports them. We are not suggesting that mechanics are unimportant (there is a strong argument to be made that careless grammatical errors can detract from an argument's impact); rather, we are advocating for a subtle but significant shift in focus.

Figure 1, in the appendix at the end of this article, is a writing rubric that one of our colleagues uses for assessing and giving feedback on essays, which are written for one of the core academic writing courses at International Christian University. Even at first glance it is evident that this rubric includes no assessment of—or feedback on—insight, logic, analysis, content, critical thinking, or creativity: it evaluates only organization, format, and mechanics. Perhaps one of the contributing factors to the use of criteria such as these is that it is much easier to assess and quantify the number of organizational shortcomings, grammar errors, and formatting mistakes than to evaluate the quality of critical thinking in a piece of writing. Figure 2, on the other hand, is an alternative rubric adopted by two other colleagues who teach the same core academic writing course. Note that it has three separate components, one below the other, entitled "Critical Thinking," "Content," and "Writing."

There is no doubt this second rubric avoids such shortcomings of the first as overlooking important features of academic writing like quality of insight, logic, analysis, content, critical thinking, and creativity. Yet the second rubric, with its elaboration of so many individual aspects of "Critical Thinking," "Content," and "Writing" is cognitively overwhelming for both teachers and students: it fails to compress and crystallize assessment into coherent feedback. Our colleagues, as dedicated and sophisticated teachers of writing, adopted this second rubric in part because they were disgusted with assessment of writing that placed excessive emphasis on convention, format, and discrete grammar (as reflected in the first rubric). They wanted to focus on the quality of ideas presented and their logical, critical, and creative presentation as well as to give feedback on the entire range of elements present in good academic writing and thinking. Although they went to considerable lengths to design this rubric, they gave up on using it after a single term.

As an alternative to these two rubrics, we would like to present a prototype of a rubric that is coherent and comprehensible, yet neither neglects important aspects of academic writing and critical thinking nor overwhelms with too much information. Our view (like many educational psychologists and curriculum specialists) is that too little or too much feedback has roughly the same effect: a very small one because it either under informs or overwhelms. Therefore, we focus now on a prototype rubric—transportable across courses and the curriculum—which was developed for use in our English for liberal arts program and is reproduced here as Figure 3. It contains criteria that students can gradually learn from and ultimately internalize as they study with different teachers in a variety of courses. Underlying it are these three purposes for having transparent criteria in a rubric for academic writing:

- to help individual students learn to write and think better by helping them see more transparently the principles and qualities of good academic writing and critical thinking;
- to give teachers a more orderly, reliable, and accurate basis to evaluate their students' writing; and
- to provide coherence across assignments within individual courses, across related courses, across teachers, and across the curriculum.

We would like to note that as a course (or curriculum) progresses, additional features can be added to the criteria in a given component, such as in Figure 4 where "logic" has been added to "Content: critical/creative thinking," "topic sentences" has been added to "Organization," and "citations and works cited" has been added to "Language control and convention." Of course, weightings can also be increased or decreased to reflect the emphasis of a particular assignment or course. Ideally, though, the first two components of the rubric—Content and Organization—should remain relatively constant across a course, a series of courses, and even a curriculum, but its sub-components may vary, as for example with the type of evidence that is appropriate. The third component, "Language control and convention," may vary considerably in emphasis and detail and in weighting depending upon the teacher or the assignment.

Despite our belief that the kind of rubric in Figures 3 and 4 gives teachers a valuable rhetorical framework to convey culture and criteria, we acknowledge that there is no such thing as a universal rubric and that as writing tasks change in focus, complexity, or genre, the rubric that assesses them will also have to evolve. In addition, the components of a rubric will reflect those skills or qualities that a teacher wants an assignment to cultivate, and how they are weighted will vary depending upon the relative importance the teacher places on each component. In addition, we have two specific caveats. First, we are not advocating rubrics as substitutes for personalized comments from a teacher to students written on a paper. We think a few sentences specifically addressing the quality, content, engagement, creativity, or accomplishment of a paper are valuable; hence a box for "Comments" has been included below the rubric components. That said, one of the advantages of rubrics is that they reduce the need to write by hand, over and over, similar comments about organization or grammar on a large number of essays. The second caveat is that our rubric is intended to be a core rubric to which individual teachers can append a third or even fourth component, depending upon the focus of their course; an example would be whether the writer incorporated key concepts from assigned readings or provided appropriate support based upon primary or secondary sources.

What students experience when using rubric-based criteria is a consistency of intellectual and pedagogical focus that continues across assignments, courses, and teachers. It empowers them to improve and develop.

3. Conclusion

In the last decade, rubrics have become more widely used in first-language composition courses in particular and in higher education in general in North America. For instance, in *Introduction to Rubrics*, curriculum specialist Dannelle Stevens and history professor Antonia Levi (2005) present an array of rubrics for papers, presentations, scientific reports, and other educational tasks in the North American college classroom; they also articulate a variety of arguments and variations for their use to which we are indebted. When culture and criteria are in opposition, that is, when the students' previous experience with writing and their assumptions about education have been inconsistent with that of the western model of exposition and argumentation, the importance of rubrics increases dramatically. Partly for this reason, the noted educator Clifford Hill of Columbia University Teachers College strategically adopted rubrics to establish coherent speaking and writing criteria that allowed second-language graduate students to make the cultural and pedagogical leap to different modes of composing and presenting. Our own development of rubrics in the liberal arts context in Asia originated in a thought-provoking presentation by Professor Hill (2012) when he came to International Christian University as a visiting scholar.

We have especially found that in the Asian cultural context of the liberal arts college, rubrics are invaluable because they can clearly convey the aims and the aspirations of this paradigm of education. They help students to internalize what writing in a liberal arts tradition should exemplify and what they should ultimately aim to achieve, which according to former Dartmouth President Jim Yong Kim is "to reason clearly, to think independently, to solve problems elegantly, and to communicate effectively" (2011). Without such training—that is, re-education in the liberal arts tradition along with the tools to achieve it—they have little chance of producing writing consistent with these ideals.

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Appendix
Grading rubrics

Figure 1:
A writing rubric that a colleague uses for assessing and giving feedback on essays
submitted for a core academic writing course at International Christian University

ARW Autumn—Essay 1

Essay and Argument Structure

Formatting (4 points)	Points
Heading and Title—name, professor's name, class, section, date, and title, as in SGW page 31. **(1 point)**	/1
Formatting—A4 paper, double spaced, 2.5 cm margins. **(1 point)**	/1
Paragraphs are indented 5 spaces. All lines continue to the margin. **(1 point)**	/1
Title and "Works Cited" title are **centered** (but the reference information is left aligned. **(1 point)**	/1
Thesis statement and introduction (5 points)	
The introduction introduces the topic in a general and interesting way. It is not too detailed. **(1 point)**	/1
The thesis statement is clearly identifiable. It is one or two sentences only. **(1 point)**	/1
The thesis statement is at or near the end of the introduction. **(1 point)**	/1
The thesis statement previews the argument by stating all of the claims that will be made. **(1 point)**	/1
The thesis statement matches the order that the argument is presented in the body paragraphs. **(1 point)**	/1
Body Paragraphs—12 points (2 points for all, **1 point** for all but one, **0** if two or more paragraphs fail.	
Begin with a transition such as *First*, *Second*, or *On the other hand*	/2
Have proper topic sentences—no pronoun, express the main idea of the paragraph	/2
Have Unity—all sentences are about the same idea	/2
Are relevant—support the thesis or main idea of the essay	/2
Are of adequate length. They provide evidence such as reasons, examples or data to support the claim.	/2
Use transitions within the paragraph, such as *For example, Therefore, Consequently*, to show the connection between sentences.	/2
Conclusion (3 points total)	
Begins with a suitable transition, such as "In conclusion" or "To conclude."	/1
Closes the essay in an appealing and thoughtful way. (Re-states the thesis, or gives a final thought.)	/2
Sentences—8 points (2 points for very few errors, **1 point** for some errors, **0 points** for many errors	
There are fragments (incomplete sentences). Usually they begin with *Because* or *Although* but don't have a main sentence clause.	/2
There are run-on sentences (sentences with multiple subjects and verbs, often separated by commas).	/2
There are errors with spelling or punctuation, including "no space" between sentences, or no capital letter for the first word in a sentence.	/2
There are grammatical errors, such as missing articles, subject verb agreement, wrong word form, etc (**2 points** for few errors, **1 point** for many errors, **0 points** if some sections are not comprehensible because of errors.	/2
Citations (8 points)	
There are enough citations, at least three, not including the original "Japan Times" citation. At least two citations are NOT Japanese, and at least ONE is NOT Wikipedia.	/2
In text citations are properly formatted, including "period" in the correct place, a "space" after period.	/2
The in text citations are include author's family name, either in the sentence or in the citation. If a short title is used, it is short (1-3 words) and enclosed in "quotation" marks.	/2
The Works cited—the various works are cited according to MLA style.	/2
Total	/40

Figure 2:
A threefold rubric used by two other colleagues for assessing essays
submitted for the same core academic writing course as that in Figure 1

Grading Rubric for ARW: Papers: Spring: Critical Thinking

Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
❑ The paper displays insight and originality of thought.	❑ There are some original ideas, but many seem obvious and/or elementary.	❑ There are few original ideas. Most seem obvious and/or elementary.
❑ There is a sound, logical analysis that reveals clear understanding of the relevant issues.	❑ Analysis is generally sound, but there are gaps in logic or understanding.	❑ Analysis is superficial and the author seems to struggle understanding the relevant issues.
❑ There is an appropriate balance of factual reporting, interpretation and analysis, and personal opinion.	❑ The balance between factual reporting, interpretation—analysis, and personal opinion is often not clear yet.	❑ The is a clear imbalance between factual reporting, interpretation—analysis, and personal opinion.
❑ The author goes beyond the obvious in constructing interpretation of the facts.	❑ The paper shows understanding of relevant issues but stays within the obvious. There is more reporting than thinking and persuasion.	❑ The paper lacks understanding of relevant issues. It is largely a report rather than a persuasive essay.
❑ Accurate details are used to reinforce the author's arguments.	❑ Generally, accurate details are included, but the reader is left with many unanswered questions—more development is needed.	❑ There are few details or most information is irrelevant. More accurate information and more analysis are needed.
❑ The paper is convincing and satisfying.	❑ The paper is somewhat vague and leaves the reader wondering.	❑ The paper is vague and leaves the reader confused.

Proposed Grading Rubric for ARW A Papers: Spring: Content

Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
❑ The paper clearly addresses the topic within the context of the thesis and is successful in promoting some kind of personal, social / cultural / political / paradigm change.	❑ The paper addresses the topic within the context of the thesis and makes a good attempt to promote some kind of personal, social / cultural / political / paradigm change.	❑ The paper does not address the topic within the context of the thesis. It therefore fails to promote some kind of personal, social / cultural / paradigm change.
❑ The paper is complete and leaves no important aspect of the topic unaddressed.	❑ The paper is basically complete, but some important aspects of the topic are not addressed.	❑ The paper is clearly incomplete, with many important aspects of the topic left untouched.
❑ The author displays understanding of what is known, generally accepted and what is yet to be discussed / studied.	❑ The author has a good understanding of the relevant information, but does not distinguish between what is known, what is generally accepted and what is yet to be discussed / studied.	❑ The author lacks a good understanding of the relevant information. As a result, there is no distinction between what is known, what is generally accepted and what is yet to be discussed / studied.
❑ The information presented is clearly important and adds to our understanding of the topic or issue.	❑ The information presented is interesting but does not add to our understanding of the topic or issue.	❑ The information presented is basically common knowledge and does not help readers' understanding of the topic or issue.
❑ Connections between the topic of the paper and related topics enhance our understanding.	❑ Few connections are made between the topic of the paper and other possibly related topics.	❑ No connections are made between the topic of the paper and other possibly related topics.
❑ The paper uses specialized terminology within the context and the discipline.	❑ Use of specialized terminology is sometimes confusing and/or inaccurate.	❑ No specialized terminology is used.
❑ The author seems to be writing from personal knowledge and/or experience.	❑ The author seems to be writing from knowledge and/or experience, but has difficulty going from general observations to specific points.	❑ The author seems to be only reporting facts and information. No specific points are made.

Figure 2 - continued

Grading Rubric for ARW A Papers – Spring: Writing

Accomplished	Developing	Beginning
❏ Good introduction. Draws the reader in. Flows smoothly to thesis.	❏ A recognizable introduction, but no strong sense of anticipation. Flow to thesis may not be smooth.	❏ There is no clear introduction to set up the paper. No flow of ideas.
❏ *There is a clear thesis.*	❏ *There is a thesis but it is ambiguous and/or unfocused.*	❏ *There is no clear thesis.*
❏ Paragraphs are well-focused, unified, and coherent. Effective topic sentences.	❏ Paragraphs occasionally lack focus, unity, or are not coherent. Most topic sentences effective.	❏ Paragraphs lack focus, unity, and coherence. Few or no effective topic sentences.
❏ *Transitions clearly show how ideas connect.*	❏ *Transitions often work well, but some leave connections between ideas fuzzy.*	❏ *Connections between ideas are often confusing or missing. Poor use of transitions.*
❏ Effective use of parallelism, keywords, pronouns, sentence variety.	❏ Some use of parallelism, keywords, pronouns, and starting to have variety of sentence types.	❏ No use of parallelism, keywords, or pronouns. No variety in sentence type.
❏ *Sequencing of ideas is logical and effective. Ideas effectively emphasized in sentences/paragraphs. Ideas move forward.*	❏ *Sequencing of ideas is somewhat logical but lacks effectiveness. Some ideas not emphasized effectively. Ideas starting to move.*	❏ *Sequencing of ideas is not logical. Ideas not emphasized. Ideas have little movement.*
❏ Various types of evidence are used to support the author's points. Concrete details included.	❏ Evidence generally supports the author's points, but more variety is desired. Some detailed support used.	❏ Evidence is irrelevant and/or infrequent and often fail to support the author's points. Lack of details.
❏ *Opposing views are acknowledged and dealt with effectively.*	❏ *Opposing views mentioned but not dealt with completely.*	❏ *No mention of opposing views.*
❏ Quotations, paraphrases and summaries are effectively used, integrated well, and cited appropriately.	❏ Most quotations, paraphrases and summaries generally effective, but some may not be integrated or correctly cited.	❏ Quotations, paraphrases and summaries tend to break the flow of the text, are not integrated, or are not cited properly.
❏ *Good conclusion: leaves the reader with a sense of closure. A clear "yoin" 余韻 or final resonating thought.*	❏ *The conclusion merely sums up main points but may not tie the paper into a coherent whole. Attempts to add "yoin" 余韻 or final resonating thought.*	❏ *There is no real conclusion. New, irrelevant information is presented instead. No "yoin" 余韻 or final resonating thought.*
❏ Good, clear use of grammar. Good spelling. Good punctuation.	❏ Minor problems with grammar or spelling. End punctuation is good, but internal punctuation can be confusing to the reader.	❏ Errors in grammar to the point of interfering with meaning. Frequent spelling errors. Punctuation is often missing or incorrect.
❏ *Uses proper MLA format.*	❏ *Uses the basic MLA format, but there are noticeable errors.*	❏ *Frequent errors in MLA format or incorrect format used.*

Figure 3:
A prototype of a coherent and comprehensible rubric for academic writing courses
for the English for Liberal Arts Program at International Christian University

	Excellent 3	Good 2	Developing 1
Content: critical/creative thinking			
☐ sufficient evidence			
☐ quality of evidence			
Organization			
☐ intro-body-conclusion structure			
☐ arguable thesis			
Language control and convention			
☐ grammar, word choice, spelling			
☐ format (margins, spacing, indentation, font size)			
Total			

Comments:

Figure 4:
A modified version of the rubric in Figure 3

	Excellent 3	Good 2	Developing 1
Content: critical/creative thinking			
☐ sufficient evidence			
☐ quality of evidence			
☐ logic			
Organization			
☐ intro-body-conclusion structure			
☐ arguable thesis			
☐ topic sentences			
Language control and convention			
☐ grammar, word choice, spelling			
☐ format (margins, spacing, indentation, font size)			
☐ citations and works cited			
Total			

Comments: