**Mike’s Graduate Student Writing Assessment Tool©**

This tool is meant for assessing graduate student writing, which is to say, I recommend using it to perform initial and annual assessments, but not necessarily for all grading/commenting purposes. The truth is that I work a little more organically, but these are the elements/features of a client’s writing that I’m always tracking.

This is a four-step process, with separate activities attached to each part of the process. You’ll see the activities highlighted in yellow.

1. **Holistic Readthrough — What is going on? Identification**

Perform your initial readthrough without marking up the draft, **except** to remind yourself about returning later or focusing your attention when you’ve finished. I have difficulty doing holistic reads when I keep stopping to comment or fix so I use a highlighter for stuff that I plan on returning to in conversation and/or commenting.

1. Identify Difficulty/Smoothness

I’m looking for places of either exceptional difficulty or smoothness. This is all about me, the reader, being aware of my experience of the text.

Mark them. I like to a use highlighter.

Places of difficulty — rate them, 1-5 or 1-10

Places of smoothness — rate them, 1-5 or 1-10

We are NOT, at this point, trying to figure out *why* something is difficult or smooth. We’re just noting the places that, as readers, we experience these. We’ll get to the “why” later.

1. I’m looking to fit the writing into one of the broad categories in the writing rubric that

I use:

Efficient/Effective

Elegant

Engaging/Compelling

Powerful

At this stage, you might ask yourself: What keeps the writing from the next category up? What would it need to do to get there? The point here: these are really broad and imprecise categories that keep you in the holistic headspace, that are as much about your instincts, intuition, and feel as they are about any specific issues.

1. **Focusing on the Particulars — why is the writing difficult?**

Now, go back to all of the “Difficulty” places that you marked and look at them carefully, trying to figure out what doesn’t work for you, the reader. Three broad categories through which I like to think about difficulty:

1. *Difficulty in Articulating*
   * Is it happening primarily within sentences or across sentences?
   * Within sentences suggests that we’re dealing with mechanical issues.
   * Across sentences might mean that the ideas are underdeveloped in the writer’s mind.
   * If both are happening, begin with the ideas, not the mechanics.
2. *Difficulty in Proving*
   * Is it happening primarily within paragraphs or across paragraphs?
   * Within paragraphs suggests that they’re not clear about what elements a proof needs in order to be complete, or that though they know, they just don’t do it consistently.
   * Across paragraphs might mean that they’re struggling with structure — which is to say, order and emphasis in the larger argument.
   * Again, tackle the larger issues first and work back toward paragraph-level issues.
3. *Difficulty in Strategizing*

For audience and effect on audience

From our Holistic Readthrough we want to generate a general sense of the writing’s issues that we can communicate to a writer, *with precision*.

Writing Struggle Table

Okay, this is by no means a complete list of all the things that hinder a piece of writing. But what I’ve done is put together a whole bunch of common ones that I see and slotted them into one of the three categories I mentioned. I do this simply to make clearer to you how I think about the three categories above.

By the way, these are all issues that are common in either Efficient or Elegant Writing, and only begin to scratch the surface of Engaging Writing. You’ll recall that I said that Elegant Writing should be the minimum target for graduating students.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Articulating** | **Proving** | **Strategizing** |
| Can’t make sentences — mechanics of standard prose in your discipline | Missing, unfocused/imprecise, confused central argument | Missing the point of convincing/persuading — writerly v. readerly prose |
| Can’t make paragraphs | No strategy for proving (organization) | No signposting for reader |
| Tangled sentences, though not necessarily grammatically incorrect | Missing steps in proof | Insufficient explaining *why* you’re doing something or direction you’re moving |
| Topic sentences — spotty, ineffective, or missing | Useless information | Misreading of audience |
| Weak or missing transitions | Rabbit holes and diversions | Frustrate audience expectations at either sentence or paragraph level |
| Missing steps in articulation — the largest being a central argument | Ineffective use of sources |  |
| Incomplete ideas | Underreporting data |  |
| Too much context or only context | Overreporting or only reporting data |  |
| Overly long or underdeveloped paragraphs | Missing or minimal analysis of evidence |  |
| Diction is out of step with the task at hand and/or audience | No original thought |  |
| Repetition | Repetition | Repetition |
| All abstraction/All concrete = imbalance between the general and the specific | All abstraction/All concrete = imbalance between the general and the specific | All abstraction/All concrete = imbalance between the general and the specific |

\*A note on central arguments. Here’s a quick table to use to assess an argument:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Argument Content | Argument Articulation |
| Fact | Complete |
| Observation | Clear |
| Analysis | Compact |

The development of an argument usually follows in the Articulation column in that order: first, getting it all down on the page; second, making sure that it’s clear; and only after those two are done, being able to say it in two sentences or less.

Summarize the larger issues in bullet points

See if you can gather those issues into broader categories for grouping. In communicating with a student, I like to identify and explain at least 2 issues and no more than 5 or 6 in a holistic readthrough.

1. **Mechanics of Articulation**

Once we’ve identified issues to be addressed at the level of articulation, it’s useful to take either a particularly troubled paragraph or passage (1-3 paragraphs) and put it under the microscope. The important thing here is that you’re not needing to perform this kind of analysis on the whole document, though you can. I have definitely found occasions to analyze whole sections of a longer document.

***The Sentence***

1. Look at the S-V-O relationship

* Identify the subject, verb, and object of the sentence, the sentence’s Spine, do the sentences have all of these elements?
* How many words between each element? The more words between these three, the more difficult a sentence will be for the reader to follow.
* Are the sentences crosscut by subordinate clauses? How many? Where did the writer place these clauses? Sentences with clauses at the beginnings and ends of sentences are easier to follow than are those in which the clauses intervene in the S-V-O spine.

1. How often does the writer use passive verb forms (versions of the infinitive, “to be” like: is, are, was, were, has/have been, will be, etc.)? Passive forms can either read as lifeless prose and/or yield an unnecessarily vague and imprecise articulation of ideas.
2. How often does the writer use transitional elements between sentences? We’d like to see this at somewhere around 70-80 percent of the time, or better.
3. Does the writer vary sentence length and complexity?
4. Beware preposition stacking, esp. with the word “of.”

Want a quick way to assess the statistics of a student’s prose? Take a look at Helen Sword’s The Writer’s Diet, which allows you to plug in up to 1,000 word passages and see the stats on a piece of writing:

<https://writersdiet.com/>

Students might find it useful in evaluating their prose — in general. It is less useful for the evaluation of a particular piece of writing.

***The Paragraph***

Topic Sentences

Look at the topic sentences. Do they convey the subject of the paragraph or do they, for instance, provide background information, only perform a transitional function before the writer gets to the central idea of each paragraph. Whether or not writers are conscious of the creation of topic sentences, Elegant Writing, more often than not, will have strong Topic and Concluding sentences.

Like arguments, argumentative units (typically organized into 1-3 or 4 paragraph chunks) tend to have the same basic elements: facts, observations, and analyses. Look for all 3 in each paragraph or argumentative grouping, examining how the writer moves from one element to the next. Often, unsuccessful paragraphs will provide the fact and observation and be short on or entirely leave off analysis, as if the fact/observation dyad proves itself.

Transitions

In most cases, each sentence should have a transition built into it, which is to say, some piece of information that tells the reader how we are to understand a sentence in relation to the one or ones just before it. Look for a regularity of transitions within and between paragraphs. Usually, this is accomplished through transitional words and phrases like: thus, however, consequently and longer transitions like: what this means, in order to clarify, etc. The University of Manchester has a great Phrase Bank that students can use to provide transitional variety (though beware, many of them are passive constructions):

<https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/using-cautious-language/>

Here’s an example of a paragraph with strong transitioning:

History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed. That image has previously been drawn, even by scientists themselves, main­ly from the study of finished scientific achievements as these are recorded in the classics and, more recently, in the textbooks from which each new scientific generation learns to practice its trade. Inevitably, however, the aim of such books is persuasive and pedagogic; a concept of science drawn from them is no more likely to fit the enterprise that produced them than an image of a national culture drawn from a tourist brochure or a language text. This essay attempts to show that we have been misled by them in fundamental ways. Its aim is a sketch of the quite different concept of science that can emerge from the historical record of the research activity itself.

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas S. Kuhn (U Chicago P, 1962)

Concluding sentences

Does the concluding sentence provide an “end cap” to the key idea in the paragraph and provide a transition into the next paragraph? A good concluding sentence does both of these, though, sometimes, these duties have to be broken up into two (or, occasionally, three) sentences.

1. **Communicating in the Writing, Communicating with Students**

In complex arguments, a writer will fall short if they can’t do two things at once: convey that complexity, but in an easily digestible form. So, much of academic writing is about just this sort of communicating — complex and simple at the same time.

Movement

Transition

Signposting

Organization

Strategic v. formulaic

Organic

Rhetorical shape and function are matched

How does it appear? You will likely know by rhetorical strategies when a writer has gone to the trouble of imagining what a reader is thinking, anticipating resistance to an argument, where they dwell because something is difficult and/or complex. This is all “higher-level” thinking in writers and rarely exists with any consistency in graduate student writing when they begin their careers.

This is the zone of handoff to the substance stuff that you’re likely already doing. In other words, this is the kind of mentoring/advising about writing that you’ve likely imagined would be the kind of support you’re “responsible for doing.”