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TEXTUAL CRITERIA

What They Really Valued, Part 1

We can now look at answers to the question: What did instructors and administrators in City University's First-Year English Program value in their students' writing? The multifaceted, surprising findings of this study strongly suggest the depth of self-knowledge and truthfulness of self-representation that other writing programs could gain by conducting Dynamic Criteria Mapping.

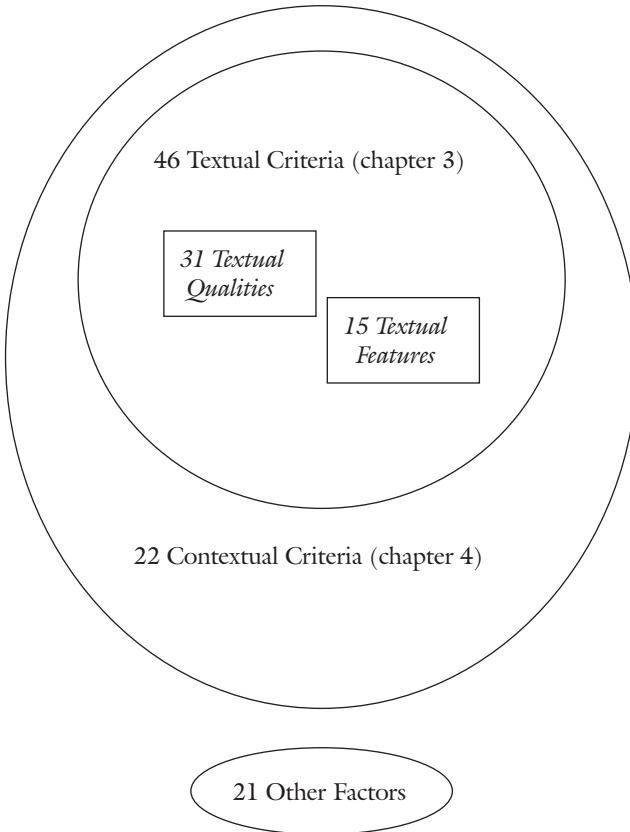
Before readers look at my findings, however, I urge them to read the sample texts presented in appendix B, "Selected Sample Texts from City University,"² and to make their own notes on the strengths and weaknesses they perceive in these texts. Readers who take time now to read and evaluate these sample texts will not only better understand and appreciate the findings I am about to present, they will experience this exploration of City University's evaluative terrain as "insiders." In addition, readers may find appendix E helpful in understanding the system of abbreviations that I use in referencing excerpts from the transcripts in this and later chapters.

QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE OVERVIEWS OF CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT

Before delving into detailed findings from my study of City University's portfolio assessment program, we need to glimpse the big picture. Figure 2 provides a graphical "Overview of Dynamic Criteria Mapping for City University."

Though this figure masks nearly every interesting element of my analyses, it provides a useful visual and conceptual sketch of the three main categories of criteria for evaluation and how they are related. Textual Criteria include those factors (such as "detail" and "texture") inherent in the specific text under evaluation. By contrast, the exact same text might pass or fail depending on which Contextual Criteria participants invoke (for example, what is best for the student-author or what are the goals of the English 1 course).

Figure 2
Overview of Dynamic Criteria Mapping for City University



Textual Criteria fell into two distinct subcategories: Textual Qualities and Textual Features. (The distinction between Qualities and Features is explained below.) Other Factors (neither Textual nor Contextual) also figured into participants' evaluative decisions. This book explores Textual and Contextual Criteria in detail, but does not analyze Other Factors.

Table 2, "Quantitative Analysis of All Criteria for Judgment," provides a numerical overview of all criteria judges invoked when defending and negotiating their evaluative decisions. As with the spatial representation in figure 2, readers who take a few minutes to browse this table will gain a useful overarching grasp of the criteria discussed in this chapter and the next.

As table 2 shows, participants named a total of eighty-nine substantial and distinct kinds of criteria that informed their judgments of students' writing. Those criteria fell into three major categories:

1. Forty-six Textual Criteria (either qualities or features of the text being judged)
2. Twenty-two Contextual Criteria (issues not directly related to the text being judged)
3. Twenty-one Other Factors (additional dynamics shaping evaluative decisions)

Table 2
Quantitative Analysis of All Criteria for Judgment

CATEGORY: Criterion	Transcript lines coded	Passages coded	Coded in # of transcripts out of 27	% (rounded) of transcripts partially coded for this criterion
TEXTUAL CRITERIA (46 criteria)				
<i>Textual Qualities (aspects of reading experience)</i> (31 criteria)				
Significance/Development/Heart	731	117	18	67
Interesting/Lively/Creative	389	67	18	67
Thinking/Analysis/Ideas	367	60	13	48
Unity/Harmony/Connection	344	55	16	59
Effort/Taking Risks	316	60	19	70
Revision/Process	288	39	11	41
Focus/Pace/Concise	276	49	12	44
Control/Boundaries	221	39	15	56
Style/Tone/Diction/Concision/Dialect	217	28	11	41
Organization/Structure/Flowing/Momentum	214	30	15	56
*				
Empty/Hollow/Clichéd	186	24	13	48
Voice/Personality	170	30	12	44
Mystery Criterion	169	39	10	37
Clarity/Confusion	99	20	10	37
Competent/Knows How To Write	98	17	8	30
Goals/Purposes/Intentions	95	14	5	19
Persuasive/Convincing/Powerful	90	18	11	41
Audience Awareness	76	15	6	22
Sophisticated/Elegant/Mature	58	9	5	19
Tight/Subtle/Minimalist/Show Not Tell	47	8	5	19

* Empty rows in this table are intended to divide the long lists of criteria into visually and/or mathematically meaningful groups. Usually the breaks come between groups of ten criteria. In the case of several criteria that are broken out into subcriteria, a break comes at the end of the list of subcriteria.

Writer's Attitude	40	8	5	19
Authority/Take Charge/Serious	33	7	5	19
Sincerity/Honesty/Innocence	32	6	4	15
Giving The Teacher What She Wants	31	4	2	7
Humor	29	6	3	11
Consistency/Contradiction	23	5	2	7
Redundancy/Repetition	21	7	3	11
Texture/Richness/Artful	17	5	2	7
Distanced	12	2	2	7
Writing Ability (General)	8	3	3	11
Relevance	7	2	2	7
Textual Features (elements of text) (15 criteria [counting Mechanics and Sentences as one each])				
Mechanics/Conventions/Mistakes/ Errors (not including sub-themes listed below)	901	119	22	81
Grammar	331	69	18	67
Punctuation	159	31	9	33
Spelling	96	23	9	33
Usage	46	13	5	19
Capitalization	14	4	3	11
Typing	14	4	3	11
Legible	8	2	1	4
Format	2	1	1	4
Total for Mechanics/Conventions	1571	266		
Content/Topic				
Content/Topic	420	63	15	56
Sentences(not including subthemes listed below)	250	54	18	67
Sophistication	44	8	6	22
Variety	42	7	4	15
Clarity	19	4	3	11
Total for Sentences	355	73		
Detail/Description/Examples/ Dialogue				
Detail/Description/Examples/ Dialogue	295	50	14	51
Length/Amount (Of Text)	166	22	10	37
Objectionable Views, Characters, and Events	144	16	7	26
Endings/Conclusions	108	18	7	26
Paragraphing	99	20	10	37
Portrayal of Characters and Relationship	43	3	2	7
Leads/Beginnings	31	8	4	15
Transitions	18	4	3	11
Anecdotes	17	2	2	7
Title	10	3	3	11
Messy Appearance	9	1	1	4
Graphics	8	1	1	4

CONTEXTUAL CRITERIA (22 criteria)				
Standards/Expectations	1344	127	23	85
Constructing Writers	725	109	14	52
Fulfilling the Assignment	713	78	15	56
Learning/Progress/Growth	281	37	9	33
Plagiarism/Originality	223	15	7	26
Nature of Pass/Fail Judgment	216	25	11	41
Essay vs. Portfolio	212	22	8	30
Ready for English 2	196	28	10	37
Benefit to Student	132	15	11	41
Nontext Factors	115	14	6	22
Goals for English 1	72	6	4	15
Difficulty of the Writing Task	65	10	4	15
Writing Center	65	11	6	22
Fairness/Hypocrisy	43	4	2	7
Writer Shows Promise	42	8	3	11
Cultural Differences	35	4	2	7
Using the Spell Check	30	2	1	4
Constructing Teachers	16	2	2	7
Compassion for Writer	14	2	2	7
Time	14	3	3	11
Turned in Late	10	1	1	4
Attendance	7	2	2	7
OTHER FACTORS (21 factors)				
Relations (not including subthemes listed below)	8	2	1	4
Teaching and Evaluation	586	58	16	59
Relations among Evaluators	276	29	9	33
Norming and Trios	238	23	7	26
Relations among Texts	214	19	6	22
Relations among Criteria	112	14	9	33
Classroom and World	68	10	6	22
Content and Form	27	3	2	7
Sample Texts and Live Texts	24	2	2	7
Midterm and Endterm	8	1	1	4
Writers' Strengths & Weaknesses	8	1	1	4
Totals for Relations	1561	160		
Borderline/Undecided/Change of Mind (what made it hard to make up your mind?)	1370	179	25	93
Consensus and Dissent (what made it hard to agree?)	1154	92	19	70

Evaluators: Comments About	698	78	20	74
Evaluation Process	379	33	9	33
Program Policies: Revision	269	14	5	19
Comparing Texts	224	21	6	22
In-class Essay	130	5	1	4
Professional Development	84	5	2	7
Evaluating Each Others' Teaching	4	1	1	4
References to Other Events and Texts	3	1	1	4

This chapter will explore findings regarding Textual Criteria, the largest of the three categories. The following chapter discusses Contextual Criteria.

Criteria in table 2 above are ordered according to the number of transcript lines coded for each criterion. Those criteria discussed in the largest number of transcript lines (discussed most often or at the most length) are listed first; those mentioned in the fewest lines (discussed least often or most briefly) are listed last. Though frequency and length of discussion about a particular criterion does not simply equate to its significance or importance in the program (that is a qualitative judgment), quantitative sequencing does provide useful information about relationships among criteria for evaluation.

The quantitative information provided in the other three columns of table 2 can generate additional insight. Comparing the number of transcript lines coded for any criterion to the number of passages coded yields a ratio between how *much* that criterion was discussed and how *often* it was discussed. Some criteria might be discussed relatively few times, but at considerable length, or vice versa. The third column in this table, showing number of transcripts out of twenty-seven in which a criterion was coded, indicates in how many different settings or events that criterion was discussed. In other words, it points to the breadth to which participants found the criterion important enough to mention. The final column in table 2 simply converts the “number of transcripts out of twenty-seven” ratio to a percentage figure for easy assessment of how broadly that criterion was discussed across the norming, trio, and interview transcripts.

Generating a detailed, complex, and accurate list of the criteria by which we judge students' writing is itself a worthy goal, particularly when we compare the richness of this list with the sparse contents of a standard five- or six-category scoring guide (such as “focus, support, organization, conventions, integration,” per Illinois Standard Achievement Test of Writing). However, the most important and interesting discoveries of

what was really valued at City University are revealed not in table 2 but in the results of my qualitative analyses: the Dynamic Criteria Map. This map illustrates dynamic relations among and within Textual Criteria and offers provocative insights into the acts of teaching and assessing writing.

Textual Criteria

Evaluators at City University articulated two kinds of Textual Criteria for evaluation: Textual Qualities and Textual Features. Both categories were highly important to judgments formed by participants in my study, and both received a great deal of attention in their discussions.

Significance/Development and *Voice/Personality* are two examples of Textual Qualities. These criteria emerge from a judge's sustained intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic engagement with a text. Textual Features, by contrast, can nearly always be physically pointed to: for example, problems with *Mechanics* or the presence of *Dialogue*. Evaluators can also identify Textual Features without entering fully or deeply into the rhetorical and literary experience of a text; some Textual Features (*Length/Amount* or *Paragraphing*, among others) can be assessed without reading a single word of the text being judged. Thus, Textual Features are available to a quick assessment, to a reading oriented to the surface of the text. Since City University's administrators and instructors discussed Textual Qualities somewhat more than they did Textual Features, I begin my discussion of Textual Criteria with the subcategory of Textual Qualities.

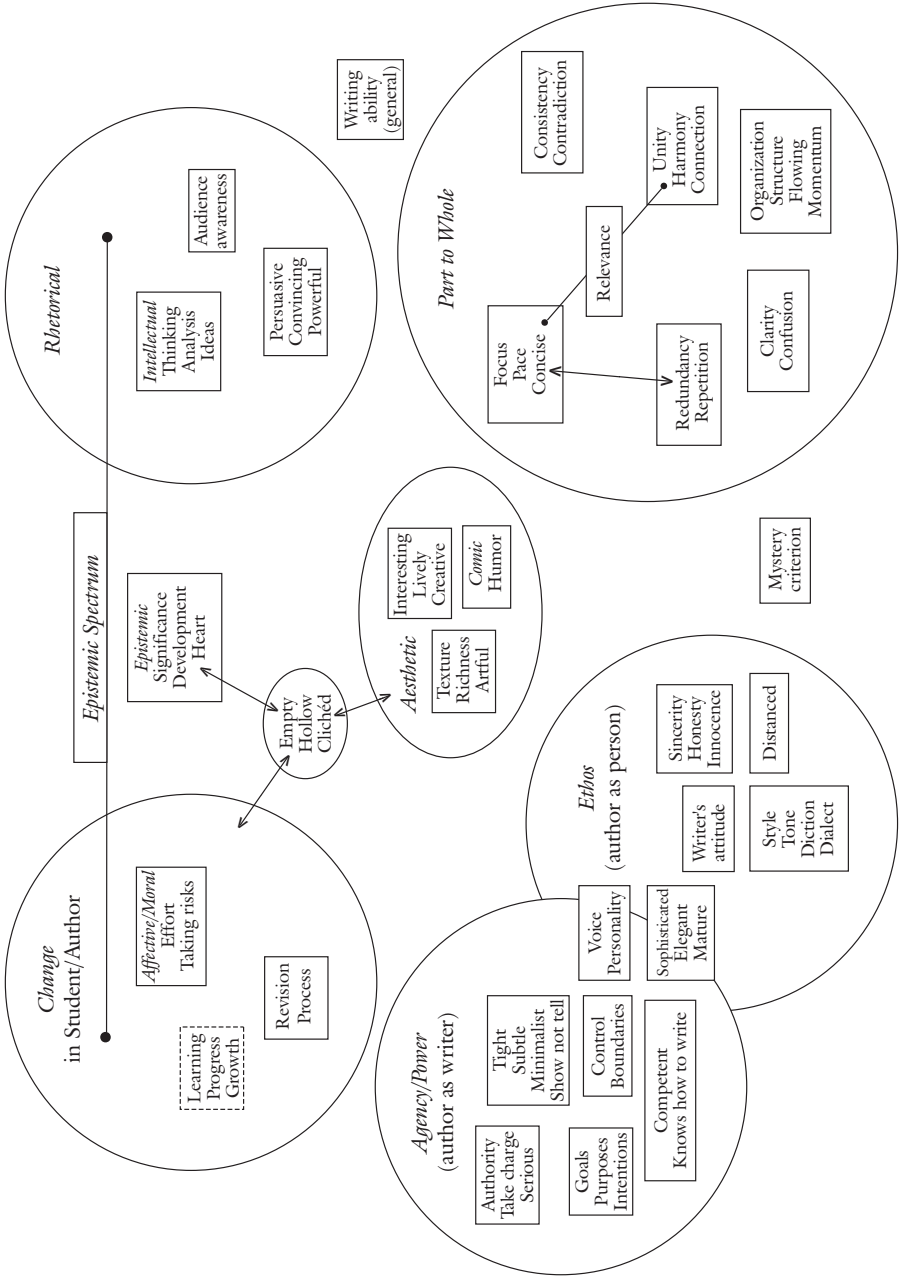
TEXTUAL QUALITIES

The map of textual qualities valued at City University includes seven distinct constellations of criteria (plus three constellation-independent criteria). As illustrated in figure 3, "Dynamic Criteria Map of City University's Textual Qualities," I have grouped criteria into seven constellations, each of which I address separately below.

I recommend that readers lay out the large format Dynamic Criteria Map (see pocket inside the back cover) and follow along during the ensuing discussion, moving from one criterion to the next and noting juxtapositions and interconnections among them as they go.

In the following discussion I devote primary emphasis to those criteria that were quantitatively or qualitatively most significant. Unfortunately, space limitations require me to disregard a number of criteria, including several with interesting and worthwhile stories to tell.

Figure 3
Dynamic Criteria Map of City University's Textual Qualities



The Epistemic Spectrum

The most substantial criterion of Textual Quality was *Significance/Development/Heart* (henceforth abbreviated simply as *Significance*; see Figure 4). In vivo synonyms and antonyms for this criterion are listed below.³ Careful reading of these excerpts will reward readers with a feel not only for the richness of the discourse clustered at each criterion, but also for the personalities and passions of the instructor-evaluators whose writing program I studied.

Significance/Development/Heart

Synonyms: significance, development, fleshed out, elaboration, exploration, involved, depth, substance, complexity, meaning, follow-through, extend, accomplish, movement, moving forward, heart, storytelling, thoughtful, reflective, engaged, discover, make knowledge, learning by writing, address (vs. mention), pursues, builds something up, goes somewhere with it, thorough, the unspoken, the other stuff (vs. mechanics)

Antonyms: fly over it; hurried; listing information; just action; skimmed over some material; didn't do much with; didn't cover a lot of [evaluation] criteria . . . just told about what the movie was about and the characters; like a journal entry. It lacks finality . . . just very limited in its content . . . the in-class was a write-off . . . It's a this-then-this; doesn't go anywhere from there; it's dead; doesn't know where to go with it; slight; perfunctory

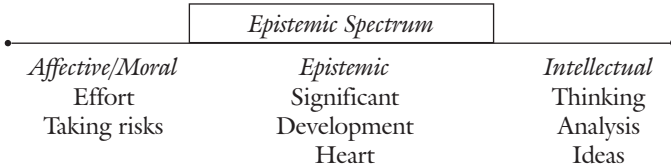
Significance indicates that the reader experiences something meaningful, weighty, important, worthwhile, or affecting during her encounter with the text. *Significance* is an intellectual, emotional, and poetic experience. It is also a close fit with one of the two prime goals laid out in the FYE Program mission statement:

One broad goal [of the program] is to teach students that writing is a way of thinking and that in the very act of writing about a particular subject for a particular audience, the writer will discover new knowledge.

The great prominence of the epistemic criterion *Significance* in the discussions I studied must count as an important success for the FYE Program in reaching this "broad goal" of the program.

Given its preeminent status among criteria of Textual Quality, *Significance* could legitimately be called the heart of what instructors at City University wanted writing to be and do. Instructor-evaluators wanted to see knowledge made in the texts they read, so I termed this

Figure 4
The Epistemic Spectrum



value “epistemic.” *Significance* is something more than just creative or critical thinking (see *Thinking/Analysis/Ideas*). It is fundamentally about learning-by-writing. For one can think without learning; one can arrange one’s arguments in logical and persuasive ways without considering other points of view or changing one’s own views. By contrast, *Significance* focuses on the particular, hard-to-define performance by which writers demonstrate that they are learning something by being “engaged” with their material, by “exploring” it, by “discovering” and “elaborating” within their topics, by showing their moral or intellectual “movement” over the course of the text.

Another crucial pedagogical point emerging from my examination of the criterion *Significance/Development/Heart* was that instructors wanted to *find* significance in a text, but they didn’t want to be *given* significance. Several comments coded under *Significance* showed evaluators complaining that the significance in the sample essay “Pops” was “tacked on” at the end in an unconvincing way.

Peter: ‘Cause the end has that corny, tacked on feeling: “Okay, now’s the part where I have to say . . . how important this was. ‘Cause it didn’t come through in the beginning, right? (A Mid Norm, 489)

Hal: I mean it’s as if an anecdote has been inserted . . . and uh, and a conclusion is there which then sort of distills the apparent significance.

Students need to know not only that *Significance/Development/Heart* is a prime criterion for evaluation, but also that they must provide that quality by “showing rather than telling” (see the related criterion *Tight/Subtle/Minimalist* in the *Agency/Power* constellation). They must trust their readers to find the significance embedded in their narratives and descriptions and not shove it in their faces.

Significance was closely related to two other criteria, between which it stood as a hybrid. On the one hand, *Significance* was related to—though also, as explained above, distinct from—the intellectual virtues of *Thinking/Analysis/Ideas*. On the other hand, the moral elements of *Significance* as a quality that demonstrates the courage required to explore, engage, and develop a topic linked it with *Effort/Taking Risks*. Arrayed together, these three substantial textual qualities comprise the *Epistemic Spectrum*.

“Change in Student-Author” Constellation

At the *Effort/Taking Risks* end of the *Epistemic Spectrum* lies the *Change in Student-Author* (abbreviated below as *Change*) constellation, made up of three criteria:

*Learning/Progress/Growth*⁴
Effort/Taking Risks
Revision/Process

The vital, though unsurprising, concept around which the *Change* constellation coheres is that writing instructors wanted to see their students change for the better.

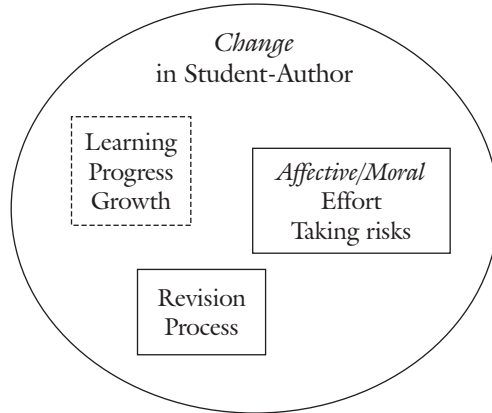
Learning/Progress/Growth often emerged, for example, in discussions of portfolios. Evaluators would comment with satisfaction on the fact that the four pieces in a portfolio showed steady progress on one or more criteria (*Length*, *Significance*, or *Mechanics*, for example), or they expressed alarm that the pieces in the portfolio “got weaker as [the portfolio] went along.”

Effort/Taking Risks distills and amplifies the moral and affective values latent in the *Significance* criterion. These are qualities in texts that led readers to admire the author. When, on the other hand, the qualities of effort and risk taking were perceived as missing, the author might be viewed as a slacker who doesn’t care about herself, her writing, or her instructor.

Effort/Taking Risks

Synonyms: effort; work; taking risks; engagement; engaged; ambition; ambitious; struggle; wrestling; choices; aware; attempt; worked really hard; was getting somewhere; [student sought instructor’s help]; really trying; done a lot of work; try something harder; tries some difficult things; reaches too high; shows a lot of work, a lot of attention; put some effort into it; the student is working it out

Figure 5
Change in Student-Author



Antonyms: they almost haven't tried; he doesn't really try in there; he doesn't want to deal with some explosive stuff; the student didn't seem to take much trouble with this paper; carelessness; FAILURE to attend to these [errors]; this person did not go and seek help! Did not go and take care of this; I don't see that he put all the effort into this one.

Revision/Process is the first of several criteria to be discussed here that provided explosive challenges to City University's FYE Program, challenges that urgently demanded the program's attention to, reflection on, and negotiation of powerful and competing values. It is worth noting here, however, that because City University lacked a process for recording, negotiating, and publicizing its criteria for evaluation, such opportunities were lost; and issues such as those surrounding *Revision/Process* went unresolved.

A useful start on considering *Revision/Process* as a criterion of Textual Quality is that one might not expect it to appear as a Textual Criterion at all. Since at City University neither essays (at midterm) nor portfolios (at end-term) provided direct evidence of revision or other aspects of writing process and since evaluators were urged by administrators to judge strictly on the basis of the textual evidence that came before them (as opposed to information supplied by the student's instructor), it might have been reasonable to expect *Revision* not to play a significant role in evaluative discourse. On the contrary, however, *Revision* was not

only one of the most quantitatively significant criteria, it was also one of the most theoretically and pedagogically instructive.

Various documents in City University's FYE Program made clear that writing processes, especially revision, were important and valuable aspects of the pedagogy of the introductory writing course (English 1) and of the communal writing portfolio assessment system that was an integral part of English 1. The first page of text in the English 1 *Instructor's Guide* quickly established that

A foremost advantage to students [of portfolio assessment] is that the system allows their best work to be assessed. Essays in their portfolio will be essays that they have labored over, essays that represent the best that they have done in a ten-week writing course. (2)

This advantage of portfolio assessment may have accrued partially thanks to the fact that students omitted one of their first two papers from the final portfolio, but the "best work" benefit also presumably stemmed from the fact that students were allowed and encouraged, within certain constraints, to revise ("labor over") their texts.

The FYE Program "Mission Statement" also provided strong support for teaching and valuing revision:

Instructors should also be certain that they teach the entire composing process, offering students assistance in prewriting, writing, and rewriting. . . . Rewriting covers revision strategies—adding, deleting, rearranging, and the like—as well as editing skills. (4)

Instructor-evaluators of English 1 responded to such encouragement and direction from administrators by putting significant emphasis on *Revision/Process* in their teaching and evaluation of writing. The following sampling of pro-process excerpts illustrates some of the range of ways in which revision was valued and privileged in the program.

Sandra: His mistake was not getting rid of that when he wrote his final version. (A-1 Mid Trio, 1340)

Emily: Also, for the theme that gets written in class, I don't think that you fail this portfolio on the basis of this [unrevised] essay. (Admin Pre-Port Norm, 1017)

Kevin: I think this is a very promising paper. And as a first draft, it looks wonderful. I think it needs a lot still. (C Mid Norm, 734)

These remarks suggest that another of the major goals for the FYE Program as a whole was met in the context of English 1: instructors encouraged, required, looked for, and rewarded revision and process as they taught and evaluated. Note how DCM provides rich data for program evaluation as well as in support of student learning and assessment.

Directly alongside the privileging of *Revision/Process* in program documents and in instructors' teaching and assessment of writing, however, stood a powerful and contradictory concept: that *unrevised*, in-class writing provided the "true story" of a writer's ability and was therefore the best guide to whether a student should pass English 1. This position was articulated by Peter and Ben during Team A's End-Term (portfolio) Norming session.

The *Revision* issue arose when Veronica, a graduate-student TA, posed this question to Team A near the outset of their end-term norming session:

I have a question about the in-class paper. . . . I mean how does it actually function in the portfolio, like, does it really help to decide when a portfolio is really "C" or whatever or that it's going to fail. . . . Do you see what I'm asking? I mean, how do we count the in-class essay? (A Mid Norm 1097)

In response to Veronica's query, Peter offered this view privileging the unrevised, composed-in-class text:

It can be a very good determinant of pass/fail. . . . Well, I mean, yeah it's timed writing and everything, but they've also had plenty of time to prepare, and I think just somebody's basic writing skills are more apparent than than who knows how much revision they've done on it, whether it's their roommates' . . .

When Sandra, an adjunct instructor, immediately challenged Peter's antirevision argument, Terri, the norming session leader, supported Peter by reminding Sandra that exam writing goes unrevised, and the in-class essay in the portfolio "is also practice for exam writing." Peter then elaborated on his antiprocess position.

I mean I just think you can tell a lot about the person's ability level from in-class writing, more a lot of times than you can tell from prepared, more worked-over papers where they're thinking "What does my teacher want?" or what's other students' comments on them or something. (A Mid Norm 1134)

For Peter, revision masked a writer's true ability level, whereas unrevised, timed writing revealed it. Ben added this statement in support of Peter's perspective:

I think the in-class is important, because it tells you whether they're ready to move or they're not ready to move. (A Mid Norm 1236)

Discussion on this topic continued for several more minutes, with various instructors exploring and negotiating how in-class writing should be assessed (for example, focus on *Organization* and *Thinking*, and disregard occasional faults in *Mechanics*). Then Team A moved on to discuss other sample texts and other criteria.

This writing program had a serious problem. Its mission statement, its lead administrators, and many of its instructors were privileging *Revision* as a value for judging whether each City University student was capable enough to proceed with his or her degree. Meanwhile, other instructors (and Terri, the assistant to the director of the FYE Program) argued to privilege unrevised over revised writing because unrevised writing was seen as a more reliable indicator of a writer's "true" ability and a test of whether the author may have plagiarized or received undue assistance on the revised texts.

This is precisely the sort of scenario in which the process of Dynamic Criteria Mapping is most helpful. Without a method for placing side by side statements from program documents and candid statements from various norming and trio sessions—some privileging revision and others privileging unrevised prose—a writing program would lack the ability to identify a serious pedagogical and theoretical fissure in the program that is likely to lead to dramatically different pass/fail judgments depending on which of these two "camps" an evaluator has joined. Dynamic Criteria Mapping clarifies the rift, produces a text to illustrate it, and makes it available for programmatic discussion, negotiation, and decision making. Such a process not only helps instructors know how to evaluate and lets students know how they will be evaluated, the process also demonstrates to interested outside parties that the writing program is actively engaged in identifying problem areas of instruction and evaluation and addressing them in a proactive and professional manner.

As noted earlier, *Revision/Process* was highly valued in the program, both in official statements and in the discourse of most instructors. At the same time, in an effort "to protect [instructors] from . . . endless revisions that never stop, that seem to go on forever," the program constrained how much and which essays students were allowed to revise once the instructor had responded to them. Officially, students could revise *only* whichever of their first two essays (important person or significant event) they included in their portfolio. Some instructors accepted

this policy limiting revision, while others commented that the policy “doesn’t make any sense at all,” because

I just don’t feel comfortable saying [to my students] “multiple drafts are the way to do it, except you’re not allowed to.” (Peter, A Mid Norm 311)

and

that doesn’t make sense to say [to students], “Look at my comments, read every word I say, ponder it—but don’t use it.” (Florence, A Mid Norm 318)

Instructors handled this tension between limiting workload and encouraging revision by providing their students with varying instructions and levels of freedom regarding which pieces could be revised and how much. Some of those instructors who allowed their students to exceed the official limit experienced an intriguing phenomenon: “revision guilt.” Veronica reported that

I got into trouble in my own classes because I gave them more freedom of choice, I gave them the opportunity to revise a paper that they wanted most to work on as opposed to saying do either [essay number] one or two. (Veronica 1, 702)

Sandra and Rhonda . . . said something about how they don’t allow students to revise so how could I have done that. (Veronica 2, 129)

I was reprimanded, do you see what I’m saying? Because of the parameters of the thing. I had this vision of all their students not having this chance to revise and all mine [having that chance]. (Veronica 2, 173)

An interesting side effect of revision guilt was that instructors sometimes coped with it by evaluating their students according to a higher standard. In order to compensate for the unfair advantage they felt they had given their students, they expected less from other instructors’ students than from their own. This evaluative dynamic slides into another surprising aspect of revision: that revision was usually viewed as good, but could also be perceived as bad.

In the midterm meeting of Trio A-1, trio-mates Veronica, Sandra, and Rhonda were discussing the hypothetical case of a student “who’s done eight drafts to get what they got” and who “came to you [the instructor] every single day [and said] ‘What can I do? What can I do?’” I asked these instructors how this hypothetical student’s multiple drafts and repeated pleas for direction would affect their evaluation of his work.

Rhonda replied that “it would definitely work in his favor,” and Sandra explained that

The emotional impact—If someone is really, really trying . . . I would hate to say, “Yeah, you’re not passing,” you know, to someone who has been working really hard.

This comment helps illustrate the strong link between *Revision/Process* and *Effort/Taking Risks* as criteria for evaluation. Veronica, however, offered an answer quite different from her trio-mates’:

Sometimes it might work negatively, too, because if you point out all the sentence-level errors and . . . then the next paper has the same errors, you know, they almost haven’t tried. So, the same thing could work negatively.

The same behavior that looks to Sandra and Rhonda like *Effort* and *Revision* could finally register with Veronica as *lack* of effort—“they almost haven’t tried.” Students should therefore know that multiple drafts and visits to the instructor are not enough to earn credit for *Revision/Process*: they need to undertake the recommended revisions with demonstrated seriousness of purpose.

Furthermore, students can’t merely follow the instructor’s directions for revision; they need to show independence of judgment and craft. For example, Veronica observed that one student-author

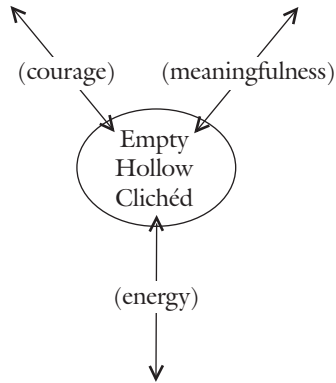
has a jillion comma splices, which he just mechanically fixed because I marked them. . . . He had them before, too. So, I mean, I was going to fail him, you know.

Veronica demanded that her students do more than “mechanically fix” errors she marked for them. (See the related criteria *Authority* and *Giving the Teacher What She Wants*.) She also doesn’t want her students to wait until the last minute to do their revisions.

He’s revised every paper in here. He’s just this guy, this person that didn’t work for nine weeks, and you know, bellyache a lot the whole time, and then at the end in two days, he’s worked this all out.

In this case, though the student had “revised every paper,” those revisions did not count in his favor because he waited until the last two days to do them. This is an example of instructors penalizing revision. Here again, students should know that revision can actually count against them if their instructors perceive them as idlers who bail themselves out in the final hour of the course.

Figure 6
Empty, Hollow, Clichéd



Empty/Hollow/Clichéd

Empty/Hollow/Clichéd

empty, hollow, clichéd, flat, corny, bland, superficial, one-dimensional, boring, nothing wrong with it, abstraction, shell, safe, vapid, formulaic

This criterion cluster is distinctive in two ways. First, it is one of only four criteria in the DCM of exclusively negative quality (the others are Textual Features *Objectionable Views, Characters, and Events* and *Messy Appearance* and the Contextual Criterion *Turned in Late*). Second, it acts as a foil for three other substantial criteria of textual quality: *Effort/Taking Risks*; *Significance*; and *Interesting/Lively/Creative*. In participants' comments, and thus on the DCM, *Empty/Hollow/Clichéd* was opposed to all three of those criteria.

Empty counterposes *Significance* on the axis of meaningfulness. It opposes *Effort/Taking Risks* on the axis of courage. And it contrasts *Interesting/Lively/Creative* on the axis of energy. For example, those instructors most critical of the sample essay "Pops" called it most of the names listed in the box above. This was in contrast with the sample text "Gramma Sally," which was generally judged strong on all three of the criteria to which *Empty* is opposed, though the essay suffered from many weaknesses of *Mechanics* and *Style*.

Because this is a negative criterion that exists chiefly as the opposite to three other important affirmative criteria for judging students' writing, the data on *Empty/Hollow/Clichéd* offer less basis for commentary than I found for the other criteria discussed here.

The “Aesthetic” Constellation

The three criteria clustered in the *Aesthetic* constellation—*Interesting/Lively/Creative*; *Textured/Rich/Artful*; and *Humor*—all provide aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction to readers. (See Figure 7.)

Interesting/Lively/Creative is by far the most quantitatively substantial of the three,

Interesting/Lively/Creative

Synonyms: interesting, fascinating, exciting, creative, innovative, lively, complex, energy, spirit, life, lively, flair, striking, original, out of the ordinary, endearing, appealing, neat, cute, sweet, kept my attention, you wanted to read on, shocking, stunning, surprising, spice, spicy, enjoy, arrest the reader, alive, engaging, inviting, unique, remembered it fondly, vivid, vital, vitality, fresh, something different

Antonyms: conservative; boring (“bored spittleless”); abstraction; awful, generalized rambling; unremarkable; flatly competent; pat; didn’t turn me on; uninspired

Instructor-evaluators and administrators were unanimous in proclaiming the sample text “Gamma Sally” as a highly *Interesting* essay.

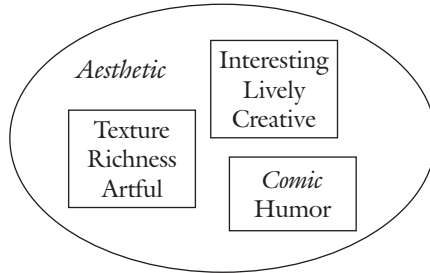
Fred: The dog, I mean . . . It was something out of the ordinary, like, God, this is really interesting. . . . I could see how people would fail it, and it probably should be failed, but I just thought the subject matter was so endearing . . . I didn’t want to fail it. I didn’t want to. (A Mid Norm, 1091)

Kevin: You wanted to read on, to find out. And also, the way she, the woman was torturing the dog . . . was so shocking to me, you know? Kind of sadistic? It was interesting. (C Mid Norm, 413)

Kevin: I think this is in some ways the most interesting paper in the group. It’s rich with detail, it’s full of good examples, it’s lively, it’s interesting. The writer is clearly deeply engaged in the topic. (C Mid Norm, 908)

The unusually high level of interest, the “lively” and “endearing” qualities of “Gamma Sally” help to explain why FYE Program instructor-evaluators split almost exactly evenly (twenty-four to pass, twenty-six to fail) when it came time to vote on whether the essay met program standards, even when the essay also suffered from serious deficiencies in the areas of *Mechanics*, *Focus*, and *Style*. The sample text “Pops” was generally

Figure 7
Aesthetic Constellation



viewed as the mirror image of “Gramma Sally”: highly competent at the level of *Mechanics*, *Sentences*, and *Style*, it was also judged to be abstract, pat, and unremarkable. Forty-five instructors voted to pass “Pops,” while six voted to fail it.

An important perspective on the *Interesting* criterion comes from Grant Wiggins, who complains in several of his publications that he encounters great difficulty trying to persuade groups of English instructors to place *Interesting* on their rubrics and scoring guides.

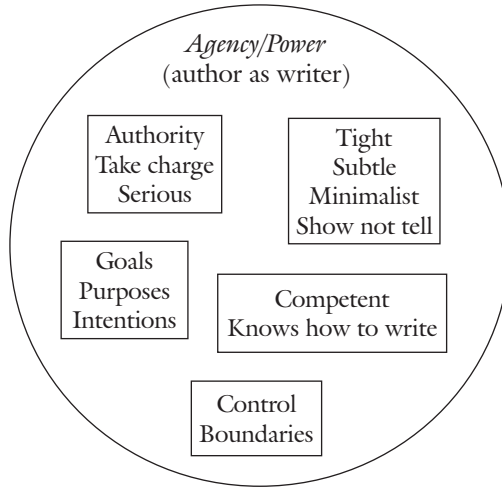
[O]ur skittishness in assessing such things [as “enticingness”] is revealing and ironic. Surely . . . these are the kinds of effects we should be scoring. For, at its heart, the act of formal writing is designed to move a reader in some way. (132–33)

In light of Wiggins’s repeated struggles and protests, I take it as a major point in favor of both the City University FYE Program and of Dynamic Criteria Mapping that *Interesting/Lively/Creative* not only made it onto the City University Map, but took a prominent place there. These are some of the benefits of researching what we really value when teaching and reading rhetoric, as opposed to placing in a rubric only what we think we are supposed to value (typically “objective” and “formal” features) in large-scale assessment settings.

The “Agency/Power” Constellation

The *Agency/Power* constellation contains a collection of criteria by which evaluators constructed a picture of the student-author’s characteristics and capabilities as a writer. (See Figure 8.)

Figure 8
Agency/Power Constellation



Tight/Subtle/Minimalist/Show-Not-Tell. In the earlier discussion of *Significance*, I noted how instructors wanted to find significance but did not want to be handed significance or hit over the head with it. In a related evaluative dynamic, the criterion *Tight/Subtle/Minimalist/Show-Not-Tell* focuses intensely on the writer's ability to create the textual conditions within which a good reader will find fulfillment without spoiling the experience by overwriting.

Tight/Subtle/Minimalist/Show-Not-Tell

Synonyms: subtle; minimalist; tight, deft suggestions rather than elaborations; she's resting a lot on the things . . . she leaves out; stripped-down style; suggests; understatement; constraint; getting the job done; it shows and it doesn't tell

Antonyms: overblown; very flowery; belabor its point

Emily, director of the FYE Program, admitted that she had a special appreciation and enthusiasm for the sample essay "Pops," based in her identification with the writer's style:

Probably my own stylistic taste is for minimalist stuff, for tight, deft suggestions rather than elaborations. So in my view, that paper, "Pops", is a very sophisticated, skillful paper. (Emily 1, 45)

I was raised reading writers who learned from Hemingway and E.B. White, and so I have a particular, you know, affinity for a certain kind of stripped-down style. So I think I'm a more responsive reader to this style of this paper than I might be to some other papers. . . . It shows and it doesn't tell, it doesn't belabor its point but it suggests it. I like that. I think that's really good. And those are things that I very much value in writing. (Emily 2, 295)

It is interesting to note that some of the passages that instructor-evaluators in the program marked as "clichéd," Emily interpreted and valued as "understated." The fact that one reader's *Cliché* can be another's *Subtlety* suggests that a writing program's Dynamic Criteria Map might contain potentially hidden links among criteria depending on different readers' literary or stylistic orientations.

Goals/Purposes/Intentions and Authority. Two closely related criteria in the *Agency/Power* constellation are *Goals/Purposes/Intentions* and *Authority/Take Charge/Serious*.

Goals/Purposes/Intentions

Synonyms: purpose; rhetorical purpose; attempting to fulfill a particular purpose; intent; it starts and goes somewhere and does what it ought to do; she's fairly consistent in fulfilling the goals; she was aware of her goals; the essay's goals are fulfilled; the tone and purpose of the essay were in complete harmony; she meant to do it this way; some sense of what they are going to accomplish

Antonyms: he didn't have a sense of what he was trying to do in that paper, where he wanted to go and stuff like that; the effect is just unintentional; it wasn't intended to be what it turned out to be

What we learn from studying *Goals/Purposes/Intentions* is that evaluators noted with appreciation when a writer appeared to know what she wanted to accomplish in a text and furthermore succeeded in accomplishing it. At the same time, those familiar with the history of literary interpretation and criticism may sympathize with the astonished protest from Ted, a graduate TA-instructor on Team C, that tracing (or inventing) authorial intention is a widely discredited method for establishing the meaning and value of a text.

In discussing the sample essay "Anguish" during midterm norming, Team C fiercely debated whether some of the "fractured literary effect" for which some instructors were praising the essay was intentional or a

coincidental result of the writer's lack of ability to control language and express thought. Ted exclaimed,

I'm amazed that people are coming up with this authorial intent kind of stuff. I mean, we're supposed to get that trained out of us [in graduate studies]. We have something here in front of us, let's work on it. (C Mid Norm, 1100)

Ted's colleague Kent responded with the trenchant observation that Ted's praise for the essay's literary effect also relied on a construction of authorial intention, though Kent rephrased Ted's position in dismissive language.

Well, aren't you saying that she meant to do it this way? That her intent was to come across like she can't write? (1121)

Together, Kent and Ted raised a provocative question for writing assessment: in what ways does and should construction of authorial intentions or goals shape our evaluations?

Authority/Take Charge/Serious. Because references to this criterion often occurred in the same breath as mention of the *Goals* criterion, at one point in my analysis I considered merging the two criteria. They remain separate in the DCM because while *Goals* concerns the writer knowing her rhetorical goals and fulfilling them, *Authority* captures a broader sense of the author's intellectual and rhetorical power. Consideration of the criterion *Authority* also leads us to the two criteria that link and bridge the *Agency/Power* constellation to the *Ethos* constellation: *Voice/Personality* and *Sophisticated/Elegant*.

Authority/Take Charge/Serious

Synonyms: the kind of serious persona we want writers to have; authority; direct; confidence

Antonyms: doesn't take charge of his own writing

The "Ethos" Constellation

The two most closely related constellations on the DCM are *Agency/Power* and *Ethos*. The full map shows these constellations overlapping because both mark evaluators' perceptions of the student-author. *Agency/Power* focuses on the author as a writer; in judging *Ethos*, on the other hand, evaluators respond to their perceptions of the author as a person. In Lester Faigley's terms, City University's

writing teachers were as much or more interested in *whom* they want their students to be as in *what* they want their students to write. (1992, 113)

Voice/Personality and *Sophisticated/Elegant* emerge from the distinction and connection between the *Agency/Power* constellation (a judgment of the author's qualities as a writer) and the *Ethos* constellation (a judgment of the author's qualities as a person). It is important to understand how they emerge from and bridge the two constellations.

Voice/Personality

voice; individual; personality; feelings; sense of themselves as a writer; charm; the emotion of her story; emotional; a scream [of "Anguish"]; powerful piece of writing; working with her feelings; clouded by emotion; strong emotional confusion; like seeing her naked; a very mature voice; shifting voice; confidence in [author's voice]; personal

The fact that I could not clearly divide comments related to *Voice/Personality* into synonyms and antonyms points up evaluators' deep ambivalence about many instances of this textual quality. The sample essay "Anguish" provides the most dramatic example of this ambivalence. The raw emotion it presented impressed some readers as courageous, sincere, and honest, but made others uncomfortable ("like seeing her naked") and often led them to judge the writer as not in control of her subject matter or expression. The nuances of these conflicting responses to the *Voice* and *Personality* in "Anguish" help illuminate how this criterion bridges considerations of an author's personal qualities (*Ethos*) and her rhetorical power (*Authority*). The same is true of the blend of considerations discussed under *Sophisticated/Elegant/Mature*.

Sophisticated/Elegant/Mature

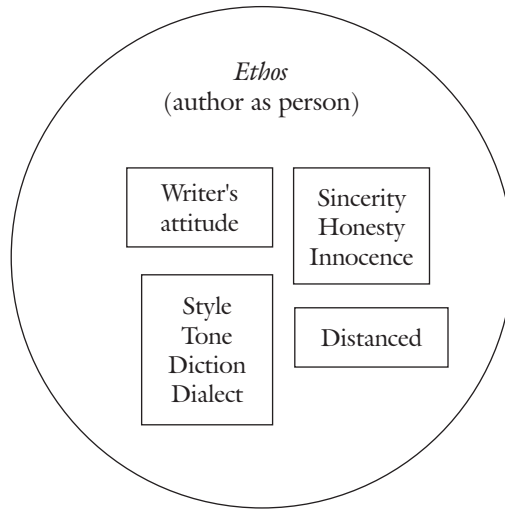
Synonyms: sophisticated, getting a sense of what an essay is; skillful; a very mature voice

Antonyms: inelegant; awkwardness; very beginning writing; mechanical; immature

Here again we find judgments based on qualities that are as attributable to the author's self (mature/immature, sophisticated/inelegant) as to her capabilities as a writer.

Now on to those criteria wholly and firmly located in the *Ethos* constellation.

Figure 9
Ethos Constellation



Writer's Attitude might be judged “egocentric, arrogant, humble, or interested” (as distinct from *Interesting*). These perceptions of the author strongly influenced readers’ pass/fail judgments. Similarly, if an author was perceived as *Distanced* from her subject and providing *Perspective*, she was generally lauded for it. However, the major debate over the sample essay “Anguish” raised questions about whether authors should be punished for providing “fire” and “splatter” in their essays when the assignment and other FYE Program documents encouraged “intensely personal” writing. *Sincerity/Honesty* was a related criterion by which the author was judged truthful and earnest. Faigley discusses this criterion at length in “Judging Writing, Judging Selves” (1989). But the largest criterion within *Ethos*—and the point of judgment that will lead us out of the personalness of this constellation and into the more comfortable and familiar ground of clearly rhetorical judgments—is the next one.

Style/Tone/Diction/Dialect focuses on how the author uses language at the word and sentence level, but it excludes the closely related Textual Features of *Grammar* and *Usage*, for example. To illustrate the usefulness and fineness of some of these distinctions, let us consider the concern articulated under the criterion *Style* for apparently unjustified shifts in verb tenses: “moving from the present to the past tense without clear

reasons.” Verb tense is an issue also treated under *Mechanics: Grammar*. To justify the distinction we must notice that verb tense switching within a sentence is a grammatical problem, whereas verb tense switching between or among sentences is a stylistic problem.

Style/Tone/Diction/Dialect

Synonyms: I liked her style of writing; I think she’s a good writer; “Plethora”? Did you teach him that word? That’s an awfully big word for this age; articulate; able to move the language around; used sentence fragments dramatically; language control; stripped-down style; outward or topical control of language

Antonyms: a lot of use of the second person, when, really he didn’t need to be doing that; extremely wordy; missing words; confusion in her tenses; moving from the present to the past tense without clear reasons; inappropriate tone; dialect interference; lingo; it was the dialect of the student; issues of dialect, issues of non-standard English; a very flowery paper; fluid, extreme, out of control style; language problems

Concerns like diction, concision, missing words, pronoun and verb tense instability among sentences, and dialect belong here under *Ethos* because they are aspects of style and language that lie extremely close to readers’ questions about what sort of person the author is. Other language issues more firmly rooted in the author’s text make up the criteria that populate the *Part-to-Whole* constellation.

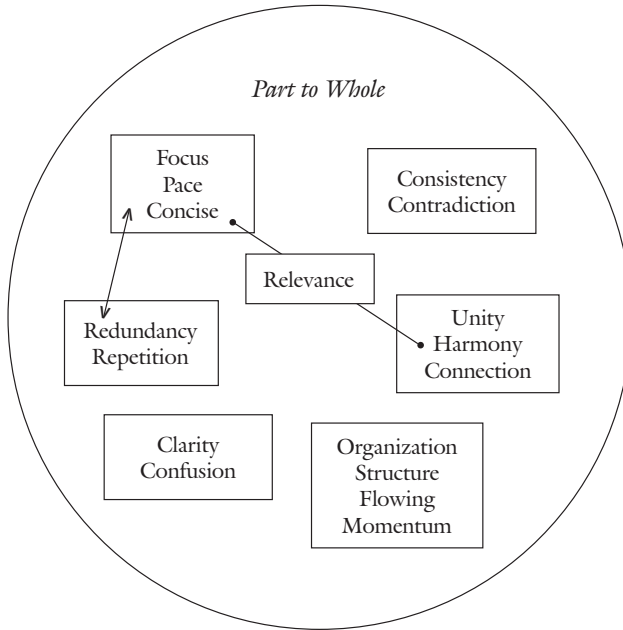
The “Part-to-Whole” Constellation

As the name for this last constellation suggests, criteria positioned here treat the question of relationships among different parts of a text, as well as the relation of a text’s parts to the text as a whole. The two most substantial of these criteria are *Unity/Harmony/Connection* and *Focus/Pace/Concise*; these two criteria also have an intricate interrelationship.

Unity/Harmony/Connection

Synonyms: cohesion, cohesive; coherence, coherent; connection; harmony; unity, unified; mesh together; whole essay works as a unit; rhetorically working together; work together really well; work well within itself; put together in a sensible way; how to put an essay together; [fulfill expectations you create in your readers; don’t introduce things you haven’t led your reader to expect]; stay with one idea; integrated; correlation; pattern or design; framework

Figure 10
Part-to-Whole Constellation



Antonyms: [student's field notes] not really incorporated into the text, it's just sort of stuck there; it doesn't quite all fit together; he didn't go back to the introduction; I would pass half the paper and not pass the other half of the paper; the paragraphs don't work together as an essay; that paper fell apart; not being able to put things together; convoluted and unconnected; it jumps around; thoughts don't seem connected; several different ideas thrown together; disjointed; just didn't seem to go together; incoherent; things falling apart here; falls apart; brokenness; parts don't have any connection to each other; details don't mesh together

Unity/Harmony, as the above excerpts illustrate, concerns how successfully the parts of a student's text work together, a fairly straightforward and familiar criterion for rhetorical judgment. *Unity/Harmony* is the part-to-whole criterion par excellence, with a focus on smooth and satisfying interrelationships among a text's sections. The double-edged criterion *Consistency/Contradiction* is closely related to *Unity/Harmony*, but it focuses on logical rather than on part-to-whole concerns. For example, the author of "Gamma Sally" opened herself up to criticism for inconsistency

by reporting an unexpected, hard-to-explain softening toward the title character at the end of her essay. *Consistency* is therefore a logical version of *Harmony*. When texts *Contradict* themselves, by contrast, they demonstrate internal logical disharmony.

Focus/Pace/Concise

Synonyms: focus; pace; pacing; concentrate; she followed it; making the point; limited [scope]; subject gets . . . narrowed in on; stick with something; frame (around it); tight framework; to the point; stayed within boundaries; concise; finding a center to this narrative; sticks to [it]; constraint; getting the job done; worked within [a framework]

Antonyms: [no] high point; totally out of the blue; took such a long time getting started; [not writing about what you lead your readers to expect your text will be about]; he lost track; he lost the topic; rambled/rambling; it's such a large problem [scope]; wordy; paragraphs jump around; jerky; doesn't stay with one idea; cover[s] too much ground; kinda drifts away; drifting; shifting; moved around; long, convoluted; she just rolls and rolls and rolls; belabors the point; go on and on and on; goes off onto a tangent; distracted; tried to bite off everything; long, convoluted . . . could have been stated in a couple of simple sentences

Focus/Pace/Concise is illustrated by counter-example in *Redundancy/Repetition*, a negative criterion. Material that is repetitive or redundant exhibits faults of *Concision* and *Pace*.

Though they present an unusually large number of synonyms and antonyms, both these criteria (*Unity/Harmony* and *Focus/Pace/Concise*) may be usefully summarized in a single word: "wholeness." Yet they must be distinguished because they address two different kinds of wholeness. *Unity/Harmony* addresses whether and how well all the parts of a text fit with each other. *Focus/Pace*, by contrast, deals with the whole text being about one thing. *Focus* concerns an abstract or overarching wholeness, a wholeness that comes from the relation of the text (in all its parts) to a theme or idea; *Unity* is a relational wholeness, a wholeness that comes from the relations of parts to one another.

As I struggled to understand the relationship between *Focus* and *Unity*, a metaphor suggested itself. Imagine a ship on a journey. The crew and passengers have two kinds of concerns about their ship. First, is the ship strong, solid, and consistently well fitted? This consideration parallels *Unity*. Second, is their ship on course, is it consistently headed toward their destination, is it making good time? These questions pertain to

Focus and *Pace*. The most successful ships, and texts, both hold together and stay on a steady course.

One interesting additional facet of the interrelationships between *Focus* and *Unity* is that *Relevance* is a criterion that applies to both, for material in an essay that lacks relevance can be either off the topic (lacking *Focus*) or not a good fit with other sections of the composition with which it is juxtaposed (lack of *Harmony* and *Coherence*).

Clarity/Confusion. Though my study of the coding report for *Clarity/Confusion* yielded no dynamics worthy of elaboration (in other words, the criterion speaks for itself), it carried illustrative synonyms and antonyms that I thought would prove useful and interesting to students and teachers of writing.

Clarity/Confusion

Synonyms: clarity; clear; clearly explained; makes sense; get your point across; doesn't lose himself in various things; understandable

Antonyms: things are glumphed together; confused; confusing and troubling; unclear; I had no idea what they were getting at; I couldn't understand it!; she kind of lost me; muddy; inconsistent; parts that weren't understandable

Organization/Structure/Flowing/Momentum was likewise self-evident.

Organization/Structure/Flowing/Momentum

Synonyms: organization; structure; order [logical sequence vs. tidiness]; sequence of events; she followed it spatially and temporally; a series of things he's thought about here that he is proposing in some sort of systematic way; its organization makes sense; sticks to that structure absolutely; clear understanding of cause and effect, of . . . how to put an essay together; it did have a beginning and ending and flowed more coherently; arranged differently; transitions jumped from one place to another

Antonyms: he doesn't follow [the argument he set up]; disorganized; structural problems; it didn't follow

Like *Focus*, *Organization* is about staying on track. But whereas *Focus* consists in staying on track in relation to an overarching theme or idea (heading toward the destination), *Organization* concerns a specifically logical movement from one part of the journey to another. In this way, *Organization* is something of a hybrid of *Focus* and *Unity*. *Organization* is *Unity* in motion, *Focus* over time.

Our tour through the Dynamic Criteria Map of City University's Textual Qualities reveals many subtle and complex nuances of evaluation

in the writing program, including surprising links and interconnections among those criteria. Examined in the next section of this chapter on Textual Criteria, Textual Features present somewhat less resonant and complex interrelationships than those among Textual Qualities. Nevertheless, Textual Features are important and interesting criteria for evaluation of writing that reward careful study.

TEXTUAL FEATURES

Whereas evaluators' assessment of Textual Qualities (discussed in the preceding section of this chapter) emerged gradually from a deep and sustained engagement with a piece of writing, Textual Features are those aspects of a text that can be recognized—and evaluated—at a glance. For example, instructor-evaluators sometimes criticized texts that came before them for having one or more excessively long paragraphs or, more simply, faulted texts for being altogether too short. It is worth noticing that these two Textual Features, *Paragraphing* and *Length/Amount*, could be—and sometimes were, in fact—adequately assessed by judges who had literally not (yet) read a single word of the text before them.

Also unlike Textual Qualities, the names of Textual Features usually do not inherently convey whether presence of the feature in a text will count for or against the writer. In fact, Textual Features and Textual Qualities often exhibit what might be called a syntactical relationship. Textual Features function like nouns: they identify parts or elements of a text. Textual Qualities function like adjectives: they describe traits experienced when reading. Therefore, it was common to encounter statements from participants in my study that combined the two kinds of Textual Criteria: “What a *boring title*.” (Adjective, noun; quality, feature.) “Her *transitions* were really *elegant*.” (Noun, adjective; feature, quality.) Textual Features are therefore distinct from the Textual Qualities discussed above in how they are perceived, named, and valued.

My study of Textual Features did not yield the same rich network of interconnections as did my study of Textual Qualities. As a result, Textual Features are most effectively presented in the form of a list rather than a map. In order of quantity of discourse devoted to each Feature, table 3 lists the Textual Features discussed in City University's FYE Program.

Table 3
City University's Textual Features

Mechanics
Grammar
Punctuation
Spelling
Usage
Capitalization
Typing
Legible
Format
Content/Topic
Sentences
Variety
Sophistication
Clarity
Detail/Description/Examples/Dialogue
Length/Amount (of Text)
Objectionable Views, Characters, Events
Endings/Conclusions
Paragraphing
Portrayal of Characters and Relationship
Leads/Beginnings
Transitions
Anecdotes
Title
Messy Appearance
Graphics

Mechanics

For several reasons, the clear dominance in City University's evaluative discourse of the Feature *Mechanics* (including its eight subcriteria) merits discussion. First, this Textual Feature demonstrated quantitative supremacy not only over all other Textual Criteria (both Qualities and Features) but also over all other single criteria of any kind (including Contextual Criteria and Other Factors). Yet neither program documents nor comments by the various instructors and administrators in the program indicated that they valued *Mechanics* above all else. Instead, *Mechanics* (more precisely "technical conventions of the dominant dialect") was articulated as one important rhetorical value *among many important others* at the level of the entire FYE Program and in documents about English 1 in particular.

The First-Year English sequence . . . is about textuality, how texts are produced and consumed; the sequence, therefore, is necessarily about critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing. (*Mission Statement*, 1)

English 1 is a course in writing about personal experience. . . . Instructors should be certain that students understand the effects that the rhetorical context (“the writer’s role,” “subject matter,” “audience,” and “purpose”) has on the choices that a writer makes. . . . Instructors should also be certain that they teach the entire composing process, offering students assistance in prewriting, writing, and rewriting. . . . An important part of English 1 is ensuring that students understand that it is as “product” that the work of any writer is judged; students should, therefore, learn to edit their work for the grammar, punctuation, and usage that are appropriate to formal writing. Toward this end, students must be familiar with a number of grammatical terms and have a working knowledge of a number of grammatical rules. . . . It is also important to teach a sentence unit (*Mission Statement*, 4)

Explicitly and implicitly, these program documents clearly state that *Mechanics* count. A key question for City University’s FYE Program and for this study is: “How did *Mechanics* come to count above *all* other criteria (*Thinking*, *Significance*, *Sentences*, *Authority*, *Voice*, *Style*, *Focus*, and *Organization*, to name just a few) for evaluating students’ writing?”

A few participants in my study offered their theories on why, and in what circumstances, *Mechanics* dominated their portfolio evaluation process. Martin, a graduate TA on Team C, offered the most intriguing of these theories. In interviews, Martin explained that he believed members of Team C performed for one another a ritual display of “rigor” focused on *Mechanics*. Martin believed this performance was designed to gain status and respect among their TA peers, as well as from Kevin, their course professor, team leader, and associate director of the FYE Program. (Martin’s theory is discussed in more detail in chapter 4, under *Standards/Expectations*.) Rhonda, an adjunct instructor, had a slightly different explanation for the disproportionate emphasis in the program’s evaluative discourse on *Mechanics*:

Having things like specific organizational or mechanical things to talk about is a way to equalize everybody, to get rid of the personal contact and defensiveness or whatever, because it’s more something that you can point to. “Well, there’s a sentence fragment,” or something like that. So it’s safer ground than other things. (Rhonda, 528)

Perhaps, as Rhonda suggested, *Mechanics* were “safer” to talk about than other, more complex, potentially more contentious aspects of rhetoric.

Or, if Martin is right, focusing on *Mechanics* would earn you status points in the program. Whatever the reasons, this Textual Feature overshadowed all other concerns in terms of the sheer number of lines of transcripts participants devoted to discussing it.

And the dominance of *Mechanics* in the Program was not merely quantitative. Especially in debates during midterm norming on passing and failing the sample texts “Gramma Sally” and “Pops,” we can see that mechanics also enjoyed a qualitative superiority or privilege. This Textual Feature came to be seen and used as the “bottom line” criterion for judgment. *Mechanics* as the “bottom line” meant that even though “Gramma Sally” showed tremendous *Significance* and was highly *Interesting* and *Powerful*, because it suffered from many mechanical problems, it therefore failed. On the other hand, even though “Pops” was described by some as “vapid, clichéd, and hollow,” it passed because it commanded *Mechanics* quite successfully.

Well more than half the discussion of *Mechanics* as a criterion for evaluation referred to such generalized considerations as “error, editing, mistakes, conventions, competence” without referring to any particular aspect of mechanics that would identify the concern as one or more of the eight specific mechanical concerns listed under *Mechanics*. For example, in urging everyone in Team A to pass the sample essay “Pops” (two instructors had voted to fail it), Terri made this argument:

We also have to look at the level of writing itse[lf]—you know, is this person making errors? Do they know conventions? Certainly they do, you know? I mean this person is facile in the normal conventions. So I would be hard pressed to fail them just, you know, on that ground. (A Mid Norm, 596)

When, like “Pops,” an essay commands conventions with solid (though by no means complete) success, we should not be surprised if evaluators don’t pick out specific conventions as examples of that success. Still, for more than half of the extensive discussion of *Mechanics* to omit any reference to specific conventions seems odd. And even when critiquing essays and portfolios with a primary focus on faults in conventions, sometimes participants’ comments were still entirely free of references to specific errors or even categories of errors.

It seems to me that this student for one thing has kind of a proofreading type of problem? You know? The one essay, I forget which one, had tons and tons of mechanical errors. (Peter, A Port Norm, 958)

Well, you know, looking at the first essay in this batch, I think that if it were clean, I would have passed [the portfolio]. (C Port Norm, 2008–9)

Particularly in light of the surprising fluidity and porousness of what errors evaluators noticed and identified, what they called them, and how they judged them, the strong predominance of “generic” references to *Mechanics* merits discussion in the program.

The mysteries of *Mechanics* at City University should remind us of Joseph Williams’s “The Phenomenology of Error,” in which perceptions and judgments of error are subject to what Williams calls “deep psychic forces” (Williams 1981 153).

Well, it is all very puzzling: Great variation in our definition of error, great variation in our emotional investment in defining and condemning [*sic*] error, great variation in the perceived seriousness of individual errors. The categories of error all seem like they should be yes-no, but the feelings associated with the categories seem much more complex. (155)

As part of some future effort at Dynamic Criteria Mapping, some bold researcher will interview instructor-evaluators regarding the psychodynamics of *Mechanics* (or what James Sosnoski calls the “psycho-politics of error”) and bring to light answers to what must remain in my study merely provocative questions.

“Qualifying” Features

With the notable exception of the feature *Mechanics*, most Textual Features were “qualified” when invoked by participants in my study. That is, evaluators worked hard to avoid judging texts by features alone. Instead, they most often spoke of how Textual Features alone could be misleading indicators of the rhetorical success of a text. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this intriguing dynamic arises in the criterion *Length/Amount (of Text)*.

Length/Amount (of Text). The criterion *Length/Amount (of Text)* included this substantial group of synonyms and antonyms:

Length/Amount (of Text)

Synonyms: [this writer] seems somewhat prolific; she generates a lot; she’s got a lot to say; there’s a lot more material . . . the person is really engaged in this topic; especially for the in-class paper, I don’t think [length] is quite as

crucial; she managed, what, a page and a half or something? It's as if she kind of lost her energy after those first two papers; like a student who writes a lot but then in the end, well . . . ; wow, what a long in-class paper . . . All in forty-five minutes?; every single thing that I read of hers seemed hurried, even though some of them are like four or five pages; she writes an abundance, but a lot of what she's putting in there seemed totally irrelevant to me to what she was saying; it just got a lot done . . . there was just a lot of material there; this writer, you know, writes too much instead of too little; I couldn't pass it because it was too long

Antonyms: the essays get shorter and shorter; to turn in a page and a half [length essay], that's like a sin in my class; I wouldn't pass it . . . just on length alone . . . that's a little pet peeve of mine; it would be really hard to pass a one-page paper; the first paper is too short; but aren't his essays too short, I mean all of them?; what about length as a problem . . . On certainly the last two papers?; it's a little short, but she really dealt with the problem; she just [is] always really skimpy; I counted the words . . . and it's roughly two-thirds of the minimum

Given that it is the most obvious Textual Feature of all, it's not surprising to find overall *Length/Amount (of Text)* substantially discussed in the program. Evaluators wanted to see a substantial amount of text generated, and they were pleased when texts delivered on that expectation. More interesting, perhaps, are the ways in which this important criterion qualified and also linked with other criteria.

One of the first things I noticed about participants' discussions of *Length/Amount* was how judges worked actively to qualify and contextualize that criterion so that students would neither pass nor fail solely on the basis of how many words their texts presented. All of the following comments qualifying the impact of *Length* came from the end-term (portfolio) meeting of Trio A-1:

I couldn't pass it because it was too long.

She writes an abundance, but a lot of what she's putting in there seemed totally irrelevant to me to what she was saying.

It's a little short, but she really dealt with the problem.

Even though *Length* is highly important, evaluators were chary of letting it play too big a role, perhaps precisely because it is the quickest

and easiest criterion by which to judge a text and can be employed using the most cursory of readings—or, in fact, without reading the text at all.

One of participants' favorite strategies for limiting the influence of *Length* in their pass/fail decisions was to link *Length* with other criteria. A prime example of this approach lies in the association between *Length* and the Contextual Criterion *Learning/Progress/Growth*. At the end of the term, when portfolios came before them, instructors noted with interest whether those portfolios demonstrated *Learning/Progress/Growth* of various kinds from the first to the last text. And *Length/Amount* was one of the most frequently invoked signs of *Progress*—or of decline.

Also, the essays get shorter and shorter. And that more than anything was the deciding factor for me [in deciding to fail Portfolio #4]. (A Port Norm, 1293)

As my later discussion of *Learning/Progress/Growth* (chapter 4, “Contextual Criteria”) explains, the narrative template of steady and continuous improvement powerfully shaped instructors' judgments of portfolios. And *Length* was among the most obvious and powerful indicators of *Progress*. Even here, however, some instructors saw the need to contextualize and reinterpret the significance of *Length*.

The last paper should be the longest, but it's also the end of the quarter and length doesn't always mean everything. (Veronica 2)

Length could also be a mark of “engagement,” one of the key synonyms for the lead criteria of Textual Quality, *Significance/Development/Heart*.

One reason [in favor of an essay in Portfolio #4] is that there's a lot more material. The person is really engaged in this topic. She's very into it. (A Port Norm, 1334)

When a later essay offered more text than an earlier essay, one explanation was that the author became more engaged and more fluid in composing the later essay. For some evaluators, the importance of the criterion *Length* was also explicitly limited in the context of in-class essays, for which writing time was strictly limited.

Especially for the in-class paper, I don't think [length is] quite as crucial. (A Port Norm, 1420)

The [length of the] in-class essay doesn't bother me as much as the one previous to that where they had time. (A Port Norm, 1428)

In all these ways, participants limited, qualified, and contextualized the importance of *Length/Amount (of Text)* when judging essays and portfolios at City University. It was as if, knowing how powerful and yet superficial a criterion *Length* could be, they wished to prevent it from shading out other, more significant rhetorical values. As a result, they resisted judging by *Length* alone and consistently counterbalanced and alloyed it with other Textual Criteria in reaching their judgments of students' textual performances.

Content/Topic/Subject. Student writers must be warned that instructor-evaluators are likely to read their students' essays with severe irritability and grouchiness regarding a cluster of "Terrible Topics." City University's top five Terrible Topics included:

- Senior prom
- Spring break in Florida
- My boyfriend
- High school graduation
- The Big Game (baseball, football, basketball, etc.)

(Appendix A, "Assignments for English 1 Essays," illustrates how the assignments may have encouraged such well-worn subjects for students' essays.) English 1 instructors at City University were not unsympathetic to authors of essays on these topics. They recognized that, for student-authors and perhaps even for a student-audience, such topics might be profoundly meaningful and compelling.

That's always so hard for me to figure out whether or not to pass just based on the fact that the paper's so boring, but then some of the other students think that that's interesting, 'cause they've just experienced it. (Penelope, A Mid Norm, 1040)

Nevertheless, instructors acknowledge that they see so many essays on these topics—or, perhaps more to the point, that most essays on these topics are so frighteningly alike—that they can't enjoy them or find in them most of the Textual Qualities they most admire and value.

To their credit, instructor-evaluators' responses to this predicament were reflective and inquiring, not punitive or dismissive. They debated whether content should be considered at all when evaluating students'

work, yet the inescapable reality of their experience as reader-evaluators was that Terrible Topics sent a chill through them that inevitably affected their judgment.

The gravity and complexity of Terrible Topics in the evaluative dynamics of this writing program call for open discussion of the issue among instructor-evaluators in an attempt to set program policy and, at the very least, for instructors to inform students of the Top Ten Terrible Topics so they can choose topics knowing the relative risks associated with them. Widely publicizing Terrible Topics and their hazards would also presumably make instructors' lives more enjoyable because it would encourage students to range more widely in their selection and treatment of topics.

Objectionable characters, views, and situations. Closely related to Terrible Topics is another textual feature, *Objectionable Characters, Views, and Situations*. Although endless complaints about "political correctness" have for the most part lost their cultural credibility in our society over the past few years, *Objectionable Characters* will no doubt prove a politically volatile criterion, for it introduces issues of free vs. responsible speech.

Instructors sometimes complained that characters, views, or situations in students' essays were sexist, classist, racist, or violent. The most widely discussed example was the essay "Cheers" from Portfolio #3, a sample text for end-term norming. The most problematic passage from this Profile of the famous TV series from the 1980s and 1990s was the closing sentence, which was also the closing paragraph:

When I turn on the T.V. I want to see a beautiful girl, and for the past three years I have and so has America.

The author of "Cheers" also described the waitress in the series as "an ugly brown-haired girl with five children named Clara" and ridiculed the character played by Diane Chambers for her intellectual and literary ambitions. In this context, instructor-evaluators found the essay, in Terri's mock-furious words, "sexist and anti-intellectual!" In my interview with Laura, she described the essay as "nauseating" and "the biggest piece of patriarchy I've ever seen on paper." In the next breath, however, Laura pulled herself up short:

That's where I think you do need to be careful and blur your eyes and see where the movements are in a paper rather than what the content always is, because the content can get you into trouble. (Laura 193)

To avoid “trouble,” Laura wants to dramatically curtail the influence of content in judgments of students’ writing. Veronica, one of the most theoretically and politically progressive among my participants, went even further than Laura. Rather than ignoring the problematic content of the paper, Veronica saw great pedagogical potential in “Cheers.”

I know people failed [“Cheers”] because it’s sexist and so on, but in my class we talked about that essay and we talked about how this writer could have . . . said that a lot of attraction and desires are mobilized by the use of glamorous women and it has this kind of effect. It seems to me that there’s a way to make even those criteria persuasive. We talked about that. (Veronica 1, 955)

Veronica would neither condemn the sexism of “Cheers” nor overlook it. She would coach the author on how to take an evaluative criterion (the physical beauty of the lead actress) that came across in one draft as offensively sexist and shift it to a more sophisticated analysis that would make a similar point with similar data, but in a way that would engage, rather than offend, the intellect and sensibilities of university instructor-evaluators.

Whichever of these responses to objectionable discourse they ended up endorsing, instructors and administrators needed to talk through the tension between their appropriate and justified contempt for ignorant, elitist, violent, racist, sexist, homophobic discourse and an evaluative framework that does not punish authors because their worldviews diverge from their instructor’s or their evaluators’. Then they needed to inform English 1 students of the outcome of their discussion.

Detail/Description/Examples/Dialogue. Synonyms for this Textual Feature included

physical description; descriptive powers; details; examples; dialogue; sense of observation; vivid pictures of what we were passing through; he has this weird detail eye where he picks up on bizarre things; well observed and captured; imagery

Teachers of writing frequently impress upon their students the importance of providing *Detail/Description/Examples/Dialogue* to bring their writing to life, to make it compelling and convincing. Data from City University indicate that this criterion was quite important in that writing program and that a majority of the time the presence of this textual feature worked in the student-author’s favor.

I like the details of that first essay really a lot. (A Port Norm, 1267)

She does the dialogue well. (Admin Pre-Port Norm, 722)

I was thrilled to see the descriptive powers . . . (C Mid Norm, 1021)

I think there's power in this writer's sense of observation. (C Mid Norm, 1293)

I would have liked to have had more vivid detail about the landscape (C Mid Norm, 1821)

In these cases, both when instructors found strong *Detail/Description/Examples/Dialogue* and when they missed finding it, they valued it very positively.

About one time in four (eleven out of forty excerpts coded), however, the presence of *Detail* worked against writers. When a reader felt that the author had inserted dialogue, examples, or description “mechanically,” the presence of those features counted against the text and its author. Complaining about the failure of the sample essay “Pops” to “add up” or “hold together,” Veronica explained,

I don't have a clue about what this relationship is about. You know, not from the description, not from what they talk about, not from the argument, and not from the ending. (A Mid Norm, 585)

Veronica repeatedly lamented what she saw as “mechanical” insertion of *Detail/Description/Examples/Dialogue* into texts. Later in the term, Kevin expressed similar reservations about the essay “When Thinking” from sample Portfolio #2.

When she describes Lela, I get no picture of Lela at all. It's like, “Her appearance is deceiving: five nine, curly brown hair, baby blue eyes, big smile, great skin,” you know, she doesn't sort of have an overall characterization of Lela to sort of form an impression in my mind. (Admin Pre-Port Norm, 843)

As in the cases of *Revision* and *Significance* (among other criteria), studying *Detail* reveals unexpected nuances and dynamics that cry out for further discussion and decision making among instructors and for providing fuller information for students.

Dynamic Criteria Mapping of evaluative discourse at City University revealed that the dominant group of criteria for judgment in this writing

program were *Textual*. That is, judges of students' writing most often made their pass/fail decisions based on their experiences and perceptions of the texts being judged. This chapter has explored four main findings regarding this writing program's textual criteria for evaluation:

1. Textual criteria could be either *qualities* or *features*
2. Textual criteria were numerous, multifaceted, and responsive to rhetorical context
3. Dynamics, nuances, tensions, and conflicts were at work *within* individual textual criteria
4. The interplay *among* textual criteria was also dynamic, nuanced, and sometimes controversial

While these findings are rewarding and useful, they cover relatively familiar ground in writing assessment. We expect the judgment of writing to be based in the qualities and features of the texts being judged. The following chapter explores less familiar territory: judgments of student writing being shaped by criteria that have nothing to do with the specific texts being assessed. At the same time they pondered Textual Criteria while trying to reach decisions, evaluators at City University also grappled with Contextual Criteria. In other words, nearly as often as the difference between "pass" and "fail" depended on a text's *Mechanics*, *Revision*, or *Unity* (for example), it hinged on such considerations as *Goals for English 1*, a *Construction of the Writer*, or evaluators' views of appropriate *Standards and Expectations* for their students. Judgments of texts were therefore also judgments of contexts.