

Inquiry into Assessment:  
Examining the Benefits and Constraints of Using  
Rubrics and Conferences in Assessing Student Writing

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## Inquiry Into Assessment - Introduction

My inquiry into assessing student work took place at St. Johnsbury Academy, a private/public school in Vermont's rural but picturesque Northeast Kingdom. The Academy is a coeducational institution, serving nearly 1000 boarding and day students in grades 9-12. All three pieces of student work being assessed came from two classes of standard-level sophomores. Standard-level courses are labeled by the Academy as college preparatory courses that move at a slower pace than the Accelerated courses offered by the Academy. Two papers were produced by international students, one from Kazakhstan and one from China, and the third sample came from a local student.

The assignment being assessed was an end of unit writing piece that took place when students had completed their study of the first three acts of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Students were provided with an assignment sheet with directions that can be found in the appendices of this paper.

In addition to the directions, students were provided with a copy of the holistic rubric that would be used to score all student work. Class instruction time was given to examining news articles to study organizational format, quote incorporation, and communicating bias through diction. The assignment was designed to assess a number of areas of content and skills that had been covered during the unit. These included: identifying the key plot events in the first three acts of *Macbeth*, analyzing Shakespeare's characterization of Macbeth, taking the perspective of a disaffected citizen of Scotland who supports MacDuff and Malcolm, identifying key quotes from the play and incorporating them into the article with analysis, communicating bias through diction, using appositive phrases, and eliminating run-on sentences.



## Inquiry Into Assessment - Assessment Methods

I identified three types of writing assessment to use and evaluate in this project: an analytic rubric, a holistic rubric, and student-teacher conferencing. The analytic rubric was a six traits of writing rubric developed by the University of Northern Colorado and adapted from the 6+1 writing traits rubric widely used in American schools. This rubric is found in the appendices of this paper. The 6 trait or 6+1 trait rubric is a form of assessment that is purported to “aid in conceptualizing, assessing, and describing the qualities of writing” (Coe, et al., 2012, p. 5). The rubrics focus on ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions. They provide a brief description for each trait in categories ranging from strongest to weakest. Proponents of the 6 trait writing rubric assessment state that they “focus teaching and help students improve their writing performance” (Arter and McTighe, 2001, p. 1) because they “define and describe the most important components that comprise complex performances and projects” (Arter and McTighe, 2001, p. 8). However, critics have stated that this method is problematic because it “rewards students who share the cultural norms of the rubric creators” (Spence, 2010). Further, the generalized feedback can prove to be of little real use to students in gaining an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as a writer (Wilson, 2007).

The holistic rubric was my own creation, based on the goals of the assignment. Holistic rubrics offer instructors the benefit of choosing specific criteria to assess for a particular assignment. Because they reflect the design of the assignment that is being assessed, holistic rubrics permit teachers to provide students with feedback on specific curricular content and skills. Though they require more time on the part of the instructor as they must be created for each new assignment, holistic rubrics can provide “an interactive, interpretive process, in which



a teacher's wisdom, insight, experience, and judgment play an important role. Far from becoming robot like in their response, good readers use criteria as reminders, then look diligently for the tiniest sparks of voice, an unexpected phrase or connection, the trail of the writer's thinking” (Kamm, 2006, p. 20). The holistic rubric created for this project can be found in the appendices of this paper.

Many instructors feel that rubrics do not offer students meaningful feedback. Maja Wilson writes that “comments on a rubric don’t help good writers become better, since even the most carefully chosen complimentary comments don’t create a conversation about the author’s intent and the words’ effect” (2007, p. 65). Wilson, and others, put forth the argument that meeting with students to discuss their writing is more meaningful as it “gives students the power to think through what effect they want their words to have rather than how their words measure up to the categories on a rubric” (2007, p. 64). Conferencing provides an opportunity for a teacher to establish a dialogue with a student about the student’s goals in a particular writing assignment, the choices he or she makes in crafting a piece of writing, as well as the student’s overall development as a writer. Feedback becomes more specific because it is no longer a one-sided conversation. Instead, the give and take of question and answer generates insight into students as writers and thereby shapes the instructor’s experience as a reader of student work. In the case of this project, the conferences took place after school during the Academy’s designated teacher conference period. Each student met with me twice, once for feedback on their initial drafts, and then later to receive feedback on their revised drafts. In most cases the initial conference lasted about 10 minutes, and the second between 5 and 10 minutes. In one case, the initial conference extended to nearly forty minutes.



## Inquiry Into Assessment - 6-Trait Analytic Rubric Implementation and Results

The first paper assessed was by a female student from the local community. For the purposes of this project, she will be referred to as Myra. I read through her piece and assessed her as follows:

Ideas and Content: Proficient to Strong  
 Organization: Strong  
 Voice: Strong  
 Word Choice: Proficient and Strong  
 Sentence Fluency: Strong  
 Conventions: Proficient

Assessing Myra's news article using the 6 traits rubric rewarded her for what she did well, and acknowledged her issues with grammar, usage and mechanics. However, without direct comments on her article, she will be unable to locate the errors in question - predominantly verb tense issues and run on sentences.

The assignment asked students to incorporate quotes from the text that fit the goal of the article (Myra did this), but they were also asked to provide analysis of the quotes - investigating the implications of what had been said in terms of Macbeth's guilt. Myra attempted this, but her analysis was overly brief. While selecting proficient in the ideas and content box would acknowledge that Myra's analysis was "limited" it would not allow me to reward her for choosing excellent quotes that certainly go beyond "some support" and feel more "appropriate" "interesting" and "focused" - so here I was in a bit of a fix. I could choose to select both boxes and annotate to provide more guidance regarding why I selected each box, but the generalized



nature of the rubric really didn't allow me to give Myra clear feedback on what worked and what didn't in her paper.

Also, I was frustrated because simply checking off "strong" for voice and sentence fluency gives Myra the feedback that she did well in these categories, but doesn't let me pinpoint the specific words that she chose that I found engaging, or permit me to highlight her use of rhetorical questions to engage her reader as well as appositive phrases to provide additional detail about her subjects.

Then too, with word choice I ended up checking both strong and proficient because I felt that Myra's word choice and phrasing certainly "energized" her writing, but did not feel that she used a "broad range of words" - again this was frustrating because while it communicates to some extent what Myra did well and what she needs to work on, this generalized feedback doesn't allow me to provide what I deem to be specific and meaningful feedback.

The second paper I assessed with this rubric belonged to a student from China with decent control of the conventions of American English. For the purposes of this paper he will be referred to as Victor. Victor's paper was assessed as follows:

Ideas and Content: Strong  
Organization: Strong  
Voice: Strong  
Word Choice: Proficient  
Sentence Fluency: Developing  
Conventions: Proficient

The strengths of Victor's paper were found in his quote selection and analysis, as well as his organization. While deeming these categories strong indicated his success, simply noting his "interesting ideas" did not allow me to note the excellent work he did in analyzing the



characterization of Macbeth based upon the quotes he selected. Further, the two areas that Victor most needs to improve: diction and sentence variety, could not be sufficiently explored by simply checking Proficient and Developing. For instance, in choosing Developing for Sentence Fluency, I was indicating that Victor had both “some awkward constructions” and “many similar patterns and beginnings,” when in truth it was merely the latter.

The third paper I assessed with the 6 trait rubric was written by a student from Kazakhstan, who, for the purposes of this paper, will be referred to as Syrym. Syrym’s paper was assessed to be:

Ideas and Content: Strong  
 Organization: Proficient  
 Voice: Developing  
 Word Choice: Developing  
 Sentence Fluency: Developing  
 Conventions: Emerging

As the above assessment reveals, Syrym struggles to express himself in English. Using the 6 trait rubric was most frustrating in the case of this struggling ELL student. Simply checking boxes would do little more than confirm what Syrym already knows: his written English is weak. To grow as a writer, Syrym requires more specific feedback that details the errors that he has made and how he can fix them.

### Inquiry Into Assessment - Holistic Rubric Implementation and Results

The holistic rubric was designed to evaluate the specific instructional goals of the assignment. It incorporated aspects of content, as well as expression.



Myra met all almost all the standards. The two areas where she approached rather than met the standards were quotation analysis and run-on sentences. In the case of run-on sentences, the holistic rubric specifically states that a paper that meets the standards will contain no more than two run-on sentences. However, I unwittingly constructed a holistic rubric that grouped quote selection with the analysis. In the case of Myra's paper, quotes were well chosen, but not sufficiently analyzed. That is, she met the standard from one point of view, but merely approached it from another. Ultimately, Myra's paper was deemed to meet the standard. By circling the phrases on the approaches the standard section of the rubric for run-on sentences and analysis, I was able to convey to Myra what she needed to improve.

Victor met almost all of the standards, and exceeded them in the case of run-on sentences, as his article was free from such errors. According to the rubric, Victor met the standards for most points, and exceeded on one point. Hence the thought would be that this is a solid piece of writing. And so it is, in terms of addressing the goals of the assignment. However, Victor is a student from China and his article, while it does not technically contain more than a few issues with mechanics and grammar, does however suffer from a limited vocabulary and a lack of sentence variety. In this case, the 6 trait rubric would have been helpful as it would have allowed me to make note of Victor's word choice and sentence fluency. Sadly, this was not included in my holistic rubric because it is not a key concern for the majority of my students and has therefore not been a focus of classroom instruction.

Syrym's paper was most difficult to assess using the holistic rubric. His quotes were well chosen and analyzed, and he clearly attempted to use a tone that condemned Macbeth. However, Syrym's sentence construction and diction were so poor that they could not be deemed to even



approach the standard. Despite the fact that Syrym's paper reflected many hours of work and a clear, concentrated effort, the holistic rubric would neither allow for recognition of these efforts, nor identification of his construction errors beyond a proliferation of run-on sentences. It is because of students like Syrym that my lowest category on holistic rubrics is "Revision Required." This category requires students to attend Conference Period to receive assistance in revising their work.

### Inquiry Into Assessment - Student Conferences and Results

My first student writing conference was with Myra. The conference lasted just seven minutes and began with an acknowledgement of all the strengths I saw in Myra's writing piece. I was particularly impressed with her clever title and the way in which her questioning tone implied a lack of trust in Macbeth as a leader and his morality. The major issue in construction for Myra was her knack for incorporating run-on sentences. The majority of our conference time was spent in reviewing the methods for correcting run-on sentences and reviewing comma splices. The final minutes of the conference centered on certain repetition in Myra's word choice - particularly transitions. By having Myra circle her transition words and note the overuse of particular words, I was able to help her locate a key area for improvement. She left the conference with the goals of varying her transitions and eliminating or correcting her run-on sentences. When Myra returned the following afternoon, she had fix all but one of her run-on sentences and improved the variety of her transitions. The writing conference was an excellent opportunity to help Myra learn to recognize two of her key areas for growth as a writer.

The next conference was with Victor. This conference lasted about ten minutes and focused on Victor's reliance upon three sentence types: simple sentences, compound sentences,



and complex sentences using “because.” Victor and I reviewed other sentence constructions, and he left with the goal of revising his piece to incorporate at least one new sentence type in each paragraph. Victor returned the following day to show me his revised piece: an article that was ultimately more readable thanks to more varied sentence types. The writing conference not only allowed me to help Victor become more aware of the need for sentence variety to encourage reader engagement, but also helped him review both the types of sentences he was prone to using and the variety of sentence types that he could add to his repertoire. Moving forward, Victor will likely be more conscious of his sentence construction when crafting writing pieces.

The longest conference was with Syrym. In meeting with Syrym to go through his draft, I first reviewed the work he had submitted and developed a general feel for the strengths and weaknesses of his piece. While he is capable of good literary analysis as demonstrated by classroom discussion, and he has a clear sense of how to organize a paper, his work suffers greatly from ELL issues due to the fact that his first language is Kazak, and his second Russian. Syrym can communicate verbally in English with only a little difficulty, but his writing can be incomprehensible at times.

In meeting with Syrym, I began by asking him about the quotes he selected. Syrym spoke to his thought process in selecting those quotes and demonstrated excellent reasons for doing so. I offered positive feedback on his quotes and we turned to the analysis. In analysing his first quote, Syrym. wrote:

For our newspaper his word made a big words, because when we were taking interview from Macbeth, in his interview he said that he killed people ,who were



protecting king's live, as a punishment, but on the other hand he could kill them for keeping himself from unnecessary witnesses.

Together, Syrym and I worked through his analysis - rephrasing his sentences. Syrym keeps a notebook where he tracks new English words and phrases - and he added each phrase as we worked. We repeated this process for each of the quotes Syrym had selected.

Next we turned our attention to the introduction and conclusion of his article. Both were woefully brief and lacked development. They were also plagued by GUM issues. We returned to the model article that we had looked at in class and identified the writer's inclusion of the classic W's and H in the lead paragraph, as well as specific words that communicated the writer's bias. We then returned to Syrym's article and I had him underline the W's and H that he had included. He noticed the ones that were missing and added them to his introduction. Next, I asked him to identify words that indicated his bias - here he pointed to "behaviour started to be really suspicious" and "dive inside a rumors" as well as "was shown strange." I applauded his use of diction in terms of selecting the words "rumors" "suspicious" and "strange" and then helped him craft clear sentences that incorporated these words.

We finally turned to the conclusion and talked through what he wanted the reader to be thinking at the conclusion of his piece. He replied that he wanted readers to think that Macbeth was guilty and that Malcolm would be a better king. I asked him what would cause them to think Macbeth was guilty and he pointed to the quotes that he had used. I agreed and then asked how he would remind the reader of the things in the quotes that pointed to Macbeth's guilt. I had him select the strongest line from each piece of quotation analysis and sum it up with a word or



two. These summations became the center of the first half of his new conclusion. We then talked about what would make a reader want to select Malcolm as king. Syrym's answers formed the second half his conclusion. I sent Syrym back to his dorm with the mission of crafting a final sentence or question that would force his reader to want to overthrow Macbeth in favor of Malcolm. Syrym returned the next day with this finale (two sentences): "With a tyrant like Macbeth on the throne, Scotland can suffer. Everyone hope for the return of Malcolm." Our second conference focused on structuring these two sentences into one thrilling conclusion and addressing the obvious errors with grammar.

Ultimately, Syrym ended up with a successful news article that conveyed his understanding of the play and his ability to engage a reader. While I fully expect that GUM will continue to be an ongoing struggle that Syrym works on, he picked up some new phrases and developed his skills in terms of crafting introductions and conclusions. I think ultimately that conferencing was a useful experience for Syrym and will help his growth as a writer. The only downside to this process was the time constraint. My first meeting with Syrym lasted a full 45 minutes. Our follow up conference was about five minutes. With a student load of 40 freshmen and 26 sophomores, conferences of this length are impractical. Granted most students would not require the amount of time that Syrym required, but the time factor is still one that is worth considering.

### Inquiry Into Assessment - Conclusions

In conclusion, I ultimately preferred interacting with my students in a personal manner through writing conferences. Conferencing about their writing helped me to understand my



students' intent and thought process in crafting their writing pieces, and allowed me to ask for clarification in instances where I was confused by their writing. Additionally, I was able to tailor my feedback to each student's specific needs. I was not constrained by the language of a rubric, and I was free to address whatever I felt was most pressing in an individual student's writing. Best of all, because I was involved in a dialogue with the student to deliver feedback, they were able to ask for clarification when feedback was unclear. Then too, I was able to provide specific instruction as needed to help address shortcomings in student's craft. I believe that the writing conferences allowed for the most meaningful feedback exchange of the three methods I employed. It easily allowed for differentiation and most importantly, improved my relationship with my students and their understanding of their own development as writers.

The chief constraints of writing conferences is the time required to effectively discuss strengths and weaknesses in student writing. Additionally, because a conference focuses on student intent and revision, the process can be used as a critical formative assessment, but is difficult to employ as a summative assessment. Ultimately, writing conferences are extremely valuable for nurturing the development of student writers, but must be supplemented with summative assessments of student writing through another assessment method.

Rubrics, while they are impersonal, allow for little differentiation, and often do not provide students with enough specific feedback, are useful for evaluating writing in a summative manner. Additionally, they can be used to effectively compare student writing competency in comparison to their peers both in their own class and beyond. They also allow for instructors to arrive at a numerical score or letter grade that can be entered in the gradebook to track student achievement.



My personal preference would be to assess students through writing conferences with a summative assessment in the form of a writing portfolio. Student achievement would be shared with parents in the form of narrative reports and conferences that would do far more to communicate a student's development than a number, letter or phrases from a rubric. Until my school adopts this strategy, I will continue to employ a variety of assessments as I work to help my students become effective writers.



### Inquiry Into Assessment - References

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## Inquiry Into Assessment - Appendices

### Appendix A - Assignment Instructions

#### MACBETH NEWS ARTICLE

Directions: You will be writing a news article that captures the events that have occurred in Scotland in the first three acts of Macbeth. This article is for a newspaper funded by MacDuff, so it should have an anti-Macbeth bias. Your article should inform readers of the events, but should also seek to answer the question of who is behind the events that have transpired. Further, you need to incorporate "imaginary interviews" with three characters from the play. Their responses to your interview questions should be in the form of quotes from the play. For example, if you chose to interview Lady Macbeth on the odd behavior of her husband, you might make use of her line from Act III, scene iv: "My lord is often thus and hath been from his youth."

Have fun with this, but be intentional in your writing, as well as your quote selection. Quotes should be incorporated with context and analysis. PLEASE CREATE A GOOGLE DOC FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT SO THAT IT CAN BE USED IN YOUR PORTFOLIO.



## Appendix B - Six Traits Writing Rubric



## Six Traits Writing Rubric

	6 Exemplary	5 Strong	4 Proficient	3 Developing	2 Emerging	1 Beginning
<b>Ideas &amp; Content</b> ✎ <i>main theme</i> ✎ <i>supporting details</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exceptionally clear, focused, engaging with relevant, strong supporting detail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear, focused, interesting ideas with appropriate detail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evident main idea with some support which may be general or limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main idea may be cloudy because supporting detail is too general or even off-topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purpose and main idea may be unclear and cluttered by irrelevant detail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lacks central idea; development is minimal or non-existent</li> </ul>
<b>Organization</b> ✎ <i>structure</i> ✎ <i>introduction</i> ✎ <i>conclusion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effectively organized in logical and creative manner</li> <li>Creative and engaging intro and conclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong order and structure</li> <li>Inviting intro and satisfying closure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organization is appropriate, but conventional</li> <li>Attempt at introduction and conclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempts at organization; may be a "list" of events</li> <li>Beginning and ending not developed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of structure; disorganized and hard to follow</li> <li>Missing or weak intro and conclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of coherence; confusing</li> <li>No identifiable introduction or conclusion</li> </ul>
<b>Voice</b> ✎ <i>personality</i> ✎ <i>sense of audience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expressive, engaging, sincere</li> <li>Strong sense of audience</li> <li>Shows emotion: humour, honesty, suspense or life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriate to audience and purpose</li> <li>Writer behind the words comes through</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evident commitment to topic</li> <li>Inconsistent or dull personality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Voice may be inappropriate or non-existent</li> <li>Writing may seem mechanical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing tends to be flat or stiff</li> <li>Little or no hint of writer behind words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing is lifeless</li> <li>No hint of the writer</li> </ul>
<b>Word Choice</b> ✎ <i>precision</i> ✎ <i>effectiveness</i> ✎ <i>imagery</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Precise, carefully chosen</li> <li>Strong, fresh, vivid images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Descriptive, broad range of words</li> <li>Word choice energizes writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language is functional and appropriate</li> <li>Descriptions may be overdone at times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Words may be correct but mundane</li> <li>No attempt at deliberate choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monotonous, often repetitious, sometimes inappropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited range of words</li> <li>Some vocabulary misused</li> </ul>
<b>Sentence Fluency</b> ✎ <i>rhythm, flow</i> ✎ <i>variety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High degree of craftsmanship</li> <li>Effective variation in sentence patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easy flow and rhythm</li> <li>Good variety in length and structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally in control</li> <li>Lack variety in length and structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some awkward constructions</li> <li>Many similar patterns and beginnings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Often choppy</li> <li>Monotonous sentence patterns</li> <li>Frequent run-on sentences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult to follow or read aloud</li> <li>Disjointed, confusing, rambling</li> </ul>
<b>Conventions</b> ✎ <i>age appropriate, spelling, caps, punctuation, grammar</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exceptionally strong control of standard conventions of writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong control of conventions; errors are few and minor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Control of most writing conventions; occasional errors with high risks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited control of conventions; frequent errors do not interfere with understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frequent significant errors may impede readability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numerous errors distract the reader and make the text difficult to read</li> </ul>



## Appendix C - Holistic Rubric

### **Macbeth News Article Holistic Rubric**

Engaging an audience in an examination of Macbeth's possible guilt through textual evidence and character analysis.

#### Exceeds the Standards (90-100):

This article skillfully covers all key events from the first three acts of Macbeth and incorporates quotes from three characters with context and thorough analysis. These quotes fit the article's content and are correctly interpreted. It is written in an engaging tone that clearly questions or condemns Macbeth in a nuanced manner. The article is at least 500 words in length, and it is free (or nearly so) from errors in grammar, usage and mechanics. The article makes strong use of appositive phrases to add appropriate detail about subjects and does not contain run-on sentences.

#### Meets the Standards (75-89):

This article covers all key events from the first three acts of Macbeth and incorporates quotes from three characters with context and analysis. These quotes fit the article's content and are correctly interpreted. It is written in a tone that clearly questions or condemns Macbeth. The article is at least 500 words in length, and while it might contain GUM issues, they do not prevent reader comprehension. The article makes use of appositive phrases to add appropriate detail about subjects and contains no more than two run-on sentences.

#### Approaches the Standards (65-74):

This article covers some key events from the first three acts of Macbeth and incorporates quotes from two characters with an attempt at providing context and analysis. These quotes somewhat fit the article's content and are correctly interpreted. It is written in a tone that attempts to question or condemn Macbeth. The article is at least 400 words in length, and it contains errors in GUM, some of which cause confusion for the reader. The article Attempts to use appositive phrases to add detail about subjects, but either does not use the assigned minimum (3) or uses them incorrectly, and it contains three or more run-on sentences.

#### Revision Required:

The article is missing several key events from the first three acts of Macbeth. It demonstrates little understanding of plot and/or characters. The article fails to incorporate quotes or chooses quotes that do not fit the context of the article. The article is either excessively brief and/or contains so many errors in grammar, usage and mechanics that the audience is unable to read the article without difficulty. No attempt is made to use appositives. Excessive run-on sentences prohibit reader comprehension. You will need to attend CP for assistance and rewrite this piece.