

**GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY  
GENERAL EDUCATION FOUNDATION ASSESSMENT REPORT:  
ORAL COMMUNICATION  
SPRING 2011**

Oral communication competency at George Mason University is defined as the ability to use oral communication as a way of thinking and learning, as well as sharing ideas with others. The general education program identifies a set of learning goals in oral communication that are addressed in two Communication courses: COMM 100, Public Speaking; and COMM 101, Interpersonal and Group Interaction. Students are required to take one of these courses (or demonstrate competency through successful completion of a waiver exam) to meet the general education requirement for Oral Communication. Upon completion of these courses, students will be able to:

1. Analyze audience and adapt an oral presentation to audience.
2. Construct and deliver a well-organized, logical, and informative oral presentation that demonstrates analytical skills.
3. Use clear, concise, colorful, creative and culturally sensitive language in an oral presentation.
4. Use appropriate delivery techniques (e.g. maintain adequate eye contact, be vocally expressive, avoid distracting or nervous mannerisms, etc.) in an oral presentation.

### **Background**

Assessments were conducted in both COMM 100 and 101 in fall 2005 and spring 2007. A team of faculty raters used two course-specific rubrics to rate student presentations during weeks 10-12 of each term. Based on competency levels established by faculty committee, results of the assessment showed that a very high proportion of students demonstrated competent or highly competent oral communication skills. In subsequent years, Communication faculty have revised the teaching workbooks and grading rubrics used in both courses to more explicitly address the stated learning outcomes.

In fall 2010, two revised rubrics were used to measure student achievement of learning outcomes for COMM 100. Course sections were randomly selected for assessment. The sample comprised 105 students from five sections of COMM 100, accounting for 14% of enrolled students and 15% of total course sections offered in the fall 2010 semester. A team of five trained faculty raters used video recordings to rate two student presentations on a 3-point scale in six categories: Audience Analysis/Topic Choice; Introduction; Content/Organization; Language; Delivery; and Conclusion (see Appendix A for rubrics).

### **Data Collection and Assessment Process**

The first and last graded speeches were used as pre-test and post-test, respectively. The first graded speech assignment was the last in a skill building series of short speeches, and required students to prepare a 60-90 second speech focused on the presentation of examples to support a central statement. The assignment emphasized delivery skills, including the use of voice, eye contact, movement, and nonverbal gestures. The final graded speech assignment for the course served as a posttest. Students were expected to prepare a 7-9 minute persuasive presentation with a focus on advocating for a community organization. The assignment required students to use information technology, incorporate supporting evidence, and develop a plan of action. Expectations emphasized both delivery and content, as well as credible references. Faculty raters observed a total of 105 students deliver both of these presentations and scored them based on the designated rubrics.

### **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 displays the summary of data from the scored rubrics. Percentages are derived from the number of students who received each score on a 3-point scale, where 2 = Exceeds Expectations; 1 = Meets Expectations; and 0 = Does Not Meet Expectations. For example, 51% students on the first speech were judged to have exceeded expectations in presenting a topic that was “appropriate and relevant to audience,” while 53% did so on the posttest speech. A total of 94 students were scored on the pretest, and 105 on the posttest. Discrepancies occurred in sample sizes because some students did not complete both speeches.

### ***Pretest Speech***

The majority (87%) of students met or exceeded expectations on their first speech. Students met expectations on average for 48% of the rubric items, and exceeded expectations on average for 39% of items. The areas in which students performed best on the first speech included meeting their time limit (88% exceeded expectations), choosing topics that are appropriate and relevant to their audience (51% exceeded expectations), making appropriate eye contact (49% exceeded expectations), having well-developed arguments and evidence (48% exceeded expectations), and having an interesting and creative approach to their topic (47% exceeded expectations). Students performed the least well by not meeting expectations for using clear transitions and summaries (40%), avoiding nervous mannerisms and other nonfluencies (28%), citing credible and appropriate source material (25%), and having a memorable and creative conclusion (23%).

### ***Posttest Speech***

Results were mixed for the posttest speech when comparing item by item average scores to the pretest. The majority of students (90%) met or exceeded expectations on the posttest speech, while fewer students failed to meet expectations (11% versus 13% on the pretest). Students performed best in meeting time limits (74% exceeded expectations), choosing topics that are appropriate and relevant to their audience (53% exceeded expectations), and identifying a question of policy (51% exceeded expectations). Students performed least well in establishing credibility (25% did not meet expectations), avoiding nervous mannerisms and other nonfluencies (18% did not meet expectations), and using clear transitions and summaries (16% did not meet expectations).

It is notable that scores on several items dropped from “exceeds expectations” on the pretest to “meets expectations” on the posttest. It appears that scores dropped the most in the category of delivery, while remaining relatively stable overall in content/organization. Scores generally improved from “does not meet expectations” in the category of content/organization, but fell slightly overall in delivery. Viewing scores in this way provides some useful information; however, to determine whether these differences are meaningful, statistical tests are required.

**Table 1.** Score Results from Pretest and Posttest Speeches

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations		Meets Expectations		Does Not Meet Expectations	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
<b>Audience Analysis/Topic Choice</b>						
(1 & 18) Appropriate & relevant to audience	51%	53%	47%	46%	2%	2%
(2 & 19) Interesting & creative approach to topic	47	38	49	57	4	6
<b>Introduction</b>						
(3 & 20) Memorable & creative	41	36	50	55	10	9.0
(4 & 21) Establishes credibility (ethos)	38	21	51	54	12	25
<b>Content/Organization</b>						
(5 & 22) Identifies question of fact/policy <sup>^</sup>	36	51	56	43	7	6
(6 & 23) Key ideas are well-organized & explained	45	39	47	50	9	11
(7 & 24) Arguments/evidence well-developed	48	32	45	64	7	4
(8 & 25) Uses clear transitions & summaries	14	24	46	60	40	16
(9 & 26) Cites credible/appropriate source material	31	35	45	55	25	10
<b>Language</b>						
(10 & 27) Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	41	34	49	60	10	6
<b>Delivery</b>						
(11 & 27) Meets time limits (60-90 seconds)	88	74	11	16	1	10
(12 & 28) Makes appropriate eye contact	49	22	48	69	3	9
(13 & 29) Vocally expressive, conversational style	45	22	47	64	9	14
(14 & 30) Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	11	23	61	59	28	18
(15 & 31) Nonverbally expressive	34	27	51	60	15	13
<b>Conclusion</b>						
(16 & 32) Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	29	26	56	65	15	9
(17 & 33) Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	21	20	55	70	23	10
<b>Average Score</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>11%</b>

Numbers may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

<sup>^</sup>Item is inconsistent with assignment instructions.

### ***Comparing the Results***

Table 2 displays a comparison of mean scores for each of the paired rubric items. The mean score gives an average of all student scores for each item. The mean is based on a 3-point scale from 0 (does not meet expectations) to 2 (exceeds expectations). The highest possible mean is 2 (if 100% of students received a 2). Note that because not all of the 105 sampled students completed both assignments, the total number of students differs between pretest (n=94) and posttest (n=100).

For most items, the mean score is lower for the posttest than for the pretest, which would suggest that students performed worse on the pretest. The average overall mean score for the posttest dipped below the pretest score of 1.26 to 1.23. To determine whether these dips are meaningful, a paired samples t-test was performed to determine whether students' performance differed between the pretest and posttest presentations. Paired samples t-test compares the means of the pretest and posttest to see if there is any real difference between the two. If there is no difference, we expect that the paired samples mean is close to zero. In this case, negative means suggest improved scores. Significant differences are notated with an asterisk (\*) in Table 2. More details are displayed in Table 4 in Appendix B.

Because not all students completed both assignments, the sample size for the paired samples test was reduced to 80 students. Rubric items were paired by matching criteria, and mean scores were tested. Results are displayed in Table 2, column 3. Scores showed significant change in 5 of the 17 paired items, with students performing worse on the posttest on 4 of the 5 items: Establishes credibility; meets time limits; makes appropriate eye contact; and vocally expressive, conversational style. Only one item showed improvement from the pretest to the posttest: Uses clear transitions and summaries.

An examination of inter-rater reliability found that one of the five faculty raters rated one course section of students significantly and consistently lower on the posttest rubric than the pretest, resulting in scores that are outliers from the rest of the data. No evidence exists to explain why this is so. Because these outlier scores are likely to skew the results for the entire sample, a second paired samples t-test was performed on the data after removing the scores from this rater. Results are displayed in Table 2, column 4. Table 5 in Appendix B displays more detailed results. Using this analysis, three items showed significant improvement from the pretest to the posttest: Identifies question of policy; uses clear transitions and summaries; and avoids nervous mannerisms and other nonfluencies. No other items showed significant change in either direction.

**Table 2.** Mean Comparisons Between the Pretest and Posttest Scores

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Pretest Mean N=94</b>	<b>Posttest Mean N=100</b>	<b>Paired Samples Mean (Full) N=80</b>	<b>Paired Samples Mean (Minus Outliers) N=61</b>
<b>Audience Analysis/Topic Choice</b>				
(1 & 18) Appropriate & relevant to audience	1.49	1.51	.11	-.05
(2 & 19) Interesting & creative approach to topic	1.43	1.33	.16	-.07
<b>Introduction</b>				
(3 & 20) Memorable & creative	1.31	1.27	.15	.00
(4 & 21) Establishes credibility (ethos)	1.26	.96	.34*	.16
<b>Content/Organization</b>				
(5 & 22) Identifies question of fact/policy^	1.29	1.45	-.06	-.41*
(6 & 23) Key ideas are well-organized & explained	1.36	1.28	.19	.08
(7 & 24) Arguments/evidence well-developed	1.40	1.28	.15	.2
(8 & 25) Uses clear transitions & summaries	.73	1.08	-.33*	-.31*
(9 & 26) Cites credible/appropriate source material	1.06	1.25	-.19	-.20
<b>Language</b>				
(10 & 27) Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	1.32	1.28	.08	-.10
<b>Delivery</b>				
(11 & 27) Meets time limits (60-90 seconds)	1.87	1.64	.21*	.15
(12 & 28) Makes appropriate eye contact	1.36	1.13	.39*	.13
(13 & 29) Vocally expressive, conversational style	1.36	1.08	.31*	.18
(14 & 30) Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	.83	1.05	-.16	-.36*
(15 & 31) Nonverbally expressive	1.19	1.14	.14	.12
<b>Conclusion</b>				
(16 & 32) Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	1.14	1.17	.04	-.03
(17 & 33) Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	.98	1.10	-.10	-.03
<b>Average Scores</b>	<b>1.26</b>	<b>1.23</b>		

Mean is based on a 3-point scale from 0 (does not meet expectations) to 2 (exceeds expectations). Highest possible mean is 2.

\*Differences are significant  $p < .05$ ; ^Item is inconsistent with assignment instructions.

### Concern About the Rubrics

A paired samples correlations test on the 61 cases in the analysis on the data with the outlier rater removed reveals a general low level or lack of correlation between pretest and posttest scores per item (see Table 6 in Appendix B). Five items show a low level of correlation (.205-.248), and two items are moderately correlated (.347-.409), while the rest show no correlation. This analysis suggests that scores are consistent for some items but not for others, begging the question of why students who scored well on certain items in the pretest would not score at least similarly well on the same items in the posttest.

### Standards of Competency

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) sets competencies for all postsecondary students in the Commonwealth. These competencies overlap with Mason general education goals, and their assessment is guided by faculty teams who determine the goals, objectives and methods that will be used.

In 2005, the faculty committee set the following competency standards for Oral Communication:

- *Highly competent level*: a student “meets expectations” on 90% or more of 20 items
- *Competent level*: a student “meets expectations” on 75-89% of the 20 items
- *Less than competent*: a student “meets expectations” on less than 75% of the total items

Table 3 displays results from the fall 2010 assessment. For the pretest speech, 68% of students were judged to be “highly competent,” increasing to 77% in the posttest speech. Students who were judged to be “competent” decreased from 21% to 11%, a finding that could be interpreted as improvement, given that the “highly competent” ratings improved. The number of students who were judged as “less than competent” did not change between the pretest and posttest.

**Table 3.** Fall 2010 Competency Levels

	Pretest Speech		Posttest Speech	
	N	%	N	%
Highly Competent (90% or better)	71	68%	81	77%
Competent (75-89%)	22	21%	12	12%
Less than Competent (lower than 75%)	12	11%	12	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Summary of Open-Ended Questions

Faculty raters were given an opportunity to write open-ended comments about the student presentations, as well as suggestions to the course instructors. One of the raters made overall suggestions directed at Communication faculty. A summary of comments follows.

#### Pretest Speech

The majority of comments on the pretest speech related to delivery. About 5% of comments complimented students’ use of voice, tone, non-verbal communication, and overall style. About 10% of comments related to students’ use of nervous mannerisms and nonfluencies. Several comments noted students’ need to rehearse the speech before class. The second main area that raters noted as problematic for students was citing credible sources, as well as establishing credibility. Approximately 10% of comments reflected raters’ concern with both the quality and lack of

evidence in the pretest speech. Relatively few comments focused on the other broad areas represented by the rubric. Four comments noted topic choice, with only one noting that the choice was poor.

### ***Posttest Speech***

Raters made many more positive comments on the posttest speeches, mainly related to delivery, research/evidence, and transitions. About 15% of comments noted that students used facts well, but failed to cite their sources. Raters' comments emphasized overall difficulty with organization, transitions, and conclusions. Very few comments noted nervous behavior or disfluencies in the posttest speech. One course apparently experienced technology malfunctions that were beyond the speakers' control; however, a few raters commented on students' need to be more flexible in dealing with these glitches.

### **Observations**

Overall, the fall 2010 assessment process showed little improvement for students in COMM 100. However, the majority of students seem to have come to class with at least the expected minimum levels of competence in public speaking, and it appears that many students (about 10%) raised their performance from basic competence to higher levels of proficiency. There are some concerns with the findings that deserve noting here. First, the assessment process used a new set of rubrics to measure student learning in COMM 100. Because the items generally showed low correlation between the pretest and posttest, there is cause for further investigation. Perhaps a longer period of testing with larger sample sizes would bear out the effectiveness of the rubrics. It is possible that the pretest and posttest speech assignments emphasized such different expectations that comparisons were difficult to make. There are also questions regarding inter-rater reliability and user subjectivity for the rubrics. A reflective discussion with participant raters may reveal useful information to improve future use.

Finally, it should be considered that the span of time between the pretest and posttest speeches in one introductory course may not be sufficient for students to demonstrate significant improvement. The general education program at Mason emphasizes "oral communication as a way of thinking and learning, as well as sharing ideas." COMM 100 introduces and strengthens certain communication concepts skills, but students need more time and opportunities to practice in order to master concepts and skills they are learning in class. It is expected that students will develop these skills in the context of future general education courses, major courses, and in campus, civic, and other venues. Thus presents the difficulty of gaining an accurate picture of student learning; this assessment activity is merely a snapshot, but it can provide useful information for the direction of curriculum and instruction.

It should be noted that the assessment of oral communication was originally designed to provide information to faculty who were teaching general education courses in oral communication, and to respond to a state requirement to assess communication (and other competencies). Several changes have occurred since the initial assessment took place that will result in future changes to the process. First, the assessment of general education outcomes has moved to a course portfolio method of assessment in which faculty teaching approved general education courses are asked to complete a portfolio that identifies student learning outcomes for the course, and presents examples of student work such as taped oral presentations for external reviewers to examine. Second, in spring 2010, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) changed the requirement for a "value-added" approach to assessment (essentially a pre- and post-test) to a locally defined method. Mason has used a competency approach for many years that emphasizes skills/knowledge achieved, not the change from the beginning of a course to the end. Going forward, a competency-based approach using a course portfolio method will be the standard for all Mason general education categories as well as all SCHEV-required competencies.

## Appendix A

### Oral Communication Assessment – Rubric One Speech: Question of Fact

Criteria	Level of Achievement		
	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Does not Meet Expectations
<b>Audience Analysis/Topic Choice</b>			
1. Appropriate & relevant to audience	2	1	0
2. Interesting and creative approach to topic	2	1	0
<b>Introduction</b>			
3. Memorable & creative	2	1	0
4. Establishes credibility (ethos)	2	1	0
<b>Content/Organization</b>			
5. Identifies question of fact.	2	1	0
6. Key ideas well-organized & explained	2	1	0
7. Arguments/evidence well-developed	2	1	0
8. Uses clear transitions & summaries	2	1	0
9. Cites credible/appropriate source material	2	1	0
<b>Language</b>			
10. Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	2	1	0
<b>Delivery</b>			
11. Meets time limits (60 – 90 seconds)	2 within limits	1 ≤ 1 minute under/over	0 ≥ 1 minute under/over
12. Makes appropriate eye contact	2	1	0
13. Vocally expressive, conversational style	2	1	0
14. Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	2	1	0
15. Nonverbally expressive	2	1	0
<b>Conclusion</b>			
16. Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	2	1	0
17. Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	2	1	0

**Maximum: 34 points**

**1. Additional observations and/or comments:**

**2. Recommendations for instructor:**

**Rater:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Oral Communication Assessment – Rubric Two Speech: Question of Policy

Criteria	Level of Achievement		
	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Does not Meet Expectations
<b>Audience Analysis/Topic Choice</b>			
18. Appropriate & relevant to audience	2	1	0
19. Interesting and creative approach to topic	2	1	0
<b>Introduction</b>			
20. Memorable & creative	2	1	0
21. Establishes credibility (ethos)	2	1	0
<b>Content/Organization</b>			
22. Identifies question of policy	2	1	0
23. Key ideas well-organized & explained	2	1	0
24. Arguments/evidence well-developed	2	1	0
25. Uses clear transitions & summaries	2	1	0
26. Cites credible/appropriate source material	2	1	0
<b>Language</b>			
27. Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	2	1	0
<b>Delivery</b>			
28. Meets time limits (7 – 9 minutes)	2 within limits	1 ≤ 1 minute under/over	0 ≥ 1 minute under/over
29. Makes appropriate eye contact	2	1	0
30. Vocally expressive, conversational style	2	1	0
31. Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	2	1	0
32. Nonverbally expressive	2	1	0
<b>Conclusion</b>			
33. Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	2	1	0
34. Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	2	1	0

**Maximum: 34 points**

**3. Additional observations and/or comments:**

**4. Recommendations for instructor:**

**Rater:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

**Table 4.** Student Performance: Full Sample

Item Pairs	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Effect Size
(Q1&18) Appropriate & relevant to audience	80	.113	.746	.181
(Q2&19) Interesting & creative approach to topic	80	.163	.787	.068
(Q3&20) Memorable & creative	80	.150	.887	.135
(Q4&21) Establishes credibility (ethos)	80	.338	.941	.002*
(Q5&22) Identifies question of policy	80	-.063	1.023	.586
(Q6&23) Key ideas are well-organized & explained	80	.188	.858	.054
(Q7&24) Arguments/evidence well-developed	80	.150	.797	.096
(Q8&25) Uses clear transitions & summaries	80	-.325	.742	.000*
(Q9&26) Cites credible/appropriate source material	80	-.188	.887	.062
(Q10&27) Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	80	.075	.759	.380
(Q11&28) Meets time limits (7-9 minutes)	80	.212	.688	.007*
(Q12&29) Makes appropriate eye contact	80	.387	.787	.000*
(Q13&30) Vocally expressive, conversational style	80	.313	.773	.001*
(Q14&31) Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	80	-.162	.770	.063
(Q15&32) Nonverbally expressive	80	.137	.689	.078
(Q16&33) Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	80	.037	.754	.658
(Q17&34) Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	80	-.100	.851	.296

\*Paired samples t-test <.05

**Table 5.** Student Performance: Outlier Ratings Removed

Item Pairs	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Effect Size
(Q1&18) Appropriate & relevant to audience	61	-.049	.717	.594
(Q2&19) Interesting & creative approach to topic	61	-.066	.704	.470
(Q3&20) Memorable & creative	61	.000	.913	1.000
(Q4&21) Establishes credibility (ethos)	61	.164	.840	.133
(Q5&22) Identifies question of policy	61	-.410	.824	.000*
(Q6&23) Key ideas are well-organized & explained	61	.082	.881	.470
(Q7&24) Arguments/evidence well-developed	61	.016	.764	.867
(Q8&25) Uses clear transitions & summaries	61	-.311	.765	.002*
(Q9&26) Cites credible/appropriate source material	61	-.197	.872	.083
(Q10&27) Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	61	-.098	.651	.242
(Q11&28) Meets time limits (7-9 minutes)	61	.148	.679	.095
(Q12&29) Makes appropriate eye contact	61	.131	.618	.103
(Q13&30) Vocally expressive, conversational style	61	.180	.764	.070
(Q14&31) Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	61	-.361	.684	.000*
(Q15&32) Nonverbally expressive	61	.115	.635	.163
(Q16&33) Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	61	-.033	.657	.698
(Q17&34) Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	61	-.033	.795	.749

\*Paired samples t-test <.05

**Table 6.** Paired Samples Correlations

<b>Item Pairs</b>	<b>Correlation</b>
(Q1&18) Appropriate & relevant to audience	.05
(Q2&19) Interesting & creative approach to topic	.21*
(Q3&20) Memorable & creative	-.08
(Q4&21) Establishes credibility (ethos)	.03
(Q5&22) Identifies question of policy	-.18
(Q6&23) Key ideas are well-organized & explained	.01
(Q7&24) Arguments/evidence well-developed	.02
(Q8&25) Uses clear transitions & summaries	.25*
(Q9&26) Cites credible/appropriate source material	.16
(Q10&27) Clear, concise, colorful/creative, culturally sensitive (nonsexist/inclusive)	.41**
(Q11&28) Meets time limits (7-9 minutes)	.24*
(Q12&29) Makes appropriate eye contact	.25*
(Q13&30) Vocally expressive, conversational style	.17
(Q14&31) Avoids nervous mannerisms, other non-fluencies	.17
(Q15&32) Nonverbally expressive	.35**
(Q16&33) Reviews major ideas; urges thesis	.22*
(Q17&34) Memorable & creative, clearly ends presentation	.10

\*Low correlation; \*\*Moderate correlation