

Professional Competencies with Behaviorally Anchored Ratings for Graduate Students

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Professional development, at all levels, is focused on improving performance across a broad range of skills. As a result, this universe of skills needs to be systematically categorized and labeled to provide the structure for professional development. A common approach for this categorization is to group skills into competencies. Competencies are combinations of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other individual characteristics that can be reliably measured to differentiate performance [1]. Defining and describing professional competencies is one of the central tasks to creating an effective professional development strategy or framework. In engineering education, a common practice is to draw these competencies from the accreditation framework adopted by ABET. Competencies defined from these sources are certainly valid for engineering programs, but tend to focus on the technical skills of graduates. This focus is understandable, considering that engineers must be first, and foremost, technically competent, but this focus overlooks other professional skill sets.

In this paper, the development and initial validation of a set of professional competencies and related behavioral anchors is described. These proposed competencies are intended to complement the technical competencies from more traditional sources and are formulated as a part of a National Science Foundation-supported research project focused on the professional development of graduate students. The University of Tulsa Professional Competency (TUPC) model presented here is informed by existing frameworks that have been used in the organizational psychology and leadership literatures. As such, these professional development areas include skills that are more commonly aligned with other disciplines, especially those in business and management. However, as many engineers ultimately aspire to take on leadership roles within their organizations, these skills are vital to their development. The competency model described in this paper is intended to work in tandem with the traditional technical competencies expected in graduate-level engineers.

In the present paper, we present our proposed competency model and discuss the process by which the individual competency areas and definitions were determined. After discussing this model, the behavioral anchors associated with each competency are discussed and preliminary validation of the anchors is presented. Finally, we discuss the usage of this material in the context of a professional development program.

Competency Model

The authors' ongoing NRT-IGE project required the development of a set of professional competencies that parallel and complement the technical content of graduate engineering education. Unlike most accreditation-based competencies, a set of behavioral anchors was also formulated to define performance levels. Behavioral anchors were classed into three categories: development opportunity, average performer, and area of strength. The competency model development approach was to first identify critical areas for graduate student development. An initial list was created that grouped potential competencies in three areas, shown in

Table 1. Competencies in this list were drawn from work on developmental assessment centers for managers [2, 3], with input from the faculties in the different engineering disciplines at the University of Tulsa, as well as their Industrial Advisory Boards.

Table 1. Initial set of professional competencies.

Technical	Communication	Cultural
Information Seeking	Oral Communication	Cultural Adaptability
Planning and Organizing	Leadership	Teamwork
Problem Solving	Conflict Management	Fairness
		Ethical Reasoning

The individual competencies shown in Table 1 were grouped into three broad categories: technical, communication, and cultural. Technical competencies are the non-knowledge-based skills that are critical for supporting the basic technical development of a graduate student. These include the ability to *seek information* when confronted with a new situation or problems. The ability to *plan and organize*, especially when taking on new tasks or expanding outside a student's or engineer's current level of technical competency. Finally, the ability to *solve problems* is important in both the technical and non-technical aspects of a graduate degree-holding engineer.

The communication competencies include *oral communication*, *leadership*, and *conflict management*. Oral communication competencies are usually addressed through formal and informal presentations when graduate students present at conferences and routine research meetings. Leadership and conflict management are, at best, addressed informally through inter-student interactions and an occasional assignment to a mentoring role for undergraduates.

Cultural competencies are also occasionally included in a formal engineering curriculum. Specifically, *teamwork* and *ethical reasoning* are frequently addressed by the inclusion of team projects and through direct ethics instruction. The remaining two competencies of *cultural adaptability* and *fairness* are generally not directly addressed in formal or informal settings. While these competencies are not always part of formal graduate engineering education, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to work effectively in a diverse work environment are becoming central to success. Engineering has historically been predominantly male, which has made the professional and education system vulnerable to practices that are unwelcoming to underrepresented groups, especially women. A focus in the development of this competency model was to include competencies related to professional behavior that creates an open and inclusive environment for everyone.

Based on the preliminary competencies in Table 1, a draft of competencies and definitions were created. The definitions were drawn from experience and existing definitions, such as the list in Thornton, Hanson, and Rupp [4], and the proposed competencies and definitions were provided to three engineering faculties for comment.

Table 2. Final Competency list and definitions.

Competency	Definition
Conflict Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uses effective strategies for dealing with conflict ● Recognizes and openly addresses conflict appropriately ● Arrives at constructive solutions while maintaining positive working relationships
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develops and encourages novel ideas or solutions to problems ● Acquires information from multiple sources and develops a clear perspective on an issue or topic ● Anticipates future trends and assesses the likelihood and feasibility of possible responses
Cultural Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintains a consistent standard of treatment toward all individuals ● Values interaction with people from diverse backgrounds ● Displays sensitivity to the needs, feelings, and viewpoints of others and expresses courtesy, neutrality, and respect
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guides, directs, and motivates others using regular, specific, and constructive feedback ● Balances the interests, abilities, goals, and priorities of self and others with the needs of the group ● Commands attention and respect while working toward goal achievement
Oral Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clearly conveys information with appropriate purpose and detail ● Matches communication style with audience ● Listens effectively and responds to input
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritizes information and uses that information to set short and long-term goals ● Monitors tasks and activities of self and others to ensure objectives are met and goals are accomplished ● Accomplishes goals and completes work in one area without neglecting other projects
Problem Solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recognizes problems and potential challenges in their work ● Identifies solutions and evaluates costs and benefits of each ● Makes timely decisions, plans course of action, and carries out action accordingly
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Values the contributions of all team members toward meeting the team objectives ● Shares information and encourage others to do the same ● Remains flexible within the dynamics of a group context and can works effectively with almost anyone
Written Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expresses thoughts clearly and succinctly across all written formats ● Uses proper grammar and spelling ● Follows a logical flow and has a developed sense of style

These departments were Mechanical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Petroleum Engineering, which were chosen because all departments have PhD programs and large, active, advisory boards. The University of Tulsa offers graduate degrees in two other engineering fields, Electrical Engineering and Computer Engineering.

Electrical Engineering does not have a PhD program and Computer Engineering was established only a year ago. Due to these considerations, these programs were not included in the initial discussion. However, since the completion of the draft competency structure these departments are participating in the NRT-IGE project.

Suggestions from the faculty were accommodated by modifying the competency definitions to emphasize specific traits. No additional competencies were added based on the comments from the faculty. After faculty comments were incorporated into the competency definitions, the list was disseminated to the advisory boards of the respective departments. Comments from these boards were uniformly positive and no significant additions were made as a result of this request for comment. The finalized list of competencies is shown in Table 2. These competencies were broadly similar to our initial list shown in Table 1, but combined some of the competencies together and reflects specific emphases in graduate engineering education.

Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale

While the competency model described above is the core structure of the assessment protocol, there is a distinct need to create a framework for students, advisors, and peers to provide more specific, behavioral feedback. Behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS) were adopted in the current study to rate performance. Typically, BARS are presented as a scale with several points and the rater chooses a level to indicate an individual's current performance. One of the critical aspects of BARS are narratives, or examples to illustrate varying levels of performance at each rating [5]. By including specific markers of behaviors along with the numerical ratings, BARS can be less subjective or biased when compared to pure numeric ratings. The use of specific examples and multiple increments allows for more structured rating decisions [6]. As part of our competency model development, BARS were established for each competency included in the model. Behavioral anchors were designed to equip graduate students and faculty advisors with a shared mental model of performance in each professional competency.

Table 3: Labels assigned by respondent to the Oral Communication competency.

Label	Respondents
Oral Communication	8
Verbal Communication	2
Effective Communication	1
Communication	1
Communication Self-Monitoring	1

Behavioral anchors for each competency were determined based on the experience of the faculty members and researchers involved in the project. Once the scales were determined, the BARS

were tested for validity using a Q-Sort test with a small test group (n=13) that consisted of graduate students and faculty members from several departments. This study group also included members that had no role in the development of the competency model or behavioral anchors. As an example of the rating results, the responses for Oral Communication are given in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 4. Q-sort results for Oral Communication with $n=13$.

Anchor	Percent Agreement	Accurate Rating (n)	Most Common Rating
1 – Is not at all comfortable speaking to or in front of others; Is unable to convey information clearly or coherently	100	13	1 ($n = 13$)
2 – Is somewhat able to convey information, especially in less formal settings, but may not be particularly comfortable doing so; Has difficulty expressing things concisely, may get caught up in the details but is able to get main ideas across	45	6	3 ($n = 7$)
3 – Can convey information to others so that the audience understands the gist, but tends to ramble or struggle to get to the point in a concise way; Tends to use uncomfortable language or mannerisms and struggles to adjust communication style to suit the audience	30	5	2 ($n = 6$)
4 – Can convey information concisely and the content of the message is strong but they don't consistently connect with the audience; May dominate conversations or meeting dialogue, but speaks in a clear and compelling manner in doing so	35	7	4 ($n = 7$)
5 – Verbally conveys information with ease and in an engaging tone; Clearly expresses content but sometimes engages in unnecessary gestures or vocal mannerisms	40	8	5 ($n = 8$)
6 – Delivers informative and entertaining presentations with minimal rehearsal; Is able to express ideas thoughtfully and articulately when put on the spot	85	11	6 ($n = 12$)

As a first check on the validity of the competency definition, each participant was asked to identify the competency based only on the bulleted description given in Table 2. The results of this survey for Oral Communication is given in Table 4. Out of the competencies defined here, Cultural Adaptability, Planning, Problem-solving, and Creativity were most commonly misidentified by respondents. Misidentification was generally in the form of swapping labels among the overlapping competencies. This response was expected based on the content overlap in many of these competencies.

For the behavioral anchors, respondents were able to correctly identify the anchors associated with the lowest and highest performing categories. In addition to accurately identifying the highest and lowest anchors, intermediate anchors were generally identified in the correct order. When there was an incorrect order, respondents were normally off by one ranking (e.g. 3 vs 4 for example). This result tends to indicate that the anchors were robust and accurately captured the expected progression of achievement in each competency. Based on these results, we propose that this rating scale is appropriate for use in professional development programs intended for engineering graduate students.

The complete list of competencies and BARS is provided in Appendix A. These competencies and BARS are expected to provide guidance when performing assessments of graduate student development levels and progression. By incorporating a direct assessment of students alongside the traditional technical assessments, graduate students can receive feedback on all aspects of their performance. The goal of the pilot program is to combine structured guidance on professional development with consistent and useful feedback. In this manner, graduate students can become proficient at identifying areas of weakness and developing action plans for improving performance in those areas. Other researchers and educators could use this work as starting point to adapt the competencies and BARS to their unique program needed and goals.

Conclusions

A competency model based on existing work in development coaching has been proposed for use in the professional development of engineering graduate students. Informal feedback solicitation from stakeholders, including industry and academic representatives, indicated that the initial competency list was appropriate for a variety of final job destinations for graduate engineering students. In addition to the assessment of the competencies and the definitions, a set of behavioral anchors were also constructed to aid in ranking graduate student performance levels. These anchors were tested for rank order validity using a Q-sort approach. For the current anchors, respondents were able to clearly identify the extremes of performance, but had some difficulty discriminating between the middle levels.

Acknowledgements

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number 1545211.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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Appendix A

The complete competency list with BARS is located after this page.

Conflict Management

- Uses effective strategies for dealing with conflict
- Recognizes and openly addresses conflict appropriately
- Arrives at constructive solutions while maintaining positive working relationships

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often fuels conflict by forcing their way • Is often aggressive, autocratic, or uncooperative in dealing with conflict 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes when a conflict arises but often waits for others to resolve it • Plays a minimal role in achieving solutions

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to reach resolutions but isn't always effective in doing so • Tries to resolve conflicts by giving in to others and trying to please everyone 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can frequently achieve a solution to a conflict • Is usually able to resolve conflicts in a way that maintains positive and constructive relationships among everyone

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes conflicts and openly addresses them with the parties involved • Can maintain positive relationships with others while working to resolve a conflict 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes conflicts at the earliest stages and is proactive in addressing them • Is nearly always able to reach an effective resolution while maintaining positive working relationships with everyone, regardless of the situation

Creativity

- Develops and encourages novel ideas or solutions to problems and suggests innovative ways to approach the task at hand
- Acquires information from multiple sources and uses it to develop a clear perspective on an issue or topic
- Anticipates future trends correctly and can assess the likelihood and credibility of possibilities

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not generate new ideas or plans • Does strictly what they are told when completing tasks or solving problems, without developing new ideas 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows where to find relevant information about their discipline but does not go out of the way to access that information • Keeps somewhat up-to-date on their field but does not try to build on that information by developing new opinions or ideas

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows what's trending in their discipline • Is aware of new technologies, theories, and ideas as they emerge 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is generally knowledgeable of emerging trends in the field and develops their own opinions on these trends and advancements • Often applies new theories, technologies, or ideas to their work

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is always on top of the latest developments and trends in their discipline and regularly forms opinions on them • Discusses ways to push the newest trends and developments even further 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows what ideas, methods, and technologies will become popular in the future • Regularly has novel ideas and acts on them in the classroom and on extracurricular projects

Cultural Adaptability

- Maintains a consistent standard of treatment toward all individuals
- Values interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Displays sensitivity to the needs, feelings, and viewpoints of others and expresses courtesy, neutrality, and respect

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes offensive remarks or off-color comments or jokes regardless of who's around • Belittles others that are different 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates an intolerance toward different opinions, but generally isn't blatantly offensive or inappropriate • Is usually unwilling to interact with people that are different and may avoid them

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't openly avoid or put down people from other groups but shows a preference for similar others • Appears indifferent to others' values and beliefs when they differ from their own 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is tolerant of all viewpoints encountered • Is able to interact respectfully and appropriately with people with different perspectives

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly interacts with individuals who are different than themselves and these interactions are generally positive • Understands differences between cultural or demographic groups and tries to make sense of others' values and beliefs 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges cultural differences and appreciates the positive impact of such diversity • Proactively demonstrates a commitment to diversity in engineering by trying to include others in social and professional settings

Leadership

- Guides, directs, and motivates others using regular, specific, and constructive feedback
- Balances the interests, abilities, goals, and priorities of self and others with the needs of the group
- Commands attention and respect while working toward goal achievement

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes no effort to influence others • Avoids positions of power, oversight, or responsibility in group or team settings 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not voluntarily assume leadership positions but makes an effort to lead when formally assigned such a role • Is usually unsuccessful in their leadership efforts

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is willing to step into positions of leadership but isn't consistently effective or comfortable • Is able to direct group members but struggles to include opinions and needs of those group members 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers for leadership positions and usually seems comfortable acting as a leader • Is usually able to direct group members toward achieving an end goal

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers for leadership roles and is able to direct group members while taking their individual interests, opinions, and abilities into consideration • Facilitates the group's achievement of a goal by providing constructive feedback to group members 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost always takes on a leadership role when the opportunity arises and consistently delivers successful results • Appropriately provides both recognition and constructive criticism to group members

Oral Communication

- Clearly conveys information with appropriate purpose and detail
- Matches communication style with audience
- Uses listening to effectively respond others input

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is not at all comfortable speaking to or in front of others • Is unable to convey information clearly or coherently 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is somewhat able to convey information, especially in less formal settings, but may not be particularly comfortable doing so • Has difficulty expressing things concisely, may get caught up in details, but is able to get main ideas across

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can convey information to others so that the audience understands the gist, but tends to ramble or struggle to get to the point in a concise way • Tends to use uncomfortable language or mannerisms and struggles to adjust communication style to suit the audience 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can convey information concisely and the content of the message is strong but does not consistently connect with the audience • May dominate conversations or meeting dialogue, but speaks in a clear and compelling manner in doing so

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbally conveys information with ease and in an engaging tone • Clearly expresses content but sometimes engages in unnecessary gestures or vocal mannerisms 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaks clearly and concisely and is exceptionally engaging • Delivers informative and entertaining presentations with minimal rehearsal • Is able to express ideas thoughtfully and articulately when put on the spot

Planning

- Prioritizes information and uses that information to set short and long-term goals
- Monitors tasks and activities of self and others to ensure objectives are met and goals are accomplished
- Is able to accomplish goals and complete work in one area without neglecting other projects

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles with goal setting and time management • Is usually unable to meet deadlines and accomplish tasks on time 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is usually disorganized but is able to meet some goals or deadlines by working hard just before the deadline • Needs work determining priorities and managing their time

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is involved in a few projects or commitments at a time • Does not do an exceptional job in any area of work, but is generally able to meet goals 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has simultaneous ongoing projects and is usually able to navigate all of them and complete all required work • Completes work at an acceptable level of quality but is not a top performer in any area

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is involved in many simultaneous projects or tasks and nearly always meets deadlines • Consistently delivers good quality work by setting goals and prioritizing competing demands 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently manages ongoing projects and performs well • Can not only prioritize and take on new tasks, but is able to create synergy between new and existing responsibilities in order to be more efficient

Problem Solving

- Recognizes problems and potential challenges in their work
- Identifies solutions or course of action and evaluates the costs and benefits of each
- Makes timely decisions, plans course of action, and carries out action accordingly

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is unable to identify challenges when they arise • Is easily overwhelmed by problems and is usually unsure of how to act 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can usually identify challenges when they arise but cannot act on them independently • Is generally indecisive about solutions for a given problem and must receive directions before acting
Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is usually aware of challenges that they encounter and can think about them independently • Sometimes struggle to translate thoughts into actions; individual thinks about problems but can't consistently act on their ideas 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies and thinks practically about challenges • Can successfully identify courses of action that will be ineffective and is sometimes able to implement effective solutions
Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can generate potential solutions and implement them with minimal instruction or direction • When part of the planned solution does not seem to be working, takes the initiative to investigate the potential issues, diagnose what is going awry and debug the problem 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can not only recognize challenges, but can transition between looking at the big picture as well as individual aspects of them • Can develop and implement solutions without any direction or supervision and can adapt their plan of action as needed

Teamwork

- Values the contributions of all team members toward meeting the team objectives
- Shares information and encourage others to do the same
- Is flexible within the dynamics of a group context and can work effectively with almost anyone

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is inflexible and refuses to make adjustments to accommodate anyone else • Does not accept input from other group members and focuses exclusively on personal goals 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to either dominate a group setting, take all of the credit for group accomplishments, or loaf • Will work in a team if required to, but displays a clear preference for individual work.

Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is usually able to make independent contributions to the team goals • Works toward team objectives but prioritizes own goals. 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently works well with others. • Regularly contributes ideas to the team and is receptive to the ideas of others.

Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works hard to meet the team goals and objectives • Is willing and able to adjust working style to perform any role within the team. 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works effectively with all group members at all times. • Champions the ideas of other team members and prioritizes team objectives over personal goals

Written Communication

- Expresses thoughts clearly and succinctly across all written formats
- Uses proper grammar and spelling in writing
- Follows a logical flow in writing and has a developed sense of style

Example Competency Level

Growth Opportunity		
1	2	3
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes with little or no proper sentence structure, grammar, or word choice • Writes with substantial grammatical and logical errors that obscure the content of the written message 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes with sound logical structure • Tends to write with stylistic or grammatical errors that detract from the main ideas or arguments
Standard Performer		
4	5	6
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writes in a generally clear and logical structure with few grammatical errors • Writes with an awkward or unnatural style at times 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces work that's free from grammatical or logical errors • Has developed a personal writing style, though sometimes the use of this style detracts from logical points
Area of Strength		
7	8	9
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently produces writing that's free of distracting logical or grammatical errors • Writes with a distinctive style that enhances the quality of their presentation 		<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces work that is clear, logical, and enjoyable to read • Regularly uses a personal writing style that makes the material easy to understand and the argument clearer