

UALR School of Public Affairs MPA Program

# Methods and Writing Assessment of MPA Policy Analysis Papers

Fall 2014 and Fall 2015

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## Purposes

The policy analysis paper assessment seeks to provide data to inform the UALR MPA program's faculty about the extent to which we are successful in meeting our program's academic objectives, including NASPAA's universal competencies. In turn, this data informs our process for reviewing and updating the program's curriculum, teaching approaches and methods, academic advising and other student support services.

In particular, the policy analysis assessment provides data on aggregate student learning with respect to two of the MPA program's goals

**Goal 2: Research Skills** --- Use **critical thinking and decision-making** approaches, appropriate research methods and employ **analytical tools and statistical techniques** for collecting, analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data for policy, organizational, and managerial issues in public and/or non-profit organization.

**Goal 4: Communication Skills** --- Develop written and oral communication skills essential for effective public administrators to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry

These two goals correspond to two of NASPAA's universal competencies:

**Competency 3:** To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions

**Competency 5:** To communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry

The papers represent student learning at a point midway through a typical student's curriculum and is based on an assignment that all students complete in our policy analysis core course (PADM 7363). Hence it informs a review of curriculum covering the first year of the program and the second year required policy analysis course.

## Assessment method

Two faculty members evaluated each policy analysis paper (22 papers in all<sup>1</sup>) completed for PADM 7363 (Public Policy Analysis) in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 using the rubric shown in Appendix A. Each item in the rubric is matched with a UALR MPA program learning outcome. In turn, learning outcomes are linked to MPA program learning goals and NASPAA universal competencies. Faculty raters scored each paper on a four-point scale according to the extent to which the paper demonstrated mastery of the corresponding skill: 0 (skill not evident), 1 (skill somewhat evident), 2 (skill mostly evident), or 3 (skill completely evident).

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<sup>1</sup> Papers for Professor Wigand's fall 2014 section of PADM 7363 were not available and so are not included in this analysis.

## Summary results

I calculated the frequency distribution and the median for each learning outcome. The results are reported in Table 1. The median is calculated as the median of the average score reported by the two raters. In addition, we used the frequency distribution of the lower of the two faculty ratings to categorize each learning outcome as follows:

**Significantly deficient:** 30% or more of student papers were rated as 0 (not demonstrated) on the item by at least one faculty member reviewing the paper.

**Deficient:** 20% or more of student papers were rated as 0 (skill not evident) on the item by at least one faculty member reviewing the paper.

**Superior:** 40% or more of student papers were rated as 2 (skill clearly evident) by both faculty members reviewing the paper.

**Satisfactory:** Rubric items for which aggregate student performance meet none of the above standards may be taken to be “**satisfactory**”.

<i>Table 1</i> <i>Summary Results of Policy Analysis Paper Analysis</i>		
<b>Rubric Item</b>	<b>Median score<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Overall performance</b>
<i>Goal 2: Research Skills</i>		
<b>Evidence:</b> Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature	2	Deficient
<b>Chart construction:</b> Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices	1.75	Satisfactory
<b>Chart interpretation:</b> Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations	2	Deficient
<b>Inferential methods:</b> Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly	1.75	Deficient
<b>Generalize:</b> Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	2	Significantly deficient

<b>Goal 4: Communication skills</b>		
<b>Organization:</b> Paper has the appropriate structure and format for a policy analysis paper, i.e. describes the nature and scope of a public problem; analyzes causes or evaluates effect of policy on that problem; and makes a policy recommendation.	2	Satisfactory
<b>Writing mechanics:</b> Paper is free of mechanical problems (i.e. grammatical and spelling errors)	2.5	Satisfactory
<b>Writing style:</b> Paper's writing style (word choice, paragraph and sentence construction) is appropriate for a non-technical reader	2	Satisfactory
<b>Professional-level competence:</b> Overall, the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in policy analysis	2	Satisfactory
<i>Score: Completely evident (3); Mostly evident (2); Somewhat evident (1); Not evident (0)</i>		
<sup>1</sup> <i>Median of the two-rater average</i>		

In addition, it is possible to compare the median scores for each learning outcome to those in 2012-13. These scores are reported in table 2. Each item on the 2014-15 policy analysis paper rubric corresponds to an item on the 2012-13 rubric. But the 2012-13 rubric used a three-point scale, where 2 indicated skill was “clearly evident”, 1 partly evident, and 0 not evident. To make the comparison possible, I collapsed the four-point 2014-15 scale to a 3-point scale by assuming that both the “somewhat evident” (1) and “mostly evident” (2) categories are equivalent to the “partly evident” category of 2012-13. Hence, the re-coded 2014-15 data ranges from 0 (skill not evident) to 2 (skill clearly evident) as does the 2012-13 data.

<b>Table 2</b> <b>Comparison of 2014-15 Median Score with 2012-13 Median Score</b>		
<b>Rubric Item</b>	<b>2012-13 Median score<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2014-15 Median score<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>Goal 2: Research Skills</b>		
<b>Evidence:</b> Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature	1	1.5

<b>Chart construction:</b> Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices	0.25	1
<b>Chart interpretation:</b> Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations	0	1
<b>Inferential methods:</b> Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly	0	1
<b>Generalize:</b> Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	1.5	1
<b>Goal 4: Communication skills</b>		
<b>Organization:</b> Paper has the appropriate structure and format for a policy analysis paper, i.e. describes the nature and scope of a public problem; analyzes causes or evaluates effect of policy on that problem; and makes a policy recommendation.	1.5	1.5
<b>Writing mechanics:</b> Paper is free of mechanical problems (i.e. grammatical and spelling errors)	1.5	1.5
<b>Writing style:</b> Paper's writing style (word choice, paragraph and sentence construction) is appropriate for a non-technical reader	1.5	1.5
<b>Professional-level competence:</b> Overall, the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in policy analysis	1.125	1
<i>Score: Clearly evident (2); Partly evident (1); Not evident (0)</i>		
<sup>1</sup> <i>Median of the two-rater average on the 2012-13 three-point scale</i>		

## Discussion

Overall, our program is meeting its objectives with respect to helping student to develop professional-quality writing, at least with respect to mechanics and style. Median scores for each of the three writing-centered learning outcomes are at least 2 (“skill mostly evident”) and the distribution of those scores generally indicates that few to no students show “no skill” with respect to writing. These results are consistent with the 2012-13 analysis. This suggests that the writing-intensive nature to our curriculum and the feedback we provide students on writing

mechanics and style have been largely effective in helping students to improve their writing quality.

At the same time, the results indicate that a significant proportion of our students fall short in program goals with respect to research and analytic skills. Between 20% and 30% of students showed no evident skill in supporting arguments with evidence, and particularly in interpreting charts and using inferential statistical methods. More than 30% of students showed a no evident skill in being able to generalize from their results to generate original arguments or conclusions. These results suggest that while students are writing well in terms of mechanics and style, their writing often lacks analytic depth. Given the writing-intensive nature of our curriculum, this is a bit puzzling. But it does suggest that we may need to provide additional feedback to students concerning the depth of their writing, as well as additional instruction in how to think and write critically.

In addition, these results may reflect a lack of comfort or familiarity with using quantitative evidence as part of a research project. This may indicate a need to integrate evidence-based argumentation across the curriculum, beyond the methods and policy analysis courses.

The research skills results, however, are encouraging in one important respect. Overall, they show evidence that student research skills have improved significantly since the 2012-13 assessment. That assessment, too, found deficiencies in student performance in the area of research skills. Table 2, however, shows that the median score improved in four of the five research skills learning outcomes since 2012-13. For example, the median paper was rated as a “1” (i.e. skill partly evident) with respect to showing evidence in support of arguments in 2012-13, but was rated at 1.5 (between partly and completely evident) in 2014-15. This suggests that steps taken by the MPA program after the 2012-13 study, such as seeking to integrate descriptive statistical analysis in more of the core courses, may be having some effect. Consequently, the MPA program is moving in the right direction with respect to meeting our goals with respect to research and analytic skill development. Continued emphasis on integrating methods across the curriculum might reinforce these outcomes.

## Appendix A

**Policy Analysis Paper Assessment Rubric**  
**2016 MPA Program Methods and Writing Assessment**

**Evaluator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Year/Paper #:** \_\_\_\_\_

The policy analysis paper assignment in PADM 7363 (Policy Analysis) serves as an opportunity for students to demonstrate professional-level competence at making arguments about a public problem and policy supported with original data analysis, including problem definition and analysis, policy evaluation and analysis of policy recommendations. Each student draws on his/her skills and knowledge in research, quantitative analysis, critical thinking and writing from the first half of their MPA experience to complete this paper. Please indicate the extent to which the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in the following ways:

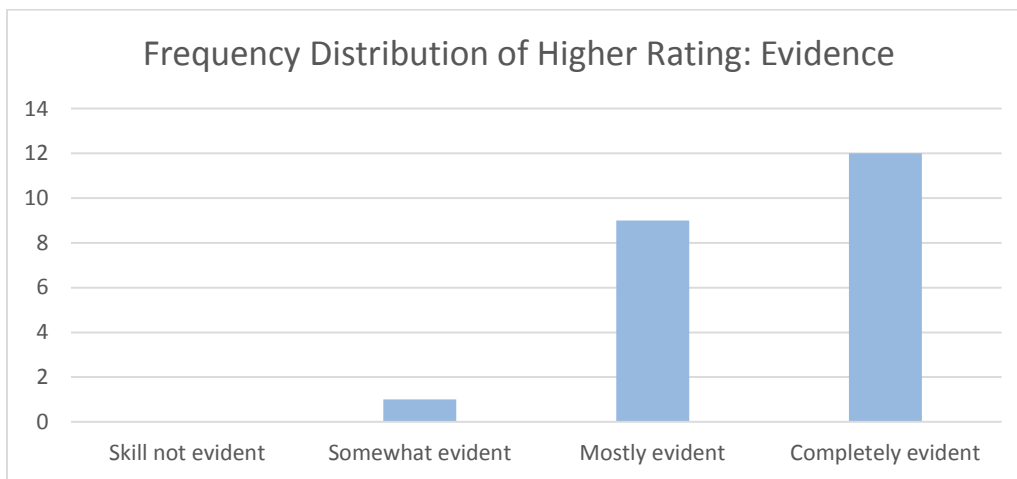
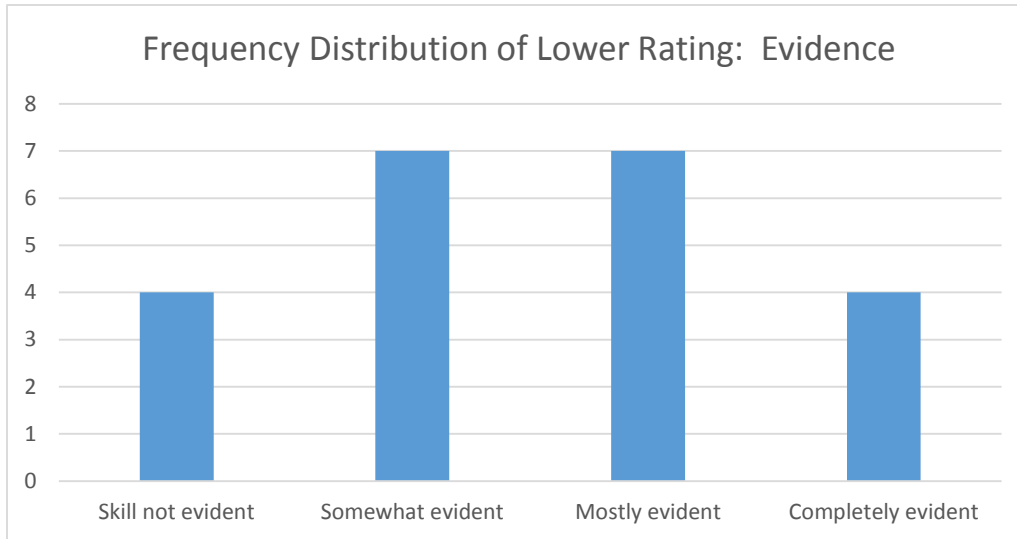
Score: Completely evident (3); Mostly evident (2); Somewhat evident (1); Not evident (0); Not applicable (N/A)

<b>Learning outcome</b>	<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>4.1</b>	Paper has the appropriate structure and format for a policy analysis paper, i.e. describes the nature and scope of a public problem; analyzes causes or evaluates effect of policy on that problem; and makes a policy recommendation.	
<b>4.2</b>	Paper is free of mechanical problems (i.e. grammatical and spelling errors)	
<b>4.2</b>	Paper's writing style (word choice, paragraph and sentence construction) is appropriate for a non-technical reader	
<b>2.9</b>	Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature	
<b>4.4 and 2.9</b>	Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices	
<b>4.4 and 2.11</b>	Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations	
<b>2.11</b>	Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly	
<b>2.14</b>	Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations	
	Overall, the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in policy analysis	

**Appendix B:** Histograms for rubric items (top histogram shows the frequency based on the low score given each paper on the corresponding item, bottom histogram shows the frequency based on the high score given each paper).

## EVIDENCE

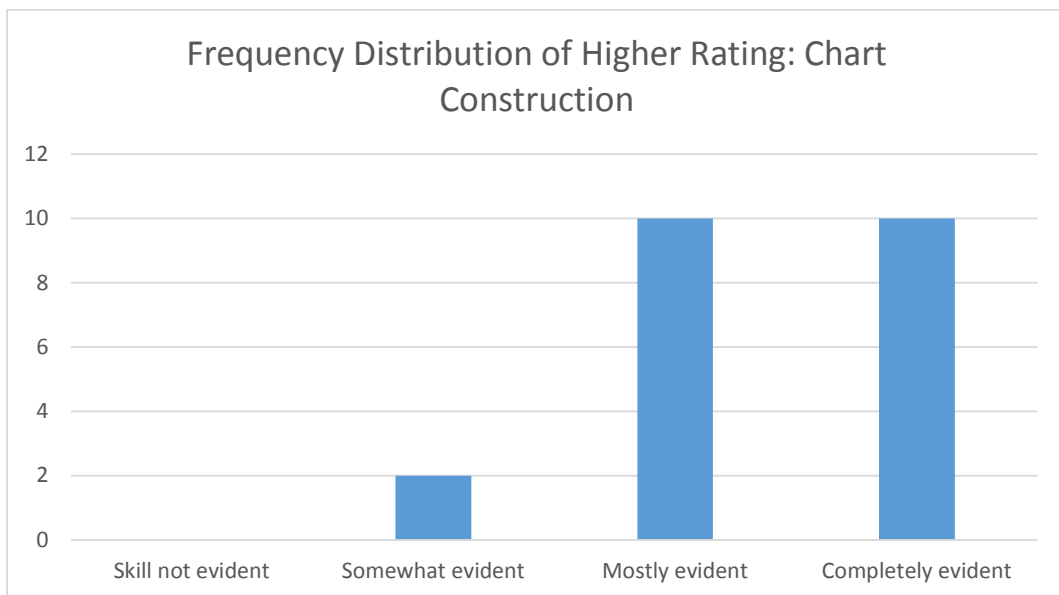
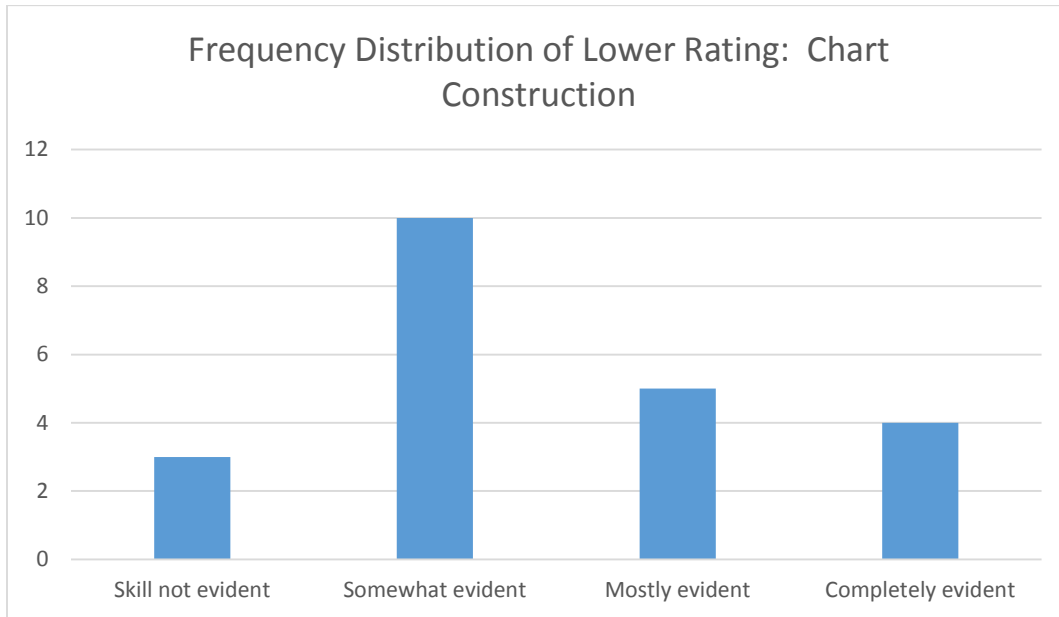
Supports arguments with evidence from relevant data sources and/or scholarly and public policy literature.





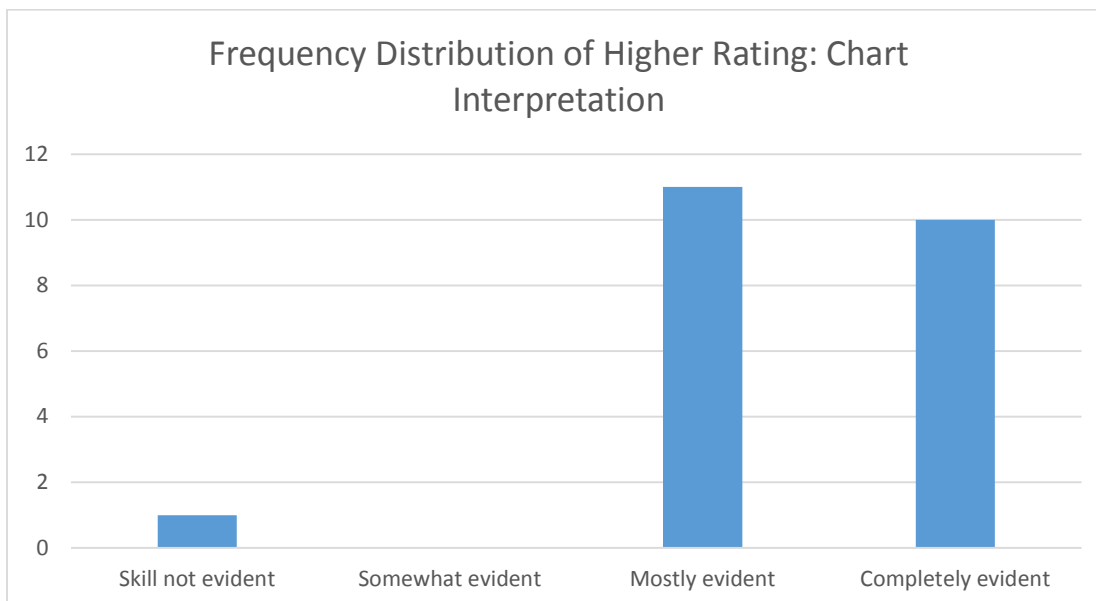
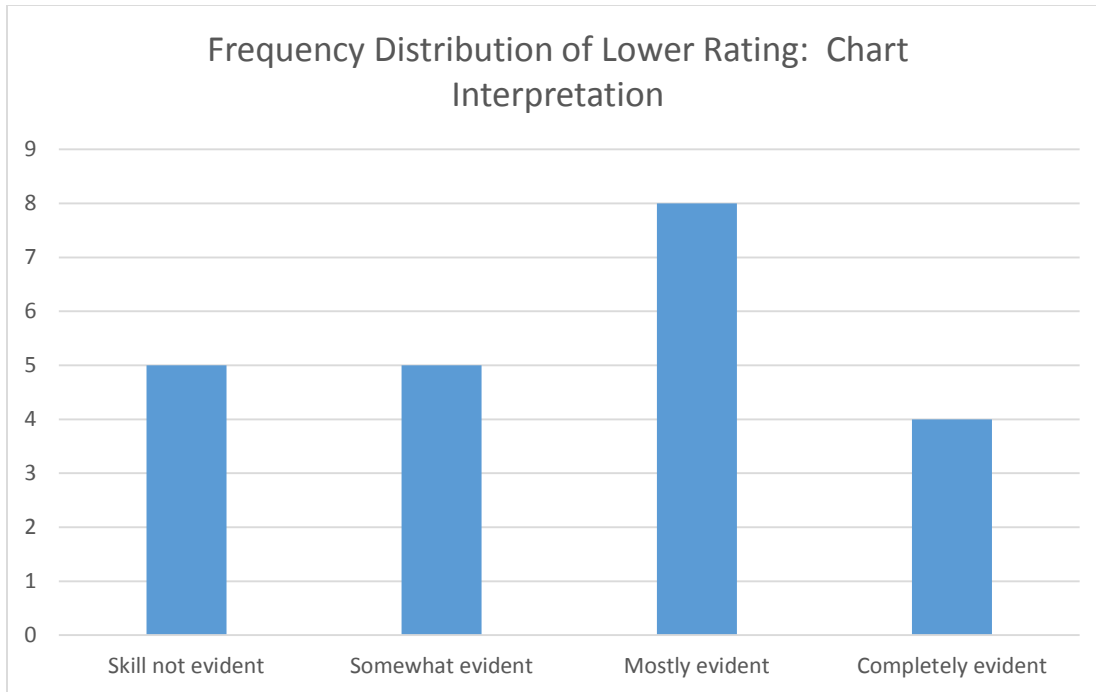
## CHART CONSTRUCTION

Tables, charts and illustrations are easy to interpret and adhere to best practices.



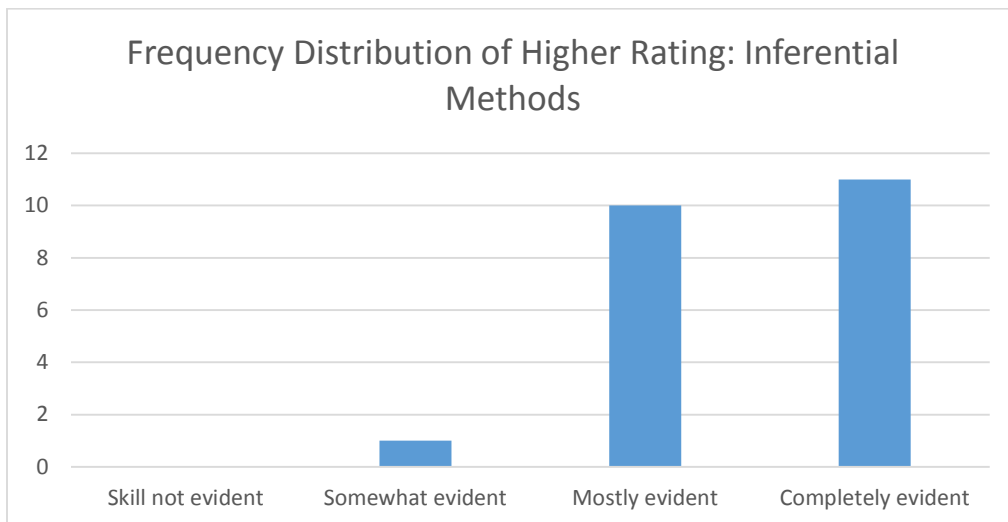
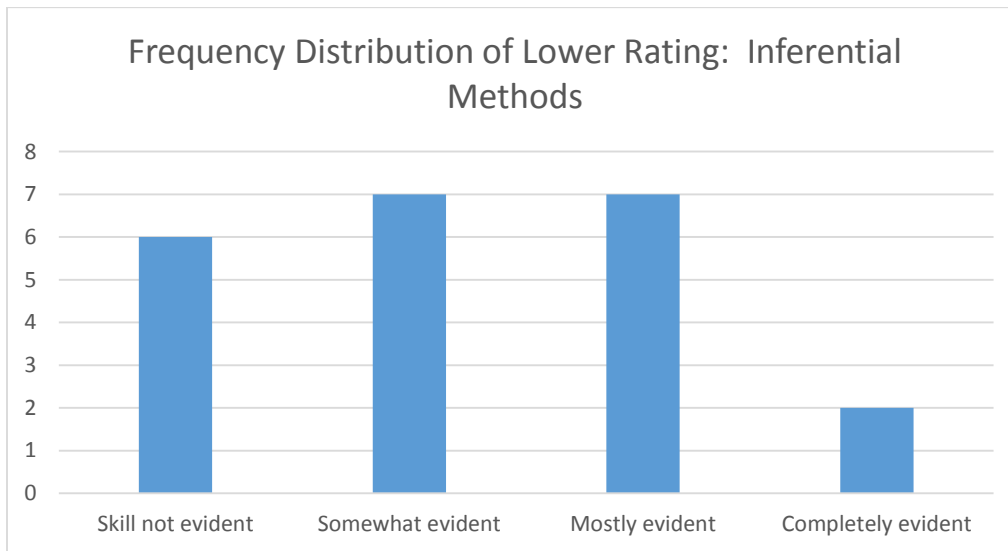
## CHART INTERPRETATION

Draws appropriate conclusions from tables, charts and illustrations.



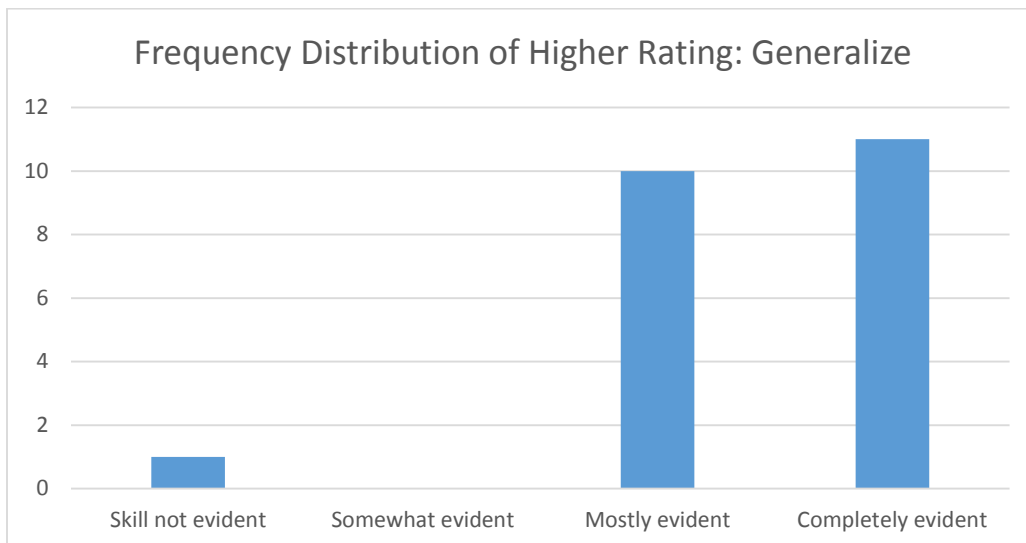
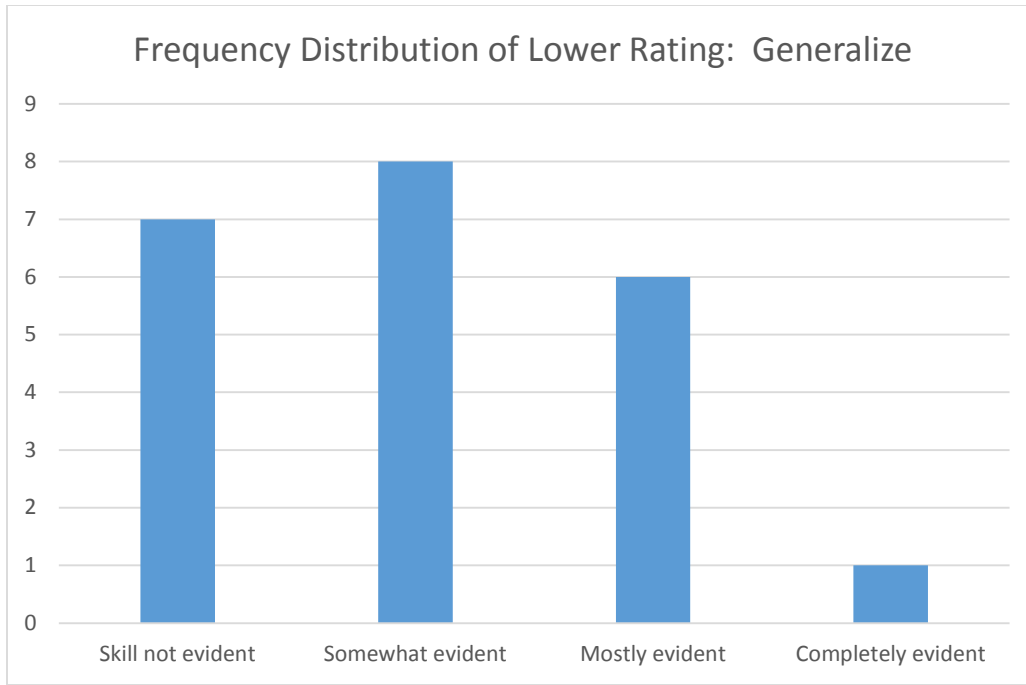
## INFERENCEAL METHODS

Uses and interprets inferential statistical methods (e.g. regression analysis) correctly.



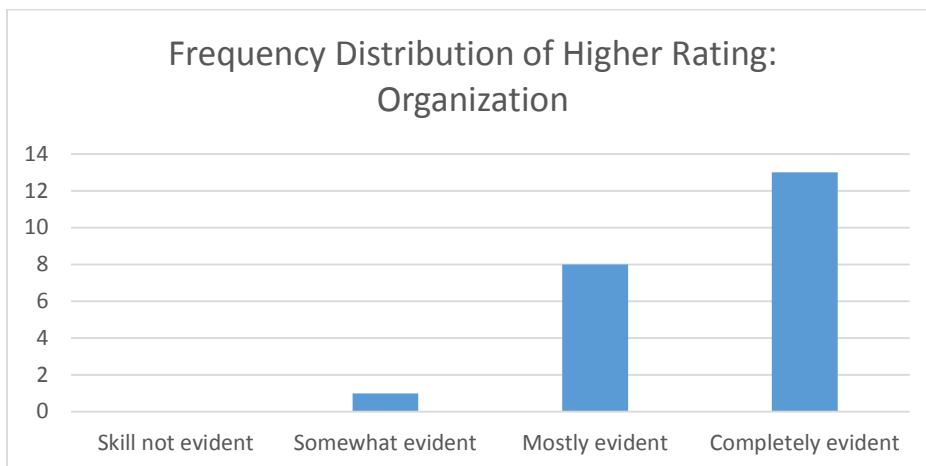
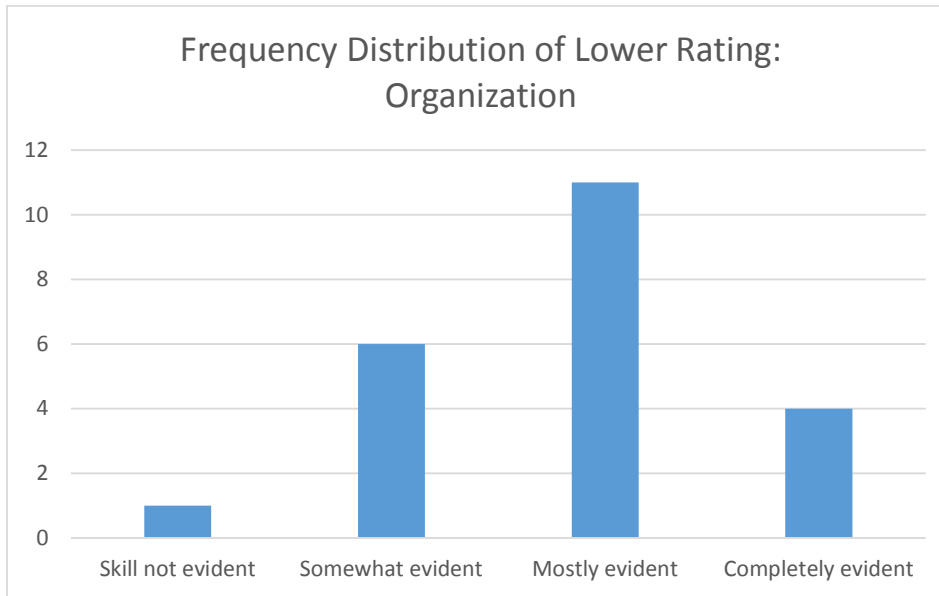
## GENERALIZE

Arguments and analysis generalize from the evidence and literature to generate original ideas, conclusions or recommendations.



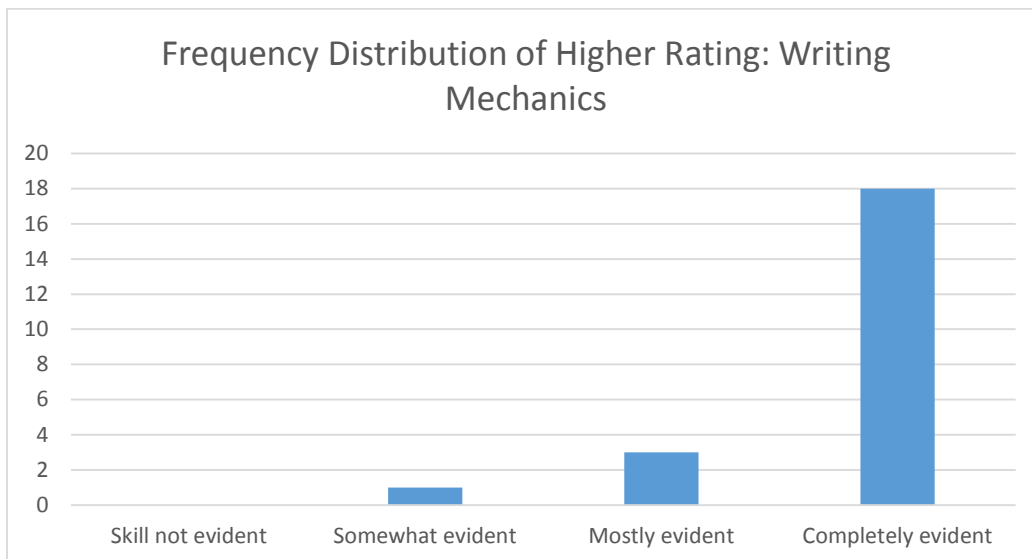
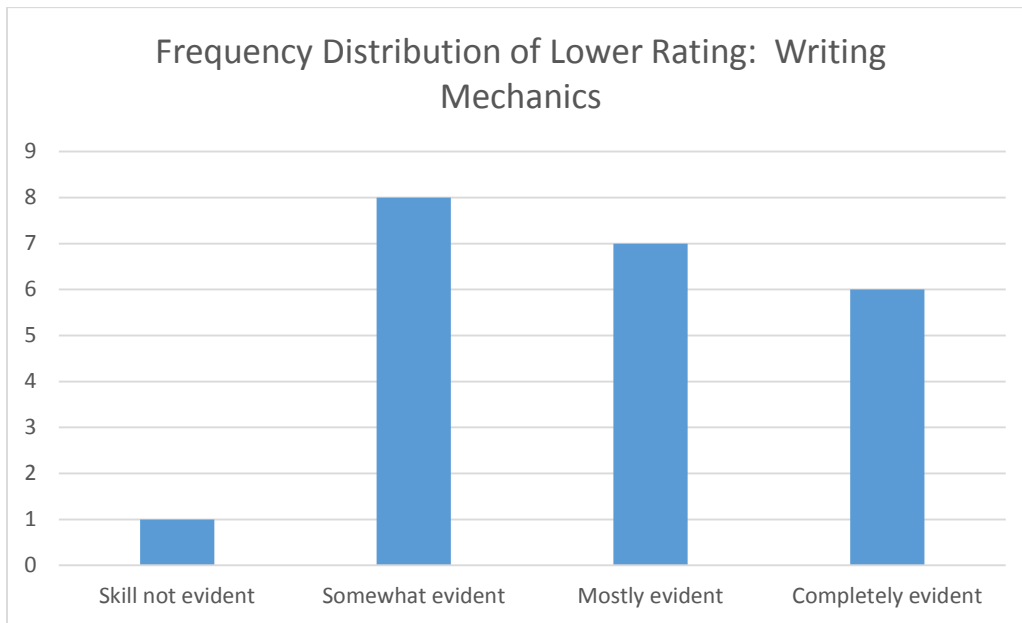
## ORGANIZATION

Paper has the appropriate structure and format for a policy analysis paper, i.e. describes the nature and scope of a public problem; analyzes causes or evaluates effect of policy on that problem; and makes a policy recommendation.



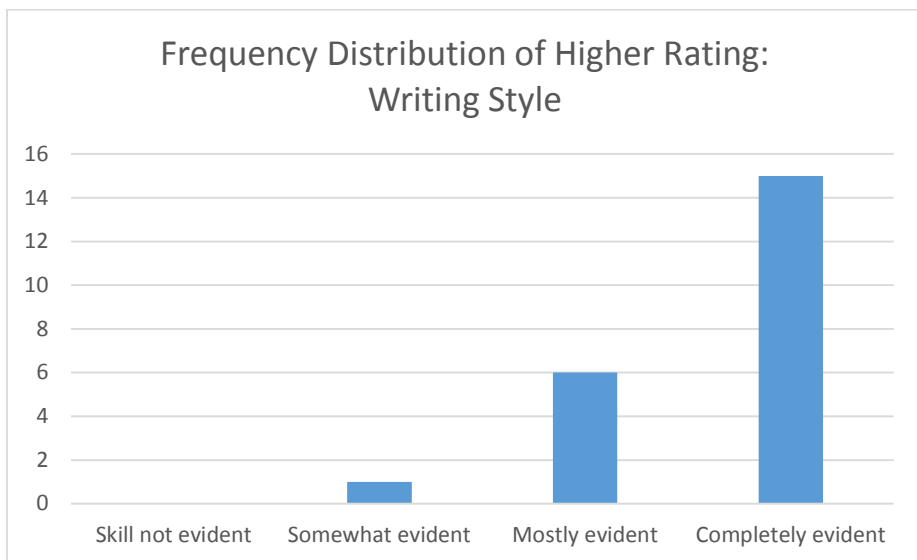
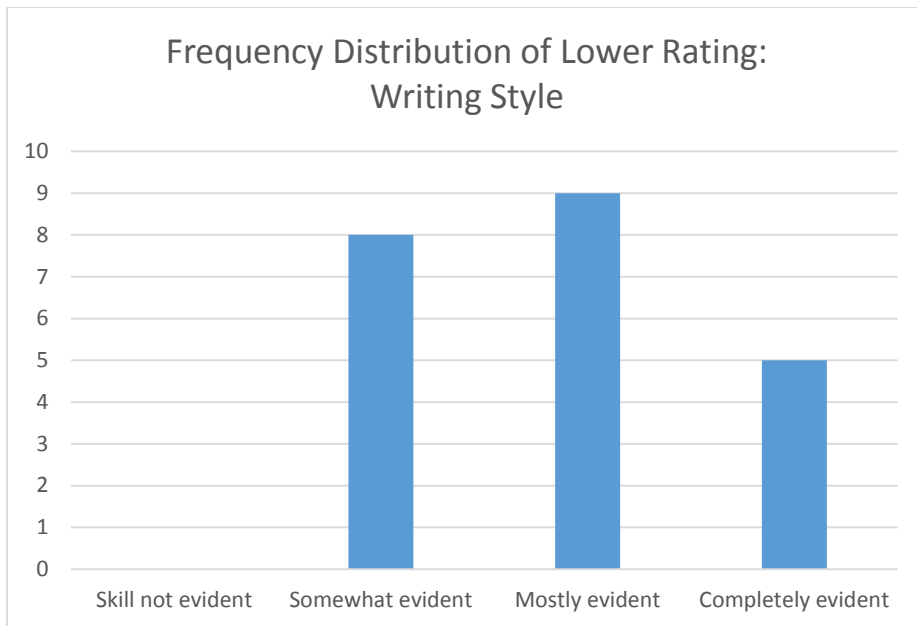
## WRITING MECHANICS

Paper is free of mechanical problems (i.e. grammatical and spelling errors).



## WRITING STYLE

Paper's writing style (word choice, paragraph and sentence construction) is appropriate for a non-technical reader.



## PROFESSIONAL-LEVEL COMPETENCE

Overall, the paper demonstrates professional-level competence in policy analysis.

