

# A Tale of Two (Or More) Tones: Strategies for Assessing and Improving Student Knowledge of Tone

Will Youngman, English Department  
Future Faculty Assessment Grant

## What's Tone Got to Do With It?

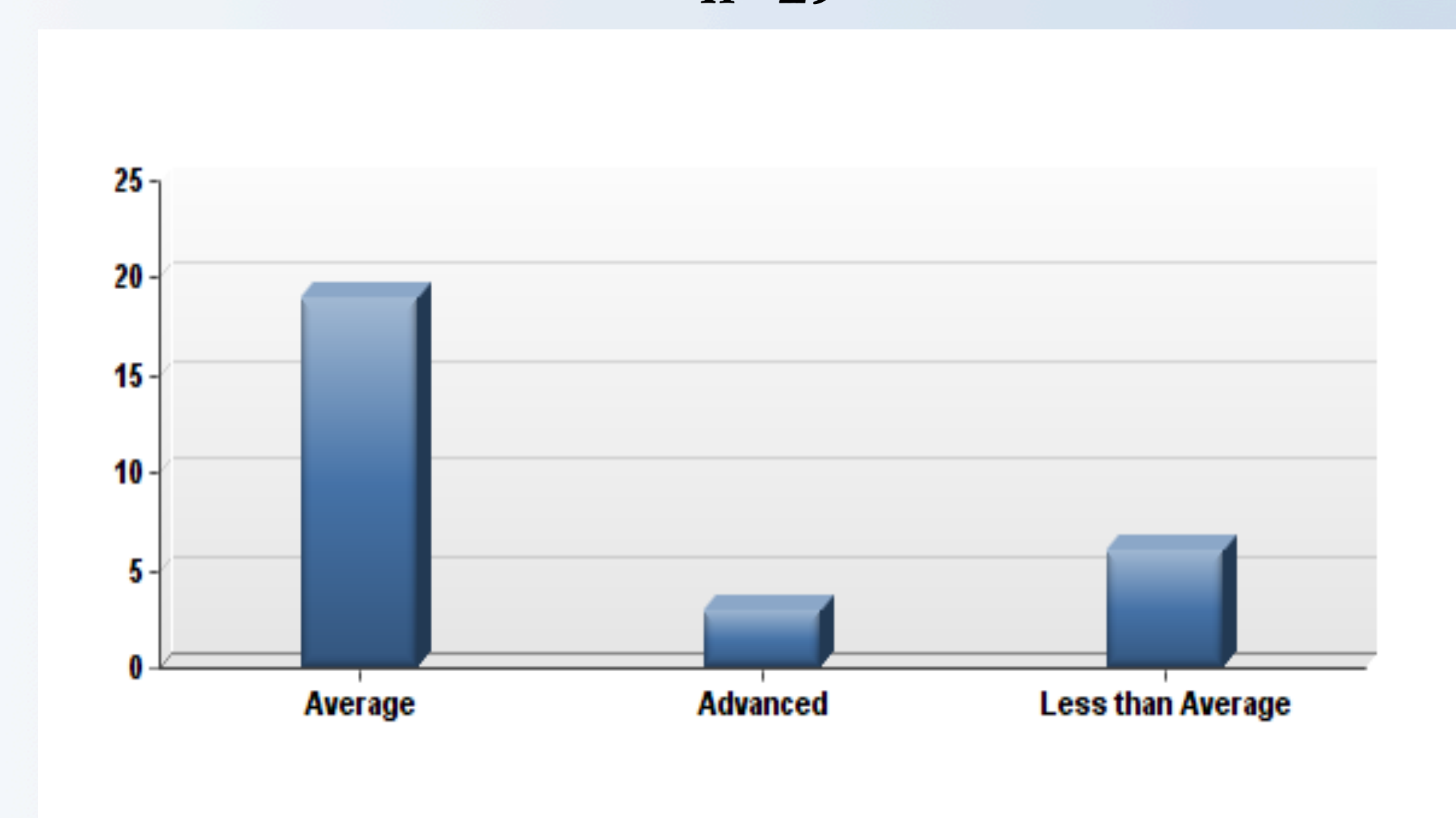
Tone, the attitude of a work toward its theme or subject, helps readers discover how and why to read.

Students often struggle not only to discern and evaluate tone in their reading, but also to create tone in directed exercises.

How can students best learn to create and evaluate tone?

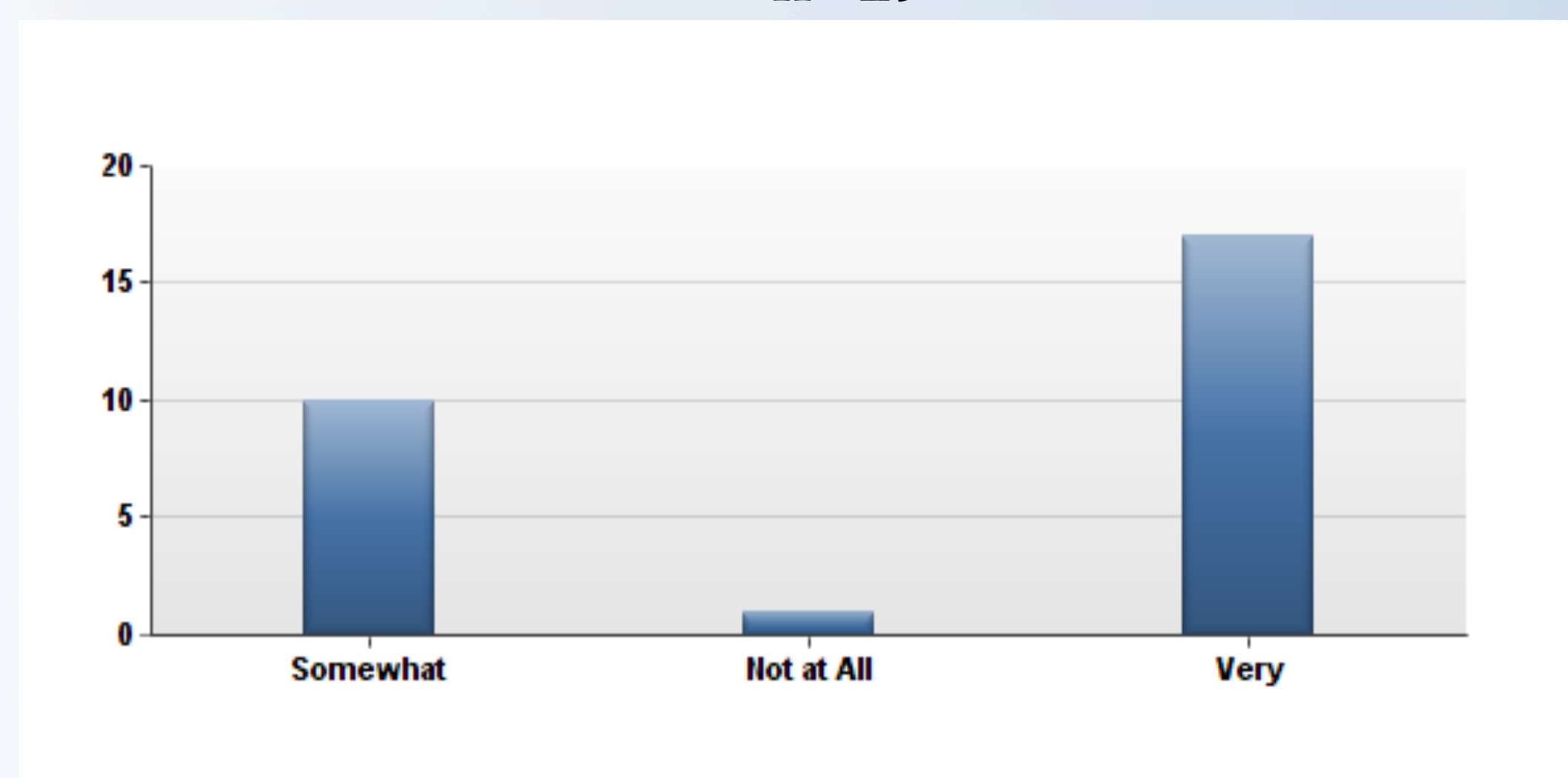
“At the start of the semester, how would you rate your knowledge of tone?”

Students' Self Assessment: Beginning Knowledge of Tone  
n=29



“How comfortable are you now with tone (its creation and evaluation)?”

Students' Self Assessment: Ending Knowledge of Tone  
n=29



## Tonal Testimonials

I gave students the opportunity to give open feedback on their final survey, and their evaluations of their current knowledge of tone, including how they learned to analyze it over the semester, range widely (but mostly affirm that their current knowledge is due to classroom activities and work on essays).

“I believe that focusing on tone, and especially the way multiple authors can speak differently about similar events (as in the *Dracula* letters activity), was very helpful. I believe that it definitely improved my ability to analyze tone.”

“I enjoyed the interactive worksheets as well as the class discussions. Writing essays about similar topics made the writing process less painful.”

“I came into class without a firm grasp on how to describe and create what I thought was the tone of a passage. I always struggled with connecting the tone to my thesis in essays. I rarely made the “so what” connection in my writing. Throughout the semester, the emphasis placed on the “so what” factor helped me consistently tie tone into my work and remember to analyze the tone and its contribution to the novel.”

These responses characterize over 75 % of the open responses. Neutral or negative responses tend to reflect that the student already knew how to analyze tone or that class merely emphasized something s/he already had learned (presumably in a previous FWS or high school English class).

And, of course, there's this response: “*What is tone?*” And I consider this submission a sign of success because I've agonized about the respondent's chosen tone for a week now.

## Tonal Dissonance

At the start of the semester, I assigned a required diagnostic essay to both classes, which revolved implicitly around tone and its construction.

Although the two classes read different material, they both read Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and I highlighted Chaucer and tone in Essay #2. Both classes also completed a peer review worksheet that asked questions of their understanding of tone.

One class, however, did two separate in-class tone worksheets. The other did more informal activities with tone that involved reading aloud and acting out lines and scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Sonnets*, and *Twelfth Night*

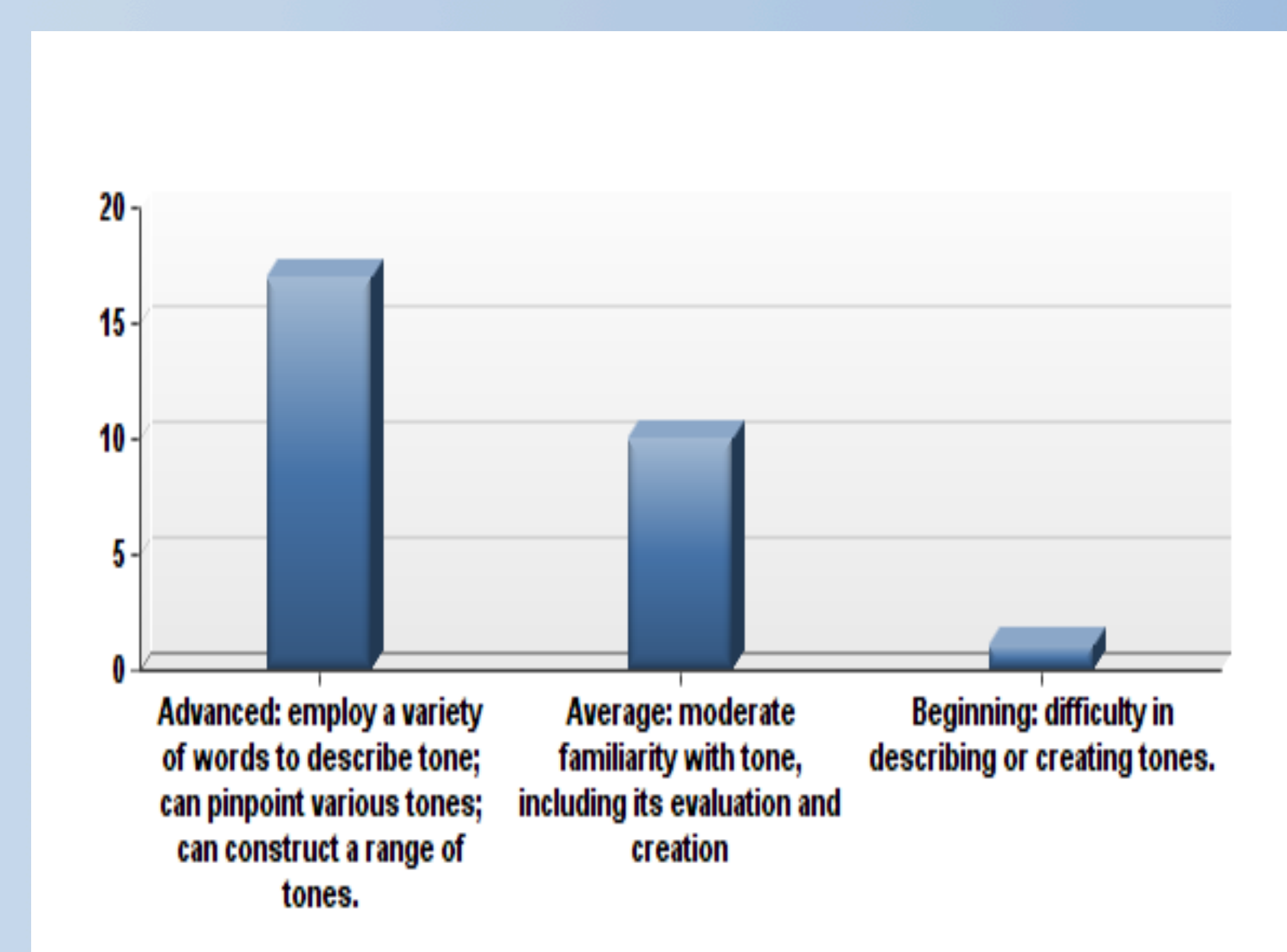
Peer Review Sheet: Essay #2 Close Reading and Tone	
Areas for Improvement	Suggestions for improvement
<b>Thesis:</b> What text and tone does the paper describe? Evaluate the thesis (is it clear, present an argument?)	
<b>Organization</b> —do thoughts and paragraphs flow together? How is the paper organized?	
<b>Grammar/Punctuation</b> —Subject-Verb Agreement —Complete Clauses —Correct Comma Usage	
<b>Citation</b> Do in-text citations follow MLA? Works Cited in correct format? Is information cited?	
<b>Sentence Structure</b> Sentences of varying lengths used? Well-constructed?	
<b>Introduction</b> Avoids generalizations, Sets up argument	
<b>Conclusion</b> Rather than restatement, reminds the reader what was argued Final statement of the “stakes” of the argument; where else might this argument or text be useful?	

Find and copy a sentence here that demonstrates clarity, precision, and elegance.

Find and copy a sentence that would benefit from revision. How do you think it should be revised?

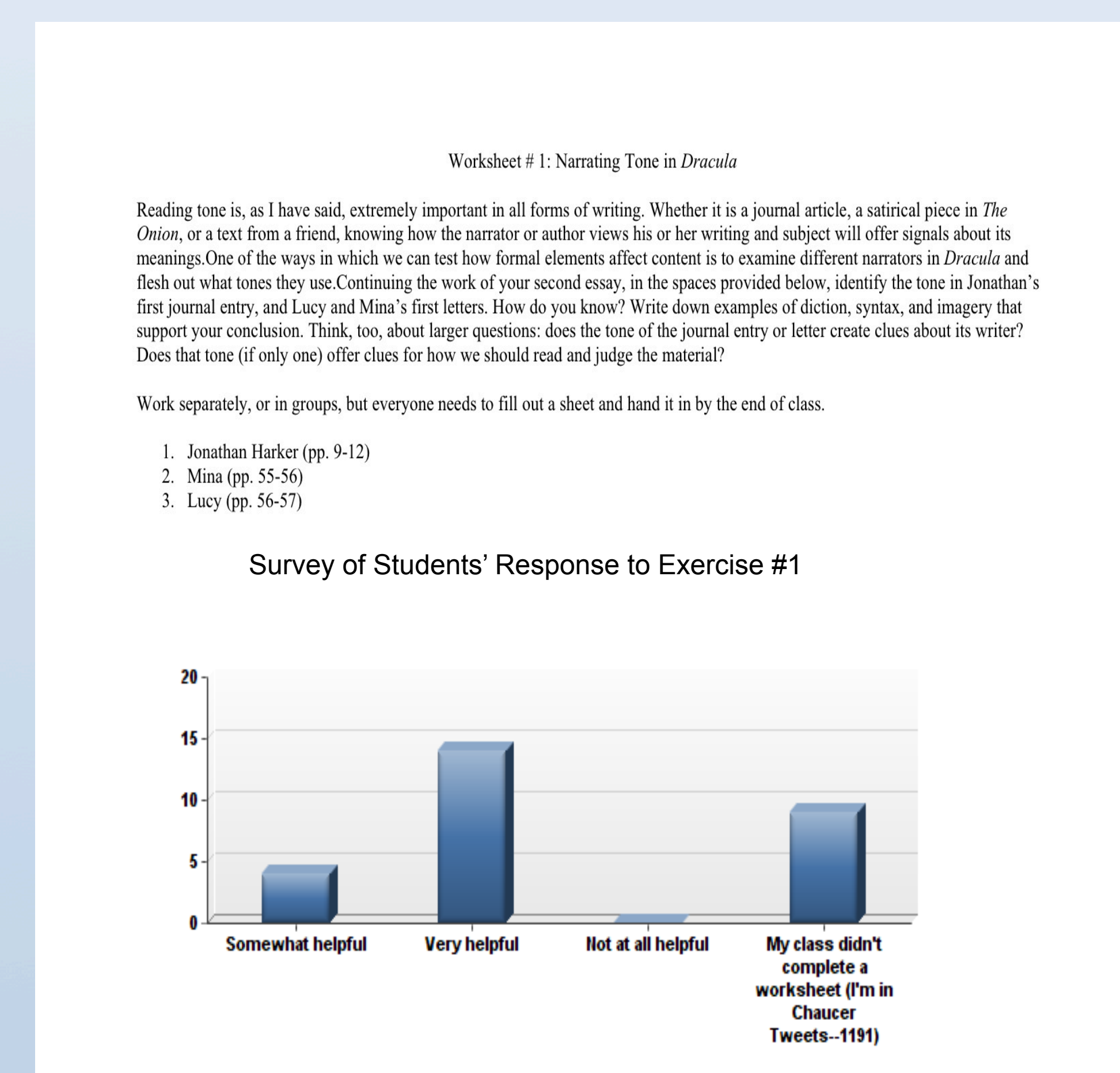
“After writing your final drafts for Essay #2, how would you rate your knowledge and use of tone?”

Student Response about the Effectiveness of Peer Review/Rubric of Essay #2  
N=29

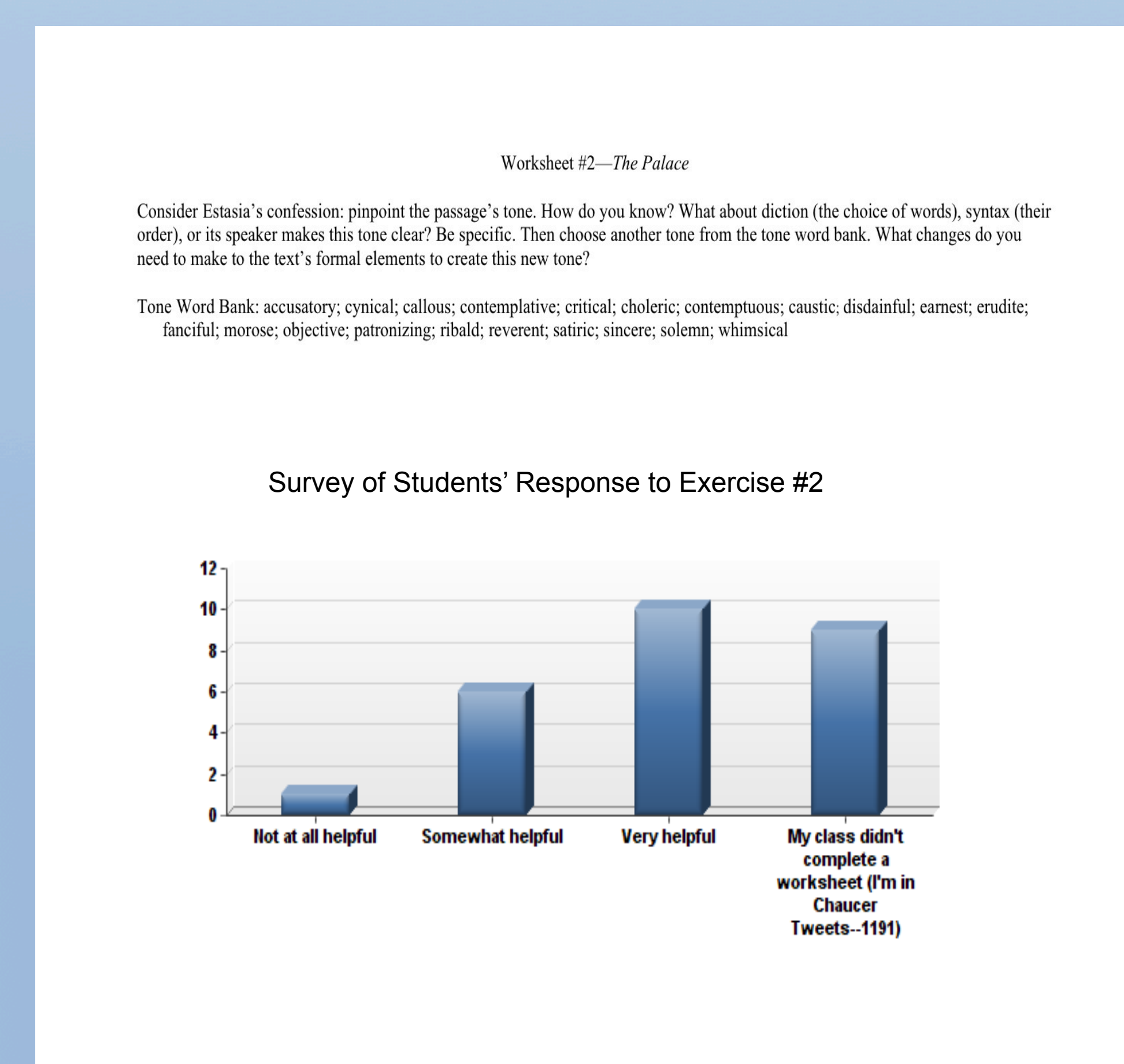


## The Tone's the Thing

The first in-class tone worksheet asked students to evaluate tone in *Dracula* for three of the novel's main character's (Jonathan, Lucy, and Mina).



The second exercise prompted students to identify the tone of a passage from *The Palace* using a word bank of common tones.



## Tone Does Have Something to Do With It

After various exercises (structured and written for one class, and verbal for the other), both classes demonstrated a working knowledge of tone. The class that received written worksheets, however, made more frequent and specific written mentions to tone, using a greater variety of tone words and evidence from texts.

Beyond their helpfulness to written work, the use of written exercises made discussion more lively over time in the class that completed them. Students appeared ready to discuss tone first as they referenced their tone worksheets.

For both classes, the use of a peer review rubric that was both general—it asks students to look for the main characteristics, as I understand them, of an analytical paper—and specific—as it asked them to notice what tone their colleague analyzed and how—was successful for both classes. For the majority of students, in both classes, their comments on the rough drafts and rubrics were similar to ones I would have written.