

ALTERNATIVES TO CURRENT TESTING PRACTICES

Speaker: Richard Beach, *University of Minnesota*
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Richard Beach stated that he is convinced that the form of essay testing currently used by the NAEP does not cue students to use the types of strategies that would allow them to produce their best writing, but instead instructs students only to "discuss" the topics. According to Beach, this type of assignment format does not invite the student to invent through particular techniques such as listing, summarizing, inferring, etc., nor does it in any way elicit or test the student's pre-writing strategies.

Beach is now working to develop more helpful assignments that would direct the student to call on various strategies which are essential to success in both reading and writing. The activities include goal-setting, visualizing and responding, ordering and summarizing, self-assessing, and revising. The final two components of this list are intentionally separated to emphasize Beach's belief that self-assessment is a completely different activity from revising, and that the former affects a deeper level of cognitive performance than the latter. Writers should do more than examine the text; they should examine themselves for what they know and for what and how they want to communicate as writers.

Good writers, said Beach, have the ability to name what it is they are doing. This self-understanding eases the tension between the person's intention and the text produced. Thus, in order to teach people to become good writers, the teacher must emphasize the importance of the relationship between various writing strategies—listing, backgrounding, supporting, contrasting—and the manifestations of these strategies in the form of what Beach calls "criteria" — relevancy, validity, clarity, etc.

Teachers must structure essay questions that will help students use and organize their knowledge of writing strategy in relation to their purposes and audiences. This is not a traditional consideration of audience, but rather one similar to self-assessment, only with the reader as the object of concern instead of the writer. According to Beach, a consideration of audience should involve the writer's asking, "What do they know?" and "What will they need to know in order to understand my message?"

This deeper level of awareness of all of the people involved in the writing event will allow for clearer and more sophisticated expression, moving the writer from capacities for narrating or describing to the more engaging capacities for reflecting and dramatizing.