design to believe that what counts in important writing is mainly the ability to "explain" (an act not clearly defined for the student) their agreement or disagreement with a generalizing statement. The developers of the WAT believed that this skill is an essential one for a student in college to master. However, the statement is offered to them without its own explanation, illustration, or support. To be sure, all students enrolling in The City University will be asked frequently to explain, illustrate, or support generalizations (usually their own). But if students believe (or have been taught) that generalizations must be illustrated and receive one of the tests, they may be puzzled by this test: the responsibility for supporting and illustrating, or support generalizations falls upon them but not upon the person (the examiner) who speaks to them.

Further, students are not asked to perform other writing tasks that writers must often perform: they are not given data to interpret; they are not asked to arrive independently at an assertion about a topic; they are not asked to respond to experience or examine their feelings. They are not asked to judge a text; they are not asked to argue a proposition that they have arrived at independently. They are asked only to say why they think specified assertions are true or not.

Second, students are not asked to address an audience interested in or able to act upon the subject under discussion. Writing, in these circumstances, is without a context. No one's store of information about a topic will be increased by what the students have written; no one's beliefs will be changed. A writer, the students are informed, needs no reader; they have no reason to prepare a reader except to demonstrate competency at writing (or to earn a grade). Indeed, students have no reader in mind. Writing on an enrichment of interest or in views on the subject they have no way of determining.

Third, whether the students have read or pondered one of the assigned subjects does not matter; they are asked to write about them before the subject are drawing together in fifty minutes whatever readings, observations, and personal experiences they can recall, or be assigned to "remedial" instruction. But this test says to the students that writers do not need to know very much about the subject on which they write in order to pass the test and advance in college.

These are, I think, the wrong messages to send to those students who, at the start of their college careers, are troubled about writing. If we believe that writing is based, at least in part, on what we know, that one writes for a reader, and that writers must accomplish a variety of different tasks (defining causal relationships, narrating, evaluating—to name just a few examples), I think that the test of writing we at CUNY now give to determine our students' fitness for upper-division study contradicts those beliefs, and does so with the emphasis that comes from repeated administrations of the same kind of test.

Having defined a problem—one by no means unique to CUNY's practices in testing—I suggest improvements in our tests of writing? 1) Vary from test administration to test administration the writing tasks set before the student. For example, invite on one test a report of an experience; on another, an enumeration of the steps followed in solving a problem; on still another, a judgment on a short piece of writing by another person.
2) Stipulate an audience for the students to address, and if possible a reason for addressing that audience. Ask students to play a role just as they will need to play a role in any writing done for any audience.
3) If the assigned task requires students to have some knowledge, furnish at least a little information on the topic, along with more specific instructions for the writing task. If fifty minutes is likely to be too short for students to read the information,
CORE CURRICULUM AND THE WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAM RECONSIDERED

In 1979, when the College of Arts and Sciences at U Mass/Boston began giving its required Writing Proficiency Exam, we knew we would not have to ask students their opinions about the exam. No matter how we explained its aims, its design, the arguments against it and denounced it. Even though students did not have to pass the exam before the beginning of the junior year, and although the Core Curriculum provided instruction in most of the Core courses and in freshman English, students thought the exam unfair and resented it. They resented the penalties: the fact that first-year seniors who had not passed the exam could not take a full load of courses and had to enroll in a special non-credit writing course. Even more, they resented the fact that after the first half of the junior year they could not take any courses until they passed the exam. Student sentiment most emphatically showed itself a year after the exam was first given, when students occupied a University building. The students at first presented three demands: reversal of two faculty tenure decisions, rehiring of a Student Affairs staff member, and a 51% student voice on all University committees. But when the protesters needed wider support, they got it by expanding their list of demands. The fourth was "End the Proficiency Exam," well ahead of No. 9, "Repeal of the 43% tuition increase." The exam is designed to test the student's ability to write about a specific topic discussed in a set of readings. Four or five times a year the examiners distribute packets of readings; each packet contains three essays, each essay provides about fifteen pages of essays and articles on a specific topic, like U.S. Immigration Policy, The Recombinant DNA Controversy, or The Films of Alfred Hitchcock. A month before the exam students pick up the packets and look them over, choose to study one set of readings carefully, and in the exam room ask for the questions on that set. In June, 1981, after three years of assembling packets of readings on challenging yet manageable topics, the examiners fell back on the topic of Liberal Education to round out a packet that already contained sets of readings on The Brain and Social Sciences fiction. The Liberal Education set had essays by J.M. Cameron, Mickey Friedman, Peter Engel and Russell Baker. The examiners gave the students a choice of two questions. The first asked them to evaluate the extent to which various college curricula described in the essays met the goal of liberal education which one of the essayists said was "to awaken innocent minds to a suspicion of information." The second question was the one that provided some insight into student opinion of the exam itself, was:

You are now taking the UM/B College of Arts and Sciences Writing Proficiency Examination. To what extent is this examination consistent with the views of education contained in the assigned readings? (You may take any position you wish, as long as your answer is supported by specific references to the readings.)

Fifteen students wrote on the "suspicion of information" question, twenty on the educational value of the exam itself. Out of the 150 students at that sitting of the exam, twenty (8%) hardly constitute a sample; but their bluebooks offer some interesting comments and confirm a general college opinion that students have come to accept the exam. First of all, the bluebooks show that the college catalogue and brochures, the orientation meetings, the advising system, and classroom instruction have combined to establish the Proficiency Exam in the students' minds as a coherent part of the college's response to student problems in writing. Like the rest of us, students have failed to teach writing. Hence, whatever their appraisal of the exam, most bluebooks focused attention on how effectively the college helped improve student writing rather than on whether we should have an exam at all. And it was gratifying to find so many explicit comments that the faculty in introductory courses...

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plan, and write (tasks that are, after all, inseparable in the experience of most working writers), extend the time for completing the test so that the students can proceed as a working writer would.

My second and third suggestions are amply discussed in the literature on the making of writing assignments. But the first suggestion needs some elaboration here.

Researchers on testing resist that first suggestion by asserting the need for precise comparability between the tasks set on different versions of a test. If the tasks differ, the argument goes, the scores on the different tests may not mean the same thing, and attorneys in legal disputes over test results may argue that the test is discriminatory. Possibly, but the usual inference from these assertions is that from version to version the "mode" of writing asked for must be the same. Despite their current status as stereotyped categories for use in discussing writing, the "modes" mislead us as teachers and test-makers. Writers do not write in modes; they write to reach audiences on subjects of each, employing whatever speech acts (defining, restating, inferring, conceding, and so on) will enable them to accomplish their purposes. Instead of worrying about "modes," why cannot we, as teachers and test-makers, place before students in our assignments and in our tests the following specific elements that make up almost any imaginable situation in which writers write: a reason or impulse for writing, a subject, a body of data, a reader or group of readers, and a sense of the action or response desired from those readers? As test-makers,

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why cannot we do research to determine whether test questions that stipulate different subjects, audiences, purposes, and so on will produce comparable scores, before assuming that, in order to assure comparability of scores, we have to ask the student to work in a way very different from the way working writers work.

I emphasize, in closing, that these comments and suggestions apply not only to tests of minimum competency in writing but to most essay tests that are intended to measure ability in writing. That is, scorers of tests and the interpreters of test scores need, I think, to be attentive not only to statistics about the validity, reliability, and comparability of test scores, but also to the messages that the tests themselves send to students—and to teachers—about what writing is, how one writes, and what characteristics of writing entitle it to be called "good." Those of us who engage in the testing of writing win a pyrrhic victory. I suggest we do our best to produce scores that satisfy statisticians and attorneys, we give tests that communicate erroneous messages about what writing is and what writers do.