
TESTING ESL WRITERS: WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

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Why have we begun to test English as a Second Language (ESL) students' ability to produce, as well as to recognize, standard written English? What exactly do we want to know? To succeed and complete with native-speaking students, ESL students in most North American colleges and universities must be able to communicate clearly and effectively in writing. Thus, we examine what constitutes sufficient writing skills for this purpose. In order to make this determination, examiners must be familiar with the standards of the receiving institution and its writing requirements and expectations for students at the graduate and undergraduate

levels as well as with the requirements in specific fields of study.

What we have discovered from surveying a number of colleges and universities is that students must be able to summarize material, analyze and present evidence, and defend a position in writing. Some departments require that students be able to write within the time frame of an essay test, while others require students to write extended pieces over a period of time. Further, since standards, requirements, and expectations vary from one institution to another, no one test or scoring procedure is appropriate for all situations.

Defining what and how much we need to know determines the way we structure, administer, and interpret a production writing test. Major purposes for evaluation or testing ESL writing include entrance to an academic institution, placement into a program of study within the institution, and identification of instructional needs of students within a program.

In light of these considerations, we find that large-scale writing tests, producing first-draft writing in a brief time period, and using scoring scales ranging from 1 to 6 (such as the holistic scale for the ETS-TWE), are adequate for most admissions purposes. However, when an academic institution needs more complete information about students' specific writing abilities in English, such as for placement and instructional purposes, then a test designed to elicit a more specific kind of writing and a scoring scale that provides more detailed information (such as the Composition Profile used by Texas A&M University or the scoring grid used by Michigan University) is preferable.

Ultimately, then, testing purpose, specific institutional requirements, and the intended use of the test results should influence the design, administration, and type of scoring that provide what we really want to know.