Brossell reminded us that the means of testing can and should affect instruction. A large question, then, is how in assessing writing do we build into writing prompts the stimuli that evoke what we desire from students? And how do we get those teaching writing to coordinate curriculum and programs in such a manner as to support and prepare the student being tested and make rational the assessing process? We must move carefully to assure that the cause-effect relationship is asserted in the right direction. Brossell suggested that we should start with the questions "Why do we teach writing and what skills in writing comprise the qualities in the writer we want the schools to produce? How can we achieve such consensus across the curriculum?"

Brossell has surveyed the area of student response to the writing prompt. He notes three variables in writing assessment: topic variables, writer variables, and procedural variables. How do we muster our efforts as teachers and testers to achieve feedback that serves the purposes we have created our curriculum for? Brossell gave us several generalizations that deserve our attention but may leave is slightly uneasy as we seek some larger verities for pinning down an admittedly elusive field:

1. Small differences in wording within the same general framework seem to make little difference in student responses.
2. Topics with low cognitive demands and high experiential demands elicit higher scores from readers.
3. The problem of unequal familiarity with the topic can usually be overcome by supplying ample information.
4. A writing prompt calling for an argument rather than a narrative is more difficult to respond to, especially among young respondents.
5. Prompts that are at least moderately specified (rather than open-ended) elicit more focused and better organized essays. This is more important in a timed essay.

Brossell concluded by noting that Alan Purves and his colleagues at the Curriculum Lab of the University of Illinois have been working on a model of the composition assignment which sets forth fifteen dimensions of a writing assignment: instruction, stimulus, cognitive demand, purpose, role, audience, content, discourse, specification, tone and style, preparation, length, format, time, number of drafts, and criteria for evaluation. The categories are intended to give testmakers and teachers a set of tools for "adjusting" writing topics.

PROFICIENCY TESTING (continued)

and 1500 essays were collected for analysis. Each essay was holistically scored and inter-rater reliability checks were conducted throughout the scoring procedure. Two discourse features were analyzed. One category, development and focus, consisted of the ability to state generalities and support those generalities. Another, high level mechanics, included evidence of proper sentence embedding and varieties of sentence constructions. This study is still in progress, so no final report was made. However, it proved extremely useful as a model of how to set up an effective research design and helped illustrate issues to consider in managing a complex research project.