Claire Pelton began by describing the events which prompted the creation of the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) writing exam. The proficiency exam was suggested by California's Gary Hart, now a state senator, in response to the charge that some teachers were illiterate. As evidence, he circulated a teacher's letter which contained numerous spelling errors and sentence fragments. The bill resulting from his efforts states that teachers and teaching candidates must demonstrate proficiency in mathematics, reading, and writing. An advisory committee of thirty-five members, selected from the disciplines of reading, writing, and mathematics, some of whom were political appointees, wrote the initial test specifications. Along with objective sections on mathematics and reading, the proposed test included a one-hour essay to be scored holistically. California's Superintendent of Education recommended that there also be an objective part to the writing section.

Paul Ramsey said that he shared the Superintendent's view, expressing his concern about a single writing test determining people's futures in their chosen careers. Although a multiple choice test on writing defies the intuition of most writing teachers, there is a high correlation between scores on certain multiple choice tests and writing skills. New types of objective tests can, for example, measure skills in revision and in selecting stylistic options, which are indicators of the writer's linguistic ability. Therefore, Ramsey advocated a larger test with at least 47 objective questions in addition to the essay. This would enhance the reliability of the essay and make it more valid for making a judgment about prospective teachers' competencies.

The advisory committee, of which Pelton was a member, rejected Ramsey's proposal and recommended a writing test composed of two essays in two different modes, each to be evaluated by two readers. One of the essay topics would have an expressive aim and pertain to a remembered experience (such as an event in college which made the writer a different person). The other would have a referential aim and require analytical thinking. Pre-testing established that neither essay topic should designate an audience, since writers became angry with audience specification, knowing full well that their audience consisted of the scorers. There was much debate on this issue, but Pelton maintained that the audience specification, used effectively in classroom assignments, is not necessarily good for mass testing. Audience specification becomes a problem for holistic scoring when well-written papers fail to consider the audience. Even letters to the editor, furnishing false audiences, can create problems, with different editors prompting different conclusions. A test that lacked an audience designation, according to Ramsey, is closer to a real writing situation.

For pre-tests, candidates were encouraged to bring a watch, but there were no time announcements during the hour. There was some concern that they would spend too much time on the first topic. The first time the test was administered, the expressive topic preceded the referential, and candidates slacked the latter in favor of the former. In subsequent administrations, however, the topic order was reversed, and the problem disappeared. Also on the subject of pre-testing, Pelton said that the state planned to offer the test free to 2,000 upper-level college students who were candidates for teaching, and to 275 teachers taking administrative positions. She stressed the importance of testing borderline candidates, students with SAT scores of 300 verbal and 380 math, and B's and C's in academic work. The advisory committee anticipated that these students would be its main challenge. It also searched for a significant number of minority students for prem-