
WHAT IS PROFICIENT WRITING AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL?

Speakers: Howard Cohen, University of Massachusetts, Boston
Suzy Groden, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Introducer/Recorder: Karen Greenberg, National Testing Network in Writing

The speakers began by stating that they were going to explain the procedures used to determine how the standard of writing proficiency recognized by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Massachusetts-Boston compares with that of experts in composition theory.

Suzy Groden described the Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE), the test that students in the college of Arts and Sciences must pass by the end of their sophomore year. Before students take the test, they are asked to choose a set of readings from a booklet of three sets, each of which is about twenty pages long. The selections are based on topics from courses across the curriculum. When students take the test, they are asked to choose one question from a choice of two about the set of readings that they selected. They are asked to answer the question solely on the basis of the material that they have read in the reading set. Students are allowed three hours to respond to the question and revise and edit their writing.

WPE essays are graded by two (or more) faculty members of the Proficiency Evaluation committee using a nine-point checklist of the elements of writing proficiency. Grades are either "pass" or "repeat." Students who think that they have been graded unfairly have the right to appeal their grade to a panel of faculty members not involved in the original grading. Students who do not pass this test by the end of their sophomore year are required to reduce their coursework and to enroll in a "Fundamental Skills" course. And those who do not pass the test by the middle of their junior year are not permitted to enroll in further courses for degree credit until they pass the test or receive a passing grade on a portfolio of their work. The portfolio is an alternative method of demonstrating writing proficiency that is recommended for students who have special difficulties in performing well on tests. The portfolio has to meet specific conditions: three of the four papers must be expository essays written for courses; at least two of the papers must be based on reading materials; the fourth paper must be about a series of readings distributed by the Office of Academic Support; and none of the papers can consist solely of personal narrative.

Howard Cohen then explained their effort to compare the level of proficiency required of their students to nationally recognized standards of proficient writing. In order to do this, he sent 45 sample WPE essays to eleven nationally recognized composition experts and asked them to compare their judgments with those of the faculty who had graded the WPEs. The results indicated that there was a surprisingly high degree of accord among the consultants as to the rating of each essay and a high degree of agreement with the ratings

assigned by the College of Arts and Sciences faculty. Thus, Cohen noted that he and his colleagues concluded that the grading standards that they have been using to assess the WPEs are in accord with those used by composition theorists from other institutions: "We seem to agree on what constitutes an appropriate ability to read and write critically for a mid-career undergraduate, and our sense of what represents excellence in the performance of such a student, as well as inadequacy, is pretty much the same as that of our outside consultants."

Cohen and Groden then handed out the report to their faculty detailing the study, the grading sheet used to rate WPEs, and the booklet, *Nine Elements of Proficiency in Writing* (a manual describing the exam and the elements of proficient writing that the exam assesses).◊