



# NOTES from the NATIONAL TESTING NETWORK IN WRITING

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*A Project of The City University of New York and The Fund For The Improvement of Postsecondary Education*

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## ABOUT NTNW

During the past five years, programs for assessing students' writing competency have mushroomed at colleges and universities across the country. At the present time, thirty-five states have passed or are actively considering legislation that mandates statewide testing of students' writing skills. The results of the tests currently in place have a decided influence on educational, administrative, economic, and political decisions affecting the lives of thousands of students. Both those who create writing tests and those who use them must examine repeatedly the merits and the drawbacks of current models and methods of evaluating students' writing abilities.

The National Testing Network in Writing (NTNW) grew out of the perceived need for teachers, administrators, and researchers to exchange ideas, to investigate existing tests and testing programs, and to pool resources and data. From hundreds of institutions, NTNW is collecting information concerning the measures and the procedures used to assess students' writing skills. We plan to catalog, store, and disseminate data to Network members. In addition to serving as a clearinghouse on writing assessment, NTNW will coordinate a number of activities aimed at analyzing and synthesizing writing assessment theory, research, and methodology.

This publication is the first of these activities. By bringing together the ideas and the concerns of expert researchers and practitioners, these *Notes* chart some of the relatively new and very controversial areas of writing assessment. Rather than provide conclusive answers, many of the essays call attention to how limited present knowledge about testing is; the authors raise important questions and common concerns and uncertainties that attend the rush to test writers. In fact, the goals of this publication are only to identify the major issues, trends, and problems in writing assessment and to stimulate dialogue in the profession about these issues and questions.

We hope that readers will respond to the points raised in the essays that follow and will join NTNW. We also hope that readers will plan to attend NTNW's national conference on writing evaluation and assessment to be held in New York City on March 3-5, 1983. This conference will bring together teachers, writing assessment specialists, and administrators from institutions across the country for an intensive examination of writing evaluation models and methods, of test development and administration, and of the impact of tests on pedagogy, curricula, and attitudes.

NTNW expects also to provide technical assistance to institutions that want to consult with experts about specific problems in writing assessment. Trained consultants will work with colleges attempting to create or to evaluate a testing program for writers. And finally, NTNW will publish a monograph on models and issues in testing writers. Growing out of concerns that are highlighted by the *Notes* and at the national conference, this monograph will show the range of perspectives, the diverse methods, and the varied problems and solutions related to the testing of writers.

We look forward to your active participation in all of NTNW's activities.

Karen L. Greenberg  
Harvey S. Wiener  
Richard A. Donovan

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## FROM THE EDITORS

The purpose of *Notes*, the first publication of the National Testing Network in Writing, is to explore—in however preliminary a way—the major areas of writing assessment by having knowledgeable professionals respond briefly to some central questions in one or more of these areas. Several months ago, after considerable consultation with colleagues nationally prominent in the testing of writing, we drew up the following tentative list of concerns associated with writing assessment:

- What can tests tell, or what can they not tell, teachers or administrators about students' writing problems?
- What should a teacher—or parent, school administrator, school board member, or legislator—know about testing—especially about the implications and limitations of test results?
- What have been the effects of local and centralized minimum competency programs on a) test designs, b) procedures, c) curriculum, and d) writing program development? What are the most effective ways to respond to a mandated test of minimum competency in writing?
- On the basis of your experience, what mistakes or pitfalls can those interested in testing writing avoid in the future?

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- What are the major concerns that the classroom teacher should have about a college-wide testing effort, and how should the classroom teacher participate in test development and use?
- Based on your conversations and/or research, how do students perceive writing tests—their purposes and uses?
- What are the unresolved issues in testing writing? In what direction should the field be heading? What research should be conducted?
- What should a teacher—or parent, school administrator, school member, or legislator—read to be the most informed on current issues in testing writing?

We sent off this list of questions and requested brief responses from nationally known theorists, designers, administrators, and evaluators of writing tests. We encouraged our contributors to choose any format they thought appropriate: a series of statements, a brief piece of expository prose, or the like. The response was so encouraging that we plan to publish a second issue of *Notes* within the next few months.

The pages that follow might best be regarded as provocative probings of an increasingly controversial subject—assessing students' writing. However tentative these essays may be, we trust that they will help identify and/or clarify some essential issues for the colleges and faculty who design and administer such tests and for the students who take them.

The articles in this first issue reflect both the range and the diversity of faculty and administrators' concerns about the evaluation of student writing. The first four articles challenge testers of writing to examine certain assumptions that have guided writing assessment in the past and to clarify goals in terms of new theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. **Lynn Troyka** reviews ten years of resolutions of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to demonstrate how the profession has moved from "condemning to informing... from reaction to action" and exhorts faculty to become actively involved in setting goals in the future. **Richard Lloyd-Jones** cautions writing testers to recognize the limits of testing in evaluating students' writing performance and to use tests "more modestly as part of a teaching process of learning-mastery so as to indicate what yet needs to be mastered." **Carolyn Matalene** describes her efforts to design an objective exam that is pedagogically sound and that also meets her University's demands for a test offering the necessary consistency and controls. **Lester Faigley** offers insights into the ways writing programs have traditionally been evaluated and suggests a pluralistic approach which emphasizes the dynamic nature of writing programs, "taking into account the processes of writing, writer-reader interactions, and the human relationships particular to any program."

As Faculty Program Consultant to the Florida Board of Regents, **Steve Rubin** was involved in the implementation of the College-Level Academic Skills Project (CLASP), a concerted effort to improve the quality of basic skills instruction throughout the state. In this essay, he spells out the dramatic reaction to the program and reviews

such unresolved issues as **minority impact**, **faculty preparedness**, and the program's legal implications.

The next two articles review the process by which one multi-campus university implemented a writing assessment program through the efforts of faculty from each campus working in concert. **Marie Lederman** details the evolving process by which an essay test was chosen as the sole measure of assessment, and **Robert Lyons** addresses some of the pitfalls to be avoided if such a writing test is to be maintained as a vital element in the educational life of the college.

**Lee Odell** and **Gertrude Conlan** address specific concerns relating to essay testing. Lee Odell spells out ways to determine demands made upon students by different essay topics, rhetorical purposes, and audience characteristics. He cautions testers to look closely at curriculum lest their tests tell them that students are failing at tasks they should not be expected to know. Gertrude Conlan, speaking from "years of writing, revising, discussing, trying out..." at the Educational Testing Service, warns that essay topics must be carefully evaluated before being used in order to determine if they interfere with students' ability to demonstrate how well they can write.

Two authors discuss aspects of the impact of testing on values and curriculum. **Ann Herrington** urges writing faculty to take the lead in developing tests which reinforce the values they cherish, while **Barbara Weaver** sees the positive effects which evaluation of student writing can have on the reevaluation of course design and teaching strategies.

**Robert Atwan**, **Anne Gere**, and **Ed White** identify some still uncharted territory for research. Bob Atwan convincingly argues that writing specialists need to think more seriously about the statistical realities of educational measurement and that test specialists need to consider more closely the ways people actually write. Anne Gere is concerned that future evaluation should attend to the attitudes of writers as well as to the products and processes of writing. Finally, Ed White offers a provocative list of unresolved questions, calling upon the profession to recognize that most writing tests nationwide are poorly designed, and that their results are often misused. A major effort is necessary, he warns, to disseminate both "knowledge and experience...throughout a generally hostile profession."

We have asked one of our contributors, **William Lutz**, whose essay on multiple-choice testing will appear in the second issue, to furnish a brief list of the readings he considers most important as a primer for all those new to the field of writing assessment.

We wish to thank Dan Fader, Marcia Silver, Stephen Witte, and especially Andrea Lunsford of NTNW's Advisory Board, as well as Barry Kwalick of the Instructional Resource Center and Robbin Juris, Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, for their helpful criticism and editorial assistance. Our thanks also to Beth Gleick of *House Publications Service* who graciously guided us through the mysteries of graphic design.

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