

TEACHING WRITING:

Methods, Materials, & Measurement



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Testing and Teaching in Composition

Timothy R. Donovan

It is understandably the case that teaching usually lags behind research. Teachers of, say, literature or composition need time to read and apply the latest biography, the most recent critical study, the most innovative theory, to their regular classroom activities. But our assumption is usually that it will get done, that the cycle will proceed apace. Such is not currently the case, however, in the realm of testing and placement for writing ability. While research in the composing process has advanced significantly in the last ten years or so, testing instruments, devised either by publishers, agencies, institutions or writing program administrators, have not issued from (nor added greatly to) this research.

At present, students are being tested in language skills for at least four reasons:

1. to predict success at a certain level of education, usually college;
2. to place students in special courses;
3. to determine the most appropriate language instruction;
4. and to measure growth in the ability of students.

My point is not that the tests for any of these purposes fail. On the contrary, some of them have a proven record of success. It is that none of them, either individually or collectively, delve deep enough into the complex operations of writing ability to be of any great use to the writing teacher when a student arrives at the door of the classroom. In addition, none of them are coordinated so that growth in a student's writing ability can be characterized periodically through the educational system or be reflected meaningfully for the next teacher. To see why this is true (and why it is ultimately a failure), we must first look at the kinds of tests for writing ability available, then see how they are typically utilized in American colleges today.

Standardized, or atomistic, tests are those most familiar to the majority of teachers and students. They function by isolating certain features of writing--vocabulary, syntax, punctuation, diction, etc.--and providing samples, or "items", which challenge the test-taker's ability to recognize errors or distinguish levels of appropriateness according to the conventions of Standard Edited English. The virtues of the standardized test are that it is relatively easy to administer to large numbers of people and can be reliably quantified for comparative purposes. If the aim of the writing program which uses such tests is to track students into courses which presume competency in or evaluate writing primarily according to Standard English, then these tests are quite useful.

But there are limits to the usefulness of standardized tests. For example, to what degree can we assume that a mastery over the smallest units of discourse correlates with ability in the larger arts of discourse? Richard Braddock, a reviewer of diagnostic tests, has concluded that "No commercially available standardized test attempts to measure

a student's ability to select a subject, and an approach and a mode for it appropriate to the writer and the prospective readers. No commercially available standardized test attempts to measure a student's ability to organize and detail his or her writing so that prospective readers can share the writer's experience and appreciate his or her purposes."¹ In other words, while it is reasonable to say that a skillful writer is one who can control manuscript mechanics, one cannot claim the reverse, that the ability to recognize an error in spelling or punctuation is the same as writing skillfully. In addition, standardized tests are inherently limited by the fact that students are locating errors which have been written by someone else and to which they are predisposed to respond. They are not being tested for their ability to avoid or even spot errors in the process of composing their own papers, which is a different and often more difficult task. (Teachers who pass students on grammar quizzes only to despair with the next group of essays understand this phenomenon.) It would seem that the overriding limitation of standardized tests--that ultimately they do not act on the students' own writing--remains a formidable one.

Holistic tests do call for the students' own writing. They simply ask a student to write, usually from 20 minutes to an hour, on an assigned topic. The paper is then read holistically, or for an over-all first impression, not re-read or analyzed for particular aspects of composition. It is usually read by two different evaluators, with a third reader on hand to resolve substantially different responses. Generally, the third reader is not necessary, suggesting a high degree of reliability for this method. The underlying principle of holistic reading is that each of the components of the writing process bears on all the others and thus cannot be separated from the others. The piece of writing must be judged as a whole, not just for a comma splice or sentence fragment. Given the time limit imposed, the reader must allow the writer a number of mistakes. Again, the general quality of the paper as a whole is the criteria by which writing competence is judged.

The advantages of holistic tests, which are an increasingly popular feature of placement in state college and university systems, the Educational Testing Service (College Board), and individual institutions generally, are that they provide a sample of the student's actual writing, which may be assessed in isolation or added to (and possibly increasing the validity of) scores from atomistic tests. In addition, they emphasize to students the importance of their writing. Finally, they are potentially more informative because they are authentic samples of student's writing, the subject of the curriculum.

But holistic reading, like the standardized tests, has limitations, at least as currently employed. The first is the topic, which, no matter how well pretested, is still not the writer's. In an ideal model of the writing process, the content emanates from the writer if the subject is to be of interest to him or her. Assigned topics frequently have the effect of denying the content and thus perhaps reducing the quality of the writing. Secondly, the topic is likely to involve only one rhetorical mode, usually argumentation. Although the modes cannot be so neatly defined, we frequently don't encounter assignments in narration, description or even exposition in the holistic test. Thus the kind of writing called for is restricted and the assessment of the student's ability incomplete.

Thirdly, the constraints of time naturally inhibit the writer. Again, an ideal model of the writing process includes prewriting, writing, and rewriting in an interrelated cycle. An hour or less is generally not enough time to fully engage in this process. Again, the limits of this test are largely created by the limits of its purpose. Most holistic tests are simply administered to gauge general competency; they certify that the writer can make himself or herself reasonably understood with pen and paper. They do not provide qualitative information in any depth helpful to writing program administrators or teachers.

Having surveyed the various kinds of tests, and as well as their strengths and weaknesses, I would next like to briefly see the role--or non-role--they play in the actual practice of a student's movement through the educational system. In most cases, by the time the student is a senior in high school he or she has taken years of English with little to show anyone except a string of grades. At this point, the student is ready for the SAT's and Achievement tests, which quantify his ability in the manner previously described. The scores will be passed onto a college, where, upon admittance or enrollment, he or she may be asked to take a placement exam, which again may be an atomistic exam or a holistic exam or both, for assignment into the appropriate composition class. The scores or essay may even be passed on to the writing teacher. During the first class another essay might be called for, which is likely to be read holistically by the teacher as a final net in the screening process--just to be certain. The teacher is then ready to begin the course in earnest. And at this point he or she has just about no pedagogically useful notion of the student's writing ability. This teacher will start, like all of the student's other teachers, from scratch. Nearly half the term may be spent just becoming acquainted with the student's variable writing processes. In a college writing curriculum, which is often restricted to one term, this is indeed precious time lost. The failure, then, of the tests (or at least of our use of them) is that they have little or no direct educational purpose. As J. N. Hook, another reviewer of the tests, has argued, "Results of tests should be usable in planning improvements in a school's language program and in individual evaluation and diagnosis."² Regrettably, such is not the case.

A broader context, then, is needed to measure writing ability than is currently available, or at least accessible, to most teachers or curriculum planners. This context would necessitate cross-disciplinary involvement by educators, composition researchers, psychologists, linguists, and, of course, teachers. We must, of course, acknowledge early on that "writing ability" is going to be difficult to define, although like other things undefinable, "we know it when we see it." But a start can be made, and questions such as the following might be addressed:

1. What cognitive functions does the particular writer bring to bear in composing? Though here is clearly a case where research has not advanced as much as

needed, more work must follow up Lee Odell's essay on measuring intellectual processes.³ Those he identifies include focus (locating, selecting, and shifting distinct units of experience), contrast (recognizing distinctions, incongruity, disparity), classification (comparing and labeling), change (recognizing historical movement), and physical context (perceiving shapes, sounds, etc.). Surely there are others. Psychologist Jerome Bruner, for example, in discussing "The Conditions of Creativity" suggests other categories, though not strictly cognitive, important for self-expression but which often present themselves to the artist as contraries: (a) detachment and commitment (a willingness to divorce oneself from the obvious while maintaining a need to understand something); (b) passion and decorum (a desire to express oneself through art while respecting the forms and etiquette of the idea); (c) the freedom to be dominated (to be free from the defenses that hide us from ourselves); and (d) deferral and immediacy (the willingness to hold back completion until knowing what one wishes to say).⁴ These and other elements of cognitive processes obviously play a vital but for now unelucidated part in the dynamics of written composition.

2. What affective functions are brought to bear? In this category we might consider such items as the student's attitude toward writing, capacity to be inspired, self-regard, organizational abilities, natural intuition, and sheer persistence. Since research usually shows that as much as fifty percent of the success of a writing project depends upon the writer's will to have it succeed, anything influencing motivation generally might profitably be explored.
3. What is the student's typical composing process? Is the student inclined to spend inordinate time on prewriting, writing, or rewriting, and to what effect? For example, a student who spends too much time prewriting may become immobilized in a swamp of detail or a morass of shifting focus that hinders the actual writing of the piece. On the other hand, a student who worries too much too early about "correctness" might also be blocked from significant insights helpful to the meaning of the paper. Too little time or concern, of course, produces corresponding problems. Students' writing processes are frequently habitual and may be characterized to expedite proper instruction.
4. Does the student have greater difficulty with one mode of discourse than another? Again, although we still don't know enough about what features of a particular discourse, say, narrative, demand what cognitive or operational ability, teachers have long wondered why a student can write a sensitive personal narrative on the one hand but be handcuffed in attempting an effective argument, or vice versa. Even apart from knowing why, a teacher's position would immediately be improved by knowing

that a student had strengths and weaknesses in particular modes or sub-modes of discourse.

5. Finally, what learning styles does the student bring to the classroom and to writing assignments that might affect his or her performance in the composition course? The answer to this question could help answer others. For example, should the student be sectioned to prescriptive, relatively deductive approaches to the teaching of writing or to inductive, self-motivated approaches, based upon the individual learning style? What kind of evaluation works best for a particular student? What kinds of writing assignments would be most stimulating? How much writing would be appropriate? While many writing courses ask the student to conform to a pre-arranged sequence of instruction, most teachers are nevertheless willing to be flexible in order to "reach" a particular learning style. It's partially a matter of finding it out, and early enough.

These are, it seems to me, basic questions. Undoubtedly further research will be required to answer them fully and to create appropriate testing methods and instruments. We may discover that some of them can't be reliably answered or economically produced. We may have to evolve better questions. But we are at the point, if writing instruction is to be given its full due, where we cannot continue to re-invent the proverbial wheel with every writing class.

There has been some promising movement. The ETS has developed the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS) which reflect an understanding that test results ought to have greater utility in a school's writing program. Because the tests (which for now are in Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, Logical Relationships, and Usage) can be given separately or as a battery, the teacher can have specific information about a student's strengths and weaknesses in these skills, as well as a versatility in what may be tested, depending upon the instructional goals of the program. Perhaps more importantly, each test also yields three or four "cluster" scores indicative of specific competencies within the area of the single test. For example, the test of Sentence Structure would reveal particular information about the student's grasp of complete sentences, coordination and subordination, and placement of modifiers. The DTLS thus improve on most standardized tests. Though they do not overcome all the limitations previously noted, they can nevertheless be used either to section off students by competencies or to assign students some individualized instruction with the teacher or self-paced modules.

One of the more promising alternatives to standardized tests of writing is Primary Trait Scoring developed at the University of Iowa for the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁵ It asks that readers of student writing determine whether it contains certain characteristics, or "primary traits", such as imaginative

expression of feeling, deemed essential for successfully completing the given assignment. Thus, unlike the standardized tests, it sets the writing task--and the student--in a full rhetorical context, while providing more information than could a holistic reading. Of course, a great deal of the success of Primary Trait Scoring depends upon the effectiveness of the discourse required, the validity of the primary trait(s), and the accuracy of the rather complex scoring guide. But certainly this method is enhanced by interpreting actual writing samples that can be used for both summative evaluations and formative diagnoses of composing problems.

Perhaps the most ambitious project currently underway--and potentially the most helpful--is one by ETS to develop student portfolios.⁶ Students would, through their secondary schooling and possibly into their college years, periodically write on specific topics. Their essays would be evaluated locally at the school and/or centrally at ETS. While the information that could result depends upon the type of testing and evaluation, the greatest advance here might be that a permanent body of knowledge about the student's growth as a writer over a period of years would be accessible to the writing program and to the teacher. The testing and evaluation might evolve, too, over the years as the project, and the information requested from it, becomes more sophisticated.

Not surprisingly, at the heart of the ETS project and any testing project is the matter of economic feasibility. The more elaborate the test, the more it will cost. But if a project is academically justified, it is more likely to be financially justified. Thus if tests can be made to work for teachers and students, then teachers and students will work to have them in the writing program. When testing materials and procedures catch up with and provoke research in composition, no efficient writing program will want to be denied them.

Northeastern University

NOTES

¹"Evaluation of Writing Tests," in Reviews of Selected Published Tests in English, ed. Alfred H. Grommon (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1976), p. 1

²"Tests on the English Language," in Reviews, p. 79.

³"Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing" in Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging

⁴In On Knowing, Essays for the Left Hand (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 17-30.

⁵For a full description of this method see Richard Lloyd-Jones' "Primary Trait Scoring," in Evaluating Writing, pp. 33-66.

⁶Personal communication with Evans Alloway, ETS.