Using the Test of Standard Written English
As a First Step in Placement Testing

Thomas J. Morrissey

I share the belief of most writing teachers that holistically graded writing samples are better indicators of potential student need and performance than are short answer editing tests. However, administering and grading a large number of samples in a short time presents its own problems, especially if the team of readers is small, unpaid, and beset by other pressing professional duties. Despite its shortcomings, ETS's Test of Standard Written English has proven to be a useful instrument for selecting which essays we must read for placement purposes.

At Plattsburgh we test students to determine whether they should (1) receive proficiency credit for composition; (2) complete a three-credit composition course; or (3) complete a six-credit sequence beginning with a developmental course. Identifying the students to be granted proficiency is fairly easy, since they rarely exceed 5 or 6% of the freshman class. Discriminating between the other groups is the difficult task, especially since we now have the authority to require students to abide by our placement decisions. Since the developmental classes are designed to be smaller than the regular composition classes, and since the students do a substantial amount of writing in the course, it is crucial that we place in the course only those who need it most, usually 12-15% of those tested.
Nearly 85% of our freshmen produce a writing sample at a testing session held during one of the seven summer orientation sessions. The students write the test in the morning and register on the following day. Since they see their academic advisors on the afternoon of the testing day, we have less than four hours in which to publish the results. Because over 90% of the students have taken the TSWE (this test or the less popular ACT English Test are required of most S.U.N.Y. applicants), we attempted two years ago to use the TSWE scores as a means of placing some students without reference to the writing sample.

After two years we have gathered sufficient data to suggest that with certain limitations the TSWE serves our purposes. By correlating TSWE grades with performance in our composition classes, we have been able to establish the following placement cut-offs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TSWE Score</th>
<th>Placement</th>
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<tr>
<td>54 and above</td>
<td>Read for possible proficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-53</td>
<td>Place automatically in English 101 (standard composition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Read for placement in developmental or standard composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below 30</td>
<td>Place automatically in developmental composition</td>
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As a check on the accuracy of the system, we have directed instructors to administer an additional essay on the first day of class and send to a committee essays of those students who they feel have been improperly placed. Based on this cross check we find that:

1. over 90% of the students granted proficiency credit have TSWE scores of 54 or above;
2. few students (less than 1%) in the 40-53 group are subsequently recommended for the developmental course;
3. in the 30-39 group approximately 35-40% are placed in the developmental course, but it is impossible to predict which student without reading their essays;
4. for the below 30 group, instructors rarely suggest that students do not need the developmental course in which they have been placed. Students with scores below 25 frequently have great trouble passing the developmental course.

It may seem that our use of the TSWE is more trouble than it is worth. After all, we must compile the scores, sort the essays, and, even when that is done, must still read those of any students who have not taken the test. It has, however, proven impractical, if not impossible, to read all of the essays produced at the orientation sessions. Furthermore, prior to 1977 when students were tested on the first day of class, we lost a week or more of class time moving students from one class to another. Given the fact that budgetary and other constraints force us to operate on a less than
perfect testing schedule, using the TSWE as a guide has saved considerable labor without seriously affecting the accuracy of our placement.

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Confessions of a Hired Grader

Stephen North

I had the chance over the past two years to contribute in a different way to the operation of a composition class—two classes, in fact. I was a (shudder) grader, one of those anonymous red pens to whom student writings, like so many dirty shirts, are sent out for cleaning. It was an interesting change in status. I had been, until I took this job on as a sideline, an ordinary T.A., working with my own class in my own classroom, grading and reading and conferencing with my own students. Dealing with freshman writing in this capacity, despite its current good press, still doesn't carry with it an awful lot of prestige, but at least as a classroom teacher one is looked upon as holding a legitimate academic position. Now, to hear some people tell it, I was sub-academe, a kind of para-professional (at best)—something less, anyway, than an apprentice, because a grader does not eventually move up to become a real teacher any more than a laundry man becomes a tailor. This dim view of hired graders comes disguised in more than one form, but generally boils down to a single complaint: an outside grader can only come between a teacher and students. And it isn't hard to see how that might happen, nor hard to understand why someone once burned by such an arrangement would be loath to try it again. Our attempt, though, was a success—at least so far as I could tell—and this is a description of those things that, from the grader's point of view, made it work.

There were four main features of this arrangement that made it work. First, there was the money: if you want to hire a grader with a professional interest in the teaching of writing, some professional training and experience, someone willing to do more than make cryptic copyreader's SYMBs in the margins, then you have to offer more than two or three dollars an hour. I was paid ten dollars an hour, four hours per week; at that princely rate, I was quite happy to work five or six hours to finish a stack of papers—I was paid seriously and I worked seriously. It was easy to think about the work in terms of forty dollars per week and let the hours (within reason) take care of themselves. (Let me stress that this was not part of my assistantship, but a separate contract worked out with another local college.) So the system was well lubricated. It was also, thanks to the teacher I worked with, very orderly. The reason I was hired in the first place was that her teaching load was four courses, two in composition—and each of