

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

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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:

<u>TSWE Score</u>	<u>Placement</u>
54 and above	Read for possible proficiency
40-53	Place automatically in English 101 (standard composition)
30-39	Read for placement in developmental or standard composition
below 30	Place automatically in developmental composition

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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