

Roberta S. Matthews

## THE EVOLUTION OF ONE COLLEGE'S ATTEMPT TO EVALUATE STUDENT WRITING

Inexperienced writers need a tremendous amount of support and encouragement from their teachers. Students with writing deficiencies must be assured that they can write and shown that they have ideas worthy of development. Thus, after spending a term praising student progress and shoring up student confidence, most instructors find it difficult to fail students who have not made enough progress, whose skills still need more polishing. Developmental writing courses designed to prepare students for college-level writing tasks need objective criteria to judge student writing. Yet the very nature of the course makes it difficult to reconcile the objective evaluation with the subjective and affective process.

At La Guardia, a combined concern for maintaining standards and respecting human relationships accounted for the creation of an exit exam from ENG 100, Fundamentals of Effective Writing. This developmental writing course prepares students to enter ENG 101, Basic Composition, the first of a sequence of freshman composition courses. Sarah Barber, the Director of Composition, and I felt the need for a simple procedure which would ensure some uniform standards, while helping instructors maintain the very important relationships of trust and mutual striving that teachers of writing try to create with their students.

Since instructors tend to be considerably more objective about the writing abilities of unknown students, we decided that all ENG 100 instructors would exchange students' final in-class papers with each other. Each class was given a code number so that graded exams could be returned easily to each instructor, but graders did not know either the student or instructor related to a particular paper. In order to allow for the value and necessity of judgments based on an intimate knowledge of

---

*Roberta S. Matthews, whose special interest is modern British and Irish literature, chairs the English Department at La Guardia Community College.*

student work and achievement, we established a Screening Committee to which instructors could appeal their own students' failing grades and, on the basis of other in-class writings, argue for a passing grade for an individual student.

In order to pass the exit exam, students had to be able to generate, in a 70-minute period, a reasonably developed, logical and coherent 300-word essay with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. We have tried to develop exit exam topics which allow us to judge how well we were accomplishing our course objectives:

1. To generate in students an enthusiasm for and enjoyment of writing.
2. To introduce and reinforce basic grammatical rules.
3. To introduce students to mature sentence structure.
4. To develop the students' ability to locate and correct their own errors of writing.
5. To instruct the students in paragraph development.
6. To improve students' understanding of logical and stylistic strategies for effective writing.

The essay had to contain fewer than eight major grammatical or syntactical errors. As stated in our performance objectives for the course:

Such errors include the following:

- |                                  |                   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. run-ons                       | 7. homonyms       |
| 2. fragments                     | 8. word choice    |
| 3. capitalization and lower case | 9. tense          |
| 4. apostrophe                    | 10. punctuation   |
| 5. spelling                      | 11. plurality     |
| 6. agreement                     | 12. omitted words |

We chose our particular criteria because experience suggested that students needed to meet them to have at least a fighting chance of passing ENG 101.

All of our full-time faculty and most of our part-time faculty teach the whole composition sequence. This is important for two reasons. First, in addition to objective criteria our instructors have another way of judging students: "Would this student be able to pass my Basic Composition course? Would I want to have this student in my Basic Composition course?" If the answer to either of these is "no," graders will not give a passing grade to an exit essay. Second, if we are not satisfied with the

quality of student writing in our college composition courses, we modify procedures to prepare our students for our courses. The system demands that we continually question ourselves and evaluate our methods of evaluation. However, the basic structure is essentially the same this quarter when 36 instructors will process 51 sections of the ENG 100 exit exam as it was several years ago when 17 instructors taught fewer than 30 sections of our Fundamentals of Writing course.

The following pages, excerpted from our *English Faculty Handbook*, outline the essential skeleton of the exit exam and appeal process. After presenting the skeleton, I will flesh it out by suggesting why and how certain procedures evolved and relating the kinds of revelations which continually convince us that, for all its problems, our exit exam is worth the effort.

The *Handbook* describes the mechanics of the exit exam as follows:

#### *PROCEDURES FOR THE EXIT EXAM*

Topics for the exam may be assigned by the Director of Composition. If this is the case, instructors will be informed when they can pick up the list of topics for their classes. All exams must be administered before noon on Wednesday of the tenth week of the quarter and turned in to the assigned tutor in the Writing Center. Then, you may pick up the batch of exams you are to mark. No instructor marks his or her own students' papers. Return all graded exams and pick up your own students' graded exams.

#### *ADMINISTERING THE EXIT EXAM*

1. Do not announce topics ahead of time.
2. Have students write their exams in "blue books" available in the English office.
3. Each instructor will be assigned a number for the exam. Have all students write this number clearly on the cover of the "blue book." Be sure that they do not write your name anywhere on the exam.
4. Check each exam to see that the student has written his or her name clearly and legibly on the cover.
5. Stress to students the need for legible manuscripts (their readers will be unfamiliar with any penmanship idiosyncrasies)—and the need to leave sufficient margins on the right and left.
6. Tell students that they shall not have time to "copy over" their rough drafts.

## GRADING EXIT EXAMS

1. Use a red pen—or a pen of some other contrasting color—so all corrections stand out clearly.
2. Circle and mark each error with appropriate correction symbol.
3. All exams are graded either “Pass” or “Fail.” In addition to judging the content, use the list of major errors in the performance objectives as your guide—eight or more constitute a failing exam. However, an error that is *exactly* repeated (e.g., a misspelling, the same wrong verb ending) should only be counted once. Note: of the eight errors, no more than two can be run-ons and/or fragments.
4. The matter of what constitutes a “major” error is, at times, judgmental. For instance, most instructors would not count a missing comma a major error unless its absence distorted the sense of the sentence. To make their criteria absolutely clear, many instructors follow this system: A) circle and identify with the appropriate symbol each and every error on the exam; B) go back over the exam, writing the symbol for each major error in the lefthand margin of the line on which it occurs; C) write the number of major errors on the cover of the booklet.
5. Read through the exams you are grading twice—the first time for a rough grading and the second for verification.
6. When done with an exam, write “Pass” or “Fail” on the cover and “Graded by #.....,” filling in your assigned number. Grade as objectively as possible, without necessarily giving the student the benefit of the doubt. An instructor may bring a borderline case to the Screening Committee if he or she feels the student should pass.
7. Students see (but do not keep) the graded Exit Exam. Therefore, if you have a comment for the instructor (e.g., suggesting an appeal), write it on a slip of paper and put it in the booklet.
8. Graded Exit Exams from past terms are on file in the English office should you wish to consult them as a guide.

## THE APPEAL PROCESS

A student who fails the Exit Exam can still pass ENG 100 if a member of the Screening Committee certifies that the student has, during the term, written at least two 300-word in-class essays that are clearly passing in terms of Exit Exam standards.

You should prepare for a possible appeal for all your students, since it will be too late to collect essays after the Exit Exams are returned and you know which, if any, students need to be appealed. Follow these steps:

1. Have all students write an “appeal theme” in the class session following the in-class Exit Exam.
2. *Grade the exam yourself*—strictly by Exit Exam standards. A passing appeal theme can be one of the two papers needed to appeal a failing Exit Exam.
3. Have students bring all their graded essays to class—either on Exit Exam day or appeal theme day. Select, for each student who has them, his or her two best passing essays.
4. Present your student’s “case” to the committee.

Once an instructor and member of the Screening Committee agree that a student should receive an F for the course, that F may *not* be changed. A list of all failing ENG 100 students goes immediately to the Registrar.

### *SAMPLE FAILING EXIT EXAM*

Below is a sample of a failing Exit Exam. It contains most of the major errors which students need to eliminate in order to pass ENG 100: insufficient development, repetition, run-ons, fragments, misspellings, plurality errors, subject-verb disagreement. Other samples of Exit Exams (passing and failing) are on file in the Writing Center.

*Assignment:* How has being in college changed your life? Answer any way you wish. You might want to consider any or all of the following: relationships with family, jobs, sense of time, life goals, values.

#### *How College Has Changed My Sense of Time*

Before I came to La Guardia I used to have alot of time. But now I find myself at home studying, reading and thinking more. I have read more books in college, than I have ever read before in my life. I am in school almost all day, then when I leave school I go to work, so when I do get home it is too late to do anything, but study. I only get to see my friends on weekend, before I started college I would see them everyday. My family and I only get to see one another at nights. I spent more time in school than in any other place. It seem like they is always something for me to do in school, or work that must be done for one of my classes. When I was in high school, there used to be alot of time for me to get into sports. As soon as I get home from work, I rush to eat, wash up, and do my homework for the next day. I find myself spending alot of time in the library, than ever

before, doing all different kinds of reports. The only time I have to enjoy myself is on the weekend, and then sometimes I am not in the mood to go out. I also use to spend a lot of time with my family, but now we dont even see each other very much. I use to hang out in the park at night with the fellow, but now all my nights or spent at home studying for exam. I also have to leave my house must sooner than before. Because of the long ride to school.

Now let me share some reasons for our policies and some things we have learned from our activities. The process of evaluating student writing has led us, perforce, into evaluating ourselves as teachers, our assumptions, our methodologies, and our standards. The process itself has been so informative that although we constantly modify it, I doubt that we will ever abandon our exit exam and screening committee.

First, and most important, our procedure is based on trust. Our instructors administer the exit exam in their own classes. They appeal failures with student essays written in class and we assume the essays were written without help and that they are originals, not rewrites. And, our instructors trust us. We have taught enough sections of ENG 100 ourselves to know that the percentage of passing or failing students does not reflect absolutely on the abilities of our instructors. They are not accountable for the number of students who fail the exit exam nor do we keep tabs on their track record. An instructor with 16 passing students one quarter might have another class in which 16 students fail the exit exam. Too many other variables preclude using student performance on the exit exam as a way of evaluating teacher performance. We use other means to evaluate our instructors.

For an instructor new to our system, the exit exam comes as something of a shock. However, as time goes on, grateful instructors learn to use the process constructively. An amorphous “they” fails students. Thus, instructors can inform students of their need to repeat the course without sacrificing or destroying the very important relationship between them which it often takes a whole quarter to establish. Instructor and student unite against the system; they can point to the progress they have made together and vow to continue to make more progress together. Many students who fail the exit exam demand to be placed in the same instructor’s course during the new quarter. When we began the exit exam we did not anticipate this extra dividend, but it certainly helps student motivation and morale.

When we began using the exit exam, each instructor was given a number to place on each student’s exam to ensure anonymity and to help

us return essays to the proper class. Eventually, we asked instructors to write “graded by #     ” and to supply their number on each essay they graded. Since we were apprehensive about the idiosyncratic grading methods of some instructors, we wanted to be able to identify and speak with instructors who had problems.

Occasionally, instructors made inappropriate stylistic judgments about student writing. Perfectly good sentences were modified unnecessarily to conform to individualistic preferences. Once or twice, the method of grading made us suspect an instructor’s ability to explain concepts to students. Sometimes the standards applied were too stringent; sometimes too easy. The master list of numbers was confidential. Any issues which arose with individual instructors were dealt with privately between the instructor and the Director of Composition.

During one quarter (and probably by mistake), we published the master list. Again, an unforeseen but valuable result occurred. Individual teachers sought out each other to argue about differences in grading and standards and helped us evolve more standardized and generally acceptable procedures. Instructors discussed everything from obscure grammatical points to the quality of the content of a particular paper. They debated the merits of experiential as opposed to analytical content. They argued about how one evaluates a student’s ability to write well and to improve his/her writing.

Regardless of how many training sessions are scheduled during a rushed and crowded quarter, it is difficult to be absolutely sure that all instructors are using the same criteria to grade exit exams. The *ad hoc* individual conversations described above evolved spontaneously. Over the course of time, we developed another means of standardizing our grading. In the beginning, we distributed exit exams for grading in a random fashion. Fairly quickly, however, we decided to use our system to our advantage. Instead of a random distribution, we began pairing experienced instructors, who had gone through the exit exam procedure several times, with new instructors. This simple modification ensured some kind of quality control and helped integrate new instructors.

Although we set up our exit exam so that instructors would not be required to grade additional papers, the appeal process does demand more from its participants. The Screening Committee consists of the most experienced full-time instructors in our department. The screening process, coming as it does during the final week of the quarter, creates a hectic final week, but yields an education in evaluation for all involved.

Our procedure is simple. At his or her discretion, an instructor may fail a student who somehow passes the exit exam but whose work during

the quarter suggests that the student could not cope with more advanced writing assignments. Bitter experience has taught us not to believe in miracles. Marginal students rarely rise to the level of the next course but rather need the reinforcement of skills and content development which taking ENG 100 over again will give them. On the other hand, many students fail the exit exam (through nervousness, for example) whose work during the quarter suggests that they can successfully take and pass ENG 101. The Screening Committee exists as an appeal board for instructors who believe their students should pass ENG 100.

We tend to pass a reasonably high percentage of students on appeal. But the process is more difficult to capture. We agonize over each student together. We review a term's work. We discuss in minute detail the student's writing. We grope for a fair decision. We try to second guess a student's abilities, responses, and reactions to challenge. We try to be just. And we continue to do it because we believe the system works.