

WHY NOT TELL THEM ABOUT THE TEST?

If we believe that a writing exam should test a writer's ability, not his adaptability, then, we, as testers, should address a simple truism: Individuals perform better when they are familiar with the territory. If making the writer comfortable with the subject increases his chance of demonstrating an accurate account of his skill, then more colleges should do as we do at California State University-Los Angeles: publish, prior to the exam, hints.

When they enter Cal State-LA, students take a diagnostic written exam. Its result either gives them credit for the writing requirement or places them into one of the three courses in the writing program: English 095 (Basic Writing: Description); English 120 (Intermediate Writing: Illustration); English 190 (Freshman Writing: Explanation).

Before they can receive credit for any course and, if necessary, proceed to the next course, they must pass an exit exam common to all sections in that course. This requirement makes it vital to give each student the best chance to exhibit his ability in writing rather than his facility under pressure. Though our impetus toward hints was the old testing assumption that any test taker can only offer evidence of a skill if he is familiar with the content, we thought it wise to test our hint procedure.

For a brief three week study, ¹ we isolated 100 students: 50 from English 120 and 50 from English 190. To account for a time variable, 50 students, 25 from English 120 and 25 from English 190 (Sample A), were given a previous term's exams with no prior hints. They were then given hints and, one week later, exams with questions similar to the hints. For the other 50, again 25 from each group (Sample B), the process was reversed: hints, week one; exams with questions similar to the hints, week two; and no hint, exams, week three.

The format for the study was:

WEEK ONE

Sample A No Hints Exam
Sample B Hints Distributed

WEEK TWO

Sample A Hints Distributed
Sample B Hints Exam

WEEK THREE

Sample A Hints Exam
Sample B No Hints Exam

The content ² of the study was:

NO HINTS EXAM QUESTIONS

English 120 Final Exam

Answer one of the following questions with an essay:

What is the most important thing your parents taught you?

How does the social life at Cal State-LA compare with the social life at (you name the place)?

What are the qualities which you would/did look for in a mate?

English 190 Final Exam

Read the attached essay:

"What's the Point of Work?" by Jill Halvorson

Answer, with an essay of about 500 words, the following question:

Is it reasonable to claim that "... the work ethic is not dead but it has deteriorated"?

Use references from the reading and your experience.

HINTS AND THEIR ACCOMPANYING EXAM QUESTIONS

Hints for the 120 Final Essay

For the English 120 exit exam, you will be asked to answer one question from three possibilities. The topic areas are Work and Play, Group Pressures, and Rights and Responsibilities. Some sample questions are:

Work and Play

How does your work interfere with your play? Vice versa?

How does your work place compare with your favorite play place?

What is the difference between work and play?

How does (you name a possession you have) serve as both a work tool and a plaything?

How can something which looks like play to the spectator (professional sports, acting, you name it) be work for the performer?

Group Pressures

What are the group pressures at Cal State-LA?

How does family pressure often oppose peer group pressure?

What did you learn from being part of a small group? a large group?

How have your family and/or friends influenced your choice of a career?

In what ways can group pressure force a person to do something (good or bad) which he/she would not ordinarily do?

Rights and Responsibilities

Have newly acquired rights increased your responsibilities?

What is the most important responsibility you have?

How can your rights conflict with your responsibilities?

Which of your responsibilities do you find most difficult to fulfill?

What right don't you have which you feel you should have?

English 120 Final Exam

Answer one of the following questions with an essay:

What is something which is work for you but play for another or vice versa?

How are family pressures between oldest and youngest children different?

What are two or three rights which every student should have?

Hints for the 190 Final Essay

For the English 190 exit exam, you will be asked a question relating to the attached reading:

"Euphemisms: Telling It Like It Isn't" by Lance Morrow

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By responding to the question with an essay, you should be able to generate your own controlling idea and produce illustrations and/or explanations to support it. Your questions will be similar to:

Is it true that "... lying is an inevitable part of society"?

You will be expected to write an essay of about 500 words. Bring the reading to the exam.

English 190 Final Exam

Answer the following question with an essay.

Is using euphemisms "... lying or a sign of good manners"?

Be sure that your essay is about 500 words and use references from the reading and your experience.

The results of the study³ were astounding:

English 120

	No Hints Test	Hints Test
Total Flaws	889	462
Flaws Per Essay	18	9

English 190

	No Hints Test	Hints Test
Total Flaws	712	451
Flaws Per Essay	14	9

This is a decrease of 9 flaws per essay in English 120 and 5 flaws per essay in English 190. That is a 50% difference in flaws in English 120 and a 39% difference in flaws in English 190. The students could not have improved, in the case of Sample A, or fallen apart, in the case of Sample B, *that* much in a week. And, even more important, the hints seemed to make a more critical difference for the less skilled students.

With these results backing our initial assumption, we publish, before each exam, some hints:

For English 095: two sample questions and their rhetorical formats.

For English 120: three topic areas with sample questions.

For English 190: the exam reading plus a sample question.

This publishing of hints before the test is not unique to Cal State-LA. I know it is done at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, Chicago State University,⁴ and Anderson College in Anderson, Indiana, to name a few. This system, along with being humane, is as statistically reliable⁵ and certainly more efficient than the cumbersome and time consuming pretesting of test topics—a method used frequently in many testing situations.

Obviously, if writers do demonstrate their writing skill better when they are—or even think they are—familiar with a test's topic, then why not provide them with that comfort and success margin?

¹ The reported data represent only two of the courses in the program because these were the only samples tested. The hint procedure does, however, operate in the other course.

² Readers will notice that the instructions of the sample tests

are very abbreviated. This form—contrary to the many testing instruments which incorporate very detailed information ranging from instructions for the format for the response to instructions on the content to be incorporated into the response—is deliberate. Our goal is to test whether the student has the ability to construct the finished essay as he develops his own content, not whether he can follow detailed directions.

3 The English 120 results are significant at x^2 level of .02. The English 190 results are significant at x^2 level of .05.

4 For further information see Rosemary Hake, "With No Apology Teaching To the Test," *Basic Writing*, 1:4 (1978) 39-62.

5 In no instance in nine years at Chicago State University, which includes 18,000 samples, and three years at California State University—Los Angeles, which includes 10,500 samples, has there been a significant difference between Credit/No credit performances of students on particular tests or topics.

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