

TESTS OF WRITING ABILITY: THEIR MESSAGES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

We define for students in several obvious ways what we value in writing: by what we tell them about writing, by our oral reactions (in class) to what they write and to what professionals write, by what we write on their papers before we return those papers, and by what we say about their papers in interviews. We also define in less obvious ways what we value: by what we ask students to write about, by the ways in which we encourage them to find ideas for writing, and by how we test students' abilities at writing. I am concerned here with these less obvious ways of defining what we value, in particular with the messages we send by the tests we give. For tests are analogous to writing assignments—indeed they are themselves writing assignments. The experience of writing, in assignments and in tests, characterizes for students what writing includes, what it is. If the experiences we give students are misleading, incomplete, or one-sided, their notions of writing may be likewise misinformed, superficial and unbalanced. From these mistaken notions may come some of the indifference, or resistance, to writing that teachers regularly encounter.

My point applies, I think, to most essay tests of ability at writing. To illustrate the point, I take up The City University of New York's Writing Skills Assessment Test (WAT). This test is intended to reveal whether or not students have the writing skills necessary to enable them to meet the requirements of college courses, most of which ask students to write regularly. Students who do not pass the WAT on entry are placed in appropriate courses, are offered necessary support services, and are retested (often more than once) after receiving the needed instruction. The test must be passed by all students in the University before they move beyond 61 credits of study. It is given every semester, sometimes more than once a semester. Each time it is given, it is open to all students who have not passed it, though not all such students take it every time it is given. On some campuses, students' performance on this test determines what kind of instruction in writing they receive, who their classmates will be, and how long they will have to pursue "remediation" before being considered eligible to take some regular college courses. Students' performance on this test may determine whether they are allowed to continue in college. What is more natural than that the students who are required to take this test—and the faculty who prepare them—should form some impressions from it about what is important in college writing?

Typically, the Writing Skills Assessment Test asks students to choose between two tasks. Each task presents students with two or three sentences of generalization (typically about some social or educational issue), cast as statements of fact (as statements that are unqualifiedly true) or as directive statements of policy (a given action "should" or "should not" be taken). Students are then asked to agree or disagree with the generalizing statements, and to "explain or illustrate" their answers from their own experience, their reading, or the observations of others.

What messages are sent to students by a test of writing that they may have to take several times before they pass it? What is suggested to them about writing by this test, a test that they perceive to be decisive in determining their ability to write? I suggest three messages.

First, students taking the test are encouraged by its

design to believe that what counts in important writing is mainly the ability to "explain" (an act not clearly defined for the student) their agreement or disagreement with a generalizing statement. The developers of the WAT believed that this skill is an essential one for a student in college to master. However, the statement is offered to them without its own explanation, illustration, or support. To be sure, all students entering The City University will be asked frequently to explain, illustrate, or support generalizations (usually their own). But if students believe (or have been taught) that generalizations must be illustrated and supported, they may be puzzled by this test: the responsibility for supporting and illustrating generalizations falls upon them but not upon the person (the examiner) who speaks to them.

Furthermore, students are not asked to perform other writing tasks that writers must often perform: they are not given data to interpret; they are not asked to arrive independently at an assertion about a topic; they are not asked to report an experience or examine their feelings. They are not asked to judge a text; they are not asked to argue a proposition that they have arrived at independently. They are asked only to say why they think specified assertions are true or not.

Second, students are not asked to address an audience interested in or able to act upon the subject under discussion. Writing, in these circumstances, is without a context. No one's store of information about a topic will be increased by what the students have written; no one's beliefs will be changed. A writer, the students are implicitly told, need have no reason to come before a reader except to demonstrate competency at writing (or to earn a grade). Indeed, students have no reader in mind—except an examiner whose interest in or views on the subject they have no way of determining.

Third, whether the students have read about or pondered one of the assigned subjects does not matter; they must address one of the subjects drawing together in fifty minutes whatever readings, observations, and personal experiences they can recall, or be assigned to "remedial" instruction. But this test says to the students that writers do not need to know very much about the subject on which they write in order to pass the test and advance in college.

These are, I think, the wrong messages to send to those students who, at the start of their college careers, are troubled about writing. If we believe that writing is based, at least in part, on what we know, that one writes for a reader, and that writers must accomplish a variety of different tasks (identifying causal relationships, narrating, evaluating—to name just a few examples), I think that the test of writing we at CUNY now give to determine our students' fitness for upper-division study contradicts those beliefs, and does so with the emphasis that comes from repeated administrations of the same kind of test.

Having defined a problem—one by no means unique to CUNY's practices in testing—may I suggest improvements in our tests of writing? 1) *Vary from test administration to test administration the writing tasks set before the student.* For example, invite on one test a report of an experience; on another, an enumeration of the steps followed in solving a problem; on still another, a judgment on a short piece of writing by another person. 2) *Stipulate an audience for the students to address, and if possible a reason for addressing that audience.* Ask students to play a role just as they will need to play a role in any writing done for any audience. 3) *If the assigned task requires students to have some knowledge, furnish at least a little information on the topic, along with more specific instructions for the writing task.* If fifty minutes is likely to be too short for students to read the information,

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plan, and write (tasks that are, after all, inseparable in the experience of most working writers), extend the time for completing the test so that the students can proceed as a working writer would.

My second and third suggestions are amply discussed in the literature on the making of writing assignments. But the first suggestion needs some elaboration here.

Researchers on testing resist that first suggestion by asserting the need for precise comparability between the tasks set on different versions of a test. If the tasks differ, the argument goes, the scores on the different tests may not mean the same thing, and attorneys in legal disputes over test results may argue that the test is discriminatory. Possibly, but the usual inference from these assertions is that from version to version the "mode" of writing asked for must be the same. Despite their current status as stereotyped categories for use in discussing writing, the "modes" mislead us as teachers and test-makers. Writers do not write in modes; they write to reach audiences on subjects of concern, employing whatever speech acts (defining, restating, inferring, conceding, and so on) will enable them to accomplish their purposes. Instead of worrying about "modes," why cannot we, as teachers and test-makers, place before students in our assignments and in our tests the following specific elements that make up almost any imaginable situation in which writers write: a reason or impulse for writing, a subject, a body of data, a reader or group of readers, and a sense of the action or response desired from those readers? As test-makers,

why cannot we do research to determine whether test questions that stipulate different subjects, audiences, purposes, and so on will produce comparable scores, before assuming that, in order to assure comparability of scores, we have to ask the student to work in a way very different from the way working writers work.

I emphasize, in closing, that these comments and suggestions apply not only to tests of minimum competency in writing but to most essay tests that are intended to measure ability in writing. The makers and scorers of tests and the interpreters of test scores need, I think, to be attentive not only to statistics about the validity, reliability, and comparability of test scores, but also to the messages that the tests themselves send to students—and to teachers—about what writing is, how one writes, and what characteristics of writing entitle it to be called "good." Those of us who engage in the testing of writing win a pyrrhic victory, I suggest, if in order to produce scores that satisfy statisticians and attorneys, we give tests that communicate erroneous messages about what writing is and what writers do.

Richard L. Larson is Dean of the Division of Professional Studies at Herbert H. Lehman College, CUNY, and is Editor of College Composition and Communication. From 1975 through 1979, he edited the annual bibliographies of research and writing about the teaching of composition that appeared in the May issues of CCC.