
DETERMINING THE VALIDITY OF ESSAY TEST
PROMPTS USED BY THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF
NEW YORK

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Every year, since 1978, The City University of New York has been testing the writing skills of 50,000 students with a universitywide writing sample test. This test—the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test (the WAT)—consists of a single, 50-minute expository essay that is holistically scored. We have been using the WAT for a decade now, and it has proven to be a reliable instrument for determining students' minimum writing competencies. However, we have decided that it is time to take another look at the validity of the WAT's prompts. We are currently in the middle of a three-year study designed to demonstrate whether our writing test is measuring the skills and abilities that it was intended to assess. Specifically, we are trying to discover (1) the extent to which the WAT is identifying skills that faculty agree are worth identifying in that they are modifiable through instruction or practice; and (2) alternate types of test tasks might produce data that are equally or more appropriate for accomplishing the WAT's purpose.

The first activity in this research project was a survey of faculty's ideas about the subdomains that constitute academic writing. In general, faculty indicated that the task types that they assign most frequently are informative and persuasive tasks which require writers to organize and reorganize personal experiences and socially shared information.

Our next step was to meet with faculty to discuss the tasks that are representative of the types they assign in their classrooms. We finally reached consensus about six experimental test tasks that we are currently pilot-testing. All of the tasks ask for the articulation of a point of view and for a defense of that point of view. The actual experiment took place Fall 1989 and Spring 1990.

Meanwhile, the project is having an important unintended benefit: writing faculty from all seventeen CUNY colleges have been

sharing information about their curricula, assignments, and pedagogy. Meeting together in small and large groups has enabled us to learn from one another and to come to some consensus about the nature of writing competence and about the ways in which we can help our students improve their writing ability.