
DETERMINING THE DIFFICULTY OF ESSAY EXAMINATIONS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Carol Peterson Haviland and Milton Clark,
California State University, San Bernardino

The three speakers described research on difficulty of essay examination questions and writing assignments. Noting that research on essay examination questions has largely ignored what student writers themselves might be able to reveal about the difficulty of essay questions posed, we reported on a two-year study in which students evaluated questions used on midterm and final examinations. We gathered data at the end of several examination writing sessions as well as in class sessions in which students responded to collections of typical questions. We received varied and revealing responses. For example, many ESL students reported that when given a choice of two questions, the topics almost were inconsequential; they elected the question that required the fewest departures from present tense verbs. Other students reminded instructors of some learning theory basics, noting that combining a difficult task (writing) with a negative personal experience was depressing, not enabling. They preferred questions that did not ask them to write about failures, bad decisions, or regrettable incidents. Students also noted preferences about other elements such as number of questions, use of poetry or quotations, and structure of prompts.

We concluded by cautioning that rather than rushing to follow all of students' directives, question writers must mesh their suggestions with testing objectives.