

INSTRUCTIONAL DIRECTIONS FROM LARGE SCALE K-12 WRITING ASSESSMENTS

Speaker: Charles Chew, New York State Department of Education

Introducer: Marie Jean Lederman
Baruch College,
CUNY and NTNW

It is now generally agreed that (1) direct assessment of writing should, if possible, approximate what we expect when students write; (2) learning to write is a process which takes place over time, sometimes recursively; and (3) requiring students to write whole discourses is a better assessment tool than the objective test of discrete skills. In 1979, when New York State first instituted a writing competency test including three writing samples, it was virtually alone in its attempt to assess students' writing ability through multiple writing samples. Five years have passed since the initiation of the first Regents Competency Test in Writing. The program has grown to encompass not only the eleventh grade but the eighth grade and fifth grade as well. Since September of 1985, G.E.D. diploma candidates must also write an essay.

The Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools administered at grade 5 comes very close to approximating the composing process. Students are required to write two different pieces for the test on two different days. A prewriting section precedes the writing sample and is not evaluated. Students draft a response and then redraft. In the tests at the secondary level, the Preliminary Competency Test in Writing at grade 8 requires students to write three pieces, as does the Regents Competency Test in Writing which is administered in grade 11 and is a requirement for graduation. The Comprehensive Examination in English, which is administered usually to average or above average students requires two writing samples.

If tests are to approximate the reality of the writing process and are to have a positive effect on instruction, they need to require many types of writing. The outline below shows the types of writing assessed in New York State Writing Assessment programs.

Types of Writing

Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools

Personal Narrative	The writer recounts an experience which he/she had.
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Personal Expression	The writer recounts a feeling or an emotion.
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Description	The writer describes a person, object, or place.
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Process	The writer explains how to do something.
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Story Starter	The writer completes a story which is started in the writing prompt.
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Preliminary and Regents Competency Test in Writing

Business Letter	The writer at eighth grade writes a letter ordering something. At grade 11, the writer composes a letter of complaint and suggests how to remedy the situation.
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Report	The writer takes data supplied and prepares a report for another person or the class.
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Persuasive Discourse	The writer attempts to persuade the reader to take some action by stating the action to be taken and giving reasons why such action should be taken.
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Comprehensive Examination in English

Essay	The writer, using literature which has been read, responds to a given question which is generic in the sense that a wide variety of literature could be used in the response.
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Composition	The writer can choose to do one question from among eight. Two of these are situations which provide a purpose and audience. The other six are discrete topics which require a full rhetorical invention by the writer.
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The methods of evaluation used in this testing program also speak to instruction. Students' writing samples are evaluated holistically at grade 5, and modified holistic scoring is used with all the other tests. This

rating procedure delivers a message to anyone in the state who is involved with the testing program. The idea that the whole piece of writing may be worth more than any one single feature is an important message to teachers who have for years spent an inordinate amount of time "red-penciling" errors in students' work. Many of the criteria used to evaluate the writing samples are virtually the same for grades 5-11, indicating that these elements are seen as essential in a competent piece of writing. The fact that the criterion focusing on mechanics is not at the top of the list reminds teachers that mechanics, although important, are not the "be all and end all" of written discourse. The fact that the tests are unlimited in time and that length is merely suggested delivers additional messages about the teaching of writing.

Any student who fails below the State Reference Point on the writing tests is required by the state to receive additional or remedial instruction. Parents must be notified of the student's grade and must be informed of the remedial program established for the student. These programs must begin no later than one semester after the administration of the test. Students can be removed from remediation if it can be documented that deficiencies have been overcome. At the senior high school level, students must pass the Regents Competency Test in Writing in order to receive a diploma.

To meet the needs of educators at the local school level in rating the tests and to devise instructional strategies to meet student needs in writing, the Bureau of English and Reading Education developed a two-year in-service program. The first phase of the program identified fifty key teachers or supervisors, representing geographic areas of the state, who came to Albany for a two and one-half day intensive training program. This program focused on rating procedures, developing a workshop agenda, and actually simulating the role of workshop leader. When these fifty people returned to their local areas, they in turn trained teachers from the local schools who were involved directly with students affected by the writing tests. The success of the program was confirmed by the evaluations done by workshop participants. The sampling by the Bureau of ratings of test papers done locally attested to the reliability of local rating.

Because of the success of our assessment program, there is a reluctance to make changes. In New York we have sensed a need to change the examinations for a number of years. After extensive discussion, pretesting and field testing, changes in the examinations will begin in the 1988-89 school year. Part III of the Preliminary Competency Test will be changed to reflect the revised composition curriculum for New York State, and the purposes for writing will rotate among those covered in this curriculum material. Evaluation of the samples will no longer require model answers. Although rating will be

done in much the same way, raters will rely on criteria only. This change goes into effect for both the PCT and RCT. In January, 1989, the format of the business letter on the Regents Competency Test in Writing will change and information needed by the test taker will be in note or outline form. This change will require the student to process the demands of the task and formulate a response rather than simply reword the task. In January 1992, Part III of the RCT will change to follow the change begun in the PCT.

I conclude by pointing out some problems, questions, and concerns which still need to be addressed by test makers and others interested in improving students' writing ability. These are as follows:

- (1) Samples of students' writing for evaluation and instructional purposes must be obtained throughout the school year, not only at test time.
- (2) Research needs to focus on the development of writers over time.
- (3) Research needs to determine if skills differ appreciably for various types of writing in a test situation.
- (4) Research needs to ascertain the relationship between writing done during a test and that done by the student at other times.
- (5) Writing prompts may not tap the experience of the writers.
- (6) Instruction can be limited to test items. Students may spend an inordinate amount of time writing business letters and structured responses to literature.
- (7) Evaluators using holistic scoring may not appreciate the fact that more must be done with student papers to plan instruction.
- (8) Once common elements of competent writing have been identified, instructional strategies need to be developed which will enable teachers to focus on these elements in a total language approach.
- (9) In-service programs connected to a test may be limited when compared to extensive needs of teachers.