

RHS WRITING ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

by Miles Canning

The Writing Assessment Program has been a successful attempt to improve writing instruction and student writing skills at Rosemount High School. To this end several purposes were established by the communications department.

- A. In order to evaluate our performance in TEACHING WRITING, some measure is needed.
- B. In order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of our STUDENTS, some measure is needed.
- C. In order to maintain a RECORD of students' progress throughout their experience at RHS, some method must be used to organize and interpret the information received.
- D. In order to aid English teachers and counselors in the PLACEMENT of students in classes which can serve their needs, data is needed.
- E. In order for the communications department to build an effective writing CURRICULUM to serve students, assessment of their abilities is needed.
- F. In order to communicate with the SCHOOL BOARD, PARENTS, AND FUNDING sources, assessment of the writing program is needed.

In 1978, meetings and discussions of various methods available to the Communications department, four assumptions gained consensus and formed the basis for the actual testing and scoring procedures.

The first assumption states that prose writing is the best

way to determine if a student has mastered how to write prose. The second assumption is, that of the three target areas for analysis, no one area is weighed more heavily than another. The third assumption concerns standardization. The test is written for local district use according to local goals. Students write on the same topic for the same length of time under the same conditions. All samples are graded anonymously and impartially. The fourth assumption is that this assessment should be used; counselors and teachers should have access to it, and students should see their scores and understand the criteria used to score their tests. In every way it is hoped the test will influence and enhance the writing curriculum. It was decided that fall term ninth graders be tested and a follow up conducted in the spring of their tenth grade year.

Once the assessment assumptions are accepted and the department decides the effort and time will be valuable, a timetable should be established. A coordinator is needed to insure paperwork and deadlines are met. This person directs the topic search, the dissemination of test instructions and materials, the inservicing of scorers, the tallying and recording of scores, and the publishing of the data. This person can make some preliminary conclusions and keep all department members apprised of problems. A sample timetable follows this report.

At Rosemount the scoring is divided into three areas. The samples are graded using the "primary-trait" method. The first area consists of grammar and sentence skills. This area is further divided into five specific skills. The second area

includes five specific punctuation and mechanics skills. The third area includes five paragraph structure and organizational skills. The criteria list with specifics follows this report.

The samples are given points for how many skills are demonstrated in each area. A total score is the sum of the three area scores. The rating points are from 4 for perfect score to 1 for an area showing less than two out of five areas mastered. The total scores range from a maximum of 12 for a "perfect" paper, to 3 for a sample with less than 4 out of 15 skills mastered.

Statistical evaluation of this data can be facilitated by computer analysis, and our school is now investigating this method. Comparisons among students, between classes, from year to year, and with specific class groups all can provide useful information. After several tests of the same grade level, a rough idea of how well a "typical" student for that grade can write is possible. Progress can be monitored and the purposes of the assessment program can be satisfied.

One aspect of this program which bears mentioning is the effect it has had on the communications faculty. Our department consists of thirteen full-time English teachers. The criteria sheet has unified our teaching objectives. The sharing of ideas and the consensus approach to developing these criteria have given us all a cooperative spirit. The willingness of all members to give time and professional effort to make this program work (four assessments in the last two years, with another scheduled for Nov., 1981), is the real secret to the success of this program.

TIMETABLE

1. Department meeting - overview for new teachers, report on program. Review topic criteria. (model)
2. Propose 10 topics to teachers
3. Select most popular
4. Write up information and instruction sheet for test. Distribute to all teachers with the topic selected. (model)
5. Set and publish timetable of due dates. Watch calendar conflicts. Establish inservice dates for scorers.
6. Secure lists of students and prepare forms for recording scores. Coordinate support services. (secretary-computer)
7. Secure labels and folders for storing tests.
8. Xerox inservice materials, criteria and rating lists.
9. Give out paper and make up folders for each teacher.
10. Testing days (give choice of 3 days).
11. Return samples (alphabetized) to coordinator. Include lists of absentees.
12. Inservice new scorers and other interested parties (ESL, SLBP, administrators, etc.) (CERO credits? pay?)
13. Alphabetize or random shuffle papers. Apportion papers to be corrected to all communications teachers.
14. Give papers to teachers in folders. Include criteria and rating sheets. Include summary of special directions. Set due dates.
15. Send reminder memo to all communication teachers of due date, availability of help, etc.
16. All papers due (including absentees).
17. Review scoring. Cross check with small group.

18. Compile lists of all students who took test and their scores. (Computer? Secretary?)
19. Analyze lists and statistically significant data (Computer? Calculator?)
20. Distribute lists and a preliminary write-up to all concerned parties.
21. File samples in folders.
22. Department review - feedback on problems and results of the testing-scoring procedure.
23. Set goals and timetable for next assessment.

RHS WRITING ASSESSMENT

DETAILED CRITERIA SHEET

AREAS OF EVALUATION

GS Grammar and Sentences

1. Clear subject - verb construction
(Using "I think" to begin a sentence is poor subject-verb construction. If this occurs in the topic sentence only, just count it off in the "paragraph" section, and not in the grammar section. If it occurs within the paragraph, count it off in the sentence, section #1. This avoids "double jeopardy." If it occurs in the topic sentence and elsewhere, count it off in both sections)
2. Use of compound and complex constructions
(Variety in sentence patterns desired) (If all that is wrong is a punctuation error, but multiple clauses

are still used well, consider this section error-free)

3. Run-ons and fragments

(These are incomplete sentences or sentences which string together too many ideas.) (Disregard for "sentence" concept)

4. Usage

(S-V agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, consistency in tense of verbs, confusion of adverb and adjective forms, double negatives, dangling modifiers, pronoun cases) (Specific grammatical problems)

5. Style, diction and slang

(Word choice eliminate deadwood, parallel structures, eliminate jargon) (General criticisms)

PM Punctuation and Mechanics

1. Capitalization (handwriting confusion counts as an error)
2. Spelling (one error or many, only count this area off once)
3. Commas (especially before a conjunction in a compound sentence, and after introductory elements)
4. Semicolons, colons, apostrophes, and other marks.
5. End punctuation (appropriate)

INFORMATION AND DIRECTIONS FOR WRITING ASSESSMENT

We will administer the 10th grade writing assessments on Monday through Wednesday, April 6th through 8th. Please plan on using an entire period one of these three days for testing. If you plan on testing early, make-ups for absentees are

easier to accomplish. It is important to refrain from "teaching the test" during this week. A better measure of what students have learned about writing can be achieved without prompting. We hope to discover several things with this assessment:

to measure reliability of this tool

(this is the third test of the same population)

to measure the progress in GS, PM, PH scores

to document the writing levels of 10th grade students

(comparisons with their own 9th grade scores, Fall and Spring as well as with the theoretical "averages" derived after the Fall, 1980 assessment)

to provide a base for future measures

to teach students what is expected of them in this area

to use the data in curricular planning, revision and registration

DIRECTIONS TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

1. Tell students this is a test to measure how well they write. Tell them the results of this assessment will be available to them later in the trimester.
2. Tell them to do their best and that you cannot answer any questions for them because it would affect the results. "Show What You Know."
3. Tell them to put their entire names in the upper right hand corner, last, first, middle initial, the class hour they are in, and today's date and year.
4. Tell them to put teacher's name on the back side in the upper righthand corner.

5. TOPIC: Advice to Freshmen (Write on board)
They may write a rough, outline, etc., but only the final will be collected. Only one paragraph is required on the assigned topic.
6. No papers should be collected until 40 minutes have passed. Proofreading should be done and all should remain quiet (reading, etc.) until the time is up. All papers will be collected then.
7. Make a list of all students missing the test. (Please try to keep this list small). Try to get these made up by 4/8, Wednesday.
8. Please put all papers from all your sections in the folder bearing your name and give it to me on Wednesday, 4/8/81. I will shuffle the papers so that you don't correct your own students! You will receive your share of papers to correct on April 10, 1981. They aren't due corrected until April 29, Monday.
9. Inservices will be provided for any individual upon request.
10. Thanks.

SAMPLE OF WRITING ASSESSMENT WRITE-UP

The lists of scores for all 10th graders (Class of '83) are now in your hands. Please tell students their scores and once again explain the criteria we use to determine the ratings. This might be the most important part of the assessment programs; to communicate to all students what is expected of them in writing and where they compare with other classmates. Ask them to look at the areas of writing in which they do well and need

to improve. Scores are also used to help identify students for RHS programs such as SLBP, PACE, Basic, Advanced, Research Paper, and Writing Lab.

Overall, we can also take a good look at our teaching of writing skills and make some comments about the performances of our students on this test. But first, the test itself needs to be analyzed.

The tool still remains a valid and important measure of comparative writing ability in the three areas. No figures should be taken at face value, and certainly this assessment, because of procedural and evaluation errors, should not be the only measure of an individual's writing ability. It can tell us about trends and changes from test to test with the same population.

This group, statistically, had about the same total score as they did a year ago. Increases were apparent in the paragraph section; in fact, 4 and 3 ratings increased over last April's assessment by 6%, and over Nov. 1979's assessment by 15.6%. 60% of all of our sophomores received a rating of at least 3 for this area.

The mechanics and punctuation section has stayed virtually the same through the three assessments. 49.8% of 10th graders received 4's and 3's, the same as in 1980.

An area for concern is the grammar and sentence section. In 1979, 48.6% of the students received 3's and 4's. This year only 44.4% of the students received 3's and 4's. The intervening assessment indicated a drop of 1.2%, and this test gives credence to this "trend." A reason for this has been suggested to me, and

I pass it along as a possible explanation - The topic, "Advice to Freshmen," suggested to many students slang-language, and two words, "advice" "advise" and "freshmen - freshman" could "load" the possibilities for errors in usage or style. These assumptions do not change the results, but they may help to explain them.

The paragraph portion is so strong, and improvement is so obvious that I think both students and teachers can be proud of the learning accomplished in this area.

Look over the tables. Please let me know your opinions or observations about this program, this particular assessment, or how we can use this information more.

I do have some specific observations to pass on to all the staff involved. This was the most difficult test to coordinate. Reading tests and the play and other spring activities interfered with both administering the tests and getting them graded. Most deadlines were not kept by all teachers. This makes all the deadlines set on the calendar difficult to maintain.

Some students were not tested at all. Their names were not given to me, and therefore we missed some important data.

Obviously, conclusions are more valid with comparable scores. These students also are among the most needy of attention by our department.

Correcting was more conservative, on the average. I only know this from the preponderance of 2's in the ratings. It seems to be a popular rating (rather than checking closely and making sure at least 3 errors are evident).

I appreciate all the effort and cooperation everyone puts

forth. I really do. It shows as a department that we are willing to go a little extra to build up some credibility for what we work so hard to do - teach writing.

With all of its shortcomings and potentials for error, we can at least be sure that we are trying to be honest with ourselves and our students.

We have now had 4 assessments. The schedule for next year includes The Fall 9th grade test, the Spring, 1982, test of the class of '84 (this year's 9th), and the follow up assessment of the class of '83 needs to be scheduled. At the next department meeting, I will ask for opinions on this test. Should it be in the winter of 81-82 or in the winter of 82-83?

Again, thanks to Doris for all of her patience and effort. And thanks to everyone who helps with this and who uses the results we get. By the way, all tests for this group and all tests for the '84 class are filed and available in the writing lab room.