

# Establishing, Administering, and Holistically Scoring A Placement Writing Assessment

by  
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In the summer of 1987, the English Department at the SUNY College of Technology at Farmingdale, working closely with the faculty of The Learning Center (a broad-based tutoring/advisement center), instituted a placement vehicle, designed to winnow entering students in need of extra help from those capable of successful completion of Freshman Composition. More accurate English placement would, we felt, increase student retention as well as create more homogenous English classes. On the basis of their scores, students would then be assigned to either non-credit English 095 or credit-bearing English 101.

The placement test had two parts: a standard short answer usage exam and a one hour holistically-scored composition. All first time, full-time matriculated day students were required to take both sections. To accommodate the waves of admissions, we established a continuous testing and grading schedule during the summer and early fall, into the first week of classes.

The assessment vehicle would be administered only to full-time matriculated students. Non-matriculating students who desired admission to either English 095 or 101 would have their credentials evaluated individually. The scores of those tested would be evaluated on a three part hierarchy:

Short Answer Exam: 1) Students who scored above a specific cut-off point on the standard short answer usage exam would be placed in English 101.

Essay Exam: 2) Students who scored below the cut-off point on the short answer usage exam would be evaluated on the basis of their score on the holistically-scored essay. If their score on the essay was above a specific cut-off point, they would be placed in English 101.

Regent's Exam 3) Students who scored below the cut-off point on the essay would also be evaluated on the basis of their scores on the English Regent's Exam. This state-wide competency exam comprises a fifty point multiple choice and fill-in section including grammar, usage listening, spelling, reading comprehension; a twenty point literature-based essay; a thirty point composition. Since this requirement proved cumbersome and affected only ten students, it has been dropped from this year's exam.

In total, we tested almost 2,400 students. Given the diversity of our community, we required a test that could be administered in no more than two hours (to leave students

time for additional placement testing in both reading and mathematics); that would be applicable to a wide variety of people from diverse backgrounds; that could be evaluated quickly.

After a year of assessing our specific needs, we tailored an exam that met these criteria. We began by gathering and evaluating exams from a wide variety of universities and colleges before deciding on the combination short-answer/essay format. The short answer section proved easily settled. We studied a series of short-answer exams and ordered a standard version from the Educational Testing Service, which has proven satisfactory. The essay portion, in contrast, required a great deal more study.

Since we were dealing with a non-teaching situation, and those administering the exam were neither trained nor required to answer questions, we felt it especially important that the assignment be precisely worded, with clear, easy-to-follow directions. In addition, since we were testing such a diverse population, we also needed a question sufficiently wide in scope to ensure all participants would be able to provide an answer. As Miles Myers explains in his pamphlet *A Procedure for Writing Assessment and Holistic Scoring*, a prompt should be designed to stimulate student writing, not test specific facts. Direct and easily understood, the prompt should enable the student to start writing quickly. We needed a prompt that could be answered by everyone, easily—but not simplistically—so students could focus on how to frame their responses as well as what that response could be. Naturally, the question will vary according to results of the needs assessment, and what works in one situation will be ineffective in another.

We began by canvassing the English Department, inviting members to submit all questions they thought suitable for consideration. A committee was formed to evaluate the submissions and come up with a final candidate. Among the questions we considered—and ultimately rejected—were the following:

**Too narrow:** Very few workers feel they are being paid enough for the work they do. You might feel that in certain jobs the salaries are too high or too low. Select one kind of work you know a great deal about or have an interest in and write an argument for its pay being either more or less than it currently is.

In the past one hundred years, numerous inventions have changed the way we live. Think about all the different inventions and discoveries that have occurred in the past century. Which one do you wish had never been invented? What, if anything, would you put in its place?

**Too vague:** Write an essay that describes the meanest thing or the nicest thing you ever did. Clearly explain what you did and why you believe it was mean or nice.

Write an essay about an object you owned in the past or currently own that is especially meaningful to you. Explain clearly why this object is

important. You can write about specific incidents that show the object's importance.

**Too difficult:** Describe one tradition or custom you think ought to be maintained and one that ought to be discarded. Describe each custom or tradition in detail and explain why you have decided it should be retained or rejected.

Write an essay about an event in your life about which your perception has changed with the passage of time. Be sure to carefully explain what happened in the past, how you felt about it then, and how you think about it now.

The prompt we chose was:

A close friend is considering a move to your community and is expecting to raise a family there. Using specific evidence from your own experience, advise your friend whether or not to make this move. Be sure to include both advantages and disadvantages of growing up in your community. You have 50 minutes in which to write, and your essay should be between 250-300 words. Before you begin to write, take a few minutes to think about what you say. Make sure your essay is clear, well organized, and contains specific examples.

This turned out to be an effective question because everyone could provide at least the bare bones of an answer. We had discussed adopting questions that asked for cultural knowledge—most memorable book, movie, television show—but discarded these as too specific for our needs. Since we were as much interested in *form* as well as its *content*, we required a question whose supporting details could be marshalled rather easily by the writer. We were careful to specifically state the time limitations, and add any necessary writing directions. We kept our instructions to a minimum, but many assessments programs instruct students to write on every other line, in pen rather than pencil, and so forth. Based on the results we obtained from last year's testing, we are considering expanding our directions to specify an audience and provide guidance on planning and revising.

To ensure precise measurement, it is vital to pretest the question under simulated test conditions. What looks great in committee may not always work in the field, where conditions may be very different. We conducted careful pretesting to make sure the question would indeed work—and it did—for everyone was able to provide an answer of some sort. It was from this sample we gathered the papers from which we formulated our model papers and scoring guide.

After reading Peter L. Cooper's *The Assessment of Writing Ability: A Review of Research*, Miles Myers' study mentioned previously, and a variety of lesser-known studies, we decided on the 4 point grading scale as affording greater reliability for its dual reading. We also felt it was best suited to our needs as the easiest to work with,

having the least number of divisions, and no fence-straddling middle ground, such as the "5" score on the 9 point scale. A committee gathered in late spring to sift through the packets of pretested essays for papers that clearly reflected each of the numerical divisions. We also choose "problem" papers: essays that fell between two divisions (a 3/4 split, for example); embodied a characteristic dilemma (such as not addressing the topic); or were bizarre, disturbing, or prejudicial in some manner. Based on these papers we wrote our rubric, containing specific guidelines for assessing papers.

The following is the rubric we developed, based on our goal of assigning no more than 22% (the national average) of our incoming students to English 095.

- 1 This score represents the weakest papers, marked by serious deficiencies in the conventions of standard written English; lack of organization, details, transitions, repetitious or poor word choice, little or no sentence variety. Essays that fall into this category may be totally off the topic, advance an irrelevant or far-fetched theory, or remain unfinished. Often, there will be marked evidence of a learning disability (reversed letters, etc.) or non-native writer. The community under discussion will not be identified either by name or specific details.
- 2 The upper part of the lower division papers, these essays also signal their weaknesses by lack of organization, although there is usually evidence of some attempt at description, purpose, and audience. There are still a number of serious writing flaws, especially sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling, but they are less obtrusive than in the weakest papers. The advantages or disadvantages of the community under discussion (rarely will both be included) will be listed rather than arranged as to arrive at any conclusion. As with the "1" papers, the community will usually not be named, but its identity can sometimes be inferred by details.
- 3 The lower part of the upper division papers, the essay that falls within this category will be marked by well-developed paragraphs, good organization, and detail. There is a sense of audience; the writing errors do not obscure meaning. The community will be identified by name and specific reference, but rarely will both advantages and disadvantages be weighed. The balance is usually heavily tipped in favor of one or the other.
- 4 These essays are well-organized, carefully thought out, logical. There is a clear sense of purpose and style, words are unusually striking, examples vivid, phrases creative. The community is named; often, historical perspective is provided. Both advantages and disadvantages are used to support a specific thesis; a conclusion is reached.

Most of us found it easiest to quickly assign a paper into either "upper half" (3,4) or "lower half" (1,2) and refine from there. We found each end of the scale easy to identify: the 1's were severely lacking basic writing skills, and the community was often

impossible to identify. Sometimes the entire East Coast was defined as a writer's "community;" other times, a writer proclaimed his community's wonders, but failed to identify any by name.

The 4's—rare birds indeed—stood out for the ease with which they fashioned language and expressed complex ideas. In these instances the community was drawn with vivid and correct detail, the advantages and disadvantages intelligently weighed, the conclusions cogent. The papers that posed the most problems lay in the murky 2/3 zone, for the 2's failed to provide any backing for their ill-arranged assertions, while the 3's drew upon detail but rarely weighed their community's advantages and disadvantages equally. For our purposes, however, this distinction was relatively unimportant, since any paper with a score of 4 or more was placed in English 101. Thus, if the first reader assigned a "2" and the second a "3", the paper would receive a combined total of "5" and clearly be placed in Freshman Composition.

We fashioned this guide by selecting papers from the pretesting that illustrated both specific grading categories and problems, and wrote brief paragraphs that described why each paper received its score. Below are some samples.

#### Sample A:

Moving to a new neighborhood families have been migrating from neighborhood for centuries. Many people are moving into new neighborhood daily. Moving into my community would be a great move for a young family but, would be at a disadvantage for senior citizen because, style of living, noisy, schools.

This community consists of ninety percent of adult under forty years of age. Most families have very small children some younger. Moving to this community and starting a new family, would be very beneficial for you and the community. The children can grow up and play together, be close friends.

Senior citizens would be at a disadvantage by moving into this community. They will have very few people to associate with. The younger people will have their parties, dancing, and loud music. Most people enjoy associating with their own peers. This type of community I would highly recommend for a friend of mine. The entire family and sometime community go bike riding or roller skating as recreation.

Grade: 2. (Both readers assigned a grade of "1")

Assessment: Paper lacks organization, weak in conventions of standard written English; lacking consistent voice/point of view. The community is never named; advantages and disadvantages blur together; paper fails to hold together.

#### Sample B

I live in Oceanside and my close friend is considering to move here and raise a family. I told Nancy, my close friend of the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in my community.

The first advantage of living in Oceanside is that the highschool is ranked in the top ten of schools on the island. The children would be getting a very good education that would prepare them for college. Another advantage is that there is a community pool

where the kids could spend the summer. The last advantage is that Oceanside is close to the beaches and it is not a very far distance to travel.

The first disadvantage of living in Oceanside is that it is a very rich community. Many material needs are much more expensive than other cities. Another disadvantage to the move to Oceanside is the housing is very expensive. New houses are being built everywhere but not many people can afford them. Another disadvantage is that Oceanside is becoming a very crowded town. There are not many empty lots of land as there used to be. The land is being filled up by shopping centers and everywhere you look another shopping center goes up. The last and largest disadvantage is in the town of Oceanside exists a very enormous dump. This dump is so big people refer to it as Mt. Oceanside. People complain because if the wind is blowing in the right direction you get a horrible smell from the dump. People are afraid with all the dumping in the canals and the dump itself in Oceanside, the pollutants will get into the drinking water and be hazardous to your health.

I think that my close friend Nancy should not make this move because of the reason I stated above. There are too many disadvantages then are advantages and I think Oceanside would be a poor choice.

Grade: 5, (First Reader 1 assigned a "2"; Second Reader, a "3")

Assessment: Paper directly addresses the question from the very beginning, mentioning both "advantages and disadvantages." The writer attempts to direct the paper to a specific audience, as shown through the use of "Nancy." Nonetheless, the examples are not fully fleshed out, and the conclusion fails to follow from the evidence; to many, the information in the 2nd paragraph would outweigh the information in the 3rd. Some sentences are awkward; the paper lacks a mature, sophisticated style.

#### Sample C:

On the surface, my hometown would appear to be a "good" community-- "good" schools, "good" kids, "good" grades. I was rather content as an elementary school student. A bored, bookish, quiet, intelligent child, I was someone with a potential. Therefore, I was put into my community's advance programs for academics and art. The greatest impact these programs had on me was that I learned how to waste time effectively. I actually *seemed* to be accomplishing something.

Other graduates of these programs have agreed. But perhaps that's changed; sometimes I look around at the kids who are now at the age I was then, and they seem truly brilliant in comparison. Your kids will have the same chances--hopefully, they won't squander them as I did.

As your children grow, they may come to realize that they live in one of the dullest, most middle-class, most conformist communities around. Yes, there are plenty of trees and the air is fresh enough, but the mind begins to stagnate. This is a great place to make friends and grow up, and then it's a great place to leave. If a person can take his education and the advantages given and make good use of them, he will grow up fine in a community like mine. One simply has to take care to avoid the creeping complacency and rampant pigeonholing of those who don't understand.

As your friend, I am saying that the crime is there, though not very bad; the drugs are there, the problem exists, but if you help your kids through the rough spots, growing up in my town can be good preparation for the real world. All any kids has to do when he has absorbed all he can is be daring enough to leave.

Grade: 7 (First Reader assigned a "4"; Second Reader, a "3")

Assessment: Sophisticated tone, point of view, word choice and sentence structure; unusually mature insight and personal view. Clear sense of audience. Drawbacks: conclusion poorly constructed, as sentences are weak and new material seems irrelevant to entire argument. In addition, paper seems one-sided to some in its point of view. Organization weak in places.

Although studies are continuing, preliminary results indicate that the placement testing appears to have increased student retention as well as created more homogeneous classes (by redirecting the bottom quarter of the class to Developmental English). There may be a causal factor operative here, as more homogeneous classes can encourage students to work at their own pace and allow the instructor greater flexibility with pacing of material.

Based on these preliminary findings, as well as more subjective impressions, we plan this year to draft several different prompts to afford greater variety for raters and lessen any chance of prior student preparation. We have dropped the Regent's grade requirement, as discussed previously, relying instead on the short answer and essay measures. Suggestions have been made regarding easing the paperwork by relaying the student's grade during actual registration via computer. We have discussed the possibility of expanding the placement testing to those non-matriculated students who intend to enroll in introductory English classes.