

ASSESSING THE ABILITY TO APPLY WRITING SKILLS

Tests of writing serve different functions. An important type of assessment is one which tests a writer's ability to communicate a particular point of view in practical contexts, such as letters to a friend, agency, or employer.¹ In an attempt to help colleges and universities assess their students' ability to apply their knowledge to such writing tasks and, in addition, to spell out just what skills students should acquire from a general education, the College Outcome Measures Project (COMP),² organized by the American College Testing Program (ACT), developed three assessment instruments: The Composite Examination, the Objective Test, and the Activity Inventory.

Questions in the Composite Examination and the Objective Test are based on television documentaries, recent magazine articles, ads, short stories, art prints, music, discussions, and newscasts. In the Composite Examination, students consider these materials and then respond with short written answers, with some longer expository passages (a task made more realistic to students by asking them to write "letters" rather than "essays"), with some oral responses which are audio-taped, and through innovative multiple-choice questions. In the Objective Test, students respond only through multiple-choice questions. The Activity Inventory uses a multiple-choice, self-report format to assess the quality and quantity of student participation in out-of-class activities related to six broad outcome areas.

In choosing to use an instrument such as COMP, users must first judge whether writing proficiency as defined by the COMP instrument is congruent with the method and intended outcome of their program. The instrument should then be used to verify that the program is effective in increasing levels of proficiency and identifying which students are helped most by the program. Specifically, institutions electing to choose COMP as an assessment instrument will want to be familiar with its basic methodology which incorporates role-playing.

Simulation activities are judged to be an important aspect of the tasks required in the three assessment instruments. The writing part of the Composite Examination is composed of three role-playing tasks using audio-taped stimuli in the content areas of the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the arts, which ask participants to compose three letters: one to a friend, one to a legislator, and one to an employer. As adults we are often called upon to adopt roles or positions which we may not be particularly interested in or find contrary to our beliefs. The writing section of the COMP test asks students to accept such roles and perform responsibly in them. Thus, role-playing becomes for the writer a realistic task that he or she might face in an out-of-class context.

The authors of the COMP writing test have made a considerable effort to develop an instrument that is content-fair, i.e., one that includes a broad range of topics and takes into account that writers vary in their knowledge of different subjects. In an attempt to meet the above criterion, COMP instruments require students to write about social institutions, science and technology, and the arts. Within these areas, the three writing samples might include topics related to family, energy, and music, thus providing a more valid and accurate measure of an individual's writing proficiency than would one sample alone.

While it is difficult to separate a writer's knowledge of a subject from his ability to write about it, the COMP

rating scales call for as much separation as possible. When used as part of the Composite Examination, there are rating scales for writing and separate scales to assess the content of the essays for relevant information in each of the three content areas. Also, skills in Solving Problems and Clarifying Values are assessed by separate scales. Therefore, in the writing assessment, evaluators are asked to concentrate on the communicating skills of the respondent rather than on the ideas espoused.

Equal weight is given to rhetorical concerns (organization), psychological concerns (making contact with and attending to the perspective of the audience), and practical concerns (using vivid language, illustrations, etc. to dramatize and create an effect). Little weight is given to such formal errors as misspelled words, punctuation, and the like, unless they noticeably detract from or obscure the message. These three criteria are qualitatively scaled to allow a norm-free judgment of the overall effect of the essays. The overriding guidelines for judging the writing is the degree to which it represents effective writing for an adult engaged in each social role. COMP provides training materials, sample responses, and guidelines to minimize bias in rating, as well as a special service to verify reliability of rating. Trained evaluators at ACT rerate a sample of student responses to verify both reliability and level of rating, to assure a common rating standard across institutions. ACT also provides reference group norms for institutions that wish to compare levels of proficiency of freshmen and seniors at their colleges to those at a number of different institutions.

In addition to comparing exit level skills, the reference group norms also make it possible for a college to compare gains made by its own group from entry to exit to gains made by other institutions regardless of whether the groups all enter at the same level of proficiency. Alternative forms of the COMP writing assessment equated in difficulty are also available to allow for individual longitudinal studies.

Once a college conducts a longitudinal or cross-sectional study to assess how well its program improves students' skills, it can use the COMP writing test to find out which writing problems remain. COMP writing samples can also serve as benchmarks of levels of proficiency at various points in time. However, no single assessment can serve all purposes. The COMP assessment does not assess specialized kinds of writing, nor does it reveal how writing programs affect students' attitudes toward writing. But it can test whether or not a program has been successful in communicating the generic writing skills which a person needs to function effectively in a variety of adult roles.

1 See B.G. Davis, M. Scriven, and S. Thomas, *The Evaluation of Composition Instruction* (Inverness, CA: Edgepress, 1981), pp. 37-42.

2 The College Outcome Measures Project (COMP) is a major cooperative effort involving a variety of postsecondary institutions which was organized by the American College Testing Program (ACT) in 1976. The purpose of COMP is to design, develop, validate, and implement assessment instruments and procedures to measure the knowledge and skills that undergraduate students are expected to acquire as a result of general or liberal education programs, and that are important to effective functioning in adult society.

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