



An Essential Question: What Is “College-Level” Writing?

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Introduction

I recently participated in a statewide meeting sponsored by the Connecticut Coalition of English Teachers to continue work we began on a pilot study that examined what various English teachers at community colleges around the state do when they teach composition. Our goal was to develop some common standards as well as shared expectations in terms of workload and student outcomes. We attempted, among other things, to define what “college-level” writing was. As it turns out, we found this task to be more daunting than we expected, and we found ourselves again and again returning to a variety of complex questions related to the teaching of writing. Among the questions we discussed were the following:

- ◆ What makes a piece of writing college level?
- ◆ What differentiates college-level writing from high school-level writing?
- ◆ If it is true that all politics are local, is it also true that standards related to college-level writing must be local, too?
- ◆ Shouldn’t a room full of college English teachers be able to come to some kind of consensus about what college-level writing is?
- ◆ Are variations in standards from campus to campus, state to state, and teacher to teacher something we ought to pay some attention to (or worry about)? Or should we consider these varia-

tions insignificant given the complexity of what we are teaching?

- ◆ We have an increasing number of students who come to us unprepared for college-level reading, writing, and thinking. How can we best teach these students to do college-level work?
- ◆ How, if at all, do standards of college-level writing change if faculty from departments other than English weigh in on the subject?
- ◆ How do high school English teachers define college-level writing? What are the issues that most concern high school English teachers as they prepare their students for college-level work?
- ◆ And finally, how do college students define college-level writing? What experiences have students had in high school and college classrooms that might help us define college-level writing more effectively?

I subsequently found that these issues were not limited to our particular group or locale. At a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)/Two-Year College English Association Northeast Conference, I conducted a session on this subject in which I encountered many of the same complexities, and many of the same differences of opinion. We discussed a variety of sample student essays at this session, for example, and the range of opinion about this work was extraordinarily varied. In one memorable case, the assessments about a particular essay ranged from A-quality, college-level work (“This is definitely college-level writing. It is very well organized, and there are no spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors. I would love to get a paper like this from one of my students.”) to F-quality work (“This is definitely *not* college-level writing. Although this essay is well organized, it contains no original, sustained analysis or thought. It’s empty. There is no thoughtful engagement of ideas here.”).

It may very well be that these conflicts are irresolvable and that all standards related to our students’ written work must ultimately be local, determined at least in part by our response to the complex realities of the communities we serve and the individual students we teach. Any discussion of shared standards may require us to ignore or discount the very powerful political and social realities that help shape students’ lives on individual cam-

puses and in particular learning communities. We must also acknowledge that much outstanding scholarly work has already been done to address this issue, especially in the area of basic writing. On the other hand, it may well be that our profession could benefit enormously from reopening a dialogue about this question. At the very least, as a matter of professional policy, it seems reasonable to revisit issues like this routinely—to open ourselves up to new ideas and insights, and to guard against rigid or prescriptive professional consensus.

At the moment, we appear to have reached an unfortunate impasse regarding our discussion of college-level writing, and this is problematic for all sorts of reasons (many of which I hope to explore in this essay). I believe that our professional discourse about this vitally important topic should be reopened. I would like to argue in this essay that as teaching professionals we should, at the very least, clearly understand the full variety of factors that help shape this debate, and carefully explore the imposing complexities that make determining a working definition of something like college-level writing problematic. I would like to argue, furthermore, that acknowledging the full range of complexities related to this issue is a necessary first step toward engaging in productive dialogue about it.

Language Is Slippery and Multivalent

Perhaps the best place to begin our exploration of these issues is with a brief discussion about the nature of language. As we know from the work of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and other modern literary theorists, language is no longer considered as reliable or as stable a medium for communication as it once was. In fact, modern theorists have argued that we must see language as essentially “slippery” and “multivalent,” a complex term which suggests that language is “always changing, and always changing in more than one way” (Leitch 1818). Although there certainly continues to be difference of opinion about this—and about the work of writers like Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, the theorists who have perhaps done the most to challenge us to think in new ways about language—it has nonetheless become widely

accepted in academic circles that communication is complicated in many significant ways because of the nature of language. This has had significant consequences for how we now understand texts to produce meaning.

The argument that language is fundamentally unstable and slippery is only the first important premise of this new theoretical framework. A number of important modern literary theorists go on to argue from this premise that because language is slippery, the art of reading and, by extension, interpretation and evaluation must always be conducted as a conditional enterprise, with the understanding that all readings of a particular text must be, at least to some degree, “unfinished” or provisional (Culler, *Structuralist*; Culler, *On*; Derrida, *Dissemination*; Derrida, “Like”; Sullivan; see also Derrida’s exchange with John Searle in “Limited Inc” and “Signature Event Context”). In Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” for example, Barthes challenges the traditional idea of the author who is solely responsible for putting the meaning *in* the texts we read. Once this old conception of the author is removed, Barthes argues, “the claim to decipher a text is quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (225). Barthes goes on to celebrate the “birth of the reader,” and introduces into modern literary theory a new variable—the role that the reader plays in creating meaning with texts. Obviously, for those of us who are reading and evaluating student texts, this new theory of language helps explain how different readers can evaluate the same student texts in very different ways.

“Myths of Assessment”

Much recent scholarship related to questions regarding assessment and the teaching of writing concludes that major differences related to standards are probably inevitable and result from, at least in part, the indeterminacies of language. In perhaps the most well-known piece of scholarship on this subject, “The Myths of Assessment,” Pat Belanoff argues that the strongest myth related to assessment is the one that suggests that “it’s possible to have an absolute standard and apply it uniformly” (55). Belanoff goes on to conclude at the end of her essay that “we need to

realize that our inability to agree on standards and their applications is not something we need to be ashamed of . . . far from it, it is a sign of strength, of the life and vitality of words and the exchange of words” (62).

Karen Greenberg draws similar conclusions in her study, “Validity and Reliability Issues in the Direct Assessment of Writing.” Greenberg finds considerable agreement about what constitutes good writing (16–17) but also considerable difference in how those standards are applied. Greenberg concludes her argument by embracing the idea that language itself is complex and that judgments about students’ writing must always be provisional:

Readers will always differ in their judgments of the quality of a piece of writing; there is no one “right” or “true” judgment of a person’s writing ability. If we accept that writing is a multidimensional, situational construct that fluctuates across a wide variety of contexts, then we must also respect the complexity of teaching and testing it. (18)

Comments like this appear frequently in scholarship related to assessment. As Davida Charney notes in her review essay, “Under normal reading conditions, even experienced teachers of writing will disagree strongly over whether a given piece of writing is good or not, or which of two writing samples is better” (67; see also Huot, *(Re)Articulating*; “Toward”; Straub and Lunsford).

Professing at the “Fault Lines”

And yet, assess we must. Certainly, establishing a clear understanding of what we mean by college-level writing is crucially important for all sorts of reasons because this foundational concept affects virtually everything we do as teachers of English, from establishing placement and assessment protocols, to developing effective classroom strategies, to administering campus-wide or even system-wide writing programs. Perhaps the single most compelling reason to address this question with the careful attention it deserves, of course, is the surging number of under-

prepared writers coming to our colleges. As a recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) notes,

In fall 2000, about three-fourths (76 percent) of the Title IV degree-granting 2- and 4-year institutions that enrolled freshmen offered at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course. . . . In fall 2000, 28 percent of entering freshmen enrolled in one or more remedial reading, writing, or mathematics courses. (4–5)

Of special note for our purposes here is that basic writing programs were not limited to community, junior, or technical colleges. This report notes that public 4-year institutions were “also significant providers of remedial education in fall 2000” (4), as were private colleges and universities, although to a lesser degree. Obviously, it is vitally important for colleges that offer basic writing courses—and this now includes most colleges in the United States—to have a very clear sense of what we mean by college-level writing. Basic writing courses are typically defined as *precollege* or preparatory in nature. As we work to evaluate and better understand student success and retention as it relates to our underprepared students and to our basic writing initiatives nationwide, we must be able to define with some degree of precision when a particular student has passed from the basic writing stage to the college level. This is one of the most fundamental outcomes for any basic writing course or program. Obviously, if we can not clearly define for ourselves what we mean by college-level writing, how can we hope to do this for our students? Being able to distinguish and articulate clearly the differences between college-level work and precollege work has become a vitally important skill on our campuses, and I believe that this will only continue to be a more pressing need in the years to come.

This is a particularly important issue for the nation’s community colleges, which now enroll approximately 41 percent of all undergraduates in the United States (see American 1; see also United States). Furthermore, our country’s undergraduate population is becoming increasingly nontraditional. As the editors of *The Condition of Education 2002*, from the United States De-

partment of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics, report,

The “traditional” undergraduate—characterized here as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time—is the exception rather than the rule. In 1999–2000, just 27 percent of undergraduates met all of these criteria. (United States 6)

These nontraditional students bring all sorts of challenges to us, and they are enrolling at our nation’s community colleges in increasing numbers. As Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers argued in a recent *College Composition and Communication* essay, community colleges exist on a “fault line, a site where contradictions meet” (439; see also Baker; Cohen and Brawer; Dougherty; Miller; Pickett; Pratt). Certainly, one such “fault line” is the wide range of skill levels that students bring with them to community college campuses. As we know, increasing numbers of underprepared students are enrolling at open admissions institutions, and research indicates that well over half of these students now need to do some form of college preparatory work, much of this in reading and writing. As John Roueche and Suanne Roueche note in *High Stakes, High Performance: Making Remedial Education Work* (1999),

On average, almost 50 percent of all first-time community college students test as underprepared for the academic demands of college-level courses and programs and are advised to enroll in at least one remedial class. This percentage of underprepared students has not changed significantly across the United States in the last two decades, and there is no evidence that it will be reduced in the near future, although in individual states percentages have fluctuated. (5)

Many community college students come to us unable to produce college-level work. This situation is complicated further by English as a Second Language students, who come to community colleges with a very different set of educational needs, but who

also eventually hope to work their way into the mainstream college curricula and do college-level work. Clearly, these students pose increasingly complex challenges to those who teach English at “democracy’s colleges” (Griffith and Connor; Roueche and Roueche, *Between*; Roueche, Baker, and Roueche; Fox; Rose).

“Cooling Out”

This large population of underprepared students enrolling at colleges throughout the United States has affected English teachers in perhaps more profound ways than any other single group of college teachers, administrators, or staff. English teachers are first contact professionals—that is, we teach reading and writing, two of the three most essential threshold college skills (along with math) that students must master before they can move on to mainstream college courses. For this reason, English teachers spend more time—both qualitatively and quantitatively—with underprepared students than any other single group of college staff. And as any English teacher will tell you, this is some of the most challenging work we do as teachers. First of all, we are teaching reading and writing, which are difficult subjects to teach even under the best of conditions, with the most well-prepared students. Secondly, our pedagogy makes this work very demanding, particularly on the most basic interpersonal, emotional level. Because our discipline has embraced a pedagogy of draft and revision, and because our classrooms typically promote collaborative learning, and because we typically work very closely with our students as they draft and revise their essays, we often form strong bonds with our students. We become invested in our students’ successes and failures in ways that are significantly different than any of our colleagues.

The kinds of professional relationships that we forge with our students have obvious and demonstrated benefits, of course, but there are also significant costs. There are heavy emotional burdens to shoulder for those of us who function in the classroom as coaches to underprepared students—especially when our students struggle or fail, as many of them do. We are the person-

nel on campus that most often deliver bad news to students about their ability to do college-level work. This is information, of course, that almost always has disturbing implications about students' future prospects within the college system and, beyond that, their professional lives.

This task may very well be the most difficult and heartbreaking that is required of us professionally. By any practical measure, English teachers perform much of the "cooling out" function at colleges that Burton Clark discussed in his famous 1960 essay, "The 'Cooling-Out' Function in Higher Education." Clark argued, as you may remember, that

The wide gap found in many democratic institutions between culturally encouraged aspiration and institutionally provided means of achievement leads to the failure of many participants. Such a situation exists in American higher education. Certain social units ameliorate the consequent stress by redefining failure and providing for a "soft" denial; they perform a "cooling out" function. The junior college especially plays this role. The cooling-out process observed in one college includes features likely to be found in other settings: substitute achievement, gradual disengagement, denial, consolation, and avoidance of standards. (569; see also Bartholomae, "Tidy"; Bloom, "Freshman"; Clark, "The 'Cooling Out' Function Revisited"; Clark, *The Open Door College*; Gunner; Harris; O'Dair; Scott; Traub, "What"; Shor, "Our"; Shor, *When*)

This is painful and emotionally exhausting work—and its cumulative effect over the course of many years has yet to be adequately measured. However much we may talk about writing-across-the-curriculum programs or sharing the burden of educating our underprepared students with other disciplines or areas of the college, the fact is that English professors do much of this difficult work. One of the long-term professional effects of this is that English professors simply become worn down emotionally, and we lose the perspective that many of our colleagues share simply because they deal much less with underprepared students. All of this serves to introduce complicated emotional factors that make defining college-level work problematic. Sometimes this works in very subtle ways and is simply a matter of seeing poten-

tial rather than actual achievement, or reading a particular essay in a slightly more forgiving way. This is a type of conditioned response that I have seen exhibited routinely in our profession, and it is something that English teachers must attempt to balance every day of their professional lives with the equally important commitment to high standards. Any discussion of college-level work must take this powerful emotional reality into consideration, for it almost always becomes an important variable in any discussion of standards and definitions of college-level writing.

Political Concerns

I would also like to argue that in the political arena, where budgets are developed and approved by increasingly interventionist and activist legislatures, the need for a stronger sense of what differentiates precollege and college-level writing may be indispensable. Personally, I believe that helping underprepared students who are seeking to create better futures for themselves is an absolutely essential part of our mission, regardless of where we teach (community college, public college or university, or private college or university). But not everyone thinks this way, of course, and as we all know, the discussion related to standards and the viability of basic writing programs has blossomed into a spirited and contentious national debate (see Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Bartholomae, *Writing*; Lavin and Hyllegard; Gray-Rosendale, “Inessential”; Gray-Rosendale, *Rethinking*; McNenny; National Commission; Roueche and Baker; Sacks; Shor, “Our”; Scott; Soliday, “From”; Soliday, *Politics*). The distinction between what is and what is not college-level work has become a crucial evaluative benchmark in this discussion.

James Traub, for example, has argued in *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* (1994) that “[t]he right to an education for which one is hopelessly underprepared is not much of a right at all” (180). This is a sentiment that is shared by many in and outside of our profession. Traub’s book is, for the most part, a heartbreaking portrait of futility and desperation—about underprepared, undermotivated, and underachieving stu-

dents struggling to reach the mainstream college curricula and generally not succeeding. This is a book that captures the frustration and despair regarding underprepared college students that is shared by a wide range of citizens, politicians, and teachers.

On a national level, an increasing number of taxpayers and politicians have looked with alarm at the modest success rates of underprepared students and have set out to limit the amount of money spent on remedial courses and programs, especially in state colleges. Some of these taxpayers and political leaders have argued that by funding remedial programs, we are, in effect, “rewarding incompetence.” Others have argued that money spent on remedial programs is a bad investment of public resources and that we should not have to “pay twice” to educate the same student (see Roueche and Roueche, *High Stakes*; Roueche, Johnson, and Roueche; Fox). Nationwide, these ideas have found their way into legislation. In Florida, Missouri, and South Carolina, for example, all remedial courses and programs have been banned from four-year state colleges and universities (Roueche and Roueche, *High Stakes* 11). In Florida, a state statute placed explicit limits on funding for remedial curricula. Perhaps most famously, New York City set in motion a very controversial and widely reported plan to eliminate a great number of remedial courses and programs. Begun by Mayor Giuliani in 1998, the City University of New York system has removed all remedial courses from their four-year colleges in an attempt to save money and “improve standards” (see Arenson, “With”; Arenson, “CUNY”; Harden; Renfro and Armour-Garb).

Meanwhile, as some seek to challenge the validity of basic writing programs, others continue to celebrate it. Studies like Marilyn Sternglass’s *Time to Know Them: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the College Level* (1997) show how transformative such programs can be in the lives of underprepared students. Sternglass’s book celebrates the triumph that can result when educational opportunities are embraced with enthusiasm and perseverance. Many of us in the profession continue to believe that offering these opportunities to our underprepared students should remain an essential component of what we do as teachers of English (see Bartholomae, “Tidy”; Bartholomae,

Writing; Beaufort; Carroll; Collins; Herrington and Curtis, *Persons*; Curtis and Herrington, “Writing”; Greenberg, “A Response”; McCourt; Roueche and Baker; Saxon and Boylan; Sheridan-Rabideau and Brossell; Timberg).

The point I would like to make here is that however one may wish to enter this debate, the need for a better shared understanding about precollege and college-level work would appear to be essential. How can we discuss basic writing programs in a public forum in any meaningful way—regardless of what side of the issue we may be on—without a stronger shared sense of what college-level and precollege work is? Furthermore, it seems to me that having a general shared understanding related to college-level work would be vital to those of us who choose to engage this debate on the most important levels—as we talk with legislators to advocate for programs and policies we believe in. Without a more consistent, clearly articulated position on this issue, we risk failing our students in the most catastrophic ways possible. In the political arena, then, there appear to be very compelling reasons for us to develop a clear, precise, shared definition of what we mean by college-level work.

Research Related to Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement

We may also find it helpful to consider the extensive body of research that examines the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement. This research might very well be useful to us as we examine the claim made by some that we must compromise our standards in order to engage underprepared students. Although this body of research does not yield simple, universal answers (Good, “How” 29), taken in aggregate it does suggest that there is a positive correlation between teacher expectation and student performance. There appears to be, in other words, significant evidence that high expectations from teachers leads to better performance from students. In “How Teachers’ Expectations Affect Results,” for example, Thomas Good summarizes the research this way:

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1. The teacher expects specific behavior and achievement from particular students.
2. Because of these varied expectations, the teacher behaves differently toward different students.
3. This treatment communicates to the students what behavior and achievement the teacher expects from them and affects their self-concepts, achievement motivation, and levels of aspiration.
4. If this treatment is consistent over time, and if the students do not resist or change it in some way, it will shape their achievement and behavior. High-expectation students will be led to achieve at high levels, whereas the achievement of low-expectation students will decline.
5. With time, students’ achievement and behavior will conform more and more closely to the behavior originally expected of them. (26)

Good finds that “some teachers appeared to ‘cause’ the students to decline by providing them with fewer educational opportunities and teaching them less. These teachers were . . . overreacting to the learning deficiencies of the lows [students perceived as low-achieving] in ways that reduced both their opportunity and motivation for learning” (27; see also Billups; Brophy, “Teacher Behavior”; Brophy, “Teacher Praise”; Brophy, “Classroom”; Brookover and Lezotte; Thomas Good, “Teacher”; Rosenthal and Jacobson).

This research related to expectations has been borne out in more recent work as well. G. Alfred Hess found that higher expectations from teachers led to improved student performance, for example, in his study of the educational reform project instituted in the Chicago school system in 1988. Hess found that the reform success within this school system was the result of four important variables—and one of those variables was higher expectations (see also Wohlstetter and Odden). Festus Obiakor has explored the complex nature of teacher expectations as they relate to young minority exceptional learners, and he also finds that teacher expectations help shape student achievement. Recent work by Kuklinski and Weinstein, Jussim and Eccles, and Wentzel supports this general argument (see also Astin; Jussim,

Smith, Madon, and Palumbo; Tinto). Although there is difference of opinion about the degree to which teacher expectations affect individual student achievement, all of the literature I have reviewed suggests that teacher expectations have at least some demonstrable, quantifiable effect on student outcomes.

Although there are any number of reasons why one might argue that we must compromise standards in our classrooms, this research suggests that we probably do not serve our students well by doing so. There are many other factors that come into play, of course, in any discussion of standards, and exactly how large an effect teacher expectations may have on individual students is in doubt. It seems reasonable, however, to listen carefully to this important research as we move forward in discussing how we might establish a better understanding of what we mean by college-level writing.

The Administrative Perspective

Finally, as I discussed these issues with administrators on a variety of campuses in our state, I discovered that college deans and presidents generally have a very pragmatic perspective related to this question. One common perception among administrators that I talked to was that definitions related to college-level work are “fluid” and that English teachers respond in some very predictable and pragmatic ways to enrollment realities. One college president who I interviewed for this essay formulated it this way: Lots of demand for courses and lots of students often result in exacting standards; less demand and fewer students often result in less rigorous standards. Depending on enrollment trends, then, college-level writing might be defined differently even by the same instructor or department (see *Soliday, Politics*).

I have found this perspective confirmed informally in any number of conversations I have had with teachers over the years. All kinds of local realities at individual campuses—related to enrollment, the institution’s learning culture, and the makeup of the student body—shape the way we interact with our students and influence the way we conceive of and apply standards related to our students’ work. Obviously, these variables compli-

cate the process of working toward establishing any kind of shared standards for college-level writing.

In my discussions with college administrators, I also discovered concern for the way in which different definitions of college-level work can affect articulation agreements. I had the opportunity to talk with two college presidents in our state about this, and although they both expressed their concerns diplomatically, they admitted that the twelve community colleges in our system apply different standards related to reading, writing, and thinking skills. This difference in standards related to college-level work has helped to complicate the development of a state-wide articulation agreement. Both presidents noted that some of the community colleges in our system prepared students very well to be successful transfer students at their institutions. Other colleges, in their opinion, did not. They went on to note that what was college level at one institution was clearly *not* college level at others. This was an obvious cause for concern for them—but it was also an issue that they approached with great caution and wariness, keenly aware of its considerable political and professional ramifications.

Moving toward Dialogue

The poststructuralist critics like Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, who taught us to appreciate the ambiguity of language, established this as only an important preliminary factor that must be considered whenever we communicate. They argued from this premise that because language is inherently “slippery,” we must proceed with heightened sensitivity and patience as we listen, read, and write. Their argument is not that successful communication is impossible, but rather that the complicating factors related to language must be recognized and respected in order for communication to be effective.

I believe that the process of discussing what we mean by college-level writing will take the kind of patience, open-mindedness, and sympathetic engagement with others that is essential for any kind of successful communication. This kind of respectful, open-minded discourse is particularly important for this discussion

because of the many variables involved, and it will be essential if we hope to avoid “going around in circles,” to borrow William DeGenaro’s and Edward M. White’s memorable phrase, as we discuss methodological and theoretical issues. After all, every college has its own unique history, its own political and social realities, and its own learning culture. It will be a challenge, given this reality, to find common ground.

I would like to begin this vitally important dialogue by offering my own sense of what college-level writing is. First of all, I would like to suggest that we change the term *college-level writer* to *college-level reader, writer, and thinker*. I believe these three skills must be linked when we evaluate students’ written work, especially as it relates to their relative level of preparedness to be successful college-level students in mainstream college courses (see Bartholomae, *Writing*; Bizzell; Bloom, Daiker, and White, *Composition*; Greene; Grego and Thompson; Horvath; Lunsford; Schreiner; Shattuck; Soles; Soliday, “From”). Good writing can only be the direct result of good reading and thinking, and this, it seems to me, is one of the foundational principles of college-level work. Furthermore, the ability to discuss and evaluate abstract ideas is, for me, the single most important variable in considering whether a student is capable of doing college-level work. Of all the components related to writing that we might consider as we evaluate student work for purposes of determining whether it is college level or not, this seems to me to be the most essential (see Berthoff, “Is”; Berthoff, *The Making*; Cooper and Odell; Corbett, Myers, and Tate; Straub and Lunsford).

I would propose, furthermore, that we consider the following list of criteria as a starting place for this discussion. This is how I would define college-level work:

1. A student should write in response to an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content and might be chosen based on its appropriateness for a college-level course. In fact, having a student read, consider, and respond to multiple readings grouped around a thematic question or issue would be ideal, in my judgment. The primary goal, regardless of the number of readings assigned, is to introduce students to an ongoing conversation that is

multilayered and complex. We would ask them, then, to engage the issues and ideas in that conversation thoughtfully.

Reading level or *readability* for this material might be determined by the approximate grade level it tests at according to, say, the Fry Readability Graph, McLaughlin’s Readability Formula, or the Raygor Readability Estimate. Some critics argue that these various readability tests can not accurately measure complexity of content (or *concept load*) very well (see Nelson; Hittleman). My experience in using these tests for work that I assign in my own classes seems to indicate that sentence length, sophistication of vocabulary, length of sentences and paragraphs, and the overall length of each essay is a good general indicator for determining what is appropriate for a college-level reader and writer. I believe that college students should be encountering readings that require extended engagement and concentration.

2. The writer’s essay, in response to this reading or group of readings, should demonstrate the following:

- ◆ A willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully.
- ◆ Some skill at analysis and higher-level thinking.
- ◆ The ability to shape and organize material effectively.
- ◆ The ability to integrate some of the material from the reading skillfully.
- ◆ The ability to follow the standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The attentive reader will no doubt wish to introduce at this point a caveat or two, perhaps formulated something like this: “That may seem reasonable, but don’t you realize that phrases like *abstract content* and *evaluate ideas and issues carefully* are impossibly vague and notoriously difficult to define? And, furthermore, don’t you realize that when we talk about *higher-level thinking* and *depth of thought*, we have to recognize, as Lee Odell has argued in ‘Assessing Thinking: Glimpsing a Mind at Work,’ that ‘there are limits to what we can know or say about thinking’ (7)?”

I would certainly agree. But without at least attempting to design writing tasks that will allow us to evaluate our students

for these kinds of skills, how can we speak, defend, or teach within a system that makes distinctions every day between precollege work and college-level work? And how can we send our basic writing students to their other college-level courses without college-level reading, writing, and thinking skills?

Perhaps the single most important reason to conduct this discussion with full, careful engagement is political. Increasingly, we have let college-level writing be defined for us by state and national legislatures, special task forces, national testing agencies, and even some activist individuals who have strong convictions and large political constituencies. Few of the people involved in making these decisions and shaping our public policy about education are teachers, and few have more than a passing acquaintance with the college classroom. If we do not conduct this discussion ourselves, and speak with a strong voice about the issues we care about most, someone else will do it for us. If that does happen, it is very likely that the best interests of our students, and the more generally enlightened approach to the enterprise of learning that so many of us support, will be compromised. Our profession should be providing the leadership on this important matter of public policy.

As we move toward initiating a shared professional dialogue about this question, we can be guided by the work of Edward M. White and Kathleen Blake Yancey, as well as documents like the *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, coauthored by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (1994); the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” authored by the Steering Committee of the Outcomes Group (2001); and the recent position statements published by NCTE about teaching and assessing writing, especially “Framing Statements on Assessment” (2004) and “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” (2004). We can also be guided by books like Wolcott and Legg’s *An Overview of Writing Assessment: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Zak and Weaver’s *The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing*, Thompson’s *Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations*, and Dombek and Herndon’s *Critical Passages: Teaching the Transition to College Composition*.

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These books provide us with a thoughtful, up-to-date overview of the issues and complexities that we must grapple with.

I would also like to suggest that we consider the following questions as we move forward with this discussion:

- ◆ What kinds of intellectual work do colleagues and students around the country associate with the concept of college-level writing?
- ◆ What are the benefits—and dangers—of standards and outcomes as proposed by documents like the Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement?
- ◆ What is the relationship between writing that students do as they transition to college, as they write in the first year of college, and as they write throughout their college career?
- ◆ When we look across different types of institutions, what is similar and what is different about the way college-level writing is defined?
- ◆ Should we attempt to establish some sort of shared national standard for college-level writing?

Conclusion

Just because this work is challenging does not mean that it can't be done or can't be done well. In fact, I would argue that the task of developing a clearer understanding of what we mean by college-level writing requires exactly the kind of patience, stamina, and good will that we privilege in our classrooms. We know how to do this kind of work very well, and given enough patience and good will, I think there is every reason to believe that we can accomplish it successfully.

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