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STATEMENT ON CRITERIA FOR WRITING PROFICIENCY

This essay was originally prepared in November 1976 as a working paper for the CUNY Task Force on Writing, which had been charged with recommending to the Chancellor suitable measures for assessing writing proficiency. Its support of holistic readings, delineation of "choices" and "givens," statement of criteria for assessment, and recommendation against quantitative measures strongly influenced the six-level placement scale finally adopted by the City University for the Skills Assessment Test in Writing. Holistic evaluation procedures include the group training sessions of readers mentioned at the end of the document. A very helpful discussion of these sessions appears in Jan Green and Gae Goodrich's "The Working of a Controlled Essay Reading," in Comparison and Contrast, edited by Edward M. White, 1976, pp. 68-75. This report is available from the Office of the Chancellor, The California State University and Colleges, 400 Golden Shore Boulevard, Long Beach, California, at \$1.50 per copy.

Although instruction in writing usually focuses systematically on specific sub-skills of writing such as grammatical inflections and paragraph design, writing competence is more than the sum of these discrete competencies. Rather, it is the successful integration of a number of linguistic skills which interact and combine in ways so difficult to delineate and measure that the holistic judgment of an experienced reader remains the most accurate form of assessment in writing.

When we examine and discuss such judgments, we can see, however, that they involve assessments in two distinct territories of competence. One territory we can call the territory of *choices*, which is concerned with the *quality* of decisions a writer makes in the selection of words and sentence patterns and rhetorical strategies. The other territory we can call the territory of *givens*, which is concerned with correct forms. In the first territory a writer can be judged to be persuasive or unconvincing, interesting or dull, precise or imprecise, organized or disorganized, etc. In the second territory he is right or wrong, according to the conventions of the written code; that is, his grammar, his spelling, his punctuation, or his

word choices will simply be perceived as right or wrong by the general reader.

Very little exists in the way of longitudinal research on writing progress to guide us in determining the role that instruction plays in the maturation of a writer in each of these territories. Furthermore, what little research has been done on the correlation between traditional criteria for writing competence and the criteria that actually figure in readers' judgments suggests a need to reexamine the entire subject of criteria.

The experience with unprepared freshman writers in open admissions classes nonetheless suggests several important features of their development which ought in turn to influence any assessment of their proficiency as writers.

1. In general, skill in the area of *choices* is the result of long exposure to written English. The cultivation of judgment in any skill, while it can be guided and stimulated by direct instruction, is largely a matter of making numerous and often unconscious attempts to approximate the models that are presented to the learner, with a gradual and even imperceptible closing of the gap between the apprentice performance and the model. Much of this growth among writers takes place as a result of students' work in other classes throughout college and cannot be said to have reached its end when they are about to move into their second or third years of college. Genuine growth in vocabulary, for example, is inextricably linked to the students' entire college experience and must therefore be assessed in highly relative terms.

2. The pace and patterns of growth among remedial-level students suggest that they are not likely to "catch up" to their more skilled peers within a semester or two of remedial instruction but that in absolute terms the measure of their improvement is so much greater than that of their non-remedial peers as they progress through college that they can reach comparable levels of performance by the time they are seniors. Thus while an early test of writing proficiency in this territory of *choices* might well reflect significant gaps between the prepared and unprepared populations, it would be a mistake to interpret these gaps as permanent and, on that basis, screen out students who are in fact capable of steady and in some instances dramatic improvement as they proceed through college.

3. Within the territory of *choices* there are certain key competencies that can and ought to be reached by the end of formal instruction in writing and that can provide the foundation for the student's independent development as a writer from then on (provided, of course, he be required to put these competencies into practice in his regular college courses). These include:

- a. The ability to sustain the development of a point or idea over the span of 300 to 500 words
- b. The ability to select words that fall within the range of appropriateness for formal writing (such a criterion would exclude from competence essays that reflect a heavy reliance upon slang, the clichés of daily life, and formalese)
- c. An ability to signal the unfolding plan of a written passage by the use of organized paragraphs, transitional sentences, phrases, and words.

4. Unlike the territory of *choices*, the territory of the *givens* is much easier to describe, arising as it does out of three relatively autonomous linguistic subsystems (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) that have been reduced to principles and rules. To be sure, many of the conditions that govern these rules are themselves so complex as to defeat any attempt to teach them directly. Nonetheless, there remains a substantial body of information about the “givens” that is transferrable by direct instruction. Indeed, it is in this area that remedial teachers have so far shown their greatest ingenuity and effectiveness. But even here there are developmental realities which should influence any decisions about criteria. Primarily there is the fact that there is generally a gap between a student’s understanding of his errors and his habitual control over them, and this gap between theoretical grasp and practical application is likely to be largest where students write under stressful conditions that allow little time for revision or proofreading. In addition, some features of these subsystems (particularly those involving certain grammatical inflections and sentence patterns) run counter to vernacular and mother-tongue patterns that lie deep in many students’ linguistic intuitions. Such features can be brought to the surface of students’ awareness and the errors caused by them reduced to the point that they appear residual rather than habitual, but it would be unrealistic to expect such difficulties to disappear entirely from a student’s formal writing by the end of his remedial instruction. More often, they will be substantially reduced during that period and then they will be gradually worn away by further practice and exposure to books and lectures. At least one survey of CUNY faculty opinion suggests that professors are not, in any event, as distressed by occasional errors of form as they are by the lack of development or order in student writing.

5. Within the boundaries dictated by the relative shortness of training time (in most colleges between one and two semesters of courses with three to four hours of class time a week) and the nature of development in writing, it is possible to set criteria for correctness that indicate a readiness to

manage college writing tasks without extra supervision (i.e., supervision beyond that which a professor is expected to give when he assigns papers). These criteria would include:

- a. The ability to write sentences that reflect a command of syntax within the ordinary range of mature writing. This would exclude from competence writing that depends so exclusively upon the simple sentence patterns as to seem childish as well as writing that so tangles syntactic possibilities as to require several readings to comprehend.
- b. The ability to make conventional use of the capital and of the major marks of punctuation—the period, comma, semicolon, and quotation marks.
- c. The ability to spell the common words of the language with a high degree of accuracy and to manage the less common words of the college vocabulary with enough accuracy to sustain the reader's attention on the content rather than the spelling of words. Since the efficient use of the dictionary is itself a key academic skill and since the skill of spelling is in most writing situations a matter of knowing when to look up an uncertain spelling, we recommend that students be permitted to use dictionaries during writing examinations.
- d. The ability to use regularly, but not necessarily faultlessly, the grammatical inflections of formal written English and to observe the rules of agreement that apply to subjects and verbs, pronouns and antecedents.

Such a list of criteria for both the territories of competence we have described here raises questions about how the cutting points in individual criteria are to be determined and how the various criteria are to be weighted in relation to each other. To attempt to solve such problems by developing detailed measures or scoring procedures (for example, to set limits to the numbers of errors in particular categories or to count the number of words in paragraphs or sentences) might well increase the degree of agreement (reliability) among readers, particularly in the territory of correctness, but it will, in the judgment of this committee, reduce the *validity* of the judgment, for no scheme of quantification appears to be sensitive or flexible enough to gauge the point at which a piece of writing is perceived to be incompetent by a general reader. Such judgments arise out of an almost infinite number of possible combinations of strengths and weaknesses, with at one time a notable strength in one area lessening the importance of flaws in others, or at another time severe weaknesses in seemingly minor features outweighing other important accomplishments.

Much might ultimately be learned as data from examinations are accumulated about the correlations between readers' judgments and measurable features of students' essays, but lacking such data now and fearing that any attempt at quantification, no matter how conscientious, would also run the risk of shifting teaching priorities so as to encourage narrowly literal views of writing competence, the committee recommends that the criteria listed above be refined through the process of examining cases in reader-training sessions.