WRITING PROJECTS AND WRITING ASSESSMENT

Note: This piece may be seen as a companion piece to Healy's discussion of Generic Writing Systems. It describes one state's approach to direct assessment of writing, and shows how Writing Project involvement can insire that assessments measure real writing tasks rather than formulaic, pattern papers. —Editor.

Every spring, Californians observe two phenomena: the first daffodil and the state achievement tests.

The daffodil is a guaranteed thing of beauty, in contrast to student achievement and the tests that measure it. For twenty-four springs, state testing programs in California have measured writing with an objective test—error identification in true/false, multiple choice fashion.

This April marks a new rite of spring. The California Assessment Program (CAP) will, with a direct writing assessment, put the emphasis where it belongs: on how well students write when they write.

Twenty-two states conduct direct writing assessments, according to a 1984 survey.* In three states—Maryland, Nevada, and New York—success on the state writing assessment is one ticket to high school graduation. Ten other states conduct comprehensive assessments—tests of all students in specified grade levels for individual pupil scores. Eight states test a sample of students for general information about strengths and weaknesses and statewide achievement. Types of writing assessed vary from state to state, but the most common are persuasive and narrative writing (nine states). Students in Hawaii write a thank you letter to a friend while students in New Mexico write an essay comparing and contrasting viewpoints on a given concept.**

Direct writing assessments, then, appear to be creatures with different habits. The Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST), used nationally for entrance level screening of teacher candidates, is a basic skills test that measures average performance on a single essay and an objective test. As such, it has wide application. Some universities administer the PPST to business majors or nursing candidates, and at one time, California explored the notion of using the PPST for ranger naturalists.

The minimum competency test is another creature. California schools districts often give minimum competency writing assessments that carry maximum impact. They determine high school graduation, and to read some of these student writing samples is to die a slow death—one formulaic paper after another cut to the pattern offered by well-meaning teachers who have taken refuge in a prescribed form. Minimum means minimum. Standard fare for district exams is a single essay.

The new CAP writing assessment is not an exclusion test. It will not postpone or prevent graduation or lop off a potential career. Ideally, it will affect the individual student in a far more beneficial way—by improving the student's schoolwide writing experiences.

The CAP writing assessment measures achievement—excellence as opposed to basic or minimum—in a range of writing. California's 300,000 eighth graders, when they take the first CAP test this spring, will be tested in an initial eight types of writing:

- an autobiographical incident
- a biographical sketch of someone known by the writer
• an eyewitness account of something observed
• a story of fictionalized experience
• a report of information
• a problem and a possible solution to that problem
• an analysis of the possible effects or consequences of some given event
• an evaluation or judgment of something students have read, a movie they’ve seen, a product they’ve used, etc.

The CAP writing assessment will extend to all twelfth graders in 1987 or 88 and to sixth and third graders in the following years. Here, too, the writing tasks will be multiple rather than the single designated task that invites a single designated response.

The test will work this way. For each type of writing, there will be three or more prompts. An individual student will respond to just one of these prompts for one type of writing. But within a given classroom, each student can get a different prompt on a different kind of writing—the magic of matrix sampling. In other words, students need to be ready for whatever prompt they draw, for the spectrum of types.

The best way to prepare students for the test, then, is to teach a wide range of writing, to have students write for a variety of audiences and purposes, to help students connect the reading they do with their writing. As it develops, the test will include specific writing tasks from a variety of subject areas, but even now, the initial eighth grade writing types lend themselves easily to writing in social studies and science classes.

While the CAP test is no guarantee that the teaching of formulaic writing will die out, students whose writing comes strictly in five paragraph form may be limited in their responses compared with students who have gone through the processes of real writers. And students who have an accumulation of writing experiences across grades and disciplines may be most comfortable of all with the diversity of writing tasks.

One of the most complex and controversial parts of writing assessments is the scoring method. Most states use the holistic, overall impression score; two states favor primary traits; two states use the analytic method; four states combine scoring methods.

California will also adopt a combination approach, using features from holistic, primary trait, and analytic methods, measuring general and specific features. Each paper will receive three scores: the first for the thinking, problem solving, and writing a student does on a given type of writing; the second for a key characteristic of writing such as coherence, focus, or support and elaboration; the third for conventions. California classroom teachers will score all papers at locations throughout the state.

The California Writing Project has been at the center of the state assessment—in the actual test development, in the coordination of staff development, in the planning of all phases and the teacher roles in all phases. CWP teachers, under the guidance of Charles Cooper, have written and revised prompts, conducted field tests, developed scoring guides, and written the materials to be distributed to their colleagues statewide.

For the California Writing Project, the new state assessment will also mean a deluge of requests for inservice. Already the CWP has conducted a two-day training session for the state’s staff development leaders. Teachers at each CWP site are now training their fellow Teacher/Consultants in the purposes and classroom implications of the assessment to develop a large enough corps of teachers to serve the whole state.

It is important that Writing Projects take the lead in state assessments to help make them the best they can be. In California, this leadership role has demanded that directors be part of the assessment from the beginning, before all the problems have been solved, before all the people have agreed with each other. And it has demanded that we do what we always have done—promote our teacher leaders. Because tests have the power to shape classroom practice, the best teachers need to be part of the test shaping.

Daffodils have a way of springing up untended; assessments need nurturing and expert attention. Daffodils are perfect from the start; assessments, we have found, need a whole lot of care—the writing and rewriting of prompts and scoring guides, their continued redrafting after field tests and initial scoring sessions. And direct writing assessments need Writing Projects—their support, their guidance and the collected wisdom of their Teacher/Consultants.


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Mary Ann Smith is Miles Myers’ Replacement at the Bay Area Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley.