THE EVALUATION OF COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION by Barbara Gross Davis, Michael Scriven, and Susan Thomas, Edgepress, 1981

This is a useful book. For Writing Project directors, innovative English teachers, grant writers, and administrators, it provides valuable "how-to" information. We are often hard pressed to demonstrate effectively the worth of educational practices and teacher development programs that everyone involved knows are worthwhile. This kind of knowing, however, is precisely what is suspect by outsiders because participants are not unbiased observers. Davis, Scriven, and Thomas do a thorough job of presenting alternative ways to provide data—the objective kind that will help effective Writing Project directors resist being swept away by the stiff broom of demands for accountability.

This book is an especially useful tool for English teachers, who tend to be in tune with far more significant but much less measurable realities than those that hard data can reflect. These authors are aware of this and yet they respect what teachers do know, as evidenced by such statements as, "One should never simply dismiss the instincts of an experienced teacher."

Readers will be grateful to the authors for endorsing a more comprehensive and morally palatable way of evaluating a writing program or professional development project than that spelled out by the Joint Dissemination Review Panel, set up in 1972 by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The JDRP uses effectiveness as "the sole criterion for approval.... No judgments are made regarding the desirability of projects or products from any other standpoint." (IdeaBook The Joint Dissemination Review Panel, 1977, p. 2) Does the project achieve its aim? is the only question they ask. An effective project by JDRP standards, then, is one that presents valid and reliable evidence that it has produced statistically significant results of sufficient magnitude and in a way that can be replicated at other sites. Davis, et al. value these criteria but embed them in a much broader context. They ask questions that go beyond whether the project achieves its self-stated aims and ask, for example: Should this program have been tried? Were its goals worthy ones? What could have been done instead? Was the money spent worth it for the benefits achieved? What were the side effects—intended or unintended? The commonsense perspective here is not likely to obscure genuine accomplishments in a misguided arraying of figures, charts, and tables. It is refreshing that the authors allow themselves the freedom to range beyond mere statistics; and yet they have provided practical help in designing and implementing a hard-nosed, objective, and respectable evaluation.

Writing teachers may be disappointed that the authors did not make a stronger case for direct assessment of writing (through writing samples), but neither did they make as strong a case for the highly reliable indirect measures (through multiple-choice tests) as might please statisticians. I wish they had balanced their citation of H. Breland and J. Gaynor’s comparison of direct and indirect assessments of the writing of college freshmen (Journal of Educational Measurement, Summer 1979) with Roger McCaig’s comparison of fourth grade writing assessments (The Language Arts Teacher in Action, NCTE, 1977). Although Breland and Gaynor found a correlation between direct and indirect measures, McCaig did not. His correlation coefficients ranged from only .09 to .18.

The best thing about his book is its comprehensiveness. It includes a handy glossary of terms. Some definitions glaringly reflect the bias of the authors, however. For example, this value judgment appears as a definition: "Grading or marking of compositions should be referenced to excellence or acceptability and not to best or average levels i.e. it should be criterion-referenced." The book includes such aids as lists of resources for selecting published tests, excellent guidance on designing questionnaires, and a full bibliography broken down by category. An unfortunate omission, however, was a citation of the collection of essays in Writing Assessment for the 80s, Clearinghouse for Applied Performance Testing, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 710 S.W. Second Avenue, Portland, OR 97204.

The plusses and minuses of various choices facing the designer of an evaluation are arrayed in a clear and sensible way, providing just the kind of information needed for responsible decision-making. Scriven’s second chapter, "Basic Evaluation Concepts" is a gem, but it would be even more effective at the end of the book. It might overwhelm beginners at evaluation; they would be more ready for that exhaustive checklist after they have an image of what an evaluation design looks (Continued on page 12)
(Continued from page 11)

like. Cross-referencing could avoid some of the repetition between Chapter 2 and the rest of the book and would have been preferable for those who read the book as a whole and do not choose just certain parts to read.

The authors have achieved their intention—to provide a "clear introduction to a useful method of evaluation...a commonsense approach to scientific evaluation." For this, we are grateful. Their checklist approach to evaluation functions as they hoped it would, to provide "an antidote to the inevitable depression inspired by the complex, controversial issues, and dissatisfied constituencies which both evaluators and composition instructors all too often must face."

Betty Jane Wagner is Co-Director of the Illinois Writing Project.