

An Introduction to Understanding Assessment

Why Do You Need This Book?

Do any of the settings, characters, or concerns in these scenarios sound familiar to you?

- The Assistant Director of a Writing Center has been asked by the Dean of the College of Architecture to set up a program that will help senior architecture majors with proposal writing. The faculty is not happy with the proposals students are writing for the major's capstone course but can't see how they could fit writing instruction into the course. The Writing Center sees this as an opportunity to offer more than walk-in tutoring services and so would like to be able to tout the program's successes to other colleges.
- A graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition at a U.S. university has been asked by the chair of her department if she would be interested in helping set up a college preview program for high school juniors at a new campus the university has established in Azerbaijan. The goals of the program are to recruit students to the university and introduce them to the practices and assumptions of U.S. style education. Students in the program would work on the kinds of essays needed for college applications and standardized admission tests. The chair tells her that it would be a great résumé builder.

- A high school English teacher runs a grant-funded summer program each year for students who fail the writing component of the state-mandated exit exam. Many of the students speak English as a second (or third) language and are new to the U.S. education system. The program allows for more individualized attention and the extra practice that the students need. The teacher and his principal feel that the program is working, and a number of the students are passing the exam the second time around. The grant agency acknowledges the program's success but has warned the teacher and principal that it may not be able to continue funding. The teacher and the principal want to provide the agency with additional evidence of the program's successes.
- At a new English-medium university in an African country with a rapidly expanding economy, the Director of First-Year Writing has been asked by the President's office to report on the program's effectiveness to the university's funders. The funders want to monitor what students are learning in the program. The Director wants to identify areas where the program is successful but would also like to make a pitch for funding to create a Writing Center and to improve the existing curriculum.
- The Biology Department's Director of Undergraduate Studies is concerned that the graduate teaching assistants who staff lab sections for the general education biology course do not know how to grade or respond to the writing in lab reports. The Director is willing to ask members of the English Department and Writing Center for advice but knows that she will not be able to pay them to run a program without outside funding. She wants to put a teacher training component into a grant proposal she is writing but feels that she needs some preliminary findings that would show promise of success.
- The Director of a university-based, Intensive English Program (IEP) has been asked by the Assistant Provost for Academic Affairs at the university's research hospital if a program could be set up for doctors who are non-native speakers of English to help them with writing medical articles for publication. The hospital has studied the publication acceptance rate of its physicians and found that native-speaker status was a significant predictor of acceptance. The IEP is self-funded and would like to run more community programs.
- The English professor for the writing pedagogy course required of all graduate students teaching in the first-year writing program realizes that many of the students, who are pursuing PhDs in literature and rhetoric, will end up working in or running a composition program. The professor knows that such

programs are constantly competing for resources and so are asked to provide evidence of student learning. The graduate students have not had much exposure to empirical research, and the professor feels that they need tools to construct evidence-based arguments. As a course project, she requires them to write a report documenting student progress in the first-year classes they are currently teaching.

Effective writing is central to educational and professional success in our globalized society. We must pass the writing component of gatekeeping exams to graduate from high school, enter college, and be admitted to graduate schools. Whether we are studying biology or hotel and restaurant management, we must use a writing process to help us organize our thoughts, and we must produce written reports to demonstrate learning. In business settings, reputations are enhanced by the clarity and concision of writing, and sales are made on the nuances of appeals.

It is no wonder, therefore, that so many people take an interest in how writing is taught. Some of these individuals are writing professionals—Writing Center personnel, Rhetoric and Composition faculty and graduate students, Language Arts teachers, ESL instructors and program administrators. Others don't see themselves on the front line of instruction, but they know good writing when they see it and believe in its importance. They include faculty and administrators for academic units across campus, parents, employers, and state and federal legislators. Finally, students themselves want to know what is expected of them on writing assignments and how they can improve.

It is also no wonder that across academic settings myriad strategies and solutions exist for how to teach writing and systematically improve the learning of writing. These strategies and solutions are referred to in this book as "programs." They may be conceptualized as a series of training workshops for teachers, a credit-bearing class such as first-year composition, required visits to the Writing Center, or an after-school club. Wherever such a program exists or is initiated, there usually also exists a need to make sure the program is accomplishing what was envisioned for it and a desire to see if it can be improved. *Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning* will fill this need.

This book is a guide to assessing and evaluating writing and writing-related instruction in academic settings. Effective assessment does not just test what students already know or have learned how to do; rather, it opens up the whole learning process for inspection. It is the implementation of a principled process that leads to curricular innovation and individual development. It involves considered decisions about inputs and constraints, the systematic collection and interpretation of data, and follow-through on the insights that have been gained. In short, assessing writing should mean assessing learning.

The goals of this book are broader than many standard books on writing assessment, which focus on evaluating an individual's ability to create an effective piece of writing for a particular purpose. (For suggestions on works that deal primarily with evaluating written texts, see the Further Reading section at the end of this chapter.) This book seeks to support teachers, administrators, program directors, and funding entities who want to make the best use of the resources at their disposal to understand what students are learning and why and then take actions based on what they have learned. It also seeks to provide a common basis for communication among all the interested parties—the writing professionals, the people who identified the need for the program, and the students.

Assessing Writing, Assessing Learning was originally written for the staff at the University of Houston Writing Center, and many of the examples contained herein were developed as part of its highly successful Writing in the Disciplines Program. I fully recognize, however, that on different campuses writing programs and writing assessment may fall to English departments, interdisciplinary units, task forces, offices of institutional research, and any number of other groups. As much as possible I have tried not to make assumptions about who the stakeholders for writing assessment may be. I have simply assumed that their common stake is a desire to promote student learning and develop quality programs.

Guiding Principles

Many assessment regimes bear little resemblance to the holistic process outlined in this book. Anyone in this field knows about locally developed **placement tests** put in place about 15 years ago that generate a numerical evaluation that no one can explain in terms of what it means a student can and cannot do. We may dread having to produce an annual **institutional effectiveness** report because we know that the outcomes were chosen simply because they were the easiest to gather data on and fail to capture a majority of what goes on in our program. Or perhaps you are frustrated by the hours you spend grading and writing comments on portfolios at the end of a semester because you know there is a 50 percent chance a portfolio will sit in a box in your office all of next semester never to be claimed by the student. Too often these efforts began with the good intention to improve assessment, but without a clear understanding of why we should be assessing or the essential characteristics of effective assessments.

The suggested practices and examples in this book are designed to support a program where assessment serves learning, and they build from these premises:

- Planning for assessment should be an integral part of designing a program, not an afterthought.
- **Formative** as well as **summative** ends should be considered in an assessment plan.
- The selection and reporting of assessment tools should be based on a detailed understanding of a program's goals, its participants, and the relation between the program and the larger curriculum.
- Assessments are data-based inferences, and having multiple types of data increases their certainty.
- The potential consequences of assessment findings for individuals as well as programs should always be considered when planning, and the actual use of the findings should be monitored after they have been reported.

Organization

These guiding principles are addressed in three sections:

- *Chapter 2: Planning* discusses program-related variables, the formulation of goals, purposes of assessment, and writing up of an assessment plan.
- *Chapter 3: Tools* describes different ways of collecting data for assessment purposes and provides links to example instruments.
- *Chapter 4: Reporting* discusses issues related to making data-based inferences and provides example formats for reporting.

Each of these principal sections is further subdivided into related topics. For each topic, a discussion of issues and advice for working through the issue are provided along with numerous examples. A list of resources to consult for more information about a topic is also provided.

Chapter 5 provides a collection of worksheets that can be reproduced and used to help the people in charge of setting up and delivering a program think through the issues presented here. Finally, there is a glossary at the end for all terms that appear in bold.

Resources

Further Reading

- American Educational Research Association. (1999). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2002). The scope of writing assessment. *Assessing Writing*, 8(1), 5–16. doi: 10.1016/S1075-2935(02)00029-6.
- Shaw, S. D., & Weir, C. J. (2007). *Examining writing: research and practice in assessing second language writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Weigle, S. C. (2002). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- White, E. M. (1994). *Teaching and assessing writing: Recent advances in understanding, evaluating, and improving student performance* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wolcott, W., & Legg, S. M. (1998). *An overview of writing assessment: Theory, research, and practice*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- www.ncte.org/positions/writing—The National Council of Teachers of English is the leading association for writing professionals and has prepared a number of position statements about the teaching and assessment of writing. Its major conference is CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication).
- www.tesol.org > Issues > Position Statements—Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has also published a number of position statements on the assessment of English language learners.
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