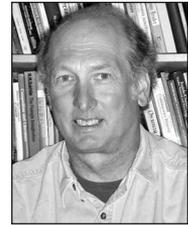


The New Writing Assessments: Where Are They Leading Us?

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There is a new rite of passage for high school juniors and seniors taking the SAT—a timed, twenty-five-minute writing section to be scored by a small army of dispersed readers. This addition is motivated in part by ominous warnings coming out of California, intimating that the university system might stop using the test if it didn't include a writing section. It and the other state-mandated writing assessments are also intended as a message to high schools about the importance of writing instruction. It is worth asking, then, what kind of message these assessments will send. What kind of writing will they promote?

A good place to begin is a sample essay topic released by the College Board, which asks students to take a position on “secrecy” and begins with two opposing quotes. One is from Sissela Bok supporting the need for keeping some secrets; the other is from Harry Truman stating that openness is essential for democratic life. Students are then asked to draw on their experiences, reading, and coursework to take a position.

This prompt resembles others released by the ETS in that it polarizes a complex issue on which students must take sides. These prompts are full of seemingly hyperstable terms such as *secrecy* that one must be for or against. This is not to say that some daring students might not muddy the water, for example, by suggesting that Truman also saw secrecy as essential to this country (e.g., the atomic bomb). And I am sure that the SAT readers, eyes glazed at the computer screen, might welcome some subversion if managed well. But early reports are that most students came prepared with the five-paragraph format that they could prop under one side of the “debate.”

The assignment, as I thought about it, evoked an earlier age of writing (and preaching) in which universalized human traits could be discussed more easily. I recently spent some time in the Harvard University Archives and stumbled on a complete list of the assignments of Edward Channing, teacher of writing and rhetoric between 1823 and 1853 (he taught Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau). On December 5, 1834, for example, Harvard students were given an assignment almost identical to another SAT sample prompt:

The different ideas we form of men whose pursuit is distinction, money, power, domestic happiness, public good.

Other topics called for an extraordinary range of generalizing:

The evils of excessive attachment to home—those too of making ourselves citizens of the world.

Is there a difference in *degree* in the pleasure derived from any absorbing intellectual pursuit—mathematics, chemistry, painting, etc.?

Emerson and Thoreau may have been able to handle this level of abstraction, drawing on an impressive stock of literary, biblical, and historical references. But the few existing papers in the archives seem little more than a network of commonplaces—generalities about generalities.

Channing's successors at Harvard, particularly Barrett Wendell, whose *English Composition* was the Strunk and White of the late nineteenth century, rejected this heavy sermonlike moralizing. In his famous “daily themes,” he pushed students to become exact observers of their experiences, rendered in language that was forceful and direct. Wendell was not

interested in large generalizations about “men” but in the particularized experiences of individuals.

A similar revolution occurred in the late 1960s when Ken Macrorie coined the term *Engfish* to describe the inflated (he would argue “dishonest”) language of college themes. In his book *Uptaught*, he provides this example: “*I consider experience to be an important part in the process of learning. For example, in the case of an athlete, experience plays an important role. After each game, he tends to acquire more knowledge and proficiency, thereby making him a better athlete*” (16; italics in original). Macrorie asserts that “[s]uch language could only have been learned in school” (16). Yet when students are expected to generalize so broadly, they almost invariably end up in the land of platitudes. One has only to look at some of the higher-rated papers from state assessments to find this kind of writing. One unintended consequence of the new SAT writing section may be this reversion to an outdated view of reality, a hyperstable, universalized view of human experience that has been under attack for the last century. It is a form of assertion that simply no longer rings true (and that will be hammered by college writing teachers).

George Hillocks Jr. has shown that another persistent problem with these types of prompts concerns *evidence*—the writer must instantly develop instances or examples to be used for support. In a sample of the released papers from the Texas state assessment, some of this evidence looks, well, manufactured. One eleventh-grade prompt asked students to write a letter to the editor taking a position on censoring music lyrics. Here is a section from one essay:

Another song with unacceptable lyrics is “O.P.P.” which was released by Naughty By Nature. The song promotes premarital sex and affairs outside of marriage. It has been proven that 4 out of every 5 girls who have premarital sex or affairs result in

pregnancy. Five out of every 8 women who have premarital sex are teenagers who listen to Naughty By Nature. My best friend, Beth, lives in Miami, Florida. She got pregnant last year at a party while listening to “O.P.P.” She now has a beautiful set of twins, but she is on welfare because her parents disowned her and her boyfriend left her. (Hillocks 75)

When I first read this essay, I imagined some free spirit, some rebel, flaunting the ethics of composition and inventing evidence to the point of parody. But when I shared this letter with a teacher from Texas, she assured me that students were coached to invent evidence if they were stuck. In my most cynical moment, I hadn’t expected that cause. And what is to stop these coached students from doing the same on the SAT writing prompt? Who would know?

My more reasonable, judicious, sensible colleagues point out that this new attention to writing is healthy, that teachers who had avoided writing will no longer be able to do so. They say writing prompts are not all bad. They remind me that there is a place for formulaic writing. They encourage me to sympathize with the difficulty of developing these writing tests. They say that the ETS is being a responsible force for educational improvement.

I’m taking the opposite position, though you’ll excuse me if I invent the evidence for my case.

Works Cited

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