



In practice session, three of readers give a sample essay grade of 1 in Organization category

On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment

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For Fran

Grace: An Acknowledgment

The numinous, Rudolph Otto believed, evokes three impulses: the sense that there is something wholly other in our lives (*mysterium*), that this otherness evokes a kind of awe (*tremendum*) and that this awe is mitigated with captivating grace (*fascinans*). Such has been the presence of this book in my life. The grace of others has moderated the fearful presence of an elusive topic.

Capturing the construct of writing and the techniques used to assess it is a process. Sometimes, the events emerging are familiar; other times, they recede into fog. Documentation involved time in the stacks at Princeton's Firestone Library and the archives at the Educational Testing Service. It involved structured interviews with specialists and a forest's worth of drafts. As a product, *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment* traces the ways that student writing has been viewed in American educational settings. Cases are drawn from the freshman class of 1874, when Harvard University first required applicants to submit an English composition, to the freshman class of 2005, when the College Entrance Examination Board required an essay as part of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Harvard's essay was designed to be taken by some 300 students; the SAT essay is designed to be taken by some 2,000,000 students. Often regarded as an allegory of oppression and protest, the history of writing assessment should also be understood as a narrative of community. In 1874 teachers came together in oak-lined rooms to read student essays resting on mahogany tables; in 2005, with essays floating on pixels, others will log into rooms without walls to read student compositions. As Alan C. Purves, perhaps the twentieth century's most subtle assessment practitioner, found in his last book, the basis of community is respect for individuality; even as modern consensus has eroded, the counterpoint of community—in this case, a writing assessment community—exists as an index of hope.

What was the United States like on the eastern seaboard when Harvard University elected to require each candidate to write a short composition on works of standard authors selected from a list that would be announced from time to time? What did the sponsors of that assessment hope to find? What did those who read those compositions think of them, and what definitions and expectations of ability did those readers hold? What were the actions of the communities involved, and how did those actions reveal dissatisfaction with both the rigidity of author lists and the flux of occasional

announcement? How was disagreement—on committee strategy and essay worth—resolved among sponsors? How did educators, embedded within a demographically exploding national system of commerce, comprehend their responsibilities? What was the impact of the new laboratory psychology on writing assessment at the century's beginning? What was the impact of the First World War? The Second? Of the fear of communism? Of the rise of long-silenced voices? What changes did those new voices inspire—or demand—as dialect blossomed and cities burned? Did the singular Harvard fathers understand writing ability in the same way as those thousands who designed and staffed assessment programs across the nation during the 1970s and 1980s? How can we tell? What premises remained, and what disappeared? What is the relationship between the technology of the computer (a world lit by lightning) and the technology of writing (a thought reified by chirography) in the assessment community of the early 21st century?

And how, within this enterprise, does one get out of the way of the narrative while knowing full well that the choice of narrative detail is itself an autobiographical act?

With help from one's friends. The composition of this book may have been an isolating process, but the product is the result of many whose desire was my success. That desire, of course, often took odd forms. Miriam Levin, Senior Examiner at ETS, was the first to find me out. "Ugh, ugh, ugh," she typed in a May 30, 1984, review of my wretched attempt to write an item for the Graduate Management Admission Test. "This is real gobbledygook. Hard to understand what in heaven's name is being talked about. This really makes no sense. The problem is a real nothing, too, so junk this, fast." Since I was reported to have some skill as a teacher of freshman composition, she sent me off to the archives to see what I could find about the history of writing assessment and, no doubt, to get me out from under foot. Twenty years later, I am still on that errand.

I have benefited greatly from the good (though often strong) will of my ETS colleagues over the years. The late Gertrude Conlan spent time explaining the premises of holistic scoring during the summer I had worked as an ETS temp to cover vacations, and both Paul Ramsey and Jill Burstein provided recent interviews for this book. Julie Duminiak worked tirelessly in the archives to help me find studies and photos; she made this project her own. At the College Board, Wayne Camara answered detailed questions and generously provided recent reports and studies; Brian Bremen of the University of Texas at Austin, a William Carlos Williams specialist helping to design the 2005 essay for the SAT, also provided an interview. Within

the university community, Lee Odell of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was generous with his time and his intellect. Leonard Podis of Oberlin College was a prince among series editors, always and everywhere a critical, encouraging reader. At New Jersey Institute of Technology, Robert Lynch and Burt Kimmelman read the manuscript, provided support generally associated with social services, and never once muttered a single ugh. At the Robert W. Van Houten Library at NJIT, Rhonda Greene-Carter filled every imaginable interlibrary loan request. The subtleties of quantitative measurement, the dangerous edge of things, were explained first to me at Texas A&M University-Commerce by Paul F. Zelhart and Maximino Plata and, later, by Margaret Kilduff, Marian Passannante, Bart K. Holland, and Frances Ward at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. Most recently, W. Patrick Beaton and Vladimir Brilller at NJIT have taken up the job of helping someone trained only to follow the trails of hounds, bay houses, and turtle-doves. Yet, to listen to Vlad (and to Paul, Max, Meg, Marianne, Bart, Fran, and Pat) you would think that scientific logic and humanistic understanding were practiced, at their best, by those who had equally heard the hound, the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud and were anxious to recover them. At Peter Lang, Phyllis Korper, Sophie Appel, and Bernadette Shade have been the best of editors and production coordinators. Mary Salerno remains an impresario of the computer and its products.

My wife, Frances Ward, gave me a place to come to, and the children in our combined family—Christian, Kathryn, James, Luke, Sarah, Jesse, Nicholas and Sophia—were, at once, both curious and amused that a grown man could become excited about something as dull as writing assessment. But they knew, as children always do, that by turning and turning we come round right

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