

NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities

The National Council of Teachers of English and the Council of Writing Program Administrators offer this statement, a white paper, on writing assessment in postsecondary education. This white paper is meant to help teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders articulate the general positions, values, and assumptions on writing assessment that both the National Council of Teachers of English and the Council of Writing Program Administrators jointly endorse. What follows is an articulation of common understandings and general agreements in the membership of both organizations on the following:

- The connections among language, literacy, and writing assessment
- The principles of effective writing assessment
- The appropriate, fair, and valid use of writing assessment
- The role and importance of reliability in writing assessment

Connections: Language, Literacy, and Writing Assessment

Writing instruction and literacy education at all levels are formal ways in which societies build citizens, and in which citizens develop reading and communication behaviors and competencies in order to participate in various communities. Learning to write better involves engaging in the processes of drafting, reading, and revising; in dialogue, reflections, and formative feedback with peers and teachers; and in formal instruction and imitative activities. A preponderance of research argues that literacy and its teaching are socially contextualized and socially constructed dynamics, evolving as people, exigency, context, and other factors change. The varied language competencies and experiences with which students come to the classroom can sometimes conflict with what they are taught or told to value in school. The assessment of writing, therefore, must account for these contextual and social elements of writing pedagogy and literacy.

Principles of Effective Writing Assessment

The principles of effective writing assessment that can take the form of classroom tests and grades or extracurricular exams measuring student writing ability are highly contextual, and should be adapted or modified in accordance with local needs, issues, purposes, and concerns of stakeholders. These assessments function across large-scale and classroom contexts and are used to make important decisions about students, curriculum, and teachers. Generally, there is agreement about the following principles that tend to be a part of effective, meaningful, and responsible writing assessment:

- **Writing assessment should place priority on the improvement of teaching and learning.** Writing assessment responds to student, teacher, institutional, and other

stakeholder needs. It should be used to foster environments for student learning. In placement testing, this principle might demand that administrators consider the local classroom conditions students will be entering after they have been placed into a writing course, or the places in the local communities from which students come.

- **Writing assessment should demonstrate that students communicate effectively.** The effectiveness of student performance should be connected to criteria relevant to the educational decisions the assessment is designed to facilitate. For example, in placement testing, student performance should indicate a readiness for the curriculum of the course in which the student is placed. In exit testing, student performance should indicate the completion of course goals and objectives and a readiness to write for the next course or courses in the curriculum. We acknowledge that writing assessment must communicate to a variety of stakeholders the essence of what we want students to learn and the evidence of such learning.
- **Writing assessment should provide the foundation for data-driven, or evidence-based, decision making.** In some cases, assessment is designed to improve student performance, and in others to improve teaching and curricula. The purposes for assessment differ depending on the desired results of the assessment project. Programs may assess end products of a student's semester-long work to consider how and whether that work demonstrates the outcomes for the course. Depending on the purpose of the assessment, results can be used to improve instruction at multiple points in the curriculum.
- **Writing assessment should be informed by current scholarship and research in assessment.** While writing assessment should be locally grown and implemented, those designing, implementing, and validating writing assessments should also stay informed of current developments in the fields of writing assessment, composition theory, and literacy studies. This means that those involved in writing assessment should be supported (financially and otherwise) to share and disseminate their own assessment and validation findings and work.
- **Writing assessment should recognize diversity in language.** The methods and language that teachers and administrators use to make decisions and engage students in writing, reading, responding, and revising activities should incorporate meaningfully the multiple values and ways of expressing knowledge by students present in the classroom and local communities. Assessments and the decisions made from them should account for students' rights to their own languages (see the Guideline approved by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974 and reaffirmed in 2003).
- **Writing assessment should positively impact pedagogy and curriculum.** Curriculum designers and teachers should attempt to understand and incorporate into instruction the ways in which the assessments can improve the curriculum and instruction in classrooms. Positive writing assessment takes into account the nature of writing as a social process and product, situated within particular contexts (e.g., classrooms or timed environments), and limited or shaped by these factors.
- **Writing assessment should use multiple measures and engage multiple perspectives to make decisions that improve teaching and learning.** These multiple measures and perspectives can include the use of several readers and the perspectives they bring to student texts. A single off-the-shelf or standardized test should never be used to make important decisions about students, teachers, or curriculum.

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- **Writing assessment should include appropriate input from and information and feedback for students.** Students should have access to the goals, purposes, and scoring criteria for required assessments. Students should also receive appropriate feedback for any important decisions made about them.
 - **Writing assessment should be based on continuous conversations with as many stakeholders as possible.** Developing, researching, and validating a writing assessment is a constant process, and one should expect the assessment, its results, and its products to change over time. Thus, it is important to have conversations about the assessment (e.g., dialogue about the features particular teachers notice in student portfolios in various courses).
 - **Writing assessment should encourage and expect teachers to be trusted, knowledgeable, and communicative.** Teachers should be the primary agents in writing assessment, and therefore need to be continually educated in writing assessment, to engage in dialogue with one another locally, and to find ways to gain the trust of the other stakeholders. Additionally, other stakeholders should support teachers in their efforts to become more knowledgeable about writing assessment and to communicate to all stakeholders involved.
 - **Writing assessment should articulate and communicate clearly its values and expectations to all stakeholders, especially students and, if applicable, parents.** Assessment should not be invisible, mysterious, or elusive to any stakeholders. There should be a variety of ways stakeholders can understand and be informed about the local writing assessment and its methods, findings, and products.

Appropriate, Fair, and Valid Use of Writing Assessment

The **Appropriate** use of writing assessment, whether in a classroom or large-scale context, means that it fits the context and decisions that will be made based on it. Appropriateness can also be understood as a measure of the decisions made. For example, when placing students into courses based on portfolio readings, one might ask—and measure in some way—how appropriate the decisions are (do students and teachers later find that the placements put students in the right places?). Appropriateness might also be considered regarding the kinds of evaluation/feedback provided, based on their purpose or use (e.g., grades, summative feedback, formative feedback, recorded audio responses, no responses, detailed annotations/marginalia, responses offered to the entire class and not individual students, etc.).

The **Fair** use of writing assessment is crucial, since it can be used to make important decisions about individuals. A concern for fairness should guard against any disproportionate social effects on any language minority group. Writing assessments that are used to make important decisions about individuals and the material and educational conditions that affect these individuals should provide an equal opportunity for students to understand the expectations, roles, and purposes of the assessment. For instance, if students have no recourse, or opportunities to respond to evaluations or judgments of their writing, or if they do not have any access to the criteria used to evaluate their writing or to the uses of the assessments of their writing, then those assessments may be unfair. Considering the fair use of power does not mean giving equal power to decide to all stakeholders in an assessment. It means all stakeholders should have as much power over the assessment as their particular roles and positions dictate they can have, considering the ethical and expedient administration of the assessment, and the purposes of judgments.

The **Valid** use of writing assessment decisions and evaluations is a complex and technical activity. “Validity refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by proposed uses of tests” (American 9). Every use of an assessment requires a validation inquiry in which an argument is made that the theoretical understanding of the assessment and the evidence the assessment generates support the decisions being made on behalf of the assessment. For example, if we use any method to place students into first-year writing courses, we must provide evidence that students are being correctly placed and profit from the educational experience. Questions such as how well students learn in each course of the curriculum must be answered in order to validate placement decisions. This inquiry-driven, researched-based activity is a required part of the **appropriate, fair, and valid** use of writing assessment.

Reliable Assessment

A reliable assessment provides consistent results, no matter who conducts the assessment. Because writing assessment often involves more than one rater scoring student performances, it can also involve interrater reliability, a measure of the degree of consistency from one rater judgment to another. A student’s score thus might depend upon the bias of the reader rather than upon the document or product being assessed. Attention to reliability is an integral part of any responsible validity argument.

Works Cited

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1999.

Conference on College Composition and Communication. “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” *College Composition and Communication* 25 (1974).