

On Grammar, Writing Style, and Writing Assessment:

A Look at the Grammatical Choices Made within Standardized and Computer Adaptive Testing

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Abstract

This study investigates a link between writing style (specifically stylistic options in sentence structure and word choice) and standardized test scores, reporting the results of a four year project comparing several standardized tests of English proficiency currently available in both paper-and-pencil and computer adaptive formats. The study focuses on students who were placed into developmental composition courses at a Midwestern college after failing to meet English proficiency standards, as judged by several standardized placement tests and by faculty readers of a freshman English writing sample. After the remedial composition course, the students were again asked for a writing sample, and 71% were judged competent freshman level college writers by the same faculty evaluators. However, standardized test scores on a host of different tests used in the study (including the Descriptive Test of Language Skills, the Test of Standard Written English and two newer computer adaptive tests) showed no statistically significant increase.

Careful study of the students' essays during the course of remediation reveals possible explanations for the discrepancy. First, remedial students seem to succeed with some portions of the writing process before others; e.g., invention is mastered before an ability to organize ideas. Secondly, remedial students are stylistically naive; i.e., they do not exploit nor are they aware of the full range of available alternatives in word choice or sentence structure. Finally, standardized tests, by their nature and their construction, seem best suited to test the portions of

the writing process learned last by developing (remedial) writers. The results of this study offer insights, then, into the writing process of developing (remedial) writers, into the most appropriate heuristic for remedial composition programs, and into the uses (and limits) of standardized tests and essay exams as methods of writing assessment.

1. Introduction

Just as many in our profession discuss the 'found' poem, I think of this effort here as a 'found' paper in the sense that it reports on some of my work establishing local norms for standardized tests both at Governors State University and now at the College of DuPage. Both institutions use standardized tests as placement tools in developmental English. And after completing a remedial English program, lasting from one to two semesters or quarters, students attempted a Competency Essay as a final exam. Gratifyingly for the developmental English composition instructors, the former remedial students were able to write sufficiently well 71% of the time to pass the Competency Essay examination. The Competency Essays were holistically evaluated by separate groups of English faculty.

However, when retested with the standardized instrument, the same former remedial students showed statistically insignificant increases in their standardized test scores. Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the average score and percentile rank before and after instruction at both institutions, at different times, using three different tests the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), the Descriptive Test of Language Skills (DTLS), and ETS' Computerized Placement Test (CPT).

TABLE 1

Governors State University Developmental English
Winter trimester of 1985 to the Spring/Summer trimester of 1986
N = 65 students

Average TSWE results before instruction:

Score 15 Percentile Rank 19

Average TSWE results after instruction:

Score 17.5 Percentile Rank 23

TABLE 2
College of DuPage Developmental Students
Fall quarter 1987 to Spring quarter 1989
N = 117

Average DTLS SENTENCE STRUCTURE results before instruction:
Score 15 Percentile Rank 13
Average DTLS SENTENCE STRUCTURE results after instruction:
Score 18 Percentile Rank 23

TABLE 3
College of DuPage Developmental Students
Fall quarter 1990 to Spring quarter 1992
N = 85

Average CPT SENTENCE SKILLS results before instruction:
Score 59 Percentile Rank 16
Average CPT SENTENCE SKILLS results after instruction:
Score 66 Percentile Rank 25

That discrepancy motivated me to examine our instruction in the remedial composition program (for one explanation says that the remedial composition instructors were 'teaching to the test') and to examine the form, function, and nature of those tests, all of which ostensibly "measured" students' writing ability yet produced such divergent results.

2. Three Generalizations about the Writing Process, Writing Style, and Standardized Tests

After collecting the syllabi from the programs' instructors, looking at the exercises and assignments, and visiting classes, I concluded that the discrepancies between the test scores could not be easily attributed to instruction; i.e., the instructors were not "teaching to the test."

Further (longitudinal) support for the assumption that the origins of the discrepancy rests with the nature (and uses) of the tests was collected from freshmen in developmental writing courses at the College of DuPage during the

1987-88 and 1988-89 academic years. All students registering for classes at the College of DuPage are required to participate in a testing and advising program. One of the placement tests the college uses in the placement and advising of students is another Educational Testing Service product, the "Sentence Structure" section of the Descriptive Test of Language Skills (1978).

One hundred seventeen students went through the developmental courses several instructors and I taught at the college during that time, and pre and postinstruction Usage test numbers below do not reflect a significant increase in writing proficiency during the period in which they were enrolled in my developmental writing sections. However, I followed the academic careers of all 117 students as they proceeded through the freshman English composition sequence (a full year of composition) at the college. All 117 earned passing grades.

Furthermore, Breland (1977) validated the multiple choice tests with writing samples. Other validity studies have focused on other criteria: grades earned in freshman English classes (Bailey, 1977; Michael and Shaffer, 1979) and one year measures of academic performance (Suddick, 1981 and 1982). So given the small number of students in this study, and given the post hoc nature of this study, I did not feel compelled to question the validity of standardized tests as a measure of writing proficiency. Instead, I thought it more useful to study both the writing sample and the standardized instruments for systematic differences that might explain the scoring discrepancies among remedial writers. With that goal in mind, I made the following three observations.

First, after reviewing two hundred essays written by different students in developmental English, I noted that the students mastered some portions of the writing process (such as invention and to a lesser extent organization) before other portions of the writing process (such as revision). There is nothing new, or surprising, here. Britton et al. (1975), Perl (1979), Rose (1980), and Mayher et al. (1983) all noted the same developmental tendencies.

Second, developmental writers seem stylistically naive: they often lack knowledge of the stylistic options available to them through the language, as is their knowledge of the functions those stylistic options serve, cf. Kies (1985a, 1985b, and 1990). The second point was first presented to me by a student, when she wrote the paragraph you see in example (1) below.¹

(1) However there were some negative experiences which I encountered. Some of the negative experiences were the inability of the foster parents to

attempt to understand many of the needs of these foster children. In my opinion, many of the parents living with these children need counselling or family counselling between the children and the foster parents in order to alleviate many of the lack of communications which were revealed which counselling some of these children such as lack of empathies listening from the parent's lack of support, in many of these children's problems which often would cause the child to give other forms of substitution, many of which were relating to some criminal tendencies such as petty theft, lack of interest in school studies, lack of modivation in general, a general feeling of not being loved and understood, which often was revealed to the counselor.

A schematic presentation of the third sentence in (1) demonstrates the difficulty more dramatically.

(1) MAIN CLAUSE

<u>Adverbial</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Object</u>
(Th1) <i>In my opinion</i>	many of the parents living with these children	need	(F1) <i>counselling or family counselling...</i>

INFINITIVE SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

<u>Subordinator</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Object</u>
(Th2) <i>in order</i>	to alleviate	many of the lack of (F2) <i>communications</i>

RELATIVE CLAUSE A

(Th3)*which* were (F3)*revealed*

RELATIVE CLAUSE B

(Th4)*which* counselling some of these children...in many of the children's
(F4)*problems*

RELATIVE CLAUSE C

(Th5)*which* often would cause a child to give other forms of (F5)*substitution*

RELATIVE CLAUSE D

(Th6)*many of which* were relating to some criminal (F6)*tendancies...*

RELATIVE CLAUSE E

(Th7)*which* often was revealed to the (F7)*counselor*.

The string of relative clauses in (1) have the form of subordinate constructions, yet they do not function as grammatically subordinate structures, what scholarly grammarians call hypotactic constructions. Rather, their function seems one of parataxis, that is as coordinated clauses. Notice how readily *and that* or *and those* can substitute for *which* in many of the relative clauses above.²

It seems to me that the use of 'paratactic' relative clauses in (1) above is not an isolated example; consider the examples in (2) through (4), where again the paratactic nature of the relative clause (hypotactic in form alone) is revealed through substitution with a coordinator and a pronoun to serve the function of grammatical subject, such as *and that*.

(2) Writing is one of my hobbies, *which* helps me to relax. [... *and that* helps me to relax.]

(3) A mask may be front of some sort, to *which* true identity is hidden. [... *and that* hides true identity.]

[NOTE: I must paraphrase the sentence in the active voice to allow for an agent subject *that*.]

(4) In high school my writing was worse because I could not write a well constructed sentence or a well constructed paragraph. *Which* made my *essay unacceptable*. In my free time, after I got out of high school, I would write a lot of sentences and paragraphs. This helped me to strengthen my writing. When I went to MATC, my english teacher helped me to strengthen my form of essay writing. *Which* I had thought I had improved in a lot. Now I think I can write an acceptable essay on almost any subject [NOTE: Italics added]. [... *And that* made my essay unacceptable. ... *And*

that I had thought I had improved in a lot.]

In addition to nonrestrictive relative clauses, a number of other 'subordinate' clauses also exhibit paratactic relationships to their 'main' clauses in the prose of college composition students, cf. (5) and (6).

(5) My teacher and I became such good friends, we call each other almost every week.

(6) My tooth hurt so bad, I was afraid it would have to be pulled.

Sentences (5) and (6) are ambiguous between hypotaxis (where an understood subordinator like that might introduce the second clause) and parataxis (where an understood coordinator like and might introduce the second clause).

Such ambiguous syntactic and semantic correspondences between hypotaxis and parataxis should not be completely unexpected, particularly in the prose of apprentice writers. In their *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk et al. note the semantic identity of many nonrestrictive relative clauses and coordinated constructions, as in (7) or (8).

(7) He met the chairperson, { who invited him to the meeting. }
and she invited him to the meeting. }

(8) Here come the Gladstone boys { , whom I mentioned to you yesterday. }
; I mentioned them to you yesterday. }

Third, many standardized test items probe the students' knowledge of stylistic options (and the pragmatic functions served by those options). Essentially, many items test the students' ability to revise for effective, appropriate use of the language. Consider, for example, (9) through (13), examples that 'mirror' TSWE

and DTLS items. (To preserve the copyright and the integrity of the test, all of the test examples here are 'TSWE-like' items.)

(9) Upon the dedication of the chairman rests the hopes for a satisfactory committee report.

- A) The hopes for a satisfactory committee report rests...
- B) The chairman's dedication rests ...
- C) Upon the dedication of the chairperson rests the hopes
- D) Upon the dedication of the chairman rests the hopes
- E) No error.

(Example 9 employs word order inversion as a distractor in order to probe the students' knowledge of subject-verb agreement.)

(10) Having watched the movie, the refrigerator provided us with a midnight snack, a fattening spread, the calories of which we gleefully ignored.

- A) Having watched the movie the refrigerator ...
- B) ...the refrigerator provided us with a fattening spread...
- C) Having watched the movie, we went to the refrigerator for a midnight snack...
- D) ...a fattening spread, and we ignored the calories.
- E) No error.

(Example 10 illustrates the "dangling" modifier construction.)

(11) A proposal by the steering committee was made to abolish the foreign language requirement.

- A) A proposal by the steering committee was made
- B) A steering committee proposal was made
- C) It was proposed by the steering committee
- D) The steering committee proposed

E) The steering committee proposal was

(Example 11 explores the students' understanding of the uses of active versus passive voice.)

(12) The restaurant has a friendly atmosphere, a clean kitchen, and its food is delicious.

- A) its food is delicious.
- B) delicious food.
- C) food delicacies.
- D) delights in good food.
- E) contains delicious food.

(Example 12 tests the students' awareness of parallelism.)

(13) One course in composition was considered to be enough and that it would ensure my passing the entrance exam.

- A) and that it would ensure my passing the entrance exam.
- B) , and that it would ensure my passing the entrance exam.
- C) , and that it would ensure me to pass the entrance exam.
- D) that it would ensure me passing the entrance exam.
- E) to ensure my passing the entrance exam.

(Example 13 uses poor coordination to focus on the students' ability to recognize effective subordination.)

Test items like (9) depend upon a student's recognizing and controlling word order inversion of a type common in formal, written English. Sentence (10) employs an appositive and a nonrestrictive relative clause as effective distractors from the 'real' modifier problem at the beginning of the sentence. Both the appositive and the nonrestrictive relative clause are stylistic options that developmental writers are struggling to control; hence the developmental writers, more than the stylistically fluent writers, may easily find themselves excessively

distracted by the 'difficult' and 'problematic' stylistic choices used in sentences (9) and (10).

A correct response to item (11) depends upon the test-taker's understanding the uses of (and biases against) the passive voice. Passive constructions offer a whole bevy of stylistic choices that are often poorly understood or ignored by writing pedagogues themselves, cf. Kies (1985b). So it is not surprising that developmental writers (among others) find nothing objectionable in (11) as written.

Sentences (12) and (13) are particularly interesting in that they focus on the stylistic differences between para and hypotactic constructions. Sentence (12), ostensibly an error in parallelism, seems completely acceptable if parataxis is the major pattern for clause linkage and if one wants to link two different, but related, topics what the restaurant is like and what its food is like. Similarly, the available answers for item (13), an example of 'awkward' coordination, would suggest that the hypotactic alternative (E) is superior to any paratactic version. Of course if parataxis is the primary strategy for linking clauses at this particular stage in a student's language development, then the student will be effectively distracted by issues of punctuation and pronoun case, trying to determine which paratactic revision is 'correct.'

Until now, we have looked at two paper-and-pencil tests. However, recently both ETS and ACT have developed computer adaptive placement tests, using the memory and programming power of computers to make accurate placement judgments in much shorter time. The two companies though use the computer very differently.

ETS' CPT asks the student to look at a series of 17 test items, putting one at a time on the screen. Many of the test items are a combination of those we looked at in (11) through (13), but the CPT also includes a new type of test item, an onscreen sentence and a prompt to rewrite mentally, as in (14) and (15).

The kind of revision that test items like (14) and (15) ask of students is just that kind of stylistic reformulation that lies at the heart of much of contemporary

composition pedagogy. Such an approach to the teaching of composition goes back at least to Christensen (1965) and has been advocated more recently by de Beaugrande (1985) and Cohen (1990). Schultz (1994) even advocates stylistic reformulation as one of the preferred teaching strategy in foreign language instruction. Unfortunately, stylistic reformulation also demands of the writer the very kind of syntactic manipulation that eludes the developmental English student, as the research of Hunt (1970), Shaughnessy (1977), Freeman (1979), and Kies (1990) has demonstrated.

(14) Since the Hubble telescope has a distorted main mirror, NASA plans to repair the device during a future space shuttle mission.

Rewrite, beginning with *NASA's plans to repair the Hubble telescope during a future space shuttle mission ...*

The next words will be

- A) were distorted
- B) by which they distorted
- C) are necessary by a distortion
- D) are the result of a distortion

(15) She believes that all politicians are corrupted by power and, as a consequence of that notion, she strongly endorses the movement for mandatory term limits.

Rewrite, beginning with *Mandatory term limits ...*

Your new sentence will include

- A) they resulted from
- B) the result was that
- C) caused her to believe
- D) because she believes

ACT's COMPASS Writing test puts an entire "essay" on the screen, as in (16). Students are asked to revise the essay. The students may move a pointer on the

screen to any phrase or clause, press the Enter key, and then choose an alternative form from a window that appears near the phrase or clause the student highlights, as in (17) and (18).

(16) Below is a mock example of an ACT COMPASS Writing Test essay as it initially appears on the screen. (For the example, I have adapted the opening paragraph of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.)

Start of Essay

One Kashmiri morning in the early Spring of 1915, my Grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air, and that they lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies. Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright. He found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had solidified too and at that moment as he brushed diamonds contemptuously away from his lashes he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision; however, made a hole in him a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history.

End of Essay

Notice that the paragraph contains some overt usage problems, like the sentence fragment midway through or the punctuation error in the third to last line. However, the test allows the student to revise any line of the paragraph simply by moving an onscreen pointer and pressing **Enter**.

Such freedom of choice may place the developmental writer at a distinct disadvantage. Unfamiliar with the syntactic potential of the language, developmental writers are frequently distracted by unusual, though perfectly acceptable, syntactic constructions. Consequently, they often find themselves revising a tempting distractor, while missing many of the real usage problems in

the test.

(17) Below is an example of how the ACT COMPASS Writing Test allows the student to edit the essay. If the student had moved the pointer to the first line and pressed Enter, s/he would then be presented with the following punctuation choices:

Start of Essay

One Kashmiri morning in the early Spring of 1915, my Grandfather Adam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray.
Three drops of

- A) One Kashmiri morning in the early Spring of 1915, my *
- B) One Kashmiri morning; in the early Spring of 1915, my
- C) One Kashmiri morning, in the early Spring of 1915; my
- D) One Kashmiri morning in the early Spring of 1915 my

* No change: this answer appears in the essay now.

in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history.

End of Essay

(18) This is another example of how the ACT COMPASS Writing Test allows the student to edit the essay. Notice how the test allows students to correct this parallelism problem once they have pointed to it:

Start of Essay

One Kashmiri morning in the early Spring of 1915, my Grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air, and that they lay before his eyes on the prayermat, transformed into rubies. Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright. He found that the

- A) air, and that they lay before his eyes *
- B) air; and that they lay before his eyes
- C) air. They lay before his eyes
- D) air, and lay before his eyes

* No change: this answer appears in the essay now.

in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history.

End of Essay

As diverse as the examples in (14) through (18) are, they all illustrate the computerized placement tests' emphasis on revision – that portion of the writing process least under control by developmental writers.

3. Conclusions

After considering those three generalizations that developmental students master revision later, that they are stylistically naive, and that standardized tests probe the students' knowledge of stylistic options I concluded therefore that the discrepancies in the test results between the standardized tests and the writing samples resulted from a convergence of various factors of language development on the one hand and test design on the other. By the end of their composition instruction, the remedial writers developed some proficiency at invention and organization, while still learning to cope with revision, with issues of style and form issues that arise later in the writing process. Coupling that new proficiency with a limited but sufficient understanding of the conventions of the written language, the developmental writers were able to pass impromptu essay examinations. (After all, under time pressure, students are not expected to revise impromptu essays substantially.)

However, given a standardized test, those same developmental writers' scores improved insignificantly after their remedial instruction. It seems to me that standardized tests, by design, do not effectively evaluate a writer's capability with invention or organization, focusing instead on revision (the last stage of the writing process to be mastered by developing writers).

In this era of 'accountability' and 'outcomes assessment,' it is often crucial not only for English instructors but also for entire programs to be able to document (to 'measure') the 'growth' of developing writers for deans or boards of trustees or taxpayers. These results suggest that writing samples or portfolios are more appropriate than multiple choice tests as instruments to evaluate remedial writers at the college level, even though they are much less convenient for the institution.

Notes

¹ All of the examples in (1) through (6) are drawn from students' essays.

² See Kies (1990) for more discussion of the distinction between para- and hypotaxis in the prose of college composition students.

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Appendix A

ENGLISH COMPETENCY ESSAY EXAMINATION GUIDELINES

A. Standards

The English Competency Essay tests your ability to respond in a reasoned, well-organized, and specific fashion to topics and questions like those discussed in the college classroom. You are expected to write a formal expository (informative, explanatory) essay of about six or eight double-spaced bluebook pages to demonstrate your mastery of both composition and grammar.

This essay must accomplish the following:

1. It must respond to the stated topic.
2. It must have a clearly stated controlling idea (thesis or topic statement).
3. It must show clear, logical organization of ideas.
4. It must include supporting details drawn from experience, observation, and/or reading.
5. It must show that you can correct and edit your own writing. Paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics of Edited American English the conventional written language of college-educated writers will all be counted. Essays written in excessively simple "primer style" prose will not be considered acceptable.

B. Writing

Take a few minutes to think before you write. Make notes or a working outline, or write down on a scratch sheet ideas you may otherwise forget as you compose your essay. You have sixty minutes.

Do not recopy your essay. Make a special effort to write legibly; take a few minutes to proofread and edit your essay before you turn it in. Correct by crossing out your errors and inserting the correction above.

C. Reminders

You are writing an expository essay that will be judged on your ability to write a thoughtful response that gives evidence for your position and point of view.

Essays that are basically narrative (stories) or purely descriptive are not acceptable. However, you may use short narrative examples or brief passages of description based on your personal experience or observations to support the major points of your essay. Please remember that we judge both what you say and how well you say it in a publicly effective written form.

Appendix B

COMPETENCY EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH

Select one of the following three topics for the writing examination. Write an essay (NOT a story) that demonstrates your ability to respond in a reasoned, well-organized, and specific fashion to the topic that you select. Your essay should demonstrate your mastery of both composition and grammar. Before writing your essay, remember

- a) to take a few minutes to discover and write a brief outline of your initial ideas about the topic (use the back of this exam),
- b) to organize those ideas into a coherent essay supporting your main point, and
- c) to save a few minutes at the end for proofreading and revising your essay.

REMEMBER: Your goal is to argue your point of view by using specific examples to back up your ideas.

EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

1. Stress is a fairly typical emotion one can experience whether anticipating a weekend vacation or worrying about a week of final examinations (or this competency essay!). In short, there is good and bad stress. Unfortunately, your body reacts the same to each kind of stress. Select a job or activity that produces stress for you or someone you know well. Examine it carefully, and then write an essay in which you analyze the causes that produce the stress. Remember: don't just describe stress or "what it is." You must argue a particular point of view and

back it up with specific examples.

2. Select a word that has particular meaning for you, or a word that you have encountered in a specific way: trash, glitter, smile, education, or another of your own choice. (Try to avoid highly abstract words like truth or ethics.) First, define the word according to your own viewpoint and be prepared to defend your point of view. You might wish to write a series of negative definitions (trash is not...) or comparisons (glitter may seem to be like..., but it is not...). In all, define the term according to your own views, and identify several examples from your personal experience that can help clarify the word's meaning. Use your examples to defend and support your viewpoint your thesis.

3. Select one of the largely unquestioned assumptions you've encountered somewhere along the line and challenge its validity, such as a statement like "Cats are aloof," or "A liberal arts degree is useless in today's job market," or "Flowers will grow better if you talk and sing to them." Jot a few notes to help you substantiate, qualify, or negate the claims in question. Then, write an essay entitled "The Truth About _____," or something to that effect. Remember to argue a specific point of view with specific examples to back it up.