

Writing Skills Assessment is Important

By Kathleen Riley-King

"When we arrived at Capital College, most of us had been speaking English since we were about a year old; we had been writing since age 6; we had completed several college-level English courses, and were at least in our third year of college. By this point in our lives, we felt that we had mastered the English language fairly well.

Then, we were told that we had to take the Writing Skills Assessment (WSA).

At the least, some of us were annoyed. "I thought it was a pain" said one agitated education major.

Some of us felt insulted. Others of us were angry. And when some of us were told that our writing was poor the anger escalated.

Even those of us who did well on the assessment became speculative or skeptical. We wondered about the purpose of such an assessment.

"It doesn't really tell anything," said an engineering student.

"There must be a purpose in it," said a humanities major.

But what is that purpose? And is the assessment accurate?

I sought some answers.

First I wanted to know how the assessment was scored. Joanne Smith, director of the Writing Lab illuminated the process.

Using last fall as an example, she explained that there had been 18 evaluators, all of whom had completed the Summer Writing Institute, a six credit course on teaching writing as a process. The evaluators included Harrisburg Area Community College faculty, high school writing teachers, and writing teachers from Capital College.

Professor Donald Wolf instructed the evaluators as to what to look for. Each assessment was then read by two readers. If the two did not agree on the scoring, a third reader became involved.

The assessments were evaluated using holistic scoring, which involved looking at the sample as a whole and determining if it was successful overall. Then, the evaluators looked at grammar, which was not the main factor in scoring the sample, Smith said.

To me, this method seemed fair, but then a student told me that during her first two years of college she had been in an excellent writing program and had won a writing award. She received a low WSA score.

A second student reported a similar experience.

Tutor Joan Klein said that once or twice students had come to the Writing Lab with low WSA scores, and she had found their writing to be acceptable. Such instances are rare, she

added.

Smith said that the WSA is not foolproof and that it is not the only way to evaluate a student's writing ability. However, she feels that it is the only way to handle the approximately 600 students who must be evaluated each semester.

"Usually these [WSA's] are valid," she said.

Then she showed me her calculations of the WSA scores for both the fall of 1986 and the fall of 1987. Between 650 and 700 students had taken the WSA each semester. Of that number, approximately 30 percent had scores that were marginal, unacceptable, or deficient.

She also explained how the WSA was initiated. "We started it...because we got so much feedback from professors that the students were not able to successfully complete either a laboratory assignment or a term paper or an essay test," she said.

By 1985, the faculty in each division had voted to have the WSA, Smith said.

With so many students having writing problems of some sort, I could understand why the WSA is given. Smith and the tutors elaborated on the reasons.

"I think a lot of students feel that they can write...and suddenly they're getting hit right between the eyes with

nasty grades, and the Writing Skills Assessment is a sieve with which to catch these people before they get into serious trouble," said Klein.

Another reason, Smith said, is "we're trying to say that when you get a degree from Penn State it means you can write. We're not saying anything's wrong with another school, but we have a set standard at this school, and we are saying that we want the students, our students, to meet this standard."

According to Smith, each division determines what a low score on the WSA means. For example, in the education division, students may be prevented from student teaching if their scores are below a certain level.

Smith said that she only makes recommendations, the final decision lies with each division.

The tutors and Smith also quickly pointed out several little-known facts about the WSA. First, Smith said, when students take the WSA, they have been already been accepted at Capital College, and if they score low, they will not be expelled from school.

Second, according to Smith and Ronda Graby, a student worker at the Writing Lab, students may retake the WSA.

Third, the WSA is almost

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What You Should Know About the Lab

What is the purpose of The Writing Lab?

According to Joanne Smith, director, The Writing Lab, its purpose is:

- * to provide a tutorial service for undergraduate and graduate students,
- * to administer the Writing Skills Assessment (WSA),
- * to provide the WSA results to all of the divisions,
- * to provide clinics, and
- * to provide in-class presentations and writing papers.

What resources are available at The Writing Lab?

Besides the tutorial service, the Lab has handouts on the writing forms accepted in the engineering and business worlds, and it has books and other aids on how to write papers, reports, and letters. "It's almost like a library," says tutor Barbara Myers.

Who goes to The Writing Lab?

Anyone who wants to improve his or her writing skills may use the Lab. Both students who struggle with writing and students who write well use the Lab. Students who just wish to have someone look over a paper or a resume also use the Lab. However, students who have been referred to the Lab have a choice: to use it, not to use it, or to get help elsewhere.

Are the tutors who work there qualified?

The tutors are either humanities graduate students or college graduates who have taught English or who have had extensive professional experience, Smith says. Last Fall, they attended a two-hour training session.

Does it cost anything to use The Writing Lab?

No, the service is free to all students.

Will my visits to The Writing Lab be confidential?

Yes. "We do not release the names of the students to people," Smith says.

How do I contact the Lab?

The Writing Lab is located in W-242 Olmsted and has the following hours:

Monday	9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Tuesday	9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Wednesday	9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
	6 p.m. - 8 p.m.
Thursday	9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

If you want to use the Lab's resources, stop by W-242 or call 948-6355 to make an appointment. If these hours do not suit, a special appointment may be possible.

Meet the Lab Personnel

When I walked into W-242 to talk to Joanne Smith, director, The Writing Lab, I was greeted by a sprightly woman. She ushered me to a chair and as I waited for a moment while she talked to a student worker, a staccato of voices resounded in my ears, bringing to mind a crowded subway station.

As we talked, she explained the voices, "the personality of the Lab is all the people that are here."

I decided to hear what some of the voices had to say.

About why they tutor:

Barbara Myers: "I'm a professional writer. . .and I enjoy all the aspects of writing, and I really enjoy the one-to-one relationship that you develop with the student."

Janice Barnes: "Mrs. Smith asked me! I would guess because I feel that I can help students to achieve a better quality. . .of the level of their writing, and that, somehow, is very satisfying."

Joan Klein: "I love working with young people."

About the Lab:

Barbara Myers: "I think the unfortunate thing is that students look at it as a place they don't want to be rather than as a resource place."

Student humanities major: "I think it's very useful. The tutors were very good."

Joan Klein: "It's a useful tool to have. . .and it's not something that is

as demanding of their [the students'] time as a class is."

Joanne Smith: "I think everyone should use it. . . Just because you're an A student or you've done well on the writing sample doesn't mean you don't have questions about how to do a paper better."

Janice Barnes: "It's almost specialized training. . . It is an opportunity which they [the students] don't want to miss."

Joan Klein: "Tutoring costs, if done privately. . .probably between \$10 and \$15 an hour, and this is free to . . .students."

About the students who go to the Lab:

Janice Barnes: "So far, everyone that I have worked with has been very congenial and very open and warm and receptive to my help. For that I'm very appreciative."

Barbara Myers: "Actually, I've found most of the people that I have [worked with] are very glad to be here."

Joanne Smith: "They've come here angry. . . You know what? Some of them won't leave. They're going to come this next whole semester. I've had three of them this week that said they want to continue to come."

About the success of the Lab:

Joanne Smith: "The kind of success we have is generally not instant. . . We have lots of stories of

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