

The English Examiner: A Helpful Solution

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It is generally acknowledged that many students in graduate schools today are poor writers. Their presence raises the question of whether there are ways of identifying them and getting assistance to them without turning to solutions such as setting writing course requirements for graduate students, solutions that are expensive and impractical, especially for larger graduate programs.

In 1970, the Graduate College at Iowa State University, concerned about evidence of poor writing ability among graduate students, instituted a program that should be of interest to directors of writing programs. It represents a relatively inexpensive, fairly easily implemented, and reasonably effective method of dealing with the problem. The program applies only to students whose native language is English.

One member of the English department is given the title of Graduate English Examiner. The person selected receives a one course reduction to handle the responsibilities of the program. One function of the examiner is to work with incoming graduate students who are screened for writing ability. The students' undergraduate records are checked to determine whether they achieved a "B" average in a sequence of two undergraduate freshman English courses. Those who did not earn a "B" average are required to take a writing proficiency test, consisting of a one-hour examination in which the student writes a paper of at least 250 words on a provided topic. Members of the English graduate faculty rate the papers as "pass," "weak pass," or "not pass." One faculty member other than the English examiner gives a second rating to all papers marked "weak pass" or "not pass." He will let the rating stand or revise it as he sees fit.

To be marked as "pass," a paper must be at a C- level or higher by Iowa State freshman English standards. Normally the "fail" rate runs from 20% to 25%. Students cannot schedule their oral examinations unless their records show that they have passed the test and are certified as proficient in written exposition.

Students whose papers are rated as "weak pass" are cautioned and given the suggestion that they discuss their paper with the examiner and perhaps bring other samples of their written work for assessment. Students who do not pass are assisted in different ways, depending on the nature and the seriousness of the problem. A very few whose problems

are relatively minimal are simply cautioned and advised to return at a later date for assessment of material they are writing. Students with somewhat more serious problems are given the option of doing another timed writing sample or of bringing in current manuscripts they are working on as part of their class work. To achieve certification of writing proficiency in this latter way, they must demonstrate more than minimal competency. The C- standard no longer pertains. Students with still more serious problems must demonstrate at least minimal competency in additional timed writing sessions.

An important aspect of the program is that once students achieve certification of competency, they are encouraged to make appointments later with the examiner for assessments of the writing aspects of their papers, especially if their passing mark was not high. They will realize that the attainment of a C- in a timed writing is not a strong basis for the kind of confidence in writing that they should carry into their professional lives. A number of students do in fact return for additional suggestions and help.

This screening and testing now represents about one half of the examiner program. When I assumed the position several years ago, I took advantage of opportunities to expand it. In addition to working with the students who fail the proficiency test, I have done general consulting. Graduate students who want assessments of their writing, who want editorial suggestions on theses, dissertations, or on work they plan to submit for publication are encouraged to make appointments with me. I also arrange for a few students each term to take an intensive, individualized 3-hour professional writing course that carries minor graduate credit.

The desire among students to take advantage of the consulting help is fairly strong. During one quarter, after I raised my "profile" on campus, I had 160 meetings with students with various problems, some seriously deficient in writing skills, some admirable perfectionists who were not satisfied with producing merely passable prose. At Iowa State the motive for seeking help is sharpened by the fact that the Graduate College will reject theses and dissertations passed by committees if the writing is haphazard. That point needs emphasis because it has general application, by the way. Writing problems in educational institutions cannot be solved by simply dumping them on an English Department and hoping for the best. To be effective, the efforts of English departments need more than just pat-on-the-back support from other university divisions.

The routine aspects of administration for a program such as this one could be worked out in many ways. At Iowa State, the Graduate College pays the one-third salary of the examiner and handles most of the paperwork: letters, announcements, record keeping and dissemination of results. The graduate office is responsible for hiring the examiner and working with him/her to maintain the program.

The less-routine aspects of administration are, obviously, more complicated. Some students who receive a "not pass" notice are upset and embarrassed, and patience and sensitivity are necessary in dealing with them. For the most part, however, they are highly motivated graduate students, most of whom realize that their writing abilities are weak. They will respond in productive ways once they discover that no students have ever failed to pass, that the program is not a major "threat," and that it has many positive aspects. Some have told me that they were glad they failed and received the help.

The examiner program has some limitations, several of which are probably already apparent. A major limitation is time. One faculty member devoting one-third of his or her time could never be entirely effective in resolving all of the problems, but expansion of any academic programs during economic times such as these is out of the question. The most serious limitation is the screening system used to determine which students must take the writing test. I have dealt with numerous graduate students who had "B" averages in their undergraduate writing courses and who therefore were not required to take the proficiency test, but whose writing was appallingly bad. The grading standards for freshman English vary so widely across the country that the "B" average becomes a very uncertain criterion to determine who must write the proficiency test. One of the larger departments on campus requires all of its graduate students to take the proficiency test. Roughly 10% of the students from this department, who would not normally have had to take the test because they had the "B" average, fail the examination.

We are now attempting to validate a machine scored test which may make it possible to screen a larger number of students. The test is modeled on various other objective tests described in the literature and used as aids for general screening and placement purposes. These are summarized in an Iowa State dissertation (Carol S. David, *Evaluating an Instrument for Testout in a Business Communication Course*, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1981). Such a test might make it possible to identify and get assistance to more of the weak writers before they reach the thesis or dissertation stage. Also, if we do eventually screen more students we will be able to report with more accuracy the dimensions of the problem of poor writing among graduate students. I for one do not believe we will find the problem to be epidemic—some admirable technical and professional prose has crossed my desk—but I am equally certain we will discover the problem is too serious to disregard. In fact, our present figures, though incomplete, support this conclusion.

The system requires a small amount of more or less "gratuitous" input into a service area from English faculty members who give the ratings to the writing samples, but the burden is slight and support in the English department for the program is strong. The examiner, in dealing with the students, carries the weight of the program as a paid colleague.

The advantages of having the English Examiner on campus are sufficiently obvious as to require no extensive elaboration here. The program is not expensive: it requires minimal paper work and one-third of the salary of one professor. Graduate faculty members from the various departments have a person to whom they can refer students who are weak writers. One advantage is simply in the fact that the program exists, and in saying that I do not wish to appear facetious. The existence of the consulting program and the writing test serves as a tangible reminder to graduate students that writing ability is a valuable and necessary attribute in all disciplines at Iowa State.



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