



Report of the Task Force on Writing Assessment

The City University of New York

June 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	2
Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	8
CUNY Assessment Principles.....	9
Stages of Test Development.....	10
Definition of Writing.....	11
The CUNY Writing Proficiency Measurement Construct and Scoring Rubric	12
Writing Task Design and Approach to Scoring	13
Writing Prompt Specifications	13
Sample Writing Prompt.....	15
Recommendations of the Task Force on Writing Assessment.....	16
APPENDICES.....	20
Appendix A	21
Appendix B	22

Executive Summary

In January 2009, the Task Force on Writing Assessment was charged by Executive Vice Chancellor Alexandra Logue with reviewing the current instrument used for assessing students' readiness for college level writing with a view to selecting an existing test or developing the specifications for a new writing assessment. The current writing assessment, the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample, had previously been reviewed by the Task Force on Reading and Writing (2005), as part of its broader study of the policies, curricula, and pedagogies that shaped developmental instruction in reading and writing at CUNY. This 2005 Task Force recommended that the writing test be redesigned to improve its use as an exit assessment from developmental and ESL writing course sequences.

In its consideration of a new test, Vice Chancellor Logue charged the Task Force on Writing Assessment to assure that the test:

- 1) Be aligned with the New York State English Regents, the SAT and the CUNY Proficiency Examination (CPE);
- 2) Measure readiness for writing assignments typical of freshman composition and other introductory and general education credit-bearing courses;
- 3) Reflect a judgment by the Task Force as to whether the same test should be used both for placement and exit; and
- 4) Be feasible to administer and score.

In addition, Vice Chancellor Logue asked the Task Force to consider whether the new test might assess both reading and writing in the same instrument.

In response to its charge, the Task Force endorsed the development of a new writing assessment and completed the task of developing the specifications for a new instrument, the Aligned Assessment of Writing – including a test prototype – that can be used as the basis for developing further test forms. The rationale for the specifications and prototype are described in detail in this report.

The work of the Task Force was guided by three documents: the CUNY Assessment Review Report (Spring 1996); the Report of the Task Force on Reading and Writing (November 2005), led by Deans David Crook and Judith Summerfield; and *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999) by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

In particular the Task Force worked to adhere to the first principle of assessment set forth in the CUNY Assessment Review Report: to create an assessment instrument that would provide information to students and instructors on student writing competence, with feedback to students on their performance and to instructors for diagnosis and placement of students within a writing curriculum.

Following test development practice recommended in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (1999, p.37), the Task Force began by delineating “the purpose(s) of the test and the scope of the construct to be measured.” Toward this end, an extensive review of writing assessment programs and research was conducted with input from two writing assessment consultants, Dr. Sandra Murphy and Ms. Rosanne Cook. The result was a measurement construct that defined for the Task Force the dimensions of assessing college-level writing readiness, and a corresponding rubric that describes performance levels within each dimension.

The rubric (which appears in Appendix B) describes 5 skill areas of performance: 1) ability to form a critical response to a text; 2) development of ideas with supporting evidence; 3) coherence in the structure of the response; 4) control of sentence structure and vocabulary; and 5) control of grammar, usage and mechanics. These dimensions are not unique to this rubric and appear under various labels and combinations in other large scale writing assessments and research studies.¹ After reviewing extensive surveys of college faculty expectations and deconstructing their own practice, the Task Force chose these dimensions to capture college instructors’ evaluation of student writing in general education courses and in CUNY’s writing programs.

Once the rubric was developed, the Task Force focused on the specifications for a prompt to elicit valid writing samples. The Task Force made a decision that the assessment instrument would be a performance test (as opposed to an indirect measure such as a multiple choice test) to better enable diagnostic decisions about writing performance as well as to adopt a format that matches the goal of developmental writing courses. Responding to the demands of college-level writing and the writing requirements of general education courses, the Task Force also decided that the writing sample should be produced in response to ideas in a reading passage. This approach would align the new test format with course writing assignments and with Task 1 of the CPE.

In refining the specifications for the writing prompt, the Task Force focused on maintaining comparability of reading passages across test forms and drafting writing task directions to elicit writing samples that can be evaluated across all five rubric dimensions. The Task Force also sought to minimize the possibility of formulaic or tangential, off-the-subject writing.

Recommendations of the Task Force on Writing Assessment

At the conclusion of its deliberations, the Task Force made the following recommendations:

¹ The Task Force’s thinking was particularly influenced by the overview of validity research presented in Murphy, S. & Yancey, K. (2007), Construct and Consequence: Validity in Writing Assessment, in C. Bazerman (Ed.) *Handbook of Writing Research: History, Society, School, Individual, Text* (pp. 361-381), New York: Lawrence Erlbaum and in the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California (Spring 2002), *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California’s Public Colleges and Universities*.

Recommendation 1. The Office of Academic Affairs should endorse the further development of the new Aligned Assessment of Writing proposed by the Task Force on Writing Assessment.

The current writing assessment instrument, the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample does not provide an effective evaluation of entering student writing since it does not present a writing task congruent with the demands of college-level writing in the general education curriculum at CUNY or represent a first standard for college-level writing that will culminate in the CPE. While the persuasive writing called for in response to the writing task of the current test is one appropriate form of college writing, most writing assignments in general education courses are analytic, most often requiring students to summarize or compare texts or to apply theories or methods to new material. Since the current test's writing task is not text-based and is limited to persuasive writing, it also does not connect effectively to the curriculum of developmental writing or ESL courses designed to bring students who previously failed the placement test to college-level writing standards.

The new Aligned Assessment of Writing, in contrast, was developed in line with college faculty expectations and practices regarding their writing assignments. It consists of a reading passage and a writing assignment based on the ideas expressed in the passage. In asking students to respond to ideas embedded in a text, this new writing assessment requires students to employ the critical thinking skills common to their introductory discipline-based courses and conforms to the kinds of written work called for in general education courses across the curriculum.

Recommendation 2. The Task Force recommends that additional time be added to the administration of the proposed Aligned Assessment in Writing.

Currently, students responding to the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample are limited to 60 minutes. The proposed new assessment uses a reading passage as the basis for the writing assignment thereby increasing the challenge to students' critical thinking and writing skills. To provide students, especially ESL students, an equitable opportunity to demonstrate these more complex skills, an additional 30 minutes should be added to the test period assigned for the administration of the writing assessment.

Recommendation 3. The Task Force recommends that students' responses to the Aligned Assessment of Writing be evaluated by a standard embodied in an analytical scoring rubric.

The Task Force endorsed an analytical rubric for two principal reasons: the dimensions chosen for evaluation – critical response to a text, development and support of ideas, coherence in the structure of the response, control of sentence structure, and control of grammar, usage, and mechanics - reflect college faculty's expectations for college-level writing, and the separate scoring for each dimension provides detailed diagnostic information about students' performance to be shared with both students and teachers. This recommendation fulfills the CUNY Assessment Review Report definition of the primary purpose of assessment as a basis for teaching and learning.

Recommendation 4. The Task Force recommends that forms of the same writing test, the Aligned Assessment of Writing, be used to evaluate students for initial placement in writing courses and for exit-testing for students registered in top-level writing and ESL courses.

The Board of Trustees mandates (1997,1999) dealing with the implementation of writing assessment define the purpose of such testing as the determination of students' college readiness.² In the implementation of the new Aligned Assessment of Writing, students and faculty need to understand that students must meet the same standard of competence when they are assessed initially for purposes of placement as when their college readiness is assessed at exit from developmental or ESL sequences. For this reason, the Task Force concluded that the test used for exit should be of the same nature and difficulty and assess the same skills as the test used for determining initial placement.

Recommendation 5. The Task Force recommends that the University continue to administer separate instruments to assess students' reading and writing competence.

Although the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing includes a reading passage as the basis of the writing assignment, and the analytic rubric includes a dimension that is based on reading comprehension, the Task Force does not think that the new test should be used both as a test of writing and a test of reading. Using students' responses to a single short passage to determine their competence would not be a valid measure of their ability to read and understand texts at the introductory college-level.

Recommendation 6. The Task Force recommends that prototypes for the new Aligned Assessment of Writing be pilot-tested during Summer 2009.

The purpose of this pilot testing is to confirm that the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing meets the requirements outlined in the charge to the Task Force that a new writing test:

- 1) Be aligned with the New York State Regents Examination in English; the SAT and ACT college entrance examinations; and the CUNY Proficiency Examination;
- 2) Measure readiness for writing assignments typical of freshman composition and other introductory and general education courses;
- 3) Reflect the judgment of the Task Force that the same test be used for both placement and exit;
- 4) Be feasible to administer and score.

Recommendation 7. The Task Force recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs regularly monitor the rubric and prompt specifications for alignment with CUNY's writing curricula.

² The relevant Board resolutions focus skills testing on "the improvement of placement testing" (September 1997) and on the definition of "the necessary level of preparation in basic skills" (September 1999).

To assure faculty and students that the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing continues to fulfill its purpose, remaining aligned with CUNY's curriculum in developmental and college-level writing courses as well as with its pedagogical and writing evaluation practices, the Task Force recommends that the rubric and prompt specifications be subject to regular review and revisions using data gathered from field testing and future live test sessions.

Recommendation 8. The Task Force recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs conduct studies to monitor and, if necessary, improve the construct validity of the proposed Aligned Assessment Test of Writing.

To assess the construct validity of the proposed test, the Task Force recommends that regular studies be carried out to compare score results from the new test with performance on other standardized measures of writing. The Task Force also recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs review additional measures of writing assessment, such as objective tests, that might add significantly to the quality of the placement and exit decisions CUNY makes.

Introduction

In 2005 the Task Force on Reading and Writing conducted a broad study of the policies, instructional formats and pedagogies that shaped developmental instruction in reading and writing at CUNY. This Task Force recommended that a new writing test be designed that would be more suitable for exit testing, that is, for determining whether students were ready for the demands of college-level writing at the conclusion of their developmental or top-level English as a Second Language (ESL) writing courses. To fulfill this recommendation, in January 2009 Vice Chancellor Alexandra Logue convened a Task Force on Writing Assessment, charging it to either select an existing test, or to develop specifications for a new writing assessment. She stipulated that their deliberations, focused on an initial test development process, should be completed by June 1, 2009, and that the test they selected or designed must:

- Align with the New York State English Regents examination, the SAT, and the CUNY Proficiency Examination (CPE);
- Measure readiness for writing assessments typical of freshman composition and other introductory and general education credit-bearing courses;
- Reflect a judgment by the Task Force as to whether the same test should be used both for placement of students into remediation, and to determine whether they are ready for exit from it;
- Be feasible to administer and score, given existing technical and logistical constraints;

In addition, Vice Chancellor Logue asked the Task Force to consider whether the new test might assess both reading and writing in the same instrument.

The Task Force was led by Dr. Raymond Moy, Director of Assessment in the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, and consisted of representatives from college-level and developmental writing, reading, and ESL programs and discipline councils, Writing Across the Curriculum, and the University's opportunity programs, SEEK and College Discovery. All six community colleges were represented, along with one representative from a senior college and one from a comprehensive college. The Task Force also included a psychometrician from the Educational Psychology Department of the Graduate Center (a list of the participants, their titles, and responsibilities appears in Appendix A).

The Task Force met ten times between January and May 2009 and spent a considerable amount of time discussing the nature of writing skills, defining college readiness, and considering various methods of assessing writing.

The work of the Writing Assessment Task Force was guided by three documents: the *CUNY Assessment Review Report* (Spring 1996); the *Report of the Task Force on Reading and Writing* (November 2005) led by Deans David Crook and Judith Summerfield; and *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, a joint publication by the American Educational Research Association, the American

Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (1999).

The Task Force reviewed writing assessment studies, the writing assessment instruments available from major testing organizations and assessments developed by institutions of higher education. In support of their review, the Task Force had at hand a survey, conducted in Summer 2008 by the Office of Assessment, of writing tests administered nationally at the high school, state, and college levels. In the survey, writing assessments were analyzed in terms of structure, content, logistical feasibility, and compatibility with the assessment needs of CUNY's diverse student body.

To assist its work, the Task Force retained two nationally known writing assessment experts: Dr. Sandra Murphy of the University of California, Davis, and Ms. Rosanne Cook, an independent consultant who had developed a number of major writing assessments when she was employed with ACT, Inc.

CUNY Assessment Principles

The Task Force sought to design an assessment that would adhere to the principles of assessment set forth in the *CUNY Assessment Review Report*. These principles highlight the following key issues:

- The chief goal of assessment as being the facilitation of teaching and learning; and the necessity that the primary effects of assessment be salutary for students
- Alignment between the content and design of the test and the pedagogical objectives of writing faculty within the developmental and general education curricula;
- The crucial role of faculty in the design, evaluation and application of the assessment;
- The necessity for extensive institutional support in administration and implementation of the test;
- The notion that the design, development, and evaluation of the assessment should be a university-wide endeavor encompassing the educational needs of individual colleges, faculty, staff and students.

In its deliberations the Task Force placed great emphasis on the first issue – that the writing assessment provide specific feedback to students about their learning progress and that it should have positive curricular impact (consequential validity). It should also ensure that instructors have the information necessary to properly place students in a writing curriculum.

The 2005 *Report on Reading and Writing* provided the Writing Assessment Task Force with the context for the development of a new test and described the logistical and other challenges that must be met in order to implement a new assessment.

In particular, the Report identified the following characteristics of an improved writing assessment at CUNY:

- The prompts must generate writing samples consistent with the type of writing expected for college-level course assignments. To this end, the prompt should contain a reading passage;
- The test must shape writing curricula in a constructive manner, given the influence of standardized tests on curricula and the pressure to teach to the test;
- The prompt specifications and scoring rubric should reflect consensus among the major stakeholders;
- Prompt topics must not be culturally or experientially biased;
- Students should be able to complete the assessment in a reasonable amount of time;
- It must be possible to score the test quickly;
- The forms of the test must be comparable and the test must be calibrated against a nationally-normed test.

The Writing Assessment Task Force recognized that the new test must reflect the demands of typical college-level writing tasks and CUNY's writing curriculum. Moreover, and in accordance with the Task Force's charge, it must align with other tests of writing such as the New York State Regents English examination, the Writing Section of the SAT, and the CUNY Proficiency Examination. Finally, test quality would have to be addressed during the piloting and field-testing phases of the test development process, as described below.

Stages of Test Development

The Task Force followed the stages of test development as outlined in the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. As set forth in Chapter 3, there are four main stages in the test development process:

- 1) Delineation of the purpose(s) of the test and the scope of the construct, or extent of the domain to be measured;
- 2) Development and evaluation of the test specifications;
- 3) Development, field testing, evaluation, and selection of the items and scoring guides and procedures;
- 4) Assembly and evaluation of the test for operational use.

The charge of the Task Force involved Stages 1 and 2. For Stage 1, the Task Force's strategy was to first define what is meant by "college-level writing skill," and then, from this definition, to develop a measurement construct along with a scoring rubric. The Task Force was then able to complete the development of specifications for the new writing assessment instrument that would elicit student writing samples appropriate for rubric scoring. These specifications were used to create prototypes test prompts, one of which appears in this report.

The Task Force outlined a timetable for completing the further stages of the proposed test development:

- Completion of Stage 2. Upon approval to proceed, pilot testing and evaluation of the specifications will take place during Summer and Fall 2009.
- Stage 3, field testing and item selection, would take place during Spring 2010.
- Stage 4, completion of test implementation would occur in Fall 2010.

Definition of Writing

The first challenge faced by the Task Force was to establish a working definition of writing, one that would serve as the basis for determining the appropriate method for assessing an entering college student's writing ability. Several key factors guided the Task Force toward consensus on a definition of writing in a college context, in particular for the purposes of developmental and college-level writing assessment. In their discussions, Task Force members relied on:

- Recent trends in composition theory and writing research as identified in the Task Force's literature review;
- A consideration of several national models for determining college writing readiness;
- Their understanding of what students are taught in developmental and college composition courses throughout CUNY;
- Their knowledge of ESL pedagogy;
- Faculty expectations of adequate preparation for first-year composition and first-year general education courses;
- The Task Force members' extensive collective teaching experience as CUNY faculty.

In addition, the Task Force's consideration of faculty expectations was informed by Dr. Sandra Murphy, who presented a review of methods used by colleges in assessing students' writing and in determining writing course placement. Of particular importance in their deliberations was Dr. Murphy's emphasis on the concept of "consequential validity," the impact on curriculum and teaching of particular forms of assessment.

The Task Force's fundamental objective for the development of a new writing assessment instrument was to create an assessment that would have a positive impact on curricula and pedagogical effectiveness in the colleges. In this context, the Task Force, facilitated by Ms. Rosanne Cook, adopted this definition of writing:

Writing is a purposeful act of communication that reflects students' ability to respond critically to the ideas of others, to present their ideas with clarity and coherence, and to make rhetorical choices about all elements of their writing in relation to the form, audience, and purpose for writing.

This definition, and its emphasis on an ability to respond critically to the ideas of others, reflects the current writing theory that informs teaching and the instructional goals of faculty who teach developmental and upper level ESL courses. This definition also addresses the college-readiness expectations of Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) faculty whose general education courses are designed to introduce students to new ideas and challenge their own beliefs and points of view.

With consensus reached on this definition, the Task Force used key elements – responding critically to ideas; presenting ideas clearly; making rhetorical choices -- to shape all facets of the new assessment: designing of writing tasks, administering tests, scoring rubrics and training processes (including development of training materials used to guide appropriate application of the scoring rubric), and reporting and using test results.

The CUNY Writing Proficiency Measurement Construct and Scoring Rubric

From a review of writing assessment scoring rubrics used at CUNY, as well as at national organizations (ETS/ACT) and those on the state level (New York State Regents Examination in English), the Task Force identified several common rubric elements to serve as the basis for assessing student writing performance. As described below, all of these elements reflect both key principles in writing instruction at the postsecondary level, and best practices in large-scale assessment. The rubric elements require the writer to demonstrate the ability to respond critically to information and ideas in a text, to make rhetorical choices that support the form, audience and purpose for writing, and to do so using correct language and grammar.

The proposed writing proficiency measurement rubric assumes that students will be given sufficient time to respond to a task that includes a reading passage, and that requires them to incorporate elements of the reading passage into their response. Although the proposed writing construct will support either a holistic or analytic rubric, the Task Force endorsed an analytic rubric with five specific scoring domains:

1. The response will demonstrate an ability to understand and respond critically to ideas in the prompt reading passage.
2. The response will demonstrate an appropriate balance between broad assertions and specific details, in order to communicate clearly and effectively. Writers will demonstrate the ability to use ideas in the reading passage to support and develop their own ideas.
3. The response will focus on a key idea in the reading passage relevant to the writer's central thesis. The organization of the response will demonstrate a progression of ideas to convey the writer's meaning in a way that is clear and coherent. Transitions will be used to indicate relationships between ideas.
4. Sentence structure will be controlled and varied to support the clarity and effectiveness of the response. Word choice will be clear and precise.
5. The language used throughout the response will be clear, and will not be compromised by errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

The Task Force came to consensus on a prototype analytic scoring rubric drafted by Rosanne Cook and based on the measurement construct outlined above (see Appendix B). The rubric contains a scoring dimension for each of the assessment elements, and a six-point scoring scale with accompanying descriptors for each score point.

The rubric dimensions and scoring scales will be evaluated during pilot testing and revised where necessary to improve the ability of readers to accurately and reliably assign a full range of scores for each dimension. Cut scores will be determined by using the best weighted combination of dimension scores to predict performance in external testing scenarios such as the current writing assessment test, composition and general education courses, and other standardized tests of writing proficiency.

Writing Task Design and Approach to Scoring

Taking into account the Task Force's definition of writing, its measurement construct, and its underlying thinking, the following summarizes the Task Forces's basic decisions about the nature and format of the new assessment:

1. The writing assessment will be a performance test, in which a writing sample will be produced in response to a prompt.
2. Because college writing is predominantly text-based, students will be asked to respond directly to a reading passage included in the writing sample task.
3. The writing sample task will ask students to respond to the reading passage using a format defined by the prompt. This format will reflect the type of writing assignment typically seen in general education courses.
4. Writing sample results will be used to provide a meaningful diagnostic profile of student achievement (both individually and in the aggregate) to be shared with students and faculty, such that the assessment can be tied to effective curricular development and instruction.

To generate diagnostic information, the evaluation of the writing sample will be based on analytic scoring of specific and defined dimensions that characterize effective college writing.

Writing Prompt Specifications

The writing prompt is used to elicit a writing sample from the student. There are two components to the writing prompt: the reading text and the writing task. Both the text and the task are designed to induce the test taker to produce a written response that can be scored in each of the analytic rubric's five dimensions.

With these general provisions in mind, Task Force members were asked to gather proposed reading texts and draft writing tasks that guide students to produce an appropriate and optimal response. At its penultimate meeting the Task Force reviewed

the texts and tasks. This review resulted in consensus as to the characteristics of appropriate reading texts, and on a template for the writing task.

Text selection

1. Suggested text sources: essay excerpts, general interest magazines, newspaper articles, and speeches. For example, *The Utne Reader*, a journal used in composition classes, and *The Week*, a news magazine, were found to have short, engaging general interest articles.
2. Reading text length: 125-250 words.
3. Text structure: clearly written texts with a main thesis sentence written early in the text are preferable.
4. Text format: reading texts may be edited by item developers to simplify vocabulary, phrasing, and length. Passages should appear with a title and citation reference.
5. Readability level: no more difficult than the 12th grade level; green or amber level ratings as shown on the readability indices website <http://editcentral.com/gwt/com.editcentral.EC/EC.html>.
6. Topics: reading texts should be appropriate for high school graduates and reflect topics about which they are likely to have knowledge, experience, or interest. Topics may also be related to general discipline areas.
7. Topics to be avoided:
 - Those that encourage students to go off on personal tangents, without addressing the author's ideas;
 - Topics involving death, violence, religion, political viewpoints, or other controversial subjects as described in prompt specifications for nationally standardized tests;
 - Topics requiring specialized knowledge that might favor one group of test takers over others;
 - Topics involving abstract, non-specific concepts or ideas;
 - Topics that either directly or indirectly criticize or put down the test taker.

A list of commonly used topics has been developed by CUNY faculty and is available through the Office of Institutional Research Assessment. It is suggestive, not definitive, and will be augmented over time.

Writing task directions

The Task Force specified that the writing task directions be written in a standard form and generically applicable to all test forms:

Writing Directions:

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author's most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is particularly significant and explain its significance.

Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that will help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

The purpose of the writing prompt specifications is to produce comparable test forms that allow students to demonstrate their writing ability. As with the scoring rubric, the comparability of the writing prompts based on both the reading text selection and writing task specifications, will be evaluated during pilot testing. The pilot test will be designed to examine three particular specification factors: text length, text readability, and topic variability. If there significant differences are found in writing performance between form factors, they will need to be controlled in the operational test.

Sample Writing Prompt

The following is a complete CUNY Aligned Assessment in Writing prompt based on the specifications discussed above:

Reading Passage

What Are Friends For?

In the quest for better health, many people overlook a powerful weapon that could help them fight illness and depression, slow aging, and prolong life: their friends. Researchers are starting to pay attention to the importance of friendship and social networks in overall health. A 10-year Australian study found that older people with a large circle of friends were 22 percent less likely to die during the study period than those with fewer friends. A large 2007 study showed an increase of nearly 60 percent in the risk for obesity among people whose friends gained weight. And last year, Harvard researchers reported that strong social ties could promote brain health as we age.

People with strong friendships are less likely than others to get colds, perhaps because they have lower stress levels.

Last year researchers studied 34 students at the University of Virginia, taking them to the base of a steep hill and fitting them with a weighted backpack. They were then asked to estimate the steepness of the hill. Some participants stood next to friends during the exercise, while others were alone. The students who stood with friends gave lower estimates of the steepness of the hill. And the

longer friends had known each other, the less steep the hill appeared.

“People with stronger friendship networks feel like there is someone they can turn to,” said Karen A. Roberto, director of the center for gerontology at Virginia Tech. “The consistent message of these studies is that friends make your life better.”

By Tara Parker-Pope, New York Times, April 21, 2009.

Writing Directions

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author’s most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that will help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

In the proposed pilot test 16 prompts of varying length, readability, and topic, will be generated and randomly assigned to groups of 150 students per prompt. Student responses will be scored by trained readers and the results of this assessment will form the basis of further test development.

Recommendations of the Task Force on Writing Assessment

At the conclusion of its deliberations, the Task Force made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1. The Office of Academic Affairs should endorse the further development of the new Aligned Assessment of Writing proposed by the Task Force on Writing Assessment.

The current writing assessment instrument, the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample does not provide an effective evaluation of entering student writing since it does not present a writing task congruent with the demands of college-level writing in the general education curriculum at CUNY or represent a first standard for college-level writing that will culminate in the CPE. While the persuasive writing called for in response to the writing task of the current test is one appropriate form of college writing, most writing

assignments in general education courses are analytic, most often requiring students to summarize or compare texts or to apply theories or methods to new material. Since the current test's writing task is not text-based and is limited to persuasive writing, it also does not connect effectively to the curriculum of developmental writing or ESL courses designed to bring students who previously failed the placement test to college-level writing standards.

The new Aligned Assessment of Writing, in contrast, was developed in line with college faculty expectations and practices regarding their writing assignments. It consists of a reading passage and a writing assignment based on the ideas expressed in the passage. In asking students to respond to ideas embedded in a text, this new writing assessment requires students to employ the critical thinking skills common to their introductory discipline-based courses and conforms to the kinds of written work called for in general education courses across the curriculum.

Recommendation 2. The Task Force recommends that additional time be added to the administration of the proposed Aligned Assessment in Writing.

Currently, students responding to the CUNY/ACT Writing Sample are limited to 60 minutes. The proposed new assessment uses a reading passage as the basis for the writing assignment thereby increasing the challenge to students' critical thinking and writing skills. To provide students, especially ESL students, an equitable opportunity to demonstrate these more complex skills, an additional 30 minutes should be added to the test period assigned for the administration of the writing assessment.

Recommendation 3. The Task Force recommends that students' responses to the Aligned Assessment of Writing be evaluated by a standard embodied in an analytical scoring rubric.

The Task Force endorsed an analytical rubric for two principal reasons: the dimensions chosen for evaluation – critical response to a text, development and support of ideas, coherence in the structure of the response, control of sentence structure, and control of grammar, usage, and mechanics - reflect college faculty's expectations for college-level writing, and the separate scoring for each dimension provides detailed diagnostic information about students' performance to be shared with both students and teachers. This recommendation fulfills the CUNY Assessment Review Report definition of the primary purpose of assessment as a basis for teaching and learning.

Recommendation 4. The Task Force recommends that forms of the same writing test, the Aligned Assessment of Writing, be used to evaluate students for initial placement in writing courses and for exit-testing for students registered in top-level writing and ESL courses.

The Board of Trustees mandates (1997,1999) dealing with the implementation of writing assessment define the purpose of such testing as the determination of students' college

readiness.³ In the implementation of the new Aligned Assessment of Writing, students and faculty need to understand that students must meet the same standard of competence when they are assessed initially for purposes of placement as when their college readiness is assessed at exit from developmental or ESL sequences. For this reason, the Task Force concluded that the test used for exit should be of the same nature and difficulty and assess the same skills as the test used for determining initial placement.

Recommendation 5. The Task Force recommends that the University continue to administer separate instruments to assess students' reading and writing competence.

Although the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing includes a reading passage as the basis of the writing assignment, and the analytic rubric includes a dimension that is based on reading comprehension, the Task Force does not think that the new test should be used both as a test of writing and a test of reading. Using students' responses to a single short passage to determine their competence would not be a valid measure of their ability to read and understand texts at the introductory college-level.

Recommendation 6. The Task Force recommends that prototypes for the new Aligned Assessment of Writing be pilot-tested during Summer 2009.

The purpose of this pilot testing is to confirm that the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing meets the requirements outlined in the charge to the Task Force that a new writing test:

- 1) Be aligned with the New York State Regents Examination in English; the SAT and ACT college entrance examinations; and the CUNY Proficiency Examination;
- 2) Measure readiness for writing assignments typical of freshman composition and other introductory and general education courses;
- 3) Reflect the judgment of the Task Force that the same test be used for both placement and exit;
- 4) Be feasible to administer and score.

Recommendation 7: The Task Force recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs regularly monitor the rubric and prompt specifications for alignment with CUNY's writing curricula.

To assure faculty and students that the proposed Aligned Assessment of Writing continues to fulfill its purpose, remaining aligned with CUNY's curriculum in developmental and college-level writing courses as well as with its pedagogical and writing evaluation practices, the Task Force recommends that the rubric and prompt

³ The relevant Board resolutions focus skills testing on "the improvement of placement testing" (September 1997) and on the definition of "the necessary level of preparation in basic skills" (September 1999).

specifications be subject to regular review and revisions using data gathered from field testing and future live test sessions.

Recommendation 8. The Task Force recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs conduct studies to monitor and, if necessary, improve the construct validity of the proposed Aligned Assessment Test of Writing.

To assess the construct validity of the proposed test, the Task Force recommends that regular studies be carried out to compare score results from the new test with performance on other standardized measures of writing. The Task Force also recommends that the Office of Academic Affairs review additional measures of writing assessment, such as objective tests, that might add significantly to the quality of the placement and exit decisions CUNY makes.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Writing Task Force Members & Staff

Member	Campus	Title
Raymond Moy, Chair	CUNY Office of Assessment	Director of Assessment
Bonne August	New York City College of Technology	Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs
Marcia Babbitt	Kingsborough Community College	Chair, English Department (ESL)
Gay Brookes	Borough of Manhattan Community College	Chair, Developmental Skills (ESL)
Frederick De Naples	Bronx Community College	Chair, English; Borough Chief Reader
Eileen Ferretti	Kingsborough Community College	Director of Developmental English
Richard Gampert	Hostos Community College	Director of Testing & Institutional Research
Sandra Hanson	LaGuardia Community College	Chair English Department; English Discipline Council Representative
Erin Martineau	Office of Academic Affairs	Associate for Teaching, Learning, and Research (WAC)
Nancy-Laurel Pettersen	Queensborough Community College	Professor, Basic Educational Skills (Reading)
Kim Sanabria	Hostos Community College	Associate Dean for Academic Affairs (ESL)
Cheryl Smith	Baruch College	Professor, English; WAC Coordinator
Jay Verkuilen	Graduate Center	Professor, Education Psychology (Tests & Measurement)
Hannalyn Wilkens	LaGuardia Community College	Chair, Communication Skills; Chair, Reading Council
Cheryl Williams	Office of Academic Affairs	Associate University Dean, Special Programs (SEEK/College Discovery)
Staff, Writing Assessment Task Force		
Staff	Campus	Title
Melissa Uber	CUNY Office of Assessment	Director of Testing
Susan Young	CUNY Office of Assessment	Faculty fellow; Professor, English, LaGuardia Community College
Eve Zarin	CUNY Office of Assessment	Faculty Liaison & CUNY Chief Reader

Appendix B

Analytic Scoring Rubric for CUNY Writing Sample

	Critical Response to Text and Writing Task	Development of Writer’s Ideas	Structure of the Response	Language Use: Sentences and Word Choice	Language Use: Grammar, Usage, Mechanics
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates a clear understanding of the complexity of ideas in the text and of the writing task. A thoughtful and insightful response to the task effectively integrates analysis of main ideas in the text and relevant elements of the writer’s own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are used skillfully to support clarity. The response maintains an effective balance between broad assertions and specific reasons, details and examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A cohesive structure that demonstrates a logical, well-executed progression of ideas that supports a central focus for the response. Sophisticated and effective use of transitions conveys relationships among ideas throughout the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are well controlled with effective variety in structure. Word choice is specific, precise, and supports clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though there may be a few errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, strong control of language is apparent and meaning is clear throughout the response.
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response usually demonstrates a good understanding of the complexity of ideas in the text and of the writing task. The response usually integrates analysis of main ideas in the text and relevant elements of the writer’s own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are usually used skillfully to support clarity. The response usually demonstrates a balance between broad assertions and specific reasons, details and examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organization is clear and demonstrates some logical progression of ideas that supports a central focus for the response. Transitions clearly convey relationships among ideas throughout the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are usually well controlled and their structure is somewhat varied. Word choice is clear and supports clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though there may be a few distracting errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, good control of language is apparent and meaning is clear.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates an adequate understanding of the main ideas in the text and of the writing task. The response adequately integrates analysis of main ideas in the text and relevant elements of the writer’s own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approaches to development (e.g., summarizing, evaluating, narrating) are adequate, but they may not always support clarity. The response maintains an adequate balance between broad assertions and specific details and examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An organizational structure is evident and supports a central focus. Ideas are presented in logical groupings. There may be an attempt at logical progression. Though often simple and obvious, transitions are usually used to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are adequately controlled and there is a little structural variety. Word choice is usually clear and adequately supports clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language use is competent. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are mostly correct and there may be some distracting errors, but meaning is clear.

Appendix B

Analytic Scoring Rubric for CUNY Writing Sample

3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates some understanding of the main ideas in the text and of the writing task. The response includes some integration of main ideas from the text and relevant elements of the writer's own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is some development of ideas, but the approaches used may not always support clarity. The response may include both broad assertions and specific examples, but the balance may be uneven and examples may not be developed enough to support clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response uses a simple organizational structure that usually supports a central focus for the response. For the most part, ideas are logically grouped. Simple and obvious transitions are used to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are somewhat controlled but with little structural variety. Word choice is sometimes unclear and may obscure meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A basic control of language is apparent. Grammar, usage and mechanics are usually correct but there are some distracting errors. Errors may occasionally impede understanding.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates a weak understanding of the main ideas in the text and of the writing task. There is little integration of ideas from the text and elements of the writer's own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little, if any, use of relevant approaches to development. A balance between broad assertions and specific details and examples may not be evident. If details and examples are present, they are brief, general, inadequately developed, or not clearly relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response shows an attempt to create a central focus for the response and to organize ideas into logical groupings, but the logic of these groupings is often unclear. Few, if any, transitions are used to convey relationships among ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are sometimes correct but there is little, if any, sentence variety. Word choice is often unclear and at times obscures meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates weak language control. Grammar, usage and mechanics are sometimes correct but there are many distracting errors and some that impede understanding.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The response demonstrates little, if any, understanding of the main ideas in the text and of the writing task. There is minimal, if any, integration of ideas from the text and elements of the writer's own reading and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is minimal or no use of relevant approaches to development. If any details or examples are present, they are brief, general, undeveloped or irrelevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main focus of the response is unclear. There may be an attempt to group related ideas but the groupings are illogical. Transitions are rarely used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sentences are often incorrect. Word choice is often unclear and often obscures meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language control is minimal. Grammar, usage and mechanics are often incorrect and errors frequently impede understanding.