

On a Scale



A Social History
of Writing Assessment
in America

Robert Elliot

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On a Scale

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*John Brereton, Director, Calderwood Writing Initiative,
The Boston Athenæum; Editor of The Origins of Composition
Studies in the American College, 1875–1925: A Documentary History*

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STUDIES IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

Leonard Podis
General Editor

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Norbert Elliot

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Grace: An Acknowledgment

The numinous, Rudolph Otto believed, evokes three impulses: the sense that there is something wholly other in our lives (*mysterium*), that this otherness evokes a kind of awe (*tremendum*) and that this awe is mitigated with captivating grace (*fascinans*). Such has been the presence of this book in my life. The grace of others has moderated the fearful presence of an elusive topic.

Capturing the construct of writing and the techniques used to assess it is a process. Sometimes, the events emerging are familiar; other times, they recede into fog. Documentation involved time in the stacks at Princeton's Firestone Library and the archives at the Educational Testing Service. It involved structured interviews with specialists and a forest's worth of drafts. As a product, *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America* traces the ways that student writing has been viewed in educational settings. Cases are drawn from the freshman class of 1874, when Harvard University first required applicants to submit an English composition, to the freshman class of 2006, when the College Entrance Examination Board required an essay as part of the SAT®: Reasoning Test. Harvard's essay was designed to be taken by some 300 students; the SAT essay was taken in its first 2005 administration by approximately 330,000 students. Often regarded as an allegory of oppression and protest, the history of writing assessment should also be understood as a narrative of community. In 1874 teachers came together in oak-lined rooms to read student essays resting on mahogany tables; in 2005, with essays floating on pixels, others log into rooms without walls to read student compositions. As Alan C. Purves, perhaps the twentieth century's most subtle assessment practitioner, found in his last book, the basis of community is respect for individuality; even as modern consensus has eroded, the counterpoint of community—in this case, a writing assessment community—exists as an index of hope.

What was the United States like on the eastern seaboard when Harvard University elected to require each candidate to write a short composition on works of standard authors selected from a list that would be announced from time to time? What did the sponsors of that assessment hope to find? What did those who read those compositions think of them, and what definitions and expectations of ability did those readers hold? What were the actions of the communities involved, and how did those actions reveal dissatisfaction with both the rigidity of author lists and the flux of occasional

announcement? How was disagreement—on committee strategy and essay worth—resolved among sponsors? How did educators, embedded within a demographically exploding national system of commerce, comprehend their responsibilities? What was the impact of the new laboratory psychology on writing assessment at the century's beginning? What was the impact of the First World War? The Second? Of the fear of communism? Of the rise of long-silenced voices? What changes did those new voices inspire—or demand—as dialect blossomed and cities burned? Did the singular Harvard fathers understand writing ability in the same way as those thousands who designed and staffed assessment programs across the nation during the 1970s and 1980s? How can we tell? What premises remained, and what disappeared? What is the relationship between the technology of the computer (a world lit by lightning) and the technology of writing (a thought reified by chirography) in the assessment community of the early 21st century?

And how, within this enterprise, does one get out of the way of the narrative while knowing full well that the choice of narrative detail is itself an autobiographical act?

With help from one's friends. The composition of this book may have been an isolating process, but the product is the result of many whose desire was my success. That desire, of course, often took odd forms. Miriam Levin, Senior Examiner at ETS, was the first to find me out. "Ugh, ugh, ugh," she typed in a May 30, 1984, review of my wretched attempt to write an item for the Graduate Management Admission Test. "This is real gobbledygook. Hard to understand what in heaven's name is being talked about. This really makes no sense. The problem is a real nothing, too, so junk this, fast." Since I was reported to have some skill as a teacher of freshman composition, she sent me off to the archives to see what I could find about the history of writing assessment and, no doubt, to get me out from underfoot. Twenty years later, I am still on that errand.

I have benefited greatly from the good (though often strong) will of my ETS colleagues over the years. The late Gertrude Conlan spent time explaining the premises of holistic scoring during the summer I had worked as an ETS temp to cover vacations, and both Paul Ramsey and Jill Burstein provided recent interviews for this book. Julie Duminiak worked tirelessly in the archives to help me find studies and photos; she made this project her own. At the College Board, Wayne Camara answered detailed questions and generously provided recent reports and studies; Brian Bremen of the University of Texas at Austin, a William Carlos Williams specialist helping to design the 2005 essay for the SAT, also provided an interview. Within

the university community, Lee Odell of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was generous with his time and his intellect. Leonard Podis of Oberlin College was a prince among series editors, always and everywhere a critical, encouraging reader. At New Jersey Institute of Technology, Robert Lynch and Burt Kimmelman read the manuscript, provided support generally associated with social services, and never once muttered a single ugh. At the Robert W. Van Houten Library at NJIT, Rhonda Greene-Carter filled every imaginable interlibrary loan request. The following folks also helped to find images and secure permissions: Margaret Aldrich (Princeton University Press), Erin Burkert (the National Academy of Sciences), Margaret J. Kimball (Stanford University), Robin McElheny (Harvard University), Meriwether Schas (the College Board), and Jennifer Ulrich (Columbia University Archives-Columbiana Library). Thanks also to the NJIT Committee on Sabbaticals for giving me time to begin the book.

The subtleties of quantitative measurement, the dangerous edge of things, were explained first to me at Texas A&M University-Commerce by Paul F. Zelhart and Maximino Plata and, later, by Margaret Kilduff, Marian Passannante, Bart K. Holland, Joesph Holtzman, and Frances Ward at the University of Medicine of Dentistry of New Jersey. Most recently, W. Patrick Beaton and Vladimir Briller at NJIT have taken up the job of helping someone trained only to follow the trails of hounds, bay houses, and turtle-doves. Yet, to listen to Vlad (and to Paul, Max, Meg, Marianne, Bart, Joe, Fran, and Pat) you would think that scientific logic and humanistic understanding were practiced, at their best, by those who had equally heard the hound, the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud and were anxious to recover them. At Peter Lang, Phyllis Korper, Sophie Appel, and Bernadette Shade have been the best of editors and production coordinators, and Tom Bechtle was a meticulous copyeditor. Mary Salerno remains a patient impresario of the computer and its products.

My wife, Frances Ward, gave me a place to come to, and the children in our combined family—Christian, Kathryn, James, Luke, Sarah, Jesse, Nicholas and Sophia—were, at once, both curious and amused that a grown man could become excited about something as dull as writing assessment. But they knew, as children always do, that by turning and turning we come round right.

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Prologue: Katherine, December 1913

I should pin the Hillegas scale, Katherine thought, at their eye level. But then she remembered that these were high-school juniors, not the elementary-school children she was used to teaching. Her students were nearly as tall as she.

I could take one of their essays in hand, read it to the class, and then compare it with the posted specimens—the term used by Edward L. Thorndike and his student, Milo Hillegas, to describe these samples of student writing. The students could then walk to the poster one at a time and try to judge the relative merit of their individual essays to those posted on the wall. The scale would be, she thought, the center of attention in class and break up the deadening recitation. That time in elementary school was not badly spent after all. Her work with younger children had allowed her to learn more techniques than her dull, rule-driven colleagues would ever be able to implement in their dreadful classes. Indeed, it would be nice to have the students work in groups, to talk together about their essays and how they compared to the specimens. But the forty desks were bolted to the floor.

“It is obvious that specimen 294 has more merit as English writing than specimen 519,” Thorndike had written last month in the *English Journal*. In the library at Columbia University, Katherine had read Professor Thorndike’s account of the scale when it had first been announced in the September 1911 issue of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. She kept up with the journals so that she would be ready next fall to begin graduate studies at Teachers College. Reading Thorndike and Hillegas, she had become excited by the science of it, by the German-inspired laboratory spirit of the design of the scale. (But then again she smiled as she realized she had also been excited by Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* when she had seen it at the Armory Show last February. Yet there were commonalities, she realized, a search for something new to be invented by each in his own way. As was the case with many of her friends, she admired Europe’s science and art but was uncomfortable about influence. Different as they were, there was something distinctly revolutionary about Duchamp and Thorndike, something that was not bound to tradition, something that hinted of vitality. In any case, her taste was not with Gallery

I, the chamber of horrors, as everyone called it, that held Duchamp's painting. She had spent most of her time in Galleries E and F and was taken with Childe Hassam's *The Spanish Stairs*. Its elegant steps captured her heart. She wanted a chance to see where those curved lines led.)

In an "appeal to experts," Hillegas had asked 160 English teachers to judge the relative merit of the writing specimens. With Thorndike, he had inductively developed a scale of merit that could be used to objectify the judgment of an essay's worth.

Professor Thorndike was very hard on Hillegas, Katherine thought, in the *English Journal*. She was looking forward to studying with Thorndike, to learning about the application of psychological and statistical methods to educational theory. Yet she wondered, with dread, if he were this critical of all his students. There was, it appeared, a hard edge to the man. The Hillegas scale (but wasn't the scale developed by both of them?) failed to differentiate, Thorndike had found, between samples of student writing (selections were taken from the unimaginable to the eloquent) and samples from world masters (selections were taken from Washington Irving and William Makepeace Thackeray). Thorndike was scathing: "Consequently, in the judgment of high-school teachers of English, the worst tenth of paragraph-writing of high-school pupils is still nearly half way from zero through the best the world knows." The scale had failed because it did not capture the phenomenon under investigation. (But what, she thought, is that phenomenon?)

Thorndike followed with an analogy—cutting indeed—describing how the scale would work if used to evaluate track performance: "Teachers of athletes would disagree very widely in the 'marks' that they gave to the same feat of running; and we should quarrel bitterly over the respective merits of A and B!" He had concluded that the scale did not measure the quality of the essays at all but only "the errors made in using such a scale." The scale doubly failed because it measured only the unstable judgment of the readers. (Perhaps, she thought, we should be studying the readers.)

Nevertheless, even Thorndike had to agree that the scale was better than nothing, that "at present a teacher, in grading a composition of general merit, uses a subjective, personal scale of values which, in the nature of the case, cannot, on the average, be as correct as one due to the combined opinions of a hundred or more judges who are on the average as competent as he is." (How Jeffersonian, she thought.)

So she had purchased it, the *Preliminary Extension of the Hillegas Scale for the Measurement of Quality in English Composition by Young People*, for eight cents. Twenty-three inches across and eighteen inches

down, she had ironed it out (it had come folded like a passport) and pinned it flat on the wall next to the blackboard. Professor Thorndike's calculated quarrels aside, the specimens gave her something to work with.

In and of themselves, the specimens were interesting. She agreed with Thorndike that specimen 519 was an example of weak writing:

Specimen 519

First, De Quinceys mother was a beautiful woman and through her De Quincey inhereted much of his genius.

His running away from school enfluenced him much as he roamed through the woods, valleys and his mind became very meditative.

The greatest enfluence of De Quincey's life was the opium habit. If it was not for this habit it is doubtful whether we would now be reading his writings.

His companions during his college course and even before that time were great enfluences. The surroundings of De Quincey were enfluences. Not only De Quincey's habit of opium but other habits which were peculiar to this life.

His marriage to the woman which he did not especially care for.

The many well educated and noteworthy friends of De Quincey.

The student had started to categorize the reasons for De Quincey's fame but then became lost. There were spelling problems ("inhereted," "enfluences"). And opium was more memorable, or at least of more interest to this student, than the prose of the eminent Victorian.

She agreed with Professor Thorndike that specimen 294 did, in fact, have more merit than specimen 519:

Specimen 294

Among the beautiful islands on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence River, there is a deep and narrow channel which separates three small wooded islands from a large fertile one. Of the three islands the largest is rocky and covered with a growth of stately pines and waving hemlocks, and a carpet of moss and ferns. On the second there is quite an assortment of trees, whose foliage during the fall turns to many shades of gold and red, which colors are greatly enhanced by the dark green background of its neighbor. On the third there is a thick growth of brush, with an occasional small tree. These three islands are so close together, that fallen trees and logs make it possible to walk from one to another.

Here was a vivid description combined with principles of classification. No wonder those 160 English teachers rated this essay higher than 519. Maybe the student's instructor, she imagined, had been a reader of Barrett Wendell's *English Composition*. In fact, perhaps the pupil's instructor had been educated at Harvard under Wendell himself. The paragraph certainly

produced an effect, and Wendell's book was filled with advice to "know what effects to produce" and "by every means" to strive to produce them. Where the composition on De Quincey had failed, the description of islands had succeeded. This student had been trained, carefully, to please.

Although Thorndike had not found it obvious why the descriptive specimen, 294, had more merit than specimen 225, she realized that the answer was not in the writer but in the readers:

Specimen 225

Before the Renaissance, artists and sculptors made their statues and pictures thin, and weak looking figures. They saw absolutely no beauty in the human body. At the time of the Renaissance, artists began to see beauty in muscular and strong bodies, and consequently many took warriors as subjects for their statues. Two of the statues that Michel Angelo, the greatest sculptor and artist, made, Perseus with the head of Medusa, and David with Goliath's head, are very similar. They show minutely and with wonderful exactness every muscle of the body. Michel Angelo was a great student of the body, especially when it was in a strained position. The position of the figures on the tomb of Lorenzo the Great is so wonderful that one can almost see the tension of the muscles.

Specimen 225 was interesting, but the effect of the word choice, the combination of denotation and connotation, as Wendell would term it, had failed. (Or, she smiled, was that talk about straining positions a bit too forceful?) There was no clear sense of classification, as was evident in specimen 294. And the idea that pre-Renaissance art was full of "thin, and weak looking" figures would have offended at least some of those five medieval-loving English teachers who had built the scale through their rankings. (The older teachers may, in fact, have been students of George Lyman Kittredge at Harvard—she had met some of these, devotees of the bibliography of Icelandic mythology—while the younger teachers may have been trained by John Matthew Manly, student of Kittredge and Chaucer scholar, at the University of Chicago. Old or young, though, these philologists would have found the specimen offensive.)

It was specimen 580, with its score of zero, that most fascinated her:

Specimen 580

Letter

Dear Sir: I write to say that it ain't a square deal. Schools is I say they is I went to a school. red and gree green and brown aint it hito but I say he don't know his business not today nor yeaterday and you know it and I want Jennie to get me out.

“Aint it hito?” she thought. Who speaks, or writes, like that? Why would the child correct “gree” to “green” and then stop revising? Why would the researchers add specimens that did not exist to the scale? A visit to almost any New York City school would have yielded weak specimens. Perhaps the researchers didn’t leave campus much? A weak writer may have jumbled ideas, but no one’s ideas are scattered in that fashion. And the tone so pleading, the desire to run away, to have Jenny—his sister?—help him escape. The letter would have been seen by the judges as an illustration not only of illiteracy but also of weakness. The deck was stacked. Weakness, as she had come to learn, gets a zero.

Yet, she thought, the Hillegas scale would be useful for its defined writing specimens and for its implicit lessons: classify and follow through; describe vividly; avoid error; and offend no one. (Science, she mused, tells us that subjectivity is to be avoided. Politics tell us that the voice of the many is superior in judgment to the few. And never, ever, show weakness in navigating these two worlds. There were lessons here for all.)

It was 1913, and Katherine knew what there was to know as she prepared to pin the scale on the wall of her classroom.

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Chapter 1

A World Where Something Was A-Doing, 1874–1917

During the nineteenth century America witnessed a fundamental cultural change: the republic as a reflection of language was receding, and the nation as a construct of science was taking its place. As Americans struggled with their cultural identity throughout the nineteenth century, the nature of the emerging American character, molded by education and expressed in writing, was an ever-present debate.

Seventeen years before Abraham Lincoln signed the Land Grant College Act, Henry David Thoreau had set about to define American cultural identity at Walden Pond. Educated at the nation's great private school (Harvard University, class of 1837), Thoreau had studied under Edward Tyrrell Channing, the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, and had used Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* as his textbook. Relying on his journal—a laboratory notebook that captured nature when he was absent from it—Thoreau wrote and rewrote his testimony from the colony, publishing it at last in 1854. Desiring his countrymen to know what it was to live deliberately, Thoreau documented his experiences, teaching us how to live without our European kinsmen and their authority.

What was to be gained by reading and writing in America in the mid-nineteenth century? Why, everything, Thoreau reported: “A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself.”¹ Language

was a timeless way for us to find our better selves, to carve out our place in the world.

That world was changing, though. The Fitchburg Railroad had touched the Pond:

When I meet the engine with its train of cars moving with planetary motion,—or, rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve,—with its steam cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths, like many a downy cloud which I have seen, high in the heavens, unfolding its masses to the light,—as if this traveling demigod, this cloud-compeller, would ere long take the sunset sky for the livery of his train; when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils, (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I don't know,) it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it.²

Among the original pre-Revolutionary American universities, Thoreau's would respond most ardently to this brave new world during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. From Channing, Thoreau had learned to profit by the circumstances in which he was placed; from Whately, he had learned perspicuity, energy, and elegance.³ If Thoreau was the product of such a rhetorical education, the more of it that could be obtained, the better. By 1874 Harvard had created a university-sponsored program of composition and, with it, a written examination required for admission.

As was the case with the train, the enterprise was value laden. Language, the American educator had realized, was an organizing system, one that could be harnessed both for eloquence and for persuasion. By turning to the rhetorical texts of Scottish theologian George Campbell during the American Revolution, then to those of the Presbyterian author Hugh Blair and British theologian and political philosopher Richard Whately, educators at universities such as Harvard could instill a frame of reference in students that urged them to see language as a vehicle for action. Reflective of mental processes themselves, language had a purpose beyond ornamentation in the new republic of industry.⁴

Useful to the emerging American consciousness was the desire for inductive reasoning and objectivity, the essence of science and its application in technology. To throw off the manacles of deduction, to discard the syllogism's major premise—this was the ideology fostered by Francis Bacon in Renaissance England, embedded into the textbooks of Whately and the lectures of Channing, and incorporated into the industrial America of Jay Gould's railways, Carnegie's steel mills, and Rockefeller's oil refineries.⁵ The 1862 Land Grant College Act spectacularly grafted the mechanical

arts of industry onto the agricultural interests of the Union. Each established before 1766, the original colleges—Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, New Jersey (later Princeton), Rhode Island, Queen’s, and Dartmouth—were by 1900 a few (albeit an influential few) among many. The state colleges had arrived, evoking democratic agrarian values, cardinal among these the possibility of achievement. “I am a farmer’s boy,” a young man wrote to the college at East Lansing, Michigan, “And as soon as the wheat is sown, I am at liberty to go to school.”⁶

The founding of Cornell University in 1865 was a symbol of American enterprise itself and reflected the decline of the classics and the free election of courses, the encouragement of scientific studies by which practical and liberal studies would be united, and the presence of nonsectarian control. Here was the very model of the land grant ideal by which youth would be prepared for a useful role in society.⁷ Concurrent with the founding of Cornell University was that of Johns Hopkins University. Opening in 1876, Johns Hopkins, fueled by dollars from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, met the growing American impulse for advanced training.⁸ Johns Hopkins was designed to foster the creation rather than the dissemination of knowledge. The school’s influence was profound: any college engaging in advanced studies had to transform itself into a university, was obliged to recruit graduate students for the purpose of stimulating an excellent faculty ready to advance their careers in pursuit of the next best offer, and was to adopt, tacitly, a model in which advanced studies were equated with rigor, rigor with science, and science with truth. As Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins, framed the enterprise in 1885: “No truth which has once been discovered is allowed to perish but the incrustations which cover it are removed. It is the universities which edit, interpret, translate and reiterate the acquisitions of former generations both of literature and science. Their revelation of error is sometimes welcomed but it is generally opposed; nevertheless the process goes on, indifferent alike to plaudits or reproaches.”⁹

In perpetual motion, scientifically based scholarship existed in a pure domain within the university, a system in which theories and empirical observation complemented each other. When Louis Agassiz sought to demonstrate polygenism at Harvard University in 1846, theorizing that black people had different origins than white people, his findings were based on the skull measurements of Samuel Morton. The theory of polygenism was thus supported by the empirical measurements of craniometry. The more the scientific process continued, the more theory was tested by observation, the more truths would be revealed. (Even Thoreau had collected specimens

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