

Assessment Topics: The Importance of the Rhetorical Frame

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The assignments used in writing assessment vary from those that provide a reading sample and ask the writer to react, to those that provide a list of suggested topics from which the writer can choose.¹ Each type of assignment, however, interposes a level of interpretation between the writer and the response, making the topic itself an important component of the rhetorical event we call writing assessment. As Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy point out, "Before the writer even lifts his pen, he leans forward to *read* and *interpret* the text of a topic provided in the essay examination" (410). Writing assessment is a rhetorical event dependent upon the test-maker's ability to communicate a rhetorical frame to the writer and, simultaneously, the writer's ability to recognize and respond appropriately to the rhetorical frame intended by the test-maker.

Researchers have investigated the effects on writing performance produced by changes in assessment procedures and in assessment instruments.² However, little research has been done to describe the rhetorical structure of writing assignments and the effects on performance of changes in rhetorical frame: as Smith, et al., point out, the way a writing assignment is "framed or structured" has not been adequately researched (74). I would like to report on a study conducted to describe the rhetorical frame of a particular assessment model developed at the University of Michigan and to compare versions of the test topics with variations in rhetorical frame.³

Since assignments used in writing assessment are intended to stimulate and direct the writer toward an appropriate written response, the assignment itself initiates a rhetorical event that is dynamic: the writer must read and interpret the assignment and respond accordingly. I term the structure of a particular assignment its "rhetorical frame" when it provides for writers the rhetorical context: the subject, purpose, audience, and voice appropriate for a response, and the structure of development called for by the assessment. Brossell, in connection with the Florida Certification Examination, studied the rhetorical specification of assessment topics.⁴ He found that full rhetorical specification (subject, audience, and purpose) did not necessarily produce better writing. However, unlike Brossell's topics, the Michigan topics not only provide

students with brief rhetorical specification, but also provide a rhetorical frame. For example, the context and subject are described in a few opening sentences. Then the students are provided with a first sentence and choice of second sentences, thus indicating a focus for the essay. In other words, the subject and rhetorical context are established by the assessment instrument, but, in addition, the direction of the argument itself is indicated for the writer.

FIGURE 1. Sample Assessment Topic (#24)

The National Student Association is sponsoring an essay contest on "Contemporary Student Attitudes and Ethics." The Association has called upon college students around the country to submit papers on problems relevant to the topic. Cheating is one of the problems most frequently examined in essays already received by the Association.

Begin your essay with the following sentence (which you could copy into your bluebook):

A large number of students report that cheating is widespread in their colleges.

Select *one* of the following as your second sentence and copy it into your bluebook:

- A. Although most students believe that cheating is wrong, many do it nevertheless.
- B. This is not surprising, since cheating is part of the American Way of Life.
- C. Most students refuse to cheat because they know that they are only cheating themselves.

Now complete your essay developing the argument that follows from the first two sentences. Do your best to make your argument convincing.

The Michigan assessment model has been adopted by many colleges and universities since it was introduced in 1978. It has proven to be an effective assessment instrument, eliciting the desired expository responses and distinguishing among writing abilities.⁵ The five characteristics of a good assessment topic, as identified by Hoetker (1979), are evident in the Michigan assessment instrument. These characteristics are 1) the topic is not overly complex or multi-faceted; 2) the topic is on a general subject matter accessible to the student writers; 3) the topic is clear and explicit in wording; 4) the topic has been pre-tested and critically appraised; and 5) the topic achieves a balance between being open-ended and being highly-structured.

However, in the Michigan assessment, as in many other assessments with large numbers of students, alternative topics are used and randomly assigned to students. As Troyka points out, in an effective

assessment, all variations of the topics must be equivalent, though not necessarily exactly alike (32). No student should be penalized for choosing a more difficult topic. I will first describe in detail the rhetorical frame provided by the Michigan assessment model and then compare versions of the test topics to discern their equivalency through an analysis of student performance.

Description of the rhetorical frame. Adapting the model of expository prose outlined by Jones, I analyzed nine assessment topics from the Michigan assessment to discover whether or not the topics effectively indicated the rhetorical frame to the writer.⁶ In Jones' model, expository discourse is comprised of four levels: performative interaction, expository script, point, and concept. When defining the rhetorical frame of an assessment topic, the test-maker should indicate the two higher levels to the writer, the performative interaction and expository script levels of exposition: to define the performative interaction level of exposition, the test-maker should indicate for the writer the subject, purpose, audience, and voice needed for an appropriate response; to define the expository script level of exposition, the test-maker should indicate for the writer the structure of development solicited by the assessment topic.

All of the Michigan assessment topics specify the performative interaction by providing the rhetorical context. For example, the sample topic asks for an essay on the general subject "Contemporary Student Attitudes and Ethics" to be submitted in an essay contest sponsored by the National Student Association. Furthermore, the topic advises the writer to "Do your best to make your argument convincing." The writer must translate this performative interaction information into a rhetorical stance—that is the writer should write an essay that is convincing to an audience of unknown contest judges. To complete the exam successfully, the writer must understand and produce an essay appropriate to the rhetorical frame outlined by the assessment topic.

Several researchers have pointed to the need for the examination context to be congruent with the rhetorical context specified by the assessment topic. Brossell suggests that one reason full rhetorical specification may not have resulted in better writing was the lack of fit between the real context of the test and the hypothetical context provided by the topic ("Rhetorical" 172). Michael Clark points to a similar concern. Clark describes shifts in tone and diction that appear to result from confusions precipitated by the test instrument. "It is possible, though," says Clark "to establish ostensible contexts that are familiar enough so as not to threaten the students while, at the same time, being close enough to the real context of the test so as to decrease the interference between the two sets of contextual variables" ("Contests" 223).

The nine Michigan assessment topics that I analyzed all specified an appropriate context, with one exception: Topic #22 asked for a letter rather than an essay, thus specifying a context that demands a level of formality incongruent with the assessment itself. The audience specified in all assessment topics was appropriate for academic exposition, with the exception of two topics that specified an audience of peers. The purpose of persuasion was defined through admonishing the writers to persuade or convince their audience using effective arguments. The writer's voice was suggested as well, through the advice to "sound convincing" to the audience.

The expository script demanded by the Michigan assessment topics is what Jones calls an "informal proof script." When a piece of exposition has a persuasive purpose, the structure of informal proof is expected. Jones identifies the constituents of informal proofs as theorem, background presuppositions, and arguments. Each of the assessment topics provides the writer with information about the expository script, through the introductory sentences and through the optional second sentences. Each first sentence attempts to give the kind of background information on the subject needed by the writer, as well as an indication of the formality expected in persuasive exposition. For example, Topic #1 begins "Your local newspaper has invited readers to submit essays about the laws concerning the privacy of minors. The newspaper will publish the best essays as guest editorials."

The optional sentences should provide writers with the theorem to be argued in the informal proof essay. For the nine topics that I examined, the majority of the sentence options contained a theorem statement (21 out of 27 options), providing the writer with a position on an issue that could be supported by appropriate arguments, structured as an informal proof. For example, option A of Topic #1 reads, "These laws discourage young people from seeking information and help they might need and should easily be able to get." If the writer selects this as a second sentence, he or she has taken a position on the issue and must argue as to why readers should share this position, thus convincing readers of the theorem's validity.

The theorems themselves seemed to be of two kinds—narrowing and expanding. The narrowing theorems, such as the one cited above, bring the writer to a clearer, more specific focus. The expanding theorems, on the other hand, move the writer toward a more general topic. For example, option B of the sample topic states, "This is not surprising, since cheating is part of the American Way of Life." This theorem has moved the focus of the essay away from the specific topic of cheating in schools, toward the far more general topic of cheating in life. I identified

six examples of expanding theorems out of the twenty-one total theorems.

Of the 27 options, 21 were theorems; the remaining options seemed to be of two kinds: 1) a statement of fact, or 2) a thesis statement. The factual statements include more background information but do not state a position that is arguable. An example is option A of topic #7: "Many older smokers are giving up cigarettes, but they are being replaced by thousands of young people who are beginning to smoke." The statement is a verifiable fact—one could quantify the number of older and younger smokers. It is the writers' task to formulate a theorem persuading the reader that this trend is or is not desirable.

Thesis statements differ from theorems in that they call for evidence rather than argument: the writer must state *how* he or she arrived at the thesis through providing evidence; whereas for theorems, the writer argues *why* the reader should think a certain way. An example of a thesis statement is option A of topic #16: "Many Americans believe that they have an historical and inalienable right to own guns for self-protection and pleasure." The key word is "believe." The thesis speculates about public opinion and could be verified through evidence explaining how the writer arrived at the observation that many Americans believe this way. Of course, it is possible to change a thesis statement into a theorem, but this takes an extra step in thinking for the writer.

Analysis of the data. I obtained data from the Michigan assessment for placement of students taking the assessment examination in the summer of 1981. There were 2,298 essays in my sample, with an average of 255 essays written on each of the nine assessment topics being investigated. By checking the placement of students writing on these nine topics—that is, how many students were exempt from composition (E), how many were required to take composition (C), and how many were required to take remedial or tutorial instruction (T)—I hoped to discern whether variations in the rhetorical frame influenced student success in the assessment. Of course, there were many other variables in addition to structural changes over which I had no control. For example, the writers were randomly assigned different topics and the various subjects being written about may have affected student responses. I intended my investigation to be preliminary and speculative, raising what I hope are some interesting questions in writing assessment.

In particular, I was interested in the placement of essays responding to topics with potential problems in the rhetorical frame: both performative interaction and expository script. Topic #22 asked for a letter rather than an essay. As Table 1 shows, this topic did not cause great difficulty for writers: the percentage of exempt essays for this topic was above the

mean and tutorials below the mean. It seems that the writers virtually ignored the letter format in favor of an essay, which they know is demanded by the real performative of the assessment itself. Two topics had potential audience problems, asking writers to address an audience of peers (#14 and #24). As Table 1 shows, these two topics did not present unusual difficulty either. The percentage of exempt essays was above the mean and tutorials near the mean for both topics. Again, the writers seemed to ignore the specified audience in favor of the "real" audience of exam readers.⁷

TABLE 1. Placement by Topic for Nine Selected Topics in U M 1981 Summer Assessment

	Topic #1		Topic #7		Topic #8		Topic #14		Topic #16		Topic #17		Topic #22		Topic #23		Topic #24	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Total	323	14.1	241	10.5	206	9.0	225	9.8	230	10.0	256	11.1	335	14.6	207	9.0	275	12.0
Placement																		
F	57	17.6*	19	7.8	28	13.6	48	21.3	33	14.6	22	8.6	68	20.3	34	16.4	61	22.2
C	230	71.2	214	88.8	145	70.4	152	67.5	161	70.0	209	81.6	242	72.2	150	72.5	190	69.1
T	16	11.2	8	3.3	33	16.0	25	11.1	36	15.6	25	9.8	25	7.5	23	11.1	24	8.7

*17.6% of those taking Topic #1 were exempt

Means = 15.8% Exempt
 73.7% Composition
 10.5% Tutorial

One topic was potentially confusing in its purpose. Topic #7 asked the writer to "Write an essay explaining how serious you believe the problem of smoking to be and how you think it can be solved." First, this statement assumes that every writer will think there is a problem; second, it asks for evidence to explain the seriousness of the problem; third, it asks for solutions to the problem, thus calling for persuasion in favor of a proposed solution. For many writers, this topic could be confusing: should the writer explain the problem or persuade the audience of suggested solutions, or both? As Table 1 shows, this topic may have indeed caused problems for the writers, since a smaller percentage were exempt and a larger percentage were placed into composition sections than for the other topics. The small percentage of exempt essays suggests that this topic was more difficult for writers, perhaps in part because of the confusion of purpose. However, the percentage of tutorials was below the mean, so most students writing on this topic were placed into the composition category.

Since the performative interaction specified by all topics in the assessment is persuasion, it follows that the informal proof script should be indicated by the exam as well. All of the topics provided background and context on the subject, an opening sentence, and an optional second sentence. However, some of the optional sentences seemed not to be

theorems but rather factual statements or thesis statements. I wished to examine the assessment data to determine whether or not different types of options resulted in differences in placement.

In charting the placement of essays by topic options (see Table 2), I discovered that the factual statement may have been more difficult for students than the other types of optional sentences: the lowest percentage of exempt essays and the highest percentage of tutorial essays were found on the factual statements. As Table 2 also shows, however, the thesis statements did not prove to be problematic for writers. Perhaps this is because a thesis statement can be readily converted into a theorem followed by arguments. The two types of theorems, expanding and narrowing, produced placement results that were very close. However, fewer writers elected the optional sentences with expanding theorems than any of the other options. Perhaps this is because the expanding theorems demand additional knowledge and expertise from the writer.

TABLE 2. Placement by Option Type

	Narrowing Theorems	Expanding Theorems	Factual Statements	Thesis Statements
E	16.1%	14.9%	8.5%	17.9%
C	74.4%	73.6%	78.6%	70.4%
T	9.5%	11.6%	12.9%	11.8%
Total %	33.2%	29.8%	31.0%	57.7%
	Elected Narrowing Theorems	Elected Expanding Theorems	Elected Factual Statements	Elected Thesis Statements

Conclusions and Implications. My primary conclusion from the study is that rhetorical frame may affect student performance in writing assessments and consequently should be carefully defined as test-makers design and construct assessment instruments. The assessment itself should provide a clear indication of the rhetorical frame, both performative interaction and expository script, in order for writers to produce an expository writing sample that will accurately and fairly differentiate them for placement purposes. Though some research has suggested that full rhetorical specification may confuse students (see Greenberg; Brosell and Ash), I found that providing a context congruent with the exam structure and suggesting the pattern of development helped writers respond appropriately to the assessment topics.

Furthermore, though other researchers have helped to identify the characteristics of good assessment instruments and good assessment writing topics, they have not discussed sufficiently changes in structure of topics themselves. I would like to suggest, based on my investigation, that testmakers pretest topics to discern the influence that seemingly minor variations in wording, particularly variations that affect the rhetorical frame, may have on student performance.

Notes

¹Purves and colleagues outline a classification scheme for composition assignments covering the range of variety possible in such assignments. The authors suggest their scheme may be used both in analyzing existing topics and in "generating parallel topics" (400).

²In the introduction to the Smith study, a brief review of current literature on assessment topics is provided. For a comprehensive review of the literature prior to 1982, see Hoetker (1982). For an overview of the various factors that affect student performance on writing topics, see O'Donnell. For a more specific discussion of how variations of structure in topics may (or may not) affect student performance, see Brossell and Ash.

³I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the English Composition Board of the University of Michigan for allowing me access to assessment topics and data.

⁴In a follow-up study, Brossell and co-author Hoetker describe a "frame topic" designed for the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) used in Florida state colleges and universities. Unlike the rhetorical frame that I am describing, Brossell and Hoetker's "frame topics" are generative structures that provide a topic-generating pattern but do not specify a subject that the writer must respond to.

⁵Bailey, Brengle, and Smith cite data from an ongoing analysis of the Michigan assessment that show the effectiveness of the Michigan approach to testing: "Students have been able to display their skills and our raters to form uniform and reliable conclusions" (144). Though the authors do not discuss the structure of the assessment topics themselves, they do provide evidence for the overall effectiveness of the Michigan testing approach. Others discussions of the Michigan assessment may be found in M. Clark's "Evaluating Writing in an Academic Setting," and Barritt, Stock, and F. Clark's "Researching Practice: Evaluating Assessment Essays."

⁶All of the Michigan assessment topics were designed to specify the rhetorical context for the writer, thus providing guidance and, at the same time, imposing constraints. All topics specify a response requiring the expository mode of writing. The nine topics that I chose to investigate had been used

continuously since the first assessment (in 1978) and had undergone minimal revision in four years of use. They had proven in general to be effective topics, eliciting appropriate responses from the writers.

⁷In a recent WPA article, Karen Greenberg points to the research on audience awareness in writing assignments that seems to indicate, as I found, that writers will ignore the specified audience in favor of the ostensible exam audience (34).

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