



## Communication Strategies<sup>1</sup>

The principles outlined in the *NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities* reflect best practices in assessment as defined by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). These principles are modeled by colleges and universities around the country, some of which are included in the “Assessment Gallery and Resources” that can be found at <http://wpacouncil.org/assessment-gallery>.

Designing and implementing good assessments is just one part of the work, however. Another involves helping stakeholders—whether colleagues in the program or department, campus administrators, community members, parents, or legislators—understand what it means to engage in *valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment that is used to improve teaching and learning*. This document offers some strategies for communicating with stakeholders about assessment processes and practices.

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In today’s media marketplace, where we are bombarded with information and sound bites, effective communication requires more than responding to critiques and questions. As educators we need to be proactive in getting our message out.

Documents like *A Test of Leadership*, the final report from the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, charge that college educators don’t engage in regular assessment and thus don’t know what students are learning. This story about education has established a familiar **frame** that is repeated regularly by politicians, policymakers, and media pundits. Through this frame, educators are cast as unaware, even incompetent. The frame is also sometimes underscored by a suggestion that someone else should step in to ensure that colleges “do their jobs.”

We need to **reframe** this discussion on assessment to highlight what we know about teaching and learning, and what we have done and continue to do to improve our work and students’ performance. To do this, we must act to:

### **1. Act locally.**

When we’re faced with something as daunting as, say, the Spellings Report or other broad national conversations about assessment or writing instruction, our tendency is to want to try to shift that national conversation. But because changing frames starts with building alliances, we need to act locally—in our program, department, or campus. This NCTE-WPA resources guide is intended to help WPAs and writing instructors develop

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effective *local* assessments that are linked by common principles. Then, course by course, program by program, we can show that local concerns can be addressed in consistent ways *across* the nation, but that good assessment is always locally based and used to improve teaching and learning in a specific context.

## **2. Develop alliances.**

Whether we like it or not, writing is everybody's business—at least, many people *believe* that writing is their business. From this position, they are often happy to tell writing instructors what we should do, how, and why. While we need to understand and be receptive to stakeholders' concerns, we also need to promote the best practices that we have developed as a result of years of research and teaching experience.

To reframe discussions about college writing instruction, we need to talk with these interested stakeholders, find out what motivates them to care about writing or writers, and find out how we can connect from our values—that is, our commitment to engaging in valid, reliable, and discipline-based assessment that is used to improve teaching and learning—to theirs.

Developing these alliances should be a process, just as writing is a process:

- a. Identify the individuals or groups who seem to care (or should care) most about what you do (e.g., colleagues in other departments, department chairs, deans, provosts, etc.).
- b. Develop a few questions that will help you learn about what motivates them. What leads them to care about what you do? For example, you could ask them to tell you the story of how they became so interested in writing, or what has led them to be as invested in students and their work as they are.
- c. Listen carefully. What values are embedded in what they say? (For example: are they committed to writing as a process? Do they believe that writing can help people change their status or situation?)
- d. Consider the values surrounding and embedded in your program, especially related to assessment. In a follow-up to the conversation (a thank-you email, for instance), frame what you want to do through the values that you and your potential ally share, and help them understand your *shared* commitment to those values.

## **3. Consider language.**

Developing alliances is one part of the effort to reframe assessment. The other comes in building a common frame for the language around assessment that incorporates research-based best practices in composition and rhetoric. To develop this language, we must carefully listen to concerns around student learning and how those concerns are expressed:

- What constitutes “knowing” about student learning by each party involved? Or what's acceptable “knowing” by each party and why?
- What does each party consider “evidence of assessment”? For instance, is it

- numbers? Is it qualitative? Is it both quantitative and qualitative? Is it from students only or also from teachers?
- What is an adequate “demonstration of achievement”? That is, how might achievement be displayed adequately? Is it numbers? Is it something else? Should it come from students, or from teachers, or from someone else?
  - What exactly does each party mean by “demonstration” and “achievement”? Does demonstration mean a broad range of writing? Does it mean a timed environment? Does it mean grammar performed in particular genres of writing? Does achievement mean value-added improvement of some sort, or a benchmark achieved and measured in some way? Is achievement static or comparative?

Listening carefully to our own and others’ responses to these questions, we can work to develop messages and, ideally, develop a frame that will allow us to proceed from our shared values.

**4. Develop messages.**

Working with allies, we can next develop messages that communicate the *principles and values* underscoring our assessments. These messages should communicate what we *do* believe and *do* value, not what we *do not* believe or disagree with. Communication strategists note that successful messages:

- ✓ are clear and concise;
- ✓ connect with interests and values of the audience;
- ✓ communicate *our* values and ideas; and
- ✓ are conceivable—that is, a general audience would “know what we mean” (adapted from Wellstone Action 37).

Consider adapting what’s known as a **Tully message box** to develop communication. The adapted box looks like this:

<b>Our message</b>	<b>Our response to them</b>	<b>Our collaborative revised message</b>
<b>Their message</b>	<b>Their response to us</b>	

Adapted from Wellstone Action. Used by permission.

To complete it, identify an audience with whom you’d like to communicate and their *specific message about assessment*, and then work backward, consider your *specific message*, and identify the shared values between those messages. For instance, using the Spellings Commission Report, a box might look like this:

<b>Our message</b> By engaging in valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment, we know to what extent students are achieving the learning objectives in our	<b>Our response to them</b> Composition instructors in our program have designed discipline-appropriate assessments that are used to improve teaching and	<b>Our collaborative revised message</b> Valid, reliable, and discipline-based assessment is grounded in principles stemming
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<p>courses, and we are constantly working to improve that achievement and the courses.</p>	<p>learning in our courses. These are shared with students regularly and assessed via authentic data that reliably help us understand how and whether students are learning in valid and reliable ways.</p>	<p>from the field responsive to local contexts and concerns, and implemented at the local level to improve teaching and learning. In our program, we use authentic data from students as evidence of their learning.</p>
<p><b>Their message</b> College educators don't know if students in their classes are achieving the learning objectives in their classes.</p>	<p><b>Their response to us</b> We need evidence from your assessments that demonstrate students are achieving the learning outcomes in your classes.</p>	

On an individual campus, the concerns tend to be more local and specific. Thus, a more localized version of a message box exchange might look like this:

<p><b>Our message</b> Our composition program engages in valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment. We know to what extent students are achieving the learning objectives in our courses, and we are constantly working to improve that achievement and the courses.</p>	<p><b>Our response to them</b> We've designed an assessment based on best practices in composition, rhetoric, and assessment research that helps us assess student work and improve teaching practice. We collect students' final portfolios and ask outside readers to make judgments about this work: Does this writing achieve the outcomes of the course as they have been defined (with input from a variety of stakeholders), or is it not passable? Our portfolio sessions allow us to improve our program's teaching generally through conversations with other teachers, contact with other teachers' students' writing, and our portfolio training processes. It also helps us</p>	<p><b>Our collaborative revised message</b> Valid, reliable, and discipline-based assessment is grounded in principles stemming from the field responsive to local contexts and concerns, and implemented at the local level to improve teaching and learning. These principles, too, require direct, or "authentic," evidence of student learning, in our case, from student portfolios. In our program, we use authentic data from students as evidence of their learning.</p>
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	gather data about the learning occurring in our courses. The reading results are shared with students regularly for their benefit. This is an authentic assessment, in that the data we collect show us directly from student work in their courses how and whether they are learning the outcomes we are asking of them.	
<p><b>Their message</b> We've heard from others, and it seems from the outside looking in, that you don't know if students in your classes are achieving the learning objectives you say they are. How do you know your students are achieving the outcomes you state for them?</p>	<p><b>Their response to us</b> We need evidence from your assessments that demonstrate students are achieving the learning outcomes in your classes.</p>	

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Your message should:

- *Be positive.* It should communicate what you *do*, not what you *do not* do.
- *Reflect the best-practice principles outlined by our discipline.* NCTE and WPA have published numerous position statements on assessment that are based in research and teaching, as well as this resource guide, to summarize these principles. In the combined membership of these groups, you have 66,000 allies—link to their values and principles, outlined in these documents, too.
- *Be clear and understandable.* Media activist Robert Bray recommends using “the brother-in-law test” for our messages—picking someone who isn’t “associated with your cause or organization [like a brother-in-law], and see if they understand your issue” (Bray 16).

We can reframe the discussion about our work by repeating, again and again, a message like:

- *Composition instructors and WPAs engage in valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment that is used to improve teaching and learning.*

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## 5. Disseminate your messages.

Writing instructors and WPAs often find themselves in a reactive position when it comes to assessment—someone says that we are (or aren't) doing something, and we need to respond. But we can also be proactive about disseminating our messages. Here, too, it's possible to work through a process.

*First, develop a communication plan.* Ask familiar questions: What audiences might be interested in hearing about your plan, and for what purposes? How can you communicate your values and ideas (clearly, concisely, and conceivably) to them? Many of the assessment models included in this guide (e.g., University of Kentucky's) also illustrate how engaging in assessment can help stakeholders outside of the writing program understand and contribute to the values reflected in the program as well. Consider developing a plan using a chart, for instance:

Message	Where	By Whom	When	Audience

*Second, consider the best venue.* Think about internal media—office newsletters, campus newspapers, even campus events can be sites from which to share with others how you're using valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment to improve student learning in your course(s) or program. Of course, it's always tempting (and can be quite satisfying) to send a letter or an opinion-editorial (op-ed) piece to your local newspaper. You also might think about pitching a story to your local radio station (especially if your campus has an NPR affiliate). Campus public relations offices also often welcome stories about events or activities in programs. If your program has something like a Celebration of Student Writing or other writing-related activity, be sure to let them know.

In all of these cases, some general tips are useful:

- Get to the point. News items are concise and direct, not long-winded and obtuse.
- Link your point to an ongoing story or trend. Media activists note that “three is a trend.”
- Include specific examples. Stories about real people encountering real situations are powerful. This is also another reason why we can be more effective at the local level: if you can localize a national story, you're more likely to get attention from local people (from administrators to journalists).
- Communicate what you *want* to happen, not what you don't want to happen.
- Once you develop your message, stick to that message. This may mean repeating it more times than you think is necessary, but remember: we're trying to change stories that are dominant in part because people hear them again and again.
- Whether you're writing a letter or an op-ed piece, check the news outlet's guidelines (which are typically included on the op-ed page). Letters and op-eds have word limits, and both are subject to editorial discretion. If they are edited,

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you won't be consulted about what is cut or kept, so make sure that your piece says what you want it to. Use the inverted pyramid style for your piece—put the most important thing, the message that you want to convey (not the one you want to negate!), at the beginning; the most important evidence about that message next; and so on.

- If you want to write an op-ed piece, try to contact the op-ed editor with a query about the piece before sending it. Introduce yourself, tell her or him what you would like to write about, and find out whether the paper would welcome such a contribution. If they would, ask about page limits and deadlines. Op-ed pieces can be sent to more than one paper; however, you do *not* want to send them to more than one outlet in the same market. As with all encounters with journalists, be *prepared* and *polite*. This could be the beginning of an ongoing relationship with this person, and you want to set the right tone.

Using these strategies, coupled with smart assessment practices, we can reframe discussions about teaching and learning, and highlight what we know and how we are continuously using valid, reliable, and discipline-appropriate assessment to improve teaching and learning.

### Note

1. Adapted from *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers* by Linda Adler-Kassner (Utah State University Press, 2008)

### References

- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2008.
- Bray, Robert. *SPIN Works! A Media Guidebook for Communicating Values and Shaping Opinion*. San Francisco: Independent Media Institute/Project SPIN, 2002.
- Wellstone Action. *Politics the Wellstone Way: How to Elect Progressive Candidates and Win on Issues*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005.