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ABSTRACT
              In order to establish competency based entrance
requirements for freshman composition, a midwestern university
sampled six freshman composition and four basic writing classes for
errors in their essay writing. ACT English and social studies scores
and several reading scores were also gathered. All this data was
computer analyzed by the multiple regression procedure, with the
final holistic rating as the criterion variable. Results indicated
the holistic rating as the best indicator of success in the freshman
writing course, and the ACT English score as second best. Number of
errors, however, did characterize the remedial writers. While the ACT
English and the preliminary holistic rating are workable for entrance
testing, they are not the best combination for determining freshman
composition entrance for students who have spent a semester under
remediation or who are testing for a second time. Therefore the
university is using a holistic essay rating plus an error count on
that essay as a freshman composition entrance test for students who
are testing for the second time. (HOD)

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Defining the Basic Writing Student by Count

Teachers of remedial composition courses know unskilled
writing when they see it. It is characterized by numerous
errors--in spelling, tense markers, noun plurals, pronoun use,
sentence boundary markers, etc.--and is generally shorter, less
specific, less logical, and more disorganized than the writing
that is considered to be of college level. Writers who produce
essays of this quality are regarded as candidates for remedial
writing classes. But when you have 4000, or even 300, students
entering school in the fall, how will you determine when the
writers are so unskilled that they should be placed in your
remedial course? What measure or measures will you use? What
will be the cut-off point indicating need for remediation?

Various schools have dealt with this problem in different
ways. In an effort to answer some of these questions at Illinois
State University, I and my colleagues have been researching
placement procedures over the last two or three years. Central
to our investigation has been the relationship of error to writing
quality.

The research began with a study that compared students
in a freshman composition class with those in a remedial writing
class. The sample was small and the generalizability limited,
yet this pilot study did lead to further research. . The two

classes were compared on T-unit length, clause length, writing
apprehension, and errors on a revision passage. Original writing
was not compared. Of the measures employed, the two classes
differed only on error count. In roughly 150 words, the remedial
class averaged 6.67 errors, while the freshman composition class
averaged 1.28, the difference being significant beyond the .001
level.

This difference is not surprising, since unskillful
writing is known to be characterized by error, and remediation
correspondingly aims for reduction of errors. The literature in
the field likewise assumes this characteristic. Slotnik and
Rogers, for example, in applying factor analysis to a large corpus
of National Assessment papers, found only two significant factors
differentiating good and poor papers: number of errors and essay
length. The City College of New York at one time regarded a
five percent error count as indicative of a need for remediation
(as reported by Barbara Quint Gray), and LaGuardia Community
College eight errors or more in 300 words (this reported by
Roberta Matthews). Shaughnessy reports that remedial writing
contains ten to thirty errors in 300 words, while Labov observes
that readers will tolerate only two percent errors.

Acting on our preliminary findings and on published re-
search, our Freshman Writing Committee devised a set of error
criteria for further investigation. These criteria divided
errors into those we considered more serious (sentence boundaries,
subject-verb agreement, tense markers, noun plural markers)
and less serious (spelling, pronoun case and reference, apos-
trophes, and omitted words). Each occurrence of the more serious

errors was counted, but only one occurrence of those regarded as less serious.

These error criteria were then applied in a multiple regression analysis of the writing of two freshman composition classes. We counted errors on an in-class essay written at the beginning of the semester. The criteria were found to have a .473 correlation with final grades. Employing the multiple regression predictability formula, we found that the error count could be no greater than 3.36 in order to assure a reasonable chance for a final grade of C. In additional informal checks made by teachers of the remedial classes, the students who ended the course with a passing grade had in general fewer than four errors.

All this preparatory analysis led up to the full-scale research we conducted in the fall of 1980 in order to establish competency-based entrance requirements for freshman composition. Our initial procedures were to randomly select a sample of six freshman comp and four basic writing classes. From these ten classes we gathered, at the beginning of the semester and at the end, an impromptu in-class essay, a revision of Kellogg Hunt's "Aluminum" passage, and a cloze test. ("Aluminum" is a series of short sentences to be rewritten in a coherent paragraph. Using it has the advantage of demanding the same tasks of all students. The cloze test was a short essay with every seventh word omitted, to be inserted by the student.)

The cloze tests were scored for the approximate word, and the "Aluminum" revisions were scored for errors as listed

on our error criteria. The essays, both pre and post, were rated
at the end of the semester by three trained readers who had no
knowledge of time of writing, course represented, or scores of
the other readers. Then the essays were submitted to an error
count using our criteria. We also gathered ACT English and Social
Studies scores and several reading s   s. All this data was
computer-analyzed by the multiple regression procedure, with
the final holistic rating as our criterion variable.

Our error counts did not come out as the best predictors.
Instead, we have the preliminary holistic rating as the best
indicator of success in our freshman writing course, and the ACT
English score as second best. Together, their R^2 accounts for
48 percent of the variability in the final essay rating. So we
are adopting these two measures for determining entrance into
our freshman composition course.

Number of errors, however, did in this study, as in ear-
lier research, characterize the remedial writers. At the begin-
ning of the semester their essays averaged 4.06 errors per 150
words in contrast to 1.89 for the freshman comp students. At
the end of the semester, the remedial writers had reduced their
errors to a mean of 2.88, a decrease significant at the .001
level, while the freshman comp students had dropped to 1.48, a
slightly less significant decrease. As far as the essay ratings
are concerned, our remedial classes increased, again at a more
significant level than our freshman comp students (beyond .001).
While these improvements are encouraging in that our remedial
courses are producing the effects we have aimed for, it is, all

the same, a f   ent, since the State of Illinois

has recently   d of all remedial courses at the

university 1   ind the courses are already being

phased out.

　　　While   ratings and the ACT English scores were

adopted as o   placement measures, we do still have a

use for the a   ind error count combination. Errors on the

preliminary essay did have a significant correlation with the

final essay rating, a coefficient of .51. This score in combina-

tion with the preliminary holistic rating accounts for 44 percent

of the variability in the final essay. Not as high as the 48

percent for essay and ACT scores, but respectable all the same,

and we can use it. While the ACT English and the preliminary

holistic rating are workable for entrance testing, they are not

the best combination or determining freshman composition entrance

for students who have spent a semester under remediation, or who

for other reasons are testing for a second time. We need a way

of knowing if these students have made enough progress to enter

the regular course, and using the ACT presents problems. Whereas

the student's academic level may have changed over the semester,

the available ACT score would be the same as at the beginning

of the semester.

　　　We therefore have gone to using a holistic essay rating

plus an error count on that essay as a freshman composition

entrance test for students who are testing for the second time.

What we will do is set up a committee of writing teachers, who

will decide on a topic for the impromptu essay and, after a

training session on reliable holistic rating, will read and score
the essays, finally counting errors in the first 150 words.
This committee will determine whether the students tested have
reached a level of competence for entering freshman composition.

So, while error count was not the best predictor of suc-
cessful completion of our freshman composition course, its high
correlation with essay ratings supports its use as an additional
measure of writing competence.

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SAMPLE GRADING SHEET FOR 101 ENTRANCE EXAM

STUDENT'S NAME_____
TEST DATE_____
GRADER'S NAME_____

1. Sentence boundary problems (count each error)

    A. Fragments   1   2   3   4

    B. Comma splices and run-ons   1   2   3   4

2. Faulty word forms (count each error)

    A. Plural markers (nouns)   1   2   3   4

    B. Tense markers

        1. -ed for past
        2. irregular verb forms
        3. 3rd person singular present

                                              1   2   3   4

3. Subject verb agreement (count each error)

                                              1   2   3   4
_____

            (If all errors are below line, 101 is recommended)

4. Pronouns (count errors only once)

    A. Case   1

    B. Number agreement   1

    C. Reference   1

5. Word mechanics

    A. Omitted words   1

    B. Misspelled words   1

    C. Apostrophe missed or misused   1
                                                        Total_____
Recommend:
            (three or fewer errors) 101_____

                              189.50_____
                        9)

TABLE 1. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS OF SELECTED PREDICTOR
VARIABLES AND POST HOLISTIC RATING OF ESSAYS

n=103	ACT-E	ACT-SS	Al.Err.	Cloze	Es.Err.	Es.Rat.I	Es.Rat.II
ACT English	1.000	.620	-.525	-.738	-.489	.649	.611
ACT Soc.St.		1.000	-.177	-.519	-.275	.348	.254
"Al." Errors			1.000	.542	.543	-.527	-.467
Cloze Errors				1.000	.477	-.650	-.527
Essay Errors					1.000	-.640	-.505
Essay Rating I						1.000	.649
Essay Rating II							1.000

$p < .05$ when $R > .195$.

$p < .01$ when $R > .254$.

TABLE 2. RECOMMENDED SCALE OF ESSAY SCORES AND ACT ENGLISH SCORES
FOR DETERMINING ENTRANCE INTO ENGLISH 101

Essay Score	ACT English Score
3.00 (C)	8
2.85	10
2.64	12
2.43	14
2.32	16
2.22	17
2.00 (D)	18
1.80	20
1.58	22
1.37	24
1.16	25
1.00 (F)	28

Applying this table, we would require a student with an ACT English score of
8 to have an essay score of 3. An essay score of 2 must be accompanied by
an ACT English score of 18, and a student scoring has little chance of success
without an ACT score of 28.