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ABSTRACT

Intended as an aid for English teachers in planning a senior-year composition program that takes into account both the strengths and the weaknesses in the writing of their students, an analysis of teacher evaluations of student writings (the Early English Composition Assessment Program--EECAP) is conducted annually by the Ohio Writing Project. This year more than 70 elementary and high school teachers read papers written by high school juniors and then evaluated them on a scale of from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). These weekend sessions offered teachers the chance to test evaluation criteria, to rethink standards and values, and, most importantly, to strive for rater consistency. Every student wrote on the same question--selected for its fairness and possibilities of exploration; and raters practiced using the rating criteria of ideas, supporting details, unity and organization, sentence structure, and diction and usage on sample essays before they started scoring the students' compositions. Several revealing patterns emerged from the raters' responses: (1) the teachers rewarded length and development, (2) raters expected writers to stick to one topic, and (3) certain facets of good writing remain more elusive, almost ineffable--for example, writing that is "in control" or that exhibits "voice" was prized. (An example of an essay on each scoring level is given, as well as raters' comments.) (NKA)

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WHAT MAKES HIGH SCHOOL WRITING GOOD?

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**An Analysis of Teacher Evaluations of Student Essays
Written for the Ohio Writing Project's Early
English Composition Assessment Program
Miami University
January, 1986**

INTRODUCTION

The major purpose of the Early English Composition Assessment Program (EECAP) conducted by the Ohio Writing Project is to provide high school juniors with both a holistic and an analytic evaluation of an essay written under controlled conditions. In conjunction with classroom assessments, this evaluation can help teachers plan a senior-year composition program that takes into account both the strengths and weaknesses in the writing of their students. But there are other purposes of EECAP beyond the evaluation of student writing.

One important purpose is the professional growth of participating teachers: for two weekends each year EECAP brings together more than seventy elementary and high school teachers who discuss among themselves and with a chief reader the criteria to be used in evaluating student writing. The most obvious purpose of their discussion, of course, is rater consistency. Through discussions of the scoring scale, the rating criteria, and sample student essays, raters are expected to assign a given paper the same score. Beyond rater consistency, however, the weekend evaluation sessions provide teachers with the opportunity for development, change, and growth. They offer the chance to test our evaluation criteria against those of our colleagues and, in a relatively non-threatening environment, to rethink and reconsider our own standards and values. After all, most of us have never before scored a paper along with seventy colleagues and then discussed with them the reasons for assigning the score we did. It is a situation which invites us to learn from each other.

The student essays evaluated this year were all written in response to the following question or "prompt":

Explain as clearly and specifically as you can whether you think American society treats men and women and/or girls and boys as equals or whether you think the two sexes are treated differently. In your explanation, you might want to tell a story about yourself or your friends, to use description, and to refer to men and women in movies, in books, and on television. In any case be sure to use examples, illustrations, and other details to make your explanation interesting and informative.

This particular question was chosen for several reasons: it seemed likely to interest and challenge high school juniors without overwhelming them with its difficulty; it seemed a fair question, one that would not discriminate against any group of students because of their background or experience; it achieved a middle level of abstraction, encouraging both broad generalizations and specific supporting details; and it invited an explanatory essay, probably the most common kind of writing for high school students. In short, the question was designed to stimulate students to do their very best writing—given the fact that they were expected to complete an essay in 35 minutes on a question they had never seen before.

Student essays were evaluated on a six-point scoring scale: "6" was the highest score an essay could receive and "1" was the lowest. (Essays that were a sentence or less in length or that were completely off topic were assigned the holistic score of "0" and were not scored analytically.) Here is a description of the points on the scoring scale:

SCORING SCALE

- Grade 5/6: Clearly above average papers which demonstrate strength in virtually all the criteria. Rarely are these flawless papers, but they are usually substantial in content and often original in idea and/or expression. A "5" tends to be thinner or weaker in some ways than a clearly superior "6."
- Grade 3/4: Papers ranging from slightly below average ("3") to slightly above average ("4"), either combining strengths with weaknesses in the various criteria or showing an over-all sense of under-development.
- Grade 1/2: Clearly below average papers which fail to demonstrate competence in several of the criteria (often because the paper is too short) or which are generally empty or which fail to respond to the question. A "2" tends to have redeeming qualities absent in a "1."

In deciding upon a score, raters used the following five criteria:

RATING CRITERIA

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|--------------------------------|--|
| IDEAS: | The extent to which the thoughts and content of the essay are original, insightful, and clear. |
| SUPPORTING DETAILS: | The extent to which the ideas of the essay are supported by examples and details which are specific, appropriate, and fresh. |
| UNITY AND ORGANIZATION: | The extent to which the parts of the essay develop its whole and to which the parts of the essay are clearly and logically connected to each other. |
| SENTENCE STRUCTURE: | The extent to which variety, maturity, and effectiveness of sentence structure is achieved. |
| DICTION AND USAGE: | The extent to which wording and phrasing are accurate, expressive, and concise and to which the principles of grammar and the conventions of standard English are, when appropriate, observed. |

Raters practiced using the five rating criteria to score a series of sample essays before they began scoring student essays on their own.

The student essays that follow represent the full range of scores on the six-point scale. Each essay was assigned its given score by four separate raters. Then each of the raters was asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of four items: 1) Please explain as clearly and specifically as you can the major reason you gave this paper the grade you did; 2) Please explain any other reasons for giving the paper the grade you did; 3) Was this paper an easy one to grade? Please explain why or why not; and 4) Please explain any other reactions to the paper that might have influenced the grade you gave it.

The following discussion, based on the raters' responses to the questionnaire, begins with middle-range papers—those that were judged either slightly below average ("3") or slightly above ("4"). It then considers lower-range papers ("1" and "2") before concluding with student essays judged to be in the upper range ("5" and "6").

MIDDLE-RANGE PAPERS

A "3" Paper

In American society men and women are treated differently in many ways. It all started a long time ago. Women were not permitted to have a job, the women's place was at home. Men thought that the only things that women were good for is cleaning, doing wash, cooking, and caring for the children.

As time passes things do change. I think men still feel the same way about a woman's place being at home, but today, it's the woman's decision on whether she is going to have a career or not, or whether or not she is going to stay home and be a housewife or if she wants a part time job.

Although some things have changed in favor for the women, there are still some things that men are considered "better" at than women. There are three times more men doctors than women doctors. There are many more judges that are men compared to the women judges.

Maybe in the next ten or twenty years this will also change. America is a changing country which matures in several ways every year.

One very important thing that I feel will never change is that there will never be a woman president. People believe that men are more educated in certain matters concerning other countries, and things to do with politics. But you never know, some brave women might run for presidency some day, but I don't look for that to happen for a long time, but this is my own opinion.

Therefore what I'm trying to say in this ESSAY is that men and women will never be treated equally in every way. Things have changed in the past and things will keep on changing. But I feel that men and women will never be treated totally as equals.

On the six-point scoring scale, this paper was consistently rated "3" or "slightly below average" in overall quality. Moreover, the raters who scored the paper a "3" considered it relatively easy to evaluate: they were equally certain that it was neither "slightly above average" (a "4") nor "clearly below average" (a "2" or "1").

The central weakness of the paper, the raters further agreed, is its lack of supporting material, the almost complete absence of specific examples, illustrations, and details. There are, to be sure, some specifics here. The writer does assert that male doctors outnumber female doctors three to one and that there are more male judges as well. He further notes that men are often thought to be superior politicians, especially in conducting foreign policy.

But since neither these nor other points are explained or developed, the paper does not become sufficiently interesting or informative to deserve a "4."

It was precisely the lack of development and the paucity of supporting material that prevented the raters from scoring the paper a "4." One rater wrote, "Had I seen more facts, I believe I would have rated the paper '4' or even '5.'" A second rater commented that the examples "were not developed well enough to earn the paper a '4.'" A third rater cited the absence of "crisp, specific examples to support the thesis" as a major reason for scoring the paper a "3."

So it was primarily the paper's failure to support, develop, and otherwise elaborate upon its key assertions that made it below average in quality. But the raters pointed to other if less important problems—occasional irrelevancies, an immature style, and errors of grammar and spelling. Perhaps because the paper was organized chronologically rather than analytically, the raters felt that it was sometimes off topic. The paper is also weakened by an immature style—most obvious in sentences like "There are many more judges that are men compared to the women judges." Finally, the paper suffers from errors in tense consistency, sentence boundaries, possessive constructions, and spelling. Still, neither the errors nor the stylistic immaturity nor the irrelevancies weighed as heavily with the raters as the lack of specific examples and supporting details.

What makes the paper "slightly" rather than "clearly" below average in quality? According to the raters, the paper merits the score of "3" rather than "2" because it addresses the assignment and because its content is substantial and its expression clear. One rater characterized the paper as "rather clear and logical. The argument was concise and to the point." Moreover, the paper follows an intelligible order: it begins with the past, moves to the present, and concludes with a glimpse of the future. And these movements through time are appropriately signalled by connectives like "As time passes" and "Although some things have changed." In fact, the paper had enough promise for one rater to lament, "I didn't want

to grade it, only discuss it and have it rewritten." If the paper were to be rewritten, the raters would advise the student to concentrate on examples and specific details.

A "4" Paper

In American society today, I feel that men and women are not treated as equals. Men in in most cases have the better paying job for the same kind of work done. In a factory that my aunt used to work for, she had worked there longer than this one man, she done the same kind & amount of work that the man did but she got paid a lower wage because she was a woman.

I also feel that men are looked up to more than women are in a business or company. For example, on this one television show I was watching, the man was a "head" of his company and of a similar company, a lady was the "head" of that company and when it came for the Cartel to do business with the best company they saw fit to complete this "deal", they picked the man's company just because he was a man and they felt that a woman could not complete "the deal" to their liking.

Most women are not thought upon as being able to do a man's job when indeed there are alot of men's jobs that women can do but not all. That does not mean that men should discriminate or wrongly judge women just because they are of the female sex. I feel that women should be respected & thought upon as a equal human being if they can do a man's job.

Most men have the thought that women are just play things & only should do what most women did before women's lib. → clean the house, have kids, raise them, go to church & be a good Christian mother, make supper, & be there when the man wants them.

Whenever you hear about some women doing something spectacular or out of the usual, the society always says, the place for the women is in the house cooking and raising kids, not doing a man's job. I feel that a man should be in the kitchen & raising kids just as much as the women does that.

In the case of boys and girls being equals, there is a little skepticism there too! Both sexes, in children, feel that they are more better than the other. For example, most girls are asked to do a lot more responsible things than boys are. Like if a mother or father wants something from the store he is more likely to ask the girl than the boy, for she is more responsible.

But boys are looked as better than girls because when there is some kind of activity involving a little physical strength, they ask the boy rather than the girl. The boys are always thought as being strong and the girls smart and responsible.

On the whole, I feel that women are not looked as equals of men, that they are below men and that girls & boys are not looked as equals and both, in different situations, are looked to be better than the other.

This paper seems to characterize "slightly above average" papers in style, in development, and in diction; in all these areas, the raters noted moments of resonance and moments of dissonance. They praised the writer's control over grammar, ideas, and rhetoric. As one rater noted, the paper was "above average in examples and was fairly well unified." But the writer's inability to capitalize on her successes earned criticism as well. "Although the paper had some substance, it could have been presented in a more interesting manner," went a typical comment.

The paper contains stylistically mature sentences, sentences that deftly handle multiple noun clauses and apposition: "Most men have the thought that women are just playthings & only should do what most women did before women's lib—clean the house, have kids, raise them, go to church & be a good Christian mother, make supper, & be there whenever the man wants them." But the paper does not maintain a mature style. It occasionally tangles syntax and confuses verb forms: "In a factory that my aunt used to work for, she had worked there longer than this one man, she done the same kind & amount of work that the man did but she got paid a lower wage because she was a woman."

In the same way, the paper promises substantial development but falls short. It opens, for instance, with a topic statement: "In American society today, I feel that men and women are not treated as equals." Then it narrows the topic with, "Men in . . . most cases have the better paying job for the same kind of work done." And it even supports the topic statement with a personal illustration: the writer's aunt was paid a lower wage than a man "because she was a woman." But other examples are vague and thin. In the second paragraph, for instance, we are told about a television show in which a man defeats a woman in a business deal simply because he is a man, yet we are given few specifics about the incident. So the raters generally agreed that the paper could have had "better ideas and more complete examples."

One rater, who commented on both syntax and diction, admitted she wanted to lower the paper to a "3" because of the grammatical problems like "she done." But she decided that a writer who could write long, sophisticated sentences and use words like "skepticism and

discriminate . . . had an above average command of language." The rater finally gave the paper a "4" because she "did not want to see the student go unrewarded for the good points." The essence of a "4" seems to be that it struggles with sophisticated techniques—in style, in development, in diction—with only partial success.

LOWER-RANGE PAPERS

A "1" Paper

Shortness often signals a "1" paper even before raters begin to read it. Like the following, most "1" papers cover less than a handwritten page:

Men and woman are treated the same to me. But, I don't like women working in factoryes that are dangerous and hard work. You always hear women that say they can do anything that a man can do and probably better and we know they can't.

Raters point out that the feature that gives such a paper merit, that earns it a "1" rather than a "0," is that the paper addresses the topic. In the first sentence of the paper, it's clear that the writer understood the question and responded. But since his response is so brief—only three sentences long—raters lament that the paper lacks substance and fails to demonstrate competence. One rater summed it up this way: "The paper lacks depth, organization, details, logic, development. In short, there is very little here to grade."

A second "1" paper, a little longer than the first, responds less directly to the topic:

My Cousin, She thinks she's the girl of all girl's an boy's. She thinks she is the super girl of the 80's. She tries to act like a boy, walk like a boy, talk like a boy. Put it this way, she does everything like a boy. God doesn't make mistakes but when he made her a girl he made a big one. So hey I think that boys and Girls should be treated equally to a certain extent.

The raters' comments reveal that when there's so little content to pique their interest, errors occupy their attention. Even more so than in longer papers, it seems. Two who rated the second paper commented that it was easy to spot errors in that paper because it was only a single paragraph. Referring to the first paper, one grader said, "Misspelled words definitely caught my eye." Her remark would seem to indicate that the paper has several spelling problems. However, the paper has only two—"factoryes" and "woman" (rather than "women") in the first line, which the writer spells correctly on two later occasions. It would appear that in a paper with so little text, any error seems blatant. The second paper drew a similar response: "Capitalization, punctuation, and sentence structure were all abused." Although more than half of the "abuses" cluster around the writer's problem with sentence boundaries, the errors overwhelm the paper because it is so short.

In fact, raters seldom find anything positive about such short papers. No one mentioned that the third sentence in the second paper coordinates infinitives for a sophisticated effect: "She tries to act like a boy, walk like a boy, talk like a boy." The only favorable remark was that the writer's voice comes through in the second paper. And the lack of positive comments isn't surprising. With no content to consider—no details to savor, no examples to enjoy—the rater has little choice but to focus on errors.

A "2" Paper

Some obvious shortcomings—problems with organization, inadequate development, and grammatical errors—characterize "2" papers. As the following paper suggests, their greater length places "2" papers a notch above the "1's."

I think that men and women are treated equally to a certain extent. Women are expected to set at home, that was the attitude. But women are moving up in the world of work and men stay home and take care of the kids.

Women are treated differently because men think that women are weak and feeble. Today women can get training to do a "man's job."

One time me and my brother were out for the same job and he got it because they felt he could accomplish more than I could and the employers told me that to my face.

There are alot of "women jobs" that are being filled by men. I see nothing wrong with that but there is such a thing as prejudice.

My aunt is a salesperson at a fine company and there was a promotion coming up, of course she had competition, a man, they had the same experience but the man got it because women shouldn't have the authority to tell a man what to do. This isn't always the case at many jobs men and women are treated equal.

Since the examples here need elaboration (What "women jobs" are being filled by men?) and the details lack specificity (What job did the brother and sister apply for? Where did the aunt work?), the paper remains vague. As one grader remarked, "Frequently I get hooked into wanting to read about what could be an excellent example, yet never are these examples specifically sketched so that I can see and understand the illustrations." Although raters also commented on the undeveloped examples and illustrations in a "3" paper, the details in a "2" paper are not only vague but sometimes inappropriate as well. The first sentence of the sample paper suggests that it will focus on equality—where or how the two sexes are treated equally, how women are moving up in the world. Instead, the paper goes on to show that women are treated differently: her brother got the job that she applied for, the promotion her aunt deserved went to a man. When we finish reading the paper, we are uncertain what point the writer wanted to make. Because inappropriate details are mixed in with a few appropriate ones, the paper lacks organization and fails to develop a central idea.

Not surprisingly, raters were distracted by numerous grammatical errors often typical of a "2" paper. One rater commented: "I found myself focusing on 'me and my brother,' 'alot,' woman 'setting' instead of 'sitting,' and the lack of punctuation."

Basically, then, graders agreed upon the deficiencies that made the paper a "2"—lack of organization, skimpy and vague details, grammatical errors.

UPPER-RANGE PAPERS

A "5" Paper

Who is Geraldine Ferraro. Is she (A) a "mouthy broad," (B) "a dumb blond," (C) "a political noose," or (D) a fellow human being who saw a need and tried to fill it? Chances are, most Americans, with the aid of the media, will answer anything but "d", depending upon how diplomatic they are.

Politics and women functions much like management and women. As long as she stays discretely in the trenches, in lower level management, or state and local politics, she's accepted. But higher ambitions are often viewed as frivolous, and serious efforts are ignored, simply because of one's sex.

When opportunities are made available, as they were to Ferraro, it's not always her qualifications which get her there. Whatever efforts or accomplishments Ferraro made in her public service became secondary to her New York and Rome connection. She was female, Catholic, and urban, running for office with a WASP from Minnesota. She may not have been the best person for the job, but she had the right connections. Thus, women, in their alleged ignorance, were expected to vote for a party because of a sexist consideration—not because of competence of the candidate.

Nearly every effort of the liberal Democrats to placate the female population and gain the vote was an insult to every woman's intelligence. It only reinforced the underlying sexism that plagues politics still today.

This paper illustrates the promise as well as the problems of a "5" paper. On the one hand, it impressed its readers with a striking introduction and engaging examples. On the other hand, like many "5" essays, the paper struck teachers as very good but not quite excellent because it lacked one essential feature—full development.

No single feature of this essay received as much comment or praise as the introduction, formatted as a multiple choice quiz. One teacher praised it as "original in its method and well developed in its thought," while another noted "a dynamic opening, . . . an original beginning which immediately caught my attention." And the paper does, in fact, display a lively voice right from the beginning. The writer's use of slang, of chatty informal style, and of the quiz format promises a lively, thought-provoking paper.

The raters also applauded the paper's strategies of development, especially the extended example. Each point of the paper revolves around Ferraro's selection as Mondale's

running mate in the 1984 presidential election. And the extended example relates clearly to a subtle inductive argument, unveiled in the second paragraph, where the writer asserts that a person's sex is not as important in lower echelon positions in business and politics as in higher level, more public positions. The paper thus implicitly questions the hidden sexism of political campaign strategy as well as Ferraro's qualifications by stating, "Whatever efforts or accomplishments Ferraro made in her public service became secondary to her New York and Rome connection. She was female, Catholic, and urban, running for office with a WASP from Minnesota. She may not have been the best person for the job, but she had the right connections." The writer uses the Ferraro example finally to substantiate the major assertion of the paper: "Nearly every effort of the liberal Democrats to placate the female population and gain the vote was an insult to every woman's intelligence." The paper's sophisticated development and careful logic impressed the raters. One praised the "attempt to show deep thought," another the decision to develop one, well-supported example.

Why then was an essay graced with a clever introduction and an extended illustration unanimously awarded a "5" rather than a "6"? The raters agreed on the matter: all four of them sought fuller development in the paper. They noted the paper's narrowness, its failure to "proceed to larger issues of equality," and its limit of "only one main supportive idea," even if the idea was "one which was developed fully." The paper's brevity clearly lost it points with the raters. One rater remarks that the paper could never be a "6" because in some places it needed to be more developed. Another assigned the "5" grade because it "might have had more substance had it been longer in length." Since none of the raters faulted the paper's other features, apparently lack of development and brevity alone influenced their decision.

The paper's originality and attention-getting introduction won it its "5." And certainly to win that "5," the essay needed to display the writer's struggle with significant, thought-provoking ideas, even if those ideas were not always substantiated through varied examples. What seems most apparent is that the typical "5" paper, if it sins at all, sins more from failed promise than anything else. The raters liked what they saw, but they wanted and

expected more. The essay invites its readers to a tantalizing five course meal but sends them home too early—right after the Beef Wellington.

A "6" Paper

Two women are sitting in a restaurant having lunch. The restaurant is reasonably fashionable, and so are the women. Both are nice looking and married. During their lunch an unmarried male friend of theirs walks in. Upon seeing him, the eldest lady comments "He's so distinguished looking for his age. He must be very happy living alone. You know what they say: once a bachelor, always a bachelor." A few minutes later, one of their single lady friends walks in. This discussion follows: "She looks worn out, if she doesn't find a man soon it will be too late. No one will want to marry an old spinster. If they do it will be out of pity." Clucking, and shaking their heads, they return to their meals.

This is an example of a normal lunch conversation that could go on between any two people in any place.

Men and women in America are treated differently. Men are allowed to make more choices in life, are given more responsibility. These choices can be in jobs, social life and even marriage. It seems that women have fewer choices in their life.

On the job, men have a wider job scope. They can be anything they want; if they want to do "women's work" they are perceived as noble and helping out the "little woman". Women don't have these opportunities; they are almost forced into what are deemed as female careers. If a woman tries to break into a "man's field", she is called aggressive and pushy. Men are also hostile towards her.

After receiving a job, men and women aren't paid the same. It has been typical practice throughout history to pay men more for the same job a woman would get less pay for.

There is also greater opportunity for men to rise up in job levels. When a woman gets a job, she should be happy for it. She will probably stay at that level. Men can rise up more rapidly. They are said to have more control and are more businesslike than women.

As shown, just in the "work aspect" of life, men have more opportunities. This is just one part of life where the treatment of men and women is unbalanced. I shudder to think about the rest of life's opportunities and the outcome if this treatment isn't changed.

Clearly, a paper doesn't have to be flawless to earn a "6" rating. This one, for instance, has misspelled words, a run-on sentence, and, at least according to one rater, "some

choppy sentences." But it also has enough substance, structure, and style to allow the raters to overlook its infelicities.

To begin with, the essay is vivid and immediately engaging. It opens with an anecdote about two married women commenting on two unmarried people—first a man and then a woman—who walk into a restaurant. The women consider the man distinguished looking and content in his bachelorhood ("He must be very happy living alone"), but they consider the woman worn out by her spinsterhood ("If she doesn't find a man soon it will be too late").

Raters are obviously moved by writers who successfully draw readers into their frame of reference and who project a personality. The raters consistently laud the paper's voice and its sense of audience. "This paper has a lively voice," one rater said. "The writer captures the reader's attention from the very beginning," another commented. "The writer involved the reader and never lost sight of her audience," a third noted. Obviously raters enjoyed this paper.

Aside from being engaging and enjoyable, the paper is organized and coherent. The writer moves smoothly from the opening anecdote to expository comments on how men and women are not only perceived differently but are treated differently—especially on the job, where men receive more pay and enjoy greater opportunity for advancement. In the exposition, as in the narrative, the contrast in opportunities for men and women is sustained. The writer notes that men who do "women's" work are seen as "noble and helping out the 'little woman.'" Women trying to make it in "men's" jobs are called "agressive and pushy." The paper sticks to the topic and sustains a structural pattern.

Nonetheless, organization and voice and audience involvement alone do not explain what makes a paper a success. What comes out in the raters' comments is that the separate components of "6" papers are held together in an imaginative, pleasing balance. One rater noted, "all of her [the writer's] thoughts blend" Another mentioned how the paper "flows well," and the third wrote that the writer "ties the parts together well." The fourth

rater perhaps summed it up best, noting the tension between freedom and formalism in this paper. "I particularly liked the balance between creativity and rigidity of form," he said.

If a "6" paper doesn't have to be perfect, its parts have to work together to create a whole greater than their sum. It sustains interest and readability because of its imagination, organization, and voice. And it motivates comments like "mature" or "sophisticated." It's like a heady wine with body and bouquet.

CONCLUSION

Several revealing patterns emerge from the raters' responses, patterns which suggest what we value and reward as teachers when we evaluate essays. From their remarks we can begin to assess what influences teachers' decision-making when they must decide between an essay which is above average and one which really shines, or between a paper marginally-acceptable or more obviously competent.

First, the teachers rewarded length and development. The "4," "5," and "6" papers are much longer than the "1" and "2" papers, each only a single paragraph. The "3" paper, moreover, was "slightly" rather than "clearly" below average because it is "substantial" but still below average because of "paucity of material." Even more important than length was a paper's use of details and examples. In fact, the raters always noted a paper's dearth or richness of development: not one paper in our sample escaped scrutiny for that particular feature. The "5" paper, for instance, with an added example or two, would become a "6"; the "4" paper needs "more complete examples"; and the "3" paper's most obvious problem is a failure to elaborate upon key assertions. Based on our sample, teachers value a paper's development more than any other single feature.

Raters also expected writers to stick to one topic. The "1," "2," and to some extent "3" papers suffer from problems with topic clarity. The sample "2" paper fails "to establish a focus," while the "3" paper exhibits irrelevancies. Each of the above-average papers succeeds, however, in establishing and maintaining a central thesis. Raters also tended to ignore basic problems in mechanics and grammar if the errors were offset by more positive traits. The "4" paper overcomes errors in tense with sophisticated diction, while clear organization and lively voice more than offset the "6" writer's misspelled words and run-on sentence. The paucity of material in the "1" and "2" papers, though, offers nothing to balance the exact same kinds of errors in agreement and spelling. Thus they appear more glaring.

Finally, certain facets of good writing remain more elusive, almost ineffable. Our raters commended writing which is "in control" or writing which exhibits "voice." Indeed, most of us recognize and laud the same features in our students' writing, though we are sometimes hard put to articulate what constitutes those traits. And many of us have equal difficulty describing what first captures our interest in a piece of writing. How does a writer make first "contact" or engage us in such a way that we wish to read on? Donald Murray once said that he chooses novels by reading the first sentence twice. If the first sentence intrigues him, he will read the first paragraph. By the end of the first paragraph, he has decided if he will buy the book. Clearly something occurs early in a piece of writing—usually in the introduction—which catches our attention, just as the vivid introductions of papers "5" and "6" impressed our raters. We do not, therefore, underestimate how complicated and how slippery it is to examine our own evaluation procedures. But we are convinced we can learn much from our colleagues and from ourselves if we question rigorously what it is we do when we read and mark our students' papers. Such questioning, it seems to us, is essential to establishing and maintaining not only fair standards for our students but, just as importantly, confidence in ourselves as professionals.