The 2013-2014
WRITING PROFICIENCY
EXAMINATION

Will be offered:
October 26, 2013
10 am – 1pm
TBA

You do NOT need to pre-register
(Just show up with photo ID)

A practice exam and sample reading are attached.
Be sure to return to pick up the exam-specific readings, available one month prior to each exam date.
PREPARING FOR THE WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAM

The information in this packet will familiarize you with the Writing Proficiency Exam and provide some general strategies for preparing to take it. We’ve included a sample reading and exam question that you can use to practice. If you would like to review your practice essay before the exam, make an appointment with a writing consultant in the Writing Center (Battelle-Tompkins 228; 885-2991).

The Writing Proficiency Exam will require you to construct an essay in response to a reading, and each administration will offer a choice of readings and questions. Readings for each administration of the exam will be available one month in advance and can be picked up from your advisor or from the Department of Literature’s information rack on the second floor of Battelle-Tompkins. You should review in advance the readings for the administration you plan to take, but copies will be available on the day of the exam. Please note that readings will change for each exam administration.
WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAM

Introduction

The Writing Proficiency Exam is designed to assess your academic writing skills. The exam requires you to write a persuasive argument in response to a short essay.

- Arrive early at the exam site, as there is no pre-registration. Be sure to bring your ID card, a pen or pencil, and your copy of the readings. You may also bring a dictionary, spelling guide, and writing or grammar handbook.

- All writing must be done on test materials. You will be provided paper for rough copies of your essay.

- Write your final copy in the blue book provided and submit all materials when you are ready to leave.

- You will have up to three hours to complete the exam.

- Be sure to leave time to proofread.

- If your first language is not English, identify yourself to the proctor and in the space provided on the exam materials so that you will be given extended time if you need it. You may choose to bring a bilingual dictionary.

- If you have a disability and require special testing accommodations, please make arrangements through the appropriate office on campus. For students with learning disabilities, contact the Academic Support Center (MGC 243, x-3360). For students with physical disabilities, contact Disability Support Services (MGC 206, x-3312).

- You will receive notice of the exam results by mail three to four weeks after the exam administration.

- If you do not pass the exam, you may make an appointment to discuss your exam with a consultant in the Writing Center (Battelle-Tompkins 228; x2991).

- If you do not pass the Writing Proficiency Exam a second time, you must enroll in either LIT 100 College Writing or LIT 101 College Writing Seminar. Students must achieve a “C” or better to satisfy the Writing Proficiency requirement.
Grading Criteria for the Writing Proficiency Exam

Thesis and Support

- The thesis is clear, discernable, and arguable.
- The thesis is supported with sufficient and relevant evidence.
- The essay reflects understanding and analysis of the reading. (See also the attached information on choosing a thesis.)

Organization

- The ideas are connected fluidly and sensibly.
- The introduction and conclusion function effectively.
- The paragraphs are coherent and unified.

Style

- The language is clear and concise.
- The diction and syntax are appropriate and clear.
- Material from the reading, whether paraphrased or quoted, is smoothly integrated but does not dominate the essay.

Standard Written English

- The writing is generally free from errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Mechanical errors do not distract from the content.

Responsiveness

- The essay addresses the question directly.
- The essay makes clear connections to the text.
Choosing a Thesis and Planning Key Assertions

The thesis is the main idea of a paper. In your essay for the exam, the thesis will express the stand you take on a topic introduced by the reading and directed by the question.

An arguable thesis meets these three criteria:

• Concerns a point of view with which another person could reasonably disagree.
• Is supported by facts and evidence to be explained in the essay.
• Reveals your current understanding or viewpoint on a topic.
• Offers the best answers to a specific question or a specific problem.

These points rule out arguments over whether you like something (“I love nature”); arguments over simple, established facts (“It is Earth Day”); and vague or general arguments that no one could refute (“The fate of the world’s environment is important to everyone”).

An example of an arguable thesis can be found at the close of the sample article where Diane Ravitch claims that our current conventions of verbal expression have “evolved into a bureaucratic system that removes all evidence of diversity and reduces everyone to interchangeable beings whose differences we must not learn about—making nonsense of literature and history along the way” (134).

The above instructions are excerpted from:


For additional advice on developing a thesis, planning an argument, or other writing issues before the exam, please visit the Writing Center (Battelle-Tompkins 228; 885-2991).
Writing Proficiency Exam

Sample Question

Please write an essay in response to the following topic. Develop your argument in a carefully organized essay of 500-1000 words. You may use any of the ideas mentioned in the question, but do not repeat the exact language of the question. In addition to the reading, you are urged to draw on any background knowledge or previous experience that would support your argument. Be specific, using examples and details to support your generalizations.

You will have up to three hours to complete the essay. Allow time to proofread so that you can check sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Don’t be reluctant to cross out, to use arrows, to move paragraphs, or to make changes; still, try to write legibly.

Please return all materials to the proctor when you complete your essay.

Question: (refers to attached essay "You Can’t Say That" by Diane Ravitch)

This article was published in a February 2004 edition of the Wall Street Journal. Write an essay that responds to Ravitch’s claim that efforts to review material for bias have “evolved into a bureaucratic system that… reduces everyone to interchangeable beings whose differences we must not learn about.” Give examples from your own experience to directly support or refute her argument.
You Can't Say That
Forbidden words and the ridiculous "education" guidelines that forbid them.

BY DIANE RAVITCH
Friday, February 13, 2004 12:01 a.m.

To judge by the magazines we read, the programs we watch or the music lyrics we hear, it would seem that almost anything goes, these days, when it comes to verbal expression. But that is not quite true.

In my book "The Language Police," I gathered a list of more than 500 words that are routinely deleted from textbooks and tests by "bias review committees" employed by publishing companies, state education departments and the federal government. Among the forbidden words are "landlord," "cowboy," "brotherhood," "yacht," "cult" and "primitive." Such words are deleted because they are offensive to various groups--feminists, religious conservatives, culturalists and ethnic activists, to name a few.

I invited readers of the book to send me examples of language policing, and they did, by the score. A bias review committee for the state test in New Jersey rejected a short story by Langston Hughes because he used the words "Negro" and "colored person." Michigan bans a long list of topics from its state tests, including terrorism, evolution, aliens and flying saucers (which might imply evolution).

A textbook writer sent me the guidelines used by the Harcourt/Steck/Vaughn company to remove photographs that might give offense. Editors must delete, the guidelines said, pictures of women with big hair or sleeveless blouses and men with dreadlocks or medallions. Photographs must not portray the soles of shoes or anyone eating with the left hand (both in deference to Muslim culture). To avoid giving offense to those who cannot afford a home computer, no one may be shown owning a home computer. To avoid offending those with strong but differing religious views, decorations for religious holidays must never appear in the background.

A college professor informed me that a new textbook in human development includes the following statement: "As a folksinger once sang, how many roads must an individual walk down before you can call them an adult." The professor was stupefied that someone had made the line gender neutral and ungrammatical by rewriting Bob Dylan's folk song "Blowin' in the Wind," which had simply asked: "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?"

While writing "The Language Police," I could not figure out why New York State had gone so far beyond other states in punctiliously carving out almost all references to race, gender, age and ethnicity, including even weight and height. In June 2002, the state was mightily embarrassed when reports appeared about its routine bowdlerizing on its exams of writers such as Franz Kafka and Isaac Bashevis Singer.
The solution to the puzzle was recently provided by Candace deRussy, a trustee of the State University of New York. Ms. DeRussy read "The Language Police," and she too wondered how the New York State Education Department had come to censor its regents exams with such zeal. She asked the department to explain how it decided which words to delete and how it trained its bias and sensitivity reviewers.

At one point, state officials said that since June 2002 (the time of the debacle) they have adhered to only one standard: "Test developers should strive to identify and eliminate language, symbols, words, phrases, and content that are generally regarded as offensive by members of racial, ethnic, gender, or other groups, except when judged to be necessary for adequate representation of the domain." Ms. DeRussy guessed (correctly) that the state was holding back the specific instructions that had emboldened the bowdlerizers. She decided to use the state's freedom-of-information law to find out more. Months later, a state official sent her the training materials for the bias and sensitivity reviewers, which included a list of words and phrases and a rationale for language policing.

So here is how New York made itself an international joke. The state's guidelines to language sensitivity, citing Rosalie Maggio's "The Bias-Free Wordfinder," says: "We may not always understand why a certain word hurts. We don't have to. It is enough that someone says, 'That language doesn't respect me.'" That is, if any word or phrase is likely to give anyone offense, no matter how far-fetched, it should be deleted.

Next the state asked: "Is it necessary to make reference to a person's age, ancestry, disability, ethnicity, nationality, physical appearance, race, religion, sex, sexuality?" Since the answer is frequently no, nearly all references to such characteristics are eliminated. Because these matters loom large in history and literature--and because they help us to understand character, life circumstances and motives--their silent removal is bound to weaken or obliterate the reader's understanding.

Like every other governmental agency concerned with testing, the New York State Education Department devised its own list of taboo words. There are the usual ones that have offended feminists for a generation, like "fireman," "authoress," "handyman" and "hostess." New York exercised its leadership by discovering bias in such words as "addict" (replace with "individual with a drug addiction"); "alumna, alumnae, alumni, alumnus" (replace with "graduate or graduates"); "American" (replace with "citizen of the United States or North America"); "cancer patient" (replace with "a patient with cancer"); "city fathers" (replace with "city leaders").

Meanwhile, the word "elderly" should be replaced by "older adult" or "older person," if it is absolutely necessary to mention age at all. "Gentleman's agreement" must be dropped in favor of an "informal agreement." "Ghetto" should be avoided; instead describe the social and economic circumstances of the neighborhood. "Grandfather clause" is helplessly sexist; "retroactive coverage" is preferred instead. The term "illegal alien" must be replaced by "undocumented worker."
Certain words are unacceptable under any circumstances. For example, it is wrong to describe anyone as "illegitimate." Another word to be avoided is "illiterate." Instead, specify whether an individual is unable to read or write, or both. Similarly, any word that contains the three offensive letters "m-a-n" as a prefix or a suffix must be rousted out of the language. Words like "manhours," "manpower," "mankind" and "manmade" are regularly deleted. Even "penmanship," where the guilty three letters are in the middle of the word, is out.

New York identified as biased such male-based words as "masterpiece" and "mastery." Among the other words singled out for extinction were white collar, blue collar, pink collar, teenager, senior citizen, third world, uncivilized, underprivileged, unmarried, widow or widower, and yes man. The goal, naturally, is to remove words that identify people by their gender, age, race, social position or marital status.

Thus the great irony of bias and sensitivity reviewing. It began with the hope of encouraging diversity, ensuring that our educational materials would include people of different experiences and social backgrounds. It has evolved into a bureaucratic system that removes all evidence of diversity and reduces everyone to interchangeable beings whose difference we must not learn about--making nonsense of literature and history along the way.

Ms. Ravitch is the author of "The Language Police" (Knopf).