

Regents Exam Review Panel
English Language Arts
Hosted by
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June 7, 2001

A panel of eight writers and university faculty met on June 7, 2001, under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, to review and discuss the English Language Arts (ELA) Regents exam. As writers and as teachers of college students, we had certain expectations of such an exam:

- **Values**

We would expect the exam to reflect literary values (such as respect for the text, the author's voice, the context within which the author wrote the text) and, for the sections on non-literary communication, to reflect the clarity of "conventional American English."

- **Higher-order thinking and teaching**

We would expect the exam to reward order higher order thinking and to encourage the highest level of pedagogy. We had no doubt that a responsible teacher would feel compelled to "teach to the test," especially given that the Regents are "high-stakes" exams. As every teacher knows, a state-mandated test tells students and teachers what is -- and is not -- important to know and teach.

- **Curricular concerns**

Since no single exam can test every aspect of a four-year high school curriculum, we would expect that the framers of the exam would carefully choose the areas to focus on from among the many options offered in a language arts program.

- **College readiness**

Finally, and of great importance to many in our group, we would expect that the exam would signal a student's readiness for college work.

None of these expectations was met, however.

What we discovered, instead, was that this test is a test of taking this test. We made this discovery by the route that we recommend everyone follow when reviewing the Regents exams: we took the test.

Values Literature was not well served in this exam. As a group, we'd written more than forty books, so we were more than a little disappointed by the reading selections, which were often inconsequential or arcane or arbitrarily edited so that the point of the selection was a distortion of the piece of literature. It also seemed strange that the literature readings were presented on the test without any contextual information - there were no

dates, no bibliographic citations, no titles, no biographical information about the authors. Furthermore, the short answer multiple-choice questions, which carried more point value than the required essays, were insulting to the literature, the author, and the student. Multiple-choice questions by their nature deny literature any subtlety or ambiguity. (Which emotion does Chekhov refer to in the lines *"for the first-time in her life it was her lot to experience in all its acuteness the feeling that is so familiar to the persons in dependent positions, who eat the bread of the rich and powerful and cannot speak their minds"*? Is it (3) humiliation or (4) fear?)

Writing was not well served in this exam either. It seems that the framers of this exam have somehow managed to be ignorant of every piece of research that has been published in the last twenty-five years about rhetoric and the writing process. While taking this exam, we had to forget about everything we know or have learned about writing. The Regents is a timed test and each section is discrete. There is no time for reflection. Instead of requiring students to rethink, revise, and rewrite their essays after a few hours, or perhaps the next day, the Regents format prohibits revision - *the single most effective, teachable, and sustainable method for improving the quality of prose.*

Higher-order thinking and teaching None of us liked the prospect of high-school teachers devoting classroom time to the skills and strategies most likely to improve scores, such as high-percentage guessing, skipping the questions you can't answer, and using the language of the essay question rather than your own ideas to frame a written response.

"That's already happening," said panelists with children enrolled in public schools. Moreover, several private, for-profit companies have already developed Regents-specific test-preparation courses for students who can afford their fees, which nullifies the claim that the Regents restores equity to public education.

In fact, as a result of taking this test, we have some advice for students and teachers:

- 1 .Do not read any of the passages provided. Reading is a waste of time. Just go directly to the questions and then go to the passage to ferret out vocabulary and context-specific questions (e.g., to answer a question such as: *The second phase of [Susan B.] Anthony's strategy was to change the law at what level of government?*)
2. When you read a part of a passage, do not expect to encounter conventional American English. This is particularly important if you are a non-native speaker of English who might think native speakers can easily parse sentences like this: *"Like music, it split the bulging rim of the future along its seam. It pried out the present. We watchers waited for the split-second curve of beauty to reveal itself."*

3. Do not spend time studying the charts and graphs. The multiple-choice questions that refer to them are typically keyed to details you will not recall.
4. Don't waste time thinking about the test; no one is interested in what you think.
5. Do not attempt to write an original essay. You don't have time. Points are awarded and subtracted on the basis of a formula. Write the five-paragraph essay, even though you will never again have a personal or professional occasion to use this format. It requires no comprehension of the text you are citing, and you can feel smart for having wasted no time reflecting on the literature selections.

Curricular concerns It was surprising that the Regents exam offered students no opportunity to demonstrate so many of the skills and abilities that are mandated by the State's ELA Learning Standards. Research methods and skills are not applicable to the required tasks; oral communication -- including public speaking, performance, debate and the specified use of "the social communications of others" (in the language of the NYS Standards for ELA) -- is not tested; the collaborative, multidisciplinary, and technology-based classroom work mandated by the curricular standards is disregarded. The Regents tells the students that most of the learning and intellectual work mandated by the standards are simply not important.

College Readiness What does this test test? It does not help students identify their weak areas in order to guide their future studies. As college professors, we concluded that it does not identify a student's readiness for college-level work (see our above five points on how to take the test).

Genuine assessment takes time. Learning is complex and assessments should be, too. The State has shown no inclination for either allotting time or addressing complexity. Like many educators and parents, the members of the panel had hoped that the Regents exam was better than nothing. But after submitting to it, we can attest that it's not a high-flying standard; it's not even a true standard. The Regents is not better than nothing, and it's not nearly as good as the available alternatives [e.g., the performance assessment tasks created and endorsed by the NY Performance Standards Consortium (Consortium)].

If you can afford the tuition, you can choose one of New York's exclusive independent schools, where students are exempt from the Regents requirement. (If it was a good test, and if it really did engender academic excellence, wouldn't the independent schools lobby to be included rather than excluded?)

For those in the NYC public schools, the only alternative now in use is the Consortium's performance assessment system, a system now under threat of extinction by NYS Commissioner Mills and his Board of Regents. For the sake of comparison, the panel read several essays written by students in Consortium schools as a prerequisite for an intensive oral competency assessment. These essays showed students working analytically, using language to interrogate texts and to express their own ideas about

them, and making connections among memorable -- and momentous -- books. Not only were the students evidently invested in these essays, the essays created opportunities for teachers to invest time productively in their students. The essays were more engaging and more significant than the essays written for the Regents exam, not least because they represented far more time and complexity: time for thinking, choosing a topic, discussing, consulting with peers and teachers, drafting, revising, responding to readers' comments and resubmitting. And there was still more time to rethink and rewrite.

This is the kind of work, and these are the kind of students that those of us who teach would want in our classes next year.

Signed by:

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Louise Meriwether, former faculty member of Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Houston.

Robert O'Meally, Zora Neale Hurston Professor of Literature at Columbia University, Director of the Center for Jazz Studies, and formerly the Director of Freshman Writing.

Sondra Perl, full professor at Lehman College and a member of the doctoral faculty in composition theory at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Ellen Willis, director of the cultural journalism program at New York University, where she is also the Chapter President, American Association of University Professors.

Ron Wolk, founding editor of *Education Week*, *Teacher Magazine*, and *Quality Counts*.