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**The Opinion Pages**

ROOM *for* DEBATE

**It Should Be About Feedback and Revision**



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Of course a standardized test can assess writing. The question is, what is it assessing, and does that assessment say anything useful about a student's writing ability?

Essays on standardized tests measure how well the student has learned to play the game through

expensive test-prep courses that disadvantage poor and at-risk students.

A high-stakes essay tells me nothing about whether a student is prepared for college-level writing because it does not mimic any rhetorical situation they will face outside of the test itself. At best, it asks students to rush through a process that should take weeks, not minutes. At worst, it relies on a mechanistic and formulaic understanding of writing for a faceless audience without feedback or revision.

High-stakes essay writing is about learning to game the system. Good test takers are just that: Students who learned the rules of the game, often through expensive test-prep courses that disadvantage poor and at-risk students. Those with greater access to coaches and materials and practice do better on the exam, but that does not mean they are better writers. Even if students will have access to free SAT-prep courses through the Khan Academy in the future, and even if their scores increase, all that demonstrates is that they have learned the rules of the game.

Good writing is a developmental process, one that immerses students in the practice of working as a writer. They wrestle with feedback from peers and their instructors; they learn to self-evaluate; they use these critiques to revise and rewrite. They compose in a digital world, demonstrating mastery of effective communication in 21st century academic, social and professional environments. My colleagues and I assess every part of the writing process, not just an end product. For this 300-word essay, I consulted 11 colleagues and wrote several drafts, because that's how real writing works.

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