

OUSD History Assessment Newsletter

Volume IV, Number 1

Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, California

February, 2007

Notes from a Scoring Session: Positives and Negatives in Student Writing

On Saturday, February 3, twenty-five teachers gathered to score the OUSD fall writing assessments for 10th and 11th grade history classes. At this session, teachers scored over 300 papers from classrooms throughout the district (each read twice) and discussed some of the specific strengths and weaknesses they found in the student writing.

On the positive side, teachers noted that almost all the student papers demonstrated the ability to state a thesis. The thesis varied in terms of depth and sophistication, but they were there in the essays. Teachers also found that students seemed to be able to comprehend the basic information contained in a majority of the documents included in the assessment. It was also positively noted that students demonstrated a sense of historical empathy. Tenth-grade students were genuinely indignant that children in another country, and over two hundred years ago, were forced to work in mines, carrying heavy weights, for low wages! Eleventh-grade students were upset by the fact that women couldn't vote, and by the poor sanitary conditions under which food was packaged for consumers. They also noted the failure of the Progressives to deal with the issues of racial prejudice and violence against African-Americans. In each of these instances the historical empathy expressed by the students was essential in supporting a thoughtful response to the assessment questions.

On the negative side, teachers noted that providing a thesis is just a first step in writing a successful essay. Many students were still unable to build upon and logically support their thesis as they developed their body paragraphs. Many of the students did not use topic sentences, and they confused supporting details with a main idea. Additionally, teachers felt the essays would be strengthened if students included more information that was "outside knowledge" (not included in the documents) and if they were able to analyze and synthesize information from documents more effectively.

In the midst of this work, teachers also recognized exemplary student work. There is not enough space in this newsletter to reprint entire essays, but we want to highlight two examples (see page 2) of strong introductory paragraphs. In each example, the introduction sets the tone for the entire essay, and provides the reader with a map of the argument the writer is going to make in support of the thesis. Neither example is perfect, as this is an on-demand assessment with no chance for revision. But, we hope that by examining what some students do well we can help other students emulate their success.



- Shelly Weintraub and Stan Pesick

Writers and Editors —

Shelly Weintraub—879-8477; Shelly.Weintraub@ousd.k12.ca.us

Stan Pesick—879-8497; Stan.Pesick@ousd.k12.cas.us

Please contact either of them if you have questions, or for more information about the assessments and related professional development.

Two successful introductory paragraphs (continued from page 1)

10th Grade—“Were the gains of the industrial revolution in England from 1780-1850 worth the pain that was caused, particularly to the working people of the country?”

In the mid 18th century, many places around the world changed from primarily agriculture based societies to industrialized ones. The Industrial Revolution was symbolized by the factories, mass production of products in a building with hundreds of workers. Also significant was the use of coal, which was a better fuel than wood and it led to the creation of countless coal mines all around Europe. There were many gains during this time, particularly the advancements in technology leading to better transportation and affordability of products. However, the gains from 1780-1850 were not nearly enough to compensate for the pain that was caused to the millions of workers, miners, and others of the lower class who had to suffer immensely during this time.

This introduction has two significant strengths. First, it provides the historical context. The writer explains that the Industrial Revolution occurred worldwide, not just in England and establishes the significance of moving from an agricultural society to an industrial one. Secondly, this paragraph has a clear thesis statement linked to a concessionary statement. In other words, the writer admits that there were gains that came from the Industrial Revolution between 1780-1850, including better transportation and affordability of products, but concludes that these gains were not enough to offset the pain caused workers. The reader then knows that as he/she reads the essay they aren't going to find a diatribe, but rather a thoughtful argument that weighs the evidence on both sides.

11th Grade—“Were Progressive Era reformers successful in encouraging government action to improve the lives of Americans?”

How much different would America be without the Progressive Era? The Progressive movement arose in the late 1890's and early 1900's and lasted through World War I. Progressives were those who were concerned about their society and the negative effects of industrialism. Their main goal was to improve lives. Progressive era reformers were successful in encouraging government action, they improved lives socially, politically, morally, and economically.

This introductory paragraph has a number of strengths, but two stand out. First, like the introduction to the 10th grade paper it provides the historical context for this topic. The writer lets the readers know when the Progressive era began and ended, and defines who the Progressives were. Rather than beginning the essay abruptly with an answer to the question the writer sets a frame for the essay. Secondly, the writer sets up categories, - social, political, moral and economic – as a way to evaluate the success of the Progressives. This provides the “road map” for the reader.

Accelerating Student Achievement on the Assessment

What distinguishes a two from a three paper and how can we help to move students from one level to the next? This is an important question because the largest number of students scored a “2” on the assessment. The initial analysis of the student papers, as discussed by teachers who attended the scoring session, indicates that one of the major distinctions between a two and three paper was a writer's command, or lack of command, of a basic essay structure. In this case this meant having

- an introduction including a thesis statement which outlines the arguments that will be developed in the paper.
- a set of body paragraphs with topic sentences that elaborated on the arguments identified in the opening paragraph
- a conclusion that summarizes the arguments that have been made in support of the thesis.

Many students may have learned this format in prior years, but they have trouble applying it to their history essays. On page 3 are examples of introductory paragraphs, from both a 2 and a 3 paper, taken from two different 10th grade World History essays. The examples are followed by a commentary that elaborates on the strengths and weaknesses of each paragraph.

Two Introductory Paragraphs—Examples and Commentary

Question: Were the gains of the Industrial Revolution in England from 1780-1850 worth the pain, particularly to the working people of the country?

Introductory paragraph from a “2” paper

The gains of the Industrial Revolution in England from 1780-1850 was not worth the pain that was caused, particularly to the working people of the country. I believed that those people and mostly those children didn't deserve to be in these hard working conditions that they were demanded to be in.

Introductory paragraph from a “3” paper

The Industrial Revolution was a big change in the world. During that time many factories operated and urban areas grew faster and faster making the population grow too. Even though the Industrial Revolution brought a lot of modern inventions and technology, it was not worth while because it made people suffer a lot, there were bad working conditions and there were bad environmental conditions.

Commentary

Admittedly, neither introduction is stellar – but there is a clear and dramatic difference between the “2” and the “3” paragraphs. The “3” paragraph has two major strengths. First, it puts the question into a larger historical context. The writer notes that the Industrial Revolution changed the world and that the growth of factories created larger urban centers. Then, and this is crucial, the writer states a thesis including “because” and outlines three ways in which the pain was not worth the gain – there was suffering, there were bad working conditions, and there were bad environmental conditions. It is clear to the reader that the writer is in control of this paper. We know what we are going to read.

The “2” paper, on the other hand, restates the question but doesn't give any reasons. The writer follows the thesis with a concern about people at the time, but no indication of the arguments that will be made in the essay.

The Standard Essay Format

These two examples illustrate how important it is for students to have command of the basic essay structure identified above. Reviewing and practicing this structure will help students as they prepare to write for the spring district assessment, and as they write other essays in history classrooms. It will also help those students who have not yet passed the CAHSEE.

For many years, and for good reasons, this standard essay format has been seen as too limiting to good writers. Concerned teachers and educators have argued that no professional writer relies on this format, and the writing that comes out of it is often stilted. Nevertheless, it is clear from reading historical essays from around the district that many of our students – in fact the vast majority who score a “2” - could benefit greatly from an understanding of this basic structure. ***This understanding would help organize thinking and, therefore, writing.*** Once students have this structure, they should be encouraged to expand it, to modify it, and to play with the conventions. In the meanwhile, this format will, we believe, substantially improve student history writing across the district. It will also provide students a foundation for developing the kinds of writing skills necessary to demonstrate the kinds of thinking and understanding identified as essential to student success in college (See page 4). In the context of the history assessment this means helping students develop the historical thinking and historical writing skills necessary to reach the “4” and “5” levels of achievement as outlined in the district rubric.

Why are the History Assessments Important?

Four years ago teachers voted overwhelmingly to implement a district-wide high school history assessment that was based in writing. Since that time many teachers are new to the district or new to teaching 10th and 11th grade history. Therefore, it is important to review the reasoning of teachers who voted to undertake the district-wide assessment. Behind the vote by district teachers were two basic goals they believed the assessment could help address:

I. Building Students Academic Capacity

Our schools have a clear goal of preparing students for college, but the state colleges and universities report that students are entering the post K-12 system unprepared to do the demanding work required to achieve academic success at that level. In 2000 the *Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges, the California State Colleges**, and the *University of California* issued a report on academic literacy that identified what academic skills are most necessary for student success in college. In the area of writing the report notes that:

- According to faculty respondents, only 1/3 of entering college students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned collegiate writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information.
- Faculty expects students to reexamine their thesis, to consider and reconsider additional points or arguments, to reshape and reconstruct as they compose, and to submit carefully revised and edited work.
- High School students should be assigned writing tasks that demand analysis, synthesis, and research.

The demands of the district assessment, as developed by district teachers, directly address many of these skills. It requires students, among other demands, to develop a thesis, and to analyze and synthesize documents that often illustrate different perspectives. Thus, by preparing students for the district assessment, we are helping to prepare students for the demands they will meet as they enter college.

II. Promoting Equity and Teacher Collaboration

If the goal of the assessment were simply to build student's academic capacity, there would be no reason to create an instrument that is developed and administered centrally. Rather, each teacher could use their own assessments – each classroom an island unto itself. But, when teachers voted for the assessment they wanted more than islands. Through the common scoring of the assessments and through staff development (elaborated on page 4 of this newsletter) we are trying to promote equity as we develop a community of history teachers from across the district. We want to be sure that what constitutes quality work in one teacher's classroom is comparable to what constitutes quality work in other teachers' classrooms. We also want to have a chance, building on a shared sense of what constitutes quality work, to talk about how to help our students do better. We want to share both ideas and strategies; having a common assessment means that we have the opportunity for a common conversation.

Thank You

Achieving these aims is an ongoing, long-term process. No single assessment or staff development program will address all the challenges teachers face in the classroom. Nevertheless, we commend history teachers for taking on this important task and working together in an effort to improve student achievement.

* A full copy of the report is available at <http://www.academicssenate.cc.ca.us/>.

District Scoring Committees

School by School Implementation

10th Grade:

- Erin Abraham, Farwest
- Sam Brewer, Tech
- Richard Charlesworth, BEST
- Joan Cone, Bay Area Writing Project
- Gordon Danning, OH
- Sarah Goudy, CBITS
- Elizabeth Macias, OUSD ELL Secondary Coordinator
- Chris Kelley, Skyline
- Lydia Ropp, Skyline
- Maria Serrano, Architecture
- Neha Ummat, Mandela
- Shelly Weintraub, OUSD
- Jonas Zuckerman, Tech

11th Grade:

- Patricia Arabia, Mandela
- Craig Gordon, Robeson
- Kita Grinberg, Dewey
- Elizabeth Haugen, Tech
- Michael Jackson, Media
- Tania Kappner, Tech
- Thea Marston, Architecture
- Mary Maulsby, Leadership
- Stan Pesick, OUSD
- Maryann Wolfe, Tech

| school | #10th and 11th grade teachers | # teachers administering assessment | % teachers administering assessment |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Castlemont Community | | | |
| • Business and Info Tech | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • EOSA | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • Leadership Prep | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| Dewey | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| Farwest | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Fremont Federation | | | |
| • Architecture | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • Mandela | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • Media | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • Robeson | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| Life Academy | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Merritt College High | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Metwest | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| McClymonds Community | | | |
| • BEST | 2 | 2 | 100 |
| • EXCEL | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Oakland High | 8 | 4 | 50 |
| Oakland Tech | 10 | 9 | 90 |
| Rudsdale | 1 | 1 | 100 |
| Skyline | 9 | 6 | 67 |
| Independent Study | 5 | 5 | 100 |
| Youth Empowerment (yes) | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| District Totals | 65 | 45 | 69 |

Score Distribution of Submitted Papers - Fall Semester, 2006—2007 (6 per class)

| Grade/Score (%) | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|--------------------------|---|----|----|----|----|
| 10th (157 papers scored) | 2 | 10 | 49 | 74 | 22 |
| 11th (157 papers scored) | 0 | 8 | 50 | 80 | 19 |

A Note to Teachers:

Your scored papers will be returned to you with the names of the students whose papers were read. We want to collect those same students papers after you administer the spring assessment. This will provide us insight into whether the assessment is serving its ultimate purpose of helping students become better readers and writers of history. Additionally, you are receiving a set of anchor papers and suggestions for how to use the anchor papers with your students to help them better understand the qualities of a well written historical essay.

Professional Development and Summer Institute Opportunities

Below is a list of upcoming professional development opportunities during this school year and during the summer. At this point all summer dates are tentative. Final dates will be identified and distributed in a later memo.

School Year Opportunities

World History Book Club (February 21, March 28, April 25—4:00—6:00 PM)

This year the “World History Book Club” will read ***There is No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*** by Reza Aslan. In past years participating teachers read books that included *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond, and *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* by Phillip Gourevitch. The club’s purpose is to deepen content knowledge for world history teachers, and to provide an opportunity for world history teachers to meet with colleagues from across the district. The book club is limited to 20 members. Please contact Shelly Weintraub (879-8477 or shelly.weintraub@ousd.k12.ca.us) if you would like to sign up or want more information.

Participants will receive a copy of the book and a stipend of \$150.

History/Social Studies Mini-Conference (March 21; 2—4 PM)

The mini-conferences are designed to enhance 10th and 11th grade teachers content knowledge around the spring assessment questions. This spring the 10th grade question will focus on Japanese expansion prior to World War II. The 11th grade question will focus the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Historians will provide historical analysis and interpretations that directly address the assessment questions.

Writing the Historical Essay (March 15, April 26—4:00 PM to 6:30 PM; June 19—8:30 AM to 3:30 PM)

This series of workshops began at a November full-day session and was attended by over twenty teachers. The series will be offered again next year for teachers who were unable to participate this school year. Participants receive sets of support materials and professional development on how to improve student writing. The series was developed in response to teacher requests for training on how to increase student success on the district assessment. teachers to move more quickly into the meat of the 11th grade curriculum. The review unit(s) will be distributed to 11th grade teachers in the districts.

Participants will receive a stipend of \$325.

Summer Opportunities

Writing Your Own Document Based Question (July 2-3 and July 5-6; 8:30 AM—3:30 PM)

This series will provide history/social studies teachers, grades 9 - 12, an opportunity to write a document based question for their students and classrooms during the fall semester of the 2007-2008 school year. The goal is to add to our body of assessment support materials and to support teachers who want to an opportunity for students to practice writing to a document based question before they write to the district assessment at the end of the semester. Historians and graduate students in history will be on hand to help participants identify significant topics and documents.

Participants will receive a stipend of \$500.

Developing a Review Unit for 11th Grade U.S. History (August 1—3; 8:30 AM—3:30 PM)

One of the challenges 11th grade teachers face covering all the material identified in the state standards. One part of this challenge is that many students come to the 11th grade without the content knowledge necessary to help them understand the significant ideas, events and individuals included in the 11th grade curriculum. During this session teachers will collaborate on identifying what should be included in a review unit that both supports student understanding of the 11th grade content, and allows teachers to move more quickly into the meat of the 11th grade curriculum. The review unit(s) will be distributed to 11th grade teachers in the districts.

Participants will receive a stipend of \$325.

Developing the District-Wide History Assessments (August 6—10; 8:30 AM—3:30 PM)

The district is creating a bank of assessments that will be rotated over a period of three years. This process is almost complete, but some development work still needs to be done. During this week a group of 12 teachers (six 10th grade and six 11th grade) will work together and with an historian to create a district assessment and/or refine existing assessments. Please contact Shelly Weintraub (879-8477 or shelly.weintraub@ousd.k12.ca.us) or Stan Pesick (879-8497 or stan.pesick@ousd.k12.ca.us) if you would like to sign up or want more information.

Participants will receive a stipend of \$625.

OUSD History Assessment Newsletter

Spring Semester 2006-2007 Assessment Questions

World History

Evaluate the motives for and consequences of Japanese expansion prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

U.S. History

Agree or Disagree: The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s successfully met the political, economic, and social goals of African Americans that not been achieved during the Era of Reconstruction.

What's Inside

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1—Notes from the Scoring Session: Positives and Negatives in the Student Writing | 3—The Standard Essay Format |
| 2— Two samples of strong introductory paragraphs | 4—Why Are the History Assessments Important? |
| 2—Accelerating student achievement on the assessment | 5—School by school implementation |
| 3— Examples and commentary on introductory paragraphs | 5—Score distribution |
| | 6 & 7—Professional development opportunities |