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Policy and Practice  
Concerning Essay-Grading Criteria  
In Developmental English And College-Level English Programs  
In Tennessee Community Colleges

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Educational  
Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

---

by  
Paul Wolford  
May 2000

**APPROVAL**

This is to certify that the Graduate Committee of

W. Paul Wolford

Met on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of March, 2000.

The committee read and examined his dissertation, supervised his defense of it in an oral examination, and decided to recommend that his study be submitted to the Graduate Council, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Education.

Dr. Terry Tollefson

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Dr. John M. Taylor

Dr. Russell West

Signed on behalf of

The Graduate Council

Dr. Wesley Brown

## ABSTRACT

### POLICY AND PRACTICE CONCERNING ESSAY-GRADING CRITERIA IN DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH AND COLLEGE-LEVEL ENGLISH PROGRAMS IN TENNESSEE COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By

W. Paul Wolford

The criteria used to grade college essays have been the subject of research for over three decades. Using quantitative data, this study investigated the differences in essay-grading criteria and essay-grading policy among the full-time faculty members who teach English composition in Tennessee's community colleges.

This study revealed beliefs about the importance of twenty essay-grading criteria and further revealed beliefs about written and unwritten essay-grading policies among those who teach developmental English, college-level English, and those who teach both courses. This study hypothesized that there were no differences in among the English composition teachers' beliefs regarding the twenty essay-grading criteria or in their beliefs regarding written and unwritten essay-grading policies. Chi-square analysis of the nonparametric data collected during this study indicated statistically significant differences among the English teachers regarding only one of the twenty essay-grading criteria and no statistically significant differences regarding essay-grading policies.

DEDICATION

For Josephine.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my profound appreciation to Dr. Terrence Tollefson, chair of my doctoral committee, for his inspiration and support throughout my doctoral program. Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge the pervasive influence Dr. John Taylor has had upon my graduate education and professional development. Additionally, I am genuinely grateful for the interest, suggestions, and support of my esteemed committee members, Dr. Ron Lindahl and Dr. Russell West.

Not least of all, I would also like to express my appreciation for their responsiveness to my esteemed colleagues, members of the population under study in this research. In particular, I would like to thank the distinguished developmental and college-level English faculty members at Walters State Community College, without whose cooperation, responsiveness, and professionalism I could not have completed this study. Likewise, the extraordinary support of Walters State Community College has been invaluable. This is one educational institution that lives up to the ideal of “community” in its name.

Most importantly, I would like to recognize the invaluable love and support of my dear and lovely wife, Pauline. Her steadfast support, along with that of all my family members has sustained me and brought me joy throughout this study, and throughout my life.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the antithetical domains of fact and opinion, writers and graders of English compositions are subjects of the latter realm. Wordsmiths, pundits, students, and professors all operate under the “conventions” of the written language, not its laws. Without a Newton to discover the fundamental principle of written forms, a Copernicus to identify the axis of written expositions, or a Pythagorus to draft an essential rhetoric, writers and appraisers of English must content themselves with the approved rather than the proven.

If, like the United States Constitution or Robert’s Rules of Order, the conventions of written English had been canonized and given a proper name, then they would at least be identifiable and concrete, but such has not been the case. Consult any pair of college writing handbooks, and one will find striking differences of interpretation and application. Ending sentences with prepositions, for instance, is something up with which one handbook currently puts (Robey et al., 1997), while another does not let such slights get by (Fowler & Aaron, 1998).

Linguists would no doubt observe that language is a living, changing entity that can no more be constrained by rules than “ain’t” can be repressed by stigma. Valid though such a perspective may be, it does little to illuminate the tasks of those whose profession includes writing or grading collegiate compositions. It is an abiding irony that the love of language that first kindles a passion in those who choose it as a collegiate major comes back to singe its admirers if they later elect to become English instructors and composition graders themselves.

I am among those who have been scorched by the responsibility of grading college compositions, primarily at the developmental English level. In fact, this dissertation is the outgrowth of my personal interest in identifying the role of developmental English as it integrates with and relates to the elements of college-level composition.

Identifying the elements used in grading written compositions is an area where there has been some promising and interesting research. Tennessee's community colleges form a coherent system in which to conduct research on essay-grading policies and practices because the colleges were originally organized into a unified statewide system that is still governed by a single board (Phillips-Madson & Malo, 1999). This is not to say that the board governs the grading policies and practices, only that the colleges form an identifiable educational body. This statewide system is peculiarly accessible to me because I am employed within it as an assistant professor of developmental English and reading.

### Target Population and Statement of the Problem

The target population consists of three groups: those individuals who teach developmental English composition, college-level English composition, and those who teach both courses in Tennessee community colleges. Those who teach English composition are targeted because composition grades and the criteria upon which those grades are based has been a source of academic concern and research since the early 1900's. Issues of fairness and the reliability of essay grades are at the center of such essay-grading concern and research (Mouly, 1970). The specific problem in this study is to determine whether there are differences in grading policy and practice among the three groups of the target population.

### Research Questions

Regarding the three groups of the target population: 1. Are there differences in how the groups ascribe importance to essay-grading criteria? 2. Are there differences among the groups regarding whether their departments have written essay-grading policies? 3. Among the groups, are there differences regarding whether their departments have unwritten essay-grading policies? 4. Among the groups, are there differences in the extent to which instructors think they should have discretion when grading policy is written, as opposed to unwritten? 5. Among the groups, are there differences in the extent to which instructors in each of the three groups think it is sensible educational practice to regularize essay-grading practices?

### Limitations

Limitations regarding this research are: 1. The results of this study are not generalizable to other composition courses in higher education or to other state systems of higher education or community colleges. 2. The gross response rate to this study was 78% of the target population.

### Definitions

Composition is synonymous with essay.

Developmental English refers to a course or courses designed to prepare students for the initial college or university credit English course, such as English 101 or its equivalent.

Essay is the form of writing typically taught and composed by students in developmental and college-level English classes.

Criteria, elements, and variables are synonymous with, and refer to, the constructs used by teachers to evaluate compositions written by their students.

### Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study that provides a rationale for the research. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the educational literature related to this study. This review includes information concerning the relationship of developmental composition courses to college-level composition courses. In addition, the chapter also includes a synopsis of grading criteria for written compositions. Chapter 3 comprises a description of the research methods used in this study. Chapter 4 consists of a summary of the quantitative results of this investigation. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the study's findings and conclusions, along with recommendations for future research and recommendations to improve practice.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Interest and concern rightfully exist regarding the integration of developmental English and college-level English, the grading of college writing, and the existence of written and unwritten policies intended to govern that grading. The purpose of this literature review is to put developmental writing into perspective with developmental education and with Tennessee community colleges and to examine the definition and effectiveness of developmental writing programs. Finally, this review focuses on the previous research on the elements of writing evaluation, and presents an appropriate model for the analysis of essay-grading policy.

#### A Brief History of Developmental Education

Although community colleges recently have played a pivotal role in the evolution of developmental education programs, the actual practice of developmental education is almost as old as higher education in America. In the early days of American higher education, the major admission requirement was not the ability to pass an entrance examination, but rather the ability of students to pay for their educations. Because most colleges were funded through tuition and fees, those students who could pay the price of admission were automatically considered college material. The result was a situation not unlike the open-admission practices of many present-day institutions. American developmental education programs began to evolve on a rather widespread basis by the latter part of the Nineteenth Century to provide assistance for those students who had been admitted to college but lacked the skills necessary to do college work (Boylan, 1988). In fact, colleges and universities in the United States have, from their beginnings, provided reading and study skills programs (Carpenter & Johnson, 1991).

In addition, the egalitarian precepts of this nation's heritage no doubt predisposed colleges and universities in America to recognize the need for some form of learning assistance. Not surprisingly, the earliest efforts to fill that need were in the fields of reading and writing. What is somewhat surprising is that it was at Harvard University

where learning assistance program was first initiated. By instituting a remedial Latin program, Harvard implicitly acknowledged that some of its students were underprepared as early as the seventeenth century (Carpenter & Johnson, 1991). Nor was Harvard alone in recognizing the need for remediation in higher education; by 1865, both Cornell University and Vassar College also had instituted learning assistance programs (Brier in Jou, 1986). Later, four-year colleges and universities let two-year institutions fill the need for learning assistance programs when the baby boom children reached college age during the 1960s. By the mid 1970s, however, over 80% of the colleges and universities in the U.S. offered special programs to assist the underprepared students in their adjustments to college. It is only a small coincidence that this 80% figure is exactly the same percentage reported for four-year institutions offering developmental programs in both 1889 and 1985. It is clear, then, that developmental education is not new. The current college developmental programs are simply updated responses to an enduring higher education dilemma (Boylan, 1988).

Further evidence of this dilemma is that in 1994, 40% of college freshmen enrolled in pre-collegiate programs to prepare for college work while in 1995, 29% of entering college freshmen enrolled in at least one remedial or developmental course (Ingash, 1997).

In the years following World War II, the community college movement literally swept the country, and developmental education programs have remained central components of this entire educational phenomenon since its inception (McCabe & Day, 1998). During the 1940s, government funding enabled colleges to establish learning centers for veterans. These centers focused on reading, writing, and study skills programs. During the 1950s, these centers became institutionalized and expanded their services to other students. The greatest growth in collegiate learning assistance programs occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, a time coinciding with the burgeoning of community colleges in America (Carpenter & Johnson, 1991).

Among the American higher education institutions, it has come to be that community colleges have offered a higher education alternative to academically underprepared students. The explosive growth of community colleges during the 1970s came at a time when relaxed admission requirements and the availability of financial aid



were part of the general higher education circumstances in America. Rather than turning away or failing large numbers of these students, community colleges created developmental programs to meet the needs of the underprepared. The readiness of these two-year institutions to accommodate the needs of non-traditional students is partly due to the democratic philosophy from which the colleges sprang, and also no doubt partly due to their need to survive in a competitive educational market. There can be no question that community colleges have dealt effectively with a greater variety of students than have other types of higher education institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 1989).

There is little doubt that developmental education programs have contributed to community colleges' effectiveness. Typical developmental programs have been found to raise GPAs about one-quarter point on the four-point scale, and they also have been found to raise persistence about 8% (Kulick, Kulick, & Shwalb, in Kulick & Kulick, 1993).

#### Definitions of Developmental Education

Boylan (1996) has collected two decades of relevant definitions of developmental education. Seven of those more pertinent definitions from that assortment include:

If the purpose of the program is to overcome academic deficiencies, I would term the program remedial, in the standard dictionary sense in which remediation is concerned with correcting weakness. If, however, the purpose of the program is to develop the diverse talents of students, whether academic or not, I would term the program developmental.

Developmental/remedial efforts reflect a continuum of organizational structures - from the isolated teacher, counselor, or director working on a particular course or program to an integrated team of specialists offering complete services (such as assessment, diagnosis, instruction, counseling, advising, tutoring, etc.) within a division or department.

The courses described as developmental range from remedial type reading courses through basic writing, mathematics, science, and advanced study techniques. They generally cover all levels of academic achievement and consist of individualized, prescriptive, laboratory experiences as well as large-group lecture approaches.

Developmental studies programs exist to assist students in the elimination of academic deficiencies that prevent their full admission to collegiate-level courses. Developmental courses vary greatly in their specific purposes, goals, features, dimensions, and parameters in which they operate. Any one program may be in a constant state of change due to internal values, such as characteristics of the student population, and external variables, such as institutional mission or state funding.

Developmental education is an umbrella term for a variety of instructional programs and individualized services that are unified by basic educational assumptions about variation of learning style being greater than the ability to learn, variation of age for the achievement of educational potential, and the ability of those with varied cultural or environmental backgrounds or physical or economic handicaps to learning.

Developmental instruction is college instruction that is adjusted in content, style, or pace to meet the educational needs of high-risk students. The adjustment is meant to raise the probability that such students will succeed at college work. Ideally, developmental instruction gives high-risk students the same chance of college success as well-prepared students have.

Developmental education is a field of practice and research within higher education with a theoretical foundation in developmental psychology and learning theory. It promotes cognitive and affective growth of all

postsecondary learners, at all levels of the learning continuum. Developmental education is sensitive and responsive to individual differences and needs among learners. Developmental education programs and services commonly address academic preparedness, diagnostic assessment and placement, development of general and discipline-specific learning strategies, and affective barriers to learning.

### Controversy and Developmental Education

Because of its nature as a catch-up entity that exists within colleges and universities, developmental education is by nature controversial. Developmental education programs are designed to prepare students to enter college courses, but paradoxically, developmental programs are taught on college and university campuses, leading many to challenge the role of developmental programs in higher education. Opponents to developmental education not infrequently complain that college developmental programs force taxpayers to pay once again for the same instruction that was given in high schools. From Harvard's reticence about its first developmental course in the sixteen hundreds (Carpenter & Johnson, 1991) to the present dispute in the state of New York, the chronicle of developmental education is a saga of strife (Healy & Schmidt, 1998).

The recent contention at City University of New York (CUNY) and the State University of New York (SUNY) is perhaps representative of the classic developmental education controversy. The issue in New York is the declaration of a standards revolution, doing away with most developmental education classes at two of the nation's largest public-university systems. The new priorities at CUNY and SUNY will apparently become competition, efficiency, and the promise of a quality product, rather than what has been a long-term commitment to maximum access for a highly diverse citizenry. Not surprisingly, the politics of this debate have fallen out along the lines of conservatives versus liberals, with the conservatives backing higher educational standards while the liberals support greater access and delivering "the basics" to the diverse student population (Healy & Schmidt, 1998).

In one incisive response to criticisms of developmental education, Cohen (1987) cited a number of circumstances that had sparked controversy and showed why such concerns were unfounded. Cohen pointed out that the changing nature of community college students had brought developmental education to the fore, and in the process, no doubt also underscored the controversy. Despite arguments to the contrary, the large number of community college students who matriculate without entry-level skills dictates that developmental education will remain at the heart of the curriculum. To the complaint that developmental education costs too much, Cohen noted that community college leaders have shown that such programs cost much less at the community college level than at four-year colleges and universities. In addition, the judicious use of paraprofessional aides could cut costs further and allow professional developmental educators to make better use of their time. As for the criticism that culturally biased tests are unfairly used to place students in developmental courses, Cohen replied that every test is culturally biased. Even if there were a culture-free screening test available, it would itself be biased if it did not accurately test students' abilities to succeed in America's higher education culture. Not least of all, developmental education programs, particularly in community colleges, are the logical outgrowth of the open-access policies that have characterized the history of American higher education.

#### A Profile of Developmental Students

Based on information gathered in a national study of developmental education that is known as the Exxon Study, it is now possible to arrive at some generalizations about developmental students. Nevertheless, there is no such thing as the "typical" developmental student; that is the conclusion drawn by Boylan, Bonham, and Bliss (1994) based upon their evaluation of the data from the study.

Earlier perceptions of developmental students by the higher education establishment have ranged from "a vandal horde of unconventionalities," (Brier in Boylan, et al., 1994) to the more recent and less scathing term used by Cross, "non-traditional students" (Boylan, et al., 1994). Later, Roueche, Baker, and Roueche (1984) described these students as "unprepared" or "low achieving." Meanwhile, Carpenter & Johnson (1991) settled on "underprepared." Maxwell can be credited with what was

perhaps made the most objective characterization by describing developmental students as those whose skills, knowledge, and academic ability are significantly below those of the “ typical” student (in Boylan et al., 1994). Some earlier terms used by Roueche and Snow (1977), including “disadvantaged,” “non-traditional,” and “high-risk,” enjoyed widespread use and continue to be found in the literature today. This plethora of terms goes beyond mere bows to political correctness and underscores the point that the “ typical” developmental student is not only difficult to describe, but likely to remain an unfilled pigeonhole.

One effort to fill the pigeonhole demographically was conducted by the National Center for Developmental Education and funded by the Exxon Education Foundation. The Exxon Study, among other objectives, sought data concerning developmental students. This study comprised the years 1989 to 1992 and included a random sample of students from 160 two-year and four-year colleges, geographically representative of American postsecondary education. Of the 5,656 students included in the sample, 2,369 (42%) were enrolled in two-year colleges, while 3,287 students (58%) of the sample came from four-year institutions. Students were classified as developmental based on the criteria established by each individual institution included in the study (Boylan, et al., 1994). Among the data reported were:

- The ages of the students in the sample ranged from 16 to 55, but the average age at two-year colleges was 23; at four-year institutions, it was 19.
- Females comprised 53% of the sample at two-year colleges and 54% at four-year institutions.
- At two- and four-year institutions, respectively, white students comprised 67% and 59% of the sample, with African-Americans representing 23% and 30% of the developmental populations.
- Twenty-two percent of developmental students at two-year institutions were married, as opposed to only 6% at the four-year schools.
- Degree-seeking students in the sample comprised 77% of the total number at two-year colleges and 98% at the four-year institutions.
- Forty percent of developmental students at two-year institutions received financial aid while 70% received financial aid at four-year schools.

- Upon students' graduation or departure at two-year colleges, the mean GPA from the sample was 2.28, compared with a mean GPA of 2.11 at four-year institutions.
- The graduation/retention rate at two-year schools was 27% and it was 37% at four-year institutions.

Subsequent to the Exxon Study, McCabe and Day (1998) reported that about half of all those students presently entering community colleges needed some form of developmental education. A statistic differing sharply from the Exxon report was related by the Maryland Association of Community Colleges (1998), showing that the average age for Maryland community college students was 29. Likewise, the American Association of Community Colleges (1998) also recounted that the average community college student was 29 years of age, while nearly a third of those reporting their ages were over 30. Additionally, the same association reported that technical and community colleges enrolled 44 % of the nation's undergraduates and 46 % of all first time freshmen.

That there is really no such thing as a typical developmental student is perhaps made most apparent by the age range recounted in the Exxon Study, from 16 to 55. However, the average ages of developmental students reported in the same study, 23 and 19, at two-year and four-year institutions, respectively, is well within the average age range for students at those schools. Nationwide, the average age range at the two-year colleges is 21 to 24 and, at the four-year institutions, it is 18 to 21. Furthermore, developmental students are like other students in that some are financially disadvantaged while some are well to-do; some are married, and some are single; many are white, but a large percentage are African-American, Latino, or Asian-American. In short, as the general student population has become more diverse, so has the developmental population, and if there is a clearly identifying demographic, it has yet to be found (Boylan et al., 1994).

### History of Public Two-Year Colleges in Tennessee

Although higher education in Tennessee is presently growing at a time when state revenues are decreasing, thus causing the first real financial crisis for Tennessee's community college system, it remains true that the state's community colleges have had their first 30 years to develop under extremely positive conditions. The result of careful planning and development under extremely favorable conditions has resulted in a statewide community college system that prompted one observer to describe as "heaven." This superlative assessment was based on the facts that: (1) Tennessee's community colleges are governed by a statewide board without any local boards, (2) the colleges are funded by state appropriations and student fees without any local financial support, (3) there are no unions, and (4) moneys can be carried forward by the colleges from one fiscal year to the next (Consacro & Rhoda, 1996).

The origin of this exemplary system of public two-year colleges in Tennessee can be traced to a 1957 study authorized by the Tennessee General Assembly. The study generated sufficient interest that, by the mid-1960s, the Tennessee State Board of Education authorized the establishment of 10 public two-year colleges. This expansion of postsecondary education was extended to the establishment of two additional community colleges and two technical colleges. Today, however, Tennessee's 14 public two-year community and technical colleges are governed the Tennessee Board of Regents, which also governs Tennessee's six regional universities (Phillips-Madson & Malo, 1999).

Having their origins during a period of higher education expansion and change, when Vietnam veterans were beginning to return home, these 14 colleges form a diverse system, reflecting the economic and geographic diversity of their respective service areas. What they all have in common is that Tennessee's statewide community college master plan began with the recognition of the impact the colleges would have on the state's economy and the appreciation of the need to encourage enrollment by keeping access open and tuition and other fees low. No doubt partly due to such relatively low tuitions, Tennessee's community colleges have been an important vehicle for the education of the state's minority groups, of which African Americans are the most numerous. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the strong structural relationship between Tennessee's

community colleges and its state universities because the same board, with the exception of the University of Tennessee, governs both. The community college presidents sit in council as equal partners with their university counterparts and, in fact, outnumber them. This bond has reportedly had a salutary effect on articulation and transfer between the two-year and four-year institutions (Consacro & Rhoda, 1996).

Today, the Tennessee Board of Regents system is among the largest collegiate systems in the United States. Including the community colleges, this board oversees a total of 46 educational institutions. At the close of the millennium, institutions in Tennessee's regents system enrolled in excess of 181,000 students. The community college and technical institute enrollments included a generous proportion of nontraditional students. Part-time students comprised 56.8% of the enrollment at the two-year institutions. With a median age of 27.6 years, over 59% are women and 16% are African-American (Phillips-Madson & Malo, 1999).

#### Developmental Writing Defined

That developmental courses, English or otherwise, should prepare students for subsequent college-level courses is to be taken as a given precept in developmental education (Boylan, 1996). That English courses reinforce each other and are designed to result in the cumulative improvement of writing skills is an underlying concept of the 'Writing Across the Curriculum' movement (Emig, 1977).

Developmental writing is taught as a beginning, or basic, course and is frequently referred to as basic writing. The term basic writing suggests that there is a place to begin learning to write, a foundation from which the forms of writing rise, and that college students must control the skills common to all writing before they take on the special demands of biology or literature (Shaughnessy, 1994).

Most authors view writing as a part of the language process, the active counterpart to reading. Shaughnessy (1994), widely regarded as the dean of developmental writing in America, defines writing as the act of creative reading...it is the encoding of speech into lines of print that are decoded into speech by a reader. Reading and writing are similar in purpose and nature. They share knowledge, processes, and cognitive and linguistic skills



(Feldman, 1994). Both readers and writers create meaning by constructing texts (Bos, 1991).

Developmental writers may be more inner-directed than others; in a 1986 study of at-risk students, Kirby concluded that personal experience and interest were very important to the construction of meaning, and Tiernay stated that reading and writing were similar acts of construction and response (Feldman, 1994).

The recursive and confounded nature of reading and writing have been well documented, and perhaps this similarity is due to the way both facets of language are processed by the brain. In order to create meaning, both reading and writing follow a circuitous path that circles in on itself (Feldman, 1994). Thus both reading and writing are seen as interactive processes that the participant uses to create meaning from text.

If reading and writing can be viewed as counterparts in the language process, there are particular types of knowledge that a writer must acquire to process text. In order to be effective, it is incumbent on developmental writing instructors to address these kinds of knowledge. Feldman (1994) included four types of knowledge demanded by the writing process: a. content knowledge, b. procedural knowledge related to manipulation of content, c. knowledge of discourse structures, and d. procedural knowledge related to the production of writing.

#### Developmental Writing Program Effectiveness

As has been made clear, reading and writing courses have been part of developmental education from the beginning, and the vitality of such programs continues into the present. Tomlinson (1989) reported that approximately 90% of all institutions of higher learning provided some developmental service, and at least 30% of the national population of higher education were enrolled in some aspect of these services. Moreover, 33% of institutions reported having a separate department or division for developmental studies or learning centers. Tomlinson (1989) concluded that developmental programs had helped to fulfill the mission of providing equal educational opportunity in a democratic society. Furthermore, several factors, including new trends in college curriculum, are likely to create a continuous need for academic support of college applicants who fall short of meeting the challenges of these changes.

Although a vast majority of the research indicates that developmental students benefit from taking the developmental English courses before pursuing the college-level English courses, some studies do indicate the converse. In a review of the literature, Biddar (1984) stated that there was conflicting evidence among researchers. Sharon (1970), using a community college population, found that completing a remedial course tended to result in slightly higher grades, as compared with a control group. Haven (1971) found that students exposed to remedial course work performed as well as other students in a college-level course. However, Losak (1972) found no difference in subsequent academic performance between a group who had the remedial experience and those who did not.

In a 1984 study of the effectiveness of developmental writing, Boggs examined the comparative achievement and persistence of developmental and non-developmental writing students. Analysis of all the research data revealed: a. those who completed the remedial course scored lower on every measure of prior language ability, b. achieved significantly lower grades in English 2210, c. persisted in English 2210 at a comparable rate, d. completed significantly more units while taking English 2210, e. completed significantly more units, and f. achieved significantly higher grade-point averages.

Biddar (1984), who compared students who had successfully completed a developmental writing course with those who had not, conducted a study with similar results. Study conclusions indicated that there were no significant differences in the grades of the comparison groups after taking into consideration initial differences in sentence structure test scores. A further conclusion was that remedial instruction had no significant effect on subsequent academic performance.

Even though studies of the effectiveness of developmental writing show mixed results, the majority have affirmed the effectiveness of developmental programs. Purves (1992) reflected on three major issues that confronted researchers conducting a comparative study of achievement in written compositions across many languages and cultures. The author concluded that most writing assessments simply measure drafting quality, a highly subjective measurement. In a study conducted at Piedmont Virginia Community College, Walsh & Head (1988) analyzed the college's assessment of students' reading and writing skills. In addition, they also investigated the relationship

between assessment scores and grades in content courses, and established the relationship between developmental course completion and content course grades. This study showed that successful completion of developmental courses was related positively and significantly to higher grades and persistence rates. There also was evidence that students who completed the developmental writing course showed skill improvements on the English qualifying exam posttest.

In a study at Walters State Community College in Morristown, Tennessee, Goodman (1999) found that among developmental education students, non-persisters outnumbered persisters by 8.2%. She further found that there was no significant difference between persisters and non-persisters who took more than three developmental education courses. She also found that students who were required to take one or two developmental courses persisted at a higher rate than did students who were not required to take any developmental education courses.

Hector (1983) also showed evidence for the efficacy of developmental writing at Walters State Community College. The study revealed that, of the developmental writing students who earned grades of C or higher and later enrolled in freshman composition, the vast majority passed the subsequent college-level course. Collins and Edwards (1985) set forth guidelines and a rationale for assessing the writing of developmental students. Ballot and Bowman (1983) have found evidence for the efficacy of developmental writing courses as have Hopper, Taylor, and Wolford (1997).

In a study at Walters State Community College, Hopper, Taylor, and Wolford investigated the grades made by freshmen during the fall semester of 1993. This study compared the percentage of former remedial and developmental English students who passed freshman English Composition 1010 to that of non-developmental English 1010 students. This study found that although the non-developmental students passed the course with significantly greater frequency than did the developmental students (apparently because of a lower attrition rate), this difference was nullified when all course withdrawals and incomplete grades were excluded from consideration. When only pass and fail categories were evaluated, the two groups performed in a statistically similar fashion. Such a result suggests that developmental English students withdrew from

English 1010 or made incomplete grades in the course at a higher rate than did non-developmental students.

An earlier study by Baker (1982) produced similar results to the findings of Hopper, Taylor, and Wolford. The earlier study of developmental writing at a two-year college also found statistically significant gains made by developmental writing students. In addition, Baker noted the characteristic higher attrition rate for developmental writing students alluded to by Hopper et al

Developmental programs have changed greatly since the early days of higher education in America, and such programs have tended to reflect the times in which they were developed. During the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, colleges emphasized basic skills programs, while programs since the 1960s have emphasized counseling and support services. The common denominators among most contemporary programs are the structure, feedback, and interpersonal support that elude most contemporary college classrooms (Kulick & Kulick, 1993).

#### Criteria for Writing Evaluation

Several authors have reported on the process of evaluating and assigning grades to written compositions. Some authors have written experientially oriented commentaries while others have reported the results of more rigorous investigations. A sampling of 11 such undertakings shed light on research and thinking from early in this century up through the past three decades. Ten such reports have sought to identify salient variables in written composition-grading procedures over the past three decades.

One set of widely recognized studies did not pursue grading variables, but rather investigated the “reliability” of high school grades given to English compositions. Starch and Elliott (Mouly, 1970) reported their landmark investigations in 1912 and 1913. Perhaps instead of reliability, it might be more accurate to say the authors reported on unreliability because it was the latter condition they found to be quite prevalent. The first study found unreliability in the grades assigned to English examinations in 142 high schools. Even after calibrating for the differences in passing scores used by the various schools (either 70 or 75), the researchers still found startling discrepancies in the grades assigned to the two sample papers in the study. In some cases, the difference was as much

as 40 percentage points. The same two papers garnered a similarly wide grade distribution when both 86 university education students and an education class composed of superintendents, principals, and teachers graded them. In another study by the same researchers, 10 papers in freshman English were graded by 10 instructors, all of whom had given the same exam, and each had already graded the papers from his own classes. Sizable ranges existed in the grades assigned to the 10 papers. One paper was awarded scores that ranged from 44 to 81 percentage points while another had a range of 20% to 65%. To check the extent to which an instructor agreed with his own grade, instructors regraded the papers and over four points difference turned out to be the average discrepancy. To test whether such wide grading discrepancies were peculiar to English, Starch and Elliott found an even wider range in the grades assigned by high school mathematics teachers to a sample geometry paper. Starch and Elliott's studies are considered to have been instrumental in the general shift from numerical to letter grades (Mouly, 1970).

Not only was Starch and Elliott's work the catalyst for a shift toward broader grading increments, their reports also underscored the subjective nature of the grading process and its potential to raise apprehensions in the graded and grader alike. Indeed, Hoyt (Bogart & Kistler, 1987) indicated that grading was inherently a conflict-laden task and that higher education faculty typically experience some degree of internal discord over the grades they give. Such apprehensions or their potential no doubt have added impetus to more recent studies of grading criteria for written compositions.

In the past three decades, a number of research efforts have focused on English grading variables. A sampling of ten such efforts is indicative of the perceptive quality and breadth of research on English grading criteria. To the degree that the studies as a whole have greater breadth, they lend perspective to the present investigation. Taken together with the present study and based on the complexity of the issue at hand, they suggest the basis for further and ever more colorful investigation.

Four reports published during the 1970s examined salient variables used to arrive at grades for college-level written compositions. Among the studies was one by Kates (1973), who reported that organization, content, mechanics, and sentence structure (including diction) were the primary grading criteria used to evaluate 285 students from

16 classes who returned for a posttest of freshman composition students. These students were enrolled in eight California community colleges and three of that state's public universities.

At Glassboro State College in New Jersey, Palandino (1977) arrived at English grading criteria for the college based on a survey of business and industry, a survey of the college faculty, a study of research manuals, various other sources, and the writer's own viewpoint. The six large grading categories Palandino ultimately identified for use at the college were organization, content, sentence structure errors, usage and syntax, diction, and mechanics. Included in these large categories can be found a number of variables included in this study. Those additional variables are thesis, details, style, logic, paragraph organization, sentence structure, punctuation, agreement, mechanics, and spelling.

Reporting eight salient English-grading criteria was a study conducted by Abraham (1978). This researcher mailed composition instruments to freshman composition directors at member institutions of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The instrument contained combinations of seven grammatical and eight nongrammatical elements of written composition. Comparative analysis of the 58 instruments that were returned indicated that idea development, theme organization, paragraph organization, sentence structure, transition, sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement, and mixed errors were the most important grading criteria.

An investigation of English 101 papers by Brodkey and Young (1979) at the University of New Mexico uncovered four criteria that accounted significantly for students' grades. The authors collected a group of 36 previously graded student essays and analyzed them for grading variables. Using multiple regression analysis, Brodkey and Young evaluated the papers on the relative performance for each variable, finding only four that were significant. Those four were interesting topic, organization, rhetoric, and sensible scope.

Like the 1970s, the decade of the eighties also saw its share of writing and research on grading criteria for written composition. Not least among those was a reprise of speeches and essays by Shaughnessy (1980), a thoughtful and widely published author and erstwhile professor of developmental English. In this retrospective, Shaughnessy

pointed out that experienced writers spent little time mulling over their main intents, but sought ways to present those intents in such a way as to be seductive to academic audiences. Lacking sophistication in the art of academic seduction, inexperienced writers spent more time on main intents and “were completely bewildered and defenseless in the lion’s den of disputation.” For Shaughnessy then, main intent and writer’s perceptivity emerged as critical variables. Shaughnessy pointed to other salient variables, including organization, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, logic, examples, tone, rhetorical strategies, interesting versus dull, grammar, punctuation, paragraph organization, transitional sentences, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement.

Bogart and Kistler (1987) investigated the extent to which the use of 21 grading variables was comparable among community college and university faculty. The researchers conducted their study of English faculty grading practices at California community colleges and throughout the California State University system. Unlike those researchers who sought grading criteria that applied to the students’ overt writing characteristics, these investigators evaluated such factors as class participation, students’ oral skills, and the students’ interpersonal skills. In a comparative analysis of the two faculties, the researchers found no differences in grading criteria selected for normal grading situations. In borderline situations, however, the university faculty did ascribe more weight to adherence to due dates than did the community college faculty.

In another article from the 1980s, Cole (1987) reported on efforts by Houston Community College to standardize within the English department the criteria to be used in grading student essays. The English department at the college charged a committee of 10 full-time instructors with the objective of establishing a standardized set of criteria for grading all required essays. As a result of their deliberations, this committee arrived at content, purpose, thesis, support, organization, development, paragraphs, sentences, word use, tone, punctuation, and mechanics as the variables to be employed in grading essays by members of the department.

Cameron’s (1993) report of the Rio Grande Holistic Scale used at Austin Community College for developmental compositions includes or implies the greatest number of variables found in this literature review. The Rio Grande Scale is essentially geared to the perceptivity, point of view, and style of essay writers. Even though it is a

holistic scale, 12 specific grading variables under scrutiny by this study were important enough for overt inclusion. Specifically mentioned were: topic, interesting, logic, sentence boundary (integrity) errors, paragraph organization, examples and details, thesis, organization, topic, word choice, sentence structure, mechanics, clarity, and assignment parameters.

Analyzing the published criteria for evaluating compositions from 22 college and university programs nationwide, Crawford (1993) identified four salient grading criteria. The results of Crawford's analysis indicated that organization, idea or focus, word choice and usage, and development were of approximately equal predominance in terms of both frequency and commentary. These four variables were almost twice as prominent as style, the other criterion specifically mentioned in the report.

In a report at a recent conference, Khalili (2000) noted the advantages of integrating an essay-grading rubric into the essence of the writing classroom environment. She saw advantages in such a strategy for both instructors and students. The four essential essay-grading criteria she cited were organization, support of argument, flow, including sentence structure variety, and format, including correct spelling.

In addition to the literal interpretation information of the foregoing reports on criteria for grading compositions, it is sensible to draw inferences and to attempt to interpret what seems implicit but not directly stated. Such an undertaking is not to put words onto the pages the authors wrote. Rather it is an effort to fully explicate the meaning implied by their words.

One case in which interpretation is germane is that of the Rio Grande Scale reported on by Cameron (1993). The scale addresses the components of effective academic writing, but rather than singling out discrete grading criteria, the scale is divided into nine levels. The grading criteria under investigation are scattered throughout descriptions of the nine levels. Because the scale is holistic, that is, meant to guide the evaluation of the whole essay rather than its components, it is something of a minor injustice to focus on the discreet grading variables in the document that are pertinent to the present study. In fact, because the scale is designed to consider the entire essay, it would seem that every variable included in this investigation might be either expressed or



implied. In fact, a careful reading of the scale confirms that none of the 20 variables in this study could reasonably be excluded.

Although few, if any, of the other reports of grading criteria could be considered to be as comprehensive as the Rio Grande Scale, there remains opportunity to draw valid and necessary inferences. A brief example may suffice to make the point clear. Considering that Kates (1973), Brodkey and Young (1979), and Crawford (1993) all reported that organization was a significant essay-grading variable, one is forced to draw inferences and make judgments about what organization means. Clearly, organization can apply to a number of elements found in a written composition. If one concludes that organization applies to the writing as a whole, that is an inference unless the author has stated otherwise, and these four authors did not. Similarly, organization also could be construed to apply to sentences and paragraphs, and common sense suggests that it does, but, again, such a conclusion is an inference, albeit a necessary one. It is obvious that some degree of interpretation is called for with other variables, including content.

Inferences aside, a literal inventory of their articles reveals that the 10 authors included in this portion of the literature review cited just over 26 salient composition-grading variables. One author wrote that as few as three variables were sufficient for grading written compositions, while at least one recognized the need for more than 20. The variable most frequently cited by the 10 writers was organization and/or development, named by 9 of the 10. Eight reports cited sentence structure, seven writers cited word choice, and seven named focus and thesis as important variables. Six writers listed paragraph organization, and five cited rhetorical style and tone as important criteria. With the exception of essay title, a variable cited by none of the authors, all the remaining grading criteria were referred to by from one to four of the authors.

### Methods for Teaching Developmental Writing

Freedman, Hechinger and Warshauer (1992) indicated that recent research was creating a better understanding of how writing was best learned, taught, and used in school and life. In their article, Making Assessment Work, Liftig, I., Fugate, & others (1992) explained the importance of accurately evaluating interpretative, higher-order essays. The authors suggested that not omitting information and focusing on key words

could help students write better. Makien (1992) developed a method to describe the relationship between coherence and writing quality through structure analysis; he found that topical development was one index of quality.

Mavrogenes, (in Hillocks, 1986) said that, although sentence-combining exercises through the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions had been used for many years, those exercises did not become a central focus of writing instruction until around 1973. Mavrogenes further stated that O'Hare (1973) had reported that students who worked with combining sets of sentences into increasingly complex structures gained not only increased syntactic maturity but also increased writing quality.

In what was perhaps one of the most pragmatic studies of developmental writing, Coppinger (1991) warned that, when it came to developmental writers, there were no easy answers or obvious patterns. The study results indicated that the learning process of developmental writers was neither pristine nor completely predictable.

Shaughnessy (1994) observed that writing produced a distinct circuitry in which writers constantly fed back to themselves in their roles as both writers and readers, and acted upon that feedback before their creations were finally put into circulation. Any developmental writing course should take this circular process into consideration.

Echoing that perspective, Feldman (1994) suggested four implications for the teaching of developmental writing. One was that acknowledging the recursive nature of reading and writing could help students form realistic expectations of the process. Second was the need to focus on more than the meaning or discourse structure of texts. Developmental writing students needed to be involved in learning and using the processes related to creating, organizing, and clarifying the content and structure of their writing. Third was the use of the instructor's metacognitive writing skills to assess students' writing. Finally, knowing what needed to be taught was only one aspect of teaching; an effective developmental instructor also needs to know how to be a facilitator of learning.

A word of caution sounded by Soven (1990) with regard to the teaching of writing should not be ignored. Soven pointed out that a search for simple teaching techniques and activities could force professionals to ignore the complex

nature of writing. Rather than grasping at the first indication of the slightest success, writing practitioners must keep in mind that some new key procedure may not always work in the same way each time. Writing will remain neither simple nor subject to a formulaic manipulation by those who teach it. In spite of the development of seemingly definitive theories and pedagogical techniques in recent years, one should resist the impulse to bring the subject of the teaching of writing to closure.

Finally, two reports suggest that utilizing essay-grading criteria in the learning environment may be beneficial to students. Crawford (1993) conducted an analysis of published essay-grading criteria from 22 colleges and universities. Mentioned elsewhere in this study, Crawford found several essay-grading criteria that predominated. His study further found that using written grading criteria in the classroom, particularly in a variety of writing situations, might be an excellent teaching technique. In a similar vein, Khalili (2000) observed that the grading rubric should evolve from just a grading “score card” into a useful teaching strategy. She further opined that integrating the essay-grading rubric into all stages of the writing process reduced the stress felt by students in the classroom environment. Finally, she reported that using written grading guidelines as a teaching technique also reduced the stress she personally experienced as an essay grader.

#### A Policy Analysis Model

During a lecture on college and university governance, Tollefson (1994) introduced a model of policy analysis that appears to be apropos to evaluating essay-grading policies and practices. Tollefson proposed a method of analyzing organizational policies that relates to whether the policies are in fact written down and whether the policies are enforced or not. This method of analysis is a categorizing technique that consigns policy into two of four categories. The categories are written or unwritten and enforced or unenforced. This analysis technique labels policy according to category; an individual policy can be described as a Category 1, 2, 3, or 4. Unlike hurricane categories, which use the same nomenclature but also include a Category 5, the category labels used in this model are for convenience only and have nothing to do with the relative strength of the policies. Policies in three of the four categories can be quite powerful.

According to this method of analysis, every institution has written policies that are enforced; these are Category 1 policies and are usually easy to identify and understand. Category 2 policies are those that are written but not enforced; this area is less obvious and is closely tied to the culture, climate, traditions, and mores of the institution. Category 3 consists of policies that are unwritten but enforced. This category is more obscure than Category 2 and also closely related to institutional culture, climate, traditions, and mores. Category 4 policies are those that are unwritten and unenforced. Policies in this category are also part of an institution's cultural milieu, pertaining to department, tone, and decorum. Although policies in this category seldom lead to overt organizational problems, there is considerable potential for this category of policy to damage a transgressor's organizational status.

With regard to essay-grading policies in Tennessee community colleges, it would seem that Tollefson's model of analysis might be quite apropos, particularly with regard to Categories 1, 2, and 3. Doubtless there are a number of Category 1, written essay-grading policies that are enforced and Category 2, unenforced by faculty. By the same token, there may also be a number of Category 3, unwritten policies that are regularly enforced by essay graders. Whether there are any Category 4, unwritten and unenforced essay-grading policies in Tennessee community colleges will probably remain a matter of speculation.

### Conclusion

It is clear that much research already has been done with regard to developmental English and essay-grading criteria. The present study, however, addresses a specific area of research because it deals entirely with community colleges and concentrates on grading policy.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter 3 addresses the basic methodology used in the planning and completion of this study, including descriptions of the study, the population, and the method of data collection, as well as an enumeration of the research hypotheses, the development of the survey instrument, and the method of data analysis. This chapter also includes a brief description of the pilot study and survey instrument field test that preceded the present research.

#### Description of the Study

This research examined the essay-grading criteria used by developmental English and college-level English faculty members at Tennessee's community colleges. In addition, the study investigates questions regarding written and unwritten grading policies at these same colleges. I collected the data by means of a survey of all members of the population. With the exception of members of the population who taught at Walters State Community College, all the surveys were sent and returned through the U.S. mail. The nonparametric data collected in this study were analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

#### Population/Sample

The target population for this study consisted of the full-time faculty members of Tennessee's 14 community colleges who taught developmental English and/or the initial college-level English courses at their institutions and who are listed in the 1999 catalogs of the 14 colleges. I sent surveys to all 209 faculty members who were shown in the catalogs to be teachers of developmental or college-level English. If any of those receiving copies of the survey did not teach either of the two courses in question, there was a place to so indicate on the survey form. Specifically, the 1999 catalogs I used were: Chattanooga State Technical Community College, Cleveland State Community College, Columbia State Community College, Dyersburg State Community College, Jackson State Community College, Motlow State Community College, Nashville State Technical

Institute, Northeast State Technical Community College, Pellissippi State Technical Community College, Roane State Community College, Shelby State Community College, State Technical Institute at Memphis, Volunteer State Community College, and Walters State Community College.

### Data Collection

Data for this study came from the survey completed by full-time faculty members who taught developmental English or the initial college-level English course at Tennessee community colleges. The survey forms were mailed to the faculty members at their respective colleges. Because the population for this study consisted of fewer than 300 individuals, a sample was not used. Rather the entire population was polled.

### Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses that were researched and tested for statistical significance in this study were:

H°1: There is no difference among the three groups of the target population in how they ascribe importance to the 20 essay-grading criteria.

H°2: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have written essay-grading policies.

H°3: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to written essay-grading policies.

H°4: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have unwritten essay-grading policies.

H°5: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to unwritten essay-grading policies.

H°6: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had a course or courses that included instruction on essay grading.

H°7: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had other instruction that included essay grading.

H°8: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices.

### The Pilot Project

I conducted a brief pilot project in the fall of 1997 at Walters State Community College in Morristown, Tennessee. The population comprised the full-time English teachers at Walters State, including both developmental and college-level faculty. Of the 18 faculty members in the population, 8 were listed in the 1997 Walters State Catalog as developmental and 10 were considered college-level. All 18 developmental English and college-level English faculty members participated in the pilot study. Thirteen members of the group from time to time have taught both levels of English.

The major objective of the pilot project was to identify a core set of theme-grading variables shared by both developmental and college-level English teachers. In the pilot project, I labeled the variables in question “theme-grading” rather than “essay-grading,” as they came to be designated in the present study.

Nine broad theme-grading variables emerged from my queries directed to the population members. These queries began with a written request that faculty members list important theme-grading criteria and return the lists to me for comparison. My next inquiry was a brief interview with each member of the group to secure general agreement on nomenclature for the variables gleaned from the lists. The resultant variables were: title quality, adherence to assigned topic, quality of organization and development, appropriateness of punctuation, content quality, neatness, quality of grammar and spelling, quality of diction, and use of supportive evidence.

I then sent a survey form, asking population members to rank the nine variables, and both developmental and college-level English teachers ranked the nine variables in much the same manner. There was a place on the survey instrument for respondents to make comments if they wished. A facsimile of the survey instrument is located in Appendix-D of this document. As a developmental English faculty member at Walters State, I was among those who responded to the survey. The response rate for the survey was 100%. Using Minitab (McKinzie, Schafer, & Faber, 1995) statistical software, I arrived at a correlation of .800 for the way the two groups had ranked the variables.

One outcome of the pilot study was that six respondents wrote on their survey instruments that ranking the variables was difficult and confusing because of overlaps in the definitions of the criteria. In the ensuing days and weeks, other participants expressed similar sentiments to me in conversation. The consensus of those who expressed reservations was that they could have made more valid responses had the variables been more narrow and discrete.

These expressions of confusion because of the overlap of the variables' definitions cast doubt the completeness of the list of grading variables, and also on the correlation I had found between the rankings by the developmental and the college-level English teachers. I subsequently undertook the present study, a more rigorous investigation into the grading criteria and policies used to evaluate college students' writing.

#### Development of the Survey Instrument

The present study is informed by my experience with the pilot study. Because approximately one-third of the written responses to the pilot study indicated that respondents had found ambiguity among the nine theme variables, my first objective in making revisions to the survey instrument was to identify less ambiguous variables.

Attempting to account for variables that are synonymous, it appears that the related literature yielded 26 discrete variables used to grade college writing. The reports from the literature sources are here summarized into one brief sentence each. Kates (1973) reported that organization, content, mechanics, and sentence structure were the primary essay-grading criteria. The essay-grading criteria that Palindino (1977) identified were organization, content, sentence structure errors, usage and syntax, diction, mechanics, thesis, details, style, logic, paragraph organization, sentence structure, punctuation, agreement, mechanics, and spelling. Abraham (1978) named idea development, theme organization, paragraph organization, sentence structure, sentence fragments, and subject-verb agreement. Brodkey and Young (1979) found four essay-grading criteria that were of significance, interesting topic, organization, rhetoric, and sensible scope.



Shaughnessy (1980) named main intent, writer's perceptivity, organization, spelling, vocabulary, logic, examples, tone, interesting versus dull, punctuation, paragraph organization, and subject-verb agreement as important variables. Bogart and Kistler (1987) named such factors as class participation, students' oral skills, students' interpersonal skills, and assignment parameters. Cole (1987) cited content, purpose, thesis, support, organization, development, paragraphs, sentences, word use, tone, punctuation, and mechanics as important essay-grading variables. Cameron's (1987) report included topic, interesting, logic, sentence boundary errors, paragraph organization, examples and details, thesis, organization, word choice, sentence structure, mechanics, and assignment parameters. Crawford's (1993) report identified four salient grading criteria organization, focus, word choice, and development.

My second source for composition grading elements once again, Walters State developmental and college-level English faculty members, yielded 29 grading variables. Unlike the interviews I did for the pilot study, however, I secured the 29 grading variables based on the faculty's immediate experience of grading a sample essay.

I wanted the sample essay for all the faculty members to grade to be at the most appropriate writing level possible for both developmental and college-level English courses. Therefore, I located a student who had been elevated from a developmental English class to college-level English on the strength of an essay he had written in the developmental class. I then obtained his written permission to use his essay in my research. Movement of students on the basis of an essay written early in the term is a fairly routine practice at Walters State. Next, I asked the 18 full-time faculty members at Walters State who taught developmental and/or college-level English to grade the essay as if it had been written in their classes early in the term and to then list the criteria they had used to arrive at the grade. The sample essay, "Article on Barbie," along with my written requests to graders appears twice in the appendices of this study. It appears first in Appendix-A with my note to developmental English graders and again in Appendix-B with my note to college-level English graders.

The essays and my requests were sent to the faculty by campus mail, and subsequently the graded essays and lists of criteria were returned to me via the same

medium. One hundred percent of the Walters State faculty I polled responded with usable criteria.

In no particular order, the 29 variables obtained from Walters State's developmental and college-level English faculty were: title, meets assigned requirements, rhetorical style, essay unity, essay organization, thesis development, focus, content quality, perceptive, intelligent, clear, humorous, point of view, examples and details, introduction, conclusion, paragraph development, paragraph transitions, sentence variety, sentence transitions, sentence structure, sentence development, run-ons, comma splices, sentence fragments, agreement of subjects and verbs, agreement of pronouns and antecedents, mechanics, diction, tone, and vocabulary usage. This list comprised a long and somewhat confusing string of variables with many seeming to have overlapping definitions, so my next step was to eliminate extraneous and synonymous variables and then to rectify this list with the one derived from the literature review.

One simple tactic I used to eliminate variables was to exclude any grading elements that had not been confirmed by another source. In the literature review, it was easy to see that most researchers had named organization as a variable, so it was clearly verified. It was equally plain that, except for assignment parameters, none of the variables named by Bogart and Kistler (1987): class participation, students' oral skills, students' interpersonal skills, and assignment parameters could be confirmed either from the literature or from my pilot study. On the other hand, it was more difficult to determine whether a variable such as diction meant the same as vocabulary usage.

My next step was eliminating synonymous or duplicate variables, which and I did by consulting some college English handbooks. For this purpose, I used The Little, Brown Handbook (1998), a college-level English textbook and The New Handbook of Basic Writing Skills (1997), a developmental English textbook. In addition, I also consulted The Harbrace Handbook (1990), based upon its reputation as an enduring guidepost for the collegiate landscape.

To further help consolidate my list of essay-grading variables, I consulted individually with eight of my colleagues at Walters State. One taught developmental English, two taught college-level English, and the other five taught both courses. This proportion of consultants, those who taught developmental to those who taught English to

those who taught both courses, turned out not to be very far from that of the target population in Tennessee's 14 community colleges.

The variable rectification and elimination process finally yielded a list of 20 essay-grading elements that seemed to be important and also to be as unambiguous as possible. So that those population members who received the survey instruments would not be faced with a random jumble of variables, I sorted the essay-grading criteria into categories. I chose what was generally a progressive arrangement of variables from least to most global and from shortest to longest in appearance on the page. The categories were: variables that applied to units that were smaller than sentences, sentences, paragraphs, the writer, and the essay. Probably I should have put the writer as the final category because that would be the most global of all the categories, but the oversight may not have caused much damage.

The variables that finally appeared in the survey instrument were, in order:

1. Spelling,
2. Mechanics,
3. Agreement,
4. Punctuation,
5. Sentence clarity and unity,
6. Sentence structure variety,
7. Fragments, comma splices, and run-ons,
8. Paragraph development and organization,
9. Writer's logic,
10. Writer's perceptivity,
11. Writer's word choices,
12. Writer's point of view,
13. Writer's rhetorical style and tone,
14. Writer's use of details and examples,
15. Essay title,
16. Essay topic content,
17. Essay interest content,
18. Essay focus and thesis statement,

19. Essay development and organization,
20. Essay assignment parameters and stipulations.

The essay-grading policy questions included in the survey came from Tollefson's (1994) policy analysis model and directly followed the grading criteria questions. The policy questions were:

21. My department, division, or academic unit has a written essay-grading policy,
22. My department, division, or academic unit has an unwritten but generally understood essay-grading policy,
23. Faculty members should have some discretion in adhering to written essay-grading policy,
24. Faculty members should have some discretion in adhering to unwritten essay-grading policy.

Once the essay grading criteria and policy questions had been tentatively established, I arranged them to fit on a standard sheet of letter-sized paper. Each question had a range of 5 choices for variable or question:

1. Strongly disagree,
2. Disagree,
3. No opinion,
4. Agree,
5. 5. Strongly agree.

I then field-tested this basic survey instrument by sending it to the faculty members of the combined developmental and English department at Northeast State Community College in Blountville, Tennessee. I faxed a copy to a colleague at the college, and asked her to Xerox it and to distribute it to the faculty members there. I had her orally ask them to answer the survey questions and write out any comments or any suggestions they might have to help clarify or otherwise improve the survey form. Of the ten faculty members who my colleague at Northeast State reported were in that department, eight completed surveys and returned them to her.

Within a few days, she faxed the completed forms to me. There were no suggestions concerning the survey form itself, but there was one comment about

nomenclature, which I later adopted. A respondent suggested that “essay-” grading criteria was a more appropriate term for the grading variables than “theme-” grading criteria, the nomenclature I had used on the instrument for its field test. I reflected that “essay” was a more specific term for the criteria than “theme” and that it also better fit the writing students did in the developmental and college-level courses targeted by the survey. I therefore adopted the term for use in the instrument and for subsequent drafts of this study. Thus the term “essay” replaced “theme” as a result of the field test.

### The Survey Mailing

I mailed the 209 initial surveys for this study on August 20, 1999, the Friday before the first week of the fall semester at most of the 14 target institutions. I anticipated that all the surveys would arrive at their destinations during that first week of fall term. The follow-up survey went out to non-respondents exactly three weeks later, on September 10, 1999. The survey instruments in the first and second mailing were identical, except that the pre-assigned numbers for each faculty member were printed in black ballpoint ink by hand on the survey form in the second mailing.

The initial mailing I sent each population member consisted of a number- ten envelope that contained (1) a cover letter, (2) a survey form, (3) a golf pencil with number-two lead, and (4) a number-nine self-addressed-stamped-return envelope. I sought to make my initial mailing appear more like a personal communication than junk mail. Therefore, I hand-addressed the 209 outside envelopes, including the return address. The survey mailings were sent to the population members’ professional collegiate addresses. My return address was also my collegiate address at Walters State Community College, but I abbreviated that as WSCC on the outside envelope to graphically demonstrate my collegiality with the recipients because I abbreviated the target institutions the same way. Thus, a recipient at Volunteer State Community College was addressed at VSCC and so on. I used the same ballpoint pen with black ink to write the outside address on the envelopes and to sign the cover letters.

The cover letters were composed with Word 97 software and mail-merged using collegiate addresses obtained from the catalogs of the 14 institutions. The greeting line on all the cover letters read, ‘Dear Professor,’ including the recipient’s last name.

The number ten envelopes and the cover letter were purchased at Office Max and were of premium quality, not standard or business quality. When mailed, these envelopes bore colorful 55-cent stamps, making it obvious to the recipient that the sender had paid considerably above regular first-class postage to reach him or her with the mailing. The stamps themselves were hand-canceled rather than machine canceled because the local postmaster feared machine canceling might clog the machine or ruin the golf pencils inside the envelopes.

The survey instrument was printed on 23 pound copy paper so it could later be run through a scanner. A copy of the survey instrument appears in Appendix-D of this study. The number 2-golf pencil was included so recipients could use it to fill in the bubbles on the survey form. The number 9 pre-addressed return envelope was not of stationery quality but of ordinary quality from Office Max. The number nine return envelope fit inside the outside envelope without being folded. The pre-addressing for the return envelopes was done via ordinary address labels from Office Max.

Besides the development of the survey instrument, I judged the effectiveness of the first survey letter to be next in importance to the success of this study because it was the only tool I would use to “sell” population members on my study. The letter’s contents were crucial because it needed to get its message across quickly and effectively. A copy of the first survey letter is in Appendix-C of this document.

Therefore, I attempted to keep the message simple and the number of words to a minimum. I also wanted to capture and hold the recipients’ attention, so I also aimed for sentence variety in an attempt to make the letter as lively and interesting as possible. In all, I spent more than 20 hours composing, rewriting, and editing the letter that was included in the initial mailing. I finally pared the number of words in the body to four paragraphs of two sentences each, for a total of 153 words. All the sentences were in active voice: six of them were declarative, one was interrogative, and one was exclamatory. The technique I used to persuade population members to participate in the study was probably a version of plain folks (Freeley, 1996). The reward I offered for participation was a summary of the study results.

One of the declarative sentences in the first letter struck a note of levity. I had included a three-inch golf pencil as an inducement to immediate action (survey in one

hand, pencil in the other), so I wrote, ‘I have enclosed a #2 pencil that is no longer than the five minutes it takes to complete the form.’ Lame though the witticism may have been, it is a novelty to encounter humor in letters of this type. Like the golf pencil included with the survey form, the humor was meant to cajole recipients to action.

The second letter, mailed with a duplicate survey form as a follow-up to population members who had not responded to the first request, contained neither pencils nor jokes. A copy of the second survey letter appears in Appendix-F of this study. Having used those tactics in the first letter, the follow-up request basically seemed to rely on (Freeley, 1996) the “bandwagon technique” to entice non-respondents to participate in the study. One of the first sentences asserted, “The survey has received an excellent response from our TBR colleagues, but your inclusion would increase the study’s validity and also permit your views to be reported.” The second letter’s body contained a spare 106 words, scattered over three paragraphs containing two sentences each. Five of the sentences were declarative, one was exclamatory, and every one was in active voice.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS

Chapter 4 presents results of the data gathering and analysis for this study. The results of the data analysis are described verbally and illustrated in tabular form

#### The Data Gathering Process

Two hundred nine individuals were listed in the 1999-2000 catalogs of Tennessee's 14 community colleges as teachers of developmental English and and/or college-level English. I mailed each of the individuals a survey package for this study. I used the campus mailing system for the Walters State faculty members; for all the others, I used the U. S. mail. By way of returns from the postal service and subsequent telephone conversations with personnel at the colleges, I learned that seven of the 209 teachers listed in the catalogs were no longer employed. That left 202 individuals who were currently employed as English teachers listed in the catalogs. Because 158 individuals responded to the survey, the gross response rate for the study was 78%.

The first mailing to the study population was on September 18, 1999, the follow-up mailing to non-respondents was on October 15, and the last few responses trickled in during the final week of October, when the data gathering phase was concluded. The time period for the data gathering phase comprised exactly six weeks from the date of the first mailing.

One hundred fifty-six survey forms were usable. The 156 responses were sorted into three groups based upon whether the individuals indicated that they taught: 1. The final course in developmental English, 2. The initial composition course in college-level English, or 3. Both courses. The 14 responses from those who indicated that they taught neither course were excluded from consideration. This exclusion left a pool of 142 responses from target population members.

Of the 142 target respondents, 14 (9.9%) indicated that they taught developmental English. Fifty-five (38.7%) of the 142 responses came from those who indicated that they taught college-level English, and 73 (51.4%) came from those who indicated that taught



both courses. For purposes of discussion, illustration, and data analysis, developmental English instructors are designated Group 1, college-level English instructors are Group 2, and those who teach both are Group 3. The group designations generally proceed corresponding to pervasive course level designations from Group 1 (below the 1000 level) for developmental English, to Group 2 (at the 1000 level) for college-level English, to Group 3, encompassing both levels.

Whereas each of the questions 1-24 on the survey form gave the respondents five choices: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) No Opinion, (4) Agree, or (5) Strongly Agree, I combined the data into three categories for analysis purposes. These new categories were (1) Disagree, (2) No Opinion, and (3) Agree. There were few responses in the Disagree and Strongly Disagree answer cells, so combining those two categories into the Disagree category reduced the number of empty cells in the contingency tables. The Agree and Strongly Agree responses were likewise combined into the Agree category, so that the reporting of scale values would be consistent and balanced.

#### Hypothesis Testing Method

Chi-square statistical procedures with four degrees of freedom were conducted for comparison of the nonparametric data that resulted from this study. The chi-square analysis is appropriate for nonparametric data (Gall, Borg, & Gall 1996). Null hypotheses for this study are presented individually, and a decision to reject or fail to reject each was based upon whether the computed probability for that comparison fell below .05, the alpha level for this study. SPSS Base 90 software was used to analyze the data.

#### The Essay-Grading Criteria

The responses to answers for the first 20 questions dealing with essay-grading criteria are shown in Tables 1 through 5, with four criteria per table. This arrangement reflects the organization of the questions on the survey instrument itself, which had groupings of four questions each.

Using the chi-square analysis for each of the essay-grading criteria, no significant differences among the responses of the three groups were found for 19 of the 20 essay-grading criteria. In fact, on five of the criteria, the respondents were in absolute

agreement that the variables were important. These five variables had neither chi-square values nor p values because the data were constant. Only with regard to question 16 was a significant difference found among the respondents in the three groups.

Table 1 shows the data collected from the survey for questions 1 through 4. Because the p value did not fall below the alpha level of  $< .05$  set for this study, no statistically significant difference was found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these essay-grading criteria questions.

Table 2 shows the survey data for questions 5 through 8. No statistically significant difference was found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these questions. Remarkably, all the respondents in the three groups were in absolute agreement on questions 5, 7, and 8.

Table 3 shows the data collected from the survey for questions 9 through 12. Because the p value did not fall below the alpha level of  $< .05$  set for this study, no statistically significant difference was found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these essay-grading criteria questions.

Table 4 shows the data collected from the survey for essay-grading criteria questions 13 through 16. Only for question 16 was a statistically significant difference found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors. Question 14 is an instance in which all the respondents in the three groups were in absolute agreement.

Table 5 shows the data collected from the survey for essay-grading criteria questions 17 through 20, for which no statistically significant difference was found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors. Question 18 is an instance in which all the respondents in three groups were in absolute agreement.

Table 6 shows the data for essay-grading policy questions 21 through 24. No statistically significant difference was found among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these policy questions.

Table 1

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Criteria #1, #2, #3, and #4,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Criteria	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	Developmental		College-Level		Teach Both			
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
<b>#1. Spelling Is Important</b>								
Disagree	1	7.1	4	7.3	11	15.1	3.07	.546
No Opinion	0	0.0	3	5.5	4	5.5		
Agree	<u>13</u>	<u>92.9</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>87.3</u>	<u>58</u>	<u>79.5</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#2. Mechanics Are Important</b>								
Disagree	1	7.1	4	7.3	2	2.7	4.30	.367
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.1		
Agree	<u>13</u>	<u>92.9</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>92.7</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>93.2</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#3. Agreement Is Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	1	1.8	0	0.0	1.59	.451
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>98.2</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#4. Punctuation Is Important</b>								
Disagree	1	7.1	4	7.3	2	2.7	2.50	.644
No Opinion	0	0.0	1	1.8	3	4.1		
Agree	<u>13</u>	<u>92.9</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>90.9</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>93.2</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		

p &lt; .05; statistically significant difference

Table 2

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Criteria #5, #6, #7, and #8,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Criteria	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	<u>Developmental</u>		<u>College-Level</u>		<u>Teach Both</u>			
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>		
<b>#5. Sentence Clarity and Unity Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	*	
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#6. Sentence Structure Variety Is Important</b>								
Disagree	2	14.3	2	3.6	3	4.1	4.48	.345
No Opinion	0	0.0	1	1.8	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>12</u>	<u>85.7</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>94.5</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>95.9</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#7. Fragments, Comma Splices, and Run-Ons Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	*	
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#8. Paragraph Development and Organization Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	*	
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		

p < .05; statistically significant difference

\* No chi-square statistics are computed because #5, #7, and #8 are constant.

Table 3

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Criteria #9, #10, #11, and #12,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Criteria	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	<u>Developmental</u>		<u>College-Level</u>		<u>Teach Both</u>			
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>		
<b>#9. Writer's Logic Is Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	.95	.621
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>98.6</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#10. Writer's Perceptivity Is Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	2	3.6	4	5.5	5.10	.277
No Opinion	2	14.3	1	1.8	7	9.6		
Agree	<u>12</u>	<u>85.7</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>94.5</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>84.9</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#11. Writer's Word Choices Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.1	7.19	.126
No Opinion	2	14.3	1	1.8	3	4.1		
Agree	<u>12</u>	<u>85.7</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>98.2</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>91.8</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#12. Writer's Point of View Is Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	10	18.2	8	11.0	6.41	.171
No Opinion	3	21.4	3	5.5	9	12.3		
Agree	<u>11</u>	<u>78.6</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>76.4</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>76.7</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		

p < .05; statistically significant difference

Table 4

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Criteria #13, #14, #15, and #16,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Criteria	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	Developmental		College-Level		Teach Both			
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>		
<b>#13. Writer's Rhetorical Style and Tone Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	3	5.5	6	8.2	7.24	.124
No Opinion	4	28.6	4	7.3	6	8.2		
Agree	<u>10</u>	<u>71.4</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>87.3</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>83.6</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#14. Writer's Use of Examples and Details Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	*	
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#15. Essay Title Is Important</b>								
Disagree	4	28.6	16	29.1	28	38.4	7.20	.126
No Opinion	1	7.1	7	12.7	17	23.3		
Agree	<u>9</u>	<u>64.3</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>58.2</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>38.4</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#16. Essay Topic Content Is Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	2	3.6	7	9.6	10.31	.035
No Opinion	1	7.1	2	3.6	13	17.8		
Agree	<u>13</u>	<u>92.9</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>92.7</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>72.6</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		

p &lt; .05; statistically significant difference

\* No chi-square statistics are computed because #14 is constant.

Table 5

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Criteria #17, #18, #19, and #20,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Criteria	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	Developmental		College-Level		Teach Both			
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
<b>#17. Essay Interest Content Is Important</b>								
Disagree	1	7.1	3	5.6	7	9.6	1.03	.905
No Opinion	1	7.1	6	11.1	6	8.2		
Agree	<u>12</u>	<u>85.7</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>83.3</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>82.2</u>		
	14	100.0	54	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#18. Essay Focus and Thesis Statement Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	*	
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>100.0</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#19. Essay Development and Organization Are Important</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	.95	.621
No Opinion	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>98.6</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#20. Essay Assignment Parameters and Stipulations Are Important</b>								
Disagree	1	7.1	0	0.0	1	1.4	5.47	.243
No Opinion	0	0.0	3	5.5	6	8.2		
Agree	<u>13</u>	<u>92.9</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>94.5</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>90.4</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		

p &lt; .05; statistically significant difference

\* No chi-square statistics are computed because #18 is constant.

### Null Hypothesis 1

H<sup>0</sup> 1: There is no difference among the three groups of the target population regarding how they ascribe importance to the 20 essay-grading criteria.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for one of the grading criterion. Therefore, Null Hypothesis 1 was rejected. Even though this hypothesis is rejected, that there were no significant differences among the answers of the respondents for 19 of the 20 essay-grading criteria questions does indicate broad agreement among the respondents regarding the grading of essays.

### The Policy Questions

In much the same manner as Tables 1 through 5 represented the research data in groups of four questions each, Table 6 illustrates responses made by the three groups to the four essay-grading policy questions. There was no significant difference in how the three groups answered question 21. “My department, division, or academic unit has a written essay-grading policy.” Nor was there a significant difference in how the three groups answered question 22. “My department, division, or academic unit has an unwritten but generally understood essay-grading policy.” Likewise, there was no significant difference in how the three groups answered question 23. “Faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to written essay-grading policy.” and finally, there was no significant difference in how the three groups answered question 24. “Faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to unwritten essay-grading policy.”

Table 6 shows that Question 21 had a chi-square value of 6.84, and  $p = .145$ . Furthermore, question 22 had a chi-square value of 1.64, and  $p = .802$ . In addition, question 23 had a chi-square value of 4.96, and  $p = .292$ . Finally, question 24 had a chi-square value of .68, and  $p = .954$ . Because all the  $p$  values for these essay-grading policy questions exceeded the  $\alpha < .05$  set for the study, there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these questions.



Table 6

Beliefs about Essay-Grading Policy Questions #21, #22, #23, and #24,

By Type of Instructor

Grading Policy Question	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	Developmental		College-Level		Teach Both			
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
<b>#21. My Department, Division, or Academic Unit Has a Written Essay-Grading Policy.</b>								
Disagree	6	42.9	23	41.8	18	25.0	6.84	.145
No Opinion	0	0.0	5	9.1	4	5.6		
Agree	<u>8</u>	<u>57.1</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>49.1</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>69.4</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	72	100.0		
<b>#22. My Department, Division, or Academic Unit Has an Unwritten but Generally Understood Essay-Grading Policy.</b>								
Disagree	6	46.2	19	36.5	25	36.2	1.64	.802
No Opinion	3	23.1	8	15.4	10	14.5		
Agree	<u>4</u>	<u>30.8</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>48.1</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>49.3</u>		
	13	100.0	52	100.0	69	100.0		
<b>#23. Faculty Members Should Have Some Discretion on Adhering to Written Essay-Grading Policy.</b>								
Disagree	0	0.0	6	10.9	3	4.1	4.96	.292
No Opinion	0	0.0	3	5.5	2	2.7		
Agree	<u>14</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>83.6</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>93.2</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#24. Faculty Members Should Have Some Discretion on Adhering to Unwritten Essay-Grading Policy.</b>								
Disagree	1	7.7	4	7.3	4	5.6	.68	.954
No Opinion	1	7.7	8	14.7	11	15.3		
Agree	<u>11</u>	<u>84.6</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>78.2</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>79.2</u>		
	13	100.0	55	100.0	72	100.0		

p < .05; statistically significant difference

### Null Hypothesis 2

H<sup>0</sup> 2: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have written essay-grading policies.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for essay-grading policy question 21. Therefore, Null Hypothesis 2 was retained.

### Null Hypothesis 3

H<sup>0</sup> 3: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to written essay-grading policies.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 23. Therefore, Null Hypothesis 3 was retained.

### Null Hypothesis 4

H<sup>0</sup> 4: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have unwritten essay-grading policies.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 22. Therefore, Null Hypothesis 4 was retained.

### Null Hypothesis 5

H<sup>0</sup> 5: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to unwritten essay-grading policies.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 24. Therefore, Null Hypothesis 5 was retained.

### Profile Information

The final questions on the survey instrument sought profile information from the respondents, and three of them were analyzed for comparison with research hypotheses. Table 7 shows the results for the three questions.

There were no significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 25, “Have you had a course or courses that included instruction on grading college essays?” Neither were there significant differences for question 26, “Have you had other instruction or training on grading college essays; including that carried out by the community college where you teach?” Nor were there significant differences for question 28, “Do you think that it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices?”

Table 7 shows that Question 25 had a chi-square value of .36, and  $p = .834$ . Additionally, question 26 had a chi-square value of 2.61, and  $p = .272$ . Finally, question 28 had a chi-square value of 3.02, and  $p = .221$ . Because all the  $p$  values for these essay-grading policy questions exceeded the alpha  $p < .05$  set for the study, there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups of English instructors for these questions.

### Null Hypothesis 6

$H^0$  6: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had a course or courses that included instruction on essay grading.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 25, “Have you had a course or courses that included instruction on grading college essays?” Therefore, Null Hypothesis 6 was retained.

### Null Hypothesis 7

$H^0$  7: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had other instruction that included essay grading.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 26, “Have you had other instruction or training on grading college essays, including that carried out by the community college where you teach?” Therefore, Null Hypothesis 7 was retained. Table 7 displays the data gathered for the profile questions.

Table 7

Demographic Information and Beliefs about Regularizing Essay-Grading Policy

By Type of Instructor

Question	Type of Instructor						$\chi^2$	p
	<u>Developmental</u>		<u>College-Level</u>		<u>Teach Both</u>			
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>		
<b>#25. Have You Had a Course or Courses That Included Instruction on Grading College Essays?</b>								
Yes	9	64.3	32	59.3	41	56.2	.36	.834
No	<u>5</u>	<u>35.7</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>40.7</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>43.8</u>		
	14	100.0	54	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#26. Have You Had Other Instruction or Training on Grading College Essays, Including That Carried Out by the Community College Where You Teach?</b>								
Yes	11	78.6	45	81.8	66	90.4	2.61	.272
No	<u>3</u>	<u>21.4</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>18.2</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>9.6</u>		
	14	100.0	55	100.0	73	100.0		
<b>#27. Do You Think It Is Sensible Educational Policy to Regularize Grading Practices?</b>								
Disagree	12	85.7	42	79.2	65	90.3	3.02	.221
Agree	<u>2</u>	<u>14.3</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>20.8</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>9.7</u>		
	14	100.0	53	100.0	72	100.0		

p < .05; statistically significant difference

### Null Hypothesis 8

$H^0$  8: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices.

The results of the chi-square analysis indicate that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for question 27, “Do you think that it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices?” Therefore, Null Hypothesis 7 was retained.

CHAPTER 5  
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS,  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 5 contains an overview of the significant findings of the study. In addition, it includes a consideration of those findings in light of previous research and my own experience. Although I was not a respondent to the study, I do have the advantage of insight gained from 25 years of experience as a member of the target population. The chapter also addresses some recommendations for further research and future practice.

Summary of Major Findings

This research study comprised responses from 142 target population members who taught developmental English, college-level English, or both courses at Tennessee's 14 community colleges. The data included responses from 14 individuals (9.9%) who taught developmental English, 55 (38.7%) who taught college-level English, and 73 (51.4%) who taught both courses. Population members were asked to identify important essay-grading criteria and to respond to questions regarding written and unwritten essay-grading policy at their institutions. Data from the respondents were analyzed for statistical significance using the chi-square analysis.

The Essay-Grading Criteria Research Question

Research Question Number One addresses the twenty essay-grading criteria under study in this research project. Although this is the only research question that pertains directly to the grading criteria, the questions regarding the criteria comprised the bulk of the survey questions. In fact, this particular research question addresses the major thrust of this investigation. The percent of agreement among the respondents regarding the essay-grading criteria questions is illustrated in Figure 1.

### Research Question Number One

Research question Number One is “Are there differences in how the three groups ascribe importance to essay-grading criteria?” Hypothesis Number One addressed this research question: “H<sup>0</sup> 1: There is no difference among the three groups of the target population in how they ascribe importance to the 20 essay-grading criteria.” The results of the chi-square analysis indicated that there were statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for one of the grading criterion; therefore, hypothesis number one was rejected.

However, the chi-square analysis did reveal that there were no significant differences among the responses of the three groups for 19 of the essay-grading criteria. These pertained to variables in survey questions: 1. Spelling, 3. Agreement, 4. Punctuation, 5. Sentence clarity and unity, 6. Sentence structure variety, 7. Fragments, comma splices, and run-ons, 8. Paragraph development and organization, 9. Writer’s logic, 10. Writer’s perceptivity, 11. Writer’s word choices, 12. Writer’s point of view, 13. Writer’s rhetorical style and tone, 14. Writer’s use of details and examples, 15. Essay title, 17. Essay interest content, 18. Essay focus and thesis statement, 19. Essay development and organization, and 20. Essay assignment parameters and stipulations.

Essay-grading criterion 16, Essay topic content was the only one of the 20 essay-grading variables on which a significant difference was found among the three groups of respondents. Zero percent of developmental English instructors disagreed that this was an important criterion, 7.1% had no opinion, and 92.9% agreed that the criterion was important. Like the developmental instructors, 92.9% of the college-level English instructors also thought that essay topic content was an important grading criterion while 3.6% had no opinion and 3.6% disagreed. Among the instructors who taught both courses, however, 72.6% agreed that essay topic content was an important essay-grading criterion while 17.8% had no opinion and 9.6% disagreed. Clearly, the group of English instructors who taught both courses gave answers substantially different from those in the other two groups. Possibly, the wider experience those who taught both courses have had with different levels of writing has led them to conclude that good quality writing is not necessarily directly related to the essay’s topic.

In addition to statistical significance, another perspective from which to evaluate the results of this study is to consider the percent of agreement among the respondents regarding the essay-grading variables. Obviously, percent of agreement is unlike consideration of statistically significant differences, but one that is equally illuminating. Examined from this perspective, there appears to be quite close agreement among the three groups of respondents regarding essay-grading variables.

It has already been pointed out in Chapter 4 that the respondents absolutely agreed 100% that five of the essay-grading criteria were important. These are the five criteria for which no chi-square statistics or p values were generated because the answers were constant. These five criteria were those from survey questions 5, Sentence clarity and unity, 7, Fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences, 8, Paragraph development and organization, and 14, Writer's use of examples and details.

In addition to the foregoing five criteria on which the respondents absolutely agreed, there were 14 others that they appear to agree are important, at least to the 70% level of agreement. An examination of Tables 1 through 5 shows that, with the exception of the criterion in question 15, at least 70% of all three groups of respondents thought that all the essay-grading criteria were important, a phenomenon plainly illustrated in Figure 1.

Of course, evaluating the results of the study from a purely arbitrary perspective, above 70% agreement on the variables and below 70% agreement, has limitations as a scientific method of analysis. This is particularly true since it is a post-hoc consideration, not included in the pre-study research hypotheses. Such an analysis, however, is essential to completely understanding the results of the study.

Juxtaposing the 19 essay-grading criteria that respondents appeared to agree were important, all except title, and the 19 on which there were no significant differences, all except topic, to the reports of variables in the literature review reveals strong parallels. In fact the parallels are nearly absolute because only two reports, Brodkey and Young (1979) and Cameron (1993) indicated that essay topic was an important essay-grading criterion, and none of the researchers listed essay title as important. In fact, essay title as a grading variable entered the study through the back door, as it were.



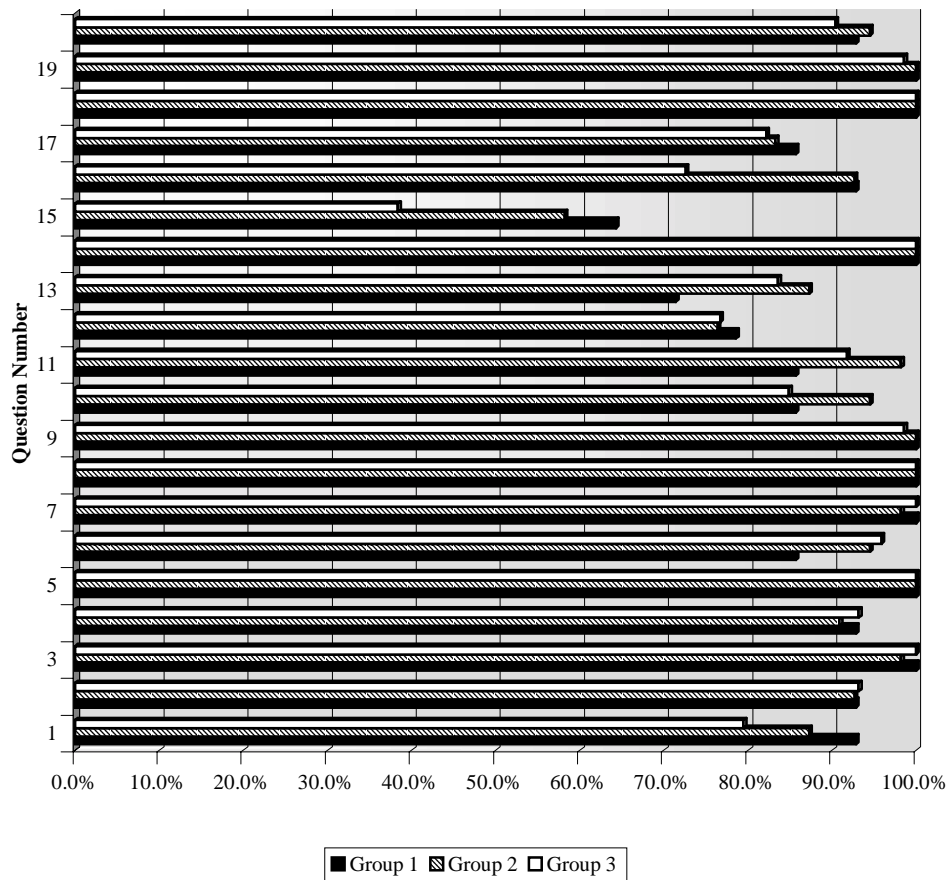


Figure 1  
 Percent of Agreement on Essay-Grading Criteria #1-#20  
 By Type of Instructor

Group 1 = Developmental English Teachers  
 Group 2 = College-Level English Teachers  
 Group 3 = Those Who Teach Both Levels of English

The use of essay title as an essay-grading criterion in this study derived from the sample student essay that the group of developmental and college-level instructors graded. Their purpose in grading the essay was to generate grading variables, and the essay they graded had a rather ambiguous title, “Article on Barbie,” revealing the young author’s relative inexperience in college composition. As a result, several of the instructors who graded the essay mentioned the title in their analysis of why they chose the particular grade that they assigned the essay. Because a number of them mentioned it, essay title was included among the essay-grading criteria included in the study.

A glance at Figure 1, Percent of Agreement on Essay-Grading Criteria #1-#20, shows that question 15, “Essay title is important” got the lowest level of agreement from each of the three groups of respondents; however, as the results of the chi-square analysis demonstrate, there is strong agreement even on this disagreement. Sixty-four point three percent of the developmental group agreed essay title was an important grading criterion; fifty-eight point two percent of the college-level group agreed, and 38.4% of the group who taught both courses agreed that this criterion was important. Thus, respondents in each of the groups awarded question 15 their lowest level of agreement.

Several analyses of essay-grading variables were reported in the decade of the 1970s. Kates (1973) reported that organization, content, mechanics, and sentence structure were the primary essay-grading criteria. Palandino (1977) identified organization, content, sentence structure errors, usage and syntax, diction, mechanics, thesis, details, style, logic, paragraph organization, sentence structure, punctuation, agreement, mechanics, and spelling. Abraham (1978) named idea development, theme organization, paragraph organization, sentence structure, sentence fragments, and subject-verb agreement. Brodkey and Young (1979) found four essay-grading criteria that were significant, including interesting topic, organization, rhetoric, and sensible scope. With the exception of topic, mentioned by Brodkey and Young as an essay-grading variable, the present research appears to confirm all the essay-grading elements mentioned by these reports from the 1970s.

Two reports from the 1980s also seem to be substantiated by the results of the present study. Shaughnessy (1980) named main intent, writer’s perceptivity, organization, spelling, vocabulary, logic, examples, tone, interesting versus dull,

punctuation, paragraph organization, and subject-verb agreement as important variables. Cole (1987) cited content, purpose, thesis, support, organization, development, paragraphs, sentences, word use, tone, punctuation, and mechanics as important essay-grading variables. The grading variables from both Shaughnessy and Cole's analyses appear to be verified.

Unlike researchers who reported grading criteria that applied to the student's overt writing characteristics, Bogart and Kistler (1987) mainly focused on such factors as class participation, students' oral skills, and students' interpersonal skills. The only essay-grading criterion named in their report that was covered by this investigation was essay assignment parameters, and this study substantiated that as an important essay-grading variable.

Cameron's (1993) report of the Rio Grande Holistic Scale included topic, interesting, logic, sentence boundary errors, paragraph organization, examples and details, thesis, organization, word choice, sentence structure, mechanics, and assignment parameters. The present research seems to authenticate all the grading criteria mentioned by Cameron except topic. Crawford's 1993 study identified four salient grading criteria, including organization, focus, word choice, and development. All of these seem to be substantiated by the present research.

Khalili (2000) noted four essential essay-grading criteria. They were organization, support of argument, flow, including sentence structure variety, and format, including correct spelling. To at least some degree, all the criteria she cited appear to be validated by the present study.

It is somewhat problematic to say exactly which of the studies included in the literature review in Chapter 4 are most supported by the findings of the present study because the nomenclature used to describe essay-grading criteria vary and not infrequently overlap. For instance, whereas Shaughnessy (1980) cited main intent as an important variable, main intent seemed to be the variable called focus/thesis in this study. Furthermore, some authors refer to criteria such as organization and development as two different criteria while the two are combined in other reports and also the present research. Conversely, variables named by some authors refer to what are considered two different criteria in this study. Palandino (1977), for example, named about 15 of the

variables covered by this study, but among them was content, a concept that comprises two criteria in this investigation.

In addition some essay-grading criteria mentioned by the authors in the literature review fell outside the parameters of this study. Examples of variables not included in this investigation include Shaughnessy's (1980) citations of "syntax, grammatical inflections, and transitional sentences," Bogart and Kistler's (1987) citations of "student's attendance, class participation, and liking for the student," and Cameron's (1993) inclusion of "nonstandard language, topic drift, conclusion, and satisfying."

However one might judge the degree to which this study validated former research on essay-grading elements, it is clear that the results of this investigation produced more similarities than differences with regard to previous reports of essay-grading criteria. This study appeared to substantiate the great majority of the criteria cited in the 10 reports pertaining to essay grading.

### The Essay-Grading Policy Research Questions

Research Questions Numbers Two, Three, and Four address the essay-grading policy questions, which pertain to survey questions #21 through #24. No statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups of respondents were found regarding these questions. The percent of agreement among the respondents for the policy questions is illustrated in Figure 2.

#### Research Question Number Two

Research question Number Two is "Are there differences among the three groups regarding whether their departments have written essay-grading policies?" Hypothesis Number Two addressed this question: "H<sup>o</sup>2: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have written essay-grading policies." The chi-square analysis showed that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question twenty-one: "My department, division, or academic unit has a written essay-grading policy." Therefore, this hypothesis was retained.

The research results reveal that 57.1% of Group One (developmental English) members agreed, and 49.1% of Group Two (college-level English) members agreed while 69.4% of Group Three (those who taught both college and developmental English) respondents agreed with this survey question. Thus it appears that the majority of respondents have a written essay-grading policy in the academic unit where they teach.

### Research Question Number Three

Research question Number Three is “Among the three groups, are there differences regarding whether their departments have unwritten essay-grading policies?” Hypothesis Number Four addressed this question: “H<sup>0</sup> 4: There are no differences among the three groups concerning whether they indicate that their departments have unwritten essay-grading policies.” The chi-square analysis showed that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 22, “My department, division, or academic unit has an unwritten but generally understood essay-grading policy.” Therefore, this hypothesis was retained.

The percent of agreement on question 22 for Group One was 30.8%, it was 48.1% for Group Two, and 49.3% for Group Three. In Group One, 46.2% disagreed and 23.1% had no opinion. In Group Two, 36.5% disagreed and 15.4% had no opinion. In Group Three, 36.2% disagreed and 14.5% had no opinion. In each of the groups, then, the majority of respondents did not agree with the question.

### Research Question Number Four

Research question Number Four was “Are there differences in the extent to which instructors think they should have discretion when grading policy is written as opposed to unwritten?” This question was addressed by research hypotheses three and five. Research hypothesis Number Three was, “H<sup>0</sup> 3: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to written essay-grading policies.” Research hypothesis Number Five was, “H<sup>0</sup> 5: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think faculty members should have discretion in adhering to unwritten essay-grading policies.” Survey questions 23 and 24 were aimed at this research question and these hypotheses.

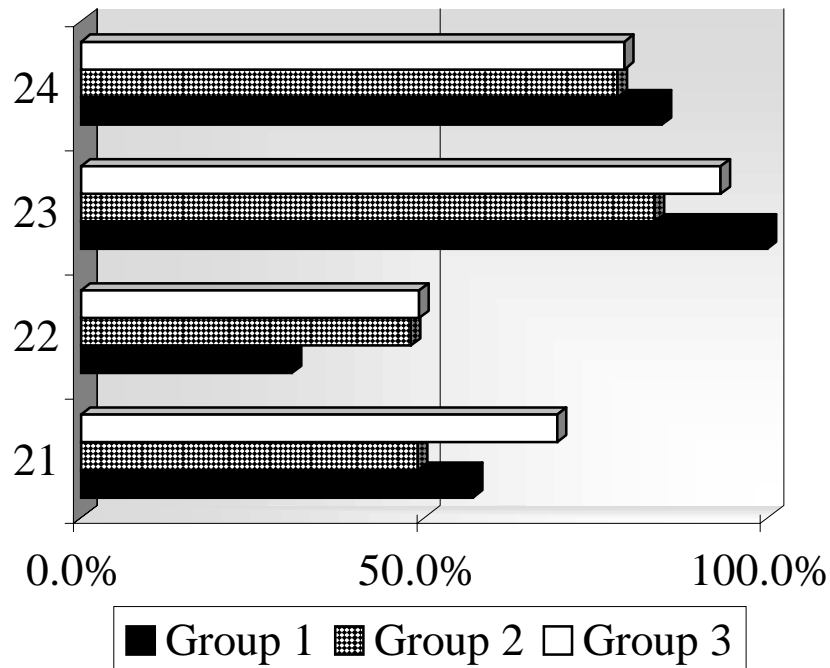


Figure 2

Percent of Agreement on Essay-Grading Policy Questions #21-#24  
By Type of Instructor

Group 1 = Developmental English Teachers

Group 2 = College-Level English Teachers

Group 3 = Those Who Teach Both Levels of English

#21. My Department, Division, or Academic Unit Has a Written Essay-Grading Policy.

#22. My Department, Division, or Academic Unit Has an Unwritten but Generally Understood Essay-Grading Policy.

#23. Faculty Members Should Have Some Discretion on Adhering to Written Essay-Grading Policy.

#24. Faculty Members Should Have Some Discretion on Adhering to Unwritten Essay-Grading Policy.

The chi-square analysis indicated that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 24, “Faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to unwritten essay-grading policy.” Therefore research hypothesis number five was retained. In Group One, 84.6% of the respondents agreed, and 78.2% of the respondents in Group Two agreed while 79.2% of the respondents in Group Three agreed.

Furthermore, the chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 23, and the same analysis showed no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 24. Therefore, an affirmative response is appropriate for Research Question Number Four.

It seems surprising that a smaller percentage of each of the groups thought that faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to written policy as opposed to discretion regarding unwritten policy. One tends to think a greater degree of discretion might apply to policy that is unwritten. Perhaps, rather than responding to the hypothetical juxtaposition of survey questions 23 and 24, the explanation might be based on the personal experiences of the respondents. As shown by Figure 2, most have had experience with written essay-grading policy and not unwritten policy. Because over 90% of each group indicated that their departments had written essay-grading policies, perhaps their experience is that discretion is often called for with regard to those written policies.

### The Profile Research Questions

Unlike the essay-grading criteria and policy questions, the profile questions had yes/no answer options instead of the five-category response choices on questions #1 through #24. The profile questions addressed opinion and educational issues. No statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups of respondents were found regarding the profile questions #25, #26, and # 28.

### Research Question Number Five

Research Question Number Five was, “Are there differences in the extent to which instructors in each of the three groups thinks it is sensible educational practice to regularize essay-grading practices?” This question was addressed by research hypothesis

Number Eight: “H<sup>0</sup> 8: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they think it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices.” Survey question number 28 addressed this issue.

The chi-square analysis showed that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 28, “Do you think it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices?” Therefore, this hypothesis was retained. Of the respondents in Group One (developmental English), 85.7% responded in the affirmative while 79.2% of Group Two (college-level English) did so, and 90.3% of Group Three (developmental and college-level English) responded affirmatively.

Clearly all the respondents thought it sensible to regularize grading practices, and this outcome for question 28 informs the respondents’ answers to the preceding policy questions and seems to suggest an endorsement of essay-grading policy. It is evident that more of those in Group Three who taught both developmental and college-level English courses thought it sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices than did the respondents in the other two groups. Perhaps the higher affirmative response by Group Three members of the population is the result of their teaching at both levels and having first-hand experience with the need for continuity of grading practice.

#### Research Question Number Six

Research question number six was “H<sup>0</sup>6: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had a course or courses that included instruction on essay grading.” This hypothesis was addressed by survey question number 25, “Have you had a course or courses that included instruction on grading college essays?”

The chi-square analysis indicated that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 25. Therefore, research hypothesis number six was retained.

#### Research Question Number Seven

Research question number seven was “H<sup>0</sup> 7: There is no difference among the three groups concerning whether they have had other instruction that included essay grading.” The chi-square analysis revealed that there were no statistically significant differences among the answers of the three groups for survey question 26, “Have you had



other instruction or training on grading college essays, including that carried out by the community college where you teach?” Therefore, research hypothesis number seven was retained. In Group One, 78.6% of the respondents answered in the affirmative, 81.8% of Group Two answered affirmatively, and 90.4% of Group Three responded affirmatively. Other than college courses, the respondents in Group Three indicate that they have had more essay-grading instruction than have those in the Group One or Group Two, but the difference is not a significant one.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Focusing on instructors who taught the final course in developmental English, those who taught the initial course in college-level English, and those who taught both courses, this study investigated the similarity of essay-grading policy and practice among Tennessee’s 14 community colleges. Future research might include:

1. The results of this study suggest that the population largely agrees on which grading variables while the incident related in “Recommendations to Improve Practice” with the eight graders of the sample essay demonstrates that those graders graded the same composition very differently. A future study might compare how essay graders actually ascribe importance to grading variables with how they say they ascribe importance to those variables. This might be accomplished by having the graders grade essays that have been written to include errors pertaining to the criteria in question.
2. The literature review suggests that it is possible that essay title, the criterion chosen the least number of times as an important grading variable by members of all three groups in the study, may be a material part of essay organization (Khalili, 2000). It would be informative to see whether varying an essay’s title would cause the grade the essay receives to vary and in what way. One could label different copies of the same essay with a variety of kinds of titles, including simple, complex, referential, and innovative.
3. At least one developmental English textbook, (Fawcett & Sandberg, 1998) opines that the use of subordinating conjunctions make writing more interesting, and interesting content was found to be one of the grading variables upon which the three groups of

- respondents to this study seemed to agree. Therefore, some research on the correlation of essay grades and the frequency of subordinate conjunctions in students' essays might prove fruitful.
4. My training as a reading educator predisposes me to view essay grading as essentially a reading activity. It would be interesting to investigate whether better readers are more thorough graders and thus give higher or lower grades.
  5. The process of collecting the data and writing this report leads me to speculate about how the adoption of grading policy by a college division, department, or other academic unit might raise or lower essay grades. One might conduct a pre- and post-adoption investigation of policy on actual grades given to essays

#### Recommendations to Improve Practice

Although it was not among the objectives of this investigation, one outcome of this study accentuates the first recommendation to improve practice. During the pilot phase of this investigation, among the strategies I used to elicit valid essay-grading criteria was to ask developmental and college-level English teachers to grade an essay and then name the criteria they used to arrive at the grade. It was not the purpose of this study to consider the grades given to essays, but a brief anecdote will lend perspective to Recommendation Number One, which is based on the premise that consistency among graders is desirable.

Eight individuals, four who taught developmental English and four who taught college-level English, graded the sample, and it received every letter grade from A to F. Even more surprisingly, the average of the grades given the sample essay by college-level instructors was higher than that given by developmental instructors. The average grade the college-level English teachers gave the essay was B-, as opposed to the average from developmental teachers, which was C-. The four college-level teachers gave the essay A, A-, C-, and D- while the four developmental teachers assigned the essay B, B-, C-, and F. All had been instructed to grade the essay as if it were written during the first few weeks of the term, had been turned in on time, was the proper length, and was on the assigned topic. A facsimile of the sample essay, along with the instructional note to the graders is located in appendices A and B of this report.

It is my abiding belief and professional judgment that the grades assigned to the sample essay were the result of a good faith effort by the graders to rightly weigh the sample essay's merit. The range of grades is apparently another incidence of the grading phenomenon reported early in this century by Starch and Elliott (Mouly, 1970). The disparity in essay grades is made poignant by the fact that they were probably difficult for the evaluators to determine and a task they did not enjoy. Bogart and Kistler (1987) reported that, "Some research studies have shown that grading is a conflict-laden process and that faculty at both community colleges and universities experience considerable conflict over their roles as teachers and the grades they give."

No doubt venting some of the very conflict and frustration associated with assigning essay grades, my second survey letter elicited a pencil-scrawled reply from a target population member. Her note read, "After 24 years teaching, I feel I know nothing about how I should grade. I can't answer [the survey questions] – please quit asking me."

Having a departmental essay-grading policy and some grade-calibration practice sessions has the potential for reducing the range of grades an essay might receive from members of that department and also for reducing teachers' feelings of conflict when grading essays. Much the same also might be said for the effect an essay-grading policy could have on reducing the conflict and anxiety that students experience with regard to the grades they receive on their compositions (Khallili, 2000).

The specific recommendations from this research are:

1. Based on the wide range of grades the sample essay received, higher education developmental and college-level English departments, divisions, or academic units should consider adopting or creating an essay grading policy and have faculty members practice carrying that policy in inter-rater reliability training.
2. Khalili's (2000) report in the literature review suggests that teachers should inform students of the criteria that will be used to evaluate their compositions. Simply stating that essays are evaluated according to the "conventions" of written English leaves too much to the imaginations and interpretations of both teachers and students.
3. Khalili's (2000) report further suggests that it is beneficial to integrate grading criteria or policy into students' entire composition procedure. Thus such

considerations are included in the author's thought and writing processes from the beginning of the essay's creation rather being mere afterthoughts.

### Conclusion

It is remarkable that, with the exception of a single essay-grading criterion, essay topic, this study has found no significant differences in the responses made by 156 members of the target population from Tennessee's 14 community colleges. That all of the respondents agreed closely on the essay-grading criteria, five of them unequivocally, demonstrates a strong consensus among the population with regard to the elements of grading written compositions. The uniformity among the replies extended not only to essay grading, but also to essay-grading policy, and profile characteristics, including education on essay grading.

A consensus of such strength demonstrates a broad sharing of perspective among the target population, and suggests that developmental English teachers in the group are promoting principles of written composition that will be reaffirmed by subsequent English courses. In so doing, they provide students in their professional care with an important bridge to college-level writing.

### Afterword

Although this has been a quantitative investigation, I feel it is pertinent to include a brief update on the student whose essay was instrumental in eliciting some of the grading criteria used herein. In his first weeks of college life, he wrote the "Article on Barbie" which appears in the appendices of this study, and he was transferred from developmental English to Freshman Composition on the rather shaky evidence of that first college composition.

He ultimately made an "A" in Freshman Composition and a "B" in his second and final English course. My last indication of his academic progress came from The Bulletin (November, 1999), Walters State Community College's weekly newsletter. It reported that he had been honored for a science paper he presented at the ACM Mid-Southeast Chapter Fall Conference. He won second place in the category for two-year college students on the basis of his paper.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX – A  
NOTE TO DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH EVALUATORS  
OF “ARTICLE ON BARBIE”

**Note to Developmental English Evaluators: Please evaluate this theme as if it were written in your Developmental Writing 0820 class, with a week between assignment and completion dates. For the assignment, students were asked to go to the library, find an article in a periodical that was well written, and compose a theme critiquing the article. Please assign a holistic grade for the theme, without using an English handbook unless it is helpful. As part of my dissertation research, I would like to ask about your considerations in arriving at the grade. All responses will be confidential, and reports of research findings will leave respondents anonymous. Thank you.**

**Paul Wolford**

#### Article on Barbie

Gloria Borger's article on Barbie, published in *U.S. News*, I found particularly interesting because of its depiction of Barbie as nothing but shallow. In a humorous and ironic way, this article depicts what a materialistic and utterly ridiculous doll Barbie is. Of course, Barbie's faults need not take away from the stupidity of the controversy often surrounding the doll and the doll's ludicrous designers.

This article starts off with an ironic comparison of the importance of a news article on an Iraqi confrontation and that of Barbie's upcoming breast reduction surgery and face lift. The author captures the reader's interest by making it humorous to even read about the subject. Gloria does an excellent job of turning what would be a bland article into a humorous, yet thought-provoking piece of journalism.

Most dolls resemble children or babies, but not the Barbie doll. The Mattell Company decided to create an image of a full-grown woman when developing Barbie. Unlike babies, an adult doll is going to have characteristics which stem from someone's view of the perfect woman. This is where the controversy begins.

Barbie's materialism is opposed by the spiritual and the poor. Her health and good looks are opposed by the less fortunate. Even her impossibly large breasts are not exempt from critics. Different minority factions around the country would prefer Barbie bare more resemblance to their views of the perfect person. This criticism is as pointless as Barbie herself.

Perhaps it would be more prudent to focus efforts into changing the society from which the doll was sprung than to waste time changing the doll itself. It would seem that Barbie is a mirror of society: therefore changing society would definitely reinvent the doll. However, who has time to change society when there are Barbie dolls everywhere that need remodeling?

APPENDIX – B  
NOTE TO ENGLISH EVALUATORS  
OF “ARTICLE ON BARBIE”



**Note to English Evaluators: Please evaluate this theme as if it were written in your Freshman Composition 1110 class, with a week between assignment and completion dates. For the assignment, students were asked to go to the library, find an article in a periodical that was well written, and compose a theme critiquing the article. Please assign a holistic grade for the theme, without using an English handbook unless it is helpful. As part of my dissertation research, I would like to ask about your considerations in arriving at the grade. All responses will be confidential, and reports of research findings will leave respondents anonymous. Thank you.**

**Paul Wolford**

#### Article on Barbie

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APPENDIX – C  
FIRST SURVEY LETTER

## First Survey Letter

August 20, 1999

Associate Professor of English  
State Technical Institute at Memphis  
5983 Macon Cove  
Memphis TN 38134

Dear Professor \_\_\_\_\_:

I would greatly appreciate a moment of your time to help with a study of essay grading at TBR two-year colleges. The brief questionnaire is part of my dissertation project at East Tennessee State University, so your input and your insights would be invaluable.

Individual responses to this inquiry will be absolutely confidential. The coding on the survey instrument is solely for following up non-respondents.

Since prompt replies are critical to my research timeline, would you consider filling out the questionnaire and placing it in the return envelope right now? I have enclosed a #2 pencil that is no longer than the five minutes it takes to complete the form.

Should you want a summary of the research results, note that there is a bubble on the questionnaire to so indicate. Thank you very much for your contribution to this study, and please do not hesitate to contact me with questions or comments!

Sincerely yours,

Paul Wolford,

Associate Professor of Developmental Education, Reading and Writing  
Walters State Community College  
500 South Davy Crockett Parkway  
Morristown, TN 37813-6899  
Telephone: (423) 585-6931  
Email: paul.wolford@wscc.cc.tn.us

APPENDIX – D  
SURVEY INSTRUMENT



A SURVEY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
ESSAY-GRADING PRACTICE AND POLICY

**Directions**

PLEASE RATE THE ESSAY-GRADING CRITERIA ACCORDING TO WHETHER YOU THINK EACH IS GENERALLY AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION WHEN YOU ARE GRADING ESSAYS FOR THE CLASSES YOU TEACH.

IMPORTANT GRADING CRITERIA	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Spelling	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Mechanics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Agreement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Punctuation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Sentence clarity and unity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Sentence structure variety	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Fragments, comma splices, and run-ons	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Paragraph development and organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Writer's logic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Writer's perceptivity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Writer's word choices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Writer's point of view	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Writer's rhetorical style and tone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. Writer's use of details and examples	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Essay title	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. Essay topic content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Essay interest content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. Essay focus and thesis statement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. Essay development and organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. Essay assignment parameters and stipulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>POLICY QUESTIONS</b>					
21. My department, division, or academic unit has a written essay-grading policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
22. My department, division, or academic unit has an unwritten but generally understood essay-grading policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
23. Faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to written essay-grading policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
24. Faculty members should have some discretion on adhering to unwritten essay-grading policy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please continue on the next page.



PROFILE INFORMATION

25. Have you had a course or courses that included instruction on grading college essays? YES NO
26. Have you had other instruction or training on grading college essays, including that carried out by the community college where you teach? YES NO
27. If you have had essay-grading instruction or training at your community college, was the purpose to regularize grading practices:
- WITHIN college departments
  - BETWEEN college-level English and development English?
  - BETWEEN AND AMONG Tennessee community colleges?

28. Do you think that it is sensible educational practice to regularize grading practices? YES NO
29. If you have had essay-grading instruction or training, how recently did it occur? (Mark one)
- Within 1 year
  - Within 2-5 years
  - More than 5 years
30.  I teach the Final course in the DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH sequence.  
 I teach the INITIAL composition course in COLLEGE-LEVEL ENGLISH.  
 I teach BOTH courses.  
 I teach NEITHER course.

31. In your current position, are you:
- Tenured
  - Not tenured, but on tenure track
  - Not tenured, but on term contract

32. Would you like an executive summary of this study? YES NO

33. How many years experience do you have in higher education?

<input type="checkbox"/>	0	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	1	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	3	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	5	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	6	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	7	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	8	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	9	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	10	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	11	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	12	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	13	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	14	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	15	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	16	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	17	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	18	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	19	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	20	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	21	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	22	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	23	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	24	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	25	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	26	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	27	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	28	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	29	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	30	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	31	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	32	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	33	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	34	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	35	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	36	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	37	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	38	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	39	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	40	<input type="checkbox"/>

34. If you have any comments about any aspects this survey covered, please write them here.

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Please insert the completed survey into the self-addressed stamped envelope and return to Paul Wolford, Walters State Community College, 500 South Davy Crockett Parkway, Morristown Tennessee, 37813. Questions or comments may also be directed to me at (423)585-6931 or Paul.Wolford@wscc.cc.tn.us.

APPENDIX - E  
SECOND SURVEY LETTER



## Second Survey Letter

September 10, 1999

Associate Professor of English  
P. O. Box 246  
Blountville, TN 37617 - 0246

Dear Professor \_\_\_\_\_:

I would personally appreciate your support in the essay-grading study I recently wrote you about, particularly since this is such a busy part of the term. The study has already generated an excellent response, but your reply would increase the study's validity and also permit your views to be reported.

Remember that individual responses to this inquiry will be absolutely confidential. The coding on the forms is for follow-up and institutional identification.

If you can possibly complete and return the survey instrument promptly, it would be most helpful. Thank you very much for your participation in this study, and if our mail has crossed paths, my apologies!

Sincerely yours,

Paul Wolford,  
Associate Professor of Developmental Education, Reading and Writing  
Walters State Community College  
500 South Davy Crockett Parkway  
Morristown, TN 37813-6899  
Telephone: (423) 585-6931  
Email: paul.wolford@wscc.cc.tn.us

## VITA

### WALTER PAUL WOLFORD

- Personal Data:      Date of Birth: October 31, 1941  
Place of Birth: San Antonio, Texas  
Marital Status: Married
- Education:            Public Schools, Bristol Tennessee,  
Crossnore School Incorporated, Crossnore, North Carolina  
Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School, Rabun Gap, Georgia  
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;  
English, B. A., 1970  
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;  
Reading, M. A., 1974  
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis,  
Ed. D., 2000
- Professional  
Experience:           Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University,  
College of Arts and Sciences, 1970 – 1971  
Teacher, Rabun Gap Nacoochee School, 1971 – 1972  
Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University,  
College of Education, 1972 – 1973  
Professor of Developmental Education, Walters State Community  
College, 1973 – Present
- Publications:        “A Tale of Two Edges,” 1996 East Tennessee State University  
Appalachian – Scottish & Irish Studies, Johnson City, Tennessee:  
East Tennessee State University, 1996, pp. 72 –82.  
“Ten Rules to Teach By,” Journal of Developmental Education,  
v.20, Winter 1996, p. 38.  
“The Success Rate of Developmental Studies Writers in Freshman  
English at Walters State Community College,” with Hopper &  
Taylor, Eric Database, 1998.
- Honors and  
Awards:                American - Scottish Society Essay Contest winner, 1996.  
Phi Kappa Phi scholastic honor society member 1998 – present.