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# USER'S GUIDE

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This book is intended for novice and veteran teachers of English, reading, and English as a second language (ESL). It explains how a wide variety of performance tasks and rubrics can be presented in any classroom.

Chapters 1 through 5 provide the basic terminology and theory. Chapter 1 explains what performance tasks are all about and how they differ from and dovetail with traditional forms of assessment. Chapter 2 tells you what rubrics are and the different ways of constructing them so that students and teachers have a clear understanding of what qualities of a product are to be assessed without overdirecting the student. Chapter 3 explains learning standards and their relationship to instruction and assessment. Chapter 4 discusses portfolios, a natural outgrowth of performance-based curricula, and gives examples of several types. And Chapter 5 gives a very brief overview of multiple intelligence theory.

The lion's share of this book gives you step-by-step procedures of specific performance tasks that you can apply to your classroom regardless of what text you use, what ability level of students you teach, whether you have heterogeneous groups, special education students or gifted students.

Most of the tasks are presented in this format:

1. Product: *What is the genre of the task?*
2. Directions to the students: *What is a clear and concise way to tell the students what they are expected to do?*
3. Instruction: *What do students need to know and be able to do to complete this task?*
4. Standards: *How does this task address the learning standards?*
5. Challenge level: *What is particularly thorny about this task? Who might have difficulty with it?*
6. Multiple Intelligence: *Aside from verbal/linguistic skills, what other kinds of intelligence go into this task?*
7. Scoring Guide: *What is being evaluated?*
8. Follow-up: *What related and more sophisticated tasks can follow this one?*

# 1

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## THE NATURE OF PERFORMANCE TASKS

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter is a primer for English teachers who need basic information about performance tasks. This chapter answers these questions:

- ◆ How do performance tasks *differ from traditional tests*?
- ◆ What is the *role of performance task assessment* in English class?
- ◆ What are the *design elements* of a performance task?
- ◆ How does performance task assessment influence *instruction*?
- ◆ What do you need to know about *portfolio assessment*?
- ◆ What are the *time management issues* involved in using performance tasks?
- ◆ What makes a performance task *authentic learning*?
- ◆ How can you develop a *collegial review process*?

When we instruct for a performance task, we make the student an active learner and problem-solver. The task should be an integral part of a series of lessons, which comprise a wide array of methodology: direct instruction, independent reading, interaction, constructed response.

### HOW DO PERFORMANCE TASKS DIFFER FROM TRADITIONAL TESTS?

A performance task is a *product that demonstrates the application of knowledge*. Allan A. Glatthorn (1999) defines a performance task as “a complex open-ended problem posed to the student to solve as a means of demonstrating mas-

tery”(p. 18). In an English class, the product can take many forms: a writing piece, an oral report, a structured discussion, a skit, an exhibit.

Consider the traditional forms of assessment in the English class of a generation ago: the five-paragraph essay, the research paper, the short-answer test on a piece of literature, the vocabulary matching column or fill-in. Short-answer tests require finite responses within a prescribed field. They ask for bits of factual knowledge out of context. They are exactly what we mean by *inauthentic learning*; that is to say, learning that serves no purpose larger than the test itself and which is, therefore, dismissible when the test is over.

Suppose your students are reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. That's a big supposition. A more likely scenario is that you've assigned a certain number of pages to be read by certain specified dates and you want to determine whether they've done your bidding. So you punctuate the reading experience with various interim quizzes, culminating in a major unit test. These assessments are usually true/false statements, multiple choice, some fill-ins, maybe a matching column. They focus almost entirely on plot events: who did what to whom, where, and when?

As teachers, we know the shallowness, but also the usefulness, of tests of this kind. To be realistic, let's admit that the genre of the traditional short-answer literature test is not about to die unmourned and be buried in unconsecrated ground any time soon. Let's consider some of the reasons why it has survived as a staple of the secondary English class.

#### ◆ Motivation

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Knowing that there's a quiz on Thursday on Chapters 1 through 7 of Book The Second, actually does motivate some students to get the stuff read. The traditional short-answer literature test has served us well and true for many generations. It has offered us a vehicle for reviewing the plot line, characters, and settings of complicated stories. It has duly punished the slothful and rewarded the righteous. It has even separated those who read the actual book from those who read the study guide. It has encouraged students to take notes on the details as they read. In short, it has told us who's been naughty and nice as far as doing the reading is concerned.

#### ◆ Convenience

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Paperwork is a tyrannical master. Few of us could keep up with the amount of student writing that we *wish* we could assign. So it's unrealistic to expect us to abandon the short-answer literature test, despite its shortcomings. The traditional test gives us quick feedback: *Did the students read and understand, on (at least) a literal level?* Without

this level of assessment, we can't proceed to higher level thinking anyway.

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◆ Traditional Expectations

There's a good reason why the short-answer response test is called *traditional testing*. It is what many parents, administrators, and students expect, and its absence would be disconcerting. Many high stakes standardized and national tests, such as the SAT/ACT and parts of Advanced Placement exams contain multiple choice questions, and, as long as they do, we need to prepare students for them. We know that it is important to familiarize students with particular testing formats, and thus we are wise to include them in our assessment repertoire.

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◆ Individual Accountability

The traditional test tells us what the student knows without assistance, copying from one's neighbor's paper notwithstanding. Inasmuch as a performance task is accomplished over time and without controlled testing conditions, we can never be certain how much help the students have received when they've completed a performance task. But a performance task, unlike a traditional test, is a learning experience *in itself*. An essential part of this learning experience *is* receiving assistance from outside sources and through communication and interaction.

Short-answer tests can also serve to scaffold learning on a higher level. The test itself, once graded, can be used as a knowledge base for a more authentic performance task later on. And, of course, the short-answer test often yields important information about reading deficiencies in students who consistently perform badly even though they think they've done the reading.

So, we are not calling for the abandonment of reading checks or unit tests. But we wouldn't want to base our curriculum on these types of assessments alone. Too often, short-answer tests on a work of literature reduce the reading experience to a shallow exercise. They don't get to the deeper experience of what literature is all about: the establishment of a relationship between the reader and the text.

Recently, I asked my tenth grade students to read *Night*, the powerful memoir by Holocaust-survivor Elie Weisel. As I was passing one of my students, Joanna, in the hall on the morning of the test, I heard her telling her resource room teacher that she had been unable to put the book down, and that it had affected her deeply. Foolishly, I administered a commercially prepared test to Joanna's class, and she failed it. She was, understandably, greatly frustrated, be-