Developing writing tasks that are interesting, challenging, and manageable for a broad range of students remains a persistent problem in the teaching of composition, in research on writing, and in writing assessment. The ideal writing task would enable students to compose comfortably and confidently and produce their best writing. But what are the elements that make up an effective writing task? Should variables such as audience, rhetorical purpose, and mode be specified, or should subject matter alone be designated? Should writing tasks simulate plausible writing circumstances beyond the classroom or testing situation by providing fictional scenarios in which students are given a role to play, or should writing tasks call for students to address real audiences in real circumstances?

Edmund J. Farrell argues that “it behooves us to create composition assignments which stimulate students to role play, to indulge themselves in a gamut of personalities during their adolescent years. Only thus will they discover the range of rhetorical voices available to them in writing” (430). In a book that has become widely used in training composition teachers, Erika Lindemann sounds a similar note, suggesting that “writing assignments should encourage role-playing because it allows students to imagine rhetorical situations and audiences outside academic contexts.” Lindemann goes on to say that if in designing writing assignments we “omit some of the factors which, in real life, help us define rhetorical contexts, we’ve sentenced students to performing poorly on the assignment” (194).

Composition researchers have also questioned what degree of rhetorical specification will allow for optimum performance. Lee Odell, Charles Cooper, and Cynthia Courts ask,

How should researchers frame a writing task so as to obtain the best possible work from students? Must researchers, as Sanders and Littlefield (1975) claim, provide a full rhetorical context, that is, information about speaker, subject, audience, and purpose? Is there any aspect of the rhetorical context that we need not include in a writing task? Would an assignment that, for example, specified speaker, subject, and audience but not purpose elicit
Research on these questions has been inconclusive. Following a detailed review of studies designed to examine audience specification, Theresa Redd-Boyd and Wayne Slater conclude that the studies "tell us little about the effects of audience specification. Apparently, the pattern of findings is an artifact of design, treatment, subject, and measurement problems. . . . Consequently, all of the experimental findings are ambiguous" (80).

Matters are no clearer in the literature on writing evaluation. Testing specialists differ on the question of rhetorical specification in writing tasks. Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lee Odell argue for specifying rhetorical variables in a testing situation in order to simulate realistic writing circumstances. James Hoetker and Gordon Brossell, on the other hand, maintain that assessment tasks should be "brief and simple and should honestly and succinctly describe the real rhetorical occasion—i.e., the student is being asked to write a piece of examination prose that several readers (English teachers) are going to evaluate in such and such a way—rather than prescribing fictional voices and audiences" (329).1

The present essay explores the question of rhetorical specification in writing tasks by looking at responses to a poorly constructed task used in large-scale placement testing at a major state university in the northeast. Although the task provides an elaborate fictional scenario, it does not specify audience, aim, or mode. Students' written responses to the task point to several problems with using fictional scenarios in writing tasks that teachers, researchers, and evaluators should recognize and avoid.

The Disastrous Case of the "Exam Cheating Task"

In the early 1980s, the university in question began testing all incoming freshmen as part of a university-wide general education program. The writing assessment consisted of a one-hour impromptu essay scored holistically by two raters. On a given test day, six or seven different writing topics were distributed randomly among the 250 to 300 students being tested. All of the topics placed the student in a fictional situation and called for persuasive writing on a well-defined issue within that situation. Audience and subject matter varied across tasks, but all identified an audience, all were designed to elicit persuasive writing, and all clearly suggested a persona or role for the student to adopt in the situation—all, that is, except for the "Exam Cheating Task," which was distributed to about 50 students during one of the testing sessions:

Exam Cheating Task
Imagine you're a participant in a qualifying exam for an administrative assistant position in a municipal housing development corporation. There are ten examinees, and the two people receiving the highest score will be hired.
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Because you're a personal friend of the administrator in charge of hiring, you've been privately assured of getting the job. You're taking the exam as a mere formality.

In the hall, before the exam, you speak with one of the other examinees. He seems bright. He tells you how much he needs the job, because he is out of work and has three children. During the exam you notice this person copying answers from a slip of paper. Later, you're told the exam may have to be rescheduled because someone may have had access to the answers before the exam.

You need the job immediately. If you report the person who was cheating, it is likely that a new exam (scheduled for two months from now) will not have to be given. You liked the person who cheated and believed he really needed the job. Would you report him? Why? Write out a clearly reasoned explanation of your position.

Because this task provides a role for students to play but fails to specify an audience, it places students both inside and outside the fictional scenario it posits. This ambiguity, along with further ambiguity about rhetorical aim and mode, makes the writing task unmanageable for students who attempt to write in response to it. But the "Exam Cheating Task" is problematic not only in terms of rhetorical specification. It also creates serious difficulty in terms of the ethical dilemma posed in the fictional scenario. Many writers might not be comfortable with having been "privately assured of getting the job" and with "taking the exam as a mere formality."

The writing elicited by the "Exam Cheating Task" suggests that it is indeed seriously flawed. Essays on this topic tended to be considerably shorter than those written in response to other topics; many were only a single paragraph, amounting to about a half page of text. More important, the writing was uniformly weak and characterized by a high degree of tentativeness and rhetorical confusion. In analyzing responses to the "Exam Cheating Task," I will first take up the issue of rhetorical specification and turn later to the ethically dubious role students are asked to assume in the task.

Rhetorical Specification in the "Exam Cheating Task"

Although the "Exam Cheating Task" provides a great deal of circumstantial information and attempts to place writers within a hypothetical situation, it does not designate an intended audience. Students choosing to report the man who had cheated might address their remarks to the administrator named in the task. Those choosing not to report the man in question have no recourse but to address the individual(s) they assume will be reading and scoring their essays. In fact, students did not identify an audience in the fictional scenario. The students who did decide to report the person who cheated on the exam do not address themselves to the hypothetical administrator named in the task. Instead, all of the "Exam Cheating" texts seem to be directed toward a rather nebulous "rater/evaluator." It might be expected that students would be
comfortable with this "rater/evaluator" conception of audience since it is similar to the notion of "teacher/evaluator," with which they are familiar. In this case, however, the issue is confounded by the detailed background information provided in the task. Students are asked to play a role in a carefully outlined set of circumstances. Yet, when they are charged with producing a written response to the situation, they are suddenly withdrawn from it and left to determine for themselves how to use the hypothetical information provided in the task to create a rhetorical context with a clearly defined audience.

That many students had difficulty determining just how to use the background information is apparent from various references to the writing task itself. One student, for example, opens her essay with the observation, "The essay topic clearly presents a question concerning cheating." Another student refers in his first sentence to "the individuals in the above situation." Yet another writer suggests, "As the situation is explained, I would have to say that I would turn the cheater in."

These self-conscious references to the topic indicate that writers were not able to imagine an audience within the writing task. The inability to conceptualize an audience in turn made it difficult to adopt a suitable persona. Students were caught in a struggle to use the information provided in the writing task to formulate for themselves a perspective from which they could write. Faced with this unpleasant bind, one student begins his essay, "As I am described under the writing task...." (The preposition is revealing here.) Struggling with an unclear relationship to the writing topic, another writer attempts to carve out his role in the situation: "If such a thing ever did take place and I was in the spot...." As will become even more apparent shortly, most students faced considerable obstacles in adopting the role that the task posits.

The "Exam Cheating Task" does not specify the aim or purpose of the writing that students are to produce. "Write out a clearly reasoned explanation of your position" might be interpreted as calling for a persuasive justification of the decision on whether to report the man who had cheated, or it could be viewed as an invitation to compose a descriptive statement on the moral principles invoked by the writer in making that decision. And there are, no doubt, other plausible interpretations as well. The lack of a specified audience, of course, only compounds the problem of an unclear aim.

The ambiguity regarding purpose leads to further uncertainty about the subject. It is not clear whether students are being asked to confine themselves to the particular circumstances outlined in the task or to extrapolate from these circumstances to more general situations. Once again, students are forced to resolve the tension between the concrete nature of the facts outlined in the writing task and the potential for generalization that these facts suggest. Accordingly, we find students struggling for a suitable level of abstraction at which to write. One student begins his essay this way:
There are many instances in everyday life where a person is forced to make a decision that will not only affect himself, but also those around him. This situation is just such an example. A person, me, is forced to decide on the boundaries of fair play. I see a person cheating on a test.

Again, we see a writer making explicit reference to both the writing task and his role within it in order to find a way into the assignment. In addition, however, this writer is trying to define a level of generality at which to approach the topic. He seems uncertain whether to confine himself to the hypothetical facts at hand or to extrapolate from those facts to a more general level.

This dilemma seemed to plague nearly all the writers who wrote on the "Exam Cheating Task." To most it was unclear whether they should be writing an argumentative essay in defense of their decision on whether to report the man who had cheated, or whether they should be composing a more general expository statement on "cheating." This confusion about aim and mode finds expression in a painfully convoluted reference to just this difficulty. One student's final paragraph reads as follows:

These are the reasons and underlying causes, which lead to the decision in which I have endeavored to execute on this expository essay.

The elevated diction and tortured complexity of this passage seem to be directed to teacher/evaluators. Such references to the search for an appropriate mode (and the difficulty in finding it), although not always this acute, abound in the "Exam Cheating" essays.

Freshman writers clearly had difficulty identifying an aim, mode, audience, and persona in the "Exam Cheating Task" that would enable them to compose comfortably and confidently; however, such a poorly constructed writing task would be trouble enough for any writer. But for writers who drew the "Exam Cheating Task," problems with rhetorical specification were exacerbated by the ethical question posed by the task and by the morally compromised role they were asked to play within it.

**Ethics and Role Playing in the "Exam Cheating Task"**

Although it is difficult to determine the precise interplay of problems with rhetorical specification and the morally questionable position in which writers are placed in "The Exam Cheating Task," it is clear that many writers were uncomfortable drawing attention to someone else's cheating when they themselves were not above reproach given their role in the writing task.

Half of the writers (49%) draw attention to the problematic role they are called upon to play in the "Exam Cheating Task" given the assurance of the administrator/friend that they will be offered one of the open positions. Some of the writers solve this problem rather easily. Two writers argue that their
qualifications can be taken for granted because the administrator/friend considers them to be qualified:

Now someone might say I am as dishonest as the guy who cheated, but I am sure my friend would not have hired me if he thought I was not qualified.

I realize that the way I am acquiring the position is not too fair, but the administrator must have faith in me, otherwise he would not have guaranteed the position to me.

Two other writers justify their position with a more straightforward, "cold, cruel world" line of argument:

The fact that I got the job because I had "connections" is also not fair, but it is an accepted means for getting a job.

It would also be unfair the way that I was getting the job, but in today's world it's hard to get a good position without "knowing" someone.

Most of the writers who acknowledge the ethical dilemma created by the writing task argue that they cannot report the man who cheated because they are themselves guilty of a form of cheating. One writer says, "I should turn him in, but I am in my own way cheating because of my personal friend who assured me of the position." Another reasons, "What I did to get the job was as bad as what he did. Both of us wanted the job without earning the right to have it. I don't see how I could report him when we are guilty of the same crime." A number of other writers present essentially the same line of argument. Some are even more strident in their observations that they too can be considered to be cheating:

I too was fraudulent in the testing. My position being assured due to a friendship I secured with the person in charge of hiring is morally and legally wrong.

The other man was not the only person "cheating" while taking the exam. In a sense I was also "cheating" because I knew that the job would be readily available to me. . . . I feel as though I have no right in that respect to report the cheater. That would be highly hypocritical.

It would be unjust to report someone who is doing no worse an action than I am. . . . I do not want to be the drunk politician voting against marijuana reform bills.

What is important about these excerpts (for the present purpose) is not the ethical choices students made (although many readers may find them reassuring, as I do) but the fact that many students were unable to identify with the
role they were called upon to assume in the "Exam Cheating Task." This difficulty is particularly apparent in one essay in which the student begins to assume the persona identified in the task but feels compelled almost immediately to distance herself from that persona:

I believe I would not turn him in but would rather wait for the test to be rescheduled. First of all though, I must say I doubt I would take a job if I was going to be chosen for it not because of my own skills but on the basis of what people I was personally acquainted with.

Another writer appears to have an even more difficult time adopting the persona outlined in the task:

Although it is clearly seen that the individual who had knowledge of the answers cheated, the first individual, too, participated in a form of cheating. To be guaranteed a job over others just on a basis of friendship is wrong. If I was this individual, I would not report the cheating unless I also confessed my advantage over the other applicants.

Other writers are simply unable to write from the perspective they are asked to assume and produce third-person accounts of the scenario and their proposed course of action:

Both people are cheating. They're cheating others who may need the job as badly as the first man, or who may be a better choice than the second.

The most successful "Exam Cheating" essay is one in which the writer overcomes the problems of aim, mode, subject, and persona through an elaborate narrative approach to the assignment. After beginning what is essentially an expository essay, the writer abandons this effort and begins a narrative in which she successfully adopts the persona suggested by the task and recounts the events from beginning to end as she saw them from her own perspective. Her initial draft ends abruptly after about a half page, at precisely the point where she would have had to relate the specific facts given in the writing task to the more general ethical questions raised by the topic. Unlike the expository effort, her narrative is quite fluent, providing perhaps one indication that she is considerably more at ease with this approach to the task. But only this one writer took a narrative approach to the "Exam Cheating Task." Apparently, only a very adept writer could see the need to take a different tack and switch modes in mid-essay.

Fictional Scenarios and Rhetorical Specification

A highly problematic fictional scenario and a lack of rhetorical specification conspire to render the "Exam Cheating Task" a quintessentially poor writing assessment prompt. Papers written in response to the "Exam
Cheating Task" were so problematic that they could not be scored along with papers written in response to other tasks. "Exam Cheating" papers had to be set aside and considered in a special reading in which evaluators attempted to overlook the obvious difficulties students were having with the task and assess the quality of the writing alone. There is no question that such a procedure compromised the validity of the "Exam Cheating Task" as a writing assessment instrument.

Of course, the "Exam Cheating Task" disaster does not resolve the question of fictional scenarios in writing assessment tasks. The task was badly flawed, but this incident certainly does not allow us to conclude that such tasks should be avoided altogether. It does provide some support, however, for the more limited claim advanced by Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy:

> Evaluators need to be wary of introducing writing tasks that simulate real life, for the sake of interest or motivation; such tasks may lead to writing samples that will not satisfy the purposes of assessment. Only the most able and test-wise students are able to balance off the conflicting demands introduced unwittingly into some of these more elaborately staged writing tasks.

("Designing Topics" 419)

Written responses to the "Exam Cheating Task" do suggest that evaluators should be wary of writing tasks that provide elaborate fictional scenarios. Specifically, the "Exam Cheating" papers suggest that evaluators should either present a fully specified situation that provides a context within which examinees can write, or they must use the evaluation setting itself (with rater/evaluators as audience) as the rhetorical context in which examinees will compose. Introducing both options in a single writing task clearly can result in disaster.²

The "Exam Cheating Task" is certainly flawed as an assessment instrument, but in my judgment it would be no less problematic in any other setting. Tasks like the "Exam Cheating Task" that require students to address an ethical problem have a long history in American pedagogy and may be more common than is generally supposed (see Jolliffe). Given their relative sophistication, such tasks may be especially common in advanced composition courses. But the "Exam Cheating Task" does more than pose an ethical problem. It places writers in a position that is both rhetorically untenable and ethically compromised.

The main rhetorical problem with the "Exam Cheating Task" seems to be that it places students simultaneously both inside and outside the situation described in the task. Examinees are given a role in a carefully outlined set of circumstances, but the written text they are called upon to produce has no plausible audience within that situation. When they begin to write, students are suddenly withdrawn from the fictional scenario in which they have been
placed and are left on their own to determine how to use the hypothetical information provided in the task to create both a role for themselves and an audience to whom they can write. Thus, students are trapped in an unmanageable tension between ethos and persona. I have suggested elsewhere that self-representation in written discourse should be understood as multidimensional, that writers project multiple "selves" into written texts. On the one hand, writers must portray themselves as intelligent, morally upstanding, and concerned for the audience (in accordance with Aristotle's notion of ethos); on the other hand, when they construct rhetorical situations in the act of writing, writers necessarily create for themselves a role to play in the situation (corresponding in some ways to the creation of a literary persona).

Although the "Exam Cheating Task" ostensibly gives student writers a role to play (a persona in the fictional scenario), it abandons the pretext of the scenario when students are called upon to write, leaving them to fall back on their personal ethos to negotiate the real examination situation. But that ethos, which is supposed to be morally upstanding, has been compromised by the transitory persona students have been asked to assume, a persona that is in the ethically dubious position of having been guaranteed a job by a personal friend. The "Exam Cheating" essays attest to what an unpleasant and unworkable rhetorical dilemma this situation posed for students, students who were already in an anxiety-producing testing situation.

Do the "Exam Cheating" texts suggest that we should avoid fictional scenarios in writing tasks altogether? No, I think not. It remains possible to create effective tasks of this type. But in all writing tasks used in teaching, research, and evaluation, we have a responsibility to make sure that the roles we create are reasonable ones for students to adopt. This admonition seems like so much common sense. As the "Exam Cheating Task" debacle shows, however, our zeal for creating interesting, challenging writing tasks that engage students with meaningful topics can sometimes derail common sense. My hope is that this account of a particularly ineffective writing assessment prompt will alert teachers, researchers, and evaluators to a serious (but avoidable) problem in using fictional scenarios in all types of writing tasks.3

Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

Notes

1Research on writing assessment has only recently taken up the question of what constitutes an effective writing task. Gordon Brossell reports on a study in which writing tasks that present a fully elaborated hypothetical context result in weaker writing than those that simply identify a topic and ask students to write on it. Leo
Ruth and Sandra Murphy ("Designing Topics") offer a model of the writing assessment "episode" and make a number of suggestions about the design of evaluation tasks. Brossell and Barbara Ash conclude that variations in the mode of address employed in writing tasks (such as personal vs. impersonal; imperative vs. request) do not result in significant differences in assessment essays. James Hoetker and Brossell have tested procedures for constructing "content-fair" writing assessment tasks. Ruth and Murphy (Designing Writing Tasks) have published the most extensive research to date on writing assessment tasks.

Responses to the "Exam Cheating Task" suggest the need to pilot test writing tasks prior to their use in assessment. It is impossible to be certain what kind of writing a task will produce until it is tested because it is impossible to know for sure how examinees will respond to the subject matter of the topic and to the role (if any) they are asked to play within it. Seemingly inconsequential variations in writing tasks can have pronounced effects on examinees' interpretations of those tasks and on written texts produced in response to them (see Witte, et al.). Had the "Exam Cheating Task" been pilot tested, the problems with the task could have been identified and corrected, or the task could have been withdrawn from the pool of tasks used for placement testing.

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Works Cited


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**ATAC Elections**

Elections for officers of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition will be held at the ATAC special interest session of the Conference on College Composition and Communication convention in March 1990. Please send nominations and self-nominations to Evelyn Ashton-Jones; Department of English; University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83843. All nominees must be present at the special interest session.