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To my family: Clarke, Tommy, and James

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Series Editors' Preface

Writing, which was once considered the domain of the elite and well-educated, has become an essential tool for people of all walks of life in today's global community. Whether used in reporting analyses of current events for newspapers or web pages, composing academic essays, business reports, letters, or e-mail messages, the ability to write effectively allows individuals from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate. Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that writing plays a vital role not only in conveying information, but also in transforming knowledge to create new knowledge. It is thus of central importance to students in academic and second language programs throughout the world. In many of these settings, the assessment of writing ability is of critical importance. Employers, academic instructors and writing teachers need to make decisions about potential employees and students, based on how well they can communicate in writing. But while the history of writing assessment goes back for centuries, it continues to be one of the most problematic areas of language use to assess. This is partly because of the vast diversity of writing purposes, styles, and genres, but primarily because of the subjectivity of the judgements involved in assessing samples of writing.

The author of this book, Dr. Sara Cushing Weigle, has extensive experience in teaching and assessing writing, and has conducted seminal research in this area. Her doctoral dissertation on writing assessment was awarded the TOEFL Award for Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation in Second/Foreign Language Testing in 1996, and she has since published numerous research studies in this area. Furthermore, her experience as a teacher has enabled her to present the complexities of writing assessment research and practice in a way that is readily accessible to practitioners and researchers alike.

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Series Editors' Preface xi

This book provides a coverage of writing assessment that is both broad and in-depth, discussing the relevant research and theory, and addressing practical considerations in the design, development and use of writing assessments. Beginning with a discussion of the nature of writing as both a social and cognitive activity, the author offers a thorough and critical review of the relevant research and theories of writing ability that provides the grounding for the rest of the book. She then proposes a conceptual framework for designing and developing writing assessments. In subsequent chapters, the author provides detailed discussions of procedures for designing writing assessment tasks and of scoring procedures, in the contexts of both large-scale and classroom assessment, illustrating her main points throughout with examples from a wide range of writing assessments. She devotes an entire chapter to an approach to assessment – portfolio assessment – that is both controversial and widely used, not only for writing assessment, but also for large-scale assessment of educational achievement. In her final chapter, the author looks ahead to examine the effects of technology on writing itself, and on writing pedagogy, as well as the potential contributions of new technologies to writing assessment. She also considers the politics of writing assessment, and the on-going tensions among different stakeholders about the nature of writing assessment, the ways in which these should be scored and interpreted, and the kinds of evidence that need to be provided to support the validity of the inferences and uses we make of the results of writing assessments.

In summary, this book provides a thorough discussion of practical issues and procedures in the design, development and use of writing assessments that is solidly grounded in research and theory. It thus has much to offer to both the test developer and the classroom teacher.

J. Charles Alderson
Lyle F. Bachman

Acknowledgements

In the summer of 1996, at the Language Testing Research Colloquium in Tampere, Finland, Lyle Bachman and Charles Alderson asked me if I would be interested in contributing a book on writing assessment to the new CUP series on language testing. In the ensuing five years I gave birth to my second child, moved with my family from Los Angeles to Atlanta to start a new job, bought a house, rejoiced with my much-loved father when he found and married the woman of his dreams, and mourned with my new stepmother a year later when Dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away. All the while Lyle and Charles, along with Mickey Bonin of Cambridge University Press, waited patiently for me to complete this manuscript and never gave up hope that I would eventually complete it. Now that it is finally finished, I need first of all to thank Lyle, Charles, and Mickey for their patience and unwavering support. I am also grateful for their guidance and feedback at every stage of the process. Lyle in particular has been willing to read and comment in detail on many drafts of each chapter, and I would like to acknowledge his many contributions to the book.

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