

## Aligning the Montana University System Writing Assessment with the Board of Public Education’s Writing Content Standards

In 2001, the Montana University System, committees of P-20 professionals, and nearly 100 high schools began collaborating to offer a statewide writing assessment that partially meets the need for performance measures in assessing K-12 content standards. Montana’s Standards for Writing (BPE/OPI, 1999) list six broad content standards. The Montana University System Writing Assessment is aligned with several of those standards—most obviously, the first: *Students write clearly and effectively*. Upon Graduation Benchmarks for **Content Standard I** clearly align with the MUS Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Rubric, as evidenced in the following table:

Montana University System Holistic Scoring Rubric	Montana Standards for Writing Upon Graduation Students Write Clearly and Effectively
<p>In a 6-level paper:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions.</li> <li>2. clarify a position on the issue, providing extensive and compelling supporting evidence.</li> <li>3. language is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice.</li> <li>4. while there may be a few errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent.</li> </ol>	<p>Students:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. organize text in paragraphs with clear beginning, middle, and end, using effective transitions and logical sequence.</li> <li>2. develop and elaborate main ideas through relevant and specific supporting details.</li> <li>3. demonstrate purposeful control of personal voice, sentence structure, and word choice.</li> <li>4. apply conventions of standard written English (e.g., spelling, punctuation, usage) appropriate for grade level and purpose.</li> </ol>

The MUS Writing Assessment requires that students demonstrate their achievement of other Standards for Writing, as described below.

**Content Standard 2, *Students apply a range of skills and strategies in the writing process***, appears not to apply to a timed, prompted writing assessment. However, as with many other state writing assessments, Montana students did not achieve higher scores with a two-day option, which allowed them to employ the writing process more effectively than during a 40-minute setting. In addition, student answers to the question “How often do you write more than one draft of a paper before it is graded by a teacher?” shows students who “usually” and “always” use the writing process score .5 higher than those who do not. Students who practice the writing process regularly are better able to produce a piece of writing on demand, within a limited time frame because they have learned “to adapt and choose the writing strategies that best suit a particular writing task” (Rationale). With the Montana University System Writing Assessment as an incentive and an opportunity to write for a critical audience, more schools realize the importance Writing Content Standard 2’s Rationale: “By having ample time and frequent opportunities to write, writers grow in confidence and competence.”

**Content Standard 3, *Students evaluate and reflect on their growth as writers***, recommends that “By using criteria for effective writing, successful writers set goals for writing improvement and select strategies and resources to accomplish those goals” (Rationale). With the widespread availability of a Scoring Rubric, students can become familiar with the criteria for effective writing. Because students have the opportunity to practice for the Montana University System Writing Assessment through classroom exercises designed by their own teachers or by using Webwriters, writers can set goals for improvement and seek resources on the Internet. Score reports to schools include data on writers’ strengths and weaknesses, helping students achieve the third benchmark under this standard “analyze and evaluate strengths and weaknesses as writers.”

Although **Content Standard 4, *Students write for a variety of purposes and audiences*** assumes that writers have the luxury of choice—“Once writers have a purpose, they select audiences”—most often in the real world, a writing task is assigned or mandated by circumstance. The Montana University Writing Assessment prompts describe a scenario that defines an audience and purpose for the writer. Within this context, it is the writer’s responsibility to “make stylistic and structural choices that allow them [students] to communicate effectively” (Rationale).

**Content Standard 5, *Students recognize the structures of various forms and apply these characteristics to their own writing*** requires that students will be able “write using characteristics of different forms” including “multi-paragraph essays, persuasive, expository, and argumentative” upon graduation. The MUS Writing Assessment requires that students demonstrate attainment of this standard.

Although **Content Standard 6, *Students use the inquiry process, problem-solving strategies, and resources to synthesize and communicate information***, focuses on research, one of its Upon Graduation Benchmarks is closely aligned with the MUS Writing Assessment. Although the benchmark “Students will identify and investigate alternative explanations or solutions, and use criteria to draw and defend conclusions based on their analysis and evaluation of the information,” technically refers to information gathered through research, in the Writing Assessment, students identify a solution which they must defend through analysis and evaluation of the alternatives.

Finally, the Writing Performance Standards describe **a *graduating student at the proficient level of writing*** who ***demonstrates solid academic performance***. He/she:

- a) *writes clearly and effectively by applying a range of skills and strategies in the writing process;*
- b) *often seeks and responds to feedback to evaluate and revise writing, as well as reflects on his/her growth as a writer;*
- c) *recognizes variations within the forms and often identifies levels of meaning;*
- d) *occasionally takes risks when applying these characteristics to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, and different genres, including expository and persuasive writing;*
- e) *initiates his/her own inquiries; and*
- f) *uses current and emerging technologies and information sources to communicate.*

When students participate in the MUS Writing Assessment, they take risks as they seek feedback about whether they can write clearly and effectively, they must apply the characteristics of persuasive writing, and they have the option of using technology to seek assistance and produce their essays. Although any one assessment cannot and should not attempt to evaluate the entire range of standards in any given content area, the addition of a timed, prompted essay can play a significant role in assessing Montana’s Standards for Writing and satisfying the Curriculum and Assessment Standard’s requirement that school districts “use effective and appropriate multiple measures and methods to assess student progress in achieving content and performance standards in all program areas” (Board of Public Education, 10.55.603).