

# The Montana University System Writing Assessment



*A Practical Guide to Writing Proficiency*

# Introduction

In 2005, The Montana Board of Regents instituted the Writing Proficiency Policy, requiring that students demonstrate their readiness to enroll in the college freshman composition courses that count toward core or degree requirements. The policy stated, “a student who has not yet demonstrated the ability to meet these standards may be admitted without condition to a two-year degree program or admitted provisionally to a four-year degree program” in the Montana University System.<sup>1</sup> In November of 2010, the Writing Proficiency Policy was folded into a single admissions policy (301.1), which now includes the Mathematics Proficiency Policy, the College Preparatory Program Policy, and both In-State and Out-of-State General Admissions Policies.

The policy, printed in full on pages 7-8 of this manual:

- Informs high school juniors if they are 1) on target to enter either a college freshman composition course that will count toward general education program, MUS Core or degree requirements or 2) to enter a course that is developmental.
- Ensures that students take the developmental courses they need during their first year in college; and
- Allows students who score at the proficient level as high school juniors to waive a campus placement test in composition.

One of the five measures students may use to demonstrate proficiency is the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA), first field-tested with assistance from ACT in 2001 in 75 volunteer high schools. The MUSWA is now administered in 140 high schools, to nearly 9,000 students.

About 350 high school teachers, pre-service teachers, and college instructors gather at regional sites for two days each spring to score the essays and participate in training that improves writing instruction. Perhaps the most important outcome of these workshops is the role they play in Improving Teacher Quality. Almost all teachers ask students to write in order to help them learn content, to test them for knowledge or understanding, or to provide them with an avenue to make their opinions known. Teachers from all subject areas, counselors, and administrators can improve the quality of their interactions with student writing at these regional workshops.

This manual is designed to assist school and university staff members as they prepare for, administer, score, and use data generated from the Montana University System Writing Assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> Montana Board of Regents of Higher Education. *Policy and Procedures Manual: Section: 301.16 Writing Proficiency*, effective November 18, 2005.

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# Test Design

In 2000, the Montana Board of Regents adopted the recommendation to field-test an authentic writing assessment as one measure for proficiency admissions to the Montana University System. A Writing Proficiency Steering Committee which included university-level Directors of Composition, professors of English, high school teachers, and education administrators made several design decisions, including the type of writing to be tested, the format of the writing prompts, and the traits described in the scoring rubric. Their rationale for those choices follows.

## **Authentic writing assessments, validity, and reliability**

To be authentic, the writing assessment should reflect the student's ability to engage in the academic writing expected at the colleges and universities in the Montana University System. The more closely the assessment aligns with the types and purposes of academic writing required in those institutions, the more authentic it is. The assessment should be constructed and conducted so as to allow students to demonstrate their proficiency by writing, rather than by identifying and correcting discrete components of writing that is not their own. Most importantly, the writing assessment should be scored using generally accepted standards of composition proficiency at the college entrance level.

An authentic writing assessment is a type of "performance assessment," which gives students greater control over the manner in which they demonstrate proficiency than multiple-choice, editing tests. And, because authentic writing assessments are open-ended in nature and focus on skills that are less "culture-bound" than syntax and usage, they are less subject to the cultural biases that sometimes characterize closed, language-focused tests.

Using a performance writing assessment to establish composition proficiency essentially reverses the challenges associated with the traditional multiple-choice instrument. Multiple-choice tests of composition proficiency are highly reliable (measurement is consistent from judge to judge), but not particularly valid (they don't measure what they purport to measure). Authentic writing assessments are extremely valid, but require continual training and checking to ensure reliability. No level of reliability can compensate for an invalid measure. Delane Munson, Senior Advisor for the Assessment Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, served as a consultant for trainers of the MUSWA in 2004. He provided the following analysis:

*To determine construct validity, one asks if the assessment instrument measures the respondents' reasoning practices and abilities relative to the content of interest. The Writing Proficiency Steering Committee studied the syllabi of freshman courses to select persuasive writing as the genre most likely to measure the reasoning and writing skills needed by college freshmen.*

*Criterion reliability refers to the correlation of assessment results with current or future successful performance in the content area of interest—in this case, writing. Studies correlating how students fare in college in comparison to the scores achieved in previous writing assessments are currently underway and required by the Writing Proficiency Policy. Preliminary results show a positive correlation.*

*To achieve reliability, scorers must balance their knowledge of the rubric with professional judgment, including the comparison of each essay with the anchor sets. Training is key to ensuring reliable scores. Through intensive training for the MUSWA, scorers:*

- *Develop a common understanding of the rubric;*
- *Learn to accurately apply the rubric to the writing being assessed;*
- *Develop a common base of scoring ability within the rater pool; and*
- *Are provided constructive guidance before and during scoring.*

The MUSWA has proven itself to be highly reliable, based on inter-rater reliability measures, such as a Cronbach's Alpha of .87 for the 2007-2009 tests.

## **Persuasive Writing**

Most college writing is persuasive and virtually all upper-division and graduate-level university writing is persuasive. In literature, the social sciences, history, philosophy, and hard sciences, academic writers take a position about the meaning or significance of a subject and then defend that position by providing credible evidence. College instructors are constantly saying to their students, "What's your claim? What evidence do you have to support that claim?" Exposition is another typical form in college settings. Persuasion relies on strong exposition and the best exposition, at some level, is deeply persuasive.

If the ability to persuade were the only consideration, the MUSWA would use what is termed "Primary Trait Scoring." However, the mode of persuasion prompts a piece of writing that measures competencies common to most writing genres: organization, development, fluency, and language conventions. Those four areas of competency can be taught and demonstrated through narrative, descriptive, expository, or persuasive expression.

Many students may be able to demonstrate their proficiencies better in the persuasive mode. Given the limited time to respond, the persuasive prompt leads the writer to the development and organization of ideas, demonstrating proficiencies that can be challenging in 40 minutes. Because other modes tend to have fuzzier purposes and more organizational and developmental choices, the writer may lose too much time fiddling with their possibilities. Having to take a stand on a position to a person authorized to act provides a real purpose that crosses experiences sometimes divided by culture, gender, geography, and demographics.

## **Letter Format**

The prompt asks for letter as a vehicle to write a persuasive essay. The letter format helps students focus on audience and purpose, giving them a jump start on their writing. For those with a well-established writing assessment program, the letter format might seem too simple. However, unlike an advanced placement essay, requiring critical reading, this is a measure of basic proficiency. The letter format makes the writing accessible to a wider audience.

## **Holistic Scoring with Strength and Weakness Feedback**

The holistic rubric was chosen to match the purpose of this assessment, to increase reliability, and to make it practical to score thousands of tests. Holistic and analytic rubrics serve different purposes. Holistic rubrics are used in large-scale assessments to the purpose of placing students in groups; analytic rubrics are used to provide diagnostic data, giving teachers and students specific feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of particular traits. The primary purpose of the MUSWA is to establish that the student has the writing proficiency necessary to

engage in college-level academic experiences. Although Analytic Scoring, such as Six Traits, may be the rubric of choice for instructional purposes, holistic scoring is the rubric of choice for external assessment (e.g., AP exams, writing placement exams, junior gating exams, etc.).

For the purposes of placing students (into a class or university), holistic scoring minimizes the problem of determining a cut point. When the purpose of scoring essays using a holistic rubric is to determine if the productions are “proficient” or “not proficient” and rigorous training and scoring procedures are used, Dr. Munson of the NWREL expects 95% reliability. With an analytic rubric of six or more features, the chances of inaccurate scoring are multiplied several times.

In addition, holistic ratings allow for rapid scoring. Holistic scoring takes perhaps half the time required for diagnostic scoring. Most schools test all of their juniors and some seniors, generating over 8,000 essays that must be scored by volunteers from participating schools, colleges, and universities.

A secondary purpose of the MUSWA is to give schools and students feedback about their writing. The MUSWA holistic rubric is based on a compilation the analytic rubrics most commonly used in Montana’s high schools and aligned with the Montana Writing Content Standards. The return of strength and weakness data to schools provides a vehicle for analyzing a school’s writing program and for students to work on their weaknesses.

## **Writing Proficiency**

What do readers expect of a writer seeking admission to the four-year college? Through its discussions, study, and norming exercises, the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee found that there is a generally accepted set of standards for evaluating the proficiency of a student adequately prepared to engage in college-level studies. The six-point MUSWA scoring rubric describes the proficient level (a score of 4) as follows:

*These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with some elaboration or relevant explanation. Organization is generally clear. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is appropriate for the topic. A competency with language is apparent, even though there may be some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.*

Academic writing – the exploration, synthesis, review, and evaluation of ideas, events, and experiences – is the primary means through which students both learn and demonstrate their learning in the college setting. It is a fundamental component of the general education core which every baccalaureate degree requires. It is a common requirement for lower-level and advanced course work in virtually every discipline.

Students who are not proficient writers upon admission to college cannot hope to engage in the scholarly discourse that is the foundation of college-level study. When students without composition proficiency are admitted and retained, two consequences follow. First, the students themselves are deprived of the full value of a college education. They do not receive the intellectual experiences academic writing is designed to provide, and as a result they do not experience the level of intellectual growth that they have a right to expect. Second, if the college revises its expectations to accommodate these students, other students who *are* prepared for the rigors of college-level work are deprived of the intellectual engagement and growth that they deserve, and the diploma that they receive has less value.

# Admissions Policy

## (Writing Proficiency Sections in Bold)

MONTANA BOARD OF REGENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Policy 301.1 – Admissions Requirements for Undergraduates into Four-year University Programs

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**I. Full Admission.** To be fully admitted as first-time, full-time undergraduates (without conditions or provisions), students must meet the following requirements:

**A. Completion of the Regents' College Preparatory Program:**

1. Four years of English: in each year the content of the courses should have an emphasis upon the development of written and oral communication skills and study of literature.
2. Three years of mathematics including Algebra I, geometry and Algebra II (or the sequential content equivalent of these courses). Students are encouraged to take a math course in their senior year.
3. Three years of social studies which shall include global studies (such as world history or world geography); American history; and government, economics, Indian history or other third year courses.
4. Two years of laboratory science: one year must be earth science, biology, chemistry, or physics; the other year can be one of those sciences or another approved college preparatory laboratory science.
5. Two years chosen from the following:
  - (a) foreign language (preferably two years)
  - (b) computer science
  - (c) visual and performing arts, or
  - (d) career/technical education units which meet the office of public instruction guidelines.

**B. Demonstration of Mathematics Proficiency:**

1. A score of 22 or above on ACT mathematics; or
2. A score of 520 or above on SAT mathematics; or
3. A score of 3 or above on the AP calculus AB or BC subject examination or a score of 4 on the IB calculus test; or
4. A score of 50 or above on the CLEP subject examinations in selected topics [college algebra, college algebra-trigonometry, pre-calculus, calculus, or trigonometry]; or
5. Completion of a rigorous high school core including four years of mathematics in high school (Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry & a course beyond Algebra II) and three years of laboratory science; or three years of mathematics including a course beyond Algebra II and four years of laboratory science, in addition to English, social studies, and electives as described in the regents' college preparatory program, with grades of C or better in all courses. (See Appendix I.)

**C. Demonstration of Writing Proficiency:**

1. **A score of 7 or above on the essay or 18 on the combined English/writing section of the optional writing test of the ACT; or**
2. **A score of 7 or above on the essay or 440 on the writing section of the SAT; or**
3. **A score of 3.5 or above on the Montana university system (MUS) writing assessment; or**
4. **A score of 3 or above on the AP English language or English literature examination; or**
5. **A score of 4 or above on the IB language A1 exam; or**
6. **A score of 50 or above on the (CLEP) subject examinations in composition.**

- D. General preparation as demonstrated through at least one of the following:
1. A composite score of at least 20 on the ACT or a score of at least 1440 on the total of mathematics, critical reading, and writing scores on the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) for admission to Montana State University-Northern; or
  2. A composite score of at least 22 on the ACT or a score of at least 1540 on the total of mathematics, critical reading, and writing scores on the SAT, for admission to Montana State University-Billings, Montana Tech of The University of Montana, Montana State University-Bozeman, The University of Montana-Missoula, and The University of Montana Western; or
  3. A high school grade point average (GPA) of at least 2.5; or
  4. A ranking in the upper half of the school's graduating class.

**II. Provisional Admission:** When admitted under provisional status, first-time, full-time undergraduate students are subject to the following rules:

**A. Provisional Admission Status based on Proficiency Standards and Operational Rules:** Students who have not yet demonstrated the ability to meet the mathematics and/or writing proficiency standards may be admitted without condition to a two-year degree program or admitted provisionally to a four-year degree program on any campus of the MUS. Operational Rules for the Provisional Admissions Status Created by Montana Board of Regents provide guidelines to assist students who have been provisionally admitted. (See Appendix II.) If students cannot move their admission status from provisional to full early in their academic careers, they cannot continue in a four-year degree program.

**B. Demonstration of Mathematics Proficiency after Provisional Admission:**

1. Students denied full admission to a four-year program in the MUS because they do not meet the mathematics proficiency standard may prove that they have the appropriate proficiency in the following ways:
  - (a) within 3 semesters or 32 credits of enrolling, earn a C- grade or better in intermediate algebra (M 95), or in a college course that is the prerequisite to a mathematics course that satisfies the general education program requirement described in board policy 301.10; or
  - (b) earn a score of 22 or above on the mathematics portion of the ACT or 520 or above on the mathematics portion of the SAT; or
  - (c) earn a score of at least 60 on the COMPASS algebra exam, or an equivalent score on another placement exam used by the campus, upon enrollment; or
  - (d) complete an A.A. or A.S. degree.
2. The above-described standards are also used to determine mathematics proficiency when students transfer from two-year programs or campuses to four-year programs or campuses. Scores below 22 on the mathematics portion of the ACT or 520 on the SAT indicate placement into developmental mathematics courses.
3. Students whose mathematics scores are below 18 on the ACT or 440 on the SAT may be fully admitted to a two-year degree program of the MUS, but may not be admitted to a four-year degree program of the MUS.

**C. Demonstration of Writing Proficiency after Provisional Admission:**

1. Students denied full admission to a four-year program in the MUS because they do not meet the writing proficiency standard may prove that they have the appropriate proficiency in the following ways:
  - (a) within 3 semesters or 32 credits of enrolling, earn a grade of C- or better in developmental writing (WRIT 95) or a composition course that is the prerequisite to the composition course that satisfies the general education program requirements described in board policy 301.10;
  - (b) earn the required score on one or more of the writing assessments listed for admissions;
  - (c) submit a letter to the admissions office documenting a disability that prevented him/her from adequately demonstrating proficiency in a test setting if no accommodation was provided at the time of the test; or

- (d) earn a score of at least 90 on the COMPASS writing skills exam; or
- (e) complete an A.A. or A.S. degree.

2. The above-described standards are also used to determine writing proficiency when students transfer from two-year programs or campuses to four-year programs or campuses. Scores below these thresholds indicate placement into developmental composition courses.

**III. Enrollment Management Procedures:** Campuses may apply admission review processes that 1) improve the likelihood of student success; 2) encourage rigorous college preparation among applicants; and 3) ensure balanced treatment of all student applications.

A. For applicants who exceed every criterion of undergraduate admissions standards, campuses may establish facilitated admissions procedures, and may identify such students with special privileges, titles, or honors.

B. For applicants whose transcripts and exam scores leave some question about the prospective student's success, additional documentation (such as essays, letters of recommendation, and/or portfolios) may be required before granting admission.

**IV. Exemptions:** Exemptions are used to admit students under special circumstances and must be used judiciously:

A. Exemptions for First-time, Full-time Students: Institutions may exempt up to 15% of first-time, full-time undergraduates from the requirements of this policy, with the exception of Completion of the Regents' College Preparatory Program, for students with special talents, minorities and others who demonstrate special needs.

B. Categorical Exemptions: The following categories of students are also exempt from the requirements of this policy:

1. non-traditional students (those who do not enter college for a period of at least three years from the date of high school graduation or from the date when they would have graduated from high school),
2. summer only students, and
3. part-time students taking seven or fewer college-level semester credits.

C. Procedures Required for Granting Exemptions:

Campuses must establish procedures for the admission of applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements set forth in this policy. Such procedures shall include submission of evidence of the ability to do college-level work and shall be subject to approval of the deputy commissioner for academic and student affairs.

## **Appendix II of 301.1 Operational Rules for Provisional Admissions Status**

The institutions that make up the Montana University System must follow these operational rules as they work with provisionally admitted students:

1. Students must be informed of their admission status by letters that include the following points:
  - a) The minimum mathematics and/or writing score(s) required compared to their score(s) that did not satisfy this requirement;
  - b) The name and number of the developmental course into which they may be placed and how they may register for or challenge the course(s);
  - c) An explanation of what they must do to be fully admitted, including:
    - a. Re-taking the entrance exam(s);
    - b. Providing CLEP results;
    - c. Taking another placement exam, such as COMPASS; or
    - d. Successfully completing the developmental coursework.
  - d) Other services available to students, such as tutoring centers.
2. If students have been provisionally admitted, they must change that status to full admission as soon as possible, but at least before the end of three semesters or the completion of 32 credits in the Montana University System, whichever event occurs first. If students do not comply with this operational rule, their provisional admissions status will be revoked and they will not be able to continue their matriculation in a four-year degree program. The Registrars at each of the four-year campus will monitor student progress to assist with the implementation of this rule.
3. Students who are provisionally admitted may declare a major.
4. Campuses may advise students to limit their course load while developing the mathematics and/or writing skills needed to be successful in college-level courses.
5. The term "provisional admission" has a particular meaning in the Montana University System, under Board of Regents' Policy. It cannot be used to describe any other admissions status or situation in the System.
7. Provisional admission does not change existing rules within the Montana University System concerning financial aid, scholarship eligibility, satisfactory academic progress, academic probation or suspension rules.

# Composition Placement Policy

## MONTANA BOARD OF REGENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

### Policy 301.17 – Composition Placement

Effective date: Fall 2008

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- A. Composition Placement Policy is based on Writing Proficiency Policy 301.16, which sets thresholds for full admission to the four-year programs at Montana State University-Bozeman, Montana State University-Billings, Montana State University-Northern, The University of Montana-Missoula, Montana Tech of The University of Montana, and The University of Montana-Western. This placement policy applies to the programs listed above, as well as Montana University System programs with open admissions and dual enrollment programs that offer composition courses for college credit.
- B. This policy reflects the Montana Board of Regents' expectation that students should not be required to take multiple writing examinations as part of their initial matriculation in the System.
- C. This policy provides campuses with the flexibility to select assessment measures based on their own course offerings, course content, and predictive studies. Campuses must clearly communicate their placement practices to students, counselors, staff, and advisors.
- D. Students who earn the following **minimum** scores on tests taken during high school will be placed directly into a college-level freshman composition course without further testing:
  - 1. **7** on the Writing Subscore or 18 on the Combined English/Writing section of the Optional Writing Test of the ACT; or
  - 2. **7** on the Essay or 440 on the Writing Section of the SAT; or
  - 3. **3.5** on the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA).
- E. Students who score below the thresholds set in D will be placed into developmental courses. Campuses have the discretion to allow students who do not meet the thresholds in D, but scored at least 5 on the ACT or SAT essays or 2.5 on the MUSWA, to challenge this placement through one of the following approaches:
  - 1. A campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA, giving the student 40 minutes to respond to a persuasive prompt and holistically scored using the MUSWA rubric and scoring process; or
  - 2. A campus-specific measure, such as portfolios, approved by the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee; or
  - 3. Regular and supervised participation in a tutoring program/learning center from which students can exit with the threshold scores set in section H of this policy.
- F. Students will be placed into developmental courses if their writing scores are below 5 on the ACT or SAT or below 2.5 on the MUSWA or the campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA.
- G. Students may be placed into advanced composition courses, where they are available, based on MUSWA, ACT, SAT, or Advanced Placement scores as determined by the English Department of each campus.

- H. Students without writing placement examination scores, whose writing scores were earned more than three years before enrolling, or students exempted under Section H of Policy 301.16 Writing Proficiency (nontraditional students, summer-only, and part-time students) are placed into college-level composition by taking examinations offered by the two-year or four-year campuses and earning the minimum scores listed below. Students with scores below these thresholds are placed into developmental composition courses:
1. 50 on the CLEP Subject Examinations in Composition; or
  2. 7 on the COMPASS E-Write Examination; or
  3. 90 on the COMPASS Writing Skills Test, until a proficiency measure is adopted on the campus; or
  4. 71 on the COMPASS Writing Skills Test if a proficient essay is also submitted; or
  5. 3.5 on a campus-administered writing assessment modeled upon the MUSWA, giving the student 40 minutes to respond to a persuasive prompt and holistically scored using the MUSWA rubric and scoring process.

**History:**

ITEM 89-003-R1195 Proficiency Admission Requirements and Developmental Education in the Montana University System, approved November 17, 1995; ITEM 107-109-RO500 Report from Joint K-16 Composition Standards Committee on Writing Proficiency Standards for Admission and Graduation from MUS, approved July 6, 2000; ITEM122-115-R0104 Writing Proficiency Recommendation, approved January 15, 2004; ITEM 129-109-R1105 Writing Proficiency Policy, approved November 16, 2005, ITEM 135-1110R0507 Revisions to Policy 301.16, Writing Proficiency, approved May 31, 2007.

# Benefits of the MUSWA

The Admission Policy requires that students take one of five performance assessments in writing. Scores from any of these writing samples are equally acceptable. However, the Montana University System Writing Assessment provides some benefits to the teachers and institutions that use them.

## Calibrating Teachers

When teachers, college instructors, and college students convene to score the essays written by students who represent small schools, large schools, reservation schools, rural schools, and Montana's largest towns, they often come with different perspectives about what constitutes good writing. During the school year, some have not been privileged to read a student paper that would score "6." Some have become so frustrated by the comma splice that it has become an egregious error, resulting in an automatic "F." Some are so wedded to the "five-paragraph essay," that any other organizational format is considered disorganized. Some are so impressed to find a student using figurative language that it can elevate a structurally flawed paper to brilliant. Holistic scoring evens out these discrepancies and calibrates all the scorers to the same set of standards. When they return to their classrooms, they apply more consistent criteria to their grading systems. In the end, high school transcripts may become more meaningful, as a "B" in one school represents the same qualities as a "B" in another.

## Measuring Performance in Authentic Ways

***Performance Counts: Assessment Systems that Support High-Quality Learning*** (Linda Darling-Hammond, CCSSO, 2010) urges that Student Assessment Systems should: 1) "address the depth and breadth of standards as well as all areas of the curriculum, not just those that are easy to measure"; 2) engage teachers in scoring student work based on shared targets; and 3) increase the capacity of teachers to prepare students for the demands of college and careers. Darling-Hammond recognizes that "high achieving systems seek to implement their standards with assessments that measure performance in authentic ways and with intensive teacher engagement throughout the assessment process, as teachers work with others to develop, review, score, and use the results of assessments. Comparability in scoring is achieved through the use of standardized rubrics, as well as training and moderation systems that enable scorers to use the same standards in consistent ways that result in reliable scores. Systems for inter-rater moderation, statistical calibration, and auditing of scores allow the use of tasks eliciting ambitious intellectual work and extensive teacher involvement."

## Conducting Research

The MUSWA has collected enough data to keep researchers busy for years. This information is vital to analyzing approaches to writing instruction, pre-writing strategies, developing valid and reliable testing instruments, studying students' post-secondary aspirations as related to their skill levels, and improving the writing curriculum. In addition to this statistical bonanza, the MUS is learning about student attitudes toward writing, student responses to educational and statewide issues, and the incredible appetite that Montana's teachers have for professional development, collegiality, and improving their students' writing skills.

# Registering for the MUSWA

In the Fall, letters of invitation are mailed to every public high school in Montana and made available on the Writing Proficiency website. Unlike other college admissions exams, the MUSWA is administered by high schools that register their classes, instead of students registering individually. Schools can register online at [www.muswa.com](http://www.muswa.com). They must make a commitment to send one staff member to a training/scoring workshop for every 40 tests submitted. Rather than paying for the test and the resulting score reports, schools support their teachers to attend training and scoring sessions. Although most high schools test all of their juniors and the college-going seniors who scored below the proficient level as juniors, schools may opt to test only those students who hope to attend one of Montana's four-year institutions.

By participating in the MUSWA, schools have access to student-, school-, and state-level data that helps teachers gauge the effectiveness of their writing curriculum in preparing students for college. In addition, students have feedback on a timed writing, using prompts typical of other college admissions exams (ACT and SAT) to help them prepare for those tests, if required by the colleges of their choice.

Schools have the option of testing students in three different modes. Two modes (handwritten and word-processed on paper) use printed test booklets with bubble-in covers to collect student information. To avoid paper waste, mailing costs, and data-collection errors generated by bubble-in sheets, the MUSWA offers an online test. Schools can use up to three days to test using this option. The testing window is long, generally the entire month of February.

Tests are scored at seven or eight regional sites during March. OCHE strives to return test data to schools before the ACT and SAT registration deadlines for June testing, in case a student wishes to try for a higher score. The test data is available electronically for the MUS campuses and school districts. Admissions officials recommend that high schools also include this test score on their students' transcripts, by affixing the labels mailed to them in the spring on the high school transcripts or uploading MUSWA scores in to their data systems.

When deciding to participate in the MUSWA, schools are asked to consider the following:

- Do you want to provide a writing assessment for college admission (or for practice for other college admission essays) at no cost to your students?
- Do you prefer to counsel college-bound students to take either the SAT or the ACT with Optional Writing Test?
- Can your district support travel and two days of substitute teacher costs for scorers?
- Do you have teachers who need professional development and renewal units or college credit in writing instruction and assessment?
- Do you have experienced scorers who would like to be trainers?
- Do you need information about how well your students write in comparison to other students across Montana?

# Preparing Students

Students will be well prepared if their school's writing curriculum provides opportunities to write about sophisticated topics; to practice persuasive essays; to demonstrate critical thinking, organizational and language skills; and to back up writing with opinions, facts, experiences, examples, and logical reasons.

Teachers can participate in writing workshops in order to become familiar with the type of writing prompt, scoring rubric, and test characteristics. Then, many teachers develop similar prompts relevant to their own curriculum and community, assign that writing to students, and allow students to score one another's writing using the Holistic Scoring Rubric. In this way, students know what to expect and how they will be scored.

In addition, <http://webwriters.msugf.edu> (Sponsored by the Student Assistance Foundation) provides direct instruction to students and an interactive feature for practice essays.

## Writing Process

Student data from five years of testing showed that students who usually or always write more than one draft of a paper before turning it into their teachers (in other words, they use a writing process) score 0.5 points higher, on average, than students who do not write multiple drafts. However, students must also learn to pace themselves, not just for the Montana University System Writing Assessment, (in which they will have 40 minutes to read the prompts, select one, think about the issue in the prompt and to plan and write the essay), but also for the ACT Optional Writing Test (30 minutes) and SAT essay (25 minutes). It's unlikely that they will have time to draft, revise and recopy an essay, so it's important to plan before writing and perhaps five minutes to do a final check before time is up.

In 2005, Dr. Robyn Wingo analyzed over 3,000 writing samples in order to determine whether prewriting activities have a relationship to writing proficiency. The mean score of writing samples from the 2004 MUSWA that included prewriting were compared to the mean score of writing samples that did not include any prewriting. The six most popular prewriting activities students utilized were outlining, listing ideas, drawing T-diagrams and webs, restating the prompt, and drafting. The data showed a significant positive correlation between prewriting and holistic scores. For example, students who outlined earned scores .6 above those who did no prewriting. According to Dr. Wingo:

*The element of time is the most constraining factor of a direct writing assessment; therefore, students who plan their writing have a better idea of the direction their writing will take and are better prepared to use the time allotted, regardless of how long that time is. Students who take the MUSWA should spend about ten minutes prewriting. Teachers must provide students with opportunities to practice many prewriting techniques to produce a better piece of writing and motivate their students to see the value of utilizing prewriting techniques.*

In this study, drafting as a prewriting method was shown to produce even lower scores than no planning. Students should be made aware that writing a separate draft is not a good use of prewriting time, especially during a time-limited writing assessment.

## Hints for Students Faced with a Timed Writing Test

**Prewrite** – Before writing, reread the chosen prompt to make sure you understand it. Decide how you want to answer the question in the prompt. Jot down your ideas. These could be a list of ideas, reasons and examples that you will use to explain your point of view on the issue. Write what others might have to say in opposition to your view and think how you would refute their arguments. Sometimes listing “pros” and “cons” (a T-diagram) is a quick way to generate ideas. Outlines can help you think about how to best organize the ideas in your essay.

**Write** – Explain your point of view in a clear and logical way. If possible, discuss the issue in a broader context or evaluate the complications of the issue. Address what others might say to refute your point of view and present a counter-argument. Use specific examples. Vary the structure of your sentences, and use varied and precise word choices. Make logical relationships clear by using transitional words and phrases. Don't wander off the topic. End with a strong conclusion that summarizes or reinforces your position.

**Review your essay** – Take a few minutes to read through your essay. Correct any mistakes in grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling. People who score the essay take into account that you only had a relatively short time to write. Try to make your essay as polished as you can during that time.

The Writing Proficiency website, <http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>, includes several links to websites about taking timed tests and writing persuasive essays, and a link to [Webwriters.msugf.edu](http://Webwriters.msugf.edu), which provides a step-by-step approach to writing a good essay.

## Ideas for Curriculum and Instruction

Rather than a curriculum that separates units by genre, a more useful approach may be to connect topics or genres within the writing curriculum, so that students can learn to apply skills used in one genre to writing another. For example, examine the way beginning, middle, and end function in a story as compared to an expository essay.

Teach students the differences among genres, so that students will consider purpose and audience as they write. At the same time, sometimes writing instruction can be approached from a multi-genre stance. For example, show students how a line of poetry may be effectively inserted into a persuasive essay. However, students must consider their audiences. For example, a simple clue to the reader, such as, “The following story illustrates my point,” can make the use of narrative to persuade very compelling.

Rather than teaching short stories as one unit and nonfiction as another, consider approaching reading and writing from a thematic perspective. For example, read a short story that illustrates and issue discussed in an essay. Discuss what makes each approach compelling.

Teach brainstorming, imagining a movie opening, juxtaposing contrasts, remembering moments of joy or sorrow, etc., as methods to open oneself to any type of writing. Such approaches are generally for creative writing, but they can also be used for exposition.

Teach that precision in word choice (whether for meaning, sound, cadence, ambiguity or clarity) may be genre-specific. Find a list of synonyms and decide which words would be found more often in a poem, a story, a newspaper, a technical report, etc.

Many students may benefit from writing collaboratively. For example, have every student write one paragraph, pass it on, where it's developed more, etc. What may seem obvious to the teacher may not be obvious to the inexperienced writer. Answer student questions or repeat instructions without appearing exasperated. Respect the individual writers—they are writing from their own experiences.

### **Assessing Writing**

As each person has his or her own story, teachers should expect each student to approach a writing task as an individual. Although teachers may provide prompts, starter ideas, and directions, where the student goes with a piece of writing may be unanticipated. In most cases, the primary lesson is not about following instructions to the letter, but about encouraging students to demonstrate their writing and thinking skills. Allow students to think outside the box.

Broader, rather than narrower interpretation of scoring features honors the student for whom narration, or perhaps journalism, is the most natural approach to writing. A broad interpretation of the features of the MUSWA Scoring Rubric follows:

#### **Focus**

The MUS Writing Assessment is a 40-minute draft. With this time limitation, losing one's train of thought may lead the writer to a bigger idea than the prompt intended. If the writer can carry the reader to a new focus and maintain that focus, the piece of writing may be successful. However, most proficient writers focus on the topic suggested in the prompt, supporting a few ideas extensively and in a compelling way.

#### **Development**

The writer may make creative connections, developing an argument through narrative(s) or engaging the reader with images. In addition, repetition may be a form of development: when a statement is made the second time in a new context, it can have a second meaning. However, many essays below the proficient level are redundant rather than fully developed.

#### **Organization**

When an ending is left open, it can signal multiple interpretations. Sometimes, summing up may even damage exposition. An essay can be organized in a variety of ways—the typical five-paragraph paper organizational approach is only one approach.

#### **Fluency and Conventions**

Language should be selected for audience and subject appropriateness. When students assess their own writing, they should ask, "How will my audience react to this?" When fluency is assessed, the use of simple language may be as effective as sophisticated language, depending upon the role that the writer assumes.

# Test Administration in Three Modes

Schools receive test materials, including instructions for administering the MUSWA about two weeks before the test window opens. Teachers are urged to observe the standardized testing procedures to ensure fair and equitable administration for all examinees. OCHE mails the test administration instructions and writing prompts to all participating schools. The printer mails test booklets directly to those schools that have selected the handwritten or word-processed modes. School that use the booklets must mail them back to OCHE as soon as testing is completed.

The writing prompts, mailed from OCHE, must be kept secure. Prompts are printed double-sided, with Student Directions on one side and two Writing Prompts on the other. There are three different forms of the Student Directions/Prompt sheet. One set is to be used for the first test administration (either Day One or Morning); one set for the second test administration (either Day Two or Afternoon); and one set reserved for Make-up Test Day. After testing, prompts must be shredded.

Regardless of the writing mode, students should be reminded to pre-write by making lists, outlining, mapping, etc., before composing their essays. Students are advised that the writing will be evaluated on their ability to address the question they have chosen, develop and organize ideas, use language that conforms to the conventions of standard edited English, and demonstrate fluency through effective word choice and sentence structure.

Handwritten Testing Method requires one Montana University System Writing Sample booklet per student. After completing the informational front cover of the booklet (either on test day or the previous day), the students select a writing prompt and pre-write on the planning pages of the test booklet before writing on the lined pages.

Word Processed Testing Method also requires one Montana University System Writing Sample booklet per student. After completing the informational front cover of the booklet, the students are instructed to select a prompt and pre-write their responses on planning pages of the test booklet. Students use a word-processing program to compose their essays, which are printed out at the school and inserted into the test booklets. Students are asked to write or type the test booklet number in the upper right corner of their essays.

Online Testing Method requires computers with a processor speed of at least 250 MHz, a browser that handles at least Javascript 1.1 and a high school bandwidth >100 Kbits/second which should handle testing 50 students simultaneously. Teachers pre-register their classes a week or two before testing begins. On test day, students log on to the computer, find their teacher name and class period, and provide the information requested using pull-down menus. Students then select the prompt and pre-write on a blank sheet of paper. They compose their essays in Microsoft Word, paste them in the online textbox and submit.

Timing. Planning and writing of responses must be completed in 40 minutes during one class period. An additional 10-15 minutes may be needed to distribute and collect tests and to bubble in and print names on the Student Information pages of the printed test booklets.

# Writing Prompts

In 2001, when the Montana University System Writing Assessment was first piloted, three prompts were selected from a pool of prompts that ACT had used in other testing situations. Before the 2002 test was administered, ACT led a prompt-writing workshop for teachers that resulted in the development and review of nearly 30 new prompts. Fifteen of those prompts, which passed the bias review, were field-tested in 2002. New prompts are field-tested and selected each year to replace well-used prompts. Good writing prompts:

- Are interesting to students, so they write enough to permit assessment of their skills;
- Elicit original writing rather than simple restatement of the topic;
- Are accessible to all students, regardless of experience, general knowledge, gender, or cultural or ethnic background;
- Are free of weighting toward students with certain experiences; and
- Encourage students to draw upon their personal experience and their own ways of organizing information.

Every year, each prompt is analyzed based on the following information:

- How often it is chosen by students;
- Inter-rater reliability;
- Average score;
- Distribution of option selections; and
- Ratings by scorers on the prompt's fairness, interest to students, and ease of scoring.

New prompts are used as older prompts are retired. From a pool of six prompts, each student can select from two prompts, paired to appeal to different interests. The prompts:

- Describe hypothetical situations involving a choice between two specific alternatives, or a unique solution proposed by the student;
- Provide criteria used to weigh alternatives, such as "improving the school experience";
- Specify an audience, such as a school board; and
- Use topics that are accessible to any high school student.

The MUSWA considers prompts an *Invitation to Write*, rather than a strict assignment. They are designed to:

- provide a "quick start" for writing by using the letter format;
- allow for the possibility of creative approaches;
- give students the opportunity to demonstrate a capacity to learn to write for college; and
- provide solutions for students to defend, or to generate their own alternatives.

# Holistic and Analytic Scoring

The MUSWA uses a holistic scoring rubric, but also provides scorers with the opportunity to provide some more detailed information to teachers and students about writing strengths and weaknesses.

Holistic rubrics:

- Are based on the whole picture of the writing;
- Provide a general impression of the essay based on anchor papers;
- Ask raters to weigh and balance various features of the writing;
- Generate one score;
- Are used for screening and/or placement;
- Are efficient and reliable; and
- May be used for a variety of genres

Many school districts in Montana use Six Traits or Six-plus-one to score their district writing assessments. Training in Six Traits has improved the writing programs in many schools and often helps teachers learn to score holistically.

Analytic scoring:

- Isolates characteristics of writings into features with specified criteria, such as:
  - Ideas and Content
  - Organization
  - Voice
  - Word Choice
  - Sentence Fluency
  - Conventions;
- Has rating scales or rubrics designed with explicit criteria for each feature;
- Generates multiple scores;
- Is used for diagnosis and adjusting writing instruction; and
- May be specific to a subject area or genre.

The MUSWA Holistic Rubric is based on the original ACT scoring rubric, modified to more closely reflect the Montana Content Standards in Writing and the Six Traits Rubrics used in so many of Montana's schools.

After the first field test in 2001, many teachers indicated that they wanted more information about their students' writing skills than is found in a holistic score. However, using full-fledged analytic scoring would not serve the purposes of this assessment. The compromise reached was to provide feedback about just those writing traits that stand out as strong enough or weak enough to tip the score either higher or lower than the other traits would indicate. Each year, about 75% of the tests are marked for one or more strength or weakness.

# Holistic Scoring Rubric

- 6 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with extensive and compelling evidence. Organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions. Language use is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent. (Advanced)
- 5 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with moderate and relevant evidence. Organization is unified and coherent, and transitions are used. Sentences are almost always well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is often precise. While there may be a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, a good command of language is apparent. (Advanced/Proficient)
- 4 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with some elaboration or relevant explanation. Organization is generally clear. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is usually clear, and word choice is appropriate for the topic. A competency with language is apparent, even though there may be some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. (Proficient)
- 3 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt, developed with a little elaboration or explanation. Organization is clear enough to follow without difficulty. Sentences are usually well controlled, expression of ideas is at times awkward or unclear, and word choice may at times be inaccurate or inappropriate. A basic control of language is apparent, even though there may be frequent errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics. (Nearing Proficiency)
- 2 These papers may state a position on the issue defined in the prompt, but development may be minimal or irrelevant. Organization may lack clear movement or focus, making the writer's ideas difficult to follow. Sentences may often be unclear, expression of ideas may often be awkward or unclear, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Numerous errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics show poor control of language and may at times impede understanding. (Nearing Proficiency/Novice)
- 1 These papers may not state a position on the issue defined in the prompt or develop an idea. Problems with organization and lack of focus may make the paper very difficult to follow. Sentences may seldom convey meaning clearly, expression of ideas may be very unclear and confusing, and word choice may often be inaccurate or inappropriate. Severe problems with grammar, usage, or mechanics show very poor control of language and may significantly impede understanding. (Novice)
- 0 These papers cannot be scored with the rubric (completely off-topic, illegible, or inappropriate) or they may be plagiarized.

# Sample Prompt and Essays

*A typical prompt:*

*Imagine that your school has experienced several incidents of vandalism and theft over the past few months. Administrators want to install surveillance cameras to monitor activity 24 hours a day to protect school grounds and personal property, and to discourage future incidents.*

*Write a letter to the school board explaining your position 1) supporting the installation of cameras; 2) opposing the installation of cameras; or 3) proposing another solution to reducing vandalism and theft. Explain how such cameras could or could not improve conditions in your school.*

*Begin your letter “Dear School Board:”*

Note that this prompt uses a situation that all students can understand and offers two solutions to a problem or proposal. In this prompt, students are told that they can invent a third solution. They are not penalized for suggesting a better idea if they are able to persuade the reader why theirs is the best solution. Students are given an audience to address and a specific criterion to weigh alternatives, such as how the proposal could or could not “improve the conditions in your school.”

The prompt above was retired in 2008, in part because so many schools now have surveillance cameras. Papers are scored against the rubric, which is illustrated through “anchor” papers that are pre-scored and “practice” papers that must be scored individually and discussed in groups during the training process. Because student essays are improving each year, using some papers from previous years as samples helps anchor the scoring process and prevents scorers from drifting to higher standards. The MUSWA is a criterion-referenced test, not a norm-referenced test. Therefore, the standard does change over time, but the range of scores and average score may change.

Annotations describe to the scorers why the paper earned the given score, often quoting parts of the rubric to reinforce those descriptions of each score point. Very few student essays reflect every aspect of the rubric at a given score point, perhaps demonstrating one or two traits of the score point above or below the assigned score. The essays used in training (and in this booklet) are actual student essays and demonstrate the range and variety of writing produced by high school juniors.

All essays are read by at least two trained scorers. If the two scores are not identical or within one point a third reader must “resolve” the score. Scores are added and then divided by two for the final score. A score of 3.5 indicates one score of 3 and one score of 4.

## Sample Essay A

Dear School Board I agree on your decisions on having a Better school on security cameras on what happened on the stabbing a couple weeks earlier.

Theres a lot of bullies out there and you have to catch them in cowardly act straight up shooky ones. They ain't crooks just cowardly hearts.

So the young ladies & gentlemen can have a Healthy personalty so they can walk through the halls with there heads held yup and have no fear of whats A head. Catch the cowardly hearts/bullys that have anfect on other people such as the people who ain't popular

Have them installed in the hallways an watch of sexual harassment on the younger ones. Bullys/cowardly hearts and straight up shook ones.

Score = 1

*Although this writer takes a position on the issue, that position is not organized coherently. "Sentences" are incomplete or awkward, consisting of a string of loosely-connected ideas written in a confusing order. The meaning of several words is unclear. Severe problems with grammar, usage, and spelling impede understanding.*

## Sample Essay B

dear school board

i support the installation of cameras in the school because these cameras are going to protect the school. it is going to protect it from vandalism and the stealing of school property. i don't think that this is a breach of privacy because if you don't have anything to hide then you don't have to worry about the cameras. if its going to stop the vandalism then you should be all for it.

i don't think that the cameras are or would be a waste of money because they would have to pay to clean up the vandalized property anyways. this way you can stop or slow down the vandalism rate. and by putting up the cameras you may be able to catch or identify the alliaged suspect or suspects. i would not want to be around the people that did this to my school. the reason why i would not want them around my school is because i take pride in my school and they oviously don't take pride in it at all.

thank you

Score = 2

*The writer addresses the issue, but development is minimal and much of the "development" can be found in the prompt. Organization lacks clear movement: the first paragraph basically restates the prompt and offers the idea that privacy isn't breached if you have nothing to hide and the second paragraph discusses money, identity, and pride. There is no conclusion. In addition to spelling errors, capitalization is lacking, e.g., "i" for "I" and at the beginning of each sentence.*

## Sample Essay C

Dear school board

I have recently been informed that you want to install cameras in the school parking lots. I have attended this school for three year now and I have never had a problem with vandalism or theft. Installing cameras on school grounds would be an invasion of privacy. And I also think that the money for cameras could be put to better use.

I have attended this school for three years I have only parked in the school lot for two. In my experience I have never had any problem on the school lot. I know students that have had problems in the past. But that is a chance you have to take when you park in any parking lot just like the chance you take when you go to the store or the movie. If theft and vandalism are such a problem for student they should try to park some were off of school grounds.

Vandalism and theft are a problem just about any were you go but installing cameras to watch students is not right. It is an invasion of privacy and should not happen for any reason. If you put cameras in the parking lot what are you going to do when the vandals revert to the school. Its an on going fight that will probably never be stopped. How do we stop this you ask well we already have the best way possible police.

The police are the best possible solution to our problem and there already working on it. The money that is being spent on cameras could go toward something that every one in the school could use like new computers or more vending machines.

I know there are a lot of people in this school that would like cameras to go up in the parking lot. But I don't think that that is the solution if every time that something went wrong we took drastic measures then we would all be living in a world with no privacy.

In conclusion I hope I know where I stand on this issue I hope my letter will influence your choice thank you for your time.

Score = 3

*This essay appears to have three main points: 1) the writer has never had a problem, but parking is admittedly a risk; 2) cameras would be an invasion of privacy; and 3) there are better ways to use the money. However, these points are supported with little elaboration and much repetition. The organization is clear and yet sentences are awkwardly phrased. While it is clear that this student understands basic sentence structure, there are frequent errors in mechanics.*

## Sample Essay D

Dear school board,

Due to the recent incidents of vandalism and theft the administrators want to install surveillance cameras on school grounds. The administrators believe that this is the solution to the incidents and will prevent future crimes. I am writing to inform you that I believe that this is not the solution, because the cameras will be expensive, crime may increase elsewhere, and students would lose the natural right of privacy.

Purchasing enough cameras, that are high enough quality, to cover the whole school grounds would be very expensive. The school would have to spend a large chunk of its budget that normally would be spent on furthering student's education. This is after all the main goal of a learning institute. What would the school have to cut and get rid of to fund cameras? Is it worth it? No, the school should stick to its primary job and spend the money on computers, books, and field trips.

Surveillance cameras would be an expensive attempt to stop crime; however, the crime would not stop. Cameras would just move crime elsewhere, not solve the problem. People that would vandalize and steal in the school are bound to continue committing their crimes in other neighborhoods. What the school needs is to make the students aware of the crimes and teach them that these things are wrong. The school could also use its assigned police officers to make a presence on the school grounds.

Finally, there is the issue of privacy. Surveillance cameras would violate the natural right of privacy. Privacy is very important and shouldn't be breached, especially in a needless situation such as this one. How would you like it if you were filmed right now in your board meeting, in the halls, and out in the parking lot? Would you feel comfortable with somebody watching your every move? I think not! The right of privacy needs to be retained.

Surveillance cameras would be a waste of money, not solve the crime incidents, and would violate the privacy of students and teachers. Cameras are a thoughtless idea that would not solve our schools problems. Please take this letter into consideration when making your decision on this issue.

Score = 4

*The writer clearly states his/her position and develops it with some relevant evidence, but may overuse rhetorical questions, without further development. The essay is organized using a five-paragraph pattern and utilizes both subtle (beginning of third paragraph) and obvious (finally) transitions. The writer's sentences are mostly simple and expression of ideas is usually clear. However, word choice is relatively simple and there are some errors (steel/steal) in usage and punctuation.*

## Sample Essay E

Dear School Board,

Due to the recent incidents of vandalism at our school, I believe that installing cameras upon the school's premises is a valid policy. Even with the many complaints about invasion of privacy and that purchasing these cameras would be a waste of school funding, safety is the number one objective of all students and facility.

The first argument, regarding privacy, seems a bit far-fetched. Students who are on school property should not be worried about being on camera; after all, they should not be involved in activities that they have to worry about others seeing. Cameras would just be a constant reminder that schools are a place of learning, and can be fun, but also safe. Since schools are tobacco and drug free zones, the cameras would ensure that the school is not corrupted with things that can bring harm not only to students and teachers, but to the community as well.

With this surveillance system, new technology could be introduced to the school without worrying about destruction of property and vandalism. Staff and facility members would also be able to keep an eye on things that concern them, such as student behavior in the hall ways. By watching these cameras, staff personal can also have insight to certain vandalism acts that students may have done. If a student goes to a specific area where a crime has occurred, the staff can question that student, where without the camera, the student may not ever be caught and repeat the crime at a later date in time.

Cameras would also protect the safety of students and staff members in the building. Cameras could document visitors who enter and exit the school, and also see if they produce any threat to students. If placed outside the building as well, they could stop a threat from entering the building, or warn students and staff of the oncoming danger. Cameras could also prove effective in the lowering of traffic accidents in front of the school, due to the lack of a parking lot. And with all the vehicles parked outside, theft is a common problem. With cameras in place, students could report a crime, and look at video tape for any evidence proving that someone broke into their automobile and removed their property.

Many argue that the cameras will be too expensive, and that school funding could be better spent elsewhere. When in reality, much money will be saved because the school will have to spend less on repairs and clean up from acts of vandalism and destruction. Though they are somewhat expensive, cameras will last for a long time, and need little maintenance and repair over the span of their life. They will prove to be a good investment for the school over the course of many years.

With Cameras, students and staff will be safer. The school will see less vandalism, and the random acts that may still be committed will be solved with ease. New technologies could be inserted into the school without worry of destruction, and the community as a whole would have to worry less about the destruction of property on the schools grounds. And with the little money required to maintain the cameras, they will prove to be fundamental in the performance of school safety.

Sincerely,  
A Concerned Student

Score = 5

*This essay takes a clear position on the issue and develops the argument with several relevant examples, as well as a paragraph refuting the opposition. However, some of the evidence strays from the focus of each paragraph. For example, the fourth paragraph begins with "safety" then veers into "theft" after the mention of traffic accidents. Despite that flaw, the ideas flow well. The writer demonstrates a good command of language, with very few errors.*

## Sample Essay F

Dear School Board,

It has become evident to the students and staff that incidents of vandalism and theft occur at school quite frequently. There has been a proposal to install surveillance cameras to monitor activities throughout the school 24 hours a day. This proposal serves as a way to protect the lives of students, the school grounds, and personal property. Vandalism can be dangerous, lead to a gang mentality, as well as destroy the school grounds. Many students express the desire to have surveillance cameras installed in the school for several valid reasons.

School is a place where a student should be able to come and feel safe. Vandalism and theft over the past several months have caused students to feel uneasy at school, fearing that their personal belongings may be ruined or stolen. These items may be as inexpensive as a pair of gym shorts or they could be expensive, such as an IPOD or CD player. The destruction or theft of either item, no matter how expensive it is, stands as a violation of that student's rights and privacy. Students should feel that their belongings stay safe at school locked in their lockers, yet recent thefts have caused students to become angry when their personal belongings disappear. A surveillance system monitoring the halls and school grounds would easily take care of this problem. The cameras record all activities. If something suspicious is found on the recording, the school administrators or police can be called in. Students and teachers opposed to a surveillance system argue that it is a waste of money, yet in reality money is wasted when students must buy a replacement for a belonging that was stolen or destroyed and the school has to use citizen's tax dollars to repair the school after it is vandalized. The money spent on repairs and replacements is equal to or greater than the amount it would cost to install a surveillance system.

To add to the problem, unchecked theft and vandalism can lead to gang mentality. The thief who brags about his "new" IPOD may inspire his friends to steal. The vandal whose graffiti adorns the west wall may be viewed as a hero to some. Stopping such acts with cameras could change this mentality.

While one problem lies in the destruction of personal belongings, there is another more prevalent problem that needs addressing. Not only is student property endangered, but student

lives are endangered as well. No one can guarantee that the person vandalizing the school and stealing personal belongings will not bring a gun or another weapon to school. However, the installation of surveillance cameras would efface this worry. If a student were to bring a weapon to school, he or she would be immediately captured on tape. The school administrators would then take care of the problem by calling the police and making sure that all students are safe and not in danger of being hurt or killed. Without surveillance cameras it may be difficult to tell if a student has a weapon. It is important to install these cameras in order to protect students, for human life is more precious than the money spent to install a surveillance system.

Overall, the installation of a surveillance system will aid the school in several different ways. It will cost money to install but will save money in the long run. More importantly, surveillance cameras will protect student property and human life. This system will fulfill a valid purpose in the protection of student welfare and allow students to feel safe at school.

Sincerely,  
Concerned Student

Score = 6

*This writer states a clear position and with strong organizational skills, makes use of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals with concrete examples, and effectively addresses the opposition. The student demonstrates a strong command of language using good transitions, precise word choice, and well-controlled sentences. Although this writer could improve fluency by using more varied sentence structures, he/she demonstrates an advanced level of writing skill.*

# Using Results

Results from the Montana University System Writing Assessment can be downloaded from [www.muswa.com](http://www.muswa.com), using secure passwords, about three weeks after the last test is scored. These reports can be accessed by designated contact person who should share the results with all interested parties. They include:

- Three state reports: one for overall scores, one for handwritten essays, and one for word-processed and online essays;
- Each school's distribution table, showing the percent of students at each score point and their plans (such as going to college) after high school;
- A distribution table for each class, by teacher;
- Individual scores for students whose essays were submitted and scored correctly, including data about strengths and weaknesses; and
- Individual MUSWA scores printed on labels and designed to be affixed to students' transcripts.

Before the school year ends, OCHE also send all schools **Letters of Recognition** to students who earned scores of 5.5 and 6 (which students often include in their college applications); and **Awards of Merit** for schools whose average scores are in the top tier (about 20%). Schools may also use electronic files with memos addressed to every student and his/her parents, explaining the meaning of this/her score and describing the other admissions requirements of the Montana University System. School counselors or teachers should print these memos for students to take home to their parents.

Schools have also been sent graphs showing their own school's and the state's distribution of strength and weakness data on each scoring feature (focus, development, organization, fluency, and conventions) in order to help design curriculum and instruction that addresses weaknesses in student writing and builds upon their strengths.

Because students initially take the MUSWA as juniors, they have the opportunity to use their senior year to improve writing skills if their scores fall below the proficient level of 3.5. A score below 3.5 will place students into developmental coursework unless they can show improvement. At the same time, students who earn high scores may be motivated to apply to selective colleges or scholarships. Many students who hope to attend college out of state use the MUSWA as practice for the ACT or SAT essays.

Teachers who participate in scoring the MUSWA learn to recognize the characteristics of writing at each score point and can teach students what is necessary to produce a proficient essay.

# Practice Prompts

Teachers often develop writing assignments with prompts similar to those used by the MUSWA. They may write their own, using a frame, or they may use retired MUSWA prompts.

## Framed Prompt:

\_\_\_\_\_ is considering a way to (help students or the community or to solve some problem). (They) have considered two options. One alternative is to \_\_\_\_\_. The other alternative is to \_\_\_\_\_. Write a letter to \_\_\_\_\_ in which you argue for (A or B), or your own alternative, explaining why you think your choice is more likely to \_\_\_\_\_ (have the desired result, improve life for students, increase participation, etc.).

## A Retired Prompt:

Imagine that each spring your school's junior class selects a "guiding principle" for students to follow the next year. Seniors will be responsible for modeling the guiding principle that next year, thus providing a kind of "peer pressure" for encouraging other students to live by it. So far, two such guiding principles have been proposed: 1) Respect yourself, your classmates, and teachers; or 2) Balance schoolwork, friends, family, and fun.

Select one of these or create one of your own and write a letter to the Junior Class President explaining why this guiding principle would prevent problems that students tend to experience and make the next school year better for all students and teachers.

## A Field-Tested Prompt:

A group of individuals has asked the local school board to ban certain books currently on the high school library shelves and used as part of the 11th grade curriculum. The group believes these books encourage immoral or violent behavior and adversely affect impressionable 11th grade students because the books include sex, violence and/or explicit language. The proposed banned books include, among others, Fools Crow, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, I know Why the Caged Bird Sings and Hamlet.

Write a letter to the school board supporting the 1) exclusion or 2) inclusion of one or all of these books in the school library and/or curriculum. Explain specifically why you think this book or these books are harmful or valuable to 11th grade students.

Begin your letter "Dear School Board:"

# Website References

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and its partners in this project have developed many documents and materials that can be accessed through the Writing Proficiency website: <http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>, including:

- Links to policies on Writing Proficiency, Provisional Admissions, and Placement
- Archived Writing Proficiency newsletters, dating from November of 2000
- Press releases
- Brochures to download, such as “Read to Understand the World, Write to Have the World Understand You”
- Links to online college courses, such as “High School Writing Strategies”
- Questions and Answers
- Links to national reports, such as “The Neglected R”
- Link to [WEBWRITERS@msugf.edu](mailto:WEBWRITERS@msugf.edu) for interactive writing practice
- Other links of note:

[www.muswa.com](http://www.muswa.com)

(Online testing and results)

[www.act.org](http://www.act.org)

(ACT College Entrance Exams)

[www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)

(SAT Exams)

[www.safmt.org](http://www.safmt.org)

(Student Assistance Organization)

[www.montanacolleges.com](http://www.montanacolleges.com)

(Montana Post Secondary Education Council)

<http://mus.edu/collegeprep.asp>

(MUS College Admissions Information)

<http://www.opi.state.mt.us/>

(Office of Public Instruction)

# Montana Writing Content Standards

## Communication Arts Writing Content Standard 5

Students will write to communicate effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences.

### Rationale

Never have writers been more in evidence in daily life than they are now. Whether it is in the form of cell phone text messages, instant messages, blogs, e-mails, personal network postings or any of the more traditional forms of writing, there is evidence readily available to show that we are taking ample advantage of our impulses to write. As the forms of writing and methods of publication increase rapidly in our digital world, the skills of writing take on new value.

Practice with many different forms and styles of writing, using a variety of media to communicate in writing, is essential for students to become proficient writers. Successful writers choose and adapt strategies to best fit the topic, purpose and audience of the writing task. Effective writers are adept at knowing when to collaborate and seek feedback to polish and clarify their written communication during the writing process. Proficient writers also understand the ethical and legal issues of using information gained from others in their writing. They follow the protocols of the medium and write in safe and responsible ways.

### Performance Descriptors:

Upon graduation, the student:

- 1) applies the steps of the writing process, evaluates and refines writing;
- 2) selects topics and generates complex thesis;
- 3) develops and elaborates upon main idea using variety of details;
- 4) organizes writing using transitions and progression of ideas;
- 5) demonstrates control of language choice;
- 6) applies conventions;
- 7) evaluates the purpose and audience; selects and uses format, style, and tone;
- 8) uses a variety of forms and genres and evaluates the effectiveness of form and genre;
- 9) maintains focus of topic in written work with complex ideas;
- 10) conducts research using information problem solving process;
- 11) follows copyright laws;
- 12) sets goals and evaluates writing;
- 13) selects and uses writing to think and learn.

*---from the Office of Public Instruction, January 2010*

# Common Core State Standards

The MUSWA rubric is closely aligned with the new Common Core State Standards or Career and College Readiness Standards. These standards have been adopted by states interested in applying for Race to the Top grants from the United States Department of Education. Relevant excerpts from these standards follow:

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

- 1) Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- 2) Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.
- 3) Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.
- 4) Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- 5) Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented. *(Writing #1)*

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. *(Writing #4)*

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products. *(Writing #6)*

Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames (a single setting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences. *(Writing #10)*

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. *(Language #1)*

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. *(Language #2)*

Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style. *(Language #3)*