

An assessment of proficiency is not a barrier to higher education; the inability to write is the barrier.

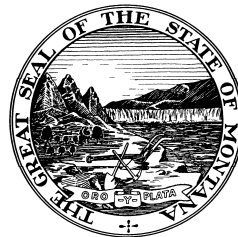
*--Richard A. Crofts, Ph.D.
Former Commissioner of Higher Education*

HOW DO PROFICIENCY ADMISSIONS STANDARDS BENEFIT STUDENTS?

Students who are admitted to college without the requisite writing proficiency struggle to become truly engaged in the discourse that is so integral to higher education. Writing proficiency ensures genuine access by giving students tools to participate fully and to demonstrate knowledge and thinking skills. Clarity about what it means to be a proficient writer benefits everyone: students, teachers, parents, and policy-makers.

To be fully admitted to Montana's four-year programs, students must earn scores of at least 3.5 on the Montana University System Writing Assessment or scores of 7 on the SAT or ACT essays. (See Board of Regent Policy 301.16 for more detail.)

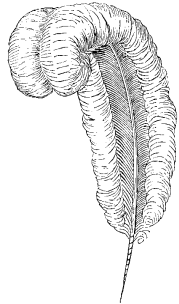
To assure that students can meet these admissions standards, opportunities are provided for professional development of teachers K-16. In addition, students may take online remedial writing courses so that they can act upon the results of their scores, strengthening their basic preparation before entering college.



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Proficiency Admissions for the Montana University System

The Montana University System Writing Assessment



The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) and the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) are committed to ensuring that students who enter the Montana University System will be prepared to produce the kind of writing that is the foundation of college-level study.

By administering a writing assessment, based on Montana Content and Performance Standards, the Montana University System is providing data that helps our students make the most of the educational opportunities available to them from kindergarten through college. When high school juniors know if they will be prepared for college writing, they may use their senior years more productively to avoid remediation.

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE MONTANA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM WRITING ASSESSMENT

In July 2000, the Montana Board of Regents moved to begin implementing proficiency-based admissions standards for the Montana University System (MUS). Policy 301.16 Writing Proficiency was adopted in 2004. The measures for assessing proficiency in writing include the Montana University System Writing Assessment (MUSWA), the optional ACT Writing Test, the SAT essay, an AP or IB Examination in English, and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Freshman College Composition test.

Volunteer high schools have been using the MUSWA since 2001, when ACT assisted with test development and trained teachers to score. Research was conducted to help schools improve their writing programs, to determine the relationships among targeted variables, and to study the possible impact of such measures on college enrollment.

HOW DO SCHOOLS PARTICIPATE?

All of Montana's high schools are invited to participate in the test at no charge. However, participating schools must contribute staff or community members to assist with the scoring of the test.

In 2008, 110 high schools, representing about 75% of Montana's junior class, volunteered to use the MUSWA.

A Steering Committee representing college composition directors, high school teachers and school administrators advises OCHE in the refinement and administration of the test and its scoring.

HOW SHOULD STUDENTS PREPARE FOR THE TEST?

Students will be well prepared if they have experienced a writing curriculum with opportunities to write about sophisticated topics; to produce effective argumentation; to demonstrate critical thinking, organizational and language skills; and to cite opinions, facts and sources.

Many teachers participate in regional writing assessment workshops in order to become familiar with the prompts, scoring rubric, and test characteristics. In addition, <http://webwriters.msugf.edu> provides direct instruction to students and an interactive feature for practice essays.

HOW ARE THE TESTS SCORED?

Expert trainers from throughout Montana help develop training materials and play key roles in the Writing Assessment Workshops held each spring at regional sites in Montana.

The scoring rubric is designed to align with Montana's K-12 Writing Standards, rubrics most commonly-used in Montana's high schools, and skills basic to freshman composition. ACT, the

Steering Committee and field test sites contributed to the development of the rubric.

Scores and an analysis of the collected data are sent to schools before the end of each school year.

HOW IS THE FIELD TEST ADMINISTERED?

Students have a choice of two prompts and are given 40 minutes to pre-write, draft, edit, and revise a persuasive essay.

Schools may test in any of three modes: handwritten, word-processed and printed, or online. In 2008, 62% of the tests were taken online.

In most cases, the tests are administered through an English class. However, the tests are often taken in a computer lab, where they are supervised by both teachers and lab staff.

A test administration manual is used to ensure that the tests are given consistently throughout the state.

WHO TAKES THE MUSWA?

Schools decide how many or which of their juniors take the test. Most test all juniors in order to gather data on the full range of scores.

Students who score below the 3.5 threshold for placement into college-level composition may retake the test as seniors if they have worked to improve their writing skills and want to begin with a college-level composition course on any of the campuses of the MUS.