

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

News Letter Fourteen, May 2004

Fourth Field Test Result; Shift "Bell Curve" Right

The fourth field test of the Montana University System Writing Assessment was administered during the last two weeks of February and first two weeks of March in 99 of Montana's high schools. Over 6,000 tests were mailed to schools and scores were reported for 4,714 students. After a training of 38 trainers in April, training and scoring of the tests took place in Glendive, Billings, Missoula, Whitefish, Helena, and Great Falls. 175 teachers, education students, and professors participated.

Test scores continue to edge upwards. In 2001, the mean score for 3365 tests was 3.0; in 2002, the mean for 3467 tests was 3.2; in 2003, the mean for 4,000 tests was 3.3; and in 2004, the mean score for 4714 was 3.4. Importantly, the number of essays at the higher scores has increased: Since 2001, essays earning scores of 3.5 or above has moved from 37.8%, to 42.7%, to 48.9%, to 52.8% in 2004.

The percentage of students scoring at the lowest levels has also decreased since the first field test: from 47.5% at 2.5 or below in 2001 to 24% in 2004. See the chart below for a three-year comparison of the 40-minute samples and the following page for more information. Notice the shift to the right.

The 2004 test used two prompts from 2003 and introduced two new prompts, modified from prompts that field-tested in 2002. Every student was given a choice of two prompts, spiraled so that the choices were randomized over the entire population.

The newer prompts suggested that students could offer a third solution to the problem presented. This type of prompt should be similar to the prompts that ACT will be using in their new writing test, slated for administration in 2005.

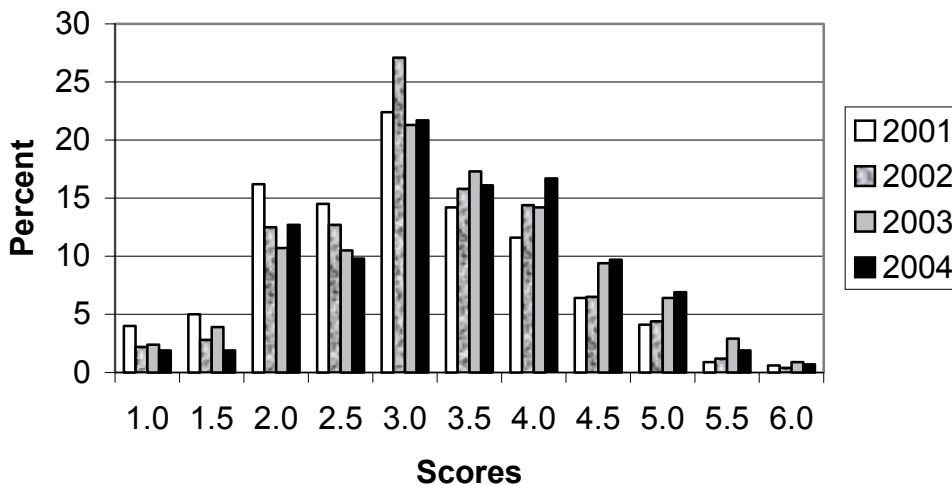
Montana University System
2500 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620-3101

Jan Clinard, Director
Academic Initiatives
Phone: 406 444 0652
FAX: 406 444 1469
Email: jclinard@oche.montana.edu



Visit our website:
www.montana.edu/mus/Writing%20Proficiency/index.htm

Distribution of Scores Taken on 40-Minute Writing Samples Over Four Years



Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency
Admissions

2004 Field Test Statewide Results

Score	Total	30 Minutes	40 Minutes	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6
1.0	1.5%	1.1%	1.6%	1.5%	1.1%	1.3%	0.6%	2.9%	4.7%	7.1%	3.5%
1.5	1.6%	2.9%	1.4%	1.5%	1.4%	1.3%	0.9%	5.9%	4.7%	0.0%	2.7%
2.0	10.4%	11.3%	10.3%	9.9%	12.6%	9.5%	6.6%	21.5%	23.3%	14.3%	18.5%
2.5	10.5%	16.2%	9.4%	10.6%	9.8%	9.9%	8.9%	22.0%	15.3%	0.0%	13.0%
3.0	23.2%	23.8%	22.5%	23.5%	21.5%	25.3%	19.6%	23.4%	24.6%	35.7%	25.0%
3.5	15.6%	16.2%	15.2%	16.0%	14.4%	17.7%	14.9%	9.8%	12.7%	14.3%	12.5%
4.0	17.2%	17.8%	17.5%	17.3%	17.0%	17.6%	20.1%	7.3%	8.5%	14.3%	12.8%
4.5	10.2%	7.3%	10.8%	10.3%	10.2%	9.2%	13.6%	5.4%	4.2%	7.1%	7.6%
5.0	6.8%	2.7%	7.7%	6.7%	7.9%	6.2%	9.7%	1.5%	2.1%	7.1%	3.0%
5.5	2.1%	0.7%	2.4%	1.9%	3.0%	1.5%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
6.0	0.9%	0.0%	1.1%	0.8%	1.1%	0.5%	1.5%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Mean	3.4	3.2	3.5	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.7	2.8	2.8	3.2	3.0
SD	1.0	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0
N	4714	450	3497	3818	787	2118	1729	205	236	14	368

Ed1: Continue my education at a college or university in Montana.
 Ed2: Continue my education at a college or university in another state.
 Ed3: Seek employment after I leave high school.
 Ed4: Join the military after I leave high school.
 Ed5: Stay at home and take care of my family.
 Ed6: Other

2003 Chart Explained

The chart above contains the following information:

- The first column to the left lists the score points from 1 to 6. Two or three people scored each essay and scores were averaged, resulting in scores such as 3.5.
- The second column (*Total*) lists student score distribution, with a **percentage** at each score point.
- Columns 3 & 4 show score distributions for the 30 or 40-minute test administration.
- Columns 5-8 list score distributions based on student grade level.
- The last 6 columns list score distributions for post-secondary plans. A key at the bottom lists possible answers to the question, "What do you plan to do after high school?"
- Below the *Mean* (average scores) row is the standard deviation (SD).
- *N* is the total number and numbers under each category (data may be missing if students did not bubble-in information about test length, year in school, etc.).

Schools were sent two additional statewide charts, one showing scores for handwritten tests, with a mean score of

3.3, and one showing scores for word-processed tests, with a mean of 3.6. Of the handwritten papers, 32.8% scored at 4.0 or above; of the word-processed, 43.3% scored 4.0 or above. At the other end of the scale, while 16.9% of the handwritten papers scored 2 or below, only 9% of the word-processed scored that low.

Questions about plans after high school reveal that 81.6% of these students intend to go to college. Of those planning to continue their educations in Montana, 22% scored below 3 (down from 29% in 2003). In 2004, 42 students scored 6.0, 14 of whom answered that they planned to attend a college or university in Montana.

By comparison, in 2003, 33 students earned 6's, in 2002, 14 students scored 6, and in 2001, 21 students scored 6. With the exception of 2001, when all of the 6's planned to go out of state, each year about one third of the highest-scoring students plan to pursue degrees in Montana.

Teachers Support Writing Assessment

Ninety-one of the teachers who administered the Writing Assessment completed questionnaires. They were given a series of ten statements, which they rated from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Based on their responses, 83% support the Montana Board of Regent's decision to use this Writing Proficiency Assessment as one way for students to demonstrate proficiency in writing for admissions to the four-year programs. In addition, 81% support "a Writing Assessment as part of Montana's Comprehensive Assessment System; not just for students who intend to enroll in a four-year university in Montana, and eventually for at least one other grade level."

Other findings include the following:

- 87% of the teachers agree their "students understand the importance of becoming proficient in writing to succeed in college."
- 67% agree "Most of my students appeared to be interested in the prompts and engaged in their thinking and writing." (Note: 77% of the scorers felt that students took the test seriously.)
- 66% agree their students were prepared to take the assessment by becoming familiar with the scoring rubric and persuasive prompts.
- 52% agree "Our school district has used the results form assessments,

such as this, to re-examine certain aspects of our writing curriculum.”

- Although ACT and SAT will be offering tests of 30 and 25 minutes, 72% do not agree that 30 minutes may be enough time for writing this type of essay for college admissions.
- Only 24% used Webwriters as they prepared for this test.

Comments of teachers who administer the test included two who found the instructions for handling the test booklets confusing. When 80% of the teachers agree that the instructions are clear, changing those instructions may not be warranted. Two thought the instructions were too long, one needed further explanation.

Despite the overwhelming support of the MUS Writing Assessment, two teachers commented that we should leave college admissions up to ACT or

SAT and writing assessments up to districts. However, students may take the optional ACT writing test or the SAT and may use the MUS assessment as a practice or as an admissions score. Schools participate voluntarily, and not all districts have writing assessments.



Prompts Address Real Problems

The prompts for the Montana University System Writing Assessment generally involve writing a school board with possible ways to improve the school or educational experience or to increase student safety—topics that any high school student can readily address without needing terms defined, knowing a certain piece of literature, or finding relevant research.

Every year, about 17% of the teachers who administer the test complain that students don't take such boring prompts seriously, but fewer than 3% of the scorers have the same complaint. A few students criticize the prompts in their essays. For example: “People tend to excel in things that interest and challenge their minds, and to be quite frank, writing this dribble about the school boards is less than stimulating my intellect.” More interesting is the fact that 99% of the students take this writing task seriously and address the prompts with some degree of enthusiasm.

Before traveling to Billings for training and scoring, I met with Bud Williams, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Steve Meloy, Executive Director of the Board of Public Education, to discuss issues some American Indian leaders had raised, including perceived cultural bias in the prompts. I pointed out that three of seven members of the bias review committee were American Indian. They eliminated nine prompts during the review. In addition, we purposefully have sample essays in the training materials that demonstrate different (perhaps cultural) approaches to persuasion.

At the end of our meeting, Bud mentioned that he is focusing on the high school graduation rate, which is particularly low among Indian students. While scoring essays in Glendive, it had occurred to me that students were proposing some interesting solutions to the problem of low graduation rates. Bud was interested in reading these essays. At subsequent scoring sessions, we set aside the “graduation” essays, which are being studied by OPI staff.

At the top of that box of essays, I placed a memo that included the following:

Although the papers with scores of 5 and above are more fluent and provide more extensive and compelling support for their arguments, those essays with lower scores are more likely to be written by the students who may not graduate. Some of their stories and examples are heart breaking. In one of these essays, the student literally begs for help in a tutoring center, hoping that just once, he or she could get 100% correct on a test. Several support the idea of paying students who understand the material to tutor those who are struggling, a win-win situation for all students.

I would like to be able to inform students that their opinions are actually being considered. Each year that I participate in the scoring process, I am impressed by the seriousness and writing skills demonstrated by many students, but equally disturbed by the number of juniors who cannot yet write an acceptable letter. With writing samples, unlike multiple-choice tests, we can hear the voices of students, glimpse into their thought processes, and taste the changing nuances of the English language and the adolescent experience. The snapshot of school life that these essays reveal is not particularly positive. If you are not overwhelmed when you pick up this box and are still determined to read the essays, I will ask teachers to tell their students that the “State” is using their ideas to help craft a solution to the problem of low graduation rates. Empowering student voices in this way will send a positive message back to some of these young cynics.

Not only is OPI interested in the content of these essays, but a professor from MSU-Billings, who is currently conducting a study on high school dropouts, wants to triangulate her focus group and survey data with these extended responses. Can the writing assessment be used to involve students in problem solving as well as to evaluate writing skills? What if prompts were designed to gather input from students, who knew that their ideas would be considered at a policy-making level? When stu-

dents reach out to us as readers, are we under any obligation? How do we respond to pleas such as the following?

Individual students have different learning techniques. Students of many races and learning levels enter the schooling system. They learn in different ways. When students feel like that battle is over, they often give up the war. Students need a sanctuary where they can relieve themselves from the irrelevant mishaps of not learning as fast as others.

In qualitative research, we look for themes that emerge from the mass of information gathered. To study our students' responses to this prompt, rather than focusing on their choice of solutions, which can easily be counted in the data, it may be instructive to count (and code) their reasons. One of the solutions proposed in the prompt gives students more attention; the other, more autonomy. What problems that result in high attrition rates may be solved by either more attention or more autonomy?

This spring, perhaps 600 hours of student thinking went into the problem of increasing graduation rates. We hope that from that effort, some viable solutions emerge.

Please write your thoughts on this topic to: Jclinard@oche.montana.edu.

Scorers Respond to Training and Scoring Experience

This year, funding from Title II expanded the Writing Proficiency Initiative's capacity to improve teacher quality in writing instruction and assessment. OCHE trained 38 Montana educators to develop training materials and train others to score. Training and scoring took place at six sites (Glendive, Missoula, Billings, Whitefish, Helena, and Great Falls), where 175 educators and pre-service teachers learned to score holistically and could earn college credits.

Training for and scoring of the Montana University Writing Assessment gives teachers valuable professional development as they discuss the quality of specific samples of writing. Seeing how these prompts have the capacity to elicit quality drafts may raise the expectations of many teachers. Comparing the essays to the rubric shows teachers that grading and scoring student writing is not a completely subjective endeavor.

Scorers were asked to complete a questionnaire with ten statements that they rated from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." At the end of their scoring experience, 63% strongly agreed and 30% agreed



that "participating in the training and scoring of the MUS Writing Assessment will help me prepare students for similar college entrance exams in the future." Only 1.25% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they "can score tests reliably with this rubric." None of the scorers disagreed with the statement: "With some exceptions, I think students took this test seriously." Only 1.88% disagreed with the statement: "I would feel confident using our school's test results to help improve school curriculum and instruction."

30% strongly agreed and 55% agreed that "using several new trainers (instead of just trainers from OCHE, ACT etc.) worked well." None disagreed that "the training materials were useful and appropriate."

Although pacing of the training itself received high marks (81% felt they had the right number of papers to practice score), the reaction to the number of papers to actually score varied by site. Trainers and over half of the scorers realized that Glendive had too many papers to score. A few in Missoula (9.5%) and in Helena (8%) also indicated that they did not have the right number of papers and amount of time to score reliably. Luckily, the other sites were comfortable with the pace of scoring. Estimates show that each Glendive scorer read about 62 tests and that at the other sites, each scorer read between 46 and 54 tests. The Glendive scorers must be saluted for their tenacity on a late Friday afternoon.

Only 2.51% disagreed that "the

prompts generated useful pieces of writing and were fair and un-biased." The prompt about teenage driving received the highest ratings (37%) as the most fair and interesting.

Scorers were also given the opportunity to write comments. Among those comments, 35% used a form of the word "discuss" to describe the aspect of training and scoring they find most useful. In addition, many commented about the value of the rubric, the annotations and, surprisingly, the calibration set (which resembles a test of how accurately someone can score).

Many scorers enjoyed working collaboratively. What was most valuable?

- Working with peers to determine the level of writing.
- Having a mix of experienced and inexperienced scorers.
- Understanding a rubric along with colleagues across grade levels and curriculum, which increases my confidence of consistency of instruction.
- Learning how to score all types of essays.
- Community building of being with colleagues and talking about writing.

Others made general comments about the experience and how they could apply it:

- The training was excellent and certainly caused my own scoring to be more consistently in line with others' scores.

Writing Proficiency Steering Committee

Arlene Walker-Andrews 243-4689
Associate Provost
The University of Montana
Missoula MT 812-3324
Arlene.Walker-Andrews@umontana.edu

Beverly Ann Chin 243-2463
Department of English
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula MT 59812-1013
bcchin@selway.umt.edu

Frank Matule 243-2362
Admissions
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula MT 59812
fmataule@mso.umt.edu

- *It reassures me that my students are on the right track. Feedback is great and the chance to discuss writing with colleagues is wonderful.*
- *I found it helpful to read examples, try some on our own, and then compare our scores with discussion. The order we were presented the material was /valuable.*

This year’s introduction of a “Discussion Set,” in which each table develops consensus scores on a set of new tests was applauded:

- *I like the new techniques you are trying—an improvement from last year.*
- *The discussion set was useful as compared to doing just another practice set.*
- *15 listed the “Discussion Set” as the most useful part of this year’s training.*

Scorers also suggest ways to improve training and scoring sessions, such as offering more breaks, fewer papers to score, a quieter room, a rubric with “bullets,” more candy, and most often, more time for discussion.

Based on some specific suggestions, OCHE will pursue the development of:

- Training materials with fewer, but

Jocelyn Siler 243-4204
Department of English
The University of Montana
32 Campus Drive
Missoula MT 59812-1013
jfsiler@ism.net

Kathy Holt 657-2337
College of Education CAFÉ Office
Montana State University – Billings
Billings MT 59101-0252
kholt@msubillings.edu

Judy Snow 444-3656
Office of Public Instruction
1227 11th Avenue, 2nd Floor
Helena MT 59620-2501
jsonow@state.mt.us

Bruce Messinger 447-8510
Helena Public Schools
55 South Rodney
Helena MT 59601
bmessinger@helena.k12.mt.us

- more targeted anchor and practice papers;
- Workshops on writing instruction tied to writing assessment results;
- A “take-home” scoring packet with sample papers and annotations.

Address Writing Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment in Culturally Appropriate Ways

By Jan Clinard, Ed.D.

From a 2003 Montana Writing Project Summer Workshop, *Storytelling: American Indian Ways of Knowing and Writing*, I gleaned a number of approaches to writing curriculum, instruction, and assessment that honor the type of writing valued by American Indians. The workshop focused on narrative. However, Montana’s K-12 Content Standards in Writing require that students learn to write in a variety of forms, including description, exposition, persuasion, and argumentation.

Phil Gaines 994-5194
English Department
Montana State University
PO Box 172440
Bozeman MT 59717-2300
gaines@english.montana.edu

Steve Tull 822-4737
Superior K-12 Schools
PO Box 400
Superior MT 59872
stull@bigsky.net

Greg Hirst 653-1771
211 Dawson
Wolf Point MT 59201
Middy@nemontel.net

Marsha Davis 447-8344
Lewis and Clark
County Superintendent
Helena, MT 59601
Mdavis@co.lewis-clark.mt.us

Mary Moe 771-4310
MSU GF College of Technology
PO Box 6010
Great Falls MT 59406-6010
mmoe@msugf.edu

The following approaches are designed particularly for students who are most comfortable with narration, or story telling.

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 illus-

trates 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.

Assessment

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 the 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 storyteller or the student for whom

Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric

6 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, providing 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.

5 These papers clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt, providing 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.

4 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt 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.

3 These papers state and support a position on the issue defined in the prompt 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.

2 These papers show significant problems in one or more areas. They may state a position on the issue defined in the prompt but support 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.

1 These papers have severe problems in one or more areas. The writer may not state a position on the issue defined in the prompt or provide support. 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

narration is the most natural approach to writing. Considering the features of the Montana University System Scoring Rubric:

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.

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.

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.