

# Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

*Newsletter Fifteen July 2004*

## Additional 2004 Test Data Reported

The Montana University System Writing Assessment was administered for the fourth time in 99 of Montana's high schools. All tests were scored using the same criteria, a holistic rubric originally developed by ACT and subsequently modified to align with Montana's Content Standards and to achieve better accuracy. Scores were sent to schools in May, accompanied by Newsletter 14, which summarized statewide results and survey instruments completed by teachers and scorers.

Briefly, those results show continued gains in statewide scores, from a mean of 3.0 in 2001, based on 3,365 tests, to a mean of 3.4 in 2004, based on 4,717 tests.

### 2004 Statewide Results Based on Timing and Mode

Score	Total	30 Minutes	40 Minutes	Handwritten	Computer
1	1.5%	1.1%	1.6%	1.9%	1.2%
1.5	1.6%	2.9%	1.4%	2.4%	0.7%
2	10.4%	11.3%	10.3%	12.6%	7.1%
2.5	10.5%	16.2%	9.4%	11.2%	9.5%
3	23.2%	23.8%	22.5%	23.0%	22.9%
3.5	15.6%	16.2%	15.2%	16.0%	15.3%
4	17.2%	17.8%	17.5%	15.9%	18.7%
4.5	10.2%	7.3%	10.8%	9.1%	11.9%
5	6.8%	2.7%	7.7%	5.7%	8.5%
5.5	2.1%	0.7%	2.4%	1.6%	2.7%
6	0.9%	0.0%	1.1%	0.5%	1.5%
Mean	3.4	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.6
SD	1	0.9	1	1	1
N	4714	450	3497	2573	1848

Because students who word-process their essays and students who are given 40 minutes to write continue to outscore students who handwrite and students with shorter writing times, the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee suggests that efforts be made to increase access to computers and to provide those important extra ten minutes. Please turn to the article on page 6 about word-processing versus handwriting and join the effort to explore ways to help schools participate in this assessment electronically.

The Board of Regents continues to support this Writing Assessment, with its computer option, longer writing times, choice of prompts, and professional development through scoring as an alternative to SAT and ACT writing tests for college admissions. See page 6.

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Visit our website :  
[www.mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm](http://www.mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm)

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency  
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## Demographics

Student demography is an important factor in analyzing test results. However, because students self-identify, this data may not be completely accurate. In 2004, scorers were provided with additional training about "Honoring American Indian Ways of Knowing and Writing," including sample papers that used narrative to persuade. However, workshops to implement this type of instruction have yet to be scheduled. Strength and Weakness data show that, like other students in Montana, the development of ideas is a particular weakness among American Indian writers. Surprisingly, fluency appears as a strength more often than a weakness in this subgroup. Further studies related to demography may help guide improvements in writing instruction for low-performing groups.

### Ethnicity

Of the students who identified themselves as American Indian in 2001, 78% scored at 2.5 or below; in 2002, that percentage was 52%; in 2003, 56%, in 2004, 54%.

<b>Total</b>	293
<b>Average Score</b>	2.66
<b>Score of 2.5 or Below</b>	158
<b>Percent 2.5 or below</b>	54%

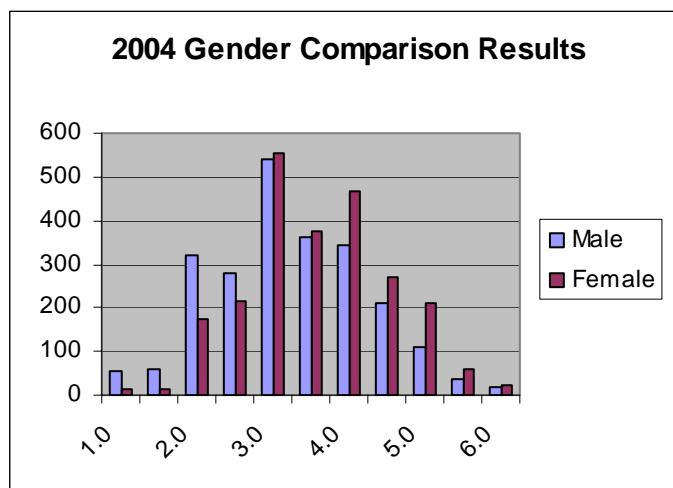
However, 149 students who did not respond to the racial/ethnic group question, had a mean score of 3.12. In 2003, when students could select the option "I prefer not to respond," 321 did not or "preferred not" to respond. Their mean score was also 3.12. In addition, in 2004 there were 150 students who classified themselves as multi-racial or other, with a mean score of 3.27. In 2003 the mean score was 2.9 for those students who classified themselves as multi-racial or other.

### Gender

The gender gap decreased significantly in 2004, from a difference of .49 in 2003 to a difference of .22 in 2004.

Year	Mean Scores	
	Male	Female
2002	2.99	3.34
2003	3.07	3.56
2004	3.24	3.46

Also, more boys are writing high-level papers. Of the 41 papers scored as "6," 19 were written by boys and 22 by girls. In 2003, boys accounted for 9 of the 6's, while girls had 26. In 2003, 78 males and 20 females scored in the 1.0 range, in 2004 the number dropped to 54 males and 15 females.



1	54	15
1.5	60	16
2	319	173
2.5	278	217
3	539	553
3.5	362	375
4	342	468
4.5	209	271
5	112	209
5.5	38	60
6	19	22

### Writing Process

Students were asked, "How often do you write more than one draft of a paper before it is graded by a teacher?" In 2002, mean scores ranged from 2.72 for students who marked "never," to 3.36 for students who marked "always", a difference of .64.

In 2004, mean scores ranged from 3.04 for students who marked "never," to 3.61



for students who marked "always." More interesting, of the students who scored 5.5 or above, only 7.1% never write more than one draft, 28.6% sometimes do, 45.2% usually do, and 16.7% always write more than one draft.

Never	292	2.9
Sometimes	1588	3.2
Usually	1403	3.4
Always	699	3.4
No Response	18	2.8

**Computer Usage**

Students who write most of their assignments using the computer, from first draft through final copy, tend to earn higher scores on this test.

Never	557	3.05
Sometimes	1815	3.32
Usually	1602	3.53
Always	671	3.67
No Response	16	2.97

Yes	1579	3.37
No	2020	3.45
No Response	1122	3.37

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education has not yet examined this data by comparing student scores based on handwritten versus word-processed testing. This is a planned study.

**District Writing Assessment**

With each passing year, the use of a formal writing assessment makes less difference to these test scores. In 2001 students from districts with writing assessments scored significantly higher than their peers in other schools. For the first time, 2004 test results show students in schools without another formal writing assessment scored slightly higher.

**Instructional Practices**

Teachers were asked, "How often do you read at least one

Never	183	3.85
Sometimes	1223	3.45
Usually	1153	3.32
Always	850	3.39
No Response	1312	3.38

draft of a student's paper before it is graded?"

The practice of reading drafts that students write does not appear to be correlated with students' writing scores. Perhaps when teachers have high-level writers, they are less likely to read drafts. Perhaps peers more often read drafts.

**Type of Writing Assigned**

Each year, the scores of students whose teachers assign analytic writing outperform other groups of students.

Narrative	270	3.34
Description	194	3.14
Analytic	1107	3.61
Expository	883	3.27
Persuasive	748	3.48
No Response	1519	3.35

This newsletter contains a section on strengths and weaknesses, showing that more often than any other writing trait, the inability to develop ideas to support an argument negatively impacts a holistic writing score.

Critical and analytic thinking skills are basic to proficient writing. When students are given practice analyzing and persuading, their writing scores are likely to improve.

## Planning for College

However, this question may be difficult to answer.

In 2002, only 274 students' teachers did not answer this question, in 2003, 928 did not answer, and in 2004, 1519 did not answer. With each passing year more students are most often assigned persuasion (324 in 2002; 474 in 2003, 748 in 2004).

### First-year College Plans in Montana

This question explores the scores of students who plan to attend college in Montana. The question reads: "If you plan to attend college in Montana, where would you go as a first-year student?"

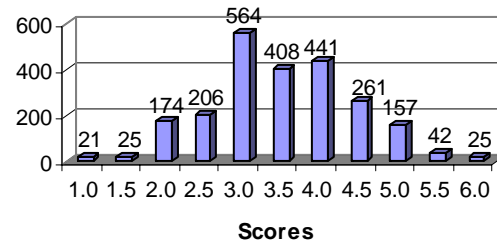
The table to the right shows numbers of students who selected various types of colleges at each score point.

The graph labeled "Students with Four-Year University Plans" shows the distribution of scores for students who plan to attend a four-year university in Montana. Were students required to score "3" or better, 426 students would be considered under-prepared, needing to retake the test or make another choice as freshmen. If 2.5 were the cut score, 220 students would

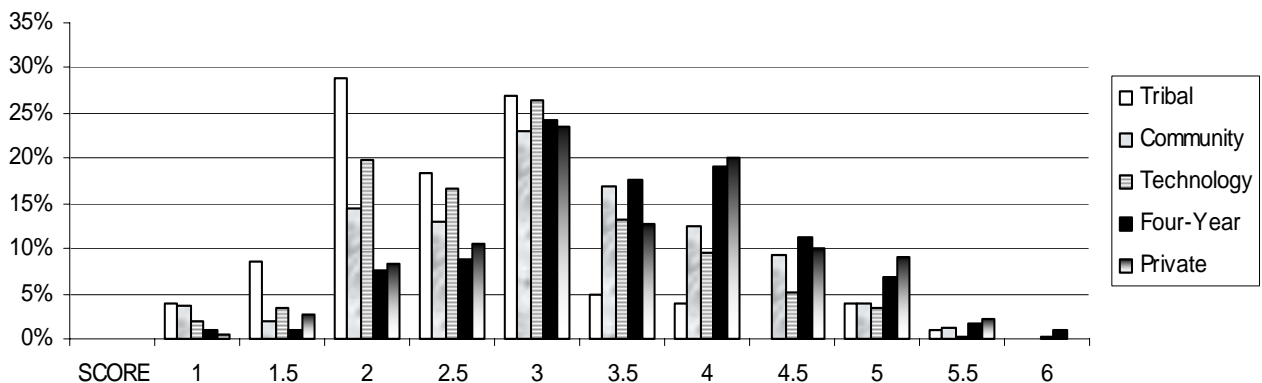
*If you plan to attend college in Montana, where would you go as a first year student?*

1	4	9	10	221	1	26
1.5	9	5	17	25	5	15
2	30	36	100	174	15	138
2.5	19	32	84	206	19	135
3	28	57	133	564	42	269
3.5	5	42	67	408	23	194
4	4	31	48	441	36	251
4.5	0	23	26	261	18	152
5	4	10	17	157	16	118
5.5	1	3	1	43	4	47
6	0	0	1	25	0	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>2525</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>1361</b>

**Students with Four-Year University Plans**



**Distribution of Scores Based on Student Plans for Higher Education in Montana**



## Strength and Weakness Data Helps Inform Instruction

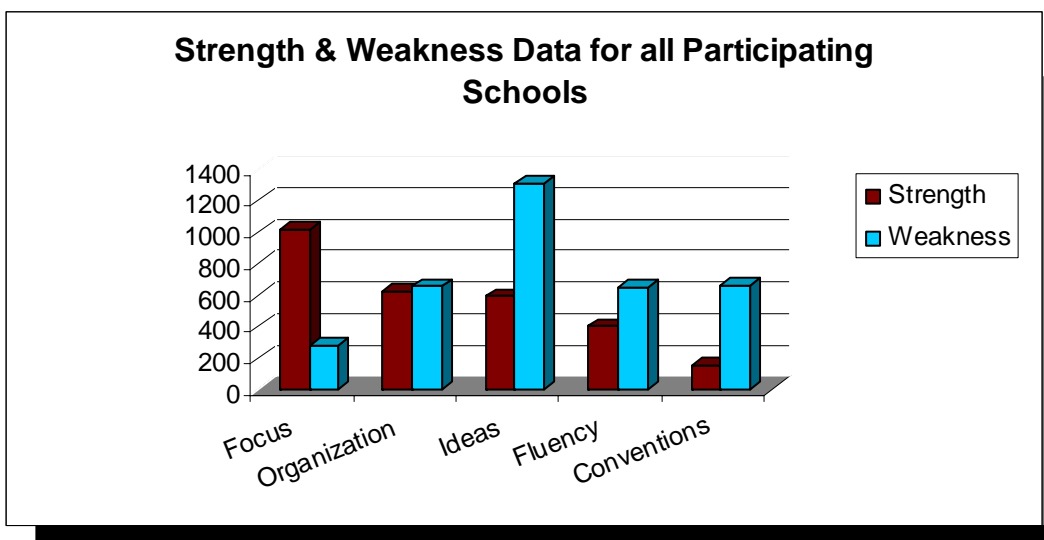
Schools participating in the Montana University System Writing Assessment received individual reports about the strengths and weaknesses that scorers identified in their students' essays. Since holistic scoring was the primary objective of this writing assessment, scorers were not required to mark a strength or weakness for every paper scored. Scorers marked strengths or weaknesses that particularly influenced the overall holistic score. Each school's report shows the percent of papers that had at least one strength or weakness marked. Across the state, this percentage ranged from 11% to 100%. When both school size and the percent of papers marked is small, even one paper with a strength or weakness can impact this data. For each trait (Focus, Organization, Development of Ideas, Language Fluency, and Language Conventions) the number of instances that scorers marked this trait as a strength and the number of instances that scorers marked this trait as a weakness is recorded. These numbers are graphed to help school staff see the data and quickly compare their school's writing traits with the overall state report.

At the state level, the major weakness is development of ideas. Students must learn to more effectively provide support for their arguments in order to be effective, persuasive writers. Secondly, teachers need to work with students to improve their use of standard written conventions—grammar, usage, and mechanics. Since 2002, overall fluency (well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice) has improved. Based on statewide data, students appear to be doing well with focusing on the topic and clarifying their positions.

Schools are cautioned to remember that 12% more weaknesses than strengths were marked. Although the average score for the state was 3.4, the average score for the papers with strength or weakness markings was 3.0, indicating that scorers were more likely to mark the low-level papers. Despite that slightly negative bias this information can be useful as teachers design instruction.

Strength and Weakness data clearly show that curriculum and instruction significantly impact the quality of student writing. If all school profiles mirrored the state profile (below), one might conclude that "these are the traits of student writing typical of high school juniors in Montana." However, in 20 schools, idea development is an overwhelming strength! In 8 schools, focus is a weakness. This is yet one more indication that teaching matters.

Montana students plan to attend as freshmen. It is important to note that most respondents were juniors, whose plans about college



	Focus	Organization	Ideas	Fluency	Conventions	Total
Strength	1013	627	593	401	154	2788
Weakness	283	655	1313	651	659	3561

## Word Processed Papers Tend to Score Higher

Although it may be difficult to achieve, on the 2004 Scorer Questionnaire, 33% strongly agree and 29% agree "all schools should use the word-processing option for students who can use computers." Unlike national data, Montana students tend to score somewhat higher if using word-processors. However, that generates an interesting discussion such as the following:

Scorer One: *One observation that I had was the evident superiority of the word-processed papers over the handwritten ones. The question that comes to mind is why is that true? Shouldn't the quality be about the same? Yet the WP papers were skewed to the upper numbers, and the handwritten were skewed to the lower numbers.*

Trainer: *I am debating the same question. Here are some possibilities:*

- 1) *We scored the handwritten essays too low;*
- 2) *The use of spell check made those papers better-- indicating that conventions are the most heavily-weighted features*
- 3) *Schools that have enough computers for students to do the test on computers put more money, in general, into instruction; or*
- 4) *Teachers who take this test most seriously select the WP option*

*What do you think?*

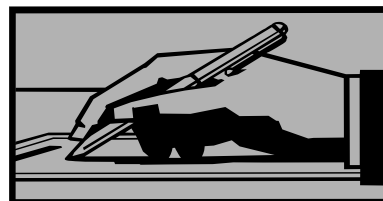
Scorer One: *One of the other scorers had the idea that modern students may be more comfortable composing on the WP than with a pencil. I don't think that I concur with the idea that we graded the handwritten papers more harshly than the WP ones. We were working on the assumption that the WP papers would "look" shorter, but I thought the development of ideas in The WPs was more complete and extensive.*

Scorer Two: *I did not feel that the word-processed essays were a great reflection of the student's ability to write. I saw many papers that were lengthy, but repetitive. It seemed as if some student felt they needed to have a long essay to achieve a high score.*

How many adults today are comfortable composing an important piece of writing by hand? When the Montana University System began considering the word-processed option, several high school students sent impassioned letters, arguing that in this age of computers, they were handicapped if they had to write out an essay in long hand.

Currently, there are two doctoral students interested in conducting research related to the writing assessment. We expect one of those studies to focus on this issue.

Please join this debate by emailing jcli-



## Will Handwriting Impact SAT Essay Scores?

A June 28 AP article by Justin Pope describes the "general anxiety for the high school class of 2006," worried "they'll write a good essay," but "scorers won't be able to decipher it, raising the question of whether penmanship should be getting more attention in the classroom."

This article focuses on handwriting versus "typing," quoting a Connecticut private school principal saying, "As an adult in today's world, you don't write anything. You type everything. There really is no need for proper handwriting."

This focus may miss the point in terms of the real handicap that students who usually word-process will face with the new handwritten SAT and ACT tests. Not only could their handwriting impact scores, but their ability to re-organize as they write, revise in mid-sentence, and see their thoughts in print will be compromised.

In 2005, OCHE hopes to participate in a study using different types of handwriting and word-processing to determine the effect of these differences on scores. This Montana data could have significant implications for the new, national writing exams.

## Electronic Submission of Essays Proposed

For the 2005 administration of the Montana University System Writing Assessment, OCHE hopes to pilot an electronic submission option, with online teacher registration, student information gathering, and actual testing. The need to move toward this type of testing format is apparent for several reasons:

1. Test booklets, with their student information sheets, score sheets, and teacher header sheets, cost just over \$1.00 per booklet. Schools must request the right number of printed tests (for 2004 that number was about 1,000 more tests than were actually completed), causing waste in many cases, but shortages in others. Mailing costs are high and weeks of clerical time is spent counting out tests, mailing them, and processing and sorting the tests upon their return.
2. In 2002-04, students' schools and teachers were identified by teacher-header sheets, stacked with accompanying student information sheets, tests, and score sheets. Each test had a unique number, which tied together the student information sheet, test, and score sheet. The use of teacher-header sheets has proven to be an unreliable method of matching students with schools. Because blind-scoring is important, there must be a method for separating the student information from the actual test (thus, unique numbers) and score sheet.
3. Bubbling in and scanning information is time-consuming and inaccurate.
4. For the tests that are word-processed anyway, the inside six pages of the test booklet are wasted.

Although a committee of school technicians will be convened to work out details, the electronic pilot may include these features:

1. Rather than using test booklets with bubble-in pages, schools would access a secure test website.
2. Teachers would register online, providing school information under a school code identifying their test-takers.
3. Students would enter information into an electronic form, with pull-down menus and/or buttons to minimize error. Later, this information would be converted to an EXCEL file to complete reports and analyze demographics and college plans related to scores.
4. Instructions and prompts would be available online, with a pop up text box for writing the essay.
5. Essays would be submitted electronically and printed at a central location. Since perforated pages would not be an option, essays would be printed in a text box on 1-3 pages, with those same pages (perhaps using about one-third of the page), doubling as the bubble-in score sheet.
6. As with the printed tests, each student's information page and essay with score sheet would be assigned a unique number.
7. It may be necessary to provide an electronic option to schools without the capacity to test students online. Perhaps these schools could download electronic files, to be used in a secure computer lab during a designated testing window. They would print the necessary pages and mail to the central location, but return student information and school data electronically.

**Please discuss this with teachers and administrators and email [jclinnard@oche.montana.edu](mailto:jclinnard@oche.montana.edu) with your answers to the following questions:**

1. Would your school be interested in participating in this pilot?
2. Does your school have the capacity to test students online?
3. How many days would you need to test your juniors (40 minutes, plus registration time)?
4. Do you have a staff member who would be interested in joining the design team?
5. What precautions or concerns do you have about this approach?



## Student Assistance Foundation Funds Web Assistance

The Student Assistance Foundation of Montana (SAF) is interested in ensuring that students will be successful when they enter the University System. SAF is into its third year of funding this forward-thinking web-based tutorial designed to help Montana students prepare for and/or improve their scores on the Montana University System Writing Assessment. The website includes the scoring rubric, with excerpts from sample essays. "Articulations" describe how certain features of an essay were scored and there are released and non-operational prompts for students to write about as practice.

The site has the capacity to accept student essays submitted electronically and send those essays by rotation to the trained teacher/scorers who provide feedback to students about how their essays are scored. Any juniors in schools participating in the writing field test can log-on to use the test. The number of essays web scored each year has increased:

- 2002: 102 essays
- 2003: 199 essays
- 2004: 367 essays

Some webscorers are already asking about next year. One wrote, "The scoring session last week in Helena was great! I am thankful to be a part of it all. When can we sign up for Web-Writers scoring for next school year? I really like doing it. It keeps me in practice throughout the year for the scoring that we did in Helena." Please let us know if you are interested. Webscorers are paid \$5 for the first 5 essays scored, and \$3 each thereafter.

Although Webcoaching has been available for two years, few students who need help with their writing apply for a coach. How can this website become more user-friendly? Your ideas are welcomed.



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