

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter Twenty-Four

2007 Test Scores Analyzed

In early 2007, over 7,000 Montana students took the Montana University System Writing Assessment. Newsletter 23, mailed to participating schools in May and available on the Writing Proficiency website, reported statewide scores with frequency distributions at each score point for different writing modes, a graph showing gains made over the period of six testing years, and survey information from schools and scorers. This newsletter delves more deeply into the test data.

For the first time in seven years, scores did not improve, with a statewide average of 3.5 points. The juniors who took this test must score at least 3.0 in order to be fully admitted to a four-year program in the Montana University System in 2008. Otherwise, they are provisionally admitted until they earn a C- or better in a developmental composition course. However, the following graph shows that, in general, students who score below that threshold plan to attend a two-year program, where they can take such courses and be admitted without provisions. This graph shows percent of students at each score point who indicated that they plan to attend one of several types of post-secondary educational institutions in Montana. For example, about 15% of the students who selected a tribal college (21 students) earned scores of 2.5 and 7% who selected 4-year public university (263 students) earned 2.5.

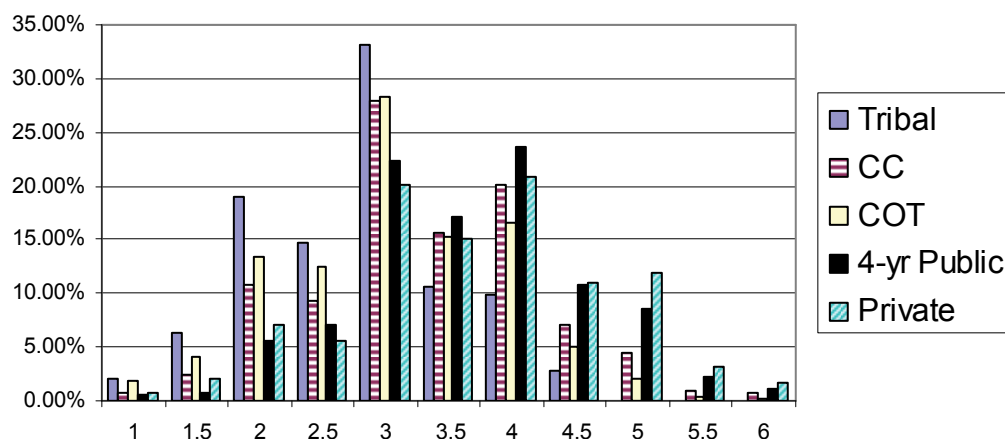
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Visit our website :
<http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>

**Post-Secondary Plans as % of Students
Planning to Attend Each College Type**



Total Students Selecting Each Type				
Tribal	CC	COT	4-yr Public	Private
142	443	982	3717	284

Proficiency
Admissions

Demographics

American Indian Students Continue to Improve Scores

Ethnicity is an important factor in analyzing test results. On the MUSWA, about 6% of the test-takers identified themselves as American Indian. In order to mitigate bias in scoring, training materials for scorers include sample papers that use narrative to persuade or less linear approaches to organization, yet still earn high ratings. These approaches to writing may be used more often in non-white cultures. American Indian students have made steady gains over the seven years of testing, in part because their teachers are committed to participating in training and scoring sessions, learning how they can better prepare students for college writing.

Percentage at each Score Point

Score	2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006		2007	
	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White
1	15.8	2.4	5.0	1.6	6.9	1.7	4.8	1.1	3.6	1.0	3.4	0.8	2.4	0.8
1.5	12.7	3.7	5.0	2.4	8.0	3.4	7.2	1.2	5.9	1.9	5.2	0.7	5.5	1.2
2	28.5	13.7	23.5	10.6	24.4	9.6	22.9	8.9	27.0	8.6	17.1	6.2	16.9	6.9
2.5	16.7	13.8	17.0	11.3	16.4	10.8	19.1	9.7	16.6	9.0	15.6	6.8	14.3	7.6
3	14.0	22.3	28.0	27.9	22.2	21.4	26.6	23.1	22.1	23.9	27.1	25.5	27.8	23.7
3.5	4.4	14.8	10.5	16.6	14.6	18.2	7.9	16.4	9.4	15.5	15.2	16.3	13.0	16.4
4	3.5	12.3	7.5	15.8	4.7	14.5	6.8	18.2	8.1	18.5	9.8	20.5	13.0	22.3
4.5	0.4	7.0	1.0	7.1	1.1	9.9	3.1	11.0	5.5	11.0	1.8	10.5	3.7	10.0
5		4.3	0.5	4.7	0.4	6.9	1.4	7.3	1.6	7.4	2.7	8.8	2.4	7.7
5.5		1.0	0.5	1.3		2.6	0.3	2.2		2.0	0.9	2.1	0.7	2.1
6		0.7	0.0	0.4		0.8		0.9		1.2		1.3		1.1
Number	228	2793	200	2679	275	3104	297	3984	307	5056	328	5940	454	6175

Mean	2.55		2.66		2.73		2.85		2.94					
% below 2.5	60.9	23.9	33.5	14.6	40.7	15.1	34.8	11.2	36.5	11.5	25.7	7.7	24.8	8.9
% above 3.5	3.9	25.3	9.5	29.3	6.2	34.6	11.6	39.6	15.2	40.1	15.2	43.1	19.8	43.2

Score	African-Am		Am-Indian		White		Mexican-Am		Asian		Hispanic		Multiracial		Not Reported		Total	
0	1	2%	1	0%	11	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	3	1%	0	0%	17	0%
1	1	2%	11	2%	51	1%	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%	5	2%	2	4%	71	1%
1.5	3	7%	25	6%	73	1%	8	6%	2	2%	1	2%	10	4%	1	2%	123	2%
2	6	13%	77	17%	428	7%	17	12%	13	15%	7	14%	28	10%	8	16%	584	8%
2.5	2	4%	65	14%	470	8%	20	14%	6	7%	5	10%	27	10%	6	12%	601	8%
3	14	31%	126	28%	1464	24%	36	25%	18	21%	15	31%	61	21%	13	25%	1747	24%
3.5	7	16%	59	13%	1010	16%	20	14%	8	9%	4	8%	52	18%	8	16%	1168	16%
4	7	16%	59	13%	1375	22%	21	15%	20	23%	10	20%	63	22%	8	16%	1563	21%
4.5	2	4%	17	4%	616	10%	10	7%	8	9%	3	6%	17	6%	3	6%	676	9%
5	1	2%	11	2%	476	8%	8	6%	9	10%	2	4%	12	4%	0	0%	519	7%
5.5	1	2%	3	1%	132	2%	1	1%	1	1%	0	0%	3	1%	1	2%	142	2%
6	0	0%	0	0%	69	1%	1	1%	1	1%	1	2%	3	1%	1	2%	76	1%
Totals	45	100%	454	100%	6175	100%	143	100%	86	100%	49	100%	284	100%	51	100%	7287	100%

Average Score

African American	American Indian	White	Mexican American	Asian	Hispanic	Multiracial	Not Reported	Average
3.03	2.94	3.55	3.19	3.47	3.19	3.28	3.11	3.48

Girls Outperform Boys in Writing and College-Going Rates

In 2007, male students again demonstrated an achievement gap of about .4 (similar to 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2006). Four times as many boys wrote papers that were given 0's, meaning they could not be scored because they were off-topic or completely inappropriate. Just over 6% of the girls wrote papers in the 1-2 range,

Score	Male		Female	
0	14	0.39%	3	0.08%
1	60	1.66%	10	0.27%
1.5	88	2.43%	34	0.93%
2	404	11.14%	180	4.94%
2.5	365	10.07%	233	6.39%
3	979	27.01%	766	21.00%
3.5	540	14.90%	627	17.19%
4	671	18.51%	887	24.32%
4.5	247	6.81%	428	11.74%
5	176	4.86%	343	9.40%
5.5	57	1.57%	85	2.33%
6	24	0.66%	51	1.40%
Total	3625	100%	3647	100%

whereas 15% of the boys wrote 1's and 2's—indicating they are not nearly ready for college writing.

In 2007, boys wrote 32% of the 6's; in 2006, boys wrote 37% of the 6's, and in 2004, boys wrote 46% of the 6-level papers.

Male students earned an average score of 3.28, whereas females averaged 3.66.

This trend showing girls more likely to be prepared for college English than boys can be found in other measures, as well. For the class of 2006, girls outperformed boys in English (21.7 vs. 20.3) and reading (23 vs. 22) on the ACT. Although boys edged out girls in math and science, their composite scores were 21.8 versus 21.9 for girls.

In Montana, 461 more girls took the ACT than did boys in Montana. Taking the ACT demonstrates an aspiration to attend college. Nationally, although at age 16, 51% of the school enrollments are male, only 49% of the high school graduates are male. Declining college attendance among boys is also evident nationally. In 1969, 59% of the higher education enrollments were male. In 2002, only 43% of those attending colleges were male. Males earn 40% of the associate's degrees, 42.6% of the bachelor's degrees, and 41% of the master's degrees.

ESL Students Score Below State Average

Only 99 students indicated that English is not their primary language. The chart to the right shows the distribution of their scores in comparison to students whose primary language is English. On average, ESL students scored 2.9, compared to the state average of 3.5. Only 11% those students were able to write very high-level essays (above 4), whereas 19.6% of the students whose primary language is English wrote essays earning the highest scores.

Score	English		ESL	
0	16	0.22%	1	1.01%
1	69	0.96%	1	1.01%
1.5	113	1.58%	9	9.09%
2	556	7.77%	20	20.20%
2.5	587	8.20%	10	10.10%
3	1718	24.00%	22	22.22%
3.5	1155	16.13%	11	11.11%
4	1544	21.57%	15	15.15%
4.5	667	9.32%	7	7.07%
5	516	7.21%	3	3.03%
5.5	142	1.98%	0	0.00%
6	76	1.06%	0	0.00%
Total	7159	100%	99	100%

Writing Assessment Manual Slated for Publication

OCHE has published 24 newsletters, six flyers, and numerous articles, as well as countless letters to schools, handouts for conferences, and webpages. Director Jan Clinard is currently writing a manual, primarily for teachers who administer the writing assessment, to provide information about every aspect of the test, from registering, preparing and administering, to training and scoring. The manual will include a short course on how to use the Holistic Rubric, with sample papers and annotations.

Inter-rater Reliability Reflects Careful Training

This table shows that for over 60% of the essays, both scorers were in perfect agreement and that only 2.5% required a third reader, called the resolver. These figures translate into an inter-rater reliability coefficient of .873, using Cronbach’s Alpha, compared to a Cronbach’s Alpha of .868 in 2006.

Rater Scoring	#	%
Perfect	4377	60.1%
Adjacent	2728	37.4%
Discrepant	182	2.5%
Total	7287	100.0%

Another set of statistics, particularly interesting to scorers, are tables that disaggregate data by scoring site and show how many tests were scored at each site. The average score per site ranged from 3.4 to 3.6. This range can be explained in part because some sites had more tests from schools earning awards of merit. In addition to the eight scheduled scoring sessions, an auxiliary, one-day session was held in Helena to score 562 tests that were missed due to technical difficulties. These scorers had already been trained in 2007.

Inter-rater Reliability by Location

Rater Match	Billings	Bozeman	Glasgow	Great Falls	Helena	Miles City	Missoula	Whitefish	Auxilliary	Total
Perfect	602 57%	490 59%	385 56%	392 61%	522 59%	190 60%	929 63%	530 63%	337 60%	4377 60%
Adjacent	431 41%	329 40%	276 40%	242 38%	327 37%	119 37%	498 34%	291 35%	215 38%	2728 37%
Discrepant	22 2%	8 1%	21 3%	10 2%	35 4%	10 3%	51 3%	15 2%	10 2%	182 2%
Total	1055 100%	827 100%	682 100%	644 100%	884 100%	319 100%	1478 100%	836 100%	562 100%	7287 100%

Prompts Analyzed for Consistency and Fairness

Each year, prompts are rated based on how frequently they were chosen by students, their inter-rater reliability, average score, and the distribution of option selected by the student to defend. Six different prompts were used in 2007. Each student could select from two prompts. Prompt selection ranged from 685 for one prompt to 1760 for another. The other prompts were selected by 841, 978, 1151, and 1700 students.

Prompts had perfect scorer agreement ranging from 57% to 61% and the need to resolve discrepant scores ranged from 2% to 3%. These ranges were somewhat closer than in 2006. The average scores for all prompts were fairly consistent, ranging from 3.43 to 3.69.

Finally, the prompt that was most balanced in the selection of three possible solutions to the problem—35%, 43%, and 22% (options one and two suggested in the prompt and the third being student-created), was also the prompt with the highest score average and lowest inter-rater reliability. The prompt most often selected had the lowest average score and least balanced choice of options. It is difficult to find prompts that rate well on all measures. The Steering Committee will use this data to determine which prompts remain in the pool for 2008.

Strength and Weakness Data Helps Inform Instruction

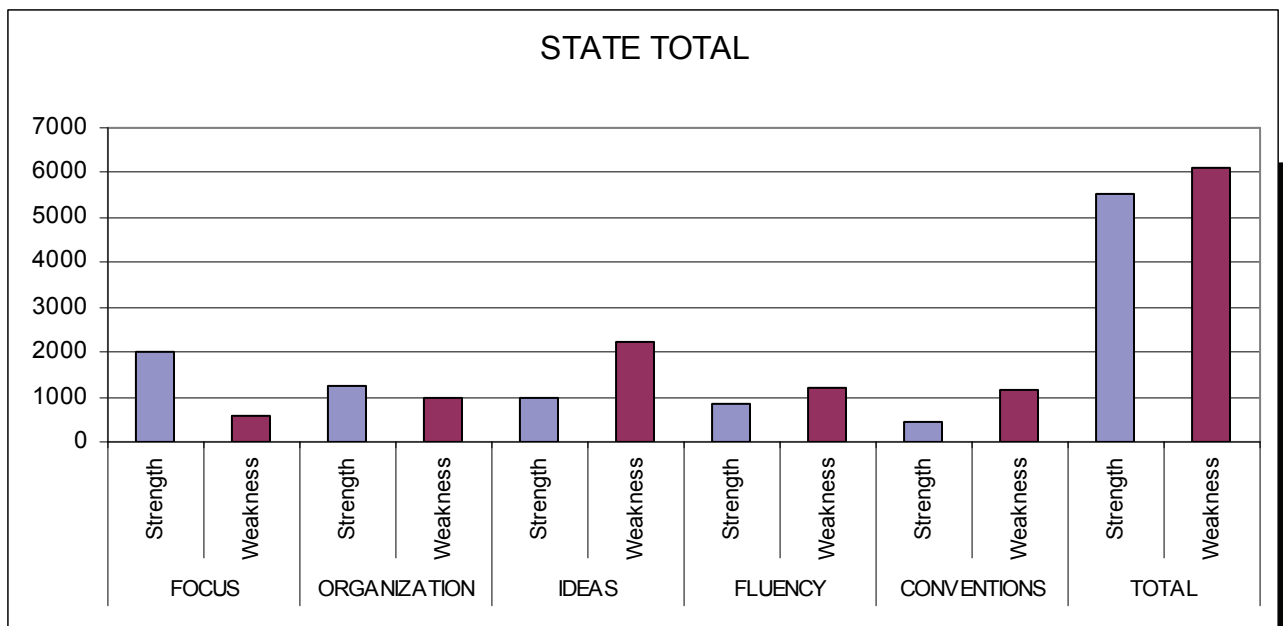
Schools participating in the Montana University System Writing Assessment receive individual reports about the strengths and weaknesses that scorers identified in their students’ essays. Since holistic scoring is the primary objective of this writing assessment, scorers are not required to mark a strength or weakness for every paper scored. Scorers mark 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 13% to 100%, with an average of 72%. When both school size and the percent of papers marked is small, even one paper with a strength or weakness can impact this data. These numbers are graphed individually for each school to help staff see the data and quickly compare their school’s writing traits with the overall state report. Because schools’ profile vary widely, this data shows us that teaching makes a difference in how well students write.

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. Most schools had idea development marked more often as a weakness than a strength. However, many schools had “ideas” marked equally, and in seven schools, idea development was a strength. Even this trait can be developed!

Secondly, we need to work with students to improve their use of standard written conventions—grammar, usage, and mechanics. In seven schools, “fluency” was a strength. Based on statewide data, students appear to be doing well with focusing on the topic (clarifying their position) and organizing their essays.

Scorers tend to mark weaknesses more often than they mark strengths and tend to mark low-scoring papers more often than they mark high-scoring papers. Often, a 6 earns no strength or weakness marks, because the score of 6 says it all: this paper is strong in all traits. At the same time, when a proficient (4) paper is read, the scorer may think, “This is a good, solid paper. Nothing stands out as particularly brilliant here, but problems with language, organization, etc., are so minor that I won’t note them, either.” However, when faced with an essay that scores 3 or below, the scorer thinks, “If only the student had developed this idea better, I could give the essay a higher score. Idea development is a real weakness here. If I could coach this student, I would tell him/her to think of an example or illustration for each of these assertions. Since I’m just not convinced by these arguments, I’ll mark ideas as a weakness.”

# of Students Tested	Average Score	Percentage Marked
7287	3.5	72%



Summarized Results and Comparisons Reported

In November 2005, the Montana Board of Regents adopted Policy 301.16, including the Montana University System Writing Assessment as one of five optional measures of Writing Proficiency to gain full admission to the four-year degree programs of the Montana University System. This test was administered for the seventh time in February and March, 2007.

7,720 tests were scored, compared to 3385 in 2001. This represents over 70% of the junior class.

110 high schools voluntarily participated, compared to 75 in 2001.

19% of the test-takers scored below 3.0, compared to 47.6% in 2001.

81% of the test-takers plan to attend college after leaving high school. Only 16.2% of the students who indicated that they plan to attend a four-year university in Montana scored below the threshold score of 3. These students must retake the MUS Writing Assessment, SAT or ACT Writing Section and earn a higher score or take a developmental composition course in college to earn full admission to a four-year program.

310 teachers, college instructors, and pre-service teachers received training and scored tests at eight sites in Montana (Great Falls, Billings, Miles City, Helena, Bozeman, Glasgow, Missoula, and Whitefish) during April. Five campuses hosted this professional development and most of the participating high schools sent teachers to score.

110 school districts provided financial support to the MUS Writing Assessment by paying for the travel costs and substitute teachers that allowed their teachers to spend two intensive days calibrating and scoring.

47 Trainers attended "Training of Trainers" to select anchor and practice essays and to practice training others to score.

Title II granted \$103,034 to five campuses to support professional development activities directly related to preparing students for college writing and teaching teachers to grade student writing using common standards. In addition, the Montana Small Schools Alliance and UM Western received \$94,770 to begin development of a writing assessment at the middle school level.

Score reports, including distribution charts for the state, for each school, and for each classroom, as well as scores and writing strength/weakness reports for each student, were mailed to schools on April 25.

As required in Policy 301.16 Writing Proficiency, OCHE sent:

Letters of Recognition to 76 students who earned scores of 6.0 and 141 students who earned scores of 5.5;

Awards of Merit for the exemplary performance of their students to the top 28 high schools with overall averages of 3.8 through 4.4 (from a statewide range of 2.2 through 4.4 on a six-point scale). High schools receiving Awards of Merit were: Winnet, Dutton-Brady, Geysler, Hysham, Savage, Valley Christian, Three Forks, Bainville, Centerville, Moore, Denton, Huntley Project, Park, Hamilton, Helena Capital, Darby, Chinook, Gardiner, Sheridan, Flathead, North Star, Helena, Dawson, Manhattan, Sunburst, Plevna, Melstone, and Belt high schools.

Certificates of Appreciation, signed by Board of Public Education Chair Patty Myers and Board of Regents Chair Lynn Hamilton, for their partnership with the University System to all 110 participating high schools.

More information and 2001-2007 test results are on the Montana University System website: <http://mus.edu/che/che.asp>. Click on Academic Initiatives, then on Writing Proficiency.

American Indian Students Continue to Improve Writing Skills

The number of students who identify themselves as American Indian has increased over the years from 228 in 2001 to 454 in 2007. Although the mean score of these students has increased modestly (from 2.55 to 2.94), the percent of students scoring below 2.5 has decreased dramatically, from 61% in 2001 to only 24.8% in 2007. Nine schools on or near Indian reservations tested in 2007. Of those schools, two had averages above the state average of 3.5. Two of these schools posted impressive gains in their average scores, one of which jumped from a 2.9 to a 3.5 average score. Although the overall mean scores of American Indian students are still relatively low, most are making good progress on this assessment measure.

Testing and Scoring Windows Accommodate Student Needs

The MUSWA testing window and the scoring dates for 2008 allow low-scoring students more opportunities to improve their scores (by taking the ACT or SAT) and time to send letters of recognition for the highest-scoring students and awards of merit to schools before the spring award assemblies. In addition, teachers have over a month of instructional time to concentrate on improving writing weaknesses identified in the assessment.

The proposed schedule for 2008 follows:

Testing window: February 4—March 7
Training of Trainers: Around February 21-22
Training /Scoring Tests: March 10-March 28
Tentative: Kalispell, March 10-11; Missoula, March 12-13; Helena, March 13-14; Great Falls, March 17-18; Bozeman, March 20-21; Billings, March 24-25; Miles City, March 25-26; Glasgow, March 27-28.

Score reports: April 21

Regents Adopt Rules for Provisional Admissions

Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16, which establishes writing proficiency standards for the Montana University System, states:

*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 on any campus of the Montana University System.*

In order to provide guidance for the institutions of the MUS, the Board of Regents adopted operational rules that suggested wording for the different letters that provisionally admitted students should receive. The rules also state that students "must gain full admission before the end of three semesters or the completion of 32 credits in the MUS, 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."

Provisionally admitted students may declare a major, receive financial aid, and are not limited in their credit load, although they are "encouraged to take a reduced number of credits while they work on their writing skills."



The **Student Assistance Foundation** of Montana (SAF) is interested in ensuring that students are successful when they enter the University System. SAF funds **Webwriters** 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. "Annotations" 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 junior in schools participating in the writing field test can log on to use the test. Webscorers are paid \$5 for the first 5 essays scored, and \$3 each thereafter. Teachers who have experience as onsite scorers can apply to become webscorers.

This site is hosted at the MSU Great Falls College of Technology and funded by the Student Assistance Foundation of Montana. It can be accessed at <http://webwriters.msugf.edu/>.

Placement Policy Under Consideration

Composition directors and other staff from the Montana University System have drafted composition placement policy for all campuses. The draft policy sets the same test scores that have been set for Writing Proficiency admissions as thresholds for placement into college-level composition. In addition, if students score below the admission thresholds, but at least 5 on the ACT or SAT essays or 2.5 on the MUSWA, they will be placed into remedial courses unless they challenge this placement. A variety of challenge options are listed in the draft.

Students will be placed into basic, developmental, or remedial courses if their writing scores are below 5 on the ACT, SAT, or COMPASS E-Write essays, 2.5 on the MUSWA or MUS Placement Examination.

On campuses that offer an advanced composition course, students may be placed into those courses with an 11 on the Writing Subscore or 32 on the Combined English/Writing section of the Optional Writing Test of the ACT; or 11 on the Essay or 700 on the Writing Section of the SAT; or 6 on the MUSWA; or 5 on the AP English Language and Composition Examination.

Montana University System 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. (Advanced)

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. (Advanced/Proficient)

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. (Proficient)

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. (Nearing Proficiency)

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. (Nearing Proficiency/Novice)

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 impede understanding. (Novice)

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*Writing Proficiency
Admissions Standards*