

# Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System



## Newsletter Twenty-Seven

### 2008 Test Scores Analyzed

In early 2008, over 7,000 Montana students took the Montana University System Writing Assessment. Newsletter 26, mailed to participating schools in May and available on the Writing Proficiency website, reported statewide scores with frequency distributions at each score point, a graph showing gains made over eight testing years, and other information, including a costs analysis. This newsletter delves more deeply into the test data.

The juniors who took this test must score at least 3.5 in order to be fully admitted to a four-year program in the Montana University System in 2009. 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, not number**, 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 11% of the students who selected a tribal college (13 students) earned scores of 3.5 and 18% who selected 4-year public university (638 students) earned 3.5.

**Office of the Commissioner  
of Higher Education  
46 North Last Chance Gulch  
Helena, MT 59620-3201**

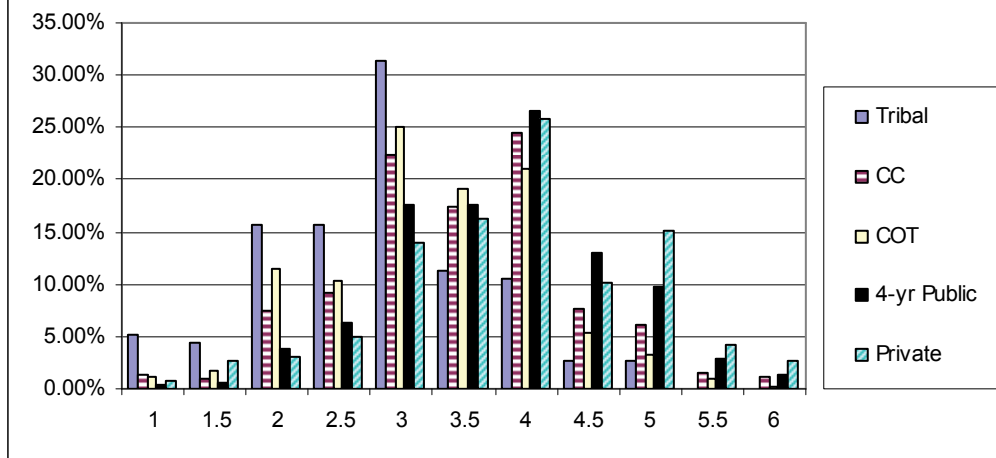
Jan Clinard, Director  
Academic Initiatives  
Phone: 406 444 0652  
FAX: 406 444 1469  
Email: jclinard@montana.edu



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

Proficiency Admissions

### Post-Secondary Plans



Average Scores of Students Selecting Each College Type

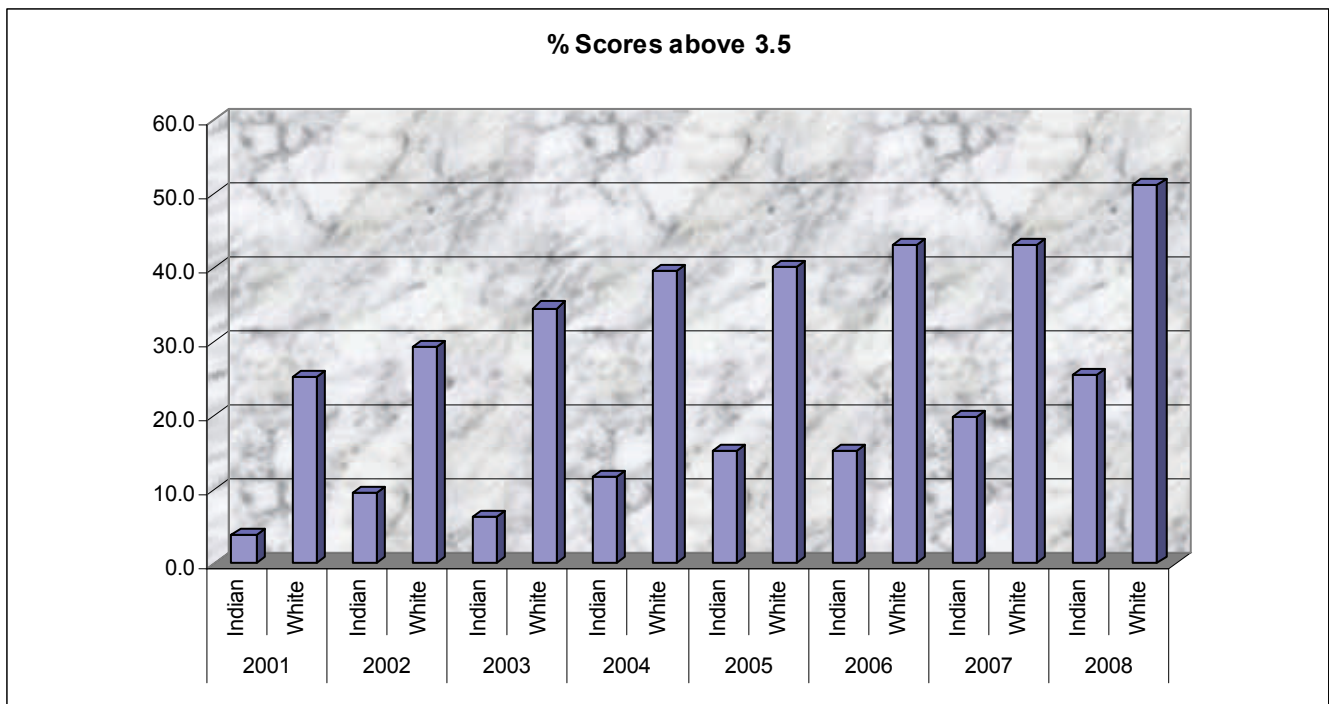
Tribal	CC	COT	4-yr	Private	No choice
2.83	3.48	3.26	3.77	3.86	3.64

## 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 all students for college writing.

### Percent of Students at Each Score Point 2003-2008

Score	2003		2004		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White
1	6.9	1.7	4.8	1.1	3.6	1.0	3.4	0.8	2.4	0.8	2.5	0.7
1.5	8.0	3.4	7.2	1.2	5.9	1.9	5.2	0.7	5.5	1.2	3.2	0.7
2	24.4	9.6	22.9	8.9	27.0	8.6	17.1	6.2	16.9	6.9	14.8	4.8
2.5	16.4	10.8	19.1	9.7	16.6	9.0	15.6	6.8	14.3	7.6	13.2	6.6
3	22.2	21.4	26.6	23.1	22.1	23.9	27.1	25.5	27.8	23.7	25.1	18.5
3.5	14.6	18.2	7.9	16.4	9.4	15.5	15.2	16.3	13.0	16.4	14.8	17.2
4	4.7	14.5	6.8	18.2	8.1	18.5	9.8	20.5	13.0	22.3	13.9	26.4
4.5	1.1	9.9	3.1	11.0	5.5	11.0	1.8	10.5	3.7	10.0	5.5	11.6
5	0.4	6.9	1.4	7.3	1.6	7.4	2.7	8.8	2.4	7.7	5.3	9.1
5.5		2.6	0.3	2.2		2.0	0.9	2.1	0.7	2.1	0.5	2.7
6		0.8		0.9		1.2	0.0	1.3	0.0	1.1	0.2	1.5
Number	275	3104	297	3984	307	5056	328	5940	454	6175	438	6124
Mean	2.55		2.66		2.73		2.85		2.94		3.08	
% below 2.5	40.7	15.1	34.8	11.2	36.5	11.5	25.7	7.7	24.8	8.9	21.4	6.2
% above 3.5	6.2	34.6	11.6	39.6	15.2	40.1	15.2	43.1	19.8	43.2	25.5	51.3



## Girls Outperform Boys in Writing on MUSWA, ACT, and SAT

In 2008, male students again demonstrated an achievement gap of about .4 (similar to every year except 2004). Over 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 1% of the girls wrote papers in the 1-2 range,

Score	Male		Female	
0	18	0.50%	4	0.11%
0.5	0	0.00%	1	0.03%
1	51	1.42%	20	0.56%
1.5	51	1.42%	17	0.48%
2	298	8.27%	108	3.03%
2.5	345	9.57%	183	5.13%
3	794	22.03%	585	16.39%
3.5	600	16.65%	624	17.48%
4	787	21.84%	1008	28.24%
4.5	342	9.49%	442	12.38%
5	221	6.13%	402	11.26%
5.5	62	1.72%	115	3.22%
6	35	0.97%	61	1.71%
Total	3604	100.00%	3570	100.00%

whereas 11% of the boys wrote 1's and 2's—indicating they are not nearly ready for college writing.

In 2008, boys wrote 36% of the 6's; in 2007, boys wrote 32% of the 6's.

Male students earned an average score of 3.44, whereas females averaged 3.83.

This trend showing girls more likely to be prepared for college composition than boys can be found in other measures, as well. For the class of 2008, girls outperformed boys in English (21.7 vs. 20.7) and reading (22.8 vs. 22.5) on the ACT. Boys edged out girls in math (22.5 vs. 21.1 and science 22.3 vs. 21.4), resulting in composite scores of 21.9 for females and 22.1 for males. A total of 6,286 Montana students in the class of 2008 took the ACT, with 624 more girls taking the ACT than did boys.

For the graduating class of 2008, 1,591 males and 2,146 females took the Optional ACT Writing Test. Girls had an average essay score of 7.4 and boys had an average essay score of 6.9. These scores are equivalent to 3.7 and a 3.5 on the MUSWA. The Writing Proficiency Policy also sets a combined writing score of 18 as the threshold for full admission. On the combined score, the girls' average was 21.7 and boys averaged 20.5.

On the writing portion of the SAT (taken by 1,189 males and 1,455 females), boys averaged 518 and girls averaged 527. For the class of 2008, 81% of all SAT students met or exceeded the threshold (440) for placement into college-level composition with their combined scores and 71% scored 7 or higher.

Members of the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee suggest that more nonfiction reading and writing may help improve writing scores of male students. Teachers interested in researching this topic further are encouraged to contact Jan Clinard (jclinard@montana.edu) for test samples, data, and ideas for graduate research.

## ESL Students Score Below State Average

Only 118 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 3.17, compared to the state average of 3.6. Only 8.4% those students were able to write high-level essays (above 4), whereas 23.7% of the students whose primary language is English wrote essays earning the highest scores.

Score	English		ESL	
0	21	0.30%	1	0.85%
1	67	0.95%	3	2.54%
1.5	64	0.91%	4	3.39%
2	395	5.60%	12	10.17%
2.5	515	7.31%	11	9.32%
3	1342	19.04%	36	30.51%
3.5	1204	17.08%	18	15.25%
4	1770	25.11%	23	19.49%
4.5	781	11.08%	3	2.54%
5	619	8.78%	4	3.39%
5.5	174	2.47%	3	2.54%
6	96	1.36%		0.00%
	7048		118	

## Inter-rater Reliability Analyzed

This table shows that for nearly 60% of the essays, both scorers were in perfect agreement and that only 1.9% required a third reader, called the resolver. These figures translate into an inter-rater reliability coefficient of .872, using Cronbach's Alpha, compared to a Cronbach's Alpha of .873 in 2007. Although the number of discrepant scores is down by 0.6% from 2007, perfect agreement of 65% represents a reasonable goal for holistic scoring on a six-point scale. At the same time, many scorers feel that the "correct" score lies between two whole-number scores and are satisfied with a score of 3.5, for example, which represents two adjacent scores.

Rater Scoring	#	%
Perfect	4236	59.4%
Adjacent	2759	38.7%
Discrepant	136	1.9%
Grand Total	7131	100.0%

Another set of statistics, particularly interesting to trainers, are tables that disaggregate data by scoring site and show how many tests were scored at each site. For 2008, the percent of perfect agreement ranged from 57.3% to 67% and the percent of discrepant scores ranged from 0% to 2.8%. The site with the fewest scorers achieved the best inter-rater reliability. The number of tests scored at each site ranged from 386 to 1,976 and the number of scorers per site ranged from 15 to 74.

The average score by site ranged from 3.4 to 3.7, differences that were statistically significant between two sites only. This range can be explained in part because three sites scored handwritten essays with lower average scores.

Accuracy in scoring is also checked by printing a random sample of tests twice and sending them to second scoring sites. Where there is a difference, the higher score is reported. Tests with discrepant scores by site are then reprinted for trainers to analyze and improve scoring accuracy in the following year.

## 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 the solution that students select to defend. Six different prompts were used in 2008. Each student could select from two, paired prompts. For these pairs, 69% of the students selected prompt 5 over prompt 6; 63% selected 1 over 2; and 56% selected 4 over 3—showing that pair to be the most evenly matched. Prompt 5 was a new prompt for 2008, and obviously very popular with students.

Prompts had perfect scorer agreement ranging from 57% to 63% and the need to resolve discrepant scores ranged from 1.2% to 2.6%. The average scores for all prompts were fairly consistent, ranging from 3.6 to 3.7, which does not represent a significant difference.

Finally, the prompt that was most balanced in the selection of three possible solutions to the problem—34%, 40%, and 25% (options one and two suggested in the prompt and the third being student-created), was also the prompt with the highest score average, but lower than average inter-rater reliability. The prompt most often selected also showed a well-balanced choice of options, but lower inter-rater reliability and average score. It is difficult to find prompts that rate well on all measures. The Steering Committee will use this data to determine which prompts will remain in the pool for 2009.

## Summaries and Comparisons

In Montana’s graduating class of 2008, 6,608 students took the MUSWA as juniors in 2007 and 492 took the MUSWA as seniors. The average score of those juniors was 3.5 and the average score of those seniors (who were re-taking the test to improve their scores) was 3.6. Students who indicated that they plan to continue their educations at a college or university in Montana had an average score of 3.7.

For 2008, the eighth administration of the MUSWA:

- 7,114 tests were scored, compared to 3,385 in 2001.
- 115 high schools participated, compared to 75 in 2001.
- 15% 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. Of the students who indicated that they plan to attend a college or university in Montana, 32% scored below the threshold score of 3.5 for placement into college-level freshman composition. These students must earn a higher score on an admissions test, take a campus placement test, or take a developmental composition course in college to earn full admission to a four-year program and begin college-level writing.
- 290 teachers, college instructors, and pre-service teachers scored at eight sites (Great Falls, Billings, Miles City, Helena, Bozeman, Glasgow, Missoula, and Kalispell) in March.
- 39 Trainers attended “Training of Trainers” to select anchor and practice essays and practice teaching others to score.

## What about Placement?

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).

Students who score below the above thresholds are placed into developmental courses. Campuses have the discretion to allow students who do not meet the thresholds or may not have scores (such as nontraditional students) to be placed through one of three approaches, one of which is “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.” The University of Montana uses this method.

During summer orientations of 2008, The University of Montana administered their MUSWA-like assessment to 163 students. 1169 students were placed with their MUSWA, ACT or SAT scores. These students were not required to test during orientation.

UM administered a survey to the students using their campus assessment, showing 36 (22%) were challenging their placement; 29 (18%) did not know their placement; 51 (31%) had not taken the required test (for example, the ACT without the Optional Writing Test); and 47 (29%) marked “another reason” on their surveys. Some students in this last category were actually “challenging” placement because they wanted an advanced composition class.

## Testing and Scoring Windows Proposed

The MUSWA schedule is designed to get scores back to schools by April 25 so that letters of recognition for the highest-scoring students and awards of merit to schools can be sent before the spring award assemblies. Also, students dissatisfied with their scores can register for the Optional Writing test of the ACT by May 8. Teachers have over a month of instructional time to concentrate on improving writing weaknesses identified in the assessment. The proposed schedule for 2009 follows:

**Testing window:** February 2—February 27  
**Training of Trainers:** February 18-19 (Helena)

Tentative Writing Workshops
March 9-10 Helena
March 16-17 Kalispell
March 18-19 Missoula
March 23-24 Billings
March 24-25 Miles City or Glendive
March 26-27 Bozeman
March 30-31 Havre or Glasgow
April 1-2 Great Falls

### Scorers Rate Workshops

After each scoring session, participants rate their experience and provide feedback to help improve scoring during the next year. Participants responded to statements by checking “strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, or strongly agree.” With surveys returned from six scoring sites, to the statement “this workshop helps me prepare students for college writing and/or other writing assessments” 94% agreed or strongly agreed. To statements about students taking the test seriously, the ability to score reliably, the value of the training materials, and pacing, 97% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed.

However, one site had rather high disagreement (9%) about having “the right number of papers to score accurately,” where over 98% of respondents from other sites agreed with the statement. For 2009, workshop organizers must ensure that tests are evenly distributed among scoring sites.

In these groups, 29% of the participants had never had training in holistic scoring.

The aspects of training/scoring that participants found most useful, were written in statements such as these:

- Studiously reviewing the rubric and listening to my peers argue their reasoning gives me pause to think about my own rationale.
- Collegiality with other teachers.
- Learning more about the test makes me better able to administer it and prepare my students for it.
- Doing the work is the only way to understand how to score essays, but more importantly, it gives us the tools to be able to improve our students’ writing capabilities.
- That entire first day can be painful, but it is really needed.
- The discussions on specific papers.

Suggestions for improvement included:

- Outlaw hand-written papers.
- Papers scored in the afternoon suffer from the weariness of scorers.
- Scorers need more quiet.
- Experienced scorers need less training.

Luckily, the number of handwritten papers is decreasing each year. If there are enough scorers, the scoring day could be shortened. However, that would also reduce the number of renewal units and impact college credit.

Experienced scorers should consider becoming trainers, and if not, should remember how important their experience is to the novice scorers at their tables.



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/>.

Please contact Jan Clinard if you would like to webscore.

### Reflection Papers Reviewed

Scorers who earned college credit for participating in Writing Assessment Workshops also wrote comments such as:

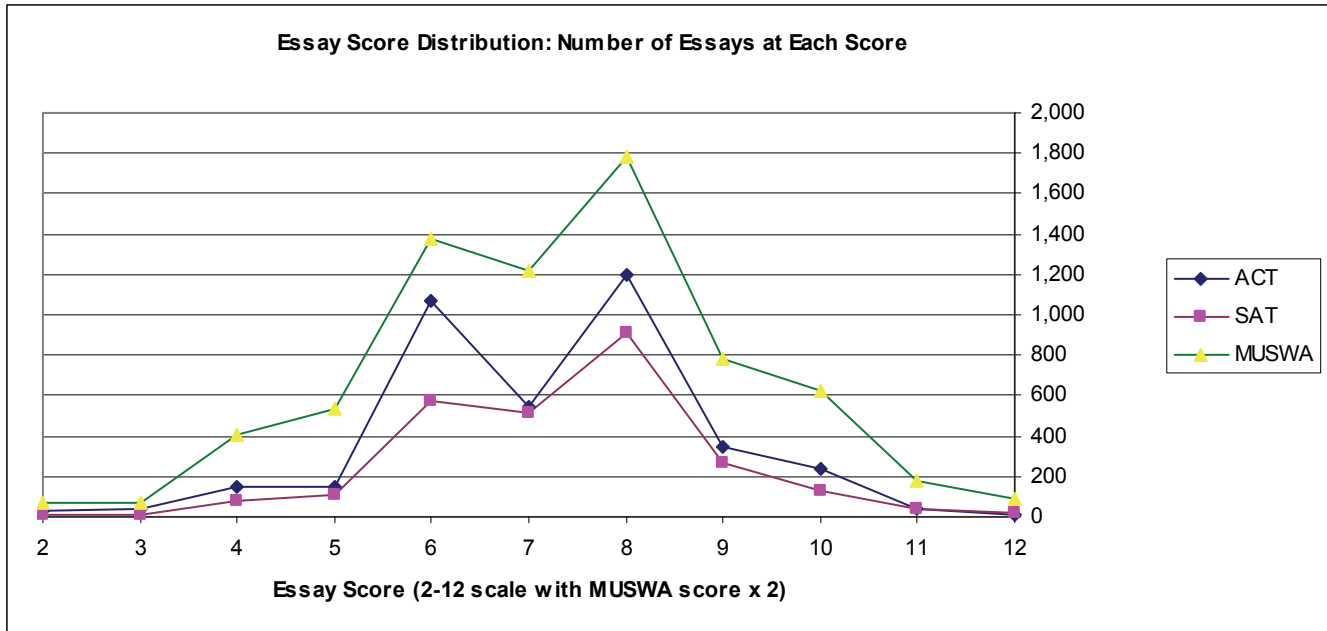
- The fairness of my grading has changed. I no longer overreact or penalize a student by grading writing too harshly on one single detail.
- Teachers look forward to the spring assessment as an opportunity to discuss not just student writing, but their personal and professional perspectives on what it means to write well. So, with the sustained support of administration, staff, etc., the MUSWA will become an investment in our students’ futures.

An outside evaluator, summarized participants:

They have commitment to MUSWA for three main reasons. One, the rubric assesses writing as a whole with expediency and accuracy. Two, the sharing of expertise in this collaborative real world context is the most authentic experience possible. Finally, multi-genre teachers enrich the workshop and take back to their classes important knowledge about writing for their students.

## ACT, SAT, and MUSWA Scores Compared

The graph below shows the number of ACT, SAT, and MUSWA essays that earned each score point during the 2008 testing year. For all three tests, scorers tended to disagree less as to whether an essay should be scored 3 or 4, resulting in a total score on ACT or SAT of 7, or a MUSWA score of 3.5. This is the demarcation between non-proficient and proficient, where perfect agreement is most important. The MUSWA may have more scores in the 2-2.5 range (converted to ACT/SAT scores of 4-5) because all students, not just college-bound students, take the MUSWA and more scores in the 4.5-5.5 range (converted to ACT/SAT scores of 9-11) because students have 40 minutes, rather than 25 (SAT) or 30 minutes (ACT) to write.



### Writing Proficiency Steering Committee

Beverly Ann Chin 243-2463  
 Department of English  
 The University of Montana  
 32 Campus Drive  
 Missoula, MT 59812  
[Beverly.chin@umontana.edu](mailto:Beverly.chin@umontana.edu)

Kathy Holt 657-2337  
 College of Education CAFÉ Office  
 Montana State University – Billings  
 Billings MT 59101-0252  
[kholt@msubillings.edu](mailto:kholt@msubillings.edu)

Marsha Davis 447-8344  
 Superintendent of Schools  
 Lewis and Clark County  
 316 North Park  
 Helena, MT 59601  
[msdavis@co.lewis-clark.mt.us](mailto:msdavis@co.lewis-clark.mt.us)

Bruce Messinger 324-2001  
 Superintendent  
 Helena Public Schools  
 55 South Rodney  
 Helena MT 59601  
[bmessinger@helena.k12.mt.us](mailto:bmessinger@helena.k12.mt.us)

Kirk Branch 994-7139  
 English Department  
 Montana State University  
 PO Box 172440  
 Bozeman MT 59717-2300  
[branch@english.montana.edu](mailto:branch@english.montana.edu)

Arlene Walker-Andrews  
 Associate Provost  
 The University of Montana  
 Missoula, MT 59812-3324  
[Arlene.Walker-Andrews@umontana.edu](mailto:Arlene.Walker-Andrews@umontana.edu)

Lou Laakso 243-4257  
 Evaluation Supervisor, Admissions  
 The University of Montana  
 Missoula, MT 59812-0001  
[Llaakso@mso.umt.edu](mailto:Llaakso@mso.umt.edu)

Kathleen Ryan 243-4410  
 Department of English  
 The University of Montana  
 32 Campus Drive  
 Missoula, MT 59801  
[kathleen.ryan@mso.umt.edu](mailto:kathleen.ryan@mso.umt.edu)

Steve Tull  
 PO Box 400  
 Superior MT 59872  
[stullmt@yahoo.com](mailto:stullmt@yahoo.com)

Greg Hirst 653-1771  
 211 Dawson  
 Wolf Point MT 59201  
[Middy@nemontel.net](mailto:Middy@nemontel.net)

Katie Kotynski 268-6031  
 GFPS  
 PO Box 2429  
 Great Falls MT 59403  
[Katie\\_kotynski@gfps.k12.mt.us](mailto:Katie_kotynski@gfps.k12.mt.us)

Judy Snow 444-3656  
 Office of Public Instruction  
 1300 Eleventh Avenue  
 Helena, MT 59620  
[Jsnow@mt.gov](mailto:Jsnow@mt.gov)



## **ATTENTION SECONDARY WRITING TEACHERS!**

### **EARN THREE GRADUATE CREDITS AT NO COST!**

The course “**High School Writing Strategies: What Works?**” will be offered during the fall 2008 semester via WebCT. The course is designed to provide practicing high teachers with an opportunity to collaborate with university writing instructors and other high school teachers from across the state of Montana. The major course goal is to assist teachers in their efforts to develop a cadre of effective instructional strategies that will improve the writing skills of their students.

The major goals of this course are to support secondary teachers’ efforts to improve the writing skills of their students. Topics such as the following will be covered: (1) assessing writing Strengths and Weaknesses - targeting areas for improvement; (2) strategies for increasing student comfort with writing; (3) designing and implementing prewriting strategies; (4) teaching writing across a variety of genres; (5) promoting writing that reflects critical thinking; (5) using the Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric to assess persuasive writing skills; (6) and implementing other writing strategies identified by practicing teachers enrolled in the course.

#### **Course Requirements**

(1) Engage in weekly discussions hosted in WebCT, and (2) submit several reflection papers related to the writing strategies implemented and (3) completing a course project. Projects will consist of creating a comprehensive writing intervention and evaluating its effectiveness.

#### **Grading Criteria:**

The grades for the course are Pass/Fail and are based on completing the requirements listed above.

#### **Dates:**

This course begins Monday, September 8th and ends on December 5th, 2008.

#### **Montana State University Instructors:**

Kaci Shober

#### **For further Information:**

Please contact Dr. Art Bangert at [abangert@montana.edu](mailto:abangert@montana.edu) for further details about course registration and other questions pertaining to the course require