

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter 33 July 2010

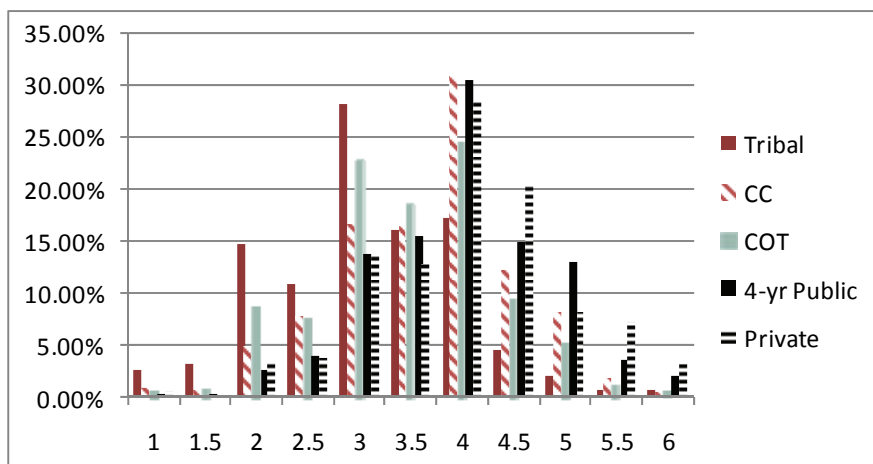
Scores Correlate with College Selections

In February of 2010, over 7,500 Montana students took the Montana University System Writing Assessment. Newsletter 32, 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 nine testing years, and other information. This newsletter delves more deeply into the test data.

Students must score at least 3.5 in order to be fully admitted to a four-year program in the Montana University System or to be placed into College Writing, WRIT101. Otherwise, they are provisionally admitted until they earn a C- or better in a developmental composition course.

The graph below shows **percent, not number**, of students at each score point who indicated which type of post-secondary educational institution in Montana they plan to attend. In general, students who score below 3.5 plan to attend a two-year program, where several developmental courses are offered and where they can be admitted without provisions. For example, 59% of the students selecting Tribal College, 41% selecting College of Technology, 31% selecting Community College, and 21% selecting Four-year Universities scored below 3.5. "No choice" includes students planning to go out of state and those without college plans.

Distribution of Scores by College Plans



Average Scores by College Plans

	CC	COT	Priv 4-yr	Pub 4-yr	Tribal	No	Overall
Average	3.68	3.48	4.02	3.95	3.09	3.86	3.84
Number	553	1033	298	3968	157	1545	

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<http://mus.edu/writingproficiency/index.asp>

Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education

Proficiency
Admissions

American Indian Scores Continue to Improve

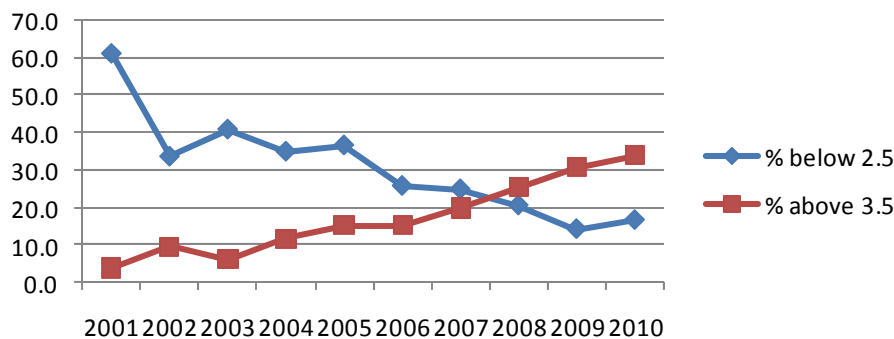
Score	2003		2004		2005		2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White	Indian	White
1	6.9	1.7	4.8	1.1	3.6	1.0	3.4	0.8	2.4	0.8	2.5	0.7	1.1	0.6	2.3	0.2
1.5	8.0	3.4	7.2	1.2	5.9	1.9	5.2	0.7	5.5	1.2	3.2	0.7	1.5	0.5	2.6	0.4
2	24.4	9.6	22.9	8.9	27.0	8.6	17.1	6.2	16.9	6.9	14.8	4.8	11.6	4.5	11.7	3.5
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	11.4	4.8	10.9	4.2
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	21.6	15.9	22.6	15.2
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	21.4	14.4	16.0	15.6
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	19.7	29.1	20.4	29.3
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	6.0	12.7	7.4	14.1
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	4.1	11.3	3.4	12.1
5.5		2.6	0.3	2.2		2.0	0.9	2.1	0.7	2.1	0.5	2.7	0.4	3.4	1.3	3.8
6		0.8		0.9		1.2	0.0	1.3	0.0	1.1	0.2	1.5	0.4	1.7	1.3	1.7
Number	275	3104	297	3984	307	5056	328	5940	454	6175	438	6124	534	6514	530	6317
Mean	2.55		2.66		2.73		2.85		2.94		3.08		3.24		3.28	
% below 2.5	40.7	15.1	34.8	11.2	36.5	11.5	25.7	7.7	24.8	8.9	20.5	6.3	14.2	5.6	16.6	4.1
% above 3.5	6.2	34.6	11.6	39.6	15.2	40.1	15.2	43.1	19.8	43.2	25.4	51.3	30.6	58.2	33.8	61.0

Approaches to Scoring and Data Recognize Diversity

On the 2010 MUSWA, about 7% of the test-takers identified themselves as American Indian and another 4% as multiracial. 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.

When the Montana University System began field testing in 2001, the score that would be used to determine placement into the entry-level college composition course had not yet been determined. The MUS began tracking the percentage of students scoring at the low end of the scale, writing essays that were not at or even nearing proficiency (scores of 1 or 2) and those that were proficient or advanced (scores of 4, 5 and 6). A score of “3” is considered “nearing proficiency” and with a score of 3.5, one scorer believed the essay to be “nearing proficiency (3), while the other scorer believed it to be just at the threshold of proficiency (4).

Percent of AI Students Scoring Below and Above Proficiency Level

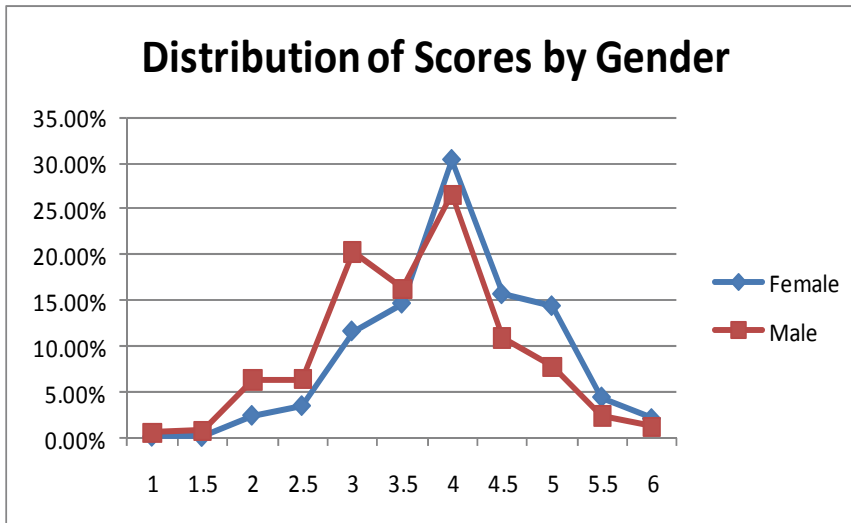


The 2010 scores for American Indian students showed a slight increase in scores below 2.5, despite an increase in the top scores, including 14 AI students who received Letters of Recognition for scores of 5.5 and 6.0 as compared to only 4 in 2009.

In addition, 13 multiracial students earned scores of 5.5 and 6.0 and 54% of the multiracial students scored above 3.5.

Girls Earn Higher Scores on Writing Assessment

In 2010, there was again an achievement gap of about .4 (similar to every other year except 2004) between male and female writers. In both 2010 and 2009, boys wrote 39% of the 6's; in 2008, they wrote 36% of the 6's; in 2007, boys wrote 32% of the 6's. In 2010, 2.9% of the girls wrote papers in the 1-2 range, whereas 7.8% of the boys wrote 1's and 2's—much better than in 2009, when 17% of the boys wrote in that lowest range. Male students earned an average score of 3.65 (up from 3.57 in 2009), whereas females averaged 4.03 (up from 3.95 in 2009).



Score	Female	Male
1	0.22%	0.65%
1.5	0.19%	0.86%
2	2.50%	6.33%
2.5	3.55%	6.43%
3	11.69%	20.31%
3.5	14.70%	16.33%
4	30.34%	26.56%
4.5	15.72%	10.96%
5	14.43%	7.81%
5.5	4.50%	2.45%
6	2.15%	1.30%

	FEMALE	MALE	Difference
Prompt 1	4.00	3.56	0.44
Prompt 2	4.15	3.73	0.42
Prompt 3	4.00	3.62	0.38
Prompt 4	3.95	3.65	0.30
Prompt 5	4.00	3.66	0.34
Prompt 6	4.07	3.66	0.41

An examination of the prompts by gender show a smaller discrepancy of scores between girls and boys on prompts 4 and 5 and the greatest difference on prompts 1 and 2. This kind of data is used each year to help determine which prompts will be retired and which remain in the pool.

ESL Students Score Below State Average

Only 123 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 3.37, compared to the state average of 3.84. However, 15.5% of those students were able to write essays with scores above 4, compared to only 8.4% in 2008 and 12.8% in 2009.

Score	ENG		ESL	
	#	%	#	%
1	30	0.41%	2	1.63%
1.5	39	0.53%	1	0.81%
2	321	4.33%	13	10.57%
2.5	362	4.89%	15	12.20%
3	1184	15.99%	27	21.95%
3.5	1149	15.51%	19	15.45%
4	2115	28.56%	27	21.95%
4.5	993	13.41%	9	7.32%
5	825	11.14%	8	6.50%
5.5	259	3.50%	2	1.63%
6	129	1.74%	0	0.00%
Grand Total	7406	100.00%	123	100.00%

Inter-rater Reliability Analyzed

This table shows that for 60.88% of the essays, both scorers were in perfect agreement with the score and that only 1.48% required a third reader, called the resolver. These figures translate into an inter-rater reliability coefficient of .868, using Cronbach’s Alpha, compared to .873 in 2009. This reliability data is considered high among performance assessments of this nature. Many scorers feel that sometimes the “correct score” lies between two whole-number score points and are satisfied with a final score of 3.5, for example, which represents two adjacent scores.

Rater Scoring	#	%
Perfect	4605	60.88%
Adjacent	2847	37.64%
Discrepant	112	1.48%
Grand Total	7564	100.00%

Another set of statistics, of particular interest to trainers, are tables that disaggregate data by scoring site and show how many tests were scored at each site. For 2010, the percent of scores with perfect agreement as figured by site ranged from 57% to 73.2%.

Missoula hosted more scorers than other sites, in part because many pre-service teachers enrolled in the University of Montana consider this training essential to their preparation as teachers of writing.

Accuracy in scoring is also checked by printing a random sample of tests twice and sending them to two different scoring sites. Where there is a difference, the higher score is reported to the student. The few tests that are found to have discrepant scores are then reprinted for trainers to analyze and use to improve scoring accuracy in the following year.

Location	# of Tests	# Scorers
Billings	1181	59
Bozeman	553	38
Glasgow	559	28
Great Falls	737	39
Helena	757	40
Kalispell	1198	44
Miles City	430	23
Missoula	2139	98
Grand Total	7554	369

Prompts Analyzed for Consistency and Fairness

	Prompt 1	Prompt 2	Prompt 3	Prompt 4	Prompt 5	Prompt 6
Perfect	813	836	957	591	665	707
Adjacent	482	509	622	365	405	446
Discrepant	24	18	22	13	14	21
Grand Total	1319	1363	1601	969	1084	1174
Perfect	61.64%	61.34%	59.78%	60.99%	61.35%	60.22%
Adjacent	36.54%	37.34%	38.85%	37.67%	37.36%	37.99%
Discrepant	1.82%	1.32%	1.37%	1.34%	1.29%	1.79%

Each year, prompts are rated based on how often they are chosen by students, their inter-rater reliability, average scores, and the distribution of solutions that students defend.

The prompts are paired, then distributed as evenly as possible to students. This chart shows that prompt #1 was only slightly more popular than #2; but prompt #3 was much more popular than #4 (62% vs. 38%); and prompt #5 somewhat more popular than #6 (52% vs. 48%). Prompt #1 was new to the 2010 test. The chart above also shows inter-rater reliability by prompt.

In terms of options (first or second solution to the problem, or a third solution invented by the writer), the prompt with the most balance among three options was prompt #4 (45.5%, 32.4%, and 22/1%) and Prompt #2 generated the fewest invented solutions (7.1%), with 63.4% taking the first option and 29.5% defending the second option. This data will help determine which 2010 prompt(s) to retire in 2011.

Scorers Rate Writing Assessment Workshops Highly; Providing Useful Comments

A total of 369 people scored essays during the March 2010 Writing Assessment Workshops. Of those, 287 completed evaluations. Assigned to collect evaluations, most of the 48 trainers did not complete evaluations. Scorers responded to statements as follows:

This workshop helps me prepare students for college writing and/or other writing assessments.

97% of the respondents agreed with this statement. Comments included the following:

I know what is expected of my students after they graduate.

This gives me teaching points.

A unified standard is handy to have as a comparison.

I love reading essays and discussing their strengths and weaknesses.

I think the prompts generated useful pieces of writing and were fair and unbiased.

97% of the respondents agreed with this statement and commented as follows:

These topics are very pertinent to issues current in our schools.

The prompts give students lots of ideas.

With some exceptions, I think students took this test seriously.

100% agreed with this statement and wrote comments such as these:

Very few times did I notice students who could have done better, but blew it off.

I watched them working diligently.

I believe that I can score tests reliably with this rubric.

96% agreed with this statement, writing comments such as:

I liked testing our calibration in a variety of ways. It helped me feel confident in my scoring ability.

This is very concrete.

Working with the rubric and anchor sets helped me understand my own biases.

We are trying to quantify something (writing skill) that is ultimately unquantifiable. This is a conundrum that most sensitive English professionals are willing to admit we must live with.

Pacing of the training was appropriate.

88% agreed with this statement. Comments included these:

A little redundant.

The many practice sets helped me greatly. After so many, I felt I knew what was expected for each level.

Would it be possible for experienced scorers to test early, and if they scored well, to begin scoring before the new scorers?

Note: The previous question appears a few times every year. However, experienced scorers are mentors for new scorers in the discussions of the anchor, practice, and consensus sets. Excusing experienced scorers from the first part of training could negatively impact the group dynamics at each scoring table and their expertise would be missed.

Experienced scorers are urged to become trainers, so that their experience can be used as an asset. Concrete ideas about how best to use experienced scorers, while not rushing the training for new scorers are welcomed! Send ideas to: (jclinard@montana.edu).

Although it's hard work, I had the right number of papers and amount of time to score accurately.

99% of the respondents agreed, commenting:

I was tired by the end.

I could have scored more!

As difficult as the scoring was, it was the best way to learn.

We rocked!

Finally, one new scorer suggested that the training and scoring be done online. However, the most common phrases used to answer what was most useful were:

**Discussing our craft
Professional collaboration
Scoring as a group
Discussion with colleagues
Getting together**

Common Core Standards Emphasize Argumentation

Governors and state school superintendents from 48 states, including Montana, have committed to implementing a common core of state standards in English-language arts and mathematics for grades K-12. **Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)** was coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

These standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within K-12 education so that they will graduate from high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs. States were asked to adopt the Common Core State Standards as part of the applications for *Race to the Top* funding.

College and Career Readiness Standards “anchor” the standards for all grade levels, but this analysis concentrates on standards for grades 11-12. Though the Writing Standards include three text types, argument, informational/explanatory writing, and narrative writing, they emphasize students’ ability to write sound arguments, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness.

Arguments are used for many purposes—to change the reader’s point of view, to bring about some action on the reader’s part, or to ask the reader to accept the writer’s explanation or evaluation of a concept, issue, or problem. An argument is a reasoned, logical way of demonstrating that the writer’s position, belief, or conclusion is valid.

English and education professor Gerald Graff (2003) writes that “argument literacy” is fundamental to being educated. The university is largely an “argument culture,” Graff contends; therefore, K–12 schools should “teach the conflicts” so that students are adept at understanding and engaging in argument (both oral and written) when they enter college. He claims that because argument is not standard in most school curricula, only 20 percent of those who enter college are prepared in this respect. When the MUSWA was introduced in 2001, this was also true in Montana. However, during the past ten years, Montana’s high schools have worked to ensure that their students can write arguments.

Theorist and critic Neil Postman (1997) calls argument the soul of an education because argument forces a writer to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of multiple perspectives. When teachers ask students to consider two or more perspectives on a topic or issue, something far beyond surface knowledge is required: students must think critically and deeply, assess the validity of their own thinking, and anticipate counterclaims in opposition to their own assertions.

Much evidence supports the value of argument generally and its particular importance to college and career readiness. A 2009 ACT national curriculum survey of postsecondary instructors of composition, freshman English, and survey of American literature courses (ACT, Inc., 2009) found that “write to argue or persuade readers” was virtually tied with “write to convey information” as the most important type of writing needed by incoming college students.

The 2007 writing framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (National Assessment Governing Board, 2006) assigns persuasive writing the single largest targeted allotment of assessment time at grade 12 (40 percent, versus 25 percent for narrative writing and 35 percent for informative writing).

A 2002 survey of instructors of freshman composition and other introductory courses across the curriculum in California found that among the most important skills expected of incoming students were articulating a clear thesis; identifying, evaluating, and using evidence to support or challenge the thesis; and considering and incorporating counterarguments into their writing.

The writers of the standards distinguish “argument” from “persuasion” by describing persuasion as appealing to emotions and the reader’s self-interest, while arguments rely more heavily on logic and reason. This distinction is not universally embraced, particularly as it applies to high school writers.

See: <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards>.

How does the MUSWA Align with the Common Core Standards?

MUSWA prompts present students with issues about which they must “clarify their positions,” developing arguments with relevant evidence, elaboration, or explanations. The Common Core Standards (CCS) require that students “write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.” Instead of the standard of evidence as “sufficient,” the MUSWA uses “extensive and compelling” for a 6, “moderate” for a 5, and “some” for a 4. During MUSWA workshops, trainers may need to discuss the concept of sufficient versus insufficient evidence.

The Common Core Standards list five student expectations under argumentation:

1. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

MUSWA describes a score of 6 as demonstrated in papers that “clarify a position on the issue defined in the prompt” with organization that is “unified and logical, with effective transitions.”

As a timed writing, the MUSWA prompt itself introduces two opposing claims. Although not specified in the rubric, often the highest-scoring essays include the counterarguments.

2. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.

Under the constraints of time and a controlled testing environment, MUSWA writers may not be able to develop claims “thoroughly” or supply “the most relevant data.”

MUSWA’s letter format encourages students to recognize the audience’s knowledge and students often appeal to their perceived values and biases.

3. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

MUSWA describes a score of 6 as demonstrated with language that is “fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice.”

Although these relationships may be evident in high-scoring essays, the MUSWA rubric does not require this level of sophistication for proficiency.

4. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

Although style and tone are not part of the MUSWA rubric, students can earn a low score for “inappropriate” language. Conventions are scored in the MUSWA in terms of grammar, usage, mechanics, and command of language.

5. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented.

In general, MUSWA considers the conclusion part of coherent organization.

MUSWA also recognizes unconventional, yet effective organizational patterns found outside academic writing and mainstream cultures.

The Common Core Standards also require that students “use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.” The bulk of MUSWA tests are taken online. In addition, CCS require that students be able to “incorporate narrative elements effectively into arguments and informative/explanatory texts.” MUSWA purposefully includes such samples in its training materials. Argumentation that successfully uses narrative, however, may not meet the standards for argumentation as described above.

The March version of the Common Core Standards clearly reflected the scoring rubrics of the ACT Optional Writing Test, the SAT Essay, and the MUSWA (which are similar in wording and emphasis). This final version appears to be based on the theoretical work of Stephen Toulmin and approaches to argumentation found in some college courses.

Teachers of Writing Can Earn Three Graduate Credits Online

Funded in part by Title II: Improving Teacher Quality, the course **EDCI 588-52: Exploring and Implementing Writing Strategies Across Disciplines** is offered during the fall 2010 semester online, via WebCT. This course is designed to provide practicing high school teachers with an opportunity to collaborate with university writing instructors and other high school teachers from across the state.

The intent of this course is to support practicing teacher's efforts to improve their students' writing skills by piloting a variety of writing strategies with their students and reflecting upon their experiences. 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.

Topics such as the following will be covered: (1) assessing writing Strengths and Weaknesses and targeting areas for improvement; (2) strategies for increasing student comfort with writing; (3) designing and implementing prewriting strategies; (4) teaching basic writing skills; (5) promoting writing that reflects critical thinking; (6) using the Montana Holistic Scoring Rubric to assess persuasive writing skills; (7) and implementing other writing strategies identified by practicing teachers enrolled in the course.

Course Requirements: 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 be one of two options: 1) choose four writing strategies that other teachers are using, implement, and examine how the strategies impact your students' writing; or 2) design and implement an action research project to demonstrate the efficacy of a writing strategy.

Computer Requirements: (1) Computer running Windows 2000 or newer or Mac OS X or higher (2) CD-ROM drive and (3) Internet access

Grading Criteria: Grades are Pass/Fail and are based on completing requirements listed above.

Dates: September 13 - December 3, 2010

Montana State University Instructor: Kaci Shober

Prerequisites: Bachelor's degree and teacher certification.

Cost: If your school district is participating in the Montana University System Writing Assessment, the cost is \$35. For all other participants, the cost is \$234.80.

Please register as soon as possible!

For More Information:

Contact instructor, Kacie Shober, bkshober@msn.com or 406-587-1647.

Register Online at <http://btc.montana.edu/courses.aspx/online.aspx#EDCI>.

2011 Testing Window and Writing Workshop Dates Set

Schools may plan ahead to a **testing window of February 1-25 for the 2011 MUSWA**. Schools should schedule a regular testing date, as well as one day for make-up tests within this window

Scoring workshops will follow this schedule:

- March 7-8 Kalispell
- March 9-10 Missoula
- March 14-15 Helena
- March 21-22 Billings
- March 22-23 Miles City
- March 24-25 Bozeman
- March 28-29 Glasgow
- March 30-31 Great Falls

Please mark your calendars with these dates. You are not obligated to attend the training nearest you, nor must all personnel from a single school district attend the same workshop. Teachers from all grade levels and subject areas are encouraged to attend.

As a rule of thumb, large schools should send at least one scorer for every 40 essays they submit. In 2010, 7,554 essays were scored by 369 people, averaging about 21 essays per scorer. colleges and universities contribute scorers, school districts do not need to send one scorer for every 25 essays. Essays are read twice. Therefore, each participant scored about 50 essays.

College credit may be earned (with an outside assignment) and OPI renewal units are available.

Training of Trainers will be held February 17-18 in Helena.