

# Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

*Newsletter Sixteen January 2005*

## Professional Development in Writing Available to All School Districts

In September, all of Montana's high schools were mailed invitations to participate in the 2005 Montana University System Writing Assessment. Roughly 90 schools plan to administer the MUS Writing Assessment during the 2005 testing window: February 14 through March 15. Anyone can participate in the free professional development offered by the University System.

This year, schools have three testing options: 1) students may handwrite essays into test booklets; 2) students may word process essays, print them out, and staple them into the test booklets; or 3) students may go to the new test website where they will enter their demographic data, type their essays, and submit them electronically. These essays will be printed with score sheets and scored in the same manner as the mailed-in tests.

Schools that have sent in the paperwork for testing should receive test booklets, prompts, and administration instructions by February 9. Schools piloting the online version must complete questionnaires for analysis by Apperson Data Management to ensure that their computer systems can support the test.

Training and scoring for the Montana Writing Assessment is a worthwhile professional development opportunity for the writing teachers of Montana, K-12 through college. Often teachers from schools that are not testing students take advantage of this training in order to learn about holistic scoring, to discuss student writing with other teachers, and to judge how well their own students write in comparison to a statewide sample. Several convenient sites are hosting these events. Trainers from local schools and colleges will serve as leaders. (See article on Training of Trainers.)

The first day, which begins at 8:30 a.m. at each site, is devoted to learning holistic scoring and achieving scoring consistency through discussion and practice. On the second day, participants will put their skills to work by scoring about 60 essays. Lunch and light breakfasts are provided on both days.

Schools pay for travel and substitute teacher costs. There is no registration fee for training. For college credit, participants must complete an assignment PRIOR to scoring.\* Training and scoring are scheduled for the following:

March 29-30	Miles City (Miles Community College)
March 31-April 1	Billings (MSU-Billings)
April 4-5	Helena (Montana Higher Education Complex)
April 11-12	Bozeman (Holiday Inn)
April 18-19	Kalispell (FVCC)
April 19-20	Missoula (Grant Creek Inn)
April 21-22	Great Falls (MSU-GF Heritage Hall)

See registration form on page 5. \*Assignments required of participants seeking college credit range from reading and reporting to developing lesson plans and assigning practice essays to conducting mini-action research projects.

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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 Admissions**

## How Should We Counsel Students Regarding the New, Optional ACT Writing Test?

During one of the November Counselor Updates sponsored by the Montana Post-Secondary Education Opportunities Council, counselors asked if students should be encouraged to take the new, optional ACT Writing Assessment. Will students need a score from this spring's administration of the ACT Writing Assessment, the SAT, or the Montana University System Writing Assessment for admission to four-year programs of the Montana University System? For which class will these scores be required?

These questions cannot be answered definitively, since the Board of Regents has the authority to set admissions standards.

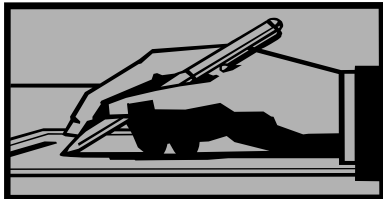
However, based on past experience, we can provide reasonable expectations.

In January of 2004, the Board of Regents "postponed the adoption of specific admissions standards for composition proficiency until July 2005 so that the revised SAT and ACT tests, which will include authentic writing measures for the first time, may be included." The Board also authorized "implementation of the Montana Writing Assessment, which will serve as an alternative admissions standard to writing portions of national tests."

First, for about 5,000 students from roughly 90 high schools that participate in the MUS Writing Assessment and intend to go to college in

Montana, there is no need to incur the added expense of the ACT Writing Assessment. For those who plan to go out of state, they should check those college's admissions standards, but it is unlikely that any college or university will set an admission score based on the first administration of ACT's Writing Test.

For those students who attend a high school that does not voluntarily participate in the MUS Writing Assessment, the answer may be less clear. The Board of Regents will not pass an admission standard that impacts the class of 2005. When the Regents take action in July, they will consider the distribution of scores from Montana students who took the new SAT, the new ACT Writing Test, and the MUS Writing Assessment and the recommendations of the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee. Therefore, it is important



that a large enough pool of Montana students take the ACT Writing Test in order to make a well-informed decision.

Whether a standard will be set to first impact the Class of 2006 or 2007 may be based on testimony, which is likely to suggest that the standard be enforced for students entering the universities in 2007. Perhaps the Class of 2006 will be given score "recommendations" to help them select the program in which they are most likely to succeed.

Therefore, if the ACT Writing Test does not present a financial hardship to the student, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education recommends taking the test to provide more data for decision-makers at the state level, for school counselors and teachers, and for college-planning by the student.

## ACT Website Includes Publications About New Writing Assessment

The ACT website ([www.act.org](http://www.act.org)) has up-to-date information about their new, optional Writing Assessment. In the list of publications, refer to the "Educator's Guide to the ACT Writing Test." This includes:

1) "Overview of the ACT Assessment Writing Test" with; Features of the Writing Test, Example prompt, and Example Essays with Scoring Explanations.

2) "Scoring the ACT Assessment Writing Test" with; The Scoring Rubric, Holistic Rubric, Anchor Set, Practice Set and Scoring Key.

3) "Using Results from the ACT Assessment Writing Test" with; Scores and Comments, Test of Essays, Norms for the ACT Assessment Writing Test, and Standards for Transition.

4) "Teaching Persuasive Writing Through an Integrated Language Arts Curriculum" with; Classroom Standards, and Integrated English Language Arts Classroom Activities. This is an article written by Dr. Beverly Ann Chin of the University of Montana, Missoula.

The complete web address is: <http://www.act.org/aap/writing/highschool/download.html>.

## Montana University System Writing Assessment Aligned with Board of Public Education’s Writing Content Standards

In 2001, the Montana University System, committees of P-20 professionals, and nearly 100 high schools began collaborating to offer a statewide writing assessment that partially meets the need for performance measures in assessing K-12 content standards. Montana’s **Standards for Writing** (BPE/OPI, 1999) list six broad content standards. The Montana University System Writing Assessment is aligned with several of those standards—most obviously, **Content Standard I: Students write clearly and effectively**. Upon Graduation Benchmarks for **Content Standard I** clearly align with the MUS Writing Assessment’s Holistic Scoring Rubric, as evidenced in the following table:

Montana University System Holistic Scoring Rubric	Montana Standards for Writing Upon Graduation
<p><b>In a 6-level paper:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. organization is unified and logical, with effective transitions.</li> <li>2. clarify a position on the issue, providing extensive and compelling supporting evidence.</li> <li>3. language is fluent with well-controlled sentences, clear and effective expression of ideas, and precise word choice</li> <li>4. while there may be a few errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, an outstanding command of language is apparent.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Students Write Clearly and Effectively; they</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. organize text in paragraphs with clear beginning, middle, and end, using effective transitions and logical sequence.</li> <li>2. develop and elaborate main ideas through relevant and specific supporting details.</li> <li>3. demonstrate purposeful control of personal voice, sentence structure, and word choice.</li> <li>4. apply conventions of standard written English (e.g., spelling, punctuation, usage) appropriate for grade level and purpose.</li> </ol>

The MUS Writing Assessment requires that students demonstrate their achievement of other Standards for Writing, as described below.

**Content Standard 2, *Students apply a range of skills and strategies in the writing process***, appears, at first glance, not to apply to a timed, prompted writing assessment. However, as with many other state writing assessments, Montana students did not achieve higher scores with a two-day option, which allowed them to employ the writing process more effectively than during a 40-minute setting. Students who practice the writing process regularly are better able to produce a piece of writing on demand, within a limited time frame because they have learned “to adapt and choose the writing strategies that best suit a particular writing task” (Rationale). Student answers to the question “How often do you write more than one draft of a paper before it is graded by a teacher?” shows students who “usually” and “always” use the writing process score .5 higher than those who do not. With the Montana University System Writing Assessment as an incentive and an opportunity to write for a critical audience, more schools realize the importance Writing Content Standard 2’s Rationale: “By having ample time and frequent opportunities to write, writers grow in confidence and competence.”

**Content Standard 3, *Students evaluate and reflect on their growth as writers***, recommends that “By using criteria for effective writing, successful writers set goals for writing improvement and select strategies and resources to accomplish those goals” (Rationale). With the widespread availability of a Scoring Rubric, students can become familiar with the criteria for effective writing. Because students have the opportunity to practice for the Montana University System Writing Assessment through classroom exercises designed by their own teachers or by using Webwriters, writers can set goals for improvement and seek resources on the Internet. Score reports to schools include data on writers’ strengths and weaknesses, helping students achieve the third benchmark under this standard “analyze and evaluate strengths and weaknesses as writers.”

Although **Content Standard 4, *Students write for a variety of purposes and audiences*** assumes that writers have the luxury of choice—“Once writers have a purpose, they select audiences”—most often in the real world, a writing task is assigned or mandated by circumstance. The Montana University Writing Assessment prompts describe a scenario that defines an audience and purpose for the writer. Within this context, it is the writer’s responsibility to “make stylistic and

structural choices that allow them [students] to communicate effectively” (Rationale).

**Content Standard 5, *Students recognize the structures of various forms and apply these characteristics to their own writing*** requires that students will be able to “write using characteristics of different forms” including “multi-paragraph essays, persuasive, expository, and argumentative” upon graduation. The MUS Writing Assessment requires that students demonstrate attainment of this standard.

Although **Content Standard 6, *Students use the inquiry process, problem-solving strategies, and resources to synthesize and communicate information***, focuses on research, one of its Upon Graduation Benchmarks is closely aligned with the MUS Writing Assessment. The benchmark, “Students will identify and investigate alternative explanations or solutions, and use criteria to draw and defend conclusions based on their analysis and evaluation of the information,” may technically refer to information gathered through research. In the Writing Assessment, students identify a solution which they must defend through analysis and evaluation of the alternatives.

Finally, the Writing Performance Standards describe **a *graduating student at the proficient level of writing*** who ***demonstrates solid academic performance***. He/she:

- a) *writes clearly and effectively by applying a range of skills and*

*strategies in the writing process;*

- b) *often seeks and responds to feedback to evaluate and revise writing, as well as reflects on his/her growth as a writer;*
- c) *recognizes variations within the forms and often identifies levels of meaning;*
- d) *occasionally takes risks when applying these characteristics to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, and different genres, including expository and persuasive writing;*
- e) *initiates his/her own inquiries; and*
- f) *uses current and emerging technologies and information sources to communicate.*

When students participate in the MUS Writing Assessment, they take risks as they seek feedback about whether they can write clearly and effectively, they must apply the characteristics of persuasive writing, and they have the option of using technology to seek assistance and produce their essays. Although any one assessment cannot and should not attempt to evaluate the entire range of standards in any given content area, the addition of a timed, prompted essay can play a significant role in assessing Montana’s Standards for Writing and satisfying the Curriculum and Assessment Standard’s requirement that school districts “use effective and appropriate multiple measures and methods to assess student progress in achieving content and performance standards in all program areas” (Board of Public Education, 10.55.603).

## Training of Trainers Scheduled

In Training of Trainers, educators: 1) learn principles of Montana’s large scale writing assessment; 2) review prompts, select anchor papers, and write annotations; 3) conduct training and scoring sessions for other teachers; and 4) apply effective strategies for teaching and assessing writing. Participants may earn 2 graduate credits. Scoring is tentatively scheduled at seven regional sites. Three to five trainers are needed at each site.

While the development of new training materials is difficult and time-consuming, test users recommend annual introduction of new writing prompts. To achieve a balance, the MUS Writing Assessment uses two “old” prompts (and their anchor and practice papers) and two new prompts. To produce a timely set of training materials, teachers who administer the 2005 Writing Assessment before February 28 bring their completed tests to Training of Trainers.

Training of Trainers is slated to begin at 9 a.m. on Monday, February 28 and adjourn at 3:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 1 at the Mountain Valley Inn, 2101 East 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Helena. To make room reservations at the Mountain Valley Inn, call 443-2300 and ask for the block of rooms under the Commissioner of Higher Education. Light breakfasts and lunches will be provided each day.

## Sixteen Newsletters Available Online

Because mailing costs are high and many school administrators are inundated with paper, the Office of the Commissioner does not regularly send Writing Proficiency Newsletters to every high school in Montana. Those high schools that test their students have newsletters enclosed in other mailings, such as their test results.

However, the information found in these newsletters should be of interest to all of Montana’s high school principals and English staff, as well as to curriculum directors and superintendents. An archive of all newsletters, which report detailed results of all test cycles from 2001 to the present can be found online at: <http://mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm>.

## Training and Scoring (March 29—April 22) Registration

Please FAX this registration form as soon as possible, but at least **by March 15** to Jan Clinard: FAX (406) 444-1469. Or, you may call 444-0652 or e-mail [jclinard@oche.montana.edu](mailto:jclinard@oche.montana.edu) with this information.

**Please check the date and site you wish to attend.**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>March 29-30</b>      | <b>Miles City (Miles Community College)</b>      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>March 31-April 1</b> | <b>Billings (MSU-Billings)</b>                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>April 4-5</b>        | <b>Helena (Montana Higher Education Complex)</b> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>April 11-12</b>      | <b>Bozeman (Holiday Inn)</b>                     |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>April 21-22</b>      | <b>Great Falls (MSU-GF Heritage Hall)</b>        |

Name of School or Institution: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Names of scorers:	E-mail addresses:	College credit?
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____

For college credit, you must complete an assignment PRIOR to scoring. For the Miles City and Billings sites, credit will be available from MSU-Billings. Contact [kholt@msubillings.edu](mailto:kholt@msubillings.edu) for assignment. For Bozeman and Great Falls, credit will be available from MSU-Bozeman. Contact [abangert@montana.edu](mailto:abangert@montana.edu) for assignment. For Missoula, Kalispell, and Helena credit will be available from UM-Missoula. Contact [beverly.chin@mso.umt.edu](mailto:beverly.chin@mso.umt.edu) for assignment.

## Training of Trainers (February 28 - March 1) Registration

**Please FAX this form to Jan Clinard at 406-444-1469 or email answers to [jclinard@oche.montana.edu](mailto:jclinard@oche.montana.edu) by February 14**

*Please print clearly.*

Name (Last)	Name (First)	Year(s) Scored (01, 02, 03, 04)	Want Credit? (Y/N)*	E-mail Address

School: \_\_\_\_\_



## Students May Use WEBwriters to Prepare for Writing Assessment and WEBcoaches to Earn Scholarships

WEBWriters provides students with the information and practice needed to earn top scores on the Montana University System Writing Assessment. At WEBWriters, students find clues about how to write a persuasive essay, the scoring rubric, sample essays, and links to more information about writing. WEBwriters is funded by the Student Assistance Foundation of Montana.

In addition, some of Montana's top English teachers have volunteered to score practice essays. With WEBWriters, students get some feedback on their writing from the same teachers who will score the test in April.

Another feature, **WEBcoaches**, invites students to apply for the services of an expert writing instructor who will coach students as they write poetry, stories, or essays. The WebCoach will read these student pieces, provide suggestions about revision, and teach the secrets to good writing--all via e-mail! This year, students who use a WEBcoach will be automatically entered into a lottery for a \$500 scholarship at the college or university of their choice.

Students are encouraged to first get all the information they can from the self-help on WEBWriters. Then, if they want feedback, their teachers should schedule 40 minutes to type a practice essay and submit it to WEBWriters.

This year, the school codes needed to submit essays are the "SC" four-digit numbers found in OPI's school directory and used in several programs at OPI. This directory is available online from OPI at [www.opi.state.mt.us](http://www.opi.state.mt.us). Click on Programs and Services, then School Directory, and scroll through the School Directory to find the SC listed after your school's name.



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*Writing Proficiency  
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