

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter Seventeen, May 2005

Fifth Year Test Results

The Montana University System Writing Assessment was administered the fifth time during the last two weeks of February and first two weeks of March in 103 of Montana's high schools. Over 6,000 tests were mailed to schools and just over 1,700 tests were taken online. Scores are reported for the 5,969 students who completed the test. (Most schools do not give make-up tests.)

This year, the mean score was 3.4. In 2001, the mean score for 3365 tests was 3.0; in 2002, the mean for 3467 tests was 3.2; in 2003, the mean for 4,000 tests was 3.3; and in 2004, the mean score for 4714 was also 3.4.

Although scores improved steadily from 2001 through 2004, the 2005 scores seem to have reached a plateau. This can be explained, in part, by the addition of about 1200 test-takers from

schools without the benefit of the experience and professional development that are integral to this project.

The chart below shows a five-year comparison of the 40-minute samples and the following page has information about score distributions.

The 2005 test used two prompts from 2004 and introduced two new prompts, drafted at the Montana Indian Education Conference. Every student was given a choice of two prompts, spiraled so that the choices were randomized over the entire population.

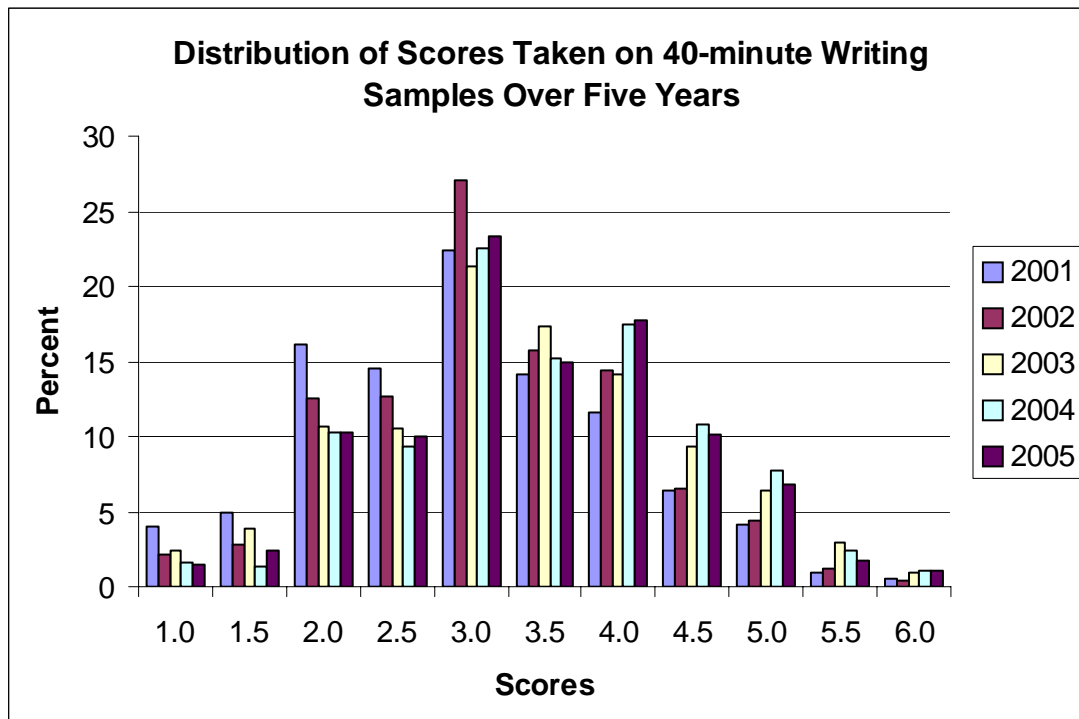
The newer prompts allow students to offer a third solution to the problem presented. This type of prompt is similar to the prompts that ACT uses in their new writing test, administered for the first time in February of 2005.

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Visit our website :
www.mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm



Proficiency
Admissions

2005 Statewide Test Results

Score	Total		11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5
1.0	1.5%		1.4%	2.8%	0.8%	1.0%	4.7%	2.3%	13.3%
1.5	2.2%		2.5%	2.2%	1.6%	1.6%	5.8%	4.7%	0.0%
2.0	10.1%		11.6%	7.8%	8.9%	7.1%	19.6%	16.8%	26.7%
2.5	9.8%		10.3%	9.7%	9.8%	7.5%	16.3%	16.4%	13.3%
3.0	23.8%		25.8%	19.9%	25.3%	20.5%	31.5%	26.6%	20.0%
3.5	14.9%		14.9%	13.2%	16.5%	14.6%	8.0%	13.3%	0.0%
4.0	17.7%		16.7%	18.4%	18.5%	20.2%	8.0%	9.8%	13.3%
4.5	10.4%		9.3%	11.7%	10.7%	12.7%	4.0%	5.9%	6.7%
5.0	6.7%		5.2%	9.7%	5.7%	9.9%	1.4%	3.1%	6.7%
5.5	1.8%		1.4%	2.8%	1.4%	3.0%	0.4%	1.2%	0.0%
6.0	1.1%		0.9%	1.9%	0.8%	1.9%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%
Mean	3.4		3.3	3.5	3.4	3.6	2.8	3.0	2.8
SD	1.0		1.0	1.1	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.2
N	5969		3806	683	2825	2105	276	256	15

KEY

- Ed1: Continue my education at a college or university in Montana.
- Ed2: Continue my education at a college or university in another state.
- Ed3: Seek employment after I leave high school.
- Ed4: Join the military after I leave high school.
- Ed5: Stay at home and take care of my family.
- Ed6: Other

Chart Explained

The chart above contains the following information:

- The first column to the left lists the score points from 1 to 6. Two or three people scored each essay and scores were averaged, resulting in scores such as 3.5.
- The second column (*Total*) lists student score distribution, with a **percentage** at each score point.
- Columns 3-4 list score distributions based on student grade level.
- The last 5 columns list score distributions for post-secondary plans. A key at the bottom lists possible answers to the question, "What do you plan to do after high school?"
- Below the *Mean* (average scores) row is the standard deviation (*SD*).
- *N* is the total number and numbers under each category. Data may be missing if students did not bubble-in information about test length, year in school, etc.

On the back page are two additional statewide charts, one showing scores for handwritten tests, with a mean

score of 3.3, and one showing scores for word-processed tests, with a mean of 3.6. Of the handwritten papers, 30.9% scored at 4.0 or above; of the word-processed, 45.1% scored 4.0 or above. At the other end of the scale, while 17.7% of the handwritten papers scored 2 or below, only 9.4% of the word-processed scored that low.

Questions about plans after high school reveal that 82.5% of these students intend to go to college. Of those planning to continue their educations in Montana, 21.1% scored below 3 (down from 22% in 2004). In 2005, 66 students scored 6.0, 24 of whom answered that they planned to attend a college or university in Montana.

By comparison, in 2004, 42 students earned 6's, in 2003, 33 students earned 6's, in 2002, 14 students scored 6, and in 2001, 21 students scored 6. Except for 2001, each year about one third of the highest-scoring students plan to pursue degrees in Montana.

Teachers' Support Writing Assessment

124 teachers who administered the Writing Assessment completed questionnaires. They were given a series of ten statements, which they rated from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Based on their responses, 86% support the Montana Board of Regent's decision to use this Writing Assessment as one way for students to demonstrate proficiency in writing for admissions to the four-year programs. In addition, 85% support "a Writing Assessment as part of Montana's Comprehensive Assessment System."

Other findings include the following:

- 85% of the teachers agree their "students understand the importance of becoming proficient in writing to succeed in college." This is down slightly from last year's figure.
- 67% agree "Most of my students appeared to be interested in the prompts and engaged in their thinking and writing."
- 66% agree their students were prepared to take the assessment by becoming familiar with the scoring rubric and persuasive prompts. A few teachers misunderstood this statement to mean that students were familiar with the test prompts themselves, rather than the format of the prompts.

Training and Scoring Attracts Record Number

In 2001, about 100 teachers and college instructors participated in training and scoring at three sites. In 2004, with five scoring sites, 175 educators and pre-service teachers scored essays. From March 29 through April 22, 2005, a record of 240 teachers, education students, and college instructors participated in training and scoring at seven sites throughout Montana.

For the second year, a group of trainers traveled to Helena and spent two days selecting training materials and practicing presentations in order to assist with training and scoring in Miles City, Billings, Bozeman, Missoula, Kalispell, Helena, and Great Falls.

These trainers are critical to the success of this project and should be commended for their contributions and professionalism.

Bozeman Trainers:

Phil Gaines
Art Bangert
Ann Sullivan
D. Winterburn

Billings Trainers:

Kathy Holt
Jen Sieve
Glenda Skillen
Jon Moore

Great Falls Trainers:

Joyce Damm
Colleen Hazen
Holly Pepprock
Dawn Dengel
Joanie Svennungsen
Jerry Grinder
Landon Harrison
Susanne Whelchel

Helena Trainers:

Robyn Wingo
Jean O'Connor

Kalispell Trainers:

Tari Johnson
Ellenjoy Hoerner
Melanie Knadler

Miles City Trainers:

Michael MacDonald
Greg Hirst

Missoula Trainers:

Beverly Ann Chin
Cathy Corr
Steve Tull
Kim Reiser
Deborah Hendricks
Carla Hinman

With few exceptions, scorers found the training/scoring experience very rewarding. Although there were a few complaints about the temperature of the room, food, noise, and pacing (too rushed, too slow), almost every scorer agreed with the statement:

- “Participating in the training and scoring of the Montana University System Writing Assessment will help me prepare students for similar college entrance exams in the future.”

Word-Processed Essays Raise Questions

The least agreed-upon statement on the Scorer Questionnaire came from the statement: “I think all schools should use the word-processing option for all students who can use computers.” 34 scorers disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement.

However, during the process of sorting tests by score, it was evident that word-processed tests tend to score higher than handwritten tests. Analysis of the scores show that only four of the 66 papers with scores of “6” were handwritten.

In 2006, it may be advisable to divide training by handwritten and word-processed at different scoring sites and customize training at each site (either handwritten or word-processed). That could reduce the amount of training time and ensure that differences in those scores are not a function of the time of day they were scored.

We expect that more schools will select the online option in 2006, which could result in even more tests word-processed. With the availability of ACT and SAT handwritten essays, it may be time to limit the MUS Writing Assessment to word-processed, making it a clearly different option than those other writing assessments.

Teachers Urged to Help Develop Prompts

The prompts used in any writing assessment are a critical component of the test. Prompts used in the Montana University System Writing Assessment must be accessible to students from any of Montana’s communities.

When the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee began working with ACT in 2001, members felt that many of their prompts would be difficult for students from rural settings. As a result, in 2002, a group of Montana teachers gathered in Helena to craft 25 new prompts. A “bias review” committee, representing small, large, and reservation schools eliminated nine of those prompts.

After field testing those 16 prompts in 2002, the MUS Writing Assessment has used four prompts each year, two of which were used in the previous year to maintain consistency in anchor sets and scoring calibrations. In 2005, two prompts were introduced without extensive field testing. Further analysis from the test data may reveal whether or not those prompts should be continued.

The MUS Writing Assessment prompts share certain features. They present:

- A hypothetical situation involving a choice between alternative solutions, or student-generated choice;
- Specific criterion used to weigh the alternatives;
- A specific audience; and
- A letter format.

Scorers are instructed to accept creative approaches and consider the prompts as “invitations to write” rather than restrictive “assignments.”

Teachers who have developed practice prompts that worked well with their students are urged to submit these prompts to the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. New prompts are needed to avoid too much recycling of prompts and to keep the scorers interested. Send them to jlclnard@oche.montana.edu.

Responding to NCTE’s Report on SAT and ACT Writing Tests

A recent *Report from the NCTE Task Force on SAT and ACT Writing Tests* projects “potential detrimental impact of the tests on writing instruction in secondary schools.” The Task Force was concerned about the brevity of writing time (25 minutes), lack of choice in prompts, holistic scoring procedures, and lack of audience and purpose for the writing task. The task force is concerned that these writing assessments will encourage formulaic writing instruction, take “precious time away from high quality writing instruction,” and “promote writing instruction based on following patterns, writing one draft, and adhering to specific criteria for the text.”

Although Montana University System Writing Assessment was designed to mitigate some of these concerns, members of the Commissioner of Higher Education’s Writing Proficiency Steering Committee are sensitive to these criticisms of the SAT and ACT Writing Assessments. Issues of validity and reliability must be considered in the adoption of any test, whether or not results are used for high stakes purposes.

In the section entitled “Equity and Diversity,” the Task Force writes, “The lack of choice in the timed writing prompts may compromise some students and not others. Some research indicates that student choice can affect writing quality. In one large-scale study of a statewide writing assessment, researchers found that gender and race, when combined with choice, had an impact on student scores, particularly in the areas of writing conventions and sentence formation” (p. 10). Although the MUS Writing Assessment provides a choice of prompts, both prompts are similar in format and the topics tend to be limited to school, community, or state issues.

In their section on “Unintended Consequences,” the Task Force fears that “the SAT/ACT professional development packages may undermine ongoing teacher professional development efforts by NCTE, the National Writing Project, and other recognized professional organizations (p. 9). Conferences and workshops of the College Board and ACT are presented professionally, often with practicing educators as presenters. NCTE is concerned that the SAT/ACT professional development could include approaches to teaching writing that conflict with NCTE’s Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing. Perhaps the College Board and ACT’s efforts to increase the amount of professional development available in writing and to increase the amount of writing produced by high school students will lead to better writing.

The membership of the National Council of Teachers of English tends to be teachers who attend conferences, read articles, deliver high quality writing instruction and produce students who perform well on a variety of writing tasks. But for every such teacher, there are many who do not actively seek effective instructional methods and seldom teach writing. Although the Task Force conceded “the College Board has expressed appropriate concern about the writing performance of high school graduates,” it did not acknowledge the recommendation of The National Commission on Writing to require students “to produce a piece of writing as part of the assessment process” (2003, p. 30) as one way to address of the problem of “The Neglected ‘R’ (writing).” Even though the 25-minute and 30-minute timed writings that have been added to the SAT and ACT may not be the idea approach to assessing all forms of writing, they have certainly gotten the attention of English teachers and students.

Data based on five years of the MUS Writing Assessment—about 23,000 students—show that students who most often use the writing process (producing several drafts and rewriting) score better on this timed writing than students who do not. Professional development for the MUS Writing Assessment emphasizes that teaching writing process prepares students for timed writings. In addition, schools whose teachers have consistently participated in the training/scoring events associated with the Writing Assessment have higher average test scores.

Engaging in the Writing Process for a Timed Writing

Scorers are often disappointed to find essays that have been completely drafted on the planning page, then recopied (with minimal changes) on the test pages. Often the actual essay is incomplete because the student spent most of his time drafting. Preliminary research in planning techniques shows that students who draft their essays first do not score any higher than students who do no planning at all. However, students who create T-charts, outlines, or lists of ideas score much better than students who do not plan. The writing process is not just about drafting and copying. Brainstorming and organizing ideas are critical and prove to be the best way to use the writing process when faced with a timed writing.

The MUS Writing Assessment, the SAT essay, and the ACT optional writing test are scored as drafts. First, students should brainstorm ideas, organize them, and quickly plan an approach to the writing task. Then, they should draft a response and proofread. Students are not penalized for crossing out or adding text to this draft, which is scored knowing it was produced in a short time frame.



**Writing Proficiency
Steering Committee**

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Montana 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 1 These papers have severe problems in more than one area. 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.
- 0 These papers cannot be scored with the rubric (completely off-topic, illegible, inappropriate or obviously interrupted)

**Rubric May Require
Fine-Tuning**

Experienced scorers wanting to ensure that the scoring rubric is applied fairly and consistently, have raised questions about the differences in “evidence,” “elaboration,” and “explanation” at score points 3-6. “Notes on Scoring Development” use the following descriptors:

- 6:** Generally imaginative, sometimes have global perspective, may include quotes
- 5:** Beyond competency to some degree of sophistication
- 4:** Shows understanding of need to extend idea and provide convincing evidence; may be redundant, however.
- 3:** May make multiple assertions that aren't related to one another; evidence may be variations on one idea without much specificity.
- 2:** Elaboration may be accidental rather than deliberate
- 1:** May make assertions with no support.

How could these “notes,” or the rubric be revised to better reflect the nuances of these score points? Send your ideas to jlclnard@oche.montana.edu.

2005 Statewide Results for Handwritten Essays

Please see Key for Ed1—Ed6 on page two.

Score	Total	Given Full 40 Minutes	Not Given Full 40 Minutes	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6
1.0	1.9%	2.0%	--	1.7%	4.2%	1.1%	1.3%	7.1%	3.9%	33.3%	3.8%
1.5	2.8%	3.0%	--	2.7%	4.2%	2.2%	2.0%	6.4%	6.3%	0.0%	6.4%
2.0	13.0%	13.2%	--	13.1%	10.7%	11.8%	8.9%	22.9%	26.8%	16.7%	24.5%
2.5	11.1%	11.3%	--	10.9%	14.1%	12.1%	7.9%	15.7%	18.1%	16.7%	12.1%
3.0	26.2%	25.8%	--	26.5%	23.3%	27.7%	24.2%	29.3%	22.0%	16.7%	25.3%
3.5	14.1%	14.0%	--	14.4%	11.1%	15.8%	14.1%	7.9%	11.8%	0.0%	11.3%
4.0	17.1%	17.0%	--	16.6%	21.4%	18.2%	20.3%	5.0%	6.3%	0.0%	10.2%
4.5	7.9%	7.8%	--	8.1%	6.1%	7.6%	10.5%	2.9%	3.9%	16.7%	3.0%
5.0	4.6%	4.8%	--	4.6%	5.0%	3.2%	7.7%	2.9%	0.8%	0.0%	3.0%
5.5	0.8%	0.8%	--	0.9%	0.0%	0.4%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
6.0	0.5%	0.5%	--	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Mean	3.2	3.2	0.0	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.5	2.6	2.7	2.3	2.8
SD	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.8	1.3	0.9
N	3060	2861	0	2791	262	1427	1048	140	127	6	265

2005 Statewide Results for Word-Processed Essays

Please see Key for Ed1—Ed6 on page two.

Score	Total	Given Full 40 Minutes	Not Given Full 40 Minutes	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6
1.0	1.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.6%	2.0%	0.7%	0.6%	2.3%	0.9%	0.0%	4.2%
1.5	1.5%	1.6%	0.0%	1.9%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%	5.4%	2.6%	0.0%	6.1%
2.0	6.9%	6.8%	0.0%	7.0%	5.8%	5.7%	5.1%	16.3%	6.0%	33.3%	16.4%
2.5	8.4%	8.5%	9.1%	8.4%	6.8%	7.6%	6.8%	16.3%	14.7%	11.1%	13.3%
3.0	21.2%	20.6%	54.5%	24.1%	17.3%	22.8%	16.5%	34.1%	29.3%	22.2%	21.2%
3.5	15.9%	16.2%	9.1%	16.7%	14.8%	17.2%	15.2%	7.8%	16.4%	0.0%	15.2%
4.0	18.3%	18.4%	18.2%	16.5%	17.0%	18.8%	20.0%	10.9%	13.8%	22.2%	11.5%
4.5	13.2%	13.0%	9.1%	12.9%	15.3%	13.9%	15.0%	5.4%	8.6%	0.0%	7.3%
5.0	9.1%	9.3%	0.0%	6.9%	12.5%	8.4%	12.7%	0.0%	5.2%	11.1%	3.6%
5.5	2.8%	2.7%	0.0%	2.9%	4.5%	2.4%	4.3%	0.8%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%
6.0	1.7%	1.7%	0.0%	1.9%	3.0%	1.5%	2.7%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Mean	3.6	3.6	3.3	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.8	2.9	3.3	3.1	3.0
SD	1.0	1.0	0.6	1.0	1.1	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0
N	2718	2420	11	896	399	1305	985	129	116	9	165

In addition to the charts above, participating schools received these distribution charts for their schools. Also, teachers received a chart like this for each of their classes.

Additional data, including disaggregation of scores by gender and ethnicity will be summarized in the next newsletter.