

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter Twenty, May 2006

Scores Continue to Improve in Sixth Year of Testing

The Montana University System Writing Assessment was administered for the sixth time during February and March in 108 of Montana's high schools. About 4,000 tests were mailed to schools and 3,597 tests were submitted online. Scores are reported for the 6,908 students who completed the test.

This year, the mean score was 3.5. 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; in 2004, the mean score for 4,714 tests was 3.4, and in 2005, the mean score for 5,969 tests was 3.4.

The chart below shows a six-year comparison of the 40-minute samples and the following page has information about score distributions. During the pilot years, different time options, from

30 to 90 minutes, were allowed. Because research showed that the 40-minute option yielded the best results, other time options are no longer permitted.

The 2006 test used three prompts from 2005 and introduced three new prompts, drafted and field-tested by practicing teachers. Every student was given a choice of two prompts, designated as sets one, two, and makeup day. 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 optional writing test, administered for the first time in February of 2005.

The Board of Regents' Writing Proficiency Policy includes this test as one measure for gaining full admission to four-year programs of the Montana University System.

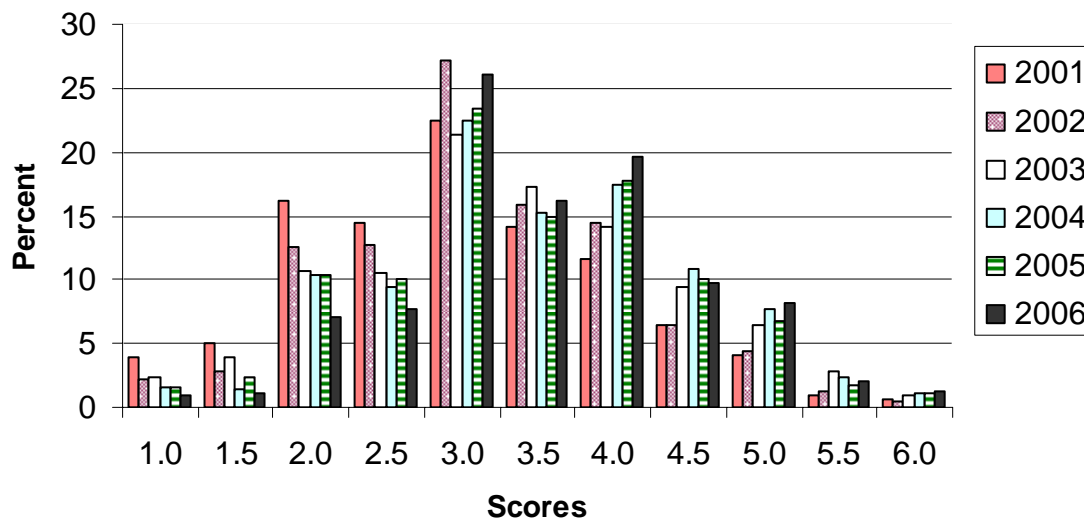
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Visit our website :
www.mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm

Distribution of Scores Taken on 40-minute Writing Samples Over Six Years



Writing Proficiency
Admissions

2006 Statewide Test Results

Score	Total	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6	N/R
1.0	1.0%	0.9%	1.4%	0.6%	0.4%	4.3%	2.9%	13.3%	2.5%	2.5%
1.5	1.1%	1.1%	1.6%	0.8%	0.8%	3.9%	1.6%	6.7%	2.1%	1.7%
2.0	7.1%	6.9%	9.5%	5.2%	4.7%	24.0%	16.3%	6.7%	14.0%	8.3%
2.5	7.7%	7.8%	7.6%	6.7%	6.1%	16.1%	13.4%	13.3%	12.8%	7.5%
3.0	26.0%	25.9%	26.6%	26.2%	21.0%	28.9%	37.1%	33.3%	35.2%	34.2%
3.5	16.1%	16.2%	15.9%	19.1%	14.3%	11.2%	10.7%	6.7%	12.4%	15.8%
4.0	19.7%	19.7%	19.2%	20.8%	23.2%	7.9%	11.4%	20.0%	9.9%	19.2%
4.5	9.8%	10.0%	8.2%	10.3%	12.2%	2.0%	3.9%	0.0%	6.0%	5.8%
5.0	8.1%	8.2%	7.4%	7.8%	11.7%	1.0%	2.3%	0.0%	3.9%	3.3%
5.5	2.1%	2.1%	1.4%	1.7%	3.5%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.8%
6.0	1.2%	1.1%	1.0%	0.8%	2.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.5%	0.8%
Mean	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.8	2.7	3.0	2.7	3.1	3.3
SD	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9
N	6908	6385	485	3319	2280	304	307	15	563	120

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 themselves.

On the back page are two additional statewide charts, one showing scores for handwritten tests, with a mean score of 3.6, and one showing scores for word-processed tests, with a mean of 3.5. Of the handwritten papers,

43.7% scored at 4.0 or above; of the word-processed, 44.1% scored 4.0 or above. At the other end of the scale, while 8.4% of the handwritten papers scored 2 or below, 7.8% of the word-processed scored that low. In previous years, the word-processed papers have outscored the handwritten papers. However, only 1,783 students handwrote this year, compared to 3,060 in 2005.

Questions about plans after high school reveal that 81% of these students intend to go to college. Of those planning to continue their educations in Montana, 13.3% scored below 3 (down from 21% in 2005).

In 2006, 83 students scored 6.0, 27 of whom answered that they planned to attend a college or university in Montana.

By comparison, in 2005, 66 students scored 6; 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.

Teacher Support Writing Assessment

66 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 this data:

- 85% support a Writing Assessment as part of Montana's Comprehensive Assessment System.
- 97% thought instructions were clear.
- 99% found that using three sets of prompts worked well.
- 87% thought their students took the test seriously. (Note that in 2005, only 67% agreed with the statement, *Most of my students appeared to be interested in the prompts and engaged in their thinking and writing.*) That increased seriousness may be a result of the Regents' policy adoption.
- 94% believe their students understand the importance of becoming proficient writers.

In the comment section, the majority of respondents believe that all students, not just college-bound students, should take this test. However, some said that students who did not plan to go to college did not take the test seriously.

Some commented that having too many instructions was confusing.

Record Number Score at Seven Sites

In 2001, about 100 teachers and college instructors participated in training and scoring at three sites. Numbers have increased yearly—to 175, to 240, and this year, to 290. They represent teachers, education students, and college instructors whose interest in student writing and instruction is evident.

For the third 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.

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

Bozeman Trainers:

Kirk Branch
Robyn Wingo
Jennie Tranel
Kaci Shober
Tricia Rummel
Tom Zuzlock

Billings Trainers:

Kathy Holt
Sue Baack
Glenda Skillen
Jon Moore

Great Falls Trainers:

Joyce Damm
Colleen Hazen
Annette Young
Dawn Dengel
Jana Carter
Renee Rasmussen
Chris Handley

Helena Trainers:

Robyn Wingo
Jean O'Connor
Jan Olson

Whitefish Trainers:

Tari Johnson
Bethany Blankenship
Beverly Kahn
Soozi Crosby

Miles City Trainers:

Michael MacDonald
Glenda Skillen

Missoula Trainers:

Beverly Ann Chin
Cathy Corr

Steve Tull
Anna Baldwin
Deborah Hendricks
Carla Hinman
Carol Sullivan
Lynda Corn
Melinda Bolinger
Rob Plakke
Tammie Slatersmith
Tiffany Rehbein

With few exceptions, scorers found the training/scoring experience very rewarding. 92% of the scorers 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.”

Responding to statements about the workshops, prompts, test results, and materials, 97-99% agreed or strongly agreed all were useful. 99% thought they had about the right number of papers to score. The poorest rating was pacing: 6.6% thought the pacing was too slow—that there could have been fewer practice sets.

Most interestingly, 98% of the scorers (though only 87% of the test administrators) thought students took the test seriously. This indicates that the actual writing of some students may demonstrate a more serious approach to the writing task than their teachers observed.

Scorers Comment that Online Tests Exhibit Email Trait

Scorers observed that some online tests appeared to have characteristics of emails: lack of punctuation and capitalization, as well as a conversational tone. In fact, the mean score for online word-processed tests was 3.5, whereas the mean score for paper word-processed tests was 3.6. Watch for an article about this disparity in the next newsletter.

Scorers suggest that schools be encouraged to use the option of asking students to compose their essays in a word-processing program rather than in the text box, which may cause students to put themselves into the email

Tests Scores Will Be Available to Campuses

The scores that students earn on the Montana University System Writing Assessment will be available to campus admissions officers from the University System Data Warehouse. It will not be necessary for students to send these scores to the campuses.

However, students who take the ACT Optional Writing Test or the SAT, must select the University they wish to attend to have their scores sent.

Teachers Write Prompts

Several teachers throughout Montana developed, then field-tested, new prompts for the 2006 assessment. The prompts were evaluated for inter-rater reliability, range of scores, score averages, and an even choice of options before being selected for use.

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 develop practice prompts that work well with their students are urged to submit these prompts to the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education.

New prompts are needed yearly to avoid overuse of prompts and to keep the scorers interested. Several 2006 scorers suggested that more “high-level thinking” prompts be developed, to be paired with the most accessible prompts. Please send prompt ideas to: jlcnard@oche.montana.edu.

**Montana Writing Assessment Word-Processed Results
Frequency Distributions 2006**

Score	Total	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6	N/R
1.0	0.9%	0.9%	1.2%	0.5%	0.4%	3.3%	3.3%	7.1%	2.4%	0.0%
1.5	1.0%	1.0%	1.8%	0.7%	0.7%	3.8%	0.9%	7.1%	1.9%	1.5%
2.0	7.6%	7.5%	9.5%	5.3%	5.2%	25.9%	18.8%	7.1%	14.6%	5.9%
2.5	8.2%	8.2%	7.4%	6.9%	6.7%	16.7%	13.6%	14.3%	13.6%	5.9%
3.0	27.6%	27.6%	27.0%	27.8%	22.7%	30.1%	37.1%	35.7%	36.7%	41.2%
3.5	15.0%	15.1%	14.2%	17.4%	13.6%	10.9%	8.9%	7.1%	13.1%	14.7%
4.0	18.9%	19.0%	18.1%	20.4%	22.6%	5.4%	10.8%	21.4%	7.8%	22.1%
4.5	9.3%	9.4%	9.2%	10.2%	11.6%	2.1%	3.8%	0.0%	3.9%	2.9%
5.0	8.1%	8.1%	8.0%	8.0%	11.1%	0.8%	2.3%	0.0%	4.6%	2.9%
5.5	2.1%	2.1%	2.1%	2.0%	3.2%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	1.5%
6.0	1.2%	1.2%	1.5%	0.8%	2.2%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.7%	1.5%
Mean	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.7	2.7	2.9	2.9	3.0	3.4
SD	1.0	1.0	1.1	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8
N	4921	4568	337	2341	1635	239	213	14	411	68

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 home and take care of my family~~
 Ed6 : Other

**Montana Writing Assessment Handwritten Results
Frequency Distributions 2006**

Score	Total	11th	12th	Ed1	Ed2	Ed3	Ed4	Ed5	Ed6	N/R
1.0	1.4%	1.3%	2.4%	0.7%	0.7%	9.3%	2.3%	100.0%	3.0%	6.5%
1.5	1.2%	1.2%	1.6%	0.9%	0.9%	3.7%	3.4%	0.0%	2.2%	2.2%
2.0	5.8%	5.7%	6.4%	5.0%	3.5%	16.7%	9.1%	0.0%	12.6%	10.9%
2.5	6.9%	6.7%	8.8%	6.4%	4.8%	14.8%	13.6%	0.0%	10.4%	8.7%
3.0	22.0%	21.3%	28.8%	22.0%	16.9%	22.2%	37.5%	0.0%	31.9%	26.1%
3.5	19.0%	19.2%	18.4%	23.5%	15.7%	14.8%	13.6%	0.0%	10.4%	15.2%
4.0	21.4%	21.5%	20.0%	21.5%	24.5%	14.8%	13.6%	0.0%	16.3%	17.4%
4.5	11.3%	11.7%	6.4%	11.3%	13.8%	1.9%	4.5%	0.0%	10.4%	8.7%
5.0	8.4%	8.6%	7.2%	7.3%	13.5%	1.9%	2.3%	0.0%	2.2%	4.3%
5.5	1.7%	1.9%	0.0%	1.0%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%
6.0	0.9%	0.9%	0.0%	0.5%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Mean	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.9	2.8	3.1	1.0	3.2	3.2
SD	1.0	1.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	0.9	0.0	1.0	1.0
N	1781	1636	125	878	579	54	88	1	135	46

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.