

Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System

Newsletter Twenty-two January 2007

Testing and Professional Development Schedule Set

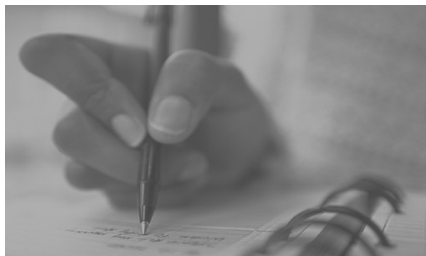
Montana's high schools may administer the 2007 Montana University System Writing Assessment on any day during a month-long window, **February 5 through March 9**. For schools using the paper versions of the test, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education must know the exact number of tests to mail. One advantage of selecting the online version is that these tests can be electronically retrieved should questions arise about their scores.

Training of Trainers, designed for experienced scorers who want to refine their leadership and training skills, will be held **February 21-22** in Helena. A registration form and tentative agenda can be found on the Writing Proficiency Website: <http://mus.montana.edu/writingproficiency/index.htm>. Trainers' lodging in Helena, four days of substitute teacher pay, and college credit are grant-funded.

Schools that participate in the MUSWA are obligated to send teachers, administrators, or counselors to assist with the scoring process and to learn how the tests are scored and to discuss the features of proficient writing with others, including college instructors. These annual sessions appear to be making a positive impact on the quality of student writing.

Training and Scoring Sessions have been scheduled throughout Montana so that all interested teachers can find a site and a date that is convenient.

March 13-14 Missoula
March 14-15 Whitefish
March 15-16 Helena
March 19-20 Billings
March 20-21 Miles City
March 22-23 Bozeman
March 26-27 Glasgow
March 28-29 Great Falls



Registration materials are available on the website. Participants may earn Renewal Units at no cost or College Credit at a significant discount.

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Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
Proficiency Admissions

Operational Rules Proposed for Provisional Admissions Status

Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16, which establishes writing proficiency standards for the Montana University System, states that "A student who has not yet demonstrated the ability to meet these standards may be admitted (without condition) to a two-year degree program or admitted provisionally to a four-year degree program on any campus of the Montana University System."

In order to provide guidance for the admissions officers in the Montana University System, a committee of campus representatives met to draft operational rules for Provisional Admissions. These draft rules will be reviewed by the Board of Regents for approval during their February 28-March 2 meeting in Helena.

Proposed Operational Rules:

1. The institutions that make up the Montana University System will use two (2) standard admission letters for students who are provisionally admitted under Policy 301.16.
 - A) Letter A will be used for students who completed at least one of the proficiency measures outlined in Policy 301.16, but their writing proficiency is below the thresholds established in that Policy. Those students may be provisionally admitted to a four-year degree program, and Letter A explains what they need to do to be fully admitted.
 - A) Letter B will be used for students who completed none of the proficiency measures outlined in Policy 301.16. Those students may be provisionally admitted to a four-year degree program, and Letter B will explain how they can obtain a writing score and what they need to do to be fully admitted. Part b) of Operational Rule 1 will only apply during the
2. If students have been provisionally admitted, they must change that status to full admission before the end of three semesters or the completion of 32 credits in the Montana University System, whichever event occurs first.
3. The criteria for full admission are set out in Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16.I.E. If students do not comply with this operational rule, their provisional admissions status will be revoked and they will not be able to continue their matriculation in a four-year degree program. The Registrars at each of the four-year campuses will monitor student progress to assist with the implementation of this rule.
4. Students who are provisionally admitted to the Montana University System may declare a major.
5. Students who are provisionally admitted will not be required to take a limited number of credits. They can be advised and encouraged to take a reduced number of credits while they work on their writing skills.
6. By Fall 2009, when the Montana University System Writing Proficiency standard is fully operational, all students who apply to a four-year degree program must be able to demonstrate their writing skills under the methods described in Policy 301.16.I.A. and C.
7. The term "provisional admission" has a particular meaning in the Montana University System, under Montana Board of Regents' Policy 301.16. It cannot be used to describe any other admissions status or situation in the System.

2006–2007 and 2007–2008 transitional years.

8. Because provisional admission has a particular meaning associated only with writing proficiency expectations, it does not change existing rules within the Montana University System concerning financial aid, scholarship eligibility, satisfactory academic progress, academic probation or suspension rules, and so on.

Status of Proposed Rules:

Student applicants have begun to receive letters from campuses modeled after the letters drafted by committee members.

Both Letters A and B quote portions of Policy 301.16. However, Letter A recommends that students plan to enroll in one or more developmental courses on campus, stating "The purpose of these courses is to advance your skill levels in preparation for college courses requiring composition."

Letter B recommends that students find a way to take one of the required tests before enrolling, arguing "by doing so, you will have the advantages of 1) knowing in advance what your admission status is, and 2) having earlier registration access to the appropriate writing course."

In both cases, students are given the final option of taking a placement exam during freshman orientation.

Many students have taken the advice in the letter and talked to their English teacher about taking the MUSWA. As a result, several schools that have not participated in the MUSWA previously have registered to test.

The Montana Board of Regents may suggest some revisions to these rules before they are adopted. Please note that the rules quoted above are in draft form.

Policies on Placement Will Lead to Consistency Across the System

The Writing Proficiency Policy 301.16 contains the following directive: “By Fall 2007, the Montana University System will:

1) Determine how this policy should be applied to the groups of students exempted in Section H, based on the Montana Board of Regents’ expectation that all students in four-year degree programs should satisfy a writing proficiency standard:

- Non-traditional students;
- summer students;
- part-time students;
- students transferring from a two-year program; and
- foreign students.

2) determine how this policy should impact the writing placement examinations on the campuses of the Montana University System, based on the Montana Board of Regents’ expectation that students should not have to take multiple writing examinations as part of their initial matriculation in the System.

3) establish a uniform system to collect and report student data related to writing proficiency to provide evaluation and analysis of the writing proficiency requirement.

To fulfill these requirements, a subcommittee of the Writing Proficiency Steering Committee has begun working on #1 above and meetings have been held on the UM and MSU campuses to begin working on #2: placement exams.

The Montana University System’s goal is to establish a system-wide Placement Policy. Hypothetically, if a student produced an essay under controlled conditions, using a

persuasive prompt, every campus in the MUS would make the same placement decision based on aligned rubrics or standards. Either that student would be placed into one of the campus’s developmental or pre-college level courses; or that student would be placed into a college-level composition course. In the case of a demonstration of outstanding writing skill, the student could also be placed in an advanced-level composition course or granted a waiver for the entry-level college composition course

Ideally, campus placement exams will follow the MUSWA testing protocol: a persuasive prompt, 40 minutes of writing under controlled conditions, the use of a holistic rubric (the MUSWA, ACT, SAT, or AP rubric), and scored by two trained scorers.

Campuses with a significant number of non-traditional students may propose the use of a computer-scored essay (such as E-Write). They may propose a methodology for either randomly hand-scoring a percentage of the essays or hand-scoring those essays scoring on either side of the threshold point.

At the time of this writing, the FIRST DRAFT of a Policy on Placement is: *Students who meet the 2009 Writing Proficiency thresholds on ACT, SAT, MUSWA, AP, or CLEP in Policy 301.16 will be placed in college-level composition courses and will not be required to take an additional writing placement exam.*

After 2008, students with writing scores below those full admission thresholds will be placed in developmental composition courses.

For placement purposes, in 2007 and 2008, campuses will first consider the ACT, SAT, MUSWA, AP or CLEP scores that were set as 2009 thresholds for full admissions.

Students scoring below the 2009 threshold will have to enroll in a developmental composition course as freshmen in order to sharpen their writing skills. However, students who believe they are ready for a college-level composition course may sit for the placement exam designed for non-traditional, part-time, summer-only, and foreign students.

The establishment of consistent placement standards and practices is important in order to provide clarity for high school students and teachers and to ensure fairness. When students are placed into development coursework, their time to graduation and college costs increase. Conversely, when they are placed into college-level courses for which they are unprepared, their failure rates increase.

The content and instructional methodologies of composition courses vary by campus and instructor. Reading is a key component of most freshman composition courses and the texts are chosen by the professors. However, because freshman comp is one of the most basic, transferable general education or core courses, expectations for the minimum skills brought into and exiting from the course should be comparable.

Grant Focuses on Prewriting as a Strategy for Writing Proficiency

by Robyn Wingo and Bethany Blankenship

Over the past two years, Robyn Wingo and Bethany Blankenship, both Assistant Professors at The University of Montana – Western, have been working under a Title II grant for improving teacher quality. Grant activities have been helping secondary English and language arts teachers focus on the first phase of the writing process – prewriting – in an effort to show their students how this strategy can improve their writing proficiency.

The grant has its foundation in Wingo’s (2005) research, which examined the 2004 MUS Writing Assessment test booklets to compare scores of essays that included prewriting to those that did not and to compare scores of different types of prewriting. Results showed that essays with prewriting had higher scores, and the most effective types of prewriting were outlining, listing, and T-diagramming. A summary of these findings can be found in the July 2005 issue of *Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System*. However, Wingo’s research was not able to determine whether a single student’s writing score would be affected with or without prewriting. The research of Wingo and Blankenship, through the grant activities, was able to determine student performance with and without prewriting.

Method

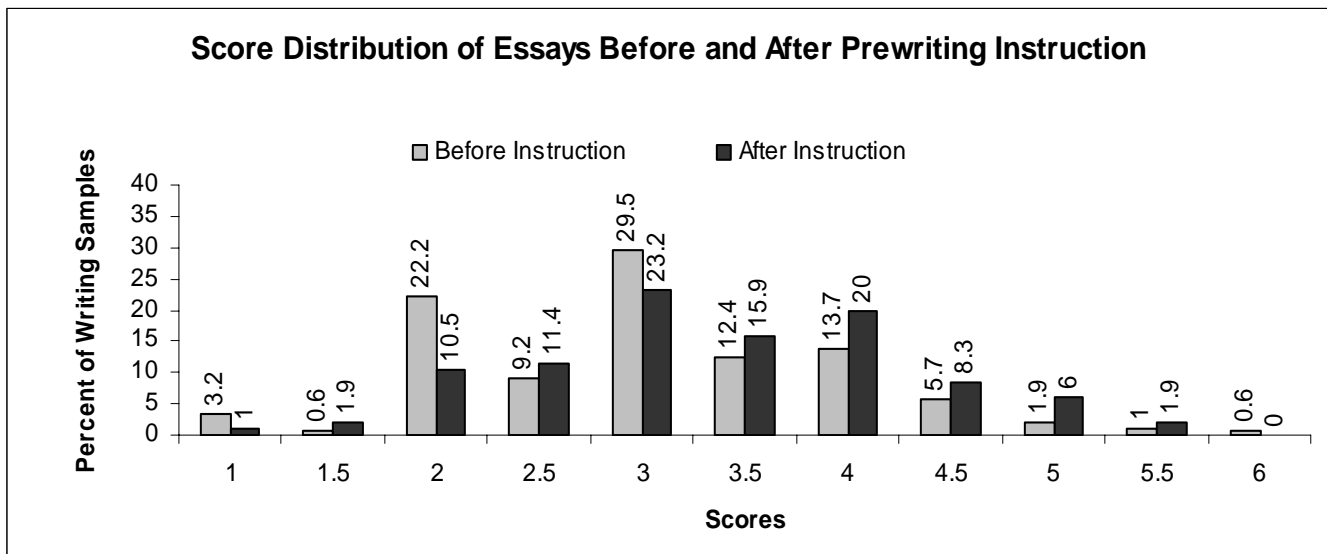
Through the grant, two workshops were developed for secondary English and language arts teachers. During the first workshop, we discussed Wingo’s research results showing increased writing proficiency through prewriting. We also showed the teachers several different methods of prewriting as well as techniques to teach prewriting. Teachers left the workshop armed with new textbooks and a directive to collect timed writing samples from students before and after they had implemented the prewriting lessons in their classrooms.

The first set of essays included a direction in the prompt for the students not to prewrite; the second set of essays directed students to prewrite before drafting. The essay prompts and time allotted for the exam mimicked the protocol for the MUS Writing Assessment. Accordingly, the student essays were scored using the six-point MUS holistic scoring rubric, and scorers for this research project were trained MUS scorers.

During the second workshop, we gave scoring results to the teachers. They and their students could then see first-hand that prewriting improves writing proficiency scores.

Results

Secondary teachers who participated in the grant activities submitted 315 sets of essays that their students wrote before and after receiving prewriting instruction. The average holistic score of the essays written before prewriting was taught was 3.0; the average score of the essays written after prewriting was taught was 3.4. The following graph illustrates the score distribution of essays before and after prewriting instruction:



The following chart illustrates the score increases with the prewriting techniques of outlining, T-diagramming, webbing, listing, and using multiple strategies:

Prewriting type	Number of essays	“Before” mean	“After” mean	Difference
Outline	28	3.6	3.8	+ .2
T-Diagram	67	3.2	3.5	+ .3
Web	135	3.0	3.3	+ .3
List	21	2.9	3.3	+ .4
Multiple types	41	2.6	3.1	+ .5

Conclusions

The challenge we face is to help students reach their full intellectual potential when it comes to demonstrating proficiency on writing assessments whether the writing sample is composed for a high-stakes standardized test or a classroom assignment. An essential part of the writing process, prewriting can easily become a part of teachers’ lesson plans. It is our hope that teachers, like those who have attended our workshops, will teach prewriting techniques as a means to help students demonstrate improved writing proficiency.

References

Wingo, R. L. (2005). The relationship between prewriting and holistic scores of a direct writing assessment (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Montana, 2005). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 66 (10), 3621A. (UMI No. 3193048)

Wingo, R. (2005, July). Dissertation studies prewriting for the 2004 MUS Writing Assessment. *Writing Proficiency in the Montana University System*, 18, 8-10. [Electronic version available at <http://www.montana.edu/mus/writingproficiency/index.htm>]

Editor’s Note: Although the authors do not point this out, students who outline not only begin with the highest scores, but also have the highest scores after the techniques are taught. Although webbing is the most popular (perhaps most fun) technique, it does not result in the best scores.

Montana University System Not Alone in Requiring Writing Proficiency for Admission

Many colleges and universities require that students submit a writing assessment score for admission. The following campuses, frequently chosen by Montana graduates, now require either the ACT with writing or the SAT: University of Washington, Washington State University, Oregon State University, Stanford University, University of Puget Sound, Harvard University, Portland State University, University of Southern California, Willamette University, Whitman College, New York University, Boston University, University of California, Princeton University, Yale University, Northwestern University, and Dickinson State University.

Students should carefully check the admissions requirements before they apply to colleges to find out if writing scores are required. In Montana, students can take the MUSWA in order to practice for the ACT or SAT Writing Assessments. All three ask students to write persuasively under controlled conditions and are scored by similar holistic rubrics.



After schools register for the 2007 Writing Assessment, their school names and codes are sent to MSU Great Falls to be uploaded on the pull-down menu of the Webwriters website. Schools can expect a delay of several days. Please remember that the number of scorers is limited.

The Montana University System appreciates the generosity of the Student Assistance Foundation, which funds Webwriters.



Remediation Task Force to Recommend Policies and Report

A task force with representatives from the campuses of the MUS and OPI met in Helena on December 13 to review current remediation practices, course-numbering, and data related to remediation and retention in the system. They wrestled with questions such as these: When students are admitted to college, but not yet ready to tackle college-level work, who has the responsibility to help them succeed? Do more stringent admission standards reduce the need for remediation? How are admission, placement, and remediation practices related to retention? How can policy help us collect accurate data that will help improve the system for all students?

Remedial or developmental courses prepare students to successfully complete college-level courses that satisfy the general education program requirements of each campus. Their content is not considered college-level, nor can their credits be transferred.

Task force members studied the Board of Regents' directives on remediation and proficiency admissions, charts showing developmental coursework on every campus, and data with college-going and remediation rates for every Montana high school.

The Task Force is expected to make recommendation on course-numbering, credit, delivery, and funding.

What are the remediation rates in the MUS?

In the Fall Semester of 2005, of those students who graduated from a Montana high school in 2005, 32.8% went into the Montana University System (2-yr and 4-yr) and of those 3,518 students, 32% were enrolled in developmental coursework. More specifically, 209 took only a developmental composition course, 639 took a developmental math course, and 278 took both math and composition developmental courses.

Rates for Spring and Fall Semesters of 2006 were not yet calculated at the time of the meeting.

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