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# Developing the ACT Assessment® Writing Test



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*An ACT Program for Educational Planning*



## Measuring the Essential Skills for College Readiness and Success

For over 40 years, the ACT Assessment® has distinguished itself as the only comprehensive measure of educational achievement available to students for college admissions and course placement in English, mathematics, reading, and science. In fact, the ACT Assessment was founded on principles that value measuring what students have learned in high school (i.e., achievement) more highly than measuring their potential to learn (i.e., aptitude). The ACT Assessment has always reflected the essential knowledge and skills students are taught in high school that are important for readiness and success in postsecondary education, based on empirical results of our National Curriculum Survey® conducted every 3 or 4 years in grades 7–14.

Writing has always been and will continue to be one of the essential skills for college readiness and success. The ACT Assessment has always included a multiple-choice format English Test that measures students' understanding of the conventions of standard written English (punctuation, grammar and usage, and sentence structure) and of rhetorical skills (writing strategy, organization, and style). However, in response to interest in a direct measure of writing, we have decided to add a 30-minute Writing Test as an optional component to the ACT Assessment beginning in 2004–2005.

The ACT Assessment Writing Test will provide information to complement that already provided by the English Test. The combined results from both tests will provide information about students' ability to make revising and editing decisions in a multiple-choice setting and their ability to produce a direct sample of writing.

### **Why are we offering the Writing Test to postsecondary institutions as an option?**

We have always considered it our primary mission to offer responsive services to postsecondary institutions by providing information they need and

want. Surveys have revealed that one-third of our nation's postsecondary institutions already have a direct writing assessment in place on their campuses; an additional one-third appear to be satisfied with the information they are currently receiving; and, although few have enacted policies yet, the remaining one-third are interested in a new writing test.

By offering an ACT Assessment Writing Test as an option to postsecondary institutions, we are acknowledging their diverse needs by providing a flexible solution, rather than by imposing a single approach. Institutions will make their own decisions about whether to require results from the ACT Assessment Writing Test for admissions and/or course placement purposes. Students will decide whether to take the Writing Test based on the requirements of the institutions they are considering. Students will not be required to take a test they do not need to take, thus incurring unnecessary expense, and institutions will have the freedom to require the tests that best meet their information needs.



## Developing the ACT Assessment® Writing Test

Although we have considered adding a writing test to the ACT Assessment in recent years, only now has the technology become available to permit reliable scoring of hundreds of thousands of essays in a reasonable reporting time. The new ACT Assessment Writing Test, which will be introduced nationally beginning in 2004–05, will be an achievement test designed to measure students' writing proficiency. It is being developed to reflect the type of writing found in rigorous high school writing curricula and expected of students entering first-year college composition courses. It is also being designed to complement the information currently provided by the ACT English Test.

To assemble the information needed to develop the new test, we undertook a detailed examination of secondary and postsecondary writing practice, instruction, and assessment across the nation:

- Reviewed results of a survey of the direct writing assessments 4-year institutions currently use to make admissions and placement decisions.
- Examined postsecondary writing assessments used for course placement.
- Gathered data on state writing content standards for grades 9–12 and on the direct writing assessments included in state high school tests.
- Researched and reviewed literature published over the past thirty years on direct writing assessments and on the teaching of composition at the postsecondary level.

After completing a comprehensive review of current writing assessment practice and research, we conducted the 2002 ACT National Curriculum Survey®. This survey is administered every 3 to 4 years to obtain information about what is being taught in grades 7–12 and what is expected of entering college students in the areas measured by the assessments in ACT's EPAS/Educational Planning and Assessment System®–EXPLORE®, PLAN®, and the ACT Assessment®. The 2002 survey asked English/language arts teachers and writing instructors what they teach and value in their classrooms. The two versions of the survey—one for secondary school teachers and one for instructors of entry-level college courses—included identical sets of 95 skills to be evaluated.

Under the broad heading of Writing Skills, the survey included items in these categories:

- Writing as Process
- Purposes of Writing
- Writing Strategy
- Organization
- Style
- Sentence Structure
- Punctuation
- Grammar and Usage
- Research Skills
- Evaluation of Writing
- Other Communication Skills
- Technology Skills

In the fall of 2002, the surveys were sent to a nationwide sample of classroom teachers:

- 4,370 English/language arts teachers from public and private high schools
- 4,465 college faculty who teach Freshman English, Composition, or Survey of American Literature (or their equivalents)
- 900 college faculty who teach Developmental English or English as a Second Language (or their equivalents)

The high school teachers were asked to indicate whether each skill is taught in their classroom and the level of importance they place on that skill. The college instructors were asked to indicate the relative importance of each skill that students should have before they take the entry-level course the instructor teaches.

On the section of the survey focusing on the Evaluation of Writing, high school and college teachers were asked to rank the relative importance of ten criteria used in the evaluation of student writing. The results show a remarkable degree of agreement among the three groups. Given the importance attributed to them by all three teacher groups, these skills form the heart of the ACT Assessment Writing Test construct.



### Mean ratings (and ranks) of the top six criteria for each group of teachers

Criteria	High School Language Arts Teachers	College Freshman Composition Teachers	College ESL/Developmental Teachers
Developing ideas using relevant examples and details	4.78 (1)	4.60 (1)	4.55 (2)
Writing unified and coherent text	4.77 (2.5)	4.56 (2)	4.60 (1)
Using a clear beginning, middle, and ending	4.77 (2.5)	4.26 (4)	4.34 (5)
Developing ideas using appropriate organizational strategy	4.65 (4)	4.36 (3)	4.42 (3)
Using correct grammar, usage, and mechanics	4.64 (5)	4.21 (6)	4.35 (4)
Writing appropriately for purpose and audience	4.46 (6)	4.22 (5)	4.16 (6)

In early December 2002, we convened the ACT National Writing Test Advisory Panel, whose members were selected to ensure a broad representation of secondary and postsecondary institutions and organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project. The panel included some of the foremost experts on writing instruction, writing assessment, and ESL and developmental writing:

- Dale Allender, Associate Executive Director, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Illinois
- Bonne August, Professor, English, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY
- Beverly Ann Chin, Professor, English, University of Montana
- Jan Clinard, Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in Montana
- Mary Carmen Cruz, Cholla High Magnet School, Tucson, Arizona
- Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, Professor, English Education, UCalifornia-Berkeley
- Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens, Arroyo Valley High School, San Bernardino, California
- Brian Huot, Associate Professor, English, University of Louisville, Kentucky
- Barbara Kroll, Professor, English, California State University, Northridge
- Sandra Murphy, Associate Professor, English Education, UCalifornia-Davis
- Christopher Saheed, Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, Massachusetts

The primary charge to this panel was to review ACT's research on writing instruction and assessment and to review the results from the National Writing Curriculum Survey. We also asked panelists to consider the current ACT English Test and to ensure that the Writing Test would provide unique but complementary information. Drawing upon this information and their own expertise and experience, the panelists were asked to offer guidance about key decisions concerning the mode of writing to be elicited, the writing prompt format, and the scoring criteria to be used in the rubric.

Based on the discussions that took place in the two-day panel meeting, we drafted a list of descriptors of what students should be able to do to succeed in first-year college writing courses.

### **Scoring Criteria for the ACT Assessment Writing Test**

1. Show the ability to make and articulate judgments by:
  - Taking a position on an issue.
  - Demonstrating the ability to grasp the complexity of issues by considering implications or complications.
2. Sustain a position by focusing on the topic throughout the writing.
3. Develop a position by:
  - Presenting support or evidence using specific details.
  - Using logical reasoning that shows the writer’s ability to distinguish between assertions and evidence and to make inferences based on support or evidence.
4. Organize and present ideas in a logical way by:
  - Logically grouping and sequencing ideas.
  - Using transitional devices to identify logical connections and tie ideas together.
5. Communicate clearly by:
  - Using language effectively.
  - Observing the conventions of standard written English.

Taking into consideration testing time and the kind of writing to be elicited from the students, the panelists advised using a single writing prompt that will provide a rhetorical situation—an issue with two alternative positions. Examinees will be asked to develop and support one of those positions or to propose a third alternative. This prompt format has come to be known as an “open binary format.” The panel advised field-testing two versions of this prompt format: an issue/position version and a problem/solution version.

Drawing on all the research and panel discussions outlined above, we produced an initial draft of the Writing Test specifications, which was reviewed in January by each member of the panel and by ACT staff.



## Developing the Prompts and Scoring Rubric

By early February 2003, the work of drafting prompts had begun in earnest. Staff held a prompt-writing workshop with high school teachers and college instructors who contributed to the development of the first set of 60 prompts for the spring 2003 field test. Those prompts were subjected to in-house review and then sent to eight external fairness consultants who reviewed them for potential fairness and sensitivity concerns. Based on their comments and further in-house review, staff reduced the number of potentially viable prompts to 40. These prompts were then field tested in approximately 125 high schools throughout the United States. At least 400 students responded to each prompt, producing more than 18,000 responses.

In late May 2003, a Rangefinding Panel consisting of ACT staff and members of the National Writing Test Advisory Panel met to review student papers and develop a six-point holistic scoring rubric. During the three-day meeting, the group read and discussed several hundred papers. Using these papers and the scoring criteria that were developed by the ACT National Writing Test Advisory Panel, the group developed an initial draft of the rubric and then tested it by using it to score student papers. The Rangefinders analyzed the effectiveness of the rubric and revised it, further clarifying descriptors at each score point. The scoring rubric that was developed and the exemplar papers identified by this Rangefinding Panel were then used to train readers to score field-test papers in June 2003.

After careful analysis of field-test data for both the issue/position version and the problem/solution version of prompt format, we selected the issue/position version for use in the ACT Assessment Writing Test.

### Sample Prompt for the ACT Writing Test

We determined that prompts used for the ACT Assessment Writing Test should describe an issue relevant to high school students and ask examinees to write about their perspective on the issue. Given the 30-minute time limit for writing, we decided to provide two different perspectives on the issue as a starting place for responses. Examinees will be told that they may choose either to develop their thoughts in support of one of these perspectives or to develop a response based on their own perspective. Essay scores will not be affected by examinees' choice of perspective for their response.

The prompts will be similar to the following example. The standard directions in the second paragraph will be a part of all prompts used on the Writing Test.

*In some high schools, many teachers and parents have encouraged the school to adopt a dress code that sets guidelines for what students can wear in the school building. Some teachers and parents support a dress code because they think it will improve the learning environment in the school. Other teachers and parents do not support a dress code because they think it restricts the individual student's freedom of expression. In your opinion, should high schools adopt dress codes for students?*

*In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.*

## **Rubric for Scoring the Sample Prompt**

The scoring rubric for the ACT Assessment Writing Test will be a 6-point holistic rubric. The holistic scoring approach is used to evaluate a piece of writing in its entirety rather than to separate individual components. The score is based on the overall impression that is created by all the elements of the writing. That is, a reader is asked to evaluate the achievement demonstrated in the essay in relation to criteria designated in the rubric and to determine, on balance, how the essay should be scored.

In a holistic rubric, criteria that represent the values identified for the assessment are embedded at each score point. For the ACT Assessment Writing Test, these criteria address a writer's ability to take and articulate a position on an issue, to maintain a clear focus on the position throughout the essay, to explain a position by using supporting evidence and logical reasoning, to organize ideas logically, and to communicate clearly in writing. These statements represent what high school teachers told ACT they taught in their writing courses, and what teachers of freshman composition in college said they expected students to be able to do at the beginning of their college writing courses.

In ACT's 6-point holistic scoring rubric, these criteria will be described at varying levels of achievement. For example, papers scored in the upper half of the rubric (score points 4–6) will show a clear understanding of the purpose of the essay by articulating their position on the issue in the prompt and by developing their ideas. Most generalizations will be developed with specific examples to support the writer's position. A clear focus will be maintained throughout the paper. The paper will show competent use of language. Although there may be some errors, these will only occasionally distract the reader and will not interfere with the reader's ability to understand the writer's meaning.

In contrast, many papers scoring in the lower half of the rubric (score points 1–3) will not clearly articulate a position on the issue. Papers at this level will usually demonstrate some development of ideas, but development may be very general or repetitious. Most papers will maintain focus on the general topic identified in the prompt, but they may not maintain focus on the specific issue. Except for the weakest papers, the papers will use a clear but simple organizational structure. The language will be understandable for the most part, but errors may frequently distract a reader and some errors may interfere with understanding.

## **Scoring the ACT Assessment Writing Test**

Readers will be rigorously trained to apply the rubric for the Writing Test. Their training will include examination and discussion of a number of exemplar papers at each of the scoring points on the rubric. Readers will practice scoring papers and will be given the correct scores to guide their application of the rubric. They will be required to qualify by scoring a specified number of papers correctly. Two qualified readers will score each paper independently; if their scores differ by more than one point, the paper will be read by a third reader. During scoring, readers will be monitored for scoring accuracy by the ACT Performance Assessment Center and they will be required to correctly score additional sets of training papers to ensure stability in the application of the rubric.

We will use these strategies for training and for monitoring scoring to ensure that all readers are applying the rubric for the Writing Test in the same way. This rigor is necessary to ensure that students' writing is scored accurately and fairly.

## Sample Essays with Score Articulations

On the following pages, we offer four sample essays representing both lower-level and upper-level score ranges. These essays are written in response to a prompt asking whether high schools should adopt

dress codes for students. Included with each essay is a score articulation that explains the holistic evaluation of that essay.

### Essay 1

#### Lower-Level Score (1–3)

*Dress code or not, a student should learn in school. That is the most important thing. She should not worry about what clothes are in style more than getting a good education. High school is not intended to be a fashion show. Although some people treat it that way. Popular styles can be distracting in the classroom. The whole class should not lose the opportunity to learn because of one girl's wardrobe decision. A dress code can provide a environment in the*

*classroom where students can work without distraction. It would let students have pride based on their intelligence rather than their bodies, leading to more lasting self-esteem. In my opinion, dress codes would be a positive thing for high schools and students, and the parents and teachers who think dress codes will provide a better learning environment at the schools are right.*

#### Score Articulation

This essay demonstrates some developing skill. It does not clearly introduce the issue being discussed, but does ultimately make the writer's position clear and provides some context. Some of the ideas suggested in the essay are insightful, especially one toward the end where the writer claims that focusing on education might offer a better avenue to self-esteem than does dressing

fashionably. Unfortunately, the development of these ideas is general and extremely limited. The writer groups ideas logically but the lack of paragraphing and transitions makes it difficult for a reader to discern where parts of the essay begin and end. Language use is understandable with few distracting errors, although the use of sentence fragments does tend to slow the reader down.

## Essay 2

### Lower-Level Score (1–3)

*In some high schools, many teachers and parents have encouraged the school to adopt a dress code that sets guidelines for what students can wear in the school building. Some teachers and parents support a dress code because they think it will improve the learning environment in the school. Other teachers and parents do not support the dress code because they think it restricts the individual student's freedom of expression. In my opinion, high schools should not adopt dress codes for students because they are adults.*

*Firstly, dress codes will not stop people being made fun of. People always find things to make fun of. If not for cloths then the way a person looks or talks.*

*Second, high school students are responsible enough to wear what they want without a dress code. Students wouldn't follow a dress code anyway because teenagers like to break the rules.*

*Last and most importantly, dress codes go against student's rights to there freedom of expression of individuality. Students use there cloths to show there personality and you can not force them to look like someone they're not. It goes against there American rights.*

*High schools should not adopt dress codes for students.*

### Score Articulation

This essay demonstrates developing skill. Its greatest strength is organization: it offers an introduction with thesis, three points and a brief conclusion. However, these components are underdeveloped. The introduction relies almost entirely on language provided in the prompt, and the brief paragraphs in the middle of the paper each assert a valid idea but do not offer any illustrations to support or clarify those ideas. While transitions are in place to move the reader between paragraphs, there are no unifying ideas within paragraphs that make the essay coherent as a whole. The essay features a prominent thesis which

makes clear the writer's stance on the issue. The thesis does not, however, function as a thematic guide for the essay. Instead, the thesis claim that students are adults appears contrary to the first two points which focus on childish aspects of high school student behavior (making fun of others and breaking rules for enjoyment). Language use in the essay is understandable despite some errors that might distract a reader. With the exception of the introductory language taken from the prompt, the writing lacks sentence variety that would make it more interesting to read.

## Essay 3

### Upper-Level Score (4–6)

*The issue of whether or not high schools should adopt dress codes for students seems to be a highly debated topic among parents, teachers, and students throughout the country. Groups that are in support of dress codes believe it will improve the school learning environment. Those opposed worry more about what the rules might take away from the students. High schools should not adopt dress codes for students because they will not improve the learning environment but may actually impede students' education.*

*Some parents and teachers may think that adopting neutral uniforms will eliminate disruption in the schools such as gang violence. The truth is that if a gang violence problem exists in a high school, changing one variable will not eliminate it.*

*Similarly, some parents and teachers believe that if every student dresses in the same uniform, it will reduce feelings of inferiority among lower-income students who can't afford to buy trendy fashions. This thinking is false as well. Teenagers will inevitably enforce class distinctions by dressing up their uniform with \$150 tennis shoes or a designer jacket. And no dress code can eliminate the feeling of riding the county school bus while other students arrive at school in their own personal sports cars. Like gang violence, this problem is more complicated than one simple change like adopting a dress code can fix.*

*Not only will it not improve the school environment, a dress code could actually impede student education. I have heard that in schools with dress codes, teachers spend more classroom time checking for appropriate outfits and writing discipline slips than they spend on teaching. In this case, a dress code creates hassle and distraction rather than solving any problem.*

*More significantly, a dress code could interfere in one of the most important parts of a teenager's education—learning about oneself. Expressing one's individuality is the basis for being an independent person. Inhibiting students' ability to express themselves truncates this part of their education. How will a teenager gain self-confidence if they are required to disguise their uniqueness each day? A dress code will lead students toward group mentality rather than independent critical thinking.*

*Imagining that dress codes are a cure-all for the multitude of problems in high school is a mistake. Such thinking can lead to school policy decisions that negatively affect student learning. Students would be better off with no dress code and more effective intervention by parents, teachers and school administrators.*

#### Score Articulation

This essay shows good but uneven writing skill. The writer takes a clear position and provides context for the issue. The development of ideas is clear and logical, and the writer uses a variety of specific illustrations to support claims throughout the essay. This writer acknowledges the complexity of the issue by including two justifications for the opposing viewpoint and is able to dismiss those ideas by revealing their false logic. The writer's attempt to cover a wide range of issues related to this controversy is ambitious but results in areas that

are less developed and less effective than others. Transitions are employed to move the reader between paragraphs, and the paragraphs also display internal transitions which give the essay cohesion. The conclusion both wraps up the discussion and continues to move forward by endorsing intervention of a more effective type. This writer has a good vocabulary and uses words with precision. Overall language control is strong. The few language errors would not cause most readers to have any problem understanding this essay.

## Essay 4

### Upper-Level Score (4–6)

*Many high schools have adopted dress codes that set guidelines for what students can wear in the school building. Many people disagree with these policies. Though arguments can be made for either side, my opinion is that a dress code can have a very positive outcome for several reasons.*

*First of all, a dress code promotes student equality and acceptance. High school students are at a vulnerable age when they want to be accepted. If a teenager feels as though they don't belong, it can lead to serious emotional problems. Some students get so upset that they withdraw from family, their grades fall, and they may become hostile. The shootings at Columbine High School were the response of two boys who felt unaccepted. Students following a dress code would look more alike. This helps all students feel like part of a group as well as eliminates problems of not wearing the "right" clothes for students affected by poverty who can't afford to.*

*Second, a dress code eliminates distractions in the classroom. Students who wear tight clothing could be uncomfortable and not able to concentrate. Some students may feel peer pressure to wear revealing clothes they believe are immodest just because it's in style. This would make*

*them uncomfortable in a different way but also keep them from concentrating. Tight and revealing clothes can also affect the rest of the students, especially the opposite sex, by catching the eye and causing people to think about things other than what they should be learning. A dress code keeps tight and revealing clothes out of the school so that the focus in the classroom stays on education.*

*Lastly, a dress code can contribute to students' education by teaching students how to dress for the working world. Since most students will have to work sometime after they graduate, it's important that they know what to wear for a job. A dress code can teach students to distinguish between what is appropriate to wear and what is not.*

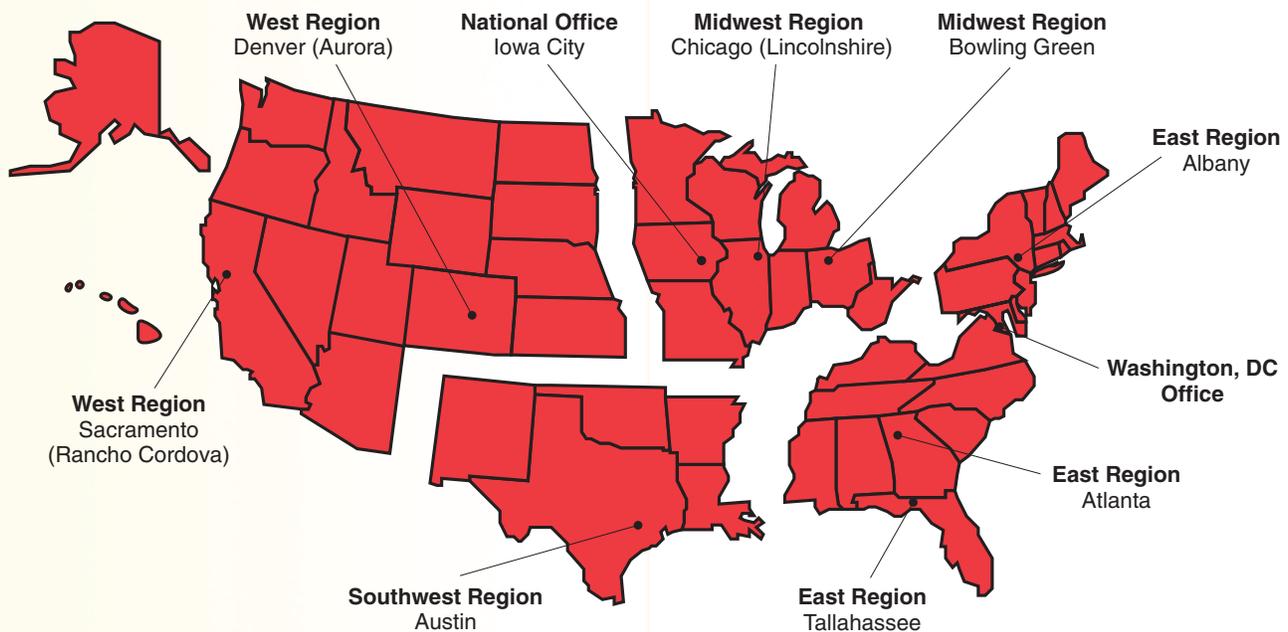
*While many people are afraid dress codes restrict personal freedom, it is important to remember that a dress code is only for school and that students can express their individual style on their own time. Since a dress code in school can make students feel more accepted, decrease distractions in the classroom and help students prepare themselves for a job, it's not surprising that many schools have adopted dress codes.*

### Score Articulation

This essay shows solid but not consistently strong skill in writing. Some introduction of context for the issue is offered, although it is not very descriptive. The writer's position is made very clear. The essay is clearly organized, with an identifiable introduction, conclusion, and three distinct paragraphs of discussion. Transitions are used as signals to move the reader through the discussion, but more internal connections within paragraphs would make the essay stronger. Development is good because the writer uses specific examples such as the Columbine incident to clarify ideas. The writer also develops ideas at

length; paragraph three, for example, thoroughly discusses how clothing can create distractions in the classroom by offering three distinct ways clothes break students' concentration. The conclusion acknowledges the complexity of the issue by addressing an opposing perspective, as well as summarizes the writer's discussion, and reminds the reader that many schools have adopted dress codes. The writer's control of language is strong. There is both sentence variety and precise word choice. The few minor language errors would not distract readers of this essay.

To find out more about the ACT Assessment Writing Test, please contact the nearest ACT Regional Office, or visit [www.act.org/aap/writing](http://www.act.org/aap/writing)



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