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# ACT Assessment® Writing Test

*What High Schools Need to Know*



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INFORMATION FOR LIFE'S TRANSITIONS  
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*An ACT Program for Educational Planning*



Dear Colleague,

I am pleased to provide this booklet as an important first step in keeping you up to date regarding the addition of an optional 30-minute Writing Test to the ACT Assessment beginning in 2004–2005.

The ability to write well is not optional. For over 40 years, the ACT Assessment has reflected the essential knowledge and skills students are taught in high school that are important for readiness and success in postsecondary education. The critical knowledge and skills are identified based on empirical results from our one-of-a-kind National Curriculum Survey, which is conducted every 3 to 4 years in grades 7–14. Because writing has always been identified as one of the essential skills for college readiness and success, the ACT Assessment has always included an English Test in multiple-choice format. Technological advances now enable us to add a direct writing test to the ACT Assessment as an option beginning in 2004–2005.



While good writing is not optional, how and when writing is assessed and how the results are used should be a matter of choice. The decision to provide the Writing Test as an optional assessment was not made lightly. Our ongoing research has revealed that not every college desires or needs a nationally standardized writing test. There already are many different valid and sound approaches to assessing writing in place on campuses around the country. We have always considered it our mission to make available services that the education community needs and wants.

By offering the ACT Writing Test as an option to postsecondary institutions, we are acknowledging their varying needs by providing a flexible solution, rather than imposing a single approach on all students and institutions. The ACT Writing Test may assist colleges and universities with admissions and placement decisions for the fall 2006 incoming freshman class. However, colleges and universities will be free to make their own decisions about whether to recommend or require the ACT Writing Test and students will be free to decide whether to take the Writing Test based on the recommendations or requirements of the institutions they are considering.

We will periodically send you updates on the development and introduction of the Writing Test and on how your students can prepare for it. Please share this information with staff at your school. I also recommend that you bookmark [www.act.org/aap/writing](http://www.act.org/aap/writing) for the latest news and materials.

ACT remains dedicated to serving you and your students. Please let us know how we may be of assistance. We look forward to working with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Richard L. Ferguson'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Richard L. Ferguson  
Chairman and CEO

## ACT Assessment® Writing Test What High Schools Need to Know

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 ACT's National Curriculum Survey™ conducted every 3 to 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 skills necessary for effective writing, including usage, mechanics, sentence structure, logic, organization, and style, as well as other rhetorical strategies. 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 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' understanding of the conventions of standard written English 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 of postsecondary institutional practices 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 Writing Test as an option to postsecondary institutions, we are acknowledging the varying needs of our nation's postsecondary institutions by providing them a flexible solution, rather than imposing a single approach on all students and institutions. They will make their own decisions about whether to require the results from the ACT 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.*

## ACT Assessment Writing Test Questions/Answers

**Q: When will the Writing Test be available?**

A: The Writing Test will be offered for the first time during the 2004–2005 testing year. The results will then be available for postsecondary institutions to consider for the class entering in fall 2006. This will allow students who are planning to enter college in fall 2006 to take the test in the spring of their junior year or in their senior year, depending on the application deadlines of the institutions they are considering.

**Q: How will the specifications for the ACT Assessment Writing Test relate to our curriculum and classroom instruction?**

A: We will determine the specifications for the ACT Writing Test following the same curriculum-based process we use for the current four-test battery. This process begins with ACT's National Curriculum Survey involving both high school English teachers and college faculty who teach entry-level composition courses. The information we obtain through the survey is considered by a national panel of educators who help us design the exact test specifications. Using this process will enable us to develop a Writing Test that will measure writing proficiencies that are taught in high school and are important for readiness to succeed in entry-level college composition courses.

In addition, the skills measured by the Writing Test will be incorporated into ACT's Standards for Transition® and the ACT School Curriculum Review Worksheets. Both are available at no charge to schools to help you review in detail the skills the ACT Assessment measures and determine when and where in your curriculum these skills are taught and reinforced.

**Q: Isn't it a good idea to require that students be able to write well?**

A: We recognize that good writing is not an option. However, there are many sound, valid approaches to the assessment of writing. These approaches vary by institutional need and focus.

The ACT English Test is designed to measure skills necessary for effective writing—including punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, organization, and style. This test alone has been effective in providing helpful information to many institutions. Currently, some institutions supplement

### Developing the ACT Writing Test

The ACT Assessment is curriculum based. This means that it measures the knowledge and skills taught in high school that are important for readiness for college-level work. In developing the ACT Writing Test, we are following the same methodology we have always used for the other tests in the ACT Assessment:

- This process begins with an inclusive, broad-based curriculum survey of the nation's high schools and colleges to determine the skills that are being taught in high school and those expected of first-year college students. The specifications for the Writing Test will come from the results of a recently completed ACT National Curriculum Survey.
- The prompts and scoring rubrics will then be developed.
- All materials will undergo our standard fairness reviews and will be extensively field tested prior to introduction.
- Like the other tests in the ACT Assessment, the Writing Test will be developed by high school and college teachers who are actively engaged in teaching students.

this information with on-campus, direct writing assessments for making course placement decisions. Still others may consider replacing their locally developed writing assessment or adopting the ACT Writing Test to supplement the information they are now using. With such diversity in the need for and use of this type of information, we are providing the Writing Test as an option so that colleges and universities have the flexibility to use it in ways that best meet their needs.

**Q: How much will the ACT Assessment fee be raised?**

A: The fee for the Writing Test has not yet been determined, but we remain committed to keeping test fees reasonable for all students. This has been a significant factor in our decision to offer the Writing Test as an option so not all students will have to pay the increased fee when the institutions they are considering do not require or use it.

**Q: What scores will be reported?**

A: We will continue to report the current ACT Composite score, based on scores from the current English, Math, Reading, and Science Tests. In addition:

- We will continue to report scores for the current English, Math, Reading, and Science Tests, plus subscores for English, Math, and Reading.
- For students who take the Writing Test, their score from the Writing Test will be combined with their English Test score and reported on a 1 to 36 scale as an additional Combined English/Writing score.
- A Writing subscore and a narrative interpretation of the Writing Test score will also be reported.

**Q: How should students prepare for the ACT Assessment Writing Test?**

A: The Writing Test is being designed as a curriculum-based test, just like the other tests in the ACT Assessment. This means that it will measure the



knowledge and skills taught in high school that are important for readiness for college-level work. The best preparation for any student taking the ACT Assessment is rigorous college preparatory courses in high school.

Students need not take commercial test preparation courses to do well on the ACT. Taking the right courses in high school, and working hard and doing well in these courses, is enough. We will continue to provide numerous materials to students at no charge that:

- Describe the test content and format in detail, including sample prompts, exemplary essays, and scoring rubric.
- Explain what to expect on the day of the test.
- Provide sample items so that students can become familiar with the test prior to taking it.

It is our goal that all students are familiar with the test and what it measures, so there are no surprises.

**Q: How will the Writing Test be scored?**

A: Each essay will be scored on a 1–6 scale by two trained raters. Score differences of more than one point will be evaluated by a third rater to resolve discrepancies.

We will carefully screen and train raters so they will be very familiar with the type of writing that merits each score. After training and before being certified to score the ACT Writing Test, raters will also be required to pass a qualifying test.

ACT has over 25 years of experience developing, administering, and scoring writing tests and has an established record of high accuracy in scoring performance assessments. Our previous experience with scoring of writing samples indicates that two raters are in perfect agreement approximately 65% to 70% of the time and are within one score point of each other 98% to 99% of the time.

**Q: Will the Writing Test be fair to all students?**

A: Yes. The specifications for the test are based on empirical data that tell us what writing skills are being taught in high school classrooms that are important for readiness for college-level work. The test will reflect classroom assignments and expectations.

The writing prompts and scoring guides will be written and reviewed by classroom teachers of writing. The writing prompts will also undergo ACT's standard fairness review by national sensitivity reviewers who will ensure that each essay topic is clearly stated and focuses on a topic to which all students can respond.

**Q: Is half an hour long enough to test writing skills?**

A: Yes; the Writing Test is being designed so that the prompt can be properly addressed in the time allotted. It will still measure skills students use when writing a college paper—such as the ability to focus on the subject at hand, to develop their ideas, and to write logically and coherently, with proper sentence structure and sound reasoning.

**Q: Will ACT Composite scores be comparable over time?**

A: Your interpretation and trend lines for ACT Assessment scores will not be compromised. The current English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science assessments will not change. And the order of the assessments will not change, either. Therefore, the score scale will not be disrupted and results for these tests will be comparable across test dates and years, regardless of whether the student takes the optional writing assessment. A “32” in 2006 will be associated with the same student skills as a “32” today . . . or a “32” in 1990.

**Q: Will the ACT Assessment continue to include a science test?**

A: Yes. Consistent with our curriculum-based approach, the ACT Assessment will continue to reflect the importance and value educators place on science skills and will continue to include a science test that assesses high levels of science achievement.

**Critical Timelines for Introduction of the ACT Writing Test**

Conduct National Curriculum Survey	Fall 2002 (completed)
Finalize test specifications	Spring 2003
Conduct field testing	Spring 2003–Spring 2004
Sample prompt and rubric available	Summer 2003
Introduce the ACT Writing Test	2004–2005 academic year



The inclusion of a science test also benefits students, by permitting them to provide information about a broader range of their skills and strengths.

**Q: Will the ACT Math Test change?**

A: No. The ACT Assessment will continue to assess high levels of mathematics achievement, including trigonometry and pre-calculus.

**Q: How does the ACT Writing Test correspond to state learning standards?**

A: Since the ACT Assessment is a curriculum-based achievement test, there is a high degree of overlap between the ACT Writing Test and state standards. We have compared the specifications for the new Writing Test to the state standards in over 30 states. The ACT Writing Test will measure the essential writing skills that have been identified in most, if not all, state standards.

**Q: What advice should we give students about deciding whether to take the Writing Test?**

A: Students should decide whether to take the ACT Writing Test based on the admission policies of the postsecondary institutions in which they are

interested and on the advice of their high schools. We will routinely list and update information on the ACT website about individual college policies—whether they require, recommend, or do not require the ACT Writing Test. Students should consult this list before registering. High schools may advise all students to take the ACT Writing Test, so their scores are on file and can be used in college counseling and in school curriculum and instruction.

We recognize that admission policies differ from college to college and that students may change college preferences or be undecided. We recommend that students plan to take the Writing Test, unless they are certain of their college choice and that college does not require it.

Testing will be available for students who decide not to take the Writing Test but later discover that they must do so. As always, we recommend that students take the ACT in the spring of junior year or fall of senior year, to meet admission and scholarship deadlines and permit time to retest.

**Q: Where can I get more information?**

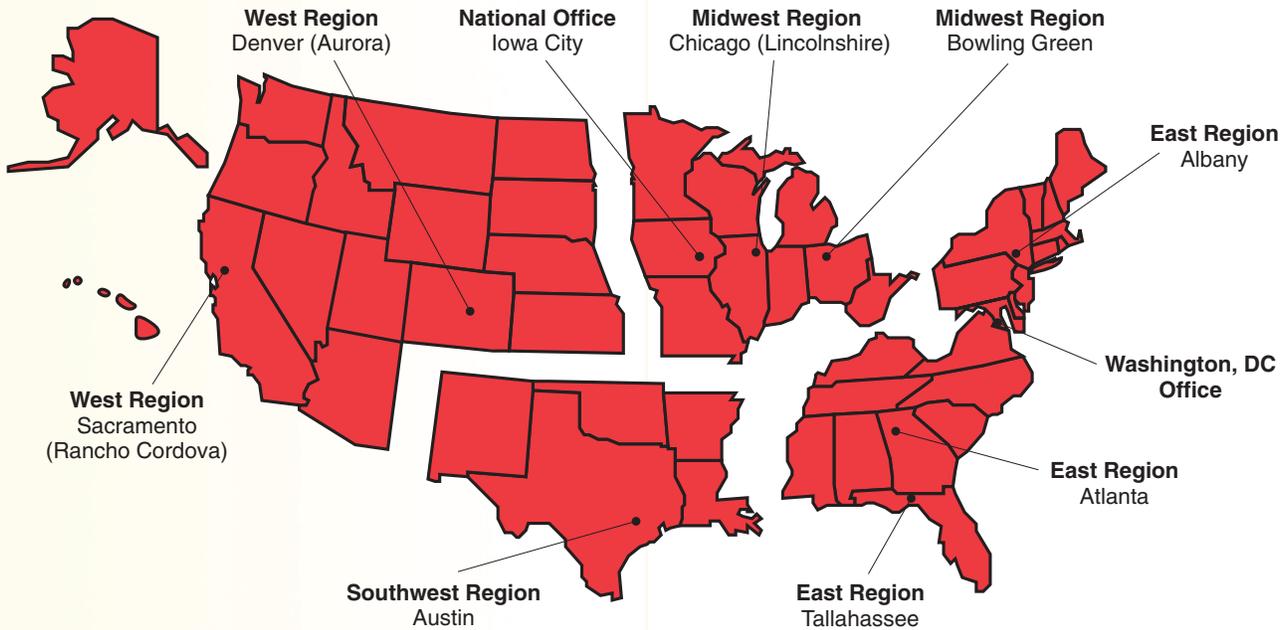
A: We will periodically send you updates on the development and introduction of the Writing Test and on preparation for it. And we recommend that you bookmark and regularly visit [www.act.org/aap/writing](http://www.act.org/aap/writing) for the latest news and to download a copy of this brochure. We will also be conducting Educator Workshops throughout the country, to assist you in keeping up to date on this new test.

**Q: If I have more questions, how can I get answers?**

A: Visit the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of [www.act.org/aap/writing](http://www.act.org/aap/writing). If you have questions that are not answered there, please use the “contact us” form at the end of that section.

Staff in our regional and national offices will also be available to assist you.

To find out more about the ACT 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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Visit the ACT website at [www.act.org](http://www.act.org).