

Linking the Current and Former ACT® Writing Tests

In September 2015, ACT introduced a number of [enhancements to the design of the ACT writing test](#). These enhancements include extended time, a broader writing task, an updated rubric, and a modified score scale. Despite these differences, however, many elements of the assessment remain the same. For example, the test is still an exercise in argumentative writing, and it continues to measure core competencies that are linked to college and career success. Because of these essential similarities, it is possible to connect the former and current ACT writing tests in a number of important ways. To that end, this document links the two assessments by examining their respective rubrics and by presenting the results of a special score concordance study.

Scoring Rubrics and Writing Construct

A scoring rubric is a reflection of the writing construct an assessment seeks to measure. By examining the former and current scoring rubrics, we find that the core writing competencies under evaluation are quite similar. Table 1 presents an examination of four domains of writing as they appear in both the former and current rubrics, using the score point of 4 as an example. As the table indicates, these writing domains—Ideas and Analysis, Development and Support, Organization, Language Use and Conventions—were measured by the former assessment and are measured by the current assessment. Furthermore, the language used to describe evidence of competency in these domains is largely consistent across the two rubrics. As such, the evidence of competency a piece of writing must exhibit in order to earn a given score (e.g., a score point of 4, as in the case of Table 1) is quite similar across the two assessments.

The similarity in expectations is also evident in the overall claims made at the score point level across both rubrics. These claims are presented by Table 2. In both rubrics, a given score point represents a particular degree of skill, ranging from “little or no” to “effective.” The association between score point and degree of skill is consistent across rubrics. Therefore, scores may be connected across the two rubrics with respect to the level of skill they represent.

There are, however, a few important differences that must be noted. The former rubric was *holistic* in nature. As a tool for evaluation, a holistic rubric is something of a blunt instrument. Raters used this rubric to assign each essay one score, weighing its strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the four domains outlined above. The current rubric is *analytic* in nature. This enhancement allows for a finer-grain evaluation of a piece of writing than is possible with holistic scoring. Raters use the analytic rubric to assign each essay *four* scores, one for each of the four domains.

In short, despite the distinction between holistic and analytic approaches, a close examination of the former and current rubrics reveals similar writing constructs on display in each. The connections between the two rubrics indicate a tight conceptual linkage, while modifications allow for a more precise measure of writing skill than was possible with the former rubric.

Writing Scores and Concordance

Due to the greater flexibility offered by the analytic rubric, scoring and reporting of the current writing test have been updated. Table 3 offers a side-by-side comparison of the former and current ACT writing scores. Where students once received one score (2–12 scale), they now receive four domain-level scores, each on a 2–12 scale, along with a subject-level writing score on the familiar 1–36 scale.

The current domain scores offer the most direct point of comparison to the former score. The former score was derived by summing the scores given by two raters, each using the holistic rubric to assign a value on the scale of 1–6. The current domain scores are determined in similar fashion, with the final 2–12 outcomes representing the sum of the scores given by two raters, each using the analytic rubric to assign four values, one per domain, on the scale of 1–6. Because of the identical score scales and the similarities in measurement constructs and scoring rubrics, the former holistic score and current domain scores are tightly connected.

The subject-level writing score is based on the sum of the domain scores (8–48) and reported on a 1–36 scale obtained through a scaling and equating process. Although the domain scores are aligned with the former holistic score, the connection between the rubrics does not provide a direct linkage between the holistic 2–12 scores and the current subject-level 1–36 scores. A concordance study was conducted in order to obtain such a link.

Concordant scores are defined as those having the same percentile rank with respect to the group of students used in the study. The collection of concordant scores is referred to as a concordance table, which is useful for determining cutoff scores on one test that result in approximately the same *proportion of students* identified by the other test, although not necessarily the *same students*.

Table 4 displays the results of the concordance study. It links the former 2–12 score scale and the current 1–36 scale. This concordance table was obtained based on a sample of students who took both the former and the current ACT writing tests on two different days. As expected when linking a test with fewer score points to one with more score points, gaps exist in the concordant current writing scores. Even so, this table could be useful when there is a need to estimate students' scores on the current ACT writing scores given their scores on the former ACT writing test. However, the concordance table should be used with caution because the sample of students included in the concordance analysis might not be representative of all ACT writing test takers, and a concordant score is not a substitute for actual performance on the assessment.

Table 1**Core Competencies**

Core Competency	Former Rubric (Holistic)—Score Point 4	Current Rubric (Analytic)—Score Point 4
Ideas and Analysis	The essay shows an understanding of the task. The essay takes a position on the issue and may offer some context for discussion. The essay may show some recognition of complexity by providing some response to counterarguments to the writer's position. There is clear movement between general statements and specific reasons, examples, and details.	The writer generates an argument that engages with multiple perspectives on the given issue. The argument's thesis reflects clarity in thought and purpose. The argument establishes and employs a relevant context for analysis of the issue and its perspectives. The analysis recognizes implications, complexities and tensions, and/or underlying values and assumptions.
Development and Support	Development of ideas is specific and logical. Most ideas are elaborated.	Development of ideas and support for claims clarify meaning and purpose. Lines of clear reasoning and illustration adequately convey the significance of the argument. Qualifications and complications extend ideas and analysis.
Organization	The organization of the essay is clear, although it may be predictable. Ideas are logically sequenced, although simple and obvious transitions may be used. The introduction and conclusion are clear and generally well developed.	The response exhibits a clear organizational strategy. The overall shape of the response reflects an emergent controlling idea or purpose. Ideas are logically grouped and sequenced. Transitions between and within paragraphs clarify the relationships among ideas.
Language Use and Conventions	Language is competent. Sentences are somewhat varied and word choice is sometimes varied and precise. There may be a few errors, but they are rarely distracting.	The use of language conveys the argument with clarity. Word choice is adequate and sometimes precise. Sentence structures are clear and demonstrate some variety. Stylistic and register choices, including voice and tone, are appropriate for the rhetorical purpose. While errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, they rarely impede understanding.

Table 2

Overall Claims of Writing Ability by Rubric Score Point

Rubric Score	Former Design—Holistic	Enhanced Design—Analytic
6	Essays within this score range demonstrate effective skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate effective skill in writing an argumentative essay.
5	Essays within this score range demonstrate competent skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate well-developed skill in writing an argumentative essay.
4	Essays within this score range demonstrate adequate skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate adequate skill in writing an argumentative essay.
3	Essays within this score range demonstrate some developing skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate some developing skill in writing an argumentative essay.
2	Essays within this score range demonstrate inconsistent or weak skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate weak or inconsistent skill in writing an argumentative essay.
1	Essays within this score range show little or no skill in responding to the task.	Responses at this score point demonstrate little or no skill in writing an argumentative essay.

Table 3

Former and Current ACT Writing Scores

Former	Current
Holistic Writing Score 2–12	Subject-Level Writing Score 1–36
	Individual Domain Scores:
	Ideas and Analysis 2–12
	Development and Support 2–12
	Organization 2–12
	Language Use and Conventions 2–12
Combined English/ Writing Score 1–36	ELA score (an average of the English, reading, and writing scores) 1–36

Table 4

Concordance of Former ACT Writing to Current ACT Writing

Former ACT Writing Score	Concordant Current ACT Writing Score
2	1
3	7
4	10
5	12
6	16
7	19
8	23
9	30
10	32
11	34
12	36