COMPASS™

COMPASS Guide to Successful ESL Course Placement

Setting the Right Course for College Success

ACT®

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

ACT designed the COMPASS English as a Second Language (ESL) placement tests to help postsecondary institutions quickly and accurately assess in-coming ESL students' English language ability levels and place them into appropriate ESL courses. The COMPASS system offers tests in four subject areas:

- Grammar/Usage
- Reading
- Listening
- Writing Essay (e-Write)

These ESL tests can be used separately or in combination to give a profile of a student's language abilities.

The COMPASS system is designed to provide flexibility and institutional control regarding placement decisions. The COMPASS system provides a comprehensive framework for translating student test performance into course placement decisions. This placement framework requires that an institution integrate cutoff scores with placement messages.

Cutoff Scores are determined by the institution and are the points on the score scale at which examinees are classified as either demonstrating or failing to demonstrate a particular level of prerequisite skills required to enter a given course. Developing cutoff scores is a two-stage process. Stage I involves setting initial cutoff scores, while Stage II involves validating and/or adjusting the initial decisions with course outcome data.

Placement Messages are assigned to an examinee's score based on that score's position relative to the cutoff score, and include information such as what course the student should take, where to register, what academic support services are available, etc.

This publication is designed to serve as a practical guide to help you set Stage I and Stage II cutoff scores and placement messages. The information is provided in three sections:

1. **How to Set Stage I Cutoff Scores** – explains two methods for establishing stage one cutoff scores. The first method is criterion-referenced, and the second method is norm-referenced. Worksheets are provided to help with the process, and ACT recommends you involve your ESL faculty with this process.

2. **How to Set Placement Messages** – provides instructions, with screenshots, how to implement your Stage I cutoff scores into the COMPASS software.

3. **How to Set Stage II Cutoff Scores** – explains how to validate and/or adjust your cutoff scores based on actual student performance, and the ACT research resources that are available to help with this process.

Section 1 – How to Set Stage I Cutoff Scores

Locally developed course cutoff scores and associated placement messages are necessary to align the standardized COMPASS ESL test results with your local ESL courses. Recognizing there are numerous ways to set initial cutoff scores, this guide will focus on two of the most common methods:

- **Criterion-referenced Alignment** of test proficiency levels and local course prerequisites
- **Norm-referenced Alignment** of local and national score distributions

ACT recommends that you employ both of these approaches to help determine the best method for your institution. ACT would encourage you to involve your faculty and advisors, as well as the professionally trained psychometricians in your Institutional Research Department, in the development of cutoff scores and placement messages.

Criterion-Referenced Alignment: Proficiency Levels and Course Prerequisite Skill Levels

The following steps summarize the process for setting initial ESL cutoff scores using COMPASS ESL proficiency descriptors:

- Step 1: Review local course descriptions, objectives, and prerequisite skills of your ESL courses
- Step 2: Review the following charts of the proficiency levels and proficiency descriptors for each of the COMPASS ESL test
- Step 3: Decide which (one or more) ESL test will be used for placement into each local course.
- Step 4: For each ESL course, compare the prerequisite skill levels of an entering student to the ESL proficiency levels associated with specific ESL tests.
- Step 5: Decide which ESL proficiency level best describes the prerequisite skills of an entering student for each course. Students who score at this proficiency are probably best placed into this course.
- Step 6: Set initial cutoff scores for placement into the course at a score within the range of scores associated with the proficiency level.
- Repeat steps for each course, and initiate course placement based on cutoff scores.
- Collect faculty judgments regarding the degree of accuracy associated with this placement decision. Also collect course outcomes. Use this information to adjust Stage II cutoff scores as needed.

For each of the COMPASS ESL tests ACT has developed proficiency levels and detailed proficiency descriptors. The proficiency levels correspond to ranges of COMPASS ESL scores. The proficiency descriptors describe the skills a typical student at a given proficiency level is likely to have. Proficiency levels are cumulative, with each level assuming material included at previous levels.

The following worksheets are designed to help you compare COMPASS ESL proficiency levels with the *prerequisite* skills needed for your ESL courses. Please work with your ESL faculty to review your course descriptions and then complete the following charts. The information in the charts will suggest ranges of Stage I cutoff scores for your courses.

COMPASS ESL Proficiency Level	COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage Proficiency Description	ESL course with these *prerequisite* skills
Pre–Level 1 (1–41)	Although students scoring at Pre-Level 1 may have some limited knowledge of English grammar and usage, they have provided insufficient evidence that they possess the skills typical of Level 1 students.	
Level 1 (42–62)	Students at Level 1 typically can recognize simple present tense, plurals, correct word order in simple sentences, and simple pronominal references.	
Level 2 (63–83)	Students at Level 2 typically can recognize correct structuring of simple sentences using a variety of tenses including simple past and present, future, past and present continuous, and high-frequency irregular verbs. They also typically can recognize correct word order in statements, imperatives, simple yes-no questions, some Wh-questions, and sentences with simple relative clauses. Level 2 students know many of the conventions of capitalization and punctuation. They recognize correct uses of the basic auxiliary system, time markers, and appropriate end-of-sentence punctuation.	
Level 3 (84–93)	Students at Level 3 typically can recognize high-frequency uses of the present perfect and past perfect tenses and correct uses of most regular and irregular verbs, simple modal verbs, passive verbs, and participial adjectives. They can select correctly structured compound sentences as well as complex sentences using subordinating conjunctions. They can correct the punctuation in many run-on sentences or sentence fragments within a context. They can often recognize correct uses of gerunds, infinitives, and conditional clauses. Level 3 students can select appropriate transition words to join clauses and sentences, and they can recognize unnecessary shifts in construction and lack of parallelism at the word and phrase level. They can select correct uses of subordinate clauses, and they can recognize and correct some errors in more abstract kinds of writing, including prose intended for academic or occupational needs.	
Level 4 (94–99)	Students at Level 4 typically can select correct uses of nearly all the verb forms of English. They can recognize unnecessary shifts in construction at the clause level. They can recognize accurate relationships among clauses and correctly formed interactions among verb tenses in related clauses. They can recognize correct word order, agreement, and the complex relationships between and among clauses at a near-native level, including correct uses of coordinating, subordinating, and correlative conjunctions, appropriate transition words, and various other cohesive devices at the level of discourse, not just at the clause or sentence level. They can select correct punctuation related to meaning. Level 4 students recognize formal and informal registers, know when language is appropriate for a given context or situation, and understand how meaning can change with context. Low-frequency uses of language may still cause problems even for these advanced students.	

COMPASS ESL proficiency level	COMPASS ESL Reading Proficiency Description	ESL course with these *prerequisite* skills
Pre–Level 1 (1–37)	Although students scoring at Pre-Level 1 may have some limited reading skills in English, they have provided insufficient evidence that they possess the skills typical of Level 1 students.	
Level 1 (38–64)	Students at Level 1 typically recognize most letters of the English alphabet and recognize a few sight words, especially those from the environment, such as common signs and words, phrases, or short sentences supported by pictures.	
Level 2 (65–79)	Students at Level 2 typically are able to read brief prose composed of short, simple sentences related to everyday needs (e.g., numbers, street signs, short informational signs, simple instructions). They can understand high-frequency structures, such as present, simple past, and simple future tenses. They usually understand some of the more common idioms and colloquial expressions. Level 2 students can compare facts to make choices (e.g., making a purchase), and they may draw simple conclusions from their reading.	
Level 3 (80–91)	Students at Level 3 typically can comprehend prose of several paragraphs on subjects within a familiar framework and with a clear underlying structure, and they can understand some main ideas in limited occupational or academic materials. Level 3 students can read news items, basic business letters, simple technical materials, classified ads, school bulletins, and academic text excerpts, and they can comprehend multi-step directions. They can use the reading strategies of skimming, scanning, and predicting to locate information and to help structure their reading for a variety of purposes. They can also use a variety of textual clues such as sentence connectors, transitions, and pronoun reference to comprehend the meaning and structure of a text. Level 3 students sometimes understand the meanings of new words from context, sometimes distinguish between main and supporting ideas, and understand some common cultural references. They can make some inferences and generalizations from what they read, though complex inferences may still be difficult for them to make. However, they can often read texts equal in difficulty to those read by students at a more advanced level, though with less consistent comprehension. They possess some awareness of style and register.	
Level 4 (92–99)	Students at Level 4 typically can read for many purposes at a relatively normal rate with increasing comprehension, and they can read materials that are increasingly abstract and grammatically complex. They understand some hypothesis, argument, and opinion and can differentiate between fact and opinion in academic, as well as general, materials; they can interpret, make inferences and generalizations, relate ideas, and identify an author's prejudices or biases, tone, or mood. They can paraphrase an author's implicit meaning or main points. Level 4 students have an emerging awareness of literary style. Materials they read accurately may include more complex newspaper articles, as well as some periodicals, academic texts, technical materials, and library reference materials. Their reading exhibits a near-native speaker proficiency, but with less flexibility and a slower rate of comprehension. Even these advanced students will experience some difficulty with unusually complex structures, with low-frequency idioms or colloquial language, and with obscure cultural references.	

COMPASS ESL proficiency level	COMPASS ESL Listening Proficiency Description	ESL course with these *prerequisite* skills
Pre–Level 1 (1–41)	Although students scoring at Pre-Level 1 may have some limited listening skills in English, they have provided insufficient evidence that they possess the skills typical of Level 1 students.	
Level 1 (42–66)	The understanding of students at Level 1 typically is limited to simple common words and learned phrases related to immediate needs (e.g., greetings). They have little ability to comprehend even short utterances.	
Level 2 (67–81)	Students at Level 2 typically have the ability to understand brief questions and answers relating to personal information, the immediate setting, or predictable areas of everyday need. They understand short conversations supported by context, but usually require careful or slowed speech, repetitions or rephrasing. Comprehension of main idea and details is still incomplete. They can distinguish common time forms, some question forms (wh-, yes/no, tag questions), most common word-order patterns, and most simple contractions but may have difficulty with tense shifts and more complex sentence structures.	
Level 3 (82–91)	Students at Level 3 typically are able to understand most discourse about personal situations and other everyday experiences, including conversations with basic academic and/or occupational subject matter. Students at Level 3 typically can understand most exchanges which occur at a near-normal to normal conversational rate; main ideas and details are generally grasped, although comprehension is sometimes affected by length, topic familiarity, or cultural knowledge. Level 3 students are able to understand different time frames and usually understand utterances using the perfect tenses, conditionals, modals, passives; they are aware of cohesive devices but may be unable to utilize them to enhance comprehension. Colloquial speech may cause difficulty. The student is able to detect emotional overtones but cannot interpret mood, tone, or intent reliably.	
Level 4 (92–99)	Students at Level 4 are able to understand linguistically complex discussions, including academic lectures and factual reports. Though there may be occasional trouble with colloquialisms, idiomatic language, or rapid native speech, they are able to use context clues to aid comprehension and have acquired an understanding of most discourse markers. They have acquired the ability to comprehend implications, inferences, emotional overtones, differences in style, and shifts in register. Level 4 students understand almost all reductions, elisions, and blends in the spoken language.	

ESL e-WRITE score range	ESL e-WRITE Proficiency Description	ESL course with these prerequisite skills
2 - 3	**Development:** Development is severely limited, and writing may be partially unrelated to the topic. **Focus:** Focus cannot be judged due to the brevity of the response. **Organization:** Little or no organizational structure is apparent. **Language Use:** Sentences demonstrate little understanding of English word order, and word choice is often inaccurate. There are numerous errors in grammar and usage that frequently impede understanding. **Mechanics:** Errors are frequently severe and obscure meaning, or mechanics cannot be judged due to the brevity of the response.	
4 - 5	**Development:** Development is limited and may include excessive repetition of prompt ideas and/or consistently simple ideas. **Focus:** Focus may be difficult to judge due to the brevity of the response; any digressions generally do not lead back to the task. **Organization:** The essay shows an understanding of the need for organization. Transitional words are rarely if ever used. There is minimal evidence of a beginning, middle and end to the essay. **Language Use:** Sentence structure is simple, with some errors evident in word order. Word choice is usually accurate but simple. Language control is inconsistent or weak, with many errors in grammar and usage, often making understanding difficult. **Mechanics:** Errors often distract and/or frequently interfere with meaning, or mechanics may be difficult to judge due to the brevity of the response.	
6 - 7	**Development:** The topic is developed using very few examples, which may be general and somewhat repetitious, but they are usually relevant to the topic. **Focus:** Focus is usually maintained on the main idea(s); any digressions usually lead back to the task. **Organization:** Some organization may be evident. Transitions, if used, are generally simple and predictable. The introduction and conclusion, if present, may be undeveloped. **Language Use:** Most sentences are complete although some may not be correct or clear. Word choice is sometimes appropriate. Although a few errors may impede understanding, basic language control is evident and meaning is sometimes clear. **Mechanics:** Errors sometimes distract and they occasionally interfere with meaning.	
8 - 9	**Development:** The topic is developed using reasons supported by a few examples and details. **Focus:** Focus is adequately maintained on the main idea(s); any minor digressions lead back to the task. **Organization:** The essay demonstrates little evidence of the logical sequencing of ideas, but there is an adequate organizational structure and some transitions are used. There is an underdeveloped introduction and there may be no conclusion. **Language Use:** Some sentence variety is present, but some sentences may not be entirely correct or clear. Word choice is appropriate and varied. Although errors may be frequent, language control is adequate and meaning is usually clear. **Mechanics:** Errors usually do not distract or interfere with meaning.	

ESL e-WRITE score range	ESL e-WRITE Proficiency Description	ESL course with these prerequisite skills
10 - 11	**Development:** The topic is developed using reasons supported by some specific examples and details. Evidence of critical thinking and/or insight may be displayed. **Focus:** Focus is maintained clearly on the main idea(s). **Organization:** The essay demonstrates sequencing of ideas that is mostly logical, and appropriate transitions are used to show relationships among ideas. There is a somewhat developed introduction and there may be a brief conclusion. **Language Use:** A variety of kinds of sentences are present and are usually correct. Word choice is varied and occasionally specific. Overall, language control is good and meaning is clear. **Mechanics:** Some errors are evident but they do not distract or interfere with meaning.	
12	**Development:** The topic is developed using sound reasoning, supported by interesting, specific examples and details in a full, balanced response. Evidence of critical thinking and/or insight may be displayed. Opposing viewpoints may be considered and/or refuted. **Focus:** A sharp focus is maintained consistently on the main idea(s). **Organization:** The essay demonstrates logical sequencing of ideas, and transitions are used effectively to show relationships among ideas. There is a well-developed introduction and the essay may have a brief but clear conclusion. **Language Use:** A wide variety of kinds of sentences are present and usually correct. Word choice is varied and specific. Although there may be a few minor errors, language control is competent and meaning is clear. **Mechanics:** Only minor errors, if any, are present and they do not distract or interfere with meaning.	

Norm-referenced Alignment: Local and National Score Distributions

Another approach to setting Stage I cutoff scores is based on the percentages of students who typically enroll in your ESL courses. For example, suppose you have four ESL courses (ESL01, ESL02, ESL03, and ESL04), and the enrollment percentages in these courses are:

ESL course	Enrollment percentage	Cumulative percentage
ESL01	35%	35%
ESL02	30%	65%
ESL03	20%	85%
ESL04	15%	100%

The cumulative percentage for a particular course is obtained by adding to its enrollment percentage the enrollment percentages associated with all the lower-level courses. For example, the cumulative percentage for ESL02 is equal to the sum of its percentage (30%) and the percentage associated with ESL01 (35%).

If you can assume that your ESL students are like those of all COMPASS ESL-tested students, then you can find the COMPASS ESL scores that correspond to the bottom 35%, 65%, and 85% of students nationally. For the COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage test, these scores are 56, 73, and 84, respectively. (See the table on the next page.) Therefore, the COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage score 57=56+1 would be the Stage I cutoff score for ESL02, because 35% of students would enroll in the course below ESL02. Similarly, the COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage score 74=73+1 would be the Stage I cutoff score for ESL03, and the COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage score 85=84+1 would be the Stage I cutoff score for ESL04.

The following tables contain cumulative percentages for the COMPASS ESL tests in Grammar/Usage, Reading, and Mechanics. To use these tables, simply draw lines under the COMPASS ESL scores that correspond to the cumulative percentages of students who enroll in your different ESL courses. Then, note the COMPASS ESL scores that correspond to these cumulative percentages. Your Stage I cutoff scores will then be the next higher COMPASS ESL scores above those that you noted in the table.

If you believe that your students are not similar to all COMPASS ESL-tested students, then you can use "local norms" in place of national user norms. To obtain local norms, you need to have previously administered COMPASS ESL and produced an Entering Student Descriptive Report (ESDR). If you are a COMPASS Internet user, you can create an ESDR report from the COMPASS Internet software "Reports" tab. If you are a COMPASS Windows user, you can obtain a free ESDR by sending your COMPASS ESL scores to ACT. We recommend a minimum sample size of 100 students for using an ESDR to set cutoff scores.

MATCHING COURSE ENROLLMENT PERCENTAGES TO COMPASS ESL NORMS

ESL GRAMMAR/USAGE

National cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage score	Local cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Grammar/Usage score (from ESDR)
5%	34	5%	
10%	40	10%	
15%	43	15%	
20%	47	20%	
25%	50	25%	
30%	53	30%	
35%	56	35%	
40%	59	40%	
45%	61	45%	
50%	64	50%	
55%	67	55%	
60%	70	60%	
65%	73	65%	
70%	76	70%	
75%	79	75%	
80%	81	80%	
85%	84	85%	
90%	88	90%	
95%	92	95%	
100%	99	100%	

MATCHING COURSE ENROLLMENT PERCENTAGES TO COMPASS ESL NORMS

ESL READING

National cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Reading score	Local cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Reading score (from ESDR)
5%	35	5%	
10%	42	10%	
15%	47	15%	
20%	52	20%	
25%	57	25%	
30%	61	30%	
35%	65	35%	
40%	68	40%	
45%	71	45%	
50%	74	50%	
55%	77	55%	
60%	79	60%	
65%	82	65%	
70%	84	70%	
75%	86	75%	
80%	88	80%	
85%	90	85%	
90%	93	90%	
95%	95	95%	
100%	99	100%	

MATCHING COURSE ENROLLMENT PERCENTAGES
TO COMPASS ESL NORMS

ESL LISTENING

National cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Listening score	Local cumulative percentage	COMPASS ESL Listening score (from ESDR)
5%	36	5%	
10%	43	10%	
15%	49	15%	
20%	53	20%	
25%	57	25%	
30%	60	30%	
35%	64	35%	
40%	67	40%	
45%	70	45%	
50%	73	50%	
55%	75	55%	
60%	78	60%	
65%	81	65%	
70%	84	70%	
75%	86	75%	
80%	89	80%	
85%	92	85%	
90%	94	90%	
95%	98	95%	
100%	99	100%	

Establishing Stage I Cutoff Scores – Summary Chart

Based on the criterion-referenced and norm-referenced approaches in the previous sections, your faculty should set Stage I Cutoff Scores. The following chart can be filled in and used for this purpose:

| Course Number	Course Name	Stage I Cutoff Score

Section 2 – How to Set Placement Messages

Now that your Stage I cutoff scores have been set and agreed upon, you need to write up the course placement messages for each score range. Typical course placement messages will include the following information:

- Congratulations, based on your COMPASS placement test results, you have tested into <Course Name and Number>.
- You may register for <Course Name> at <Place> <Date> <Time>
- Please be sure to check with the <Resource Center Name> for additional support with your ESL studies.
- Your advisor will have additional recommendations to ensure you are successful in your studies.

Next you will need to enter the course placement messages for each score range in the COMPASS software. Simply go to the "Test Setup" tab in the COMPASS software program and click on Placement Messages.
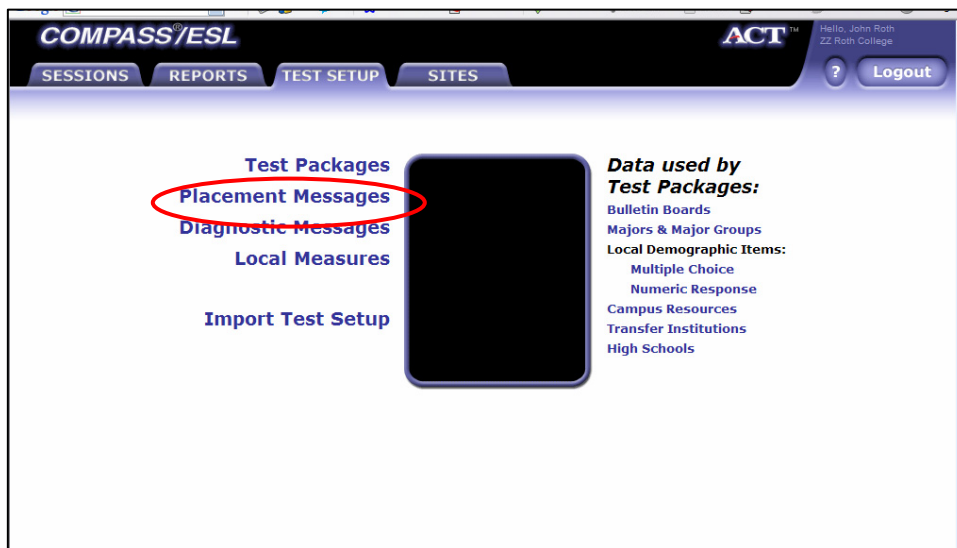
Select the ESL test module for which you wish to set placement messages and click edit:
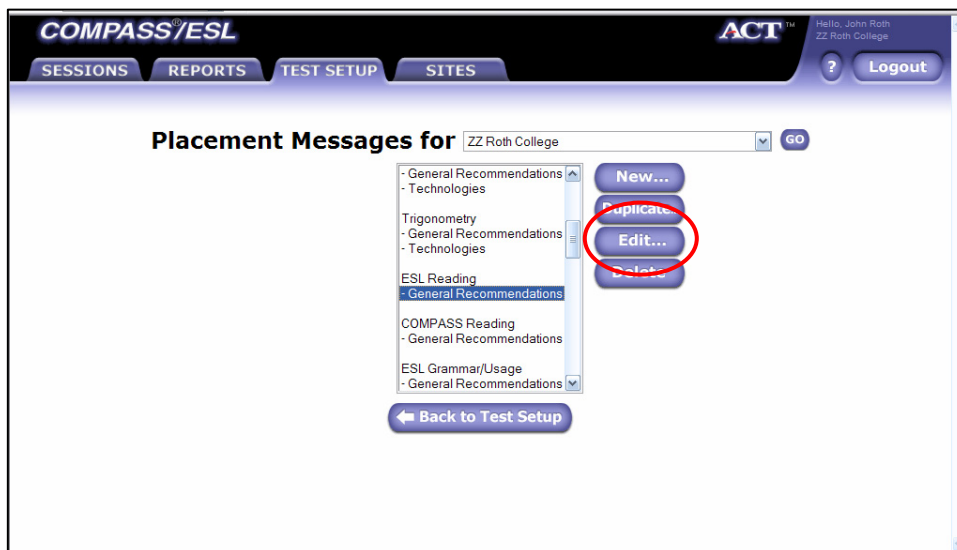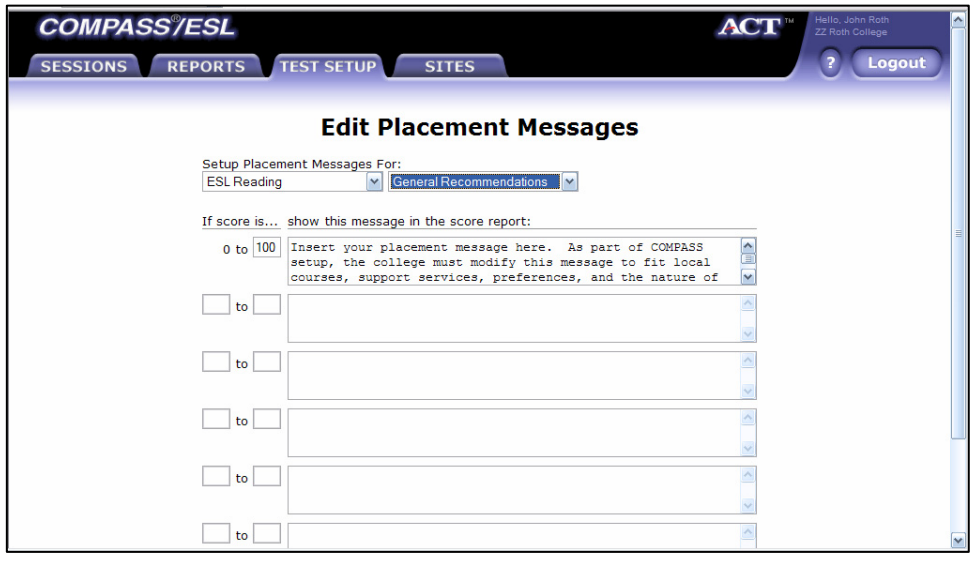
Simply fill in the score ranges and placement messages, and click "OK" at the bottom of the page when you are finished.

Both the score and the associated placement message will be displayed on a student's score report.

Section 3 – How to Set Stage II Cutoff Scores

Once Stage I cutoff scores have been set, it is imperative that you monitor the success rates of the students (generally defined as the percentage of students receiving a C or better) in the ESL courses in which they have been placed. If your faculty determines the success rates of your students are unsatisfactory, you may need to adjust your cutoff scores. These adjusted cutoff scores are Stage II cutoff scores. This type of monitoring and adjusting should be done on an on-going basis. The ACT Research Department can help with this process. Please contact ACT for additional information on this service.

The following chart can be used to help facilitate this process.

Course Number	Course Name	Stage I Cutoff Score	Student Success Rate	Stage II Cutoff Score

To help institutions better evaluate and adjust their cutoff scores, ACT offers the COMPASS **Course Placement Service**. This service provides information you can use to validate your current cutoff scores, select new cutoff scores, or compare the effectiveness of different placement tests.

Your institution reports student grades in up to 25 different ESL courses and an overall grade point average. You then request analyses showing the relationship between end-of-term course grades and COMPASS ESL test scores. You can also obtain analyses for up to five student subgroups.

For each course analysis, ACT provides several key statistics that allow you to determine the impact of setting potential placement cutoff scores higher or lower.

- **Percent placed in lower-level courses**—For any potential cutoff score, the percentage of all students who would be placed in a lower-level course, given that score.
- **Accuracy rate**—For each potential cutoff score, the percentage of all students for whom the correct placement decision would be made. (Students placed in the standard course succeed, and students placed in the lower-level course would have been unsuccessful in the upper-level course.)
- **Success rate**—For each potential cutoff score, the percentage of all students scoring at or above the cutoff score who would be expected to be successful in the standard course.
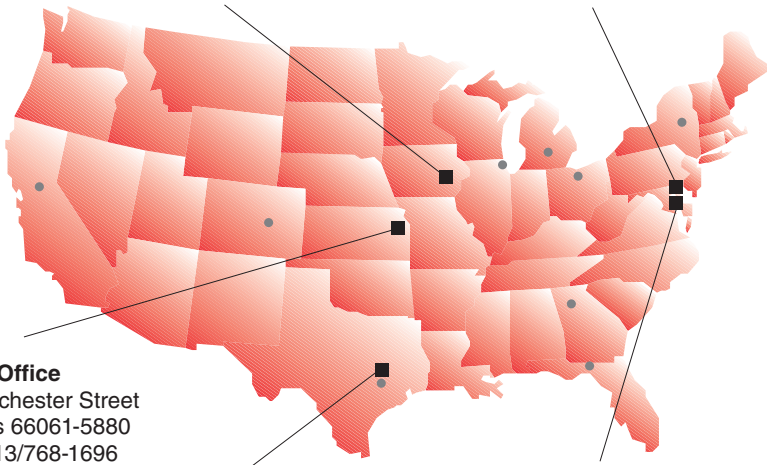
The ACT Course Placement Service can help answer the following questions

- Are my current cutoff scores too high or too low?
- Are our first-year students being placed in the appropriate college courses?
- If we were to raise the cutoff score for a particular course, what percentage of our entering students would be placed in the lower-level course?
- Can we make more accurate placement decisions for a mathematics course if ACT Mathematics scores and high school mathematics grades are used jointly to make the decisions?
- How well is my locally developed placement test functioning?
- For a given cutoff score, what are the likely success rates of students who would be placed in a course?

Contact ACT for more information about the Course Placement Service.

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