

Assessment Brief



Public Schools of North Carolina

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North Carolina Writing Assessments: Grades 4 and 7

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This publication is an update to the Winter 1999 Assessment Brief "North Carolina Writing Assessments: Grades 4, 7, and 10 (Vol. 5, No.1). It is also available at www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/testing (Testing Section Website). Information regarding the North Carolina End-of-Course Test of English II will be located in a separate Assessment Brief.

Background and Introduction

The North Carolina General Assembly in 1977 enacted legislation directing the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE) to evaluate annually the educational progress of North Carolina students in the first, second, third, sixth, and ninth grades. "A Plan for the Measurement of Writing in North Carolina" was presented to and approved by the NCSBE in November, 1982. As described in that plan, a field test of sixth and ninth graders was conducted in the spring of 1983, and formal administrations in both grades occurred in January, 1984. In 1985-86, the writing assessment at grade 9 was reassigned to grade 8. The program was expanded in 1992-93 to include writing at grade 4. Currently, students are administered the North Carolina Writing Assessment at grades 4 and 7.

Writing assessments were added initially to the North Carolina Testing Program in 1983-84 to place a greater statewide emphasis on writing. The revised North Carolina *Standard Course of Study (SCS)* emphasizes writing as a basic skill that can be improved with appropriate instructional emphasis. The measurement of writing ensures that ample time and resources are allotted for its development in the classroom.

Student performance in writing is measured statewide at grades 4 and 7. Students in grade 4 are asked to write a narrative composition (personal or imaginative), and students in grade 7 are asked to write either an expository (clarification or point-of-view) or descriptive composition.

Procedures for Test Administration

On the day of the test administration, the teacher removes individual copies of a writing prompt from a sealed envelope.

At each grade the writing prompt provides instructions that set forth the task. Each student has fifty minutes to write an on-demand composition in response to the prompt. Additional time may be allotted to students with special needs.

Students in grade 4 must write a short story from something they have experienced, read, or imagined. Students in grade 7 are required to write a composition to explain/clarify a situation/position, defend a position, or describe a place or object.

Reporting Test Results

Each year students' scored compositions and a scoring guide are returned to all fourth and seventh-grade teachers several weeks after scoring. Teachers are encouraged to use the scoring guides and the scoring criteria to interpret scores for students and parents.

Summary scores are also returned to all schools and school systems. Summary scores for the LEAs are included in a state-generated report.

Scoring the Compositions

Two independent readers, who have received extensive training in the scoring process, score each student's composition. At each grade, the composition is assigned either a 1, 2, 3, 4, or Non-Scorable (NS). For essays where the two scores are discrepant by a single score point, a mid-point score is assigned to the student's composition. For example, a student may receive a score of 2.5.

The assigned score reflects each student's performance with respect to four main criteria: (1) main idea, (2) supporting details, (3) organization, and (4) coherence. This "focused-holistic score" defines the student's command of the mode of writing being assessed.

A second, independent score represents a measure of the student's ability to use standard English conventions which include complete sentences, appropriate word forms, standard mechanics (i.e., punctuation, capitalization), and correct spelling. This score is reported as a "+" or "-". The "+" paper exhibits

an acceptable level of proficiency in sentence formation, usage, mechanics, and spelling; the “-” paper does not exhibit an acceptable level of proficiency. Since two readers score each essay for use of language conventions, each essay receives a score of “++,” “+-,” or “--.”

Each year that the same mode of writing is assessed (i.e., narrative, descriptive, or expository), the scoring criteria and score point scale used are identical. The scoring guide, however, is developed containing student papers that demonstrate standards that correspond to each prompt.

The focused-holistic score scale for each mode of writing assessed at grades 4 and 7 follows.

Grade 4 Narrative Composition

Score Point 4. The response exhibits a strong command of narrative writing. The response is focused and has an effective sequencing of events and a clear progression of ideas. The writer provides specific, relevant details to support ideas. The composition is unified and well elaborated. The writer’s organization provides a clear strategy or controlled plan; the composition progresses logically and has a sense of overall completeness.

Score Point 3. The response exhibits a reasonable command of narrative writing. The response is focused and establishes progression of ideas and events although minor lapses in focus and progression may be present. The composition contains elaboration and support in the form of specific details. The composition may have minor weaknesses in coherence. The writer’s organization provides a reasonable sense of logical progression and overall completeness.

Score Point 2. The response exhibits a weak command of narrative writing. The response exhibits some progression of ideas and events and provides some elaboration and support. The elaboration is relevant but may be flawed. The composition may not be evenly elaborated, having a list-like quality with concrete supporting details. The composition may have little connection between a controlling idea and supporting details relevant to development.

Score Point 1. The response exhibits a lack of command of narrative writing. There is evidence that the writer has read the prompt and attempted to respond to it. The writer may attempt to support ideas, but there may be no sense of strategy or control, or the writer may exhibit skeletal control but the response is too sparse to be scored higher than a “1.” The response may not sustain focus on the topic, may lack clarity, and/or may have an inappropriate strategy.

Non-Scorable (NS). Non-scorable compositions are entirely illegible or otherwise unscorable: blank responses, responses written in a foreign language, restatements of the prompt, and responses that are off topic or incoherent.

Grade 7 Descriptive Composition

Score Point 4. The response exhibits a strong command of descriptive writing. The writer consistently focuses on the subject matter and provides sufficient, specific, relevant descriptors and details as a means of elaboration. The writer’s organization provides a strategy or controlled plan with a sense of logical progression and overall completeness. The composition is coherent.

Score Point 3. The response exhibits a reasonable command of descriptive writing. The writer focuses on the subject matter and provides sufficient descriptors and details as a means of elaboration. The writer’s organization provides a strategy or plan with a reasonable sense of logical progression. The response is generally coherent and complete overall, although minor weaknesses may be present.

Score Point 2. The response exhibits a weak command of descriptive writing. The writer focuses on the subject matter, although the writer may drift from focus. Some of these responses contain many bare details while others have a few details, some of which are elaborated. These responses may be poorly organized and may not establish a logical progression, although some sense of strategy exists.

Score Point 1. The response exhibits a lack of command of descriptive writing. There is evidence that the writer has seen and attempted to respond to the prompt. However, the response may not sustain focus on the topic. The writer may attempt to describe, but there may be no sense of strategy or control. Many responses exhibit skeletal control but the description may be irrelevant or too sparse to be scored higher than a “1.”

Non-Scorable (NS). Non-scorable compositions are entirely illegible or otherwise unscorable: blank responses, responses written in a foreign language, restatements of the prompt, and responses that are off topic or incoherent.

Grade 7 Expository Composition

Score Point 4. The response exhibits a strong command of expository writing. The writer focuses on the subject matter and provides specific relevant reasons and details to support reasons as a means of elaboration. The writer’s organization provides a strategy or controlled plan with a clear sense of logical progression and overall completeness. The composition is coherent.

Score Point 3. The response exhibits a reasonable command of expository writing. The writer focuses on the subject matter and given reasons to support the main idea. Some responses contain a few well-elaborated reasons or more reasons with less elaboration. The writer’s organization provides a reasonable sense of logical progression. The response is generally coherent and complete overall, although minor weaknesses may be present.

Score Point 2. The response exhibits a weak command of expository writing. The writer focuses on the subject matter and gives at least one or two reasons or else a list of reasons with little or no elaboration. These responses may be poorly organized and may not establish a logical progression, but some sense of strategy exists. Some responses introduce reasons and ideas which are not explained or related to the subject matter, causing the reader to have to make inferences.

Score Point 1. The response exhibits a lack of command of expository writing. There is evidence that the writer has seen and attempted to respond to the prompt. However, the response may not sustain focus on the topic. The writer may attempt to support ideas, but there may be no sense of strategy or control. Many responses exhibit skeletal control but may be too sparse to be scored higher than a “1.”

Non-Scorable (NS). Non-scorable compositions are entirely illegible or otherwise unscorable: blank responses, responses written in a foreign language, restatements of the prompt, and responses that are off topic or incoherent.

Achievement Levels

Achievement levels, or performance standards, are available for interpreting student performance on the writing assessments. Achievement levels as a standard give common meaning throughout the state as to what is expected at various levels of competence in writing. These categories are used to better describe the scores on the tests. It is imperative to remember that the achievement levels for the writing assessment at grades 4 and 7 are based on student performance for one on-demand writing task. There are four achievement levels. Level I includes Non-Scorables.

Achievement Level	Score Point Ranges
Level IV	3.5-4.0
Level III	2.5-3.0
Level II	1.5-2.0
Level I	0.0-1.0

Writing Standard

The Accountability standard established for the writing assessment at grades 4 and 7 is Achievement Level III or above. This standard is reported as the Accountability indicator. The standard for the writing assessment at grades 4 and 7 is demonstrated by a score point of 2.5 or above on a four-point scale. By achieving a score at or above the standard, the student has demonstrated a reasonable command of the particular mode of writing assessed.

Released Writing Assessment Prompts

The following list contains the writing assessment prompts at grades 4 and 7 that have been released in previous years.

Grade 4

- Think about a special day that you have had. Tell about what happened that was special.
- You have met many children at school or in your neighborhood with whom you have enjoyed spending time. Choose one and tell a story about a time you enjoyed with a friend.
- One day your teacher enters your classroom, places a large bag on the desk, and leaves the room. Suddenly, the bag begins to move. Write a story about what happens.
- One day you are walking home from school. You see a large, dirty glass bottle lying next to the road. You pick up the bottle and remove the top. Something surprising happens. Write a story about what happens.
- Name a time that you were very surprised. Write a story about what happened that surprised you.
- One morning you wake up and discover that you are only six inches tall. Write a story about what happens next.
- Think about a time when something happened that made you very happy. Write a story about what happened that made you very happy.

Grade 7

- There are four seasons — fall, winter, spring, and summer. Choose your favorite season and explain why it is your favorite.
- Think about an outdoor scene, such as a mountain, a beach, a waterfall, a park, that you consider interesting. Describe this sight so that your reader will be able to picture it.
- Think about one place where people get together in large numbers. It could be a fairground, a school gymnasium or sports field, a theater, or any other place you may choose. Describe the place so that your reader will be able to picture it.
- Take a position on whether violent shows should be shown on television. State your position and explain why you think violent shows should or should not be shown on television.
- Take a position on whether your school should place more emphasis on sports. State your position and explain why you think your school should or should not place more emphasis on sports.

- Think about a place where people go to have fun. It can be outdoors, a store, a relative's, or any place where people go. Describe the place so that someone reading your paper could picture it.
- Think about the kind of weather you like best. Name the kind of weather and explain why you like this kind of weather best.
- Think about your favorite day of the week. Name your favorite day of the week and explain why it is your favorite.
- Use specific concrete modifiers (e.g., a “two-story house” rather than a “big house”).
- Instruct students to be selective by encouraging them to determine which points are important and then to elaborate those points. Avoid giving students a specific number of points to include since an adequate number varies by topic. Also, emphasize that they should not lose the overall main idea (e.g., “Describe a kitchen.” The student may describe a stove, a refrigerator and a sink, but fail to describe how the entire kitchen looks.)

Strategies for Improving on Demand Writing

- Ensure that students understand the characteristics of the four modes of writing: narrative, descriptive, expository (clarification and point-of-view), and argumentative (persuasive).
- Have students use the writing process throughout the year to improve writing skills, but make them aware that the writing test is an on-demand writing task. Therefore, help make them aware of the differences by assigning on-demand writing tasks periodically.
- Help students understand the four composing characteristics.
- Use sample papers to help students understand the score scale used to score their essay.
- Let students score each other's essays and have them justify their scores by using the criteria and rubric.
- Analyze prompts with students so they will read instructions closely and understand expectations. Also, help them focus on the key word(s) in the prompt (e.g., “tell a story,” “describe,” “explain,” “convince”) so that they will be able to classify by mode from the key words. Check to see if they can write prompts for a particular mode and explain what would be expected of them when responding to their prompts.
- Encourage students to refer frequently to the prompt while they write to be sure they maintain focus on the main idea.
- Help students analyze supporting details by instructing them to ensure supporting details are clearly linked to the main idea.
- Be certain that any examples used add additional depth or understanding and do not just repeat the main idea.
- Question whether adjectives used link back to the main idea or provide another level of understanding the prompt.
- Understand that a powerful verb is often more effective than a long string of adverbs.
- Avoid giving students a definite number of characteristics to produce (e.g., five paragraphs, ten adjectives, four reasons), since the number will vary by their choice of topics and the mode of writing.
- Remember that requiring a definite number of characteristic leads to formula writing. Formula writing may occasionally help the weak writer to develop organization but may limit the able writer, who may allow organization to become the main focus and fail to provide sufficient supporting relevant details.
- Understand that sensory descriptors can enhance a student's writing but that students generally have difficulty using the senses as an organizational strategy, which may weaken their overall focus. (Sensory description is often a forced organizational strategy because, depending on the student's choice, certain senses may not be applicable and the student must deal in generalities, thereby providing vague supporting details.)
- Read descriptive essays aloud to see if students can draw a mental picture. Read examples for different score points so they can see the importance of locators, size, and specific details.
- Explain that students writing narrative essays should be able to construct a time line sequencing the events.
- Emphasize that in persuasive and point-of-view writing students must give sound reasons with supporting details that show progression and that cause and effect writing is an effective method of elaboration. Students should not allow the cause and effect technique to overrule the content, since elaboration must be present.
- Inform students that the writing assessment is one measure on one day of their school year scored by purely objective readers who use the criteria and score scale in the scoring guide.
- Teach students that responses recorded on added horizontal lines, on unlined areas, as double-stacked sentences (i.e., two sentences recorded on top of each other on one printed line), or on extra sheets of paper will not be scored. Students will be given credit only for sentences recorded on the horizontal lines printed in the test document.