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Assessment Brief

Public Schools of North Carolina

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North Carolina Writing Assessments Grades 4, 7, and 10

What are the North Carolina Writing Assessments?

The North Carolina Writing Assessment is composed of two parts: The Writing Assessment at Grades 4 and 7 and the English II Essay End-of-Course Test in Grade 10. The writing assessment was added 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 instruction and emphasis. The measurement of writing ensures that ample time and resources are allotted for its development in the classroom.

The writing assessment at grades 4 and 7 measures students' skills in three of the four different modes of writing: narrative, expository, and descriptive. 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. For their writing task, grade 10 students are required to respond to an expository, literature-based prompt that requires analysis.

How are Writing Assessments Administered?

On the day of testing the teacher removes from a sealed envelope individual copies of a writing prompt. At each grade the writing prompt provides instructions that set forth the task. Each student has fifty minutes to write a composition in response to the prompt at grades 4 and 7 and one hundred minutes at grade 10. Additional time may be allotted to students with special needs.

The prompt requires students to demonstrate their ability to communicate information in writing in order to apply their knowledge and skills in language. Students in grade 4 must write a short story from something they have experienced, read, or imagined. At grade 7, students are required to write a composition to explain/clarify a situation/position, defend a position, or describe a place or object. Grade 10 students write an essay that requires the students to apply their knowledge of a literary concept in order to analyze a piece of world literature (other than American or British literature) that they have read.

How are scores reported?

Each year students' scored compositions, student and classroom scores, and scoring guides are returned to all fourth-, seventh-, and tenth-grade teachers several weeks after scoring. Teachers are encouraged to use the scoring guides along with the scoring criteria to interpret scores for students and parents.

Each year summary scores are returned to all schools and school systems and included in a state-generated writing report.

How are the compositions scored?

Two independent readers, who have received extensive training in the scoring process, review each student's composition. At grades 4 and 7 the composition is assigned either a 1, 2, 3, 4, or Non-Scorable (NS). At grade 10 the composition is assigned a 0 to 6 or NS score. 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 2.5 as a score.

The assigned score reflects each student's performance with respect to a set of criteria for each score point (focused holistic scoring). The score points define the student's command of the mode of writing required. The quality of each composition, regardless of mode or grade, is determined by considering the following characteristics: (1) main idea, (2) supporting details, (3) organization, and (4) coherence. A focused holistic score is assigned to each student's paper based on these characteristics.

A second, independent score represents a measure of the student's ability to use correct English which includes complete sentences, appropriate word forms, standard mechanics (i.e., punctuation, capitalization), and correct spelling. This score is reported as a "+" or "-" at grades 4 and 7. 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. At grade 10 an analytic score evaluates each of the four areas: sentence formation, usage, mechanics, and spelling. This score, ranging from 1 to 3, is reported by area.

Every year that a mode of writing is repeated, the same scoring criteria and score point scale or standards are used as were used in previous years. However, the scoring guides are tailored to fit a particular prompt and the anchor papers (i.e., papers used to exemplify score point standards) are selected to correspond to the prompt administered for a given year. The following score scale is a generic scale that defines the levels of accomplishment on the grades 4 and 7 four point scale.

- 1 = Student response exhibits a lack of command of the mode of writing.
- 2 = Student response exhibits a weak command of the mode of writing.
- 3 = Student response exhibits a reasonable command of the mode of writing.
- 4 = Student response exhibits a strong command of the mode of writing.
- NS = Student response is not readable or is otherwise unscorable.

Writing Standard

The Accountability standard established for the writing assessment at grades 4 and 7 and the English II test 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; the standard for the English II test is demonstrated by a score of 3.0 or above on a six-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.

Expository Composition Focused Holistic Score Scale for Grade 10

Score Point 6. The response exhibits a strong command of expository writing. It is focused and has a fluent, clear progression of ideas and evenness of development. There are strengths in all four criteria. The writer provides specific, relevant details to support ideas. These papers exhibit a strong command of an expository writing strategy. The writer clearly develops all parts of the prompt and uses an appropriate and highly effective approach (i.e., tone, point-of-view, and originality). An appropriate sense of audience exists. Sentence structure is varied and effective, and word choice demonstrates the ability to use a large vocabulary skillfully. If a literary work is referred to, the work must be from world literature (other than American or British literature). There is a sense of overall completeness.

Score Point 5. The response is focused, progresses logically, and exhibits a command of expository writing. There are strengths in all four criteria. There is no break in progression. The writer uses specific details and clearly links events and relationships. A few minor flaws in

coherence may be present. The writer addresses all aspects of the prompt and uses effective vocabulary and sentence structure. If a literary work is referred to, the work must be from world literature (other than American or British literature). An appropriate sense of audience exists. There is a sense of overall completeness.

Score Point 4. The response is focused and establishes progression of ideas and events although minor lapses in focus and progression may be present. The papers have elaboration and support in the form of specific details. Papers scored "4" have an organizational pattern, but minor flaws may exist. They may have minor weaknesses in coherence. The writer clearly addresses the topic and supports it, but some aspect of the prompt may be missing. If a literary work is referred to, the work must be from world literature (other than American or British literature). In some responses, a sense of audience may exist.

Score Point 3. The response exhibits some progression of ideas and events and provides some elaboration and support. The elaboration may be flawed, but it has relevance to the requirements of the prompt. Papers scored "3" have a generally organized pattern but contain minor flaws. The papers are generally coherent although minor weaknesses in coherence may be present. These papers are focused on the prompt; some may not address all aspects of the prompt. Some papers may tend to summarize at times or have a list-like quality, but they should have concrete, supporting details.

Score Point 2. There is evidence that the writer has seen the prompt and responded to it, although the response may be unclear. Some responses may have little or no sense of connection between a controlling idea and supporting details relevant to development. Other responses may have a sense of focus but lose it. Some "2" responses may be extended lists or lists with some extension. The writer has some sense of organization, but the composition may be too sparse for a higher score point. Some of the compositions do not directly address all aspects of the prompt, and some lapse into summary.

Score Point 1. 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 are too sparse to be scored higher than a "1." Some responses lack coherence and/or have an inappropriate strategy (i.e., pure summary, pure list).

Score Point 0. The response addresses a literary work but is incorrect in its perception of the literary concept.

Non-Scorable (NS). The response is off topic,

unreadable, or blank.

**Samples of North Carolina Writing Assessment
Prompts Administered in Past Years**

Grade 10

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.

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.

- In many works of literature a central character's role is determined by his or her culture. From the novels, short stories, full-length plays, and poems you have read, choose a work in which the role of a central character is determined by his or her culture. Identify the character. Using specific references from the work, explain how the character's role is determined by the culture, the character's response to being defined by the culture, and the overall effect on the work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British literature (England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.
- Symbolism is a literary device used frequently to contribute to the complexity of a work, for example the use of colors to represent ideas. From the novels, short stories, plays, and poems you have read, select an example or examples of symbolism. Explain how it/ they represent(s) a major aspect of the work or convey (s) an important message regarding the characters or theme and the overall effect of the symbolism on the work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) literature and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.
- Often in literature, authors use a friendship between characters to reveal the theme or some truth about human nature. From the novels, short stories, poems, or plays you have read, select a work in which two characters are friends. Explain the kind of friendship that the characters have, the message the author sends the reader through this friendship, and the importance of this friendship on the work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) literature and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.
- Many literary works contain an element of suspense. From the novels, short stories, poems and plays you have read, select a work in which suspense adds significantly to the appeal of the work. Using a specific example or examples of suspense from the work, explain how the author creates the suspense, the effect the suspense has on the reader, and the importance of the suspense to the overall work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) literature and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.
- A main character in a literary work often faces a conflict between personal desires and responsibilities. From the novels, short stories, full-length plays, and poems you have read, choose a work in which a character faces a conflict between his/her personal desires and his/her responsibilities. Using specific

references from the work, explain the conflict, the struggle to resolve the conflict, and the overall effect on the work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British literature (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.

- The theme of a work of literature is the central idea, thought, or insight that a writer conveys. A general theme found throughout literature involves the concept of love. The love may be a love of a person, place, object, or idea. From the novels, short stories, full-length plays, and biographies you have read, select a work in which the theme of love is present. Using specific references to the work, explain how the actions, characters, and the overall work are affected by the theme. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) literature and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.
- Literary characters often make major decisions that affect them and the people surrounding them. From the novels, short stories, full-length plays, and poems you have read, choose a work in which a character makes a major decision which has lasting results and affects him/her and the other characters. Using specific references from the work, explain what decision the character makes, how the decision affects the other characters, and the impact on the overall work. The work you choose must be from world literature other than British (England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) literature and American (United States) literature. Give the title and, if you remember, the author of the work.

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. Students should be made aware of the differences by assigning on-demand writing tasks.
- Help students understand the four composing characteristics.
- Use sample essays to help students understand the score scale used for scoring their compositions.
- 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 learn to 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;
 - 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.)
- 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 characteristics 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